AMERICAN FRONTIERS:
PATHWAYS TO MASCULINE IDENTITY REALIZATION

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores and analyzes a recurring artistic impulse that emerges time and

time again in narratives of American frontier mythology. From nineteenth-century texts

such as James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* and Herman Melville's epic

Moby-Dick, through current, reconfigured representations of frontier spaces in works like

Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* and Stephen Hunter's novel *Pale Horse Coming*, the path

to meaningful masculine identity realization occurs by entering various iterations of the

frontier. In this light, each narrative in this study is characterized by a longing to flee

civilization and the negative effects of navigating America's socio-cultural norms as they

relate to frontier closure, industrialization, the gendered separation of domestic and work

spheres, and the proliferation of a cultural emphasis on the extrinsic values perpetuated

and reinforced by American affluence. As a consequence of the trajectory of such socio-

cultural and institutional progress, American society has become almost entirely de-

tribalized, divorced from our human evolutionary past in ways that have done much to

contribute to significant rises in anxiety, loneliness, isolation, alienation, depression, and

suicide. In the realm of American fiction, this cultural and existential malaise becomes

expressed through frontier narratives by characters, men and women alike, who long for

the meaningful masculine identity realization that is enabled when one is part of an inter-

reliant group in which the three basic, intrinsic human needs of self-determination theory

are met. Through various trials of confronting the inherent chaos and hardships found in

either traditional or reconfigured frontier spaces, the male and female characters in this

study can be read as seeking a return to our tribal past. The relative successes and

cautionary failures of their journeys reveal much about the biological and cultural

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influences that shape masculine performances as they are characterized, assessed, and evaluated through artistic representations. In this context, this study explores the following works: *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), *The Hidden Hand* (1888), *Pale Horse Coming* (2001), *Moby-Dick* (1851), *McTeague* (1899), *The Awakening* (1899), *No Country for Old Men* (2005), *The Call of the Wild* (1903), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Fight Club* (1996), and *Captain Fantastic* (2016).

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CHAPTER I – MASCULINITIES AND THE FRONTIER

"My shadow's shedding skin . . ."

-Tool

Conceptualizing the Frontier

During the summer of 1893, at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago, noted historian Frederick Jackson Turner famously argued that the American frontier played a pivotal role in the shaping of American identity, democracy, and exceptionalism. Within this same context, Turner insists "American social development has been continually beginning over and over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character" (1134).

While delivering what has come to be known as his Frontier Thesis, Turner also moved to address what he described as the end or closing of the frontier, specifically in light of the U.S. Census of 1890, concluding with a sense of finality and an implicit gesture towards the future: "And now, four centuries from the discovery of America, at the end of a hundred years of life under the Constitution, the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history" (1137). Ostensibly, the frontier, along with the prospects of taming an uncultivated wilderness, had reached the point of exhaustion. Aside from the national reckoning with geographically expansionist and sectionalist closure, Turner also draws attention to the pioneer's need to adapt to the environment:

The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization. The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. . . . It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin. . . . In short, at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man. He must accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish, and so he fits himself into the Indian clearings and follows the Indian trails. (1134-1135)

Here, Turner recognizes a reciprocal, if not symbiotic arrangement: an individual both shapes and becomes shaped by the frontier environment. Along the way in his thesis, Turner also examines what frontier colonization and eventual closure meant for American society as a whole, speculating on the possible future of the nation. What this meant for the future realm of American literature, however, might now be described as a contemporary reimagining or re-opening of the closed frontier, undertaken by numerous authors through creative, preservationist, frightening, cautionary, and potentially salvific possibilities. This project will situate contemporary reconfigurations of the frontier by Stephen Hunter, Toni Morrison, Chuck Palahniuk, Cormac McCarthy, and Matt Ross alongside canonical texts by James Fenimore Cooper, E.D.E.N. Southworth, Herman Melville, Frank Norris, Kate Chopin, and Jack London and explore many thematic connections that unifies these works in light of current theories of masculinity.

My project seeks to investigate selected works of the nineteenth, twentieth, and early twenty first centuries with a specific emphasis on examining and analyzing depictions of the frontier as a liminal space in American fiction. As it currently stands,

the frontier and our contemporary conceptualizations of it are becoming increasingly occupied by representations of masculinity that challenge and often subvert previously stereotypical, flat, and one-dimensional characters. Modern iterations of the old, romantic, and heroic frontier are now shifting, allowing room for both intersectional and multicultural identities and experiences. Similarly, the face of the old heroic landscape has evolved to take the form of something more inclusive, ushering in complications and sometimes total deflation of the heroic ethos that arguably drives and defines many early frontier narratives. In his essay, "A Longer, Grimmer, but More Interesting Story," historian Elliot West addresses such claims head on, juxtaposing the old conceptions of the frontier with the new: "These new themes, by contrast, emphasize a continuing cultural dislocation, environmental calamity, economic exploitation, and individuals who either fail outright or run themselves crazy chasing unattainable goals" (122). To put it another way, frontier stories in American literature were once (with a few exceptions, of course) overwhelmingly escapist, homosocial preserves that excluded women, people of color, and non-heteronormative gender performances, and in many cases, this still holds to be true. However, as Elliot West suggests, representations of the frontier have undoubtedly become much more nuanced and are increasingly depicted with a keen attention to our current philosophical milieus, social complexities, and identity politics. Moreover, in reading the American literature engaged with exploring and navigating frontiers, it becomes apparent that masculinities are influenced in proportion to the specific nature of the frontier spaces they occupy. The resulting masculinities that emerge from the space of each frontier setting grant insight into why gender is performed as it is in these narratives and why authors consistently return to the frontier as a site of conflict

and personal transformation. Taking this approach gives us a clearer sense of the various influences that shape masculinities in relation to a successful or failed quest to achieve fulfilling, meaningful identity realization.

As it stands currently, in the somewhat distant wake of westward territorial expansion, an artistic reconfiguring of the frontier exists in the American novel, popular culture, and film. Moreover, this ever-shifting conceptualization of frontier narratives persists as a proving ground and a vehicle for expressing socio-cultural values, anxieties, and conceptions of masculinities. Turner himself made analogous claims concerning such a landscape: "each frontier did indeed furnish a new field of opportunity, a gate of escape from the bondage of the past; and freshness, and confidence, and scorn of older society, impatience of its restraints and its ideas, and indifference to its lessons, have accompanied the frontier" (1137). And so, given the ubiquity of frontier mythology in contemporary American narrative, it is entirely reasonable to connect this thematic impulse of depicting a landscape riddled with possibility to cultural desires for escape, change, hope, and freedom, all of which are regularly projected onto various manifestations of the multifaceted and malleable tableau called the frontier, for a number of deep-seated reasons.

The frontier as both an artistic impulse and a thematic element of American fiction becomes manifest in the works of even America's earliest storytellers, and the ways in which the frontier has been depicted have been numerous. Credited as one of America's first successful fiction writers, Washington Irving renders something of a frontier space via the tale of Rip Van Winkle, who, in his marital and domestic delinquency, retreats from his sharp-tongued wife to go hunting in the wilderness with his

dog, Wolf, a name clearly representative of the wild and uncultivated aspects of life apart from domestic tensions and confinement. For Herman Melville, the frontier could be the vast apocalyptic sea along with the conflicts that emerge through confrontations with a leviathan, literal and figurative alike. At times, Nathaniel Hawthorne envisions the frontier as the dark and ominous forests that terrify pious Puritan sensibilities, and for Mark Twain it is the destination where Huck Finn retreats from the imposing, contradictory forces of societal pressures and moral paradox. Interestingly, the frontier consistently remains a site of exploration and a destination for escape in the latter half of the nineteenth and early twentieth century as well. Jack London's deterministic Alaskan wilderness tests the strength, wits, and adaptive capabilities of Buck. The unknown chaos of combat challenges youthful naiveté via Stephen Crane's protagonist, Henry Fleming, in *The Red Badge of Courage*, and Frank Norris's *McTeague* presents the tale of the eponymous, grotesque character who flees from the greed, corruption, and competitive capitalist streets of San Francisco in a vain attempt to return to something more primitive and less touched by the emerging pressures of the burgeoning capitalist, industrialized landscape. Retrospectively, many scholars have convincingly argued that the frontier has been at the center of American literature, beginning as early as Christopher Columbus's fifteenth-century milk and honey accounts of the New World, and spanning the generations to arrive at our current consumption of war films, post-apocalyptic narratives, and salvific journeys that attempt to confront, if not reconcile the tensions and cultural anxieties that persist in our rapidly changing and uncertain postmodern world. In the fiction of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the traditional sprawling frontier

wilderness is geographically closed, so authors and artists now look to find new and inventive ways of recreating or reopening the frontier to suit their storytelling purposes.

Intrigued and inspired by the abundance of American frontier narratives, numerous scholars from a range of disciplines provide a number of insightful approaches to frontier mythology. In *Does the Frontier Experience Make America Exceptional* - a collection of scholarly essays concerning the influence of frontier mythology on America's past and present - historian Richard W. Etulain analyzes Turner's famous thesis, arguing that for Turner the definitive frontier experience "meant the physical movement of European settlers across the continent" (5). But as historians, critics, scholars, and authors have consistently demonstrated over the last century, the frontier experience was much more nuanced than the settler's westward exodus and conclusive settling of the continent following the initial stages of European colonization. Richard White, for example, provides a darker portrait of the frontier, arguing that "Buffalo Bill Cody produced a master narrative of the West as finished and culturally significant as Turner's own" (47). For Cody, specifically,

> The Wild West told a story of violent conquest, of the wresting of the continent from the hands of the American Indian peoples who held it already. Buffalo Bill's story was a fiction, but it was a performance that claimed to represent a history, for, like Turner, Buffalo Bill worked with real historical events and real historical figures. (White 47)

Adding to the complexities of America's continuously developing frontier mythology, Glenda Riley comments on the relatively ubiquitous omission of women from frontier narratives: "By ignoring women, Turner helped create a tunnel vision that his followers

perpetuated in the area of study he loved – sectionalism and the American West" (60). Given the expansive breadth and depth of conversations surrounding frontier mythology and the cultural impulses driving Horace Greeley's iconic call to "Go West, Young Man," it can be argued that even the more inclusive and intersectional narratives still rely, if not entirely depend, on the imagery and ideals of rugged individualism and self-reliance. This imagery and set of prescriptive ideals, in many ways, contributes to the shaping of what many still perceive to be the bedrock of America's national character and frontier mythology as a whole.

As a matter of significance, entering the frontier in either the reality of the past or in the space of fictional narrative, almost always requires a specific set of leadership roles, masculine characteristics, and performances, necessitated by the demands of the environment and the inherent hostility of the frontier space. Immersion in the space of this landscape depends upon contention with forces of environmental determinism, no matter the elasticity or variation of the frontier. While the frontier can act as a sanctuary, offering comfort and solace from numerous societal pressures and grievances, the frontier can also emerge a site of uncertainty and unforgiving hostility. Richard White effectively crystallizes these conceptualizations, commenting on both of these dimensions inherent to frontier mythology when he writes

> These are still essential stories because they are stories that define what being an American means. We still tell variants of both stories. And, indeed, for all the variant multicultural histories that the new western history introduces, these new histories will exist largely within the plotlines of these stories of conquest and stories of peaceful progress. (55)

In the current expanse of American fiction, the frontier remains a vehicle for the narratives compelled by these two impulses, one navigating a hostile world where existing dominance hierarchies and hegemonies have been upended or rejected and, therefore, must be ameliorated through painful recognitions and confrontations with chaos, human error, and misdeed, while the other engages the desire for societal escape and an urgent need for more meaningful identity realization.

In excavating the mythology and history of the Wild West, along with the lawless chaos that is inherent to such 'uncivilized' climates, frontiers have frequently been sensationally romanticized by authors and filmmakers alike, giving audiences fantastically harrowing accounts and experiences of what it meant to light out for the territories, and through risk, hard work, discipline, courage, fortitude, and strength, know that one might successfully carve out a piece of land and build a meaningful, honest life. Bordering on short-sighted idealism, however, Turner was contemptuous of sensationalized frontier representations perpetuated by the likes of Buffalo Bill Cody in his popular Wild West Show: "I have refrained from dwelling on the lawless characteristics of the frontier because they are sufficiently well known. The gambler, the desperado, the regulators of the Carolinas and the vigilantes of California, are types of that line of scum that the waves of advancing civilization bore before them . . ." (*Does the Frontier* 8-9). Claims like Turner's implicitly take a stance that altogether avoids any analysis of lawlessness or the ill-reputed while simultaneously suggesting that any subject that is "well-known" is not worth further inquiry. And although Turner was openly at odds with portraits of the west that could be found in the myriad dime novels of the late nineteenth-century - for their depictions of cowboys, savages, outlaws, and

violence - those popular conceptions of the frontier gained an increasing attractiveness to a mass consumer culture that was more than eager to discover tales of adventure, danger, and excitement in a perilous but potentially promising setting. Literary scholar Richard Poirier casts this impulse in the light of stylistic representation, noting that American works "are bathed in the myths of American history; they carry the metaphoric burden of a great dream of freedom – of the expansion of national consciousness into the vast spaces of a continent and the absorption of those spaces into ourselves" (3). And again, with the geographic closing of the frontier, authors would begin to imagine new and inventive ways of channeling these impulses and engaging the dream of freedom embedded in frontier mythology, while breathing new artistic life into this culturally monolithic narrative.

Poirier's alleged dreams of freedom that inform American mythology directly connect to many conceptions of the frontier, and the impulses behind such longings implicitly invoke a desire for socio-cultural escape. Facets of escapist desire get thoroughly investigated in Leo Marx's 1964 critical work, *The Machine in the Garden*, in which he explores what is commonly-known as the pastoral ideal and how various manifestations of this ideal influence American literature by way of the escape-driven narrative.[1] Providing the necessary context, Marx defines the pastoral ideal in American writing as the importing and reconfiguring of the classically European "ruling motive of the good shepherd, leading figure of the classic, Virgilian mode . . . to withdraw from the

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[1] For the sake of clarity and future reference, whenever I refer to Marx, I am referring to Leo Marx, not to be confused with Karl Marx, unless otherwise explicitly noted.

great world and begin a new life in a fresh, green landscape" (3). According to Marx, after Europeans discovered the new "virgin continent" of America,

> it seemed that mankind might actually realize what had been thought a
> poetic fantasy. Soon the dream of a retreat into an oasis of harmony and
> joy was removed from its traditional literary context. It was embodied in
> the various utopian schemes for making America the site of a new
> beginning for Western society. In both forms – one literary and the other
> in essence political – the ideal has figured in the American view of life . . .
> (3)

Marx also asks the question as to why so many narratives throughout American literature depict an escapist desire to return to a simplistic, often more primitive way of life. In the context of the modernized twentieth century from which he writes, he asks an important question: "What possible bearing can the urge to idealize a simple, rural environment have upon the lives of men lead in an intricately organized, urban, industrial, nuclear-armed society?" (5) Of course, Marx goes on to investigate the potential motives behind seemingly pathological escapist flights of fancy from urban environments, only to relocate to simpler, calmer, greener pastures as a means of sanctuary from the tenuous, often debilitating pressures that comprise living in an increasingly industrialized, capitalist-driven socio-cultural landscape. One of the more interesting possible answers to this query, especially as it relates to this study's analysis of masculinities, comes from Sigmund Freud who also observed that many people harbored hostile feelings and attitudes towards civilization (Marx 9). Freud reaches the conclusion, "an avowedly speculative one," in Marx's interpretation, "that such attitudes are the product of

profound, long-standing discontent. He interprets them as widespread frustration and repression" (9). Considering Freud's conclusion to be within the realm of reasonable possibility, Marx then asks the million-dollar question: "Can it be that our institutions and cultural standards are enforcing an increasingly painful, almost unbearable degree of privation of instinct? If so, this might well explain the addiction of modern man to puerile fantasies" (9). As puerile as some of these escapist fantasies may very well be, depending on who we ask, there remains no shortage of writers or people from all walks of life throughout America's past or present that call upon the frontier as a vehicle for escaping the burdens of Western society in an attempt to discover and/or reshape their masculine identities into models that are more fulfilling and interestingly just so happen to be tied to our evolutionary past. Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* illustrates such sentiments through the actions and beliefs of his primary character Tyler Durden, who organizes an all-out assault on modern American consumer culture and its symbolic representations, urging the men around him to imagine more meaningful, primitive ways of collectivist and utilitarian living. The rejection of both civilization and modernization becomes an integral part of the escape-process in the frontier narrative, and the reconfiguration of masculinities therein is regularly achieved, if only temporarily, through navigating the liminal space of the frontier.

Another integral and equally useful way of explaining the desire to escape the pressures and constraints of civilization comes from a more current scholarly analysis of American culture than that of Marx's. Sebastian Junger's critical interrogation of modern America takes shape in his book, *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging*, in which the search for causes behind modern anxiety and existential malaise, ascertained earlier by

Marx and Freud, can be discovered by looking to Europeans' first encounters with the

tribalized indigenous peoples of North America during the decades of conquest and

colonization. In accounting for the same cultural discontent outlined in *The Machine in*

the Garden, Junger traces the escapist phenomenon as far back as the initial and

subsequent contact between two diametrically opposed ways of living. Junger writes of

the tension between two disparate cultural modes of existence that

> the proximity of these two cultures [Native American and white European]
>
> over the course of many generations presented both sides with a stark
>
> choice about how to live. By the end of the nineteenth century, factories
>
> were being built in Chicago and slums were taking root in New York . . .
>
> It may say something about human nature that a surprising number of
>
> Americans – mostly men – wound up joining Indian society rather than
>
> staying in their own . . . And the opposite almost never happened: Indians
>
> almost never ran away to join white society. Emigration always seemed to
>
> go from the civilized to the tribal, and it left Western thinkers flummoxed
>
> about how to explain such an apparent rejection of their society. (2)

And as the primary works in this project will illustrate, the preference for a more tribal

way of living over Western civilization's trappings has a major role to play in the shaping

of masculine identities via a journey of escape into the frontier. Throughout his cultural

investigation, Junger insightfully integrates the nuances of tribal impulse and sentiment

as additional, essential components of Marx's escapist thesis.

At this point, it is important to mention that one of the most thoroughly

comprehensive, if not definitive analyses of American frontier mythology comes in the

form of Richard Slotkin's scholarly frontier trilogy, the works of which include

Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier 1600-1860,

The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization 1800-

1890, and *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in 20ᵗʰ-Century America*. In

Gunfighter Nation, Slotkin conceptualizes the shaping of twentieth-century frontier

mythologies, subsequent to frontier closure, in the form of two thematically elemental

styles, both of which convey specific ideologies. And though both iterations of the

frontier, "progressive" and "populist," are not mutually exclusive, nor diametrically

opposed, their definitions are useful in determining how they shape(d) the course of

American ideals, politics, culture, and democratic institutions. Slotkin argues that the

progressive style

> uses the Frontier Myth in ways that buttress the ideological assumptions
>
> and political aims of a corporate economy and a managerial politics. It
>
> reads the history of savage warfare and westward expansion as a Social
>
> Darwinian parable, explaining the emergence of a new managerial ruling
>
> class and justifying its right to subordinate lesser classes to its purposes
>
> (*Gunfighter Nation* 22).

This progressive style, for instance, becomes pointedly evinced in Stephen Hunter's

novel *Pale Horse Coming* by, among other means, presenting the pseudo-scientific

arguments grounded in the biological determinism that spawned Jim Crow laws and fed

racial tensions in the American south during the middle of the twentieth century. The

populist style, on the other hand, "developed in reaction to the emergence of the

corporate/industrial economy and the political claims of its proprietors and managers. Its

ideological premises combined the agrarian imagery of Jeffersonianism with the belief in economic individualism and mobility characteristic of pre-Civil War 'free labor' ideology" (*Gunfighter Nation* 22). In accounting for both of these styles in contemporary America's artistic production, Slotkin continues:

> In the fictive or mythic 'space' defined by the genres of mass culture, the primary contradictions of value and belief embodied in the ideological styles of progressives and populists were continuously 'entertained' – imaginatively played out in story-forms that either tested ideological propositions against the traditional values embodied in myth or invited the projection of utopian visions of a 'possible' or 'alternative' outcome of the nation's historical travail. (*Gunfighter Nation* 24)

These two styles of representation are invariably manifested in contemporary American literature. Cormac McCarthy, for example, explores the tensions that surface between the tropes and narrative conventions of the heroic western, juxtaposing naïve optimism and overestimated self-reliance with pessimistic environmental and existential determinism. Similarly, Matt Ross's 2016 film, *Captain Fantastic*, investigates the polarizing friction that arises between cultural conformity and an individualism that moves away from the mind-numbing extrinsic values of consumer culture, resulting in an existential look towards a possible reconciliation of two extremes.

Author and 2003 Pulitzer Prize winner, Stephen Hunter navigates both of Slotkin's delineated styles of frontier configuration, paying close attention to the values and shifting ideals of the post-World War II generation. One of Hunter's main protagonists, Earl Swagger, is a decorated war hero who fought in the brutal Pacific

theater, receiving the Congressional Medal of Honor from president Harry S. Truman

upon his return to life as a civilian. Hunter renders Swagger as a typical frontier hero:

battle-hardened, laconic, tragic, and above all, a man of action with a profound sense of

duty as it concerns coming to the aid of others. The frontiers he navigates in his journeys

range from the Pacific atolls of the war and urban hotbeds of debauchery, to the

backwoods swamps of Mississippi and the highway patrols of a state trooper. In short,

Swagger can be read as what Hunter characterizes as the last of a dying breed, a

generation of masculine heroes that no longer have a place in a post-masculine world of

rapidly increasing modernity, civility, law, and order where the masculine performances

of men like Earl Swagger draw ever closer to obsolescence, as state and federal control

increasingly permeate all facets of society, rendering masculinities like Earl's

unnecessary beyond the groups of people whose jobs demand specific traits and skill sets.

However, within most of Hunter's novels and a broader frontier context as well, the

lawlessness and chaos that Frederick Jackson Turner rebuked remain principal agents of

the frontier, and it seems that particular models of masculinity emerge as not only ideal,

but necessary when disorder threatens democratic institutions, moral and ethical decency.

In fact, it seems as though only the models of masculinity shaped by rugged

individualism, self-reliance, and tribal sentiment remain capable of confronting and

defeating particular threats, especially when cooperation, reason, and morality become

overwhelmed by irrational and corrupting influences.

    The implication by now is that when one sees or hears the words "American

frontier," a particular set of images invariably comes to mind, many of which are derived

from the Western genre and the silhouette of a lone gunslinger heroically riding off into

the sunset. Such as the case may be, Annette Kolodny's scholarship adds depth and nuance to conceptual perceptions of the frontier when she writes: "my reformulation of the term 'frontier' comes to mean . . . the borderlands, that liminal landscape of changing meanings on which distinct human cultures first encounter one another's 'otherness' and appropriate, accommodate, or domesticate it through language" ("Letting Go . . ." 9). Kolodny incorporates Gloria Anzaldúa's work on the hybridization of culture, ethnicity, and language within the context of racial conflict and the colonization of the American continent by Europeans. Her reformulation of the frontier to become a "liminal landscape of changing meanings" can also extend to include various representations, performances, and models of masculinity influenced by the thematic concerns found in many frontier narratives. More specifically, for many characters throughout American literature, the frontier exists as both a destination and transformative liminal space where characters venture to attempt to change, reinvent and renew masculine identities.

Gender and the Frontier

In approaching a study of the frontier in American literature, an analysis of masculinity in relation to the frontier itself helps further an understanding of the masculine representations that emerge throughout artistic renderings of journeys into chaos and hardship. The use of the term masculinities in its pluralized form linguistically signifies how the models and ideals that influence masculine performance remain in a relative state of flux throughout time and across cultures. As oft-cited gender theorist R.W. Connell writes, "There is no masculine entity whose occurrences in all society we

can generalize about" (43). This fluidity becomes self-evident by observing the many women and non-white, non-heteronormative men who perform masculinity in accordance with hegemonic cultural norms and outside of these norms as well. Providing a clearer example of shifting socio-cultural examples of masculine performance, one could look to the English model of the Victorian dandy, once seen as the pinnacle of masculinity in its era and geographic locale. However, making a transatlantic jump to the United States during the same time period shows that many American men in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries aspired to embody less effete, more rugged models of manhood. For instance, during the 1840 presidential campaign in which William Henry Harrison ran against Martin Van Buren, "Harrison's background and his more 'manly virtues' enabled him to overcome and outmasculinize Van Buren who, according to his critics, 'wore corsets, put cologne on his whiskers, slept on French beds, rode in a British coach, and ate with golden spoons from silver plates'" (Griffin 95). Other influential men in the national spotlight, like Theodore Roosevelt, also began setting more rugged standards of what it meant to demonstrate masculinity, entirely avoiding and rejecting anything that might be perceived as effeminate. This rejection, in part, can largely be traced to the socio-cultural rise of so-called rugged individualism and how its prescriptive set of masculine ideals conflicted with femininity or anything else seen as potentially emasculating.

Contributing to the understanding of how masculine performance was influenced in nineteenth-century America, sociologist and masculinities theorist Michael Kimmel, in *The History of Men*, comments on the relevance of the cultural impact resulting from the relegation of men to the workplace and women to the domestic sphere:

The separation of spheres had transformed the 19th-century middle-class

home into a virtual feminine theme park – where well-mannered and well-

dressed children played quietly in heavily draped and carpeted parlors, and

adults chatted amiably over tea served from porcelain services. This

delightful contrast to the aggressive business world made men feel uneasy

in their own homes, even as they themselves felt exiled from it . . . In their

view, men had to wriggle free from these feminine, feminizing clutches –

ironically, the very clutches that male insecurity had created to free the

workplace of female competition and to make the home into a man's

castle and thus preserve patriarchal authority . . . Men were suddenly

terrified of feminization in the very homes they had created, and now

yearned to escape or at least more clearly demarcate themselves from

women. (20-21)

Kimmel's argument recounts a widespread attempt by middle-class men to define their

masculinity in opposition to or dominance of femininity while illustrating the rejection of

domesticated models of masculinity, thus providing one more of many examples of how

masculinities always remain open to challenge and subversion.

Understanding that masculine values and ideals shift, however, makes it difficult

to pin down static definitions of masculinity, and leads to the claim that masculinities can

be more solidly defined and understood – especially in the context of the frontier – when

examined in relation to one another, though perhaps not solely in terms of patriarchal

power and privilege. After all, cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker writes that when

considering our current bodies of scientific knowledge and understanding, "evolutionary

psychology is documenting a web of motives other than group-against-group dominance (such as love, sex, family, and beauty) that entangle us in many conflicts and confluences of interest with members of the same sex and of the opposite sex" (341). Through an examination and interrogation of masculinities, it becomes increasingly apparent that the frontier provides a narrative landscape that permits revealing cultural and evolutionary analyses. Accordingly, such analyses become meaningful in that the frontier offers a liminal space through which masculinities were and still are constructed in American culture, giving us the aspirational models, abject failures, and numerous complexities that arise between these poles.

However, before moving further into a dissection of masculinities, it is important to understand two competing, though not necessarily incompatible schools of thought concerning gender and sex. One of these schools, often labeled and defined as social constructivism, was born of the mid-twentieth century postmodern emphasis on fluidity of meaning and the relationships between power dynamics, most often attributed to the theoretical work of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler's seminal, constructivist approach to gender. As of late, specifically spearheading the scholarly study of masculinities in this theoretical context is Australian sociologist R.W. Connell, whose work combines the Marxist concept of cultural hegemony and a constructivist, Butlerian approach to masculinities. The critical theory of gender put forth in *Masculinities,* perhaps Connell's most significant contribution to the field, delineates a paradigm of patriarchal power and a dominance hierarchy with hegemonic masculinity situated at the apex. Furthermore, she argues that Antonio Gramsci's theoretical, hegemonic power structure is systemically linked to the construction and performance of masculinities: "To recognize diversity in

masculinities is not enough. We must also recognize the *relations* between the different kinds of masculinity: relations of alliance, dominance and subordination" (37). In a literary context, these power dynamics arise in an abundance of narratives. For instance, with regard to this project, Stephen Hunter's novel *Pale Horse Coming* provides multiple, varied, and interesting representations of competing masculinities that simultaneously clash and vie for dominant positions of cultural power and legitimacy, whether it be in relation to person to person, group to group, or environment to person. Similarly, authors Jack London, E.D.E.N. Southworth, Chuck Palahniuk, and Cormac McCarthy accomplish the same ends, testing and interrogating masculinities in various ways that lead to insightful conclusions about attaining meaningful masculine identity realization along with gleaning what can be considered the shortcomings of certain masculine performances.

Another key figure from the constructivist camp of analyzing masculinities is sociologist Michael Kimmel, whose work relies heavily on theorizing hegemonic masculinities in relation to subordinated and marginalized models of manhood in the United States. He argues that "Manhood is less about the drive for domination and more about the fear of others dominating us, having power or control over us" (5). Providing a referential artistic context in this light, both the novel *Fight Club* and the film *Captain Fantastic* offer representations of men (and women) who totally reject socio-cultural norms and hegemonic models of masculinity, as those models often carry the capacity for exploitation, isolation, alienation, dehumanization, and psychological debilitation. And although the straight white male has, over the last several decades, become synonymous with power and privilege for various reasons, that is not to imply that masculinities and

the hegemonic models purveyed as aspirational by culture are always positively meaningful, ideal, or even necessary. Rather, the changing models of hegemonic masculinities perpetuated in American culture are enacted in relation to constantly shifting dominance hierarchies and often become performed for the sake of maintenance and a consolidation of cultural power. For instance, in her novel, *Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison's character, Milkman, provides readers with a cautionary example of an African American man who has culturally assimilated to dominant, white hegemonic constructions of culture and masculinity imparted via the colonized mind and dogmatic attitudes enforced by his father, Macon Dead. Both Macon and Milkman have co-opted and assimilated to a cultural model of affluent whiteness that informs their masculine performances and situates them in varying positions of relative power and privilege. Both the father and son in Morrison's novel attempt to define their identities through the accumulation of possessions, material wealth, and status, but as a consequence become isolated and alienated from the tribal sentiments of their own black community, the unfortunate result of espousing superficial extrinsic values, airs of superiority, and indifference, while capitalizing on racially systematized socio-economic disparity. Interestingly, however, Milkman sets out on a journey into the liminal space of the frontier and reconnects with a more meaningful ancestral past altogether removed from his former, hegemonically complicit identity.

By taking the social constructivist approach as a useful piece of a larger explanatory puzzle, relational categories of masculinities emerge in this framework that place a primary, if not singular emphasis on privilege and power. Masculinities, according to this way of thinking, acquire legitimacy when they are culturally agreed

upon. In such a framework, hegemony and hegemonic masculinities are "likely to be established only if there is some correspondence between cultural ideal and institutional power, collective if not individual" (Connell 77). Theorizing masculinity in this manner produces hegemonic, subordinate, and marginalized masculinities, categories under which any performance of masculinity arguably falls. Necessarily expanding on these categorical designations, Dean Lusher and Garry Robins outline the specifics of these relational definitions:

> The terms *complicit*, *subordinate*, and *marginalized* masculinities describe other configurations of masculinity, which sit in relation to hegemonic masculinity in a hierarchy of masculinities. Complicit masculinities refer to those configurations which support the dominance of hegemonic masculinity configuration, thus referring to the majority of men. Subordinate masculinities represent those that undermine the goals of dominative hegemonic masculinity, with gay and academically inclined men presented as examples due to their association with femininity. Finally, marginalized masculinities represent complex configurations and interactions that occur when masculinity and other factors such as socio-economic status and ethno-cultural background intersect with gender. (22-23)

Again, these categories contribute to an understanding of how and why masculinities interact with one another as they do within frontier mythology, often competing not just with one another but the socio-cultural values, norms, and moral sentiments that inform their performances. As it concerns traditional or conventional frontier masculinities, (like

that of Hawkeye, whose ruggedness, strength, courage, self-reliance, and morality relate to the tribal sentiments depicted in James Fenimore Cooper's novels) certain hegemonic performances similarly become established as a basis for aspirational and successful frontier masculinities. Such masculinities are not necessarily enacted out of a desire for cultural approval either – quite the contrary in many cases – but they arise and exist because of the narrative requirement that characters confront the chaos and violence innate to frontier mythology.

Due to the inherent violence in frontier narratives, an established, idealized version of hegemonic masculinity emerges that has remained quite consistent throughout artistic representations of the frontier. For the sake of further clarity, hegemonic masculinity, as defined by Connell, is "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (77). As well supported as Connell's claim often is, both in life and the arts, traditional frontier masculinities present versions of hegemonic masculinity not necessarily performed or sustained by the dominance of men over women, though the formation of hierarchies inevitably emerges in goal-oriented endeavors, such as successful frontier navigation. Instead, the masculinities that appear in the space of the frontier tend to emerge from the absolute need for competence when it comes to engaging and competing with the chaos and violence that stem from various, era-specific frontier conflicts. Rather than think solely in terms of a vast, conspiratorial hegemony that thrives on the subjugation of women, non-heteronormative gender identities, and people of color, as compelling as the evidence is in many cases, the masculinities rendered throughout

American fiction often produce what can just as accurately and insightfully be thought of as situationally-prescriptive hegemonic masculinities, necessitated by confrontations with frontier chaos. Nor are hegemonic frontier masculinities always characterized by racism, misogyny, or homophobia, hallmarks of what is often described today as toxic masculinity. Masculinities in the frontier are just as likely to be virtuous and born of a moral culture's connection to tribal impulses, the positive aspects of rugged individualism enacted on behalf of others, and the absence of an effective, interventionist Leviathan that can or will act on behalf of a person's safety and well-being.

Before moving into the biological side of the scholarly debate, it should be noted that the power dynamics and hegemonies delineated by social constructivists like Michael Kimmel and R.W. Connell have a crucial role in the paradigmatic constructions of dominance hierarchies and lived realities of American life. The analysis of gender through a constructivist lens, however, appears to be but a piece, significant as it is, of a larger puzzle. As many scholars argue, studies of gender that place an exclusive premium on socially constructed forces governed by power dynamics tend to overlook contributions from the sciences and ignore the vast range of human motivations that exist outside of the realm of systemic power structures. In his remarkably comprehensive work, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*, cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker addresses a number of concerns regarding the tensions between conclusive scientific data and the gender politics that prop up many social constructivists' arguments. By way of an example, he notes that "Feminism is widely seen as being opposed to the sciences of human nature. Many of those scientists believe that the minds of the two sexes differ at birth, and feminists have pointed out that such beliefs have long

been used to justify the unequal treatment of women" (338). Such a statement's truth

becomes self-evident when reviewing the litany of "scientifically-backed" claims that

once shaped discriminatory and dehumanizing legislative policies that were undeniably

sexist and/or bigoted. The physical and psychological horrors of Jim Crow laws, rest-

cures, women's forced relegation to marriage markets along with subsequent internment

in domestic spheres, and the lack of agency with regard to reproductive rights, a battle

that still rages on, were all supported by "scientific" arguments used as means of

oppression, to say nothing of the pseudo-scientific practices of eugenics and phrenology

that contributed to unthinkable violence and mass genocide. However, theoretical

approaches to gender and sex that dismiss the validity and relevance of *current* scientific

studies too often reveal underlying, if not overt, reactionary ideological and political

overcorrections which help fuel the existing polarizations situated within contemporary

intellectual discourse, despite the abundance of remarkable advances made through

modern scientific achievement.

In an attempt to reconcile this intellectual polarity, *The Blank Slate* lays bare an

urgently fundamental claim: "There is, in fact, no incompatibility between the principles

of feminism and the possibility that men and women are not psychologically identical"

(Pinker 340). Pinker emphatically continues for the sake of unmistakable clarity: "To

repeat: equality is not the empirical claim that that all groups of humans are

interchangeable; it is the moral principle that individuals should not be judged or

constrained by the average properties of their group . . . what we do know about the sexes

does not call for any action that would penalize or constrain one sex or another" (340). In

other words, the sciences, particularly today, are not necessarily beholden to the

deterministic consequences of subjugation, victimization, and oppression of the benighted past. Furthermore, the principal goal of all intellectual pursuits, ideally, is the arrival at some sort of truth and understanding. Accordingly, "gender cannot possibly be ignored in the science of human beings. The sexes are as old as complex life and are a fundamental topic in evolutionary biology, genetics, and behavioral ecology. To disregard them in the case of our own species would be to make a hash of our understanding of our place in the cosmos" (Pinker 340). And as I will continually maintain, both the sciences and the constructivism primarily found in the humanities, when brought together, give us a clearer picture of the highly intricate mosaic that encompasses life and human experiences, and by extension brings us closer to a more fully realized and accurate understanding of how frontier mythology interacts with and influences both masculinities and American culture.

Situating current scientific discourse within the field of literary studies, recent scholarly journals and a number of academics both employ and critique such efforts. Jonathan Greenberg summarizes what has become branded as "literary Darwinism," and helps explain the reasoning that compels several aspects of my own methodological approach when he writes:

> The basic premise of literary Darwinism is that because the human brain is a product of evolutionary adaptation, and because literature is a product of the human brain, then principles of evolutionary biology can be profitably extended to literature – first to literature as a general cultural entity (why it came about), then to broad literary categories and structures such

> narrative, genre, and meter, and finally to the analysis or interpretation of
>
> particular works. (425)

Of course, many remain skeptical and even object to incorporating the sciences into the

field of literary studies. However, as Greenberg notes, the two journals *Philosophy and*

Literature and *Poetics Today* "have already offered special issues more strictly devoted

to literary Darwinism and collections of essays are now appearing alongside individually

authored volumes" (425). And though detractors will inevitably – and should – arise to

take issue with nearly any mode of intellectual discourse, Pinker arrives at a conclusion

that supports the universal footing of literary Darwinism as well, writing:

> Ultimately what draws us to a work of art is not just the sensory
>
> experience of the medium but its emotional content and insight into the
>
> human condition. And these tap into the timeless tragedies of our
>
> biological predicament: our mortality, our finite knowledge and wisdom,
>
> the differences among us, and out conflicts of interest with friends,
>
> neighbors, relatives, and lovers. All are topics of the sciences of human
>
> nature. (418)

Furthermore, just as it was and still is common practice to psychoanalyze a character (a

Jungian interpretation of the unconscious role of the shadow in Hawthorne's "Young

Goodman Brown" comes to mind), and many literary scholars consider this to be a run-

of-the-mill, acceptable theoretical approach – even though a work or character might

have been authored and disseminated long before Freud's time – I argue that

incorporating the sciences into literary analysis relies upon and maintains the exact sort

of universal footing and/or purchase that commonly accepted approaches like

psychoanalysis, myth criticism, and deconstruction depend upon when making claims that art exists independently of the culture from which it emerges. Such a rationale might not be entirely persuasive to some, but I will continue to make the case nonetheless because the insight derived therein remains significant to our understanding of humanity's evolution in tandem with productions of culture.

Shifting focus toward the relevant direction of crystallizing sex differences and the models of masculinity that would be optimal for navigating and surviving an inhospitable frontier, Steven Pinker offers biological arguments related to cultural and behavioral influences that are just as compelling as constructivist theories. Importantly, Pinker foregrounds his approach with a relevant interrogation of the linguistic presuppositions that underlie many constructivist claims, particularly those advanced by deconstructionists who insist "language is a self-contained system in which words have no necessary connection to reality. And since language is an arbitrary instrument, not a medium for communicating thoughts or describing reality, the powerful can use it to manipulate and oppress others" (208). The reasoning behind Pinker's – and many others' – resistance to such claims arises, in part, because "the idea that language is a prisonhouse denigrates its subject by overestimating its power" and that "virtually all cognitive scientists and linguists believe that language is not a prisonhouse of thought" because language is not the same as thought (208-210). Furthermore, and in laying out one of many potential stakes of the outcome, Pinker contends that we protect ourselves from the manipulation of social realities

> by pinpointing the vulnerabilities of our faculties of categorization,
>
> language, and imagery, not by denying their complexity. The view that

humans are passive receptacles of stereotypes, words, and images is

condescending to ordinary people . . . And exotic pronouncements about

the limitations of our faculties, such as there is nothing outside the text or

that we inhabit a world of images rather than a real world, make it

impossible even to identify lies and misrepresentations, let alone to

understand how they are promulgated. (217-218)

Pinker's approach lays out a useful framework for discussions and analyses of sex and

gender, in the contexts of the frontier and real-world analogs, challenging the

implications of thinking solely in terms of power and privilege which often result in one-

sided and therefore limited understandings of humanity's vast complexities, motivations,

and intrinsic needs.

Aside from Pinker's aforementioned arguments and his other numerous issues

with claims about the relationships between language and power, Pinker explores

gendered traits in numerous cultural contexts as well, attempting to reach a common

denominator while corroborating some of constructivist claims, reminding us that "many

sex-differences, of course, have nothing to do with biology. Hair styles and dress vary

capriciously across centuries and cultures, and in recent decades participation in

universities, professions, and sports has switched from mostly male to fifty-fifty or

mostly female" (345). However, Pinker, takes significant issue with arguments insisting

"that *all* sex differences, other than the anatomical ones, come from the expectations of

parents, playmates, and society" (346). He writes:

the pink-and-blue theory is becoming less and less credible. . . . Sex

differences are not an arbitrary feature of Western culture . . . Women

have more intimate social relationships, are more concerned about them,

and feel more empathy toward their friends . . . In all human cultures, men

and women are seen as having different natures. . . . In all cultures men are

more aggressive, more prone to stealing, more prone to lethal violence

(including war) . . . (345-346)

This list of traits certainly parallels the characteristics of rugged individualism (explained

in more detail on page 50 of this chapter) and their connections to both masculinities and

navigating the chaos of the frontier. Such evidence, however, cannot entirely discount the

role of socialization, nor does it claim to, but it does underscore the influence and

significance of biological imperative. And as both Junger and Pinker point out, both sets

of gendered traits have particular advantages when it comes to group survival. In the

space of the frontier, again, sex differences and gendered performances can be an asset,

and neither function as necessarily beholden to deterministic opinions or forces that insist

that women and men are only suited for particular roles. Individuals vary and there is

nothing that can generally be said about a group that is not challenged or subverted by

outliers and exceptions that exist on a bell curve. Both sexes have specific trait

advantages when it comes to frontier navigation, but neither sex can be said to have an

absolute monopoly on those advantages.

Finally, a necessary deviation from the constructivist lens is well articulated by

Jonathan Gottschall when he writes:

To be timid, muscularly weak, and emotionally shaky is now and always

has been unmasculine. Masculinity is not a cultural invention. It is not the

result of a conspiracy by men against women. It is a real thing that has

evolved over millions of years as a response to the built-in competitive

realities of male life. This isn't to suggest that masculinity is entirely

innate, leaving no room for cultural variation . . . But the differences

would be of degree, not kind. (77)

Given masculinity's connectedness to strength and the competitive realities of life, it

should come as no surprise that the frontier was and still remains an extraordinarily active

site for the shaping, testing, and expression of many masculine qualities, especially

strength and its various manifestations. It should also be made clear, again, that men do

not have a monopoly on these qualities, nor do all men seek or possess them since our

modern, relatively affluent lives have rendered many traditionally masculine

performances obsolete as we have experienced a major socio-cultural departure from the

survival needs and impulses that formerly comprised the bulk of human existence.

However, the frontier, particularly the three main categories this project will explore,

undoubtedly require strength, aggression, a willingness to confront violence, cunning,

and courage, if one is to survive, let alone thrive in a wilderness or any other chaotic

space teeming with varying degrees of hardship. And if Michael Kimmel is correct in

asserting that the frontier was once a typically masculinist retreat, he is correct insomuch

as the nature of the frontier demands masculine performances, but there is no immutable

requirement that insists men singularly venture into the frontier to escape the so-called

clutches of feminization. Just as important as it is to perform masculinity in accordance

with how the frontier dictates, an escape from the debilitating aspects of "civilization"

and society via retreat into the frontier acts as a means of returning to our evolved,

tribally inter-reliant past and become integral components of what characterizes all of the works that will be analyzed in this study.

       Continuing to trace the lines of demarcation between constructivist and biological approaches to gender, Michael Kimmel makes observations that reveal his motivations for siding with the postmodernists' dedication to the potential liberation that resides in the fluidity of meaning:

> We pro-feminist men are still waiting for the weekend warriors to come home, and to fight alongside women, alongside gay men and lesbians, alongside people of color in what will be the most challenging battle of our lives: to create a democratic manhood, a manhood based on equality, a manhood that is as at home with itself inside the house as it is out in the woods. (*The History of Men* 35)

Indeed, Kimmel's progressive aims are pointed toward egalitarianism in the context of social dominance hierarchies and the idea that performances of masculinity should not always entail a flight from society, hoping that some men may indeed change for the better. Further problematizing the testing of manhood, according to Kimmel, journeys into the frontier can only offer brief or even momentary solace: "the respite has only been temporary, and either must be constantly renewed in ever more bizarre ritual appropriations, or they lapse into the same politics of resentment and exclusion of antifeminism and racism" (*The History of Men* 35). Claims like these, well-intended as they clearly are, might also be interpreted as reductionist and beholden to biased value judgments about the way things ought to be, overlooking the potentially salvific possibilities that are often a positive consequence of escapist retreat for men and women

alike. And while it remains true that many (though not all) frontier narratives present salvific possibilities that cannot be permanently sustained, this does not prevent artists from attempting to explore the possible ways in which sustainability becomes a viable option. In this way, many frontier narratives offer instructive and cautionary masculinities that achieve or fail to conform to the values and moral cultures that each specific work engages. *Fight Club*, *Captain Fantastic*, and *Song of Solomon*, for instance, all act as counter-narratives to Kimmel's temporality thesis, as the characters in these works, in various ways, reject demonstrably harmful, culturally imposed institutions, such as industrialized food production, conspicuous consumption, and non-critical cultural conformity, none of which contribute to any sort of meaningful identity realization, but instead, exponentially increase the likelihood for clinical depression, illness, violence, isolation, and psychological trauma. Through their rejection of these qualities of American lifestyle pressures, many characters actually find a comfort and solace that does offer the promise of permanence and meaningful stability, especially when it arrives by way of meaningful assimilation into some form of tribal, group cohesion. And while the characters in many works, such as those just mentioned, might not entirely live "happily-ever-after," artistic attempts to reconcile the tensions that arise between culture and biology, and individuals who fall under the sway of both persist nonetheless.

Our Tribal Ancestry

Another example of a useful, broader way of exploring masculinities and their relationship to the frontier, offers a merging of cultural anthropology with evolutionary psychology. In his profoundly revealing work, *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging*, Sebastian Junger charts the path of what he terms the "de-tribalization" of Western society and the far-reaching consequences such a socio-cultural shift has wrought upon American life. Much of Junger's investigation examines the social dynamics and individual pressures that unfold through an analysis of inter-reliant tribal frontier life while focusing on our movement away from the social structuring of tribalism, a stratified and largely egalitarian order of living that has become increasingly atrophied in modern life but was the necessary social paradigm that contributed massively to human survival, evolution, and progress. Similarly, and as previously mentioned, Junger's approach offers depth and nuance to Marx's escapist thesis by incorporating the significant roles of tribal impulse and sentiment.

In *Tribe*, Junger convincingly argues that post-industrial life in America (and many other first-world nations) is characteristically problematized by existential malaise, alarmingly exponential rises in depression and suicide, ubiquitous feelings of disconnect, purposelessness, and despair. To put it more bluntly, "Modern society has perfected the art of making people not feel necessary" (xvii). Fascinatingly, the roots of these existential dilemmas, in the American context at least, can be traced as far back as early colonization efforts by European settlers and the remarkable fact that numerous whites willingly left the familiarity of Western civilization and assimilated into Native American tribal cultures, a phenomenon Richard Slotkin calls "Indianization" (*Regeneration* 123).

Conversely, as Benjamin Franklin once observed, and as Junger now writes: the reverse almost never happened; it was extremely rare for a Native American to willingly run off to join white society (Junger 2). This is not to say that white *captives* shared the same sentiments: "Some were content with their new families and some were not, but collectively they were of enormous political concern to the colonial authorities" (Junger 4). Overwhelmingly, however, Native American societies offered that which their white counterparts did not, and the following list obviously progresses in an ascending order of importance: "Indian clothing was more comfortable, Indian religion was less harsh, and Indian society was essentially classless and egalitarian . . . For all of the temptations of native life, one of the most compelling might have been its fundamental egalitarianism" (Junger 14). Furthermore, the interpersonal disconnection, rise in mass-shootings, and ubiquitous mental illnesses that permeate our contemporary society raise a number of glaring red flags and interesting questions. I defer again to Junger, who writes: "Numerous cross-cultural studies have shown that modern society – despite its nearly miraculous advances in medicine, science, and technology – is afflicted with some of the highest rates of depression, schizophrenia, poor health, anxiety, and chronic loneliness in human history" (18-19). This conclusion speaks directly to Marx's and Freud's earlier inquiries in this chapter, and it is no wonder that Americans (and other cultures) have a continued fascination with the frontier, as it represents potential escape from the current debilitations and confines of our postmodern condition. The frontier simultaneously provides us with the landscape that allows us to reimagine our individual and collective identities through the rejection of and escape from that which has the capacity to be absolutely soul-crushing, the specifics of which include but are not limited to the inherent

isolation that comes with navigating a highly individualistic culture, the never-ending grind of the work week, and a relentless cultural emphasis on meaningless consumption and accumulation.

Throughout his commentary on how individuals become shaped by a tribal culture or lack thereof, Junger also discusses the practicing of rites of passage that young men often endured as demonstrations of manhood and readiness, the majority of which are all but absent in modern society. He writes that

> Modern society obviously doesn't conduct initiations on its young men, but many boys still do their best to demonstrate their readiness for manhood in all kinds of clumsy and dangerous ways. They drive too fast, get into fights, haze each other, play sports, join fraternities, drink too much, and gamble with their lives in a million idiotic ways. Girls generally don't take those kinds of risks, and as a result, boys in modern society die by violence and accidents at many times the rate than girls do. (37-38)

Concerning such observations on masculinities, biological and/or socially influenced, an analogous impulse reveals how the relationship between young men and some form of frontier emerges: "To the extent that boys are drawn to war [or the frontier], it may be less out of an interest in violence than a longing for the kind of maturity and respect that often come with it" (Junger 38). And it is this maturity and respect that is of innate value if one is a member of a tribe or group whose dependence on inter-reliance for survival is of supreme importance. And as it stands, the frontier is necessarily a landscape where inter-reliance, maturity, honor, loyalty, trust, and respect become paramount if one is to

survive the hostilities and chaos of the frontier and arrive at a meaningful masculine

identity realization shaped by the influence of intrinsic values of autonomy,

connectedness, and competence as opposed to extrinsic values that rarely, if ever, enable

a realized combination of these self-determining rewards needed for positive

psychological individuation.

I cannot overstate the fact that the chaos and violence inherent to frontier

narratives often create scenarios in which people must cooperatively band together or

likely die in failing to do so. Analogous situations arise in the real world beyond fiction,

and the manner in which people emerge from the wreckage of catastrophic tragedies

reveals much about human nature. In the Springhill Mine of Nova Scotia in 1958, a

seismic geological event caused the mine to collapse, tragically trapping nineteen men in

the coal shafts and killing seventy-four (Junger 61). Interestingly, facing starvation,

dehydration, and death, two types of leadership necessarily emerged, as described by

Canadian psychologists who analyzed the tragedy as a case study and published their

findings. During the initial confrontation with the disaster, the first type of leadership

qualities to emerge were those from men who "tended to lack empathy and emotional

control . . . they were not concerned with the opinions of others . . . their physical abilities

far exceeded their verbal abilities. But all of these traits allowed them to take forceful,

life-saving action where many other men might not" (Junger 64). The other type of

leadership that arose in the face of this catastrophe, after escape attempts failed and time

began to pass, emerged in the men who had

> the ability to wait in complete darkness without giving up hope or
>
> succumbing to panic . . . Researchers determined that the leaders during

this period were entirely focused on group morale and used skills that

were diametrically opposed to those of the men who had led the escape

attempts. They were highly sensitive to people's moods, they

intellectualized things in order to meet group needs, they reassured the

men who were starting to give up hope, and they worked hard to be

accepted by the entire group . . . no one, it seemed, was suited to both

roles. These two kinds of leaders more or less correspond to the male and

female roles that emerge spontaneously in open society during

catastrophes such as earthquakes or the Blitz. (Junger 64-65)

Tragic events such as these and the behaviors they engender help reinforce the earlier

assertion that group cooperation and adaptive behaviors become highly necessary for

surviving extreme dangers, and the adaptive behaviors exhibited in the face of shared,

group traumas can often be fundamentally attributed to how certain gender performances

arise out of necessity. Another purpose and additional benefit to laying out this lengthy

analogy is to illustrate the following fundamental points:

If women aren't present to provide the empathic leadership that every

group needs, certain men will do it. If men aren't present to take

immediate action in an emergency, women will step in . . . To some

degree the sexes are interchangeable – meaning they can easily be

substituted for one another – but gender roles aren't. Both are necessary

for the healthy functioning of society, and those roles will always be filled

regardless of whether both sexes are available to do it. (Junger 65)

Similarly, because the frontier is often a site of catastrophic violence, chaos that requires engagement and cannot be ignored. Regardless of the reasons that compel or usher entrance into the space, it becomes clear that men do not have a monopoly on the necessary traits for survival. Neither do women. Men and women both carry the potential to adapt as necessitated by the demands of their circumstances, and in spite of the sex differences, the differences are equally vital. As Pinker concludes, "Natural selection thus tends toward an equal investment in the two sexes: equal numbers [of genes], an equal complexity of body and brains, and equally effective designs for survival" (343). And while sex differences exist on bell curves that document a number of male/female proclivities, the performance of either gender has advantages and disadvantages, depending on the specifics and context of any given scenario.

The kind of heroism often demonstrated in frontier mythology and real-world events can also be delineated in terms of sex differences and gender performance, and if there is ever an urgent need for group cooperation and heroic acts, it is in the space of shared, collective trauma that a hostile frontier elicits. By the same token, groups that fail to function cooperatively in the frontier are far less effective and carry an increased potential for all out failure. Another way of thinking about this in relation to frontier narratives is that the narratives tend to either lead to meaningful masculine renewal or death that arrives in the form of a cautionary masculine performance. This is where the concept of adaptive behavior becomes relevant, which "tends to be reinforced hormonally, emotionally, and culturally" (Junger 55). In fact, "Humans are so strongly wired to help one another – and enjoy such enormous social benefits from doing so – that people regularly risk their lives for complete strangers" (Junger 55). This sort of altruism

is of significant importance in relation to surviving the frontier, and the manner in which the sexes demonstrate their effectiveness in such scenarios are markedly different but equally valuable. As previously noted, "risk-taking tends to express itself in very different ways in men and women" (Junger 55). Accordingly, in the same context, Junger's research shows that "Men perform the vast majority of bystander rescues, and children, the elderly, and women are the most common recipients of them" (56). Furthermore, "According to a study based on a century of records at the Carnegie Hero Fund Commission, male bystanders performed more than 90 percent of spontaneous rescues of strangers, and around one in five were killed in the attempt" (Junger 56). Again, the relationship between this sort of behavior and frontier navigation cannot be overstated, especially as it pertains to masculine performance in relation to group cooperation and inter-reliance, or lack thereof as depicted in the primary works in this analysis and demonstrated by the characters therein.

Delving further into Junger's investigation of evolution and tribal impulse, it is important to explain why men perform the vast majority of bystander rescues. As many of the characters in this study will be examined in relation to their confrontations with danger, chaos, and hardship, it is worthwhile to note that a hero "is generally defined as risking your life to save non-kin from mortal danger" (Junger 56). Additionally, "Researchers theorize that greater upper-body strength and a predominantly male personality trait known as 'impulsive sensation seeking' lead men to overwhelmingly dominate this form of extreme caretaking" (Junger 56). And so, through the merging of these biologically compelled, adaptive behaviors, with the socio-cultural expectations of men thrust into extremely dangerous and traumatic situations, it becomes evident that

nature and nurture have their respective roles to play when it comes to frontier survival, as evinced by the police officers, soldiers, and other selfless roles espoused by some of the characters that will be further explored in this study. By contrast, the masculinities that fail to adhere to the creed of tribal sentiment and honor, are typically characterized as failed masculinities, become filed into the ranks of cautionary tales, and tend to wind up dead as a consequence of their actions.

Further investigating the appeal of tribal culture as a social organization, Junger explains the relevance of self-determination theory, a previously eluded to, psychologically grounded framework "which holds that human beings need three basic things in order to be content: they need to feel competent at what they do; they need to feel authentic in their lives; and they need to feel connected to others" (22). Not meeting these basic needs becomes increasingly likely and highly problematic in that modern society often eschews these intrinsic values, and instead "seems to emphasize extrinsic values . . . and as a result, mental health issues refuse to decline with growing wealth" (Junger 22). Chuck Palahniuk explores the extreme consequences of such an existence, echoing Thoreau's nineteenth-century warning that the things you own end up owning you, and such arrangements come at a perilously high cost; hence Fight Club's allure through its appeal to fostering intrinsic values while rejecting the emptiness and meaninglessness that tend to accompany an individual's preoccupation with extrinsic values. As human beings, we have evolved to rely upon one another and become functioning members of social groups that contribute to the overall welfare of a community because its success often depends on transcending the self and the myriad, sometimes trivial interpersonal conflicts that have to potential to disrupt and dissolve the

unity of the group. However, inter-reliance is not as necessary for human survival as it once was, and what the results of detribalization produce time and time again in American culture are nothing less than a constant artistic engagement with the frontier as means of escape, a site of liberation, hope, freedom, masculine renewal, and the expression of modern society's anxieties and sources of despair.

At this point, it is also necessary to clarify part of my interpretive position: tribalism, as it relates to this study, will not be discussed solely in terms of polarizing political or moral conflicts, though such contexts will necessarily be addressed from time to time. Instead, what needs to be taken into consideration is the proximity and degree to which we interact with others in a cooperative, inter-reliant context when stakes are involved and how such a mode of living provides us with the intrinsic rewards outlined by self-determination theory, namely: autonomy, competence, and connectedness. Of course, Junger's interpretation of tribal sentiment comes with an important caveat that he too addresses when he writes "It's easy for people in modern society to romanticize Indian [tribal] life . . . That impulse should be guarded against. Virtually all of the Indian tribes waged war against their neighbors and practiced deeply sickening forms of torture" (13). Tribalism, in fact, obviously carries with it the dangerous capacity to generate violence and divide groups into conflicting, hostile allegiances that take the shape of Us and Them, especially when such groups compete for things like resources and/or power. But what Junger articulates concerning tribal sentiment and perhaps carries the most significant value is the manner in which tribal sentiments can pro-socially unite people, giving them meaning and purpose. Harvard professor of psychology, Joshua Greene, more fully addresses the problems of tribalism, but offers a potential solution akin to

what Junger more obliquely points to in his book: the need for a metamorality. Greene explains that the negative consequences of tribalism can be averted if we have "a moral system that can resolve disagreements among groups with different moral ideals, just as ordinary, first-order morality resolves disagreements among individuals with selfish interests" (26). And while Greene's observations might constitute utopian dreams to some, that certainly does not prevent artists from using the space of the frontier to seek out exemplary means of attaining such seemingly lofty, though certainly not unattainable goals.

For the sake of reiteration, it becomes clear that utilizing a combination of scholarly approaches in tandem with one another becomes more comprehensively revealing about humanity and masculinities than any singular lens or framework deployed in isolation. The nature vs. nurture debate should perhaps be cast aside, once and for all. Alternatively, it is more accurate, useful, and insightful to "invoke a complex interaction between heredity and environment: culture is crucial, but culture could not exist without mental faculties that allow humans to create and learn culture to begin with" (Pinker xiv-xv). Simply put: a bigger picture is more illuminating. The sciences are useful in that they provide an understanding of the physiological, biological, and psychological characteristics and drives of individuals. The humanities are insightful insomuch as they help us understand and explain many of the cultural relationships that are the result of the diverse experiences inherent to meaningful human interaction or lack thereof. Ultimately, the decidedly more useful approach would be to consider how nature and nurture converge in the shaping of masculinities and their interactions with frontier chaos and hardship.

Given the innately deterministic, unforgiving, and chaotic nature of the American frontier, sensationalized or otherwise, it was and still remains a cultural proving ground – literally and figuratively – for the theorizing, conceptualizing, and shaping of masculinities in the United States. I circle back to Kimmel who writes: "the frontier was the place where manhood was tested, where, locked in a life or death struggle against the natural elements and against other men, a man discovered if he truly was a real man" (*History* 95). It logically follows that many cultures around the world also have similar, ritualized tests of manhood: "Rites of passage differ around the globe, but they all test a boy's ability to handle pain and fear, and to demonstrate the toughness expected of a man . . . That girls will grow up to be *real* women is pretty much taken as a given. Masculinity is not. It must be won, and won at a cost" (Gottschall 81). And, with the closing of the frontier, this landscape becomes necessarily reimagined, in part because, as masculinities theorist Jonathan Gottschall explains, "deep down men still need to feel like men, and so, like Quixote, we invent our own dragons. Taking crazy risks remains a prerequisite for manhood in most cultures, and if young men no longer take their risks in formal rites of passage, they do so on their own . . . finding a way to be men in a post-masculine world" (82). Kimmel also comments on young men and their relationships to manhood in a decidedly post-masculine world where tribal sentiment, inter-reliance, and rugged individualism are no longer woven into the fabric of most peoples' lives: "Proving masculinity remains vitally important to young men, even as the opportunities to do so seem to be shrinking" (*Manhood in America* 267). This realization reaches a logical conclusion, but has the potential to become problematic in that a post-masculine, de-tribalized world can be described in the following observation:

> Western culture no longer needs most of its men to cultivate aggression
> and toughness. When there were bears in the woods or barbarians at the
> gates, everyone welcomed a certain ferocity in men. But now that our
> ferocious grandfathers have driven off the bears and killed the barbarians,
> male ferocity just complicates life in the family and the community.
> (Gottschall 81-82)

What this amounts to, in many cases, is friction between tribally evolved impulses,
contemporary societal norms and pressures that have little to no bearing on the immediate
need for survival in the face of external threats. Tribal sentiments and cooperation
allowed our ancestors to evolve biologically and culturally in this context, but tribal
sentiments need to adapt to the newer socio-cultural conditions of human civilization as
well, not be dispensed with altogether. Ultimately, in the context of American literature
and film, many characters attempt to test and shape their masculinity through an escape,
intentional or otherwise, of society's de-tribalized trappings by entering frontiers of the
unknown, a journey through which they meaningfully live, die or become casualties, but
as I hope to convincingly argue, this journey is not as homosocial, limited by sex, race, or
a unilateral model of masculinity as it once was or as some scholars continue to insist.

As it concerns actual entrance or escape into the frontier, two competing modes of
thought emerge. Coming from the postmodern perspective of social constructivism,
Kimmel links manhood to nineteenth-century conceptions of the frontier when he writes
that "Fantasies of western adventure, testing and proving manhood on the battlefield,
celebrating the manly in literature, even going native in a Darwinian devolution to pure
animality – these were the dominant themes of masculinist literature throughout the 19th

century" (*History* 35). For Kimmel, however, these masculine retreats and performances remain homo-socially escapist in nature: in the frontier men have "found a temporary respite from the feminizing clutches of women, and from enervating workplace lives" (*History* 35). And while scholars like Kolodny have also effectively argued about the role of the frontier in this escapist, exclusionary context, thoroughly illustrating how early American writers feminized a landscape that was to be conquered by masculine impulses, the frontier, as we see it manifested in the arts today, is more complex and inclusive than was represented in the various hyper-masculine, homosocial documentations of the past. In contrast, Junger offers another perspective that engages gender dynamics and sex differences in relation to leadership qualities that are formed by gender roles and their necessary functioning within communities, the social and psychological findings of which can help account for why contemporary frontier mythology is not as exclusionary as it is often perceived to be. Combining these approaches informs the overarching scope of this study to help further our understanding of the symbiotic and reciprocal relationships between nature and nurture. At the same time, merging science with constructivism reveals nuanced dynamics of how culture and biology function together to influence the performance of masculinities in the liminal spaces of the frontier.

Three Frontier Spaces

What distinguishes all three categories of frontier space that emerge in American literature is the retention of thematic concerns in that a protagonist who is often willing to inflict violence, often embarks upon a quest to restore peace, moral righteousness, and order to an otherwise lawless space ruled by forces, some form of corruption, or agents of chaos. These elements remain ubiquitous in the works of Stephen Hunter, who elevates but effectively complicates models of the hero. His characters run the gamut from courageous and capable to tragic and deeply flawed individuals, complicating masculinity in the process through revealing admirable, ambivalently conflicting, and detestable models of manhood. Conversely, challenging conventional themes, E.D.E.N. Southworth's female protagonist, Capitola Black, reconciles the polarity and tension that emerges between conventional masculine and feminine gender roles, offering alternative aspirational models of masculinity characterized by virtue, morality, and tribal cooperation. Again, the frontier spaces in this study simultaneously present both aspirational and cautionary models of masculinity that become shaped by nature, culture, and the trials of the frontier. Moreover, cautionary masculine failures also inhabit all three spaces, acting as foils and instructive warnings as it concerns meaningful masculine identity fulfillment.

Ultimately, this project seeks to investigate how and why frontiers serve as vehicles for the expression of the masculinities necessarily needed to confront variations of chaos and hardship, though failure through the confrontation is most certainly possible, sometimes inevitable when all variables are taken into consideration. Furthermore, the frontier as both a space and a narrative element conveys the cultural values, hopes,

anxieties, and warnings that characterize American society. Given these claims, it seems that a question should arise: why is this the chosen landscape for the exploration of so many thematic concerns? The overarching answer appears to be because of the possibilities such a space offers in terms of freedom, reinvention, growth, identity realization, and perhaps even socio-cultural equilibrium.

It should also be acknowledged that no singular chapter nor the scope of this larger project will be so ambitious as to attempt an entire cataloging of all the masculine performances throughout frontier mythology. Instead, consistently represented "versions" of masculinity shown through specific characters will comprise the primary focus of this study.

All three frontier spaces explored in this project become linked by several recurring thematic concerns pertaining to masculinity, American culture, anxiety, and hope. In many contexts, the frontier represents the chaos and lawlessness inherent to any social fabric, and as base, vulgar, or offensive as it may be to some, violence, aggression, and force are sometimes necessary characteristics to deploy when confronting the dragon – or status quo – and its numerous, often relentless pressures. To insist that violence is never a solution is to fall victim to naïve optimism. As Pinker writes, "denying the logic of violence makes it easy to forget how readily violence can flare up, and ignoring the parts of the mind that ignite violence makes it easy to overlook the parts that can extinguish it. With violence, as with so many other concerns, human nature is the problem, but human nature is also the solution" (336). The frontier, as it functions in American literature, just so happens to be the preferred landscape of many artists through which such dramas unfold.

In attempting to connect all of these methodological approaches and arguments, the frontier, as conceptualized throughout mythology, history, and artistic representation, presents aspirational scenarios and characters that demonstrate masculine performances conducive to a necessary reconnection with our tribal past. In fact, the frontier demands this of its occupants/navigators. On the one hand, frontier spaces can be sites of profound chaos and trauma. And in many cases, to go to the frontier is to go to war, literally and/or figuratively. On the other hand, the salvific possibilities and opportunities for escape share similarity to a more lawlessly violent frontier in that an Edenic life on the frontier still requires some variation of tribal culture, as necessitated by the harsh demands of a life removed from the comforts and protections of civilization and affluence. Regardless of the nature of the frontier journey/encounter or the context of the narrative's socio-cultural milieu, however, the frontier becomes successfully navigated when people arrange themselves tribally and become pro-socially inter-reliant on one another, but such arrangements typically stand in direct conflict with America's dominant socio-cultural structuring. As reflected in the primary works for this investigation, frontier spaces demand that certain attitudes, biological characteristics, gender performances, values, and beliefs be harnessed, adopted, or altogether rejected. Furthermore, the works and frontier spaces discussed throughout this study show us how masculine traits and performances can both reinforce and drift away from biological impulses and the tensions that arise when masculinities come in contact with and become influenced by shifting cultural values.

Lastly, for all of the texts and characters in the study, the frontier acts as a vehicle and liminal space where moral dilemmas and the problem of cooperation significantly

function as primary thematic concerns. These narratives in frontier mythology also depict either the successful or failed initiation into an inter-reliant tribal group. The process of initiation occurs in a transformative liminal frontier space and requires characters to endure some sort of trial, hardship, or chaos. And so, masculinities are performed accordingly throughout various attempts to achieve those ends. The primary works in this project show both the successes and failures of this quest, and these relative successes and failures can be understood in relation to how masculinities are performed. Furthermore, the metric that discerns successful frontier navigation for the works in this study exists in relation to attaining the rewards that enable meaningful masculine identity realization and positive psychological individuation through the intrinsic values of autonomy, competence, and connectedness. By contrast, the masculine failures in these frontier narratives serve as warnings against the influence of the extrinsic values that contribute to the tribal disaffiliation of the individual from the group and the de-tribalization of society as whole.

In the primary works I have chosen to explore, three major strains or iterations of the frontier become manifest. The first category of frontier, malleable as it is in representation, fits with what Richard Slotkin describes as the "progressive" style of the frontier myth; it is conventional in the sense that there remains, as Elliot West writes, a space that "shimmered with a romantic, heroic glow" (122). Additionally, and equally important in this space, "Suffering and tragedy were redeemed by the glorious results presumed to have followed – the nurture of American individualism and democracy and the coming of a civilized order into a wilderness" (West 122). Such idealistic conceptions of the frontier become lynchpins to the works of contemporary novelist Stephen Hunter.

However, rather than construct early, colonial frontier spaces populated by Native Americans or indigenous others perceived as threats and obstacles to the march of progress, as is the case with much eighteenth and nineteenth-century American literature, Hunter's frontiers emerge in the modernized, post-WWII era, revealing the cultural values and anxieties of the so-called "Greatest Generation" that continue to be romanticized in numerous aspects of popular culture today. Whether in the backwoods swamps of Mississippi, the rural highways of Oklahoma, or the battlefields of major American overseas conflicts, Hunter constructs frontiers onto which heroic masculine ideals are projected, met with violence, and sensationally tested in extremis. Similarly, chaos or the dragon Holdfast – the status quo – must be confronted in all of the works in each chapter, lest it conquer, and the timeless monomythic question emerges yet again: will the monster be bested, or will it feed? Furthermore, the status quo in the frontier narratives that make up this study also represent socio-cultural hegemonic conventions, motivations, and masculinities that fall under scrutiny in each text. These performances of masculinity and how they become influenced by cultural norms remain consistent subjects of artistic exploration and evaluation throughout frontier mythology.

Along with the painstaking breadth and depth included in Slotkin's frontier trilogy, he also makes it a point to addresses a specific, intentional omission in his writing. In *Gunfighter Nation*, he writes that his twentieth-century study explores the genres of the Western, along with the detective stories and science-fiction "in which the influence of Western scenes, heroes, and themes is explicitly acknowledged" (25). He then goes on to say that he "will not attempt to provide a full account of the differentiation, development, or significance of these genres" (*Gunfighter Nation* 25).

And so, this is precisely the scholarly gap that this study will in some ways attempt to address, specifically with regard to some of the developments and significance of the connections between masculinities engaging the frontier as a vehicle for masculine identity realization, escape, and a return to tribal sentiment as depicted through our current artistic representations of the frontier.

Further concerning hegemonic frontier masculinity construction, competent conflict navigation through the use of strength (physical and/or mental), often deployed for the good of a group or tribe, serves as a baseline requirement when it comes to confronting the chaotic and violent elements of frontier narratives. More specifically, displays of mental and physical strength are ontologically tied to the concept of rugged individualism as it is defined in relation to the frontier. Leonard Engel, professor emeritus of English at Quinnipiac University, writes that

> Out of our westward movement have emerged a number of mythic figures – not the least interesting is that referred to as the rugged individual. A product of his rough environment, [as are honor culture and evolved tribal sentiments, necessarily] this character exhibits the individualistic traits the frontier supposedly cultivated: strength, curiosity, resourcefulness, fearlessness, combativeness, independence, and, of course, violence. (22)

These masculine characteristics, in various configurations, comprise the foundation or paradigm for all "successful" frontier masculinities, particularly early frontier masculinities beginning with James Fenimore Cooper's Hawkeye who "becomes the archetype of the rugged individual" (Engel 22). These same characteristics are conspicuously present in several of the characters analyzed in Chapter II, but as the

whole of this study will show, many characters fail to live up to these hegemonically prescriptive standards, nor will all frontier conflicts require or entertain all of the traits from Engel's list. Strength of body and/or mind, however, remains a constant for protagonists, in some capacity, in all frontier narratives. And while the performances of early, traditional frontier masculinities may differ in many ways, some presented as virtuous and some not, the overarching version of a rugged hegemonic masculinity, influenced by the demands of the frontier, is not unilaterally beholden to or shaped by the subjugation of others, though such power dynamics certainly exist. Instead, archetypal versions of frontier masculinity are performed, in many ways, for the sake of competent frontier navigation and survival, though neither are guaranteed when it comes to encounters with hardship and chaos. It does, however, remain inarguable that competence, discipline, professionalism, experience, and expertise tend to tip the odds for success in one's favor.

Stephen Hunter's frontier spaces are unique in that his landscapes are navigated by protagonists who are often military veterans. And because the American west has been decidedly conquered and settled, chaos and conflict must be resituated if the frontier as a proving ground and means of escaping hegemonic norms is to be revived or reimagined and persist in America's ongoing frontier mythology. Furthermore, the protagonists to rise to this occasion are often the heroes that return to meaningful tribal inter-reliance as a means of masculine identity realization. Interestingly, for Hunter, narrative tension stems from sources of internal societal conflict as opposed to previous narrative traditions that pit a hero against a savage other. In his sensational novel, *Pale Horse Coming*, the frontier resides in an off-the-grid penal farm, strictly governed by the brutality of white

supremacy, violent physical and psychological dehumanization, and total human depravity. Thebes is a nightmare of an institution that is highly fortified, supported by the United States government, and antithetical to the very idea of democracy. Given its insular, protected, and secluded advantages, Thebes Penal Farm is impervious to conventional, rational assaults from legal systems and modern institutional powers, so a moral culture of *honor* and a sense of *duty* fall on the hero to right the moral wrong and usher in a reckoning with the status quo, expanding the moral circle of tribal inclusion in the process. What Hunter is effectively illustrating in this novel is that in spite of social progress and democratic ideals, chaos and tyranny still exist and must be confronted, often through a means of violence when progressive and civilized, morally exclusive institutions inevitably fail.

For Cormac McCarthy, by contrast, the old heroic codes depicted in Hunter's and Cooper's novels become deflated by postmodern uncertainty, and one must reconcile the existential fact that, oftentimes, chaos reigns, regardless of whoever takes up the mantle of the hero's journey, no matter how seemingly capable the protagonist. Between these two novelists, and in Hunter's own works, a significant tension arises that begs for reconciliation: reliance upon idealized and chivalric codes of honor, duty, and moral righteousness, contrasted by a deflation of these ideals through confrontations with postmodern uncertainty, ambiguity, and utter chaos that forces us to look at many unpleasant socio-cultural and psychological realities.

Chapter II explores the space that I classify as the Wild Frontier and examines James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the* Mohicans, E.D.E.N. Southworth's *The Hidden* Hand, and Stephen Hunter's *Pale Horse* Coming. Ultimately, I argue that the Wild

Frontier acts as a vehicle where lawlessness and chaos threaten democratic ideals and the potential for a morally cooperative society, exposing many of the flaws and cultural anxieties that exist in American culture and social stratification. The thematic concerns that connect and unify these novels stem from the manner in which the frontier is, in many ways, still a wilderness, both as a liminal space and physical landscape. The various settings situated in Cooper's and Southworth's novels have not yet matured in an industrialized sense, and the influence of a Hobbesian Leviathan remains in its infancy. Hunter's frontier wilderness, however, remains every bit as wild and dangerous as the frontiers of Cooper's and Southworth's narratives, but his setting is, in part, influenced by the support of the U.S. government.

For the sake of clarity and future reference, the seventeenth-century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes wrote what became a significant, influential basis for social contract theory and the governance of people in individual and collective contexts. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes shows "how the dynamics of violence fall out of interactions among rational and self-interested agents" (Pinker 318). Because violence exists in the fabric of the frontier mythology of both the past and the present, Hobbes's analysis provides a useful framework in that it discerns three primary causes of violence: competition, diffidence – or distrust, and glory – or honor. As amorphous agents, these three causes of violence appear in all of the works that comprise this study, but the presence of an interventionist state or federal authority increases by degrees with each successive chapter in this project, as government control, institutions, and economic forces become more influential to the settings and characters throughout the thematically grouped progression of the primary texts. To explain my organization of this study another way,

the works in Chapter II are less touched by industrialization, capitalism, legislative

bodies, authorities, and institutions that will have increasingly prominent effects on

characters' relationships with violence throughout the progression of this project's

chapters. Understanding Hobbes's analysis of peoples' social interactions in relation to

the presence or absence of a Leviathan and its agencies helps clarify what Steven Pinker

characterizes as the logic of violence and further contributes to an understanding of why

violence occurs, not just in the liminal spaces of the frontier but in society as a whole.

Explaining the concept of Leviathan as an influential force and agent, Pinker writes:

> A governing body that has been granted a monopoly on the legitimate use
>
> of violence can neutralize each of Hobbes's reasons for quarrel [honor,
>
> diffidence, and competition, and] a system of laws that defines infractions
>
> and penalties and metes them out disinterestedly can obviate the need for a
>
> hair trigger for retaliation and the accompanying culture of honor. (330)

Essentially, the violence innate to the liminal spaces of the frontier exists in relation to

the degree of presence or absence of Leviathan's influence, and this presence or absence

impacts a character's practice of moral culture and the inextricably connected

performance of masculinity.

The works in Chapter II that engage the Wild Frontier present sensationally heroic

narratives that are "successful" in that tribal sentiment or a group becomes restored

alongside simultaneous achievement of meaningful masculine identity realization.

Together, the novels in Chapter II illustrate the relative success of a hero's journey and

the necessary masculine performances required for a morally-virtuous and cooperative

navigation of the frontier. Masculine "failures" and cautionary masculinities become discernable within the scope of this context as well.

Chapter III focuses on the Waning Frontier, which acts as a liminal space of confusion, chaos, and violence. Navigation of this space often requires the espousal, performance, and rejection of a number of masculine qualities. The Waning Frontier also reflects a number of cultural anxieties in that "so much of our imaginative life in the twentieth century has been devoted to peeling back the masks and scabs of civilization, to finding, cultivating, and projecting nightmare images of the secret self" (David J. Skal 22). Naturalist writer Frank Norris demonstrates this creative impulse in his novel *McTeague*, and when he writes: "Terrible things must happen to the characters of the naturalistic tale. They must be twisted from the ordinary, wrenched out from the quiet, uneventful round of every-day life, and flung into the throes of a vast and terrible drama that works itself out in unleashed passions, in blood, and in sudden death" ("Zola as a Romantic Writer" 274). And although the mid-nineteenth-century novel *Moby-Dick* is analyzed in this chapter alongside later works, the thematic concerns that appear in Melville's tale are consistent with those of the rest of the novels in Chapter III, which also include *McTeague*, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, and Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*.

Unlike the characters in Chapter II, the characters in Chapter III ostensibly have nowhere "wild" left to run to either directly or indirectly achieve meaningful masculine identity realization. Consequently, most of protagonists in these works die as a result of failing to navigate the tension between extrinsic and intrinsic values and the increasing de-tribalization of American society that accompanies the progress of civilization. The

works in this chapter also reflect cultural anxieties surrounding modern issues of material consumption, commodification, alienation, and isolation, and more often than not, the characters that occupy this chapter fail to achieve meaningful identity individuation, cooperation, and/or tribal restoration. Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*, for example, explores contemporary existential dilemmas with a keen attention to juxtaposing humanity's aspirational characteristics along with its numerous shortcomings. If there is hope in McCarthy's frontier, it becomes removed from the heroic glow and optimism that characterizes the Wild Frontier. If there is heroism or redemption, it is detached from the conventions that distinguish the works in chapter two.

Chapter IV investigates what I call the Post-Frontier. This space engages the desire to return to idealized pastoral settings and seemingly Edenic landscapes, often characterized by the influence of Romantic, transcendental ideals and a return to the salvific sanctuary of a simplified mode of living. This version of the frontier is often characterized as an escapist destination, free from the pressures of unregulated capitalist exploitation, the commodification of the individual, and the emasculating grind of an existentially crushing rat race, all of which help shape the tragic outcomes that arise in Chapter III. The works explored in Chapter IV include *The Call of the Wild*, *Fight Club*, *Song of Solomon*, and the lone film in this study, *Captain Fantastic.* Chuck Palahniuk's scathing satire, *Fight Club*, envisions a return to a primitive, community-based model of living, and Matt Ross's film, *Captain Fantastic*, explores the tensions between living apart from American society and cultural conformity to the status quo in an attempt to find a meaningful equilibrium between these two extremes. Palahniuk looks at the ironies of a destructively violent, homosocial, escapist preserve, but Ross's film emphasizes

familial inter-reliance and personal growth in both an individual and communal context, along with what it means to possess strength but also meaningfully interact with a community, illustrating a much needed balance often found wanting in American culture, particularly regarding the tensions between cooperative tribal life and isolating, Westernized socio-cultural disharmony. For the characters in these works, permanent escape from civilization appears next to impossible in the modern context, but that certainly doesn't stop them from trying.

CHAPTER II – THE WILD FRONTIER

"All that we have known will be an echo . . ."

-Alela Diane

Overview

Focusing primarily on Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, Southworth's *The Hidden Hand*, and Hunter's *Pale Horse Coming*, this chapter outlines some of the masculine performances that can be characterized as "traditional" and engages the liminal frontier spaces I designate as Wild Frontiers. The frontier conflicts in this study are characterized by forms of chaos and violence that simultaneously arise from and contribute to the narrative tensions that characterize frontier dangers. Each manifestation of chaos reflects timely cultural anxieties, whether they be man-made, found in the natural world, or derived from existential crises. Addressing such an approach in a similar light, professor Diane Purkiss of Keble College Oxford explains from a psychological perspective that "people will fill the wilderness that surrounds them with what they fear in themselves, what they fear in their own society. The wilderness is a place where we expel all the stuff we don't like in ourselves, in our culture, in our society" ("The Wild Unknown"). This impulse enables all manner of projection onto frontier narratives and shapes the conflicts that become evident in the primary texts that comprise much of America's artistic representations of masculinities within frontier mythology.

Traditional frontier masculinities, the focus of this chapter, appear consistently throughout contemporary American cultural production but first emerged within the narrative conventions that depict frontier tales of captivity, Indian wars, and "the

representations of the Frontier that had developed haphazardly since 1700 in such diverse genres as the personal narrative, the history, the sermon, the newspaper item, the street ballad, and the 'penny-dreadful'" (*Gunfighter Nation* 15). Many of these narratives and their progeny deploy an iteration of a hero's journey that frequently depicts heroic, often idealized models of masculinity influenced by honor culture, morally-shaped tribal sentiment, self-reliance, and the ideological tenets/characteristics of rugged individualism. These characteristics and elements comprise the criteria I use to define traditional frontier masculinities. And though the early American tales of conquest, settlement, and expansion have since, necessarily, been reimagined to embrace more contemporary socio-cultural milieus along with more nuanced representations of masculinity, frontier scholar Richard Slotkin still emphasizes the role of the hero's quest in American culture, arguing that it "is perhaps the most important archetype underlying American cultural mythology" (*Regeneration* 20). For the sake of clarity, Slotkin imports this archetypal, narrative paradigm from mythologist Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, an expansive critical mapping and exploration of what Campbell sees as the ubiquitous, cross-cultural underpinning of an ancient narrative structure, a monomyth that Slotkin effectively summarizes in the following passage:

> The quest involves the departure of the hero from his common-day world
> to seek the power of the gods in the underworld, the eternal kingdom of
> death and dreams from which all men emerge; his motive is provided by
> the threat of some natural or human calamity which will overtake his
> people unless the power of the gods can be borrowed or the gods
> themselves reconciled with the people. (*Regeneration* 10)

This narrative structure continues to shape cultural mythologies all over the world, and in the more specific realm of American frontier mythology, an iteration of the journey can be found in most, if not all, frontier stories. *The Last of the Mohicans*, *Moby-Dick*, and *The Call of the Wild*, to name a few, can all be interpreted as fulfilling a variant of the hero's journey that occurs within the border conflicts of a frontier insomuch that all of these novels' protagonists depart civilization and venture into the hostile terrains of frontier chaos and confront threats of human or natural design. Kolodny's conceptualizing of the frontier as a borderland and liminal space comes into play here because the chaos, violence, and turmoil inherent to the Wild Frontier reveals various cultural and even biological border conflicts. The very same can be said of the significant portion of contemporary American fiction driven by analogous, thematic frontier impulses. What proves even more revealing, regarding the purposes of this study, is not just a unilateral analysis of how a text enacts the hero's journey itself, but what the path of journey reveals. More specifically, I argue that the journey reveals a shaping and interrogation of masculine values, cultural ideals, and evolved tribal impulses that typically inform the narrative tensions/conflicts in these stories.

Drawing on early frontier mythology and a few selected re-imaginings of it, this chapter explores the representation of traditional frontier masculinities and the Wild Frontiers they must navigate. Masculinities in this chapter invariably, though sometimes reflexively, present and navigate a frontier space that engages the following thematic elements and concerns: (1) the frontier is "wild" in that it is largely a lawless, untamed wilderness that is *almost* though not entirely beyond the reach and immediate influences of civilization, i.e. colonization, industrialization, capitalism, and the protection or

agencies of a Hobbesian Leviathan, such as state or federal governments, or law enforcement, whose power transcends individuals; (2) a moral culture of honor and tribal sentiment also wields a significant degree of influence on the performance of masculinity and identity formation in these frontier narratives, enabling characters to navigate, with relative success, various physical and psychological border conflicts; (3) regardless of the outcome of the inevitable border conflict, chaos/disorder must be confronted, and the confrontation typically comes in the form of man-made violence, especially due to the varying presence or absence of an interventionist, or even deterministic Hobbesian Leviathan, though the natural world and/or societal pressures/norms may act as antagonists as well. Moreover, and maybe most significantly, the primary works analyzed in this chapter – *The Last of the Mohicans*, *The Hidden Hand*, and *Pale Horse Coming* – all become unified in that the protagonists achieve meaningful masculine identity realization and the restoration of a tribe with some degree of relative success.

These conventions that influence and characterize traditional masculine performances in Wild Frontier spaces remain consistent throughout "successful" American frontier narratives, many, if not all of which deploy some form of a hero's journey for reasons best explained by looking at the structural elements upon which all myths reside. As Richard Slotkin writes, "myths appear to be built of three basic structural elements: a protagonist or hero, with whom the human audience is presumed to identify in some way; a universe in which the hero may act, which is presumably a reflection of the audience's conception of the world and the gods; and a narrative, in which the interaction of hero and universe is described" (*Regeneration* 8). These structural elements are consistently represented within narratives that treat the frontier as

a transformative liminal space, just as the same elements act as vehicles for the expression of early frontier masculinities. Accordingly, the masculinities analyzed in this chapter engage with the following, similar structure while meeting – or failing to live up to – my previously noted criteria for traditional frontier masculinity: (1) the hero/protagonist is relatable by way of masculine performances that are constructed as necessary and even aspirational, and adhere to a cultural emphasis on rugged individualism in relation to honor culture and the evolution of our ancestral tribal impulses, while more complicated, problematic, and even cautionary forms of masculinity serve as counterpoints that challenge and/or subvert culturally informed ideals; (2) the frontier is a threshold or liminal space, literal and/or figurative, and is a reflection of recognizable tensions and anxieties that comprise particular aspects of the border conflicts found in American culture and society, i.e. savage vs. civilized, tribal vs. de-tribalized, selflessness vs. selfishness, and the conflicts between gender norms and deviance; (3) the narrative thrusts the hero/protagonist into a perilous interaction with any number of the aforementioned border conflicts, to express and test the ideals and values that compel particular characters to act within the pressures/forces that comprise their worlds, seeking to arrive at some sort of conflict resolution signified by meaningful masculine identity realization achieved through living out the pro-social bonds of tribal sentiment. However, such conflict resolutions and identity realizations may or may not be unambiguously accomplished, as definitions of "success" are open to interpretation and remain quite relativistic.

Investigating the social and biological conditions that contribute to the shaping of masculinities and a culture of honor grants insight into how and why masculinities in

frontier mythology are often constructed as they are. In looking at the characters that can be read as representatives of traditional frontier masculinities such as Hawkeye, Capitola Black, and Earl Swagger, a specific constant is readily identifiable: they are influenced by an honor culture that emerges in the absence of effective intervention or protection enacted via the agency of a Hobbesian Leviathan. Protagonists such as Hawkeye, Capitola Black, and Earl Swagger successfully negotiate the instability of frontier border conflicts, whether sensationally lucky or not, and accomplish this end by way of their adherence to aspects of honor culture and inter-reliant tribal sentiment. For these characters, tribal sentiment and honor enables "success" in terms of meaningful masculine identity realization enabled by the privileging of intrinsic values. Furthermore, in traditional Wild Frontier spaces like the wilderness in *The Last of the Mohicans*, Hawkeye cannot call the police when Cora and Alice Munro are kidnapped by the villain, Magua. In fact, one of the competing colonial "authorities," the closest thing to an established Leviathan, appeals to Hawkeye for aid, and so he must rely on his own strength, cunning, bravery, and all-around rugged individualism as a frontiersman along with his reliance upon the same attributes of his compatriots as they work collectively and most effectively as a cohesive, cooperative tribal unit. And if collectivism and rugged individualism seem incompatible or even contradictory, psychologist Joshua Greene reconciles any potential polarity: "Nearly all of us are collectivists to some extent. The only pure individualists are hermits" (10). Furthermore, situations beyond the reach of Leviathan place certain demands on the characters' navigation of frontier border conflicts: sometimes they must confront violence and also be willing to inflict it. Stephen Pinker explains such situations further, bridging the potential disconnect between our

modern sensibilities and the lawlessness of many frontier settings, reminding us that "The mentality is foreign to those of us who can get Leviathan to show up by dialing 911, but that option is not always available. It was not available to people in pre-state societies, or on the frontier in the Appalachians or the Wild West, or in the remote highlands of Scotland, the Balkans, or Indochina" (326). In fact, this option is still not available to many. Further complicating matters, competing hegemonic gender roles and/or a corrupted Leviathan can create frontier border conflicts, as evinced in Stephen Hunter's novel, *Pale Horse Coming*. In this text, set in a dehumanizing and disenfranchising Jim Crow-era, white hegemony is the source of the novel's primary conflict. Throughout Southworth's *The Hidden Hand*, repeated attempts to relegate Capitola to the stereotypical gender roles of the nineteenth century contribute to her navigation of pressures engendered by the socio-cultural separation of masculine and feminine gender roles.

Ultimately, this chapter analyzes some of the early representations of masculine expression that establish a basis for recurring masculine performances found throughout American literature that involve escape from the "civilization" found in domesticity and/or escape from timely marketplace-derived social problems. The masculine performances in *The Last of the Mohicans*, *The Hidden Hand*, and *Pale Horse Coming* also reveal an escapist attachment to the pastoral ideal, and a reluctant departure (be it conscious or unconscious) from the tribal impulses and honor cultures that informed masculinities throughout much of human history while simultaneously illustrating the ways, for better or for worse, in which masculine performances begin to drift away from a culture of honor as American society increasingly de-tribalizes. The artistic expression

of frontier masculinities as a whole can be uniquely understood in terms of the nuance of masculine representations that clash with the competing influences of tribal sentiment and the pressures of living in a Westernized society. Additionally, these works foreshadow the modern/post-modern anxieties ubiquitous to much of the fiction and intellectual thought of the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries and, by extension, build upon evolving representations of American's many socio-cultural conflicts.

Narrative Influences

When considering how traditional frontier masculinities become shaped by rugged individualism in the space of the Wild Frontier alongside the narrative elements that contribute to their formation, Slotkin emphasizes the significance of European colonial encounters with the wilderness. He writes that "in tracing the developments of the conventions of narrative literature, we are tracing the development – by accretion of symbols characteristic of cultural values – of a distinct world vision and an accompanying mythology emerging from the early experiences of Europeans in the wilderness" (*Regeneration* 21). Accordingly, artistic constructions of traditional frontier masculinities place a premium on versions of masculinity that were seen as best suited to navigate the dangers and hostilities that were/are innate to frontier narratives, the performances of which are often similar in relation to one another, but nuanced and informed by way of the influences of history, cultural values, lived experience, the arts, biological impulse, and human evolution. The masculine characters and performances presented in *The Last of the Mohicans*, for instance, are revealing insofar as their

encounters with frontier hostilities and border conflicts highlight the value or futility of

certain masculine traits and moral cultures in the context of life-threatening, hostile

scenarios, just as the masculinities in Cooper's text, and others, reveal valuations of

American cultural values and societal norms. However, as the Wild Frontier increasingly

approaches closure in the wake of American progress, many of the masculine

performances found in early American fiction will come closer and closer to perceived

obsolescence as the pressures for social conformity and assimilation into newer facets of

civilization becomes more certain, and the places to run for characters like Hawkeye,

Huck Finn, and Ishmael become few and far between.

Moving into the moral landscape of frontier mythology as constructed by fiction

and real-world experiences of the chaos and hardships that inform fictionalized

representations of the frontier, most, if not all of the traditional frontier masculinities

share consistencies in idealized masculine performances while simultaneously presenting

hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities that complicate, challenge, and/or fail to

live up to those specific sets of prescriptive ideals. What emerges from the contact

between frontier chaos and the hero/protagonist amounts to an emphasis on specific

versions of masculinity. For example, in *The Last of the Mohicans*, Hawkeye's

masculinity as a scout, hunter, tracker, and all-around rugged individual willing to inflict

violence when necessary stands in stark contrast in comparison to the more effeminate

David Gamut, the Westernized Christian singer who Hawkeye regularly criticizes for his

less than masculine traits and interests throughout much of the novel. But by the end of

Cooper's tale, David ascends a hierarchy of masculine performance and adapts to the

demands of the ongoing frontier conflict, which earns him the respect and gratitude of the

formerly skeptical Hawkeye along with the contextualized approval of the narrator. In such a context, the standards and ideals of masculinity deployed in many frontier narratives become quite clear in their representative demands when it comes to engaging inevitable frontier violence/chaos. Historically, throughout the evolution of frontier mythology in America, captivity narratives, "developed during the initial stages of colonial experience . . . a second type of narrative was developed which celebrated the deeds of Indian-fighters and (later) wilderness hunters," and lastly, "The frontier romances of James Fenimore Cooper . . . codified and systematized the representations of the Frontier that had developed haphazardly since 1700 . . ." (Slotkin 14-15). Accordingly, the traditional frontier masculinities depicted in these foundational frontier narrative genres, via the likes of Hawkeye and Southworth's Capitola Black, continue to act as archetypal proto-types for the representation of masculine performances and the navigation of subsequent border conflicts/tensions that influence and shape those performances. And these narrative models, as Slotkin articulates them, are ever-present throughout the entirety of frontier mythology, from Mary Rowlandson's 1682 captivity narrative and Natty Bumppo's first appearance in 1823, all the way to the introduction of *Captain Fantastic* in the twenty-first century, the protagonist of which will be an integral part of Chapter IV. However, what sets traditional masculinities apart from their successors is the initial artistic establishing of recurring masculine values and performances in the space of the frontier. These representations of narrative and traditional frontier masculinity lay the foundations for the masculinities in Chapter III that encounter the massive changes wrought upon the cultural landscape via the far-

reaching influences of industrialism, capitalism, shifting racial conflicts,

modern/postmodern uncertainty, identity politics, and overseas wars.

Intertextually, many of the traditional frontier masculinities portrayed as

successful and heroic in nineteenth-century American literature all share a common

ground in that they are frequently shaped by the tensions created on the border between

wilderness and civilization, or "savagery" and civilization. This becomes crystallized

when Richard Slotkin writes of early frontier heroes:

> The American must cross the border into "Indian country" and experience
>
> a "regression" to a more primitive and natural condition of life so that the
>
> false values of the "metropolis" can be purged and a new, purified social
>
> contract enacted. . . . The heroes of this myth-historical quest must
>
> therefore be "men (or women) who know Indians" – characters whose
>
> experiences, sympathies, and even allegiances fall on both sides of the
>
> Frontier. . . . They are mediators of a double kind who can teach civilized
>
> men how to defeat savagery on its native grounds – the natural wilderness,
>
> and the wilderness of the human soul. (*Gunfighter Nation* 14)

This narrative structure compelling early frontier heroes similarly remains a driving force

behind the construction of traditional frontier masculinities, as does much of the rhetoric

and imagery used to define the various representations of a savage/civilized dichotomy,

so that the border conflicts through which the heroes must journey can become more

contemporary and relevant with regard to the influence of modern ideologies, politics,

fears, anxieties, and socio-cultural conflicts. For instance, the conflict between so-called

Indian savagery and white civilization is what creates much of the tension in *The Last of*

the Mohicans, but the tension in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* is generated by a desire to escape civilization through the "savage" destruction of the complete entrenchment and normalization of modern America's consumer-based economy. The same can be said of Capitola Black's masculine performance, which challenges the cautionary masculinities in E.D.E.N. Southworth's novel, *The Hidden Hand*. All the while, American progress pushes frontier masculinities and heroes towards the brink of near obsolescence as Leviathan and the spread of its many agencies become more entangled in daily life, potentially corrupting masculinities, though enforcing law, order, and civilization while honor culture – not necessarily the ideal moral culture in certain contexts – continues to wane in the midst of an increasing transition toward a culture of dignity. Meanwhile, the impulse to incorporate a desire for societal escape and the pastoral ideal, both of which can be traced back to Hawkeye, remain present but become reconfigured as more temporally and socio-culturally accommodating/relevant.

Traditional Frontier Masculinities: Border Conflicts, Honor and Tribe

An examination of James Fenimore Cooper's novel *The Last of the Mohicans* offers much in the way of establishing both successful and cautionary versions of masculinity that are shaped by the novel's thematic concerns and continue to have a profound impact on many subsequent representations of frontier masculinities. Furthermore, as it concerns a landscape conceptualized as a Wild Frontier in *The Last of the Mohicans*, the setting of upstate New York during the French and Indian War recalls the wild and lawlessly violent space that encompasses the tensions between Native

American tribal life and European colonial influence. Cooper opens the novel by establishing his own Wild Frontier, writing "It was a peculiar feature to the colonial wars of North America, that the toils and dangers of the wilderness were to be encountered before the adverse hosts could meet. A wide and apparently an impervious boundary of forests severed the possessions of the hostile provinces of France and England" (1). The context of hardship and chaos that helps define Cooper's frontier setting also allows him to depict masculinities that conform to meaningfully cooperative and inter-reliant tribal sentiment while simultaneously offering masculine foils that speak to the de-tribalizing effects of individualistic self-interest and the coming of a European Leviathan.

In attempting to reach an understanding of both how and why frontier heroes are artistically rendered as they so often are, both then and now, some significant historical, cultural, and biological influences warrant consideration. One of these integral influences is the conflict that emerges from contact between the wilderness and civilization, or "savagery" and civilization, which is often played out through the various dramas of racial conflicts. In the case of *The Last of the Mohicans*, this is well-trodden ground for many scholars.[1] In fact, one of the primary thematic concerns in Cooper's novel resides

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[1] David Reynolds, Jane Tompkins, Richard Slotkin, and Annette Kolodny, among many others, all contribute, in various ways, to the conversation about the cultural dichotomies and tensions in Cooper's novel. Slotkin, for instance, comments on Cooper's establishing of the frontier convention that the hero "know Indians" and straddle the line as a mediator between civilization and savagery.

in his consistent dichotomous classification of boundaries that present an almost Manichean view of the world.

As it pertains to the shaping of masculinities in Leviathan's absence within traditional frontier narratives, especially in *The Last of the Mohicans*, a culture of honor is what most often fills the power vacuum and provides socio-cultural structure. Accordingly, "Different forms of conflict and social control may be more or less prevalent in a given social setting. Sometimes observers will characterize an entire society or segment of society according to which forms of moral life are most prominent – what we might refer to as its 'moral culture'" (Campbell and Manning 711). Accordingly, moral cultures occupy many frontier narratives, particularly the honor cultures that characterize the primary works to be explored in this chapter.

Further concerning the novels in this chapter, along with the larger scope of this project, moral cultures of honor share overarching commonalities. Regardless of historical time or place, honor cultures share requisite foundational similarities in that "violent cultures arise in societies that are beyond the reach of the law and in which precious assets are easily stolen" (Pinker 327). This apparently applies to cultures across time, in spite of socio-cultural differences. For instance, as Pinker writes,

> African American inner-city neighborhoods are among the more
> conspicuously violent environments in Western democracies, and they too
> have an entrenched culture of honor. . . . Inner-city African Americans
> were never goatherds, so why did they develop a culture of honor? One
> possibility is that they brought it with them from the South when they
> migrated to large cities after two world wars – a nice irony for Southern

racists who would blame inner-city violence on something distinctly

African American. Another factor is that the young men's wealth is easily

stealable, since it is often in the form of cash or drugs. A third is that the

ghettos are a kind of frontier in which police protection is unreliable. (328-

329)

Including settings of inner-cities, more rural Southern locales, and beyond, another

reason a moral culture of honor can arise and continue to persist is because "poor people,

especially young men, cannot take pride in a prestigious job, a nice house, or professional

accomplishments, and this may be doubly true for African Americans after centuries of

slavery and discrimination. Their reputation on the streets is their only claim to status"

(Pinker 329). Social psychologists Richard Nisbett and Dov Cohen have also studied

honor cultures in the American south along with the tradition of dueling and conclude

that honor cultures indeed continue to inform interpersonal relations in the present day,

and if one feels his or her honor has been insulted, levels of testosterone and cortisol

become elevated, biological responses that influence many performances of masculinity

(Pinker 328).

Honor as a moral culture related to the social dynamics and masculine

performances in Cooper's novel, also serves as a deciding factor when it comes to

evaluating characters as heroes or villains. Part of defining and understanding the

influence of honor on a moral culture is described in the following passage: "A man's

honor is a kind of 'social reality' . . . it exists because everyone agrees it exists, but it is

no less real for that, since it resides in a shared granting of power" (Pinker 327).

Sociologists Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning also analyze the amorphous though

tangible function and influence of honor cultures, concluding that "Honor is a kind of status attached to physical bravery and the unwillingness to be dominated by anyone. Honor in this sense is a status that depends on the evaluations of others, and members of honor societies are expected to display their bravery by engaging in violent retaliation against those who offend them" (712). Similarly, as explained in Hobbes's *Leviathan*, honor situationally exists as a potential source of violence when conflicts emerge, and the resulting reactions largely depend on the overarching morality of the culture itself, though individual free-will should not be entirely dismissed. Campbell and Manning also note that "social scientists have long recognized distinctions between societies with a 'culture of honor' and those with a 'culture of dignity.' The moral evolution of modern Western society can be understood as a transition between these two cultures" (711-712). *The Last of the Mohicans* presents the admirably virtuous aspects and usefulness of honor culture as a basis of morality grounded in "altruism, unselfishness, a willingness to pay a personal cost to benefit others" (Greene 23). Interestingly, in Cooper's novel, honor provokes violence among "good guys" and "bad guys," but such value judgments, as Pinker notes, depend upon "whose ox has been gored" (317). Pinker concludes that whether "Freedom fighter or terrorist, Robin Hood or thief, Guardian Angel or vigilante, nobleman or warlord, martyr or kamikaze, general or gang leader – these are value judgments, not scientific classifications. I doubt that the brains or genes of most of the lauded protagonists would differ from those of their vilified counterparts" (317). Concerning the primary works in this study, such value judgments generally imply the audience's consent, or, to paraphrase Slotkin, the audience presumably identifies in some way with the hero, the world he or she inhabits and rejects the villain accordingly.

Moreover, violence "is a social and political problem, not just a biological and psychological one. Nonetheless, the phenomena we call 'social' and 'political' are not external happenings that mysteriously affect all human affairs like sunspots; they are shared understandings among individuals at a given time and place. So one cannot understand violence without a thorough understanding of the human mind" (317). Furthermore, the aspirational and evolutionary goal of group cooperation becomes contrasted by selfishly motivated behaviors that stem from group disaffiliation and "the problem of getting collective interest to triumph over individual interest, when possible. The problem of cooperation is the central problem of social existence" (Greene 20). Positive and meaningfully cooperative representations of honor culture in the tribal context of *The Last of the Mohicans* emerge through most of the novel's "good guys," with Uncas, Duncan Heyward, and Hawkeye being a few of the more virtuous and aspirational practitioners of honor via loyalty, integrity, fidelity, and risking life-threatening danger for the sake of others.

Hawkeye is in constant service to a moral culture of honor throughout the novel, such as when he tells Duncan Heyward that in spite of Uncas's savage and warrior-like appearance, off-putting as it may be to many whites, "Life is an obligation which friends often owe each other in the wilderness. I dare say I may have served Uncas some such turn myself before now; and I will remember that he has stood between me and death five different times . . ." (Cooper 77). Hawkeye's loyal allegiance to Uncas and their reciprocal altruism, along with the rest of the novel's protagonists who share this sort of moral reasoning are testaments to the fact that "Cultures of honor spring up all over the world because they amplify universal emotions like pride, anger, revenge, and the love of

kith and kin, and because they appear at the time to be sensible responses to local

conditions" (Pinker 327). The local conditions in Cooper's novel, such as the war, the

lawless wilderness of the frontier, and the cultural conflict between tribal society and

impending Western colonization are deeply connected to a tribally cooperative moral

culture of honor. Indeed, pride, anger, revenge, and the love of friends and family in a

tribal culture of honor have a large part to play in informing the drama and outcome of

Cooper's entire novel, while influencing the masculinities and artistic evaluations of them

from within.

As already mentioned, *The Last of the Mohicans* is often interpreted by scholars

and critics as a novel that has clear lines of demarcation and separation when it comes to

thematic issues such as identity, race, and the performance of gender roles. Characters

disguise themselves as beavers, bears, and fools in order to infiltrate various camps

undetected, underscoring Cooper's belief that blurring the lines of identity leads to chaos

and confusion. In her critical analysis of Cooper's novel, Jane Tompkins adds nuance and

a hint of vindication to criticisms of his characters' representations by looking at the

stereotypes the text is often, though quite accurately, accused of reinforcing. She writes:

> If one thinks of *The Last of the Mohicans* as a meditation on *kinds*, and
>
> more specifically, as an attempt to calculate exactly how much violation or
>
> mixing of its fundamental categories a society can bear, then the
>
> characters of Cora and Magua do not appear to be crude caricatures, or
>
> defective versions of characters in other novels. Rather, they can be seen
>
> to function as starkly opposed cultural types whose confrontation on the
>
> cliff [the climactic scene where Cora, Uncas, and Magua are killed]

suggests the violent repulsion that exists between the social categories

they represent: Indian versus white, male versus female, warrior versus

virgin, pagan versus Christian. The meaning of the scene they enact

consists in the irreconcilable conflict between these categories, and that is

why the characters are and *must* be stereotyped. (106)

Scholars are also quick to note that Cora, who is of mixed parentage, unlike her half-

sister Alice, must die because of the crossing of color lines that she represents.[2] The same

applies to Uncas as well. At the end of the novel, while Cora's and Uncas's funerals take

place, the tribal females presiding over the rites also highlight this division through their

critical awareness of Uncas's affection towards Cora when the two lived. The narrator

writes that the women "had discovered with the intuitive perception of their sex, the

truant disposition of his [Uncas's] inclinations. The Delaware girls had no favor in his

eyes!" (399) And while these contrasts add historical and cultural insight into how some

of the conflicts in the novel are thematically structured in terms of race, it is also

important to recognize that with regard to masculine construction and performance, the

enduring polarization that exists between tribal society and Western civilization functions

similarly and just as significantly as the novel's other dichotomies, keeping with

Cooper's penchant for categorical division and clear lines of demarcation.

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[2] Leslie Fiedler, Northrop Frye, and other scholars identify what is referred to as the Fair

Maiden/Dark Lady dichotomy in literature. As a narrative trope, the Fair Maiden

typically marries the hero, but the Dark Lady, who has power of her own, usually winds

up dead.

Further exploring the polarization of kinds and types, Cooper's novel creates a dichotomized border conflict by pitting tribal society against the social stratification and functioning of Western culture. The novel also offers representations of positive and less than ideal aspects of honor culture. The more negative or deviant representations of honor culture become effectively embodied in the characters Montcalm and Magua, who are rendered corrupt and cautionary. Cooper writes of the French commander Montcalm and his refusal to prevent the brutal massacre at Fort William Henry, that though he would later die in battle and, to some, be perceived as the masculine conquering hero, his memory would forever be stained by the fact that "he was deficient in that moral courage without which no man can be truly great" (203). Cooper's narrator continues to describe Montcalm in a disaffiliated, dishonorable context, as a man tainted by "the chilling blight of selfishness" and "who was found wanting when it became necessary to prove how much principle is superior to policy" (203). If nothing else, the narrator's commentary expresses contempt and a subtle tone of grief over the fact that Montcalm, in his selfishness, dishonored himself and his country through his inaction and failure to intervene on behalf of the innocent lives at Fort William Henry, regardless of who was on which particular side in the larger war. Montcalm's betrayal of humanity in this light can be read as a cautionary tale of a man whose character and legacy are marred by dishonor. Montcalm's cowardice and failure in a tribal context would have surely been punished, as the novel shows in the example made of Reed-that-bends, ironically indicted by the dishonorable Magua, who says: "it would have been better that you had not been born. Your tongue is loud in the village, but in battle it is still," and "The enemy knows the shape of your back, but they have never seen the color of your eyes. Three times have

they called on you to come, and as often did you forget to answer" (280-281). For his

cowardice, Reed-that-bends is summarily put to death because his behavior amounts to

disloyalty, presenting a potential threat to the overall welfare of the tribe. Ironically, even

though he is the executioner, Magua himself fails to live up to the standards of honor.

Essentially, Magua can be read as a charlatan, driven only by a monomaniacal, self-

serving thirst for revenge, and at the end of the story is punished in death. And although

Magua's masculinity never becomes a source of doubt in the context of frontier

competence in the way it does with a character like David Gamut, his masculine

performance wholly deviates from the more virtuous, morally grounded use of such

gendered attributes. Hawkeye and company use their masculine strengths for cooperative

and heroic purposes; Magua and Montcalm, on the other hand, both corrupt and exploit

the power of such attributes with self-serving behaviors and dishonorable actions that

harm others.

Although Magua's execution of Reed-that-bends appeals to the tribal community

as the correct course of action, the dramatic irony of the moment should not be lost on the

reader. Throughout the novel, Magua repeatedly demonstrates dishonorable intent and

deeds that amount to total tribal betrayal, and while he is a somewhat sympathetic

character (given the physical and psychological suffering he endures at the hands of

white European colonists) it is difficult to ignore the choices that place him alongside

Montcalm as a cautionary masculinity stained by the dishonor of his own choices and

actions. Magua's past is indeed tragic; he relates his story to Cora, insisting that "before

he saw a pale-face . . . he was happy! Then, his Canada fathers came into the woods, and

taught him to drink the fire-water, and he became a rascal. The Hurons drove him from

the graves of his fathers, as they would chase the hunted buffalo . . . the people chased him again through the woods into the arms of his enemies" (111). As he continues recounting the tale of his past, it becomes obvious that Magua completely eschews all personal accountability: "Was it the fault of Le Renard [one of Magua's aliases] that his head was not made of rock? Who gave him the fire water? who made him a villain?" (111) Consequently, Magua seeks asylum and a new tribe among the British colonizers led by Cora's father, Colonel Munro, and takes up arms against the French and their Indian allies, betraying his own people: "Renard struck the war-post of the Mohawks, and went out against his own nation . . . your father, was a great captain of our war party" (111). Under Munro's command, however, Magua breaks the "tribal" law of the regiment, drinking alcohol and disobeying orders. For these infractions, he is punished and flogged: "the gray-head [Munro] has left marks on the back of the Huron chief, that he must hide, like a squaw, under this painted cloth of the whites" (112). Clearly, Magua's masculine pride has been offended and the shame he bears consumes him, becoming the source of his relentless thirst for revenge, which in his eyes is the only way to restore his pride and masculinity.

What distinguishes Magua's interpretation of honor from the positive links to the moral culture presented in the novel is that his motives, like Montcalm's, are exclusively self-serving and not for the good of a group or tribal cooperation. The military has rules and regulations that maintain order, just as a Native American tribe does, all of which serve the welfare and protection of the group through cooperation, and if those rules are broken, punishment must follow. But rather than face the permanent seriousness of exile or execution, Magua is corporally punished for his infractions, yet he could still

presumably remain a part of the group, having learned from the disciplinary measure and come to terms with such punishments as necessary deterrents and/or correctives. Instead, the loss of his pride and his ensuing shame are internalized to wholly become what selfishly compels him. As Sebastian Junger writes on the role of duty to the welfare of the tribe, "true leadership – the kind that lives depend on – may require powerful people to put themselves last . . ." (132). By contrast, however, Magua puts himself first and completely blames others for his unfortunate circumstances. His lack of introspection, combined with his unwillingness to negotiate or make concessions, fuels his quest for revenge and his desire to restore masculine pride and honor which ultimately brings about his destruction.

The more exemplary and admirable masculine qualities influenced by honor culture in a tribal context that are simultaneously rendered hegemonic and lead to meaningful masculine identity realization through the successful restoration of tribal connectedness serve as effective counterpoints to Montcalm and Magua. The characters Hawkeye, Chingachgook, Uncas, David Gamut, and Duncan Heyward all function in this capacity, amplifying the dishonorable, de-tribalized, selfishly motivated masculinities of Montcalm and Magua. Interestingly, the only blood relatives in this band of loyal compatriots are the father and son, Chingachgook and Uncas, while Hawkeye, David, and Duncan are not related at all. In spite of their cultural differences – differences of belief as it pertains to religion, and loyalties that go beyond their small group – these characters all act in ways that selflessly promote the welfare of their small tribe and each other over individual differences or ideological disputes. Though they disagree on many subjects, they remain pro-socially united in the common goal of rescuing Alice and Cora, though

individual motives have their part to play as well. In many scenes they are presented as beholden to some form of duty and honor that is directly connected to a form of tribe, kinship, family, and the interrelated survival impulses that become necessary to protect and sustain all three, to say nothing of the motives behind self-preservation which are just as compelling.

Writing about Cooper's Leatherstocking series, Hawkeye and his cultural influences, David Leverenz refers to *The Last of the Mohicans*, noting that "Cooper's narrative seeks to blend civilized and savage virtues through a traditionally patriarchal rhetoric of mutual respect and honor" (756). Expanding on the influence of honor culture in Hawkeye's world, Leverenz continues: "Like any conception of manhood, an emphasis on honor functions ideologically, which is to say, as a social fiction [though no less real, as Pinker points out] constructed by empowered constituencies to further their power, yet felt as a natural and universal law. It shames individual deviance [like that of Montcalm's and Magua's] to protect the group [or tribe], making men more fearful of losing the respect of other men than of losing their lives in battle" (756). Sebastian Junger also recognizes the same influence of honor on cooperative behavior in a group context when he compares what was at stake for our tribal ancestors in contrast to our contemporary, more individualistic socio-cultural milieus:

> Cowardice is another form of community betrayal, and most Indian tribes [as is the case with Reed-that-bends] punished it with immediate death. (If that seems harsh, consider that the British military took "cowards" off the battlefield and executed them by firing squad as late as World War I.) It can be assumed that hunter-gatherers would treat their version of a welfare

cheat or a dishonest banker as decisively as they would a coward. They

may not kill him, but he would certainly be banished from the community.

The fact that a group of people [those that triggered the financial collapse

of 2008] can cost American society several trillion dollars in losses –

roughly one-quarter of that year's gross domestic product – and not be

tried for high crimes shows how completely de-tribalized this country has

become. (30-31)

Junger's observation effectively underscores the tribal imperative functioning in *The Last of the Mohicans* and the ways in which smaller communities were able to handle treachery by swiftly punishing deviance and disaffiliation. Junger presents further relevant contextual details that apply to the world of Cooper's novel when he writes:

Subsistence-level hunters aren't necessarily more moral than other people;

they just can't get away with selfish behavior because they live in small

groups where almost everything is open to scrutiny. Modern society, on

the other hand, is a sprawling and anonymous mess where people can get

away with incredible levels of dishonesty without getting caught. (28)

Both Leverenz's and Junger's commentaries corroborate the coercive hegemonic pressures presented by the social constructivists and help explain why culture contributes to the shaping of masculine performance as influenced by honor-based morality and how we have since, in many ways, drifted away from these influences. Further analysis shows that a compelling scientific piece of the puzzle fits the mold here too, with Junger offering further insight into how culture and biology often work hand in hand and how culture can also be thought of as a product of biological imperative.

Part of the biological imperative implicit in Cooper's novel illustrates the

evolutionary advantages of cooperation and pro-social functioning as a group which

generates a positive feedback loop for individuals. In chapter five of *The Last of the*

Mohicans, the desperate and lost Duncan Heyward, on behalf of Colonel Munro, begs

Hawkeye to help him on his quest to escort colonel Munro's daughters, Alice and Cora,

to safety. Hawkeye confers with his non-white, yet tribal comrade Uncas, reaching the

following conclusion:

> Uncas is right! It would not be the act of men to leave such harmless
>
> things to their fate, even though it breaks up the harboring place forever. . .
>
> . but spare your offers of money . . . These Mohicans and I will do what
>
> man's thoughts can invent, to keep such flowers, which, though so sweet,
>
> were never made for the wilderness, from harm, and that without hope of
>
> any other recompense, but such as God always gives to upright dealings.
>
> (44)

In spite of the infantilizing language directed towards Cora and Alice, this passage shows

that Hawkeye and company willingly take on the moral duty and dangerous task of

assisting Heyward, Cora, and Alice in their journey and will do so without any desire or

promise for material gain.[3] Instead, these men offer to help simply because they feel a

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[3] In *Beneath the American Renaissance* David Reynolds adds nuance to interpretations of

Cooper's female characters by defining what he calls the adventure feminist. Reynolds

cites female characters from Cooper's *The Pathfinder*, *The Prairie*, and *The Deerslayer*

as heroes in the masculine tradition, unlike the more helpless Cora and Alice in *The Last*

moral obligation, and Hawkeye, Uncas, and Chingachgook are capable, experienced men who have successfully navigated the frontier for years and are willing to put themselves in danger for the sake of total strangers. What's more, the men sacrifice the secret location of their cavernous sanctuary behind the waterfall for the larger benefit of their newly formed group. In the same context of moral honor and group cohesion, Junger cites the work of anthropologist Christopher Boehm, writing:

> research has led him to believe that much of the evolutionary basis for moral behavior stems from group pressure. Not only are bad actions punished, but good actions are rewarded. When a person does something for another person – a prosocial act, as it's called – they are rewarded not only by group approval [or disapproval, as in Leverenz's previous claim] but also by an increase of dopamine and other pleasurable hormones in their blood. Group cooperation triggers higher levels of oxytocin, for example, which promotes everything from breast-feeding in women to higher levels of trust and group bonding in men. Both reactions impart a powerful sensation of well-being. Oxytocin creates a feedback loop of good-feeling and group loyalty that ultimately leads members to "self-sacrifice to promote group welfare," in the words of one study. Hominids that cooperated with one another – and punished those who didn't – must

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of the Mohicans, who largely depend upon their male counterparts for traversing frontier hostilities.

have outfought, outhunted, and outbred everyone else. These are the

hominids that modern humans are descended from. (Junger 27)

Junger's and Boehm's insights into the reciprocity between the biological and moral

functioning of honor culture illustrates, in part, how culture is not necessarily influenced

by power and privilege alone, but also by socially beneficial, evolved chemical responses

that positively reward specific, prosocial and cooperative behaviors. Cognitive

psychologist Steven Pinker reaches an overarching, albeit broader conclusion about the

necessary relationship between culture and biology when he insists there is "a complex

interaction between heredity and environment: culture is crucial, but culture could not

exist without mental faculties that allow humans to create and learn culture to begin with"

(xiv-xv). So, when Hawkeye, or anyone else for that matter, intercedes to help others in

distress, as is the case in much frontier mythology, risking their own lives and reputations

in the process, it is important to understand that our ancestral evolution of moral cultures

and evolved neurochemical processes both influence human behavior, which readily

shapes honor-based masculine performances integral to a group's welfare and survival in

many frontier scenarios: "individuals can sometimes accomplish things together that they

can't accomplish by themselves. This principle has guided the evolution of life on earth

from the start" (Greene 20).

      Concerning human evolution, we now know how morality fits into the picture

regarding where morals come from. "Darwin himself was absorbed by this question. . . .

[and] We now have an answer. Morality evolved as the solution to the problem of

cooperation . . . Morality is a set of psychological adaptations that allow otherwise selfish

individuals to reap the benefits of cooperation" (Greene 22-23). Examining the ways in

which such cultural and biological phenomena function together assists in explaining and understanding masculine performances within the space of violent border conflicts encountered by a group or tribe. Cooper's character David Gamut illustrates this type of interaction. David, the singer of psalms and devout Christian is quite out of place in the frontier landscape depicted in *The Last of the Mohicans*. Cooper initially characterizes David as effeminate and ill-equipped to handle the dangers of the frontier, and he is frequently criticized by Hawkeye throughout the novel, offering David unsolicited advice on how to survive in the wilderness of the frontier: "you are welcome to my thoughts; and these are, to part with the little tooting instrument in your jacket to the first fool you meet with, and buy some useful we'pon with the money, if it only be the barrel of a horseman's pistol" (126-127). However, as Leverenz argues of this character,

> by the end of *The Last of the Mohicans* Gamut has ascended the scale of manliness. He demonstrates fortitude and integrity where other men display villainy and cowardice. He also helps to harmonize their beleaguered group, much as Cooper's narrative seeks to blend civilized and savage virtues through a traditionally patriarchal rhetoric of mutual respect and honor. (756)

In privileging the cooperation of the group or tribe over his own individual desires and beliefs, or comfort-zone, to put it more colloquially, David, for the benefit of his own and the other's well-being, assimilates into the novel's governing moral culture of honor and shifts his masculine performance accordingly, as decreed by necessity, but arguably accomplished by means of the previously established cultural connection to the biological influence and tribal sentiment. Near the end of the novel, Hawkeye and company engage

in the final pursuit of Magua and Cora, and Hawkeye warns David about the impending violence and life-threatening danger that lies ahead, should he choose to accompany them on their rescue mission. The newly emboldened, more masculinized David expresses his loyalty to what amounts to his tribe: "your men have reminded me of the children of Jacob going out to battle against the Shechemites . . . Now, I have journeyed far, and sojourned much in good and evil with the maiden ye seek; and though not a man of war, with my loins girded and my sword sharpened, yet I would gladly strike a blow on her behalf" (379). And so, armed with a sling, like his biblical namesake, David is fully cooperative within the group because of his adopted loyalty and duty to see the goal of his new tribe attained. For the once feminized and ineffectual man, a meaningfully connected and inter-reliant masculine individuation is achieved. And though David clearly remains faithful to his Christian beliefs, he reconfigures his masculinity in accordance to a moral culture that demands yet rewards inter-reliant cooperation.

Another way of thinking about David Gamut is that he shifts from the performance of a subordinated effeminate masculinity, unsuited to frontier navigation, to a performance of masculinity that is complicit with the hegemonic masculinity of the novel and required to negotiate lawlessly violent border conflicts. So, part of understanding how masculinities and traditional frontier masculinities, in particular, have developed over time involves an understanding of how honor culture functions within a social context. The findings of a 2015 article published by the Association for Psychological Science "show that two simple factors affect the evolution of honor cultures: effectiveness of police [a manifestation of Leviathan] and toughness of the environment . . . We [also] show that, far from being irrational, honor cultures are critical

for societies under certain conditions because honor cultures can restrain otherwise uncontrolled aggressive behavior" (Nowak et al. 1). Junger, again, also bridges the gap between our evolved tribal ancestry and our current social dynamics in this context when he points out that

> Dishonest bankers and welfare or insurance cheats are the modern equivalent of tribe members who quietly steal more than their fair share of meat or other resources. That is very different from alpha males who bully others and *openly* steal resources. Among hunter-gatherers, bullying males [uncontrolled aggressive behavior like Magua's] are often faced down by coalitions of other senior males, but that rarely happens in modern society. (31)

These conditions also help explain how humans must have become highly dependent on honor culture for survival, and in some cases still do, given the absence or ineffectiveness of state authorities when people face immediate threats of significant consequence. These contexts, when considered collectively, do much in the way of explaining the influences on masculine performance in *The Last of the Mohicans*.

Perhaps the most meaningful example of tribal restoration through cooperation in *The Last of the Mohicans* comes at the very end of the novel after Cora and Uncas have died and are laid to rest. Overcome with grief at the loss of his son, the end of a tribal lineage as the last of the Mohicans, Chingachgook mourns: "My race has gone from the shores of the salt lake, and the hills of the Delawares . . . I am alone −" (406). But, Hawkeye offers the promise of hope to his friend, saying "The boy has left us for a time; but, Sagamore, you are not alone" (407). And in a final show of tribal unity and

restoration, the narrator continues: "Chingachgook grasped the hand that, in the warmth of feeling, the scout had stretched across the fresh earth, and in that attitude of friendship these two sturdy and intrepid woodsmen bowed their heads together . . ." (407). This powerful moment truly captures the inter-reliance and tribal sentiments that inform much of the pro-social masculine identity realization of the novel, but this profound moment is necessarily deflated by the tribal leader, Tamenund, who ominously and accurately portends the inevitable closing of the frontier, the loss of tribal heritage/connection, and the impending arrival of a new European social order. He tells his people, "Go, children of the Lenape, the anger of the Manitou is not done . . . The pale-faces are masters of the earth, and the time of the red-men has not yet come again" (407). These final words are not only a eulogy for Uncas but for their entire culture and life as they know it. By recalling the cautionary examples of Magua and Montcalm, Cooper's novel "asserts that society seduces people into abandoning their personal morality" (Walle 73). Furthermore, "doing so leads to injustice and the dominance of amoral forces. Portraying this bleak perspective, Cooper depicts a heroic individualist [Hawkeye] who makes his own decisions and rejects the dictates of the amoral majority. This moral force, however, is inevitably crushed by the weight of culture and society" (Walle 73). And so, while many of the tribally influenced masculinities in *The Last of the Mohicans* can be lauded as morally inspired, aspirational, and restorative, the frontier will close and the new social order will spread across the American landscape, forcing the masculine influences of characters like Hawkeye, Uncas, and Chingachgook to join the ghosts of the past, ushering in a new and far less romantic literary era of cautionary, de-tribalized masculinities that will be the focus of Chapter III. And while Hawkeye can be read as a

heroic, rugged-individualist, he also embodies a masculinity that is cooperatively connected to inter-reliant tribal sentiment and walks the path of meaningful masculine identity realization.

A Young Woman in the Frontier

Serialized in the *New York Ledger* just before the outbreak of the Civil War in 1859, before making its debut in book form in 1888, E.D.E.N. Southworth's *The Hidden Hand* charts the sensational adventures and coming-of-age of a performatively masculine female character, Capitola Black. One of the primary reasons for including Capitola in this study is that she succeeds in moving the performance and ideals of manhood away from the male body. Many of Capitola's behaviors and attitudes in the novel are undeniably masculine, and like the male characters in both *The Last of the Mohicans* and *Pale Horse Coming*, Capitola's masculinity arises from the need to competently navigate border conflicts in the space of a frontier similar to the relatively uncultivated frontier wilds in both Cooper's and Hunter's novels. The frontiers in all three works reside in a wilderness mostly beyond the reach of a protectionist federal government or law enforcement agency, so the protagonists must traverse their conflicts through inter-reliance and masculine performances influenced by moral cultures and our evolutionary past. Such frontiers emerge in *The Hidden Hand* in two primary spaces: the rural wilderness or Wild Frontier "in one of the loneliest and wildest of the mountain regions of Virginia," where most of the novel takes place, and what might be considered the Waning Frontier in the slums of New York, where Southworth depicts Rag Alley as just

as hostile and dangerous as any natural frontier setting (Southworth 7). Both of these frontiers are also conducive to fostering the moral culture of honor that appears in the novel. Furthermore, while Hawkeye exists as a meaningful part of a restorative tribe in *The Last of the Mohicans*, Capitola's adventures ultimately become a hero's quest to seek out and become a meaningful part of her own tribe or community in an effort to meet the basic needs of competence, autonomy, and connectedness, the necessary components of positive psychological individuation, as prescribed by self-determination theory. Furthermore, Southworth's novel, like Cooper's and Hunter's, offers a critical evaluation of masculinities, pitting aspirational models against those that can be read as marginally cautionary or outright condemnable.

For the novel's hero, Capitola, the chaos and violence that characterize her nineteenth-century border conflicts first arrive as a consequence of being orphaned after she is taken from her mother as an infant, an event followed by the disappearance and death of her caretaker, Nancy Grewell, at the beginning of the novel. As a consequence of these unfortunate events, Capitola essentially loses her tribe. Forced to scrape a living from the dangerous neighborhood known as Rag Alley in New York City, Capitola carries carpet-bags and does "little odd jobs for my food" (42). After eventually taking to squatting in an abandoned tenement, Capitola repeatedly looks to acquire gainful employment at various houses, but to no avail because no potential employer will agree to hire a female. Her inability to gain employment reflects part of the novel's cultural commentary in that Capitola "must learn to survive in a hostile world, as all women, who are left alone in a society that allows them few respectable means of financial independence, must" (Hudock). Capitola desperately recalls of her situation that

> while all the ragged boys I knew could get little jobs to earn bread, I, because I was a girl, was not allowed to carry a gentleman's parcel, or black his boots, or shovel the snow off a shopkeeper's pavement, or put in coal, or do *anything* that *I* could do just as well as *they*. And so because I was a girl, there seemed to be nothing but starvation or beggary before me. (44)

Further adding to the precarious uncertainty of her life on the margins/border/frontier of society, Capitola also knows herself to be highly vulnerable to predation, violence, and sexual assault: "Well, being always exposed, sleeping out-doors, I was often in danger from bad boys and bad men" (45). Recognizing the collective misery of this hardscrabble upbringing, Capitola reaches a point where she realizes how she must navigate the chaos and uncertainty laid out before her: she decides to perform masculinity as dictated by necessity and as a means of protection. Amy Hudock situates Capitola's heroic masculinity in the context of Joseph Campbell's hero's journey in that "she quickly realizes that femininity is a dead end. Her call differs from the traditional call to adventure because she has no right of refusal, for to refuse means death" ("Challenging the Definition"). Where Cooper's Hawkeye, Melville's Ishmael and other male protagonists in the heroic tradition can refuse the call in Campbell's paradigm, as a woman, Capitola has no alternative or recourse. Accordingly, Capitola tells her interlocuter at her court hearing: "And then, all of a sudden, a bright thought struck me: *and I made up my mind to be a boy*" (46)! This active decision marks a turning point in Capitola's life, and her ensuing performance of masculinity become shaped by the moral cultures and tribal impulses on which she becomes reliant and which ultimately serve her

well in navigating the various border conflicts that arise throughout the entirety of the novel. And just as significantly, Capitola can be read as a female frontier hero whose beliefs and actions reconcile polarized gender norms, leading to what Southworth deemed the necessary fusion of masculine and feminine ideals that would ultimately benefit communities and even the country as a whole, providing audiences with reconfigured and aspirational models of masculinity and femininity that challenge confining and debilitating nineteenth-century gender norms for men and women alike.

Capitola's masculine performance, born of the need to navigate the rough environment of the New York streets, leaves a lasting impression on her and gets her into all manner of trouble once she is adopted by another one of the novel's primary protagonists, Major Ira Warfield, also known as "Old Hurricane," a loud and blustering man of wealth, who is wedded to notions of gendered propriety. Given Warfield's propensity for subscribing to and reinforcing conventional gender roles, he and Capitola have explosive confrontations on multiple occasions, as he continually though fruitlessly tries to tame her unfeminine behavior, bemoaning on numerous occasions: "Demmy, you New York newsboy, will you never be a woman?" (376) The push and pull between Cap and Major Warfield, while humorous at times, can be read as a border conflict that emerges between the tensions that arise between a woman's individual desires and her traditional, nineteenth-century relegation to the domestic sphere, or to what scholars describe as the Cult of True Womanhood. As author Joanne Dobson writes of the novel, "through a conscious and canny manipulation of cultural stereotypes of the masculine and feminine, Southworth presents a sweeping critique of the limiting nature of codified gender roles" ("Introduction" xxvii). Furthering her interpretation of Capitola in this vein,

Dobson continues with a useful distinction that can be made between Capitola and other heroines in her literary orbit that can, in some ways, place Capitola alongside many male heroes in frontier mythology, but not through the total abandonment of her femininity. Dobson writes:

> In her creation of Capitola Le Noir – tomboy, adventurer, hero, on the one hand, and fascinating, sexually attractive woman, on the other – Southworth too is laughing in the face of authority. In Cap she skillfully evokes and at the same time reverses the conventions of the sentimental heroine . . . [creating] the unique energies of a woman who could not be more unlike her fictional contemporaries. (xxviii)

Some of the other female characters in the story provide contextual examples brought up in Dobson's claim. For instance, as Hudock observes, "Mrs. Le Noir and Marah Rocke serve as foils to Capitola, revealing the conflict between an older generation of women taught to be victims and a new generation which challenges the assumption that they must accept injustice with grace and dignity." The same case has been made for the character Clara, who "is far too weak to defend herself" and in comparing her to Capitola, "Southworth clearly defines Clara's femininity as dangerous to the women who practice it, while celebrating Cap's refusal to become a sexual victim" (Hudock). And while *The Hidden Hand* does get somewhat folded back into the conventions of the sentimental tradition at the end of the novel with Cap's marriage to Herbert Greyson, the happily-ever-after ending is slightly subverted as Southworth writes: "I am happy to say that they all enjoy a fair amount of human felicity" (485). As Amy Hudock explains, "The conclusion suggests Southworth did not see marriage as either the pinnacle of a

woman's life nor as an unrealistic paradise." A good deal of evidence supports Cap's rightful place among other frontier heroes whose masculine performances enable the navigation of frontier border conflicts and the restoration of a tribe. In the case of Southworth's novel, however, the author also concludes the narrative with a positively meaningful identity realization that reconciles the polarity between masculinity and femininity.

Although much about Capitola Black remains decidedly feminine, her masculine performance enables her navigation of frontier conflicts and establishes her as a paradigmatic frontier hero and archetypal version of masculinity similar to that of Cooper's Hawkeye, or by the end of his novel, the subtle reconciliation of masculinity and femininity that can be seen in David Gamut, who like Capitola resorts to violence when it becomes necessary. First of all, her willingness to inflict violence in accordance with her moral compass falls in line with the cooperatively inter-reliant actions of the virtuous male characters in the novel and frontier mythology as a whole. The character Herbert Greyson, for example, heroically rushes to Capitola's defense when she poses as Clara Day during the hastily forced wedding ceremony. Upon revealing her true identity, Craven Le Noir accosts Capitola, and during the struggle "a stunning blow dealt from a strong arm covered his face with blood, and stretched him [Craven] out at Capitola's feet" (316). Amy Hudock, however, takes issue with claims concerning women and violence when she writes that many female heroes "do not rely on violence for heroic development." Indeed, violent acts do not define the whole of Capitola, and she cannot unilaterally be read as "the archetypal American hero [who] is 'hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer'" (Hudock). Though Capitola does not entirely rely upon these archetypal

masculine qualities, the case can be made, however, that they are present in her actions and impulses to varying degrees and do shape her masculine performance. For instance, rather than become a victim of Black Donald's attempted sexual assault, she sends him plummeting through a trap door in her bedroom floor as a last resort and an act of self-defense. Hudock does acknowledge that "she never allows her foes to assault her with impunity," but I contend that this act of self-preservation against Black Donald is flagrantly violent nonetheless, in spite of her evident reluctance to send him into the hidden pit. The consequences of her act to save herself from assault leads to Black Donald's physically destructive plummet into the abyss, resulting in "serious contusions and bruises, his legs were broken and several of his ribs fractured" (399). And though Capitola may have had no alternative recourse, the crushing violence inflicted upon Black Donald in this scene cannot be ignored. While it remains true that Capitola uses her wits more often than she resorts to violence, she makes threats to compete within the same dominance hierarchy as the men in the novel. Steven Pinker comments upon the usefulness of such threats when he writes that "In a hostile milieu, people and countries must advertise their willingness to retaliate against anyone who would profit at their expense, and that means maintaining a reputation for avenging any slight or trespass, no matter how small" (326). The logic of this sort of deterrence works for Capitola in one of her confrontations with Major Warfield when she suggests she would cut his throat if he ever raised a hand in anger against her, to which he nervously backs down from his tirade and says to himself "'She'll kill me! I know she will! If she don't in one way she will in another! Whew! I'm perspiring at every pore'" (118). Contrary to what some might think of such contexts or threats, even in a humorous exchange like Cap's threating of

Warfield, "violence is not a primitive, irrational urge, nor is it a 'pathology' except in the metaphorical sense of a condition that everyone would like to eliminate. Instead, it is the near-inevitable outcome of the dynamics of self-interested, rational social organisms" (Pinker 329). The same rationale applies to Capitola when she makes threatening claims or is provoked to attack, and while her conscience provides her with a virtuous moral compass that transcends many of the male characters' shortcomings throughout the entirety of the novel, she does effectively employ threats of violence and commit acts of actual violence all the same.

Like her male counterparts, a combination of a moral culture of honor and dignity shape Capitola's moral compass. In one harrowing scene, Capitola sallies forth on her horse in pursuit of Craven Le Noir with a loaded revolver in hand (harmlessly loaded with peas, but this detail is unbeknownst to her antagonist), intent on challenging the man to a duel. Her singular purpose for confronting him is to defend her honor and reputation from a man who has been "slandering me" (371). Moreover, Capitola is infuriated that neither of her visiting male cousins will rise to the occasion to defend her honor: "The MEN are all dead! if any ever really lived . . . I will give you one more chance to retrieve your honor! In one word, now – will you fight that man?" (366) But neither cousin John or the characteristically effeminate Edwin will intervene on her behalf, so Capitola rides out to challenge Craven herself, wounding him in a violent defense of her own honor. In a similar context, Capitola also recalls the previously mentioned work of Nisbett and Cohen, from which Pinker concludes 'Southerners do not approve of violence in the abstract, only of violence provoked by an insult or trespass" (328). Craven, who believes himself to be dying, says as much to the magistrate who intends to charge Capitola as a

criminal for the assault, but Craven tells him that "he did not wish that the young girl

should be prosecuted as she had only avenged her own honor . . ." (374). Again, honor

can be a source of violence in certain scenarios, and Craven sympathetically exonerates

her actions, but Capitola is more morally dignified and virtuous in that her primary goal

was to teach Craven a lesson, not kill him, as her conscience and Christian piety forbid

such drastic action. Much earlier in the story, Cap also goes so far as to physically attack

the bandit Black Donald when he reveals himself in the Major's house: "she ran out and

overtook the outlaw in the middle of the hall. With the agile leap of a little terrier she

sprang up behind him, seized the thick collar of his pea-jacket with both hands, and

drawing up her feet, hung there with all her weight . . ." (157). And though her first attack

on Donald is completely ineffectual, she is relentless in her attempt. I turn again to

Joanne Dobson who expands on the nature of Capitola's masculinity, looking toward the

symbolic imagery of Cap's birthmark for meaning:

> The birthmark of the "hidden hand," from which the book derives its title,
>
> is symbolic of a female power that can at times approach a most
>
> unfeminine violence. Although Cap is reluctant to harm Donald, she does
>
> not flinch from sending him hurtling into bottomless darkness when it
>
> becomes necessary. Old Hurricane [Ira Warfield], when threatened with
>
> the razor immediately envisions her slitting his throat. And at one point
>
> Cap, in a wild fury at Craven, literally contemplates murder.
>
> ("Introduction" xxxix)

Given these masculine exploits and her willingness to commit violent acts or threats for

the sake of her own safety, honor, or for the safety of others, Capitola's masculine

identity stands in relation to honor culture and shows how "The law of retaliation requires that the vengeance have a moralistic pretext to distinguish it from raw assault. The avenger must have been provoked by a prior act of aggression or other injustice" (Pinker 325). Similarly, whereas law enforcement cannot apprehend Black Donald, it is also insightful to note that "If women aren't present to provide the empathetic leadership that every group needs, certain men will do it. If men [like John and Edwin] aren't present to take immediate action in an emergency, women [like Capitola] will step in" (Junger 65). And since Capitola, clearly, becomes the only one capable of stopping Black Donald, as he outwits his would-be captors at every twist and turn of the story, she necessarily rises to the occasion where all other men fail. However, Southworth does not completely sacrifice Cap's feminine attributes at the expense of masculine performance in the novel. Instead, she finds meaning and mutually beneficial identity realization within a fusion of both masculine and feminine performances in addition to maintaining a critical eye of normative and stereotypical gender performances.

Rather than act as a character who simply runs around provoking violence in the face of every conflict in the story, Capitola, who is often "spoiling for a fight," is grounded by a moral culture of dignity and Christian charity that can be read as more beneficial when it comes to meaningful identity realization and the welfare of others. Southworth invokes a culture of dignity through many juxtapositions of characters and her situating of Capitola alongside what can be interpreted as the failings of certain masculine performances and particular models of nineteenth-century masculinity. In his article about the novel's critique of chivalry, for instance, Robert Rabiee argues that Capitola is "a reformer, the restorer of lost honor who steps into roles that the men in the

novel cannot. Cap embodies a new brand of chivalry; she does not dismantle the old one" (157). A lack of honor indeed characterizes several of the novel's male characters, ranging from the blustering, though somewhat redeemed Major Warfield, to the total villainy of the treacherous and self-interested Gabriel Le Noir. But Capitola revises the potentially violent moral culture of honor by merging it with a culture of dignity, allowing her to transcend the shortcomings of the other male characters and providing readers with a more virtuously tempered and aspirational model of masculinity.

We have seen how a moral culture of honor influences masculinities and leads to violence in both Cooper's and Southworth's novels and how honor "can be a laudable willingness to defend life and liberty, but it can also be a reckless refusal to deescalate" (Pinker 333). Cooper's Magua comes to mind almost immediately as do Major Warfield's explosively violent temperament and Gabriel Le Noir's relentless drive to ruin Traverse Rocke. A moral culture of dignity, however, is different from a culture of honor: "When intolerable conflicts do arise, dignity cultures prescribe direct but non-violent actions, such as negotiated compromise geared toward solving the problem" (Campbell and Manning 713). For Capitola, her espousal of a moral culture of dignity is crystallized when she contemplates murdering Craven Le Noir for slandering her name and reputation. Killing him would undoubtedly make Capitola entirely beholden to the mandates of honor culture, but instead she chooses the path of introspection and Christian non-violence, concluding that "the practice of prayer and the purpose of 'red-handed violence' cannot exist in the same person at the same time . . . So at last I made up my mind to spare his life, and teach him a lesson" (375). Again, this course of action elevates Capitola above the missteps and failures of the many quick-tempered and violent men in

the novel. And as is the case with the male characters Black Donald, Gabriel Le Noir, Craven Le Noir, and to some extent, Major Warfield, so-called sentimental novels like *The Hidden Hand* express "beliefs about men marked by greed, lust, or selfishness, and indictments of absent, ineffectual, or evil men" (Griffin 97).

Capitola Black's actions definitely serve as a foil to many of the novel's male characters insomuch that she, unlike Gabriel or Craven Le Noir, rejects the vices of pure self-interest, unrestrained lust, or material gain. The character Traverse Rocke, Major Warfield's son, similarly acts as a foil to novel's more cautionary masculinities. Traverse, like Capitola, represents a fusion of honor and dignity cultures, elevating his masculinity and morality above men like his blustering father and the Le Noir villains. As Megan Jenison Griffin writes, Traverse stands critically "apart from many of his fictional male peers. He is emotional, but never violent; he is strong but not physically aggressive; and he is submissive, but not weak. He is successful, but not at the cost of abandoning his family or competing aggressively with his friends" (97). During one particular exchange with Gabriel Le Noir, as they vie for Clara's future, Gabriel deliberately provokes Traverse by suggesting he is beneath his station; otherwise, he would challenge him to a duel. Traverse responds by saying, "And I should not come if you did, sir. Dueling is un-Christian, barbarous and abominable in the sight of God and all good men" (251). Combined, these characteristics make Traverse's masculine performance much more cooperative and tribally restorative than the actions and behaviors demonstrated by many of the other men in the novel, including his father, Major Warfield, who abandons his wife out of insecurity and pride, and has also earned the nickname "Old Hurricane" because of his violently explosive temperament.

Colonel Gabriel Le Noir, the primary villain, is the novel's most cautionary male character; he murders his brother so that he might inherit his deceased father's estate. And when he learns that his brother, Eugene, has children, and Capitola is the surviving legitimate heir, he conspires to have her killed as well. Fratricide is an undeniable act of tribal disaffiliation and permanently stains him with dishonor, to say nothing of his other selfishly motivated transgressions against others. Traverse (and Capitola) are not even remotely close to resembling Gabriel's treachery, but instead do much to honor the familial bonds and tribal sentiments that unify communities and promote group welfare. Traverse, like Capitola, is also a believer in a moral culture of dignity:

> Traverse's submissiveness is framed in opposition to the active cruelty of male characters like Colonel Le Noir, and Southworth uses him to redefine submission as a noble characteristic. Just as Capitola works outside conventional feminine boundaries to defend herself through fights and duels, Traverse moves away from masculine actions like revenge and conflict. (Griffin 100)

For Traverse, "his restraint provides a contrast to his father's violent outbursts. Major Warfield's ravings are feared by his servants and, on occasion, mocked by Capitola" (Griffin 100). And ultimately, given Traverse's altruistic behavior, pro bono work as a doctor, and his masculine restraint, "Traverse shifts definitions of what it means to be 'masculine,' emerging as a vision of the restrained manhood Southworth values: a man whose treasures are not [extrinsic] land, power, or money but home and companionship [tribal restoration]" (Griffin 98-99). These are truly intrinsic values and precisely the ideals that the cautionary masculinities fail to espouse in *The Hidden Hand*, forsaking

community and tribal connectedness in the process. As a matter of consequence, men like the Le Noirs live lives of alienation and isolation, removed from meaningful bonds with others because of their attachment to and singular emphasis on acquiring extrinsic "things" like money and property. Traverse and Capitola, by contrast, through their behaviors, attitudes, and actions, "affirm the value of community" (Hudock). The value of community remains a common thematic element throughout the works in this chapter – and the scope of this project – and both Capitola and Traverse offer examples of how meaningful masculine individuation arises through attitudes and behaviors that reflect this sentiment.

Modernizing the Frontier Hero

After examining the masculinities in *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Hidden Hand*, one would reasonably expect that the next text in line for analysis would also come from the nineteenth century. Instead, as it concerns representations of masculinity that reach meaningful identity realization through tribal sentiment and honor culture in the space of an open and Wild Frontier, Stephen Hunter's 2001 novel, *Pale Horse Coming*, provides a key thematic link to Cooper's and Southworth's novels. As noted in Chapter I, one goal of this project aims to juxtapose canonical nineteenth-century texts with contemporary frontier narratives, thereby showing how frontier mythology and masculinities continue to share a symbiotically influential relationship. Though Hunter stands at a relatively great distance apart from Cooper's and Southworth's historical and literary eras, *Pale Horse Coming* shows how specific thematic concerns in frontier

mythology endure in our current era of fiction. Like in *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Hidden Hand*, and in spite of being set in 1951, *Pale Horse Coming* presents a frontier space that is as lawless and remote as the frontiers in Cooper's and Southworth's nineteenth-century novels. However, unlike the settings used by Cooper and Southworth, the primary setting in Hunter's novel resides under the more immediate sway of capitalism and industrialization. The prison itself and the unethical experiments conducted on the inmates troublingly receive support and resources from the federal government. Still, a Wild Frontier completely cut off from the rest of American society and civilization endures. In fact, none of the three novels in this chapter lie totally beyond the reach of the impending march of "progress" or societal influence. In spite of their respective proximities to civilization and society, the settings in these works collectively offer glimpses of temporary hope and respite from the inevitable de-tribalization of American society while maintaining a critical view of American culture and masculinities. Moreover, the major protagonists in each of these works are connected by their sensational adventures and are unified in that they all achieve meaningful masculine identity realization and relatively successful conflict resolution.

Because scholars overlook Stephen Hunter, some contextual details prove necessary. *Pale Horse Coming* reimagines John Sturges's 1960 film *The Magnificent Seven*, an adaptation of Akira Kurosawa's 1954 film, *Seven Samurai*. In Hunter's modernized version of the tale, the frontier landscape surrounds a completely isolated all-black penal farm in the fictional Thebes, Mississippi, festering amid the decaying vestiges of the antebellum plantation economy in "the deepest part of the deepest South" (10). Largely cut off from civilization by a massive labyrinthine swamp, Thebes is

inaccessible by road, and it quickly becomes apparent that in attempting to navigate such a hostile wilderness by oneself: "Alone: dead. It followed" (Hunter 37). As a frontier landscape comparable to those in Cooper's and Southworth's novels, Hunter's setting also recalls the hostilities that existed between whites and Native Americans but shifts to the more immediate tensions between white and black American, further illustrating the remoteness and isolation of this "modern" frontier setting. During Sam Vincent's journey to Thebes to obtain a death certificate, the events of which set the major conflict of the novel in motion, his boatman and guide, Lazear, offhandedly remarks, "'I hope them Choctaws ain't in no drinking mood . . . If they be, sometimes it makes them hungry and they eat a white fellow . . . Mister, figure you'd taste right good to them red savages'" (36). Dr. Liz Gloyn comments on such perspectives about the wilderness in saying, "what counts as wild and what counts as natural is very much a human construct. We decide where the wilderness starts and where it ends . . . it is a very fertile ground for storytelling as cultures work out where those limits are" ("The Wild Unknown"). Human constructions and projections of what constitutes something as wild permeate frontier narratives, going back as early as Puritan fears of the devil and covens of witches lurking in the forests of New England, or in the case of Hunter's novel, the savagery and cannibalism associated with non-whites, which extends to Melville's character Queequeg who will be discussed in this context in the next chapter.

At the prison itself and the adjacent town of Thebes, the swamp, the swift, deep, and dangerous currents of the Yaxahatchee River and sprawling, dense piney woods create an isolated Wild Frontier, akin in its remoteness, to the lawless rural countryside in *The Hidden Hand* where bandits – and spirits – roam, and the occupied wilderness of

upstate New York in *The Last of the Mohicans.* Aside from the occasional prison launch that keeps Thebes stocked and armed, no one gets in and no one gets out. Inside the prison itself, the African American inmates – some dangerous criminals, some guilty of simply being born with dark skin – suffer as the victims of government funded, racially-charged dehumanization and deeply sickening forms of brutality, a pointed allegory of the infamous Tuskegee syphilis experiments. But true to frontier form, through the sensational twists and turns of the novel, seven men, tribally unified by their previous experience with guns and violence, collectively assault Thebes to liberate the incarcerated, destroy an institutional representation of white supremacy, and heroically restore democratic ideals by means of a violent, lead-filled reckoning, the kind that makes Westerns so identifiable.

Accounting for this sort of narrative catharsis, however, is not always best or accurately characterized by interpretations that insist upon a simplistic enactment of hyper-masculine, puerile fantasies. Such readings can apply to many works of fiction, and there are sensational elements of escapist fantasy in *Pale Horse Coming*, the kind that many Cooper and Southworth critics also find objectionable. However, Hunter's novel, like Cooper's and Southworth's, has more nuance and depth in that it presents astute evaluations of masculine performances as they stand in relation to the intrinsic psychological benefits attained through inter-reliant tribal sentiment and the group cohesion that enables successful frontier navigation. Similarly, the cautionary and failed masculinities are the ones driven by extrinsic and self-serving motives in Hunter's narrative, showing the negative but logical consequences of selfish, de-tribalized actions that lead to anxiety, alienation, isolation, and death. *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The*

Hidden Hand emphasize the same. Hunter's novel is also clearly influenced by the traditional ideals of rugged individualism that regularly characterize many works in the realm of frontier mythology and influence the "successful" masculine performances of his characters, along with the final conflict resolution. Frontier scholar Eliot West notes that, "Under the older frontier interpretation, the story shimmered with a romantic, heroic glow. Suffering and tragedy were redeemed by the glorious results presumed to have followed – the nurture of American individualism and democracy and the coming of a civilized order into a wilderness" (122). This brand of romantic idealism informs Cooper's and Southworth's texts, while Hunter's novel accomplishes the same with the climactic destruction of Thebes and the liberation of its captives. The character Audie Ryan – a fictionalized version of highly decorated World War II hero Audie Murphy – says to an elderly resident of Thebes' shanty-town after the prison's destruction, "'we come in to serve this place some justice . . . Have courage. Be bold. This part of your life is over . . . All your debts are burned to ash. You get what few get, and that is a new start in life'" (533). The glorious result in this case is a black population's newly acquired freedom from the savagery of white supremacy in the South and the tribal unity achieved through the inter-reliant bonds of the heroic gunfighters. And though Jim Crow era sentiments, beliefs, and legislation still have a major hold on the America of 1951, the newly emancipated men and women freed from the horrors of Thebes receive a small glimpse of possibility towards a future in a post-war, rapidly modernizing American landscape, though their hardships and experiences of racial injustices as black men and women in a pre-civil rights era are likely far from over.

Pale Horse Coming certainly explores modern influences on contemporary frontier mythology, such as the proliferation of the federal government, laws, the development of American politics, and the distribution of economic power. But a revealing socio-cultural commentary linking Hunter to Cooper and Southworth also emerges. On the one hand, the so-called heroic glow that surrounds much of Hunter's novel can be interpreted as a "successful" initiation into a restorative, inter-reliant tribal group, which enables meaningful masculine identity realization. On the other hand, the cautionary masculinities and masculine "failures" in the novel, like those in *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Hidden Hand*, can be read as a consequence of socio-cultural de-tribalization in which the disconnect between modern life and our tribal evolutionary past significantly contributes to alienation and isolation, underscoring the modern, culturally individualistic and highly problematic departure from the intrinsic human needs that enable positive psychological individuation and ameliorate the more harmful constructions of masculinity.

The masculinities in Hunter's novel, depicted as aspirational, instructive, and "successful" with regard to a positive outcome of narrative conflict resolution, are illustrated through the characters who maintain or return to some form of inter-reliant tribal stratification that emphasizes the welfare of a group over that of the individual. In *Pale Horse Coming*, the primary hero, World War II veteran and state trooper Earl Swagger – something of a modern-day Hawkeye – is first brought to Thebes out of a deep loyalty to rescue his surrogate father, Sam Vincent. Earl's tribal loyalties and moral circle crystallize when Hunter writes of him that "He loved three things in the world: his family, the United States Marine Corps and Sam" (16). Earl's meaningful, inter-reliant

relationship with Sam establishes itself early in the story as well: "In some ways, unsaid, Sam had become Earl's version of a father, his own proving to be a disappointment and his need for someone to believe in so crucial to his way of thinking . . . The bonds between the two men had grown strong . . ." (17). After heroically rescuing Sam from Thebes and certain death, early in the novel, and after surviving his own brutal captivity at the prison – as he gets captured during Sam's breakout – Earl insightfully knows the necessity of getting his salty band of hired gunfighters to function as a group that prioritizes the mission and each other over the differences between them. Once the men come together to discuss their mission, Hunter writes: "The old bastards were making Earl crazy . . . bickering among themselves, forming allegiances, then selling each other out in a trice and forming new ones . . . No marine unit could have functioned with so much inner strife . . ." (Hunter 427). But as the impending conflict with frontier chaos and violence draws nearer, "The most important thing, Earl knew, was to let them get used to each other, or as used to each other as such a confabulation of ornery, egotistical old cusses could manage . . . He knew that these old boys were stars in their own little worlds, and didn't need a sudden tyrant to bark at them and treat them like shit. They needed guidance more than leadership" (446-447). In the same context of a group necessarily adapting to function cooperatively, Junger writes of our evolutionary past that "groups that failed to function cooperatively must have gradually died out. Adaptive behavior tends to be reinforced hormonally, emotionally, and culturally, and one can see all three types of adaptation at work in people who act on behalf of others" (55). As a veteran of several combat tours, Junger also writes "In combat, soldiers all but ignore differences of race, religion, and politics within their platoon. . . . Reviling people you

share a combat outpost with is an incredibly stupid thing to do . . ." (125,128). As a

consequence, the apocalyptic assault on Thebes is successful not just because the men are

sensationally competent in combat but because Earl unifies and leads the characters

through their mission, and they all work collectively, each performing his assigned job, in

spite of the many, many marked differences of opinion and belief between them, much

like Hawkeye's heroic group in Cooper's novel.

Through Earl's guidance towards pro-social cooperation as an inter-reliant group,

the men also become unified and come to feel a sense of connectedness, autonomy, and

competence, with their most basic, intrinsic human needs met by being an integral part of

a tribal culture. Hunter writes of the men in the aftermath of Thebes's destruction: "the

cowboys were happy, to a man . . . They almost seemed in the end as if they couldn't

quite let go of it. But already they missed Bill and Jack [who had already departed for

their respective homes] . . . There was a sense, somehow, that this was it: a last roundup,

and they'd never be together again, at least not like this, in the lassitude of survival,

thankfulness, and drunkenness" (581). This passage, again, underscores the psychological

rewards a person feels when one is connected to others, feels competent in what one

does, and is autonomously motivated, altogether the cornerstones of meaningful identity

realization as delineated by self-determination theory, and the optimal way of navigating

the high stakes of the frontier. The same passage also expresses feelings of loss, as the

men must now return to their de-tribalized modern lives and get lost in the minutiae of

their own careers and personal endeavors where the heights of such connectedness,

autonomy, and competence are relatively much harder to come by. Junger speaks to the

potential consequences of this reality, writing, "Modern society has perfected the art of

making people not feel necessary," and the masculine performances and skills that Hunter's heroes possess verge on obsolescence as the country rapidly modernizes and law and order increasingly render such masculine performances unnecessary (xvii).

As I mentioned earlier, a significant aspect of *Pale Horse Coming* is that it has one foot in the traditionally heroic frontier mythology of the past, while the other resides in the cultural predicaments of the twentieth century, similar to what Cooper and Southworth accomplish in highlighting the societal, gendered, and racial tensions inherent to their respective eras. Like the interrogations of masculinity in *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Hidden Hand*, Hunter's novel similarly lays out what can be thought of as a taxonomic classification and evaluation of masculinities that illustrate the virtuous qualities of a would-be hero. At the same time, however, *Pale Horse Coming* simultaneously presents competing models of hegemonic masculinity that often clash with one another and vie for hierarchical power or legitimacy. Earl Swagger, for instance, aligns himself with the virtues of honor, duty, and doing the right thing for the benefit of those within his moral circle; his moral compass and deep sense of injustice ultimately compel him to lead the battle against Thebes. Earl's moral reasoning becomes clearer when he gives Sam his perspective on Thebes:

> You can't fix it. You can't modify it. You can't reform it. You can't make it better or gentler. You can only do two things. You can wait for it to change, meaning you wait until the world changes, which it might do tomorrow or next year or next century or never. And all that time, [in Thebes] that city of dead under the water gets more and more crowded, the Whipping House gets bloodier, the Screaming House gets louder. And we're the worst,

because we knew about it and we didn't do a goddamn thing. Or we can

blow it off the face of the earth. Those are the only two possibilities,

realistically. (334)

In this context, Earl's moral compass echoes Hawkeye's from the scene in which he

decides to help Duncan, Cora, and Alice because he feels pro-socially and morally

obligated, risking his life and inflicting violence in the process. But the character Charlie

Hatchison, one of the gunfighters Earl hires to aid him in his mission, hardly equals the

virtuous masculine heroism that defines characters like Earl, Hawkeye, or Capitola Black.

Charlie is something of an antihero – more akin to Southworth's mercenary though

somewhat redeemable Black Donald – than any of the other gunfighters. In short, Charlie

Hatchison is a racist, selfish, and arrogant man whose moral circle is far smaller than any

of the rest of the men's, and he only joins Earl for the sake of his own interests. The

nature of Charlie's character emerges in his comments on Earl's plan to liberate Thebes,

saying "'truth is I never had much use for your colored folk. That's how I feel. So don't

look for me to hold no hands and do no holy-rolling. But you're offering me something

money can't buy, and that's kills . . . So if I don't got to lollygaggle no niggers, but just

do some serious gun work, count me in . . ." (375). In this negative light, Charlie falls

under the umbrella of Kimmel's analysis of cowboy masculinity in the nineteenth century

insomuch that "the cowboy was not always a hero; he was invented *after* he had

disappeared. In the 1860s and the 1870s, the cowboy . . . appeared in public prints and

writing as rough, uncouth, shaggy, and dirty, whose behavior was violent, barbarous, and

rowdy" (*History* 29). Kimmel's description fits Charlie Hatchison to the letter, shown

clearly as Hunter writes "He was wiry, peppery, loud, and couldn't sit still . . . and it was

a problem for him to keep a smirk off his face" and "Charlie was addicted to aggression. He never tired of telling others he had killed seventeen men" (372,428). When ranking Charlie alongside Earl and the other gunfighters in the novel, Charlie easily stands out as a self-centered man with a narrow worldview, which removes him from the novel's legitimacy of a hegemonically virtuous and aspirational model of masculinity performed by the rest of the men, Earl in particular.

Even the outwardly virtuous lawyer and war veteran, Sam Vincent, one of the more educated, traveled, and cultured men in the novel – heroic in his own right – lies beholden to the benighted, prejudicial views of his time and place in Americas socio-cultural history. In a conversation about African Americans with Earl, Sam reveals the racial stereotypes he harbors, telling him '"They live in a different universe, somehow . . . It doesn't make sense to us. It is haunted by ghosts and more attuned to the natural and more connected to the earth. Their minds work differently. You can't understand, sometimes, why they do the things they do. They are us a million years ago" (18-19). And although in a previous year Sam lost his esteemed position as county prosecutor for defending a black man in court, and his moral circle extends to include the downtrodden and dispossessed as far as legal circumstances allow, his prejudices remain when they do not pertain to the letter of the law. Earl, by contrast, offers a rebuttal to Sam's observations, casting him in a more virtuous and tribally inclusive light, deferring to Sam out of politeness and respect, but raising an implicit argument that challenges Sam's perspective on African Americans: "Maybe that's it . . . Though the ones I saw on Tarawa, they died and bled the same as white folks" (19). In fact, in some of Hunter's other novels, Earl is quite progressive in comparison to the widely held beliefs of his

historically contextualized peers. In *Hot Springs*, for instance, Earl gets into a heated exchange about race with a man under his command on a casino busting team. In a horribly botched raid on one particular casino, a few innocent black civilians are killed in the gunfight, and the character Frenchy Short, unmoved by the tragedy, says to Earl "They were only Negroes. I would never say nigger because my parents told me it was uncouth, but still, they were only Negroes" (208). In his response, Earl explodes at Frenchy and tells a more detailed account of his experience on Tarawa, just mentioned in passing to Sam Vincent in *Pale Horse Coming*. During an especially chaotic day during the war, Earl was hit by a Japanese sniper and lay bleeding to death when two black men from the Ammunition Company risked their lives for him, crawling into the line of fire to drag Earl to safety. In a white-hot rage directed at Frenchy, he recalls,

> I'm dead but for them two, and a few hours later one of 'em hisself was drug in, and they laid him next to me, and he died. I watched him die. Damned if his blood weren't the same goddamned color as mine. Bright red, when it come out, then turning sort of blackish. So don't you tell me they're any goddamned different. (208)

Earl's story then reaches an emotional and even further character revealing climax: "He didn't realize by the end he was screaming;" and he tells his team "underneath, your blood is the same color as any Negro's, so when a Negro dies it's a real hard death. Anybody have any goddamned problem with that?" (208) The only replies arrive in the form of shameful, downcast looks and the murmurings of the humble "no sir" (208). In contrast to Charlie Hatchison, Sam Vincent, or any other of Hunter's characters whose ideas of justice, democracy, and moral circles tend to exclude certain groups, Earl's

moral circle encompasses a larger, more prosocial and more connected tribe, which elevates him above the limited scope of his peers, offering an aspirational model of masculinity that promotes a more democratic and egalitarian ethos that can be traced back to our ancestral past.

Aside from Earl's progressive views of race and how this distinguishes him from several of Hunter's other characters, it is also worth noting that his moral and ethical beliefs are more tribally inclusive than many of the "good guys" like Sam and Charlie, to say nothing of the opportunistic white supremacists in the novel. Steven Pinker comments on the psychological nature of such sympathies and lack thereof:

> Unless we are psychopaths, we *sympathize* with other people and cannot blithely treat them as obstacles or prey. Such sympathy, however, has not prevented people from committing all manner of atrocities throughout history and prehistory. The contradiction may be resolved by recalling that people discern a moral circle that may not embrace all human beings but only members of their clan, village, or tribe. Inside the circle, fellow humans are targets of sympathy; outside, they are treated like a rock or a river or a lump of food. (320)

In such a context, Earl's moral circle is one of the more inclusive examples in the novel. His allegiance to duty, honor, and morality, regardless of race or ethnicity, elevates him above characters like Charlie Hatchison and Frenchy Short, whose motives, like those of Cooper's characters Magua and Montcalm or Southworth's Le Noir villains, are egotistically driven, prideful, and self-serving. Like Hawkeye and Capitola, however, Earl's honor and moral compass aid him not only in terms of self-preservation and

successful frontier navigation, but they elicit aspirational models of masculinity influenced by connectedness with others, envisioning a larger moral circle, and tribal inclusivity, especially when the others are non-kin strangers for the most part.

Audie Ryan closely resembles Earl with regard to his moral psychology and its influence on masculine performance by way of his willingness to inflict violence on behalf of saving others. After Earl proposes the details of his planned assault on Thebes to the other highly decorated war hero, the narrator says of the younger man, "A faraway look played over Audie's delicate features . . . and his eyes focused on something not there. Earl knew where he was. Back in the little ruined towns and the snowy fields, up the heartbreaking, backbreaking ridges and hills, fording the cold, cold rivers, sleeping in mud and shit, hunting men in gray who hunted back" (366). Audie, like Earl, suffers from chronic post-traumatic stress disorder. Earl's mental illness became so debilitating after the war that he attempted suicide, placing his Colt sidearm to his temple only to realize "I'd forgotten to jack a shell into the chamber" (365). As a consequence of his own war-time traumas, Audie self-medicates by drinking bourbon to combat his insomnia, and worse, "if I don't, I see Germans" (363). Audie too thinks about suicide: "'I think about it every goddamn night. A few drinks, get the fancy Peacemaker out that Colt's gave me when I toured the plant one time, spin the cylinder a few times, and then at least I wouldn't think about Lattie and Joe and what happened to them. I'd be with them" (365). One can recall Hawkeye's reaction to Uncas's death at the hands of Magua, and in a moment of complete pathos, ready to give his own life to attack Uncas's killer, "Hawkeye had crouched like a beast about to take its spring, and his frame trembled so violently with eagerness, that the muzzle of the half-raised rifle played like a leaf

fluttering in the wind" (Cooper 393). For many combat veterans like Earl and Audie it is

important to know that "the very worst experience, by far, was having a friend die. In war

after war, army after army, losing a buddy is considered the most devastating thing that

can possibly happen. It is far more disturbing than experiencing mortal danger oneself

and often serves as a trigger for psychological breakdown on the battlefield or later in

life" (Junger 82). Earl and Audie, as combat veterans, know the excruciatingly painful

loss of a tribal member, and this kind of experience remains a part of what makes it so

difficult for veterans to come home: "Studies from around the world show that recovery

from war – from any trauma – is heavily influenced by the society one belongs to, and

there are societies that make that process relatively easy. Modern society does not seem

to be one of them . . . it makes one wonder exactly what it is about modern society that is

so morally dispiriting to come home to" (Junger 90). In the light of this revealing context,

it also stands to reason that Earl's war against Thebes becomes his way of returning to the

inter-reliant tribal unity that is galvanized and fostered in combat.

      Earl and Audie, Herbert Greyson and Traverse Rocke, Hawkeye, Duncan, Uncas,

and Chingachgook, especially in the context of a tribe, all carry the shared the experience

of war. But as it concerns our relatively modern understanding of how the trauma of

combat affects soldiers, "Any discussion of veterans and their common experience of

alienation must address the fact that so many soldiers find themselves missing the war

after it's over. That troubling fact can be found in written accounts from war after war,

country after country, century after century" (Junger 91). Earl's wife, Junie, worries

about her husband for the same reason. She tells their mutual family friend, Sam Vincent,

"I fear he has other things on his mind. I know this Korea business has him all het up. I'm

scared he'll get it in his head that he has to go fight another war. He's done enough. But I can read his melancholy. It's his nature to go where there's shooting, under the impression he can help, but maybe out of some darker purpose" (15-16). Junger writes about the symptoms of post-traumatic stress based on his own experiences along with the experiences of others and how tribal inter-reliance and connectedness significantly alleviate those symptoms. He writes that "in addition to all the destruction and loss of life, war also inspires ancient human virtues of courage, loyalty, and selflessness that can be utterly intoxicating to the people who experience them" (77). One could recall the conditions and shared experiences of Hawkeye, David Gamut, and company, along with Traverse Rocke and Herbert Greyson in this context as well. Similar to Hawkeye's pathos-ridden avenging of Uncas, in *The Hidden Hand*, during the expansionist conflict in Mexico, Traverse heroically takes the flag from the fallen color guard to unify the faltering men and help lead them to victory. Earl, in particular, recalls of his own harrowing experiences: "In the war, at least you had responsibilities and comrades to get you through, to share the ordeal and lend you their strength" (243). Junger connects the contextual dots pertaining to a veteran's potential existential burdens upon returning home:

> What people miss [about war or any catastrophe] presumably isn't danger or loss but the unity that these things often engender. There are obvious stresses on a person in a group, but there may be even greater stresses on a person in isolation . . . Even if he or she is a part of a family, that is not the same as belonging to a group that shares resources and experiences almost everything collectively. Whatever the technological advances of modern

society – and they're nearly miraculous – the individualized lifestyles that

those technologies spawn seem to be deeply brutalizing to the human

spirit. (93)

Feelings of alienation and a sense of being alone plague Earl and Audie, and one way to

restore their sense of tribal belonging and connectedness, no matter how temporary or

fleeting, comes through their unified attempt to wage war on Thebes alongside their

newfound brothers in arms. Junger describes this engendered sense of unity: "If there are

phrases that characterize the life of our ancestors, 'community of sufferers' and

brotherhood of pain' surely must come close" (55). The hardships experienced by our

tribal ancestors in times of war, famine, and sickness are not that far removed, as Junger

explains, from the disasters, wars, and catastrophes that occur in modern life. And living

in proximity with others who help one another through these times of crisis creates bonds

between people that are far more tenuous in times of plenty and affluence. For Earl,

Audie, and many of the other characters in this chapter, shared hardship, inter-reliance,

and cooperation all contribute to the shaping of virtuous masculine performances that

interpersonally and meaningfully connect some of the characters within the works to one

another and unify them across texts as well.

Like all of the works in this project, *Pale Horse Coming* present characters as

existing on a spectrum of masculine performances that become artistically evaluated in

relation to one another. But moving away from traditional models and conceptions of

masculinity that treat the male body as a site of manhood, the character Audie Ryan,

much like Southworth's character Capitola Black, challenges the physically dominant

and hyper-masculine models of masculinity that saturate much frontier mythology. Audie

stands apart from the other gunfighters' physical attributes insomuch that when he meets Earl for the first time, Earl "saw almost a gal's eyes, soft and gentle and sensitive and a face startling in its beauty. Hard to believe this perfect little angel was the most decorated soldier of the Second World War and had killed close to three hundred Germans" (361). Continuing along this line of unconventional masculine characterization, Hunter writes of Audie that

> Without the gun, he was a Texas redneck pretty boy with freckles and a girly name, who had to fight his way to and from school when he went. With the gun he felt the admiration of the family when he returned with rabbit or squirrel or pheasant or dove, each shot beautifully. He felt the most primitive [and inter-reliantly tribal] thing a hunter feels: I have fed my family; I am a man. (463)

It is not Audie's physical prowess or stature that makes him so deadly, as it does with a character like Earl, or the hulking psychopathic antagonist and prison guard sergeant Big Boy. But with a gun in his hand, the hard lessons of experience on his side, and a capacity for aggression, the male dominance hierarchy that would place him on a lower rung in terms of physical domination all but disappears, and Audie more than capably navigates the masculine dominance hierarchy inherent to frontier chaos and violence. As the old saying goes: God made man, but Samuel Colt made them equal. During the assault on Thebes, "Audie lifted his black German attack rifle, as it was called. He had no hesitations whatsoever, for all hesitations had been ground mercilessly out of him that day in Italy when his friend Lattie Tipton had been gunned down" (526-527). Audie has also refined his skills as a gunfighter off of the battlefield, learning the flashiness of pistol

work required by his roles in Hollywood films as a cowboy hero: "He had made himself into a different kind of killer than the boy who had thrown grenades and shot men down with carbine, Thompson and Garand; he was the Kid now, not much older than the famous Kid of 1884, Johnson County, New Mexico" (529). In both frontier conflicts, in the European theater and at Thebes, Audie harnesses the necessary masculine instinct for violence and frontier survival, making him an effective, cooperative tribal asset that Hawkeye and Capitola surely would be happy to fight alongside.

Audie Ryan is not the only character in the novel who deviates from the performances of prescriptive gender roles and stereotypes. The character Sally McGriffin is introduced to the reader as the loving granddaughter and caretaker of the legendary gunfighter Ed McGriffin, and both have their part to play in the attack on Thebes. When Sally is first introduced, she clearly embraces a willing devotion to the domestic altar of the sentimental tradition, but there is much more to her character than is initially revealed. Cleverly, Sally outmaneuvers the traditional gender roles ascribed to women, much in the fashion of Capitola Black, and in doing so she forces her way into joining the men on their mission to Thebes. As the men prepare to depart for the impending conflict, she insinuates herself into the plan and asks a reluctant Earl: "and who'll cook for this geezer crusade?" (351) This line can appear to confine Sally to the domestic service role, but this is not a true measure of the masculine strength that lies within her. In defiance of Earl's refusal for her to tag along, she threatens Earl, saying

> I will go with grandpap or grandpap will go nowhere, and that is the truth.
> And you had better adjust to that now, or you will be an unhappy fellow
> for some time to come . . . I can handle myself . . . you'd best believe I'm

coming too, and I won't hear another word or there'll be trouble. I may

look frail but I pack a punch. (351)

And as Hunter gives the reader Earl's recognition of Sally's command, he truly knows

that "as she was Ed McGriffin's granddaughter, Earl knew she spoke the truth" (351). At

this point, Sally's masculine identity only exists in relation to her grandfather, but her

competence and autonomy stand on their own once the lead starts to fly at Thebes. Like

Earl and the other men who set out to raze Thebes, Sally has grit, courage, and the ability

to hold her own in the typically male dominated social sphere of frontier mythology.

Like Capitola Black in *The Hidden Hand*, in some ways, Sally McGriffin

challenges the conventional gender roles and stereotypes of her time. Sally's display of

courage and strength under fire on the battlefield at Thebes is not entirely novel either,

and the performance of masculinity by women in order to negotiate social dominance

hierarchies has real-world analogs. On October 23, 1888, the *New York Times* ran an

article titled "She Wants to Be a Cowboy." The article gives a detailed account of a

sixteen-year-old girl named Mary Abbot who tried to run away from home with nothing

but a pack and a pair of pistols. Her escape attempt was routed and instead she held up in

a nearby barn, where concerned family and citizens tried to take her home. As a local

parson approached the barn in an attempt to retrieve her, Mary fired several warning

shots, terrifying the then fleeing parson and scattering the crowd that had begun to form.

The newspaper claimed that Mary had been victimized and negatively influenced by

dime novels and the cowboy masculinities they touted. However, Daniel Worden argues

in his analysis of the event that "Mary Abbott adopts masculine practices to challenge

what critics have recognized as masculine authority. As Mary Abbott demonstrates,

masculinity provides as way of resisting patriarchal institutions of power" (36). Worden also usefully concludes that

> The masculine heroes in dime novels and their real-life imitators adopt masculinity to produce alternatives to those very institutions of power. Mary Abbott's masculine rebellion conveys the threat masculinity posed to late nineteenth-century genteel norms and institutions, particularly through a proliferation of masculinities that are not essentially connected to a legible male body. (36)

In the examples of Mary Abbot, Capitola Black, and Sally McGriffin, there are women who are completely empowered by performing masculinity, both rejecting and transforming the prescriptive gender roles assigned to them. American literary scholar David S. Reynolds also comments on women engaging the frontier in this context. He writes: "In some novels, the moral exemplar is so sturdy that she confronts severe physical perils and survives them dauntlessly, often by temporarily assuming a male guise" (345). Reynolds's passage definitely applies to Capitola and what he terms the adventure feminist, given her masculine behavior and cross-dressing, and Sally goes on to demonstrate the very same. Reynolds continues along the same thread, citing James Fenimore Cooper – in spite of the helplessness of Cora and Alice – as part of this literary tradition and his other characters Mabel Dunham, Ellen Wade, and Hattie Hunter, writing, "Cooper knew that the exigencies of frontier life elicited untapped powers in women" (346). These exigencies and hardships enable and encourage women like Sally and Capitola to navigate the hostilities of the frontier while standing alongside their male, masculine counterparts.

Continuing to follow Sally's masculine performance, as the men make ready to depart for Thebes, Earl stands in Sally's way in a last-ditch attempt to prevent her from coming along, but brandishing the ever-symbolic cowboy hat, Sally refuses to listen to Earl (much in the way Capitola rejects the conventions of Old Hurricane) and snaps at him: "I would not be the kind of gal who sits at home, sir . . . Now stand out of my way, sir, or you and I will go at it, and as I said, I pack a punch" (474). Even during the hellish chaos of combat, Sally remains steadfast and strong, unflinchingly loyal to the group. While one of the heroic gunfighters, Elmer, lies bleeding from a gunshot wound, Sally stitches him up, teasing him for whining about his pain. Afterwards, she quickly barks orders at the older man: "Ow yourself. Now get back in the fight, sir. No time for lollygagging" (519). And in the next instant, Elmer thinks to himself, "Wasn't she a heller! That one had some damn grit!" (519) Through her brave and humorously salty performance of masculinity and rugged individualism, Sally defies both convention and her male companions' expectations, embodying a necessary and useful alternative to confining gender dogmas. Through her masculinity, Sally avoids becoming just another helpless woman left at home to cook, clean, and raise children; instead, she becomes as empowered as any frontier hero. The men around her know it, and they respect it, welcoming her into the tribe.

Honor vs. Dignity

We have already seen how morality and honor culture have influenced the masculine performances in *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Hidden Hand*, and a similar

thematic concern emerges in *Pale Horse Coming*. However, where honor culture has a major role in Cooper's and Southworth's novels, the tension between an honor culture and culture of dignity creates friction between competing hegemonic masculinities in Hunter's novel, much in the same way this tension arises in the more tempered and restrained masculinity of Southworth's Traverse Rocke. The psychology of this moral tension is best exemplified in Hunter's novel through Earl and Sam.

Although Sam is a decorated veteran of World War II and no stranger to the violent side of human nature, Sam's moral conundrum surrounding violence emerges from whether or not he sees it as justifiable. After surviving the infamous chaos and brutal winter conditions surrounding the Battle of the Bulge, Sam acknowledges his role in the conflict, remembering an attacking German Panzer unit and the fact that "We blew them off the face of the earth . . ." (333). However, after the war, when Earl tries to persuade him to carry a firearm on his initial journey to Thebes, Sam invokes the moral culture of dignity that is a fairly recent development in human history, only really gaining significant cultural footing throughout America in the early nineteenth century. Comparing the war to Earl's proposed vigilante assault on Thebes, Sam says of the German army, "There was no other thing possible . . . the state had decreed a general condition of war" (333). And in refusing to carry a gun to Thebes for protection, Sam tells Earl: "I am a man of reason, not guns. I'm a lawyer. The gun cannot be my way. Logic, fairness, humanity, the rule of law above all else, those are my guidelines" (21). Campbell and Manning observe the same moral culture shift when they write, "historically, as state authority and reliance on the law has increased, honor culture has given way to something else: a culture of dignity" (713). In the context of Sam's response

to Earl, along with the novel being set in 1951, it makes sense that Sam would insist on his current manner of approach because the "culture of dignity existed in perhaps its purest form among respectable people in the homogeneous towns of mid-twentieth century America, where the presence of a stable and powerful legal system [in which Sam has an integral role] discouraged the aggressiveness and hostility toward settlement seen in honor cultures . . ." (Campbell and Manning 714). The more cautious and honor driven Earl, by contrast, remains unmoved in his personal convictions and replies to Sam, "if I have to come, I'll be bringing a gun" (21). Sam's journey to Thebes, however, serves as quite a shock to his ideals and refined sensibilities, and the world as he perceives it quickly collapses, and only the law of tooth and fang matters once he comes face to face with the violence and corruption of Thebes. He wrestles with his ideals after nosing around in search of the death certificate that brought him there, encountering, and angering the white law enforcement that terrorizes the citizens of the all black town:

> Sam's mind was clearly arranged. He appreciated order above all things, for order was the beginning of all things. Without elemental order there was nothing; it wasn't a civilization unless undergirded by a system of laws and records, of taxes and tabulations. This down here: it was not *right*. He felt some fundamental law was being flouted before his very eyes. (46)

Even after his mistreatment, repeated beatings, unlawful incarceration, and life-threatening escape from Thebes that comes through Earl's self-sacrifice, giving Sam the opportunity to hop a train, Sam still cannot accept what he sees as the moral bankruptcy of planning and carrying out Earl's proposed plan to lead an assault on Thebes. Instead,

Sam believes in a moral culture of dignity that will investigate and prosecute Thebes county, thereby exposing its atrocities in a court of law through the weapons of logic, diplomacy, and rational tactics, assuming all the while that justice handed down by the letter of the law will prevail. Earl, having more fully reconnoitered and experienced the institutional system of Thebes as an especially vulnerable inmate, sees what Sam does not and knows that he cannot simply rely on an arm of the Hobbesian Leviathan for intervention, especially in the case of Thebes: Leviathan is behind everything. Earl lays bare the situation, as he sees it, to Sam:

> I'm trying to be clear about what they've done down there and why the ordinary remedies are doomed. You see what they've engineered? They've engineered a system that is unbreachable by what you would call a rational action, the action of men or systems who themselves are rational . . . They are set up along one line and one line only: to survive any 'rational' attack on them. If any institution attempts to change them, they can defeat it. (330-331)

The impenetrability that Earl describes goes beyond the fact Thebes resides in a vast frontier wilderness. The prison also operates on behalf of both the state and federal government, being the site of a military doctor's insidious biological experiments on the black inmates. To wage war on Thebes essentially amounts to waging war on the federal government, and that is a fight they would undoubtedly lose. The fact that Thebes, for all intents and purposes, represents an arm of the government, Earl knows that the only way to destroy it and prevent further atrocity lies in a culture of honor and the violence that tends to come with it. Masculine performance influenced by honor culture has the

potential to unleash violence in many scenarios, and Sam thinks that American culture has moved beyond this aspect of humanity's past. Given his position and privilege as a white upper middle-class lawyer, his way of thinking comes as no surprise. But when the arm of Thebes reaches into the heart of his Arkansas home through a mail-bomb that might have killed Sam and his children, he begins to see the truth of Earl's logic.

Because we currently occupy a time and place in history where honor culture and tribal sentiment have, in many cases, been relegated to the dust-bin of the past, some people tend to think that those aspects of our evolutionary past and culture no longer carry any degree of usefulness or that the impulses behind both no longer carry any relevance. However, when chaos and tragedy storm into peoples' lives, the meaningfully rewarding pro-social bonds found in cooperation and selflessness become rekindled in the liminal spaces of the frontier, informing useful and effective masculine performances that embody strength and courage on behalf of others within the larger moral circle of a shared humanity.

The Darker Side of Tribalism

Adding another interesting socio-cultural facet to *Pale Horse Coming*, Hunter effectively imports the cultural sentiments of the nineteenth-century plantation novel to create a government institution and moral center in Thebes that reflects arguments once used to justify slavery while illustrating the potentially destructive nature of tribal sentiments that deviate from larger, pro-social inclusion. In the nineteenth century, two tribal lines were ostensibly drawn in the sand with regard to the morality of an

abolitionist, free North and that of the slave-holding South. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* remains widely regarded as the quintessential abolitionist novel, but "for many southern writers during the early 1850s, the romantic plantation novel was believed to be the perfect response to these fiery abolitionist attacks" (Jones 60). In response to attacks on slavery, such as those in Stowe's novel, the planation novel incorporated elements from a revised edition of John Pendleton Kennedy's *Swallow Barn*, appropriating "its image of the planter's house as a social and moral center of order for the culture as a whole [along with] its portrayal of the planter himself as a generous, unmaterialistic gentleman whose paternalistic relation to his slaves constituted an honorable, inescapable obligation" (MacKethan 210). The novelists in this tradition "countered charges of Southern depravity leveled by antislavery advocates, arguing that the peculiar institution was but part of a larger system of reciprocal relation-ships that made southern society the moral superior of the individualistic North" (Moss 2). The irony of such alleged collectivism stands in direct conflict with our more modern, progressive sensibilities, but the conflict between these traditions contributed to the metaphorical and literal lines that were increasingly being drawn in the sand as the nineteenth century progressed. North of the Mason-Dixon, blacks were free, while in the south, king cotton and the plantation economy were booming sources of economic prosperity. When the eleven states of the Confederacy seceded from the Union in 1860 in an attempt to preserve its socio-cultural and economic paradigms, two moral tribes with competing hegemonic ideologies became solidified, and the years of bloodshed that ripped our nation apart would soon follow.

The effects of this wholly destructive and divisive tribal conflict still echo well into the twenty-first century when *Pale Horse Coming* was published. Hunter astutely recognizes and draws from the competing ideologies perpetuated in works like *Swallow Barn* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and in doing so effectively creates racial tribal divisions imported from the nineteenth century that to this day remain grounded in competing perceptions of tribal morality. In the novel, Thebes's warden, Cleon Bonverite, clings to his white-supremacist beliefs with the conviction of a man who truly believes himself to be an arbiter of moral righteousness and one of the last remaining pillars of a necessary, justifiable social order of racial segregation and oppression. Cleon's half-brother, Davis Trugood, a man of mixed parentage who methodically orchestrates the entire plot to destroy his former childhood home has the same father as Cleon. However, Davis's mother was an African American slave who was murdered by Cleon back when Thebes was a plantation, before becoming a state sanctioned prison. Upon Davis's secret return to Thebes, amid the chaos of Earl's apocalyptic reckoning, Davis finally confronts his brother in his old home. During this climactic scene of Davis's revenge, Cleon plainly reinforces his tribal/moral allegiances along with the Jim Crow-era purpose of Thebes: "You should not exist! It's an atrocity! You combine the black man's rage with the white man's cleverness and will, and you can bring nothing but tragedy and ruination into the world! You are not my brother. You are an abomination" (514). The ravings of Cleon clearly evoke the dehumanizing stereotypes once perpetuated by the likes of minstrel shows, the southern aesthetic of preservation, and a deterministic belief in white supremacy backed by pseudo-scientific arguments wielded to systematically dehumanize, brutalize, and disenfranchise an entire population. Cleon, however, believes that his

position as warden constitutes a moral obligation to society, and he tells his bother Davis: "You are evil. You will bring it all down for nothing beyond your vanity. It is so wrong, Davis. It is so wrong" (515). Such sentiments not only reflect widely held beliefs in the American south at the time but also continue to divide modern America on the dubious and injurious footing of arbitrary tribal exclusion, leading to unnecessary anxieties, isolation, and alienation from a larger, inclusive bond of a shared humanity.

Like the warden, Thebes's albino guard-sergeant, Big Boy, embodies the same brand of tribal division, and also like the warden he ironically disaffiliates himself from a larger moral circle and tribal community. Big Boy, too, resembles Magua, Montcalm, and the Le Noir villains in that he disaffiliates himself through selfish motives and a sadistic lust for violence. But where the warden enforces his plantation novel-like paternal obligation as a self-proclaimed, dignified and genteel patriarch of the institution, charged with what he sees as a moral duty, Big Boy's masculinity deploys a far less paternalistic though no less perverse sentiment. Big Boy sadistically over-compensates for the emasculating traumas of his youth, taking up weight training and learning how to fight after murdering his entire family and fleeing his crimes to begin a new life: "It turned out I was good at it because I have all that hatred stored up in me, and I like to hurt people and see them bleed. I like to make them cry and teach them they have no chance in the world (159). Finding the perfect place to channel his rage, Big Boy discovers a role to fill at Thebes and reshapes his masculine identity through violent physical and psychological domination of the unarmed black inmates and residents of the adjacent shanty town of Thebes proper. His tribal disaffiliation becomes galvanized through the exploitation of black prisoners for his own sadistic purposes and monetary compensation, completely

divorcing him from the ties of a common, pro-social human bond. In exchange for his tribal bond with a common humanity, Big Boy aligns himself with white supremacists to serve his own selfish and sadistic motives. Big Boy's masculine performance through acts of aggression, strength, and domination completely prevent him from forming any meaningful connections with others and only leaves people, including his white cohort, around him cowering in fear, something many people often confuse with respect. His horrible acts inevitably embolden the inmates to conspire against him and usher in the total destruction of Thebes. Interestingly, Big Boy's albinism likens him to the blankness and of horror of nature represented by Melville's eponymous leviathan, Moby Dick. Like the whale, Big Boy represents chaos, but in the context of Hunter's novel, his whiteness simultaneously includes a literal, physical representation of the depraved nature of white-supremacists who sequester themselves into small, easily identifiable groups while culture and society progress around them.

The more egregious, cautionary masculinities in Hunter's novel, along with the rest of the works in this study, perform acts of tribal disaffiliation. Many of the cautionary masculinities interrogated in this project connect to the Native American myth of the "skinwalker," as recalled by Sebastian Junger who lived on the Navajo Reservation in 1983. He writes: "The ultimate act of disaffiliation isn't littering or fraud, of course, but violence against your own people" (113). Junger also explains that "Virtually every culture in the world has its variation of the skinwalker myth" (114). According to Navajo legend, "Skinwalkers were almost always male" and killed people within their own community, often roaming the landscape at night to viciously attack victims, not unlike the werewolf of European folklore, a man with a dark and terrible monster lurking within

(114). Junger then concludes that this myth "addresses a fundamental fear in human society: that you can defend against external enemies but still remain vulnerable to one lone madman in your midst" (114). This lone madman not only figures into cultural myths across the world and our current social climate, but he endures as a staple of the moral landscapes and liminal spaces in frontier narratives. It is his violent disaffiliation from the group that makes him so monstrously grotesque and render his actions so profoundly tragic, often preventable, personal affronts. The canonical precedents of James Fenimore Cooper's Magua and Montcalm, E.D.E.N. Southworth's Gabriel Le Noir, and Herman Melville's Ahab connect to this mythos, as do others I will explore in the coming chapters. Stephen Hunter's character, Big Boy, mirrors the skinwalker in this tradition in that his crimes are "murder and mayhem committed by an individual who has rejected all social bonds and attacks people at their most vulnerable an unprepared" (Junger 114). The very same applies to the other cautionary frontier characters whose masculine performances and power only cause harm and conflict, rather than engender unity and positively meaningful tribal sentiment. Consequently, when Big Boy dies at the hands of Earl, he dies alienated and alone with no one to turn to.

By now, an obvious problem unambiguously rises to the surface. Tribalism is not necessarily positive or egalitarian in all circumstances and ranks among the list of cultural dilemmas artists attempt to work out in the liminal space of the frontier. Joshua Green, like Sebastian Junger, explores the negative consequences of tribal affiliation, connecting it to morality, and reaches similar conclusions as Junger when he writes that "Morality did not evolve to promote universal cooperation. On the contrary, it evolved as a device for successful intergroup competition" (26). Intergroup competition in Hunter's

novel primarily exists in the conflict between preserving a white hegemony, and a rising class of disenfranchised African American citizens that threaten the legitimacy of an arbitrary, authoritarian, and systemic power structure. When considering morality, either in the context of a culture of honor or dignity, Greene argues "Morality is nature's solution to the problem of cooperation within groups, enabling individuals with competing interests to live together and prosper . . . We need a kind of thinking that enables groups with *conflicting moralities* to live together and prosper" (26). This kind of morality accurately characterizes the beliefs and behaviors of the aspirational masculine performances in this chapter, and tribal sentiment carries with it the capacity to become entirely prosocial. Earl's larger, inclusionary moral circle mirrors both Hawkeye's and Capitola's. All three characters perform masculinity via strength, risk taking, rugged individualism, and resorting to violence on behalf of others, even those outside of their respective tribes. Hawkeye comes to the aid of those with whom he has many fundamental disagreements. Capitola uses her strength and abilities to liberate Black Donald from prison, in spite of his litany of crimes, redeeming his masculinity in the process, while also reconciling the tensions between her own gendered performances. Capitola and Traverse Rocke both manage to embody balanced, tempered masculine performances through the more compassionate and refined treatment of those with whom they interact, in contrast to Traverse's explosively hot-tempered father, Old Hurricane, and the other men in the novel compelled by vice and self-serving agendas of treachery. Earl Swagger represents a prosocial, inter-reliant masculine performance and uses his masculine characteristics for the benefit of others, offering a paradigm of hope as it

concerns masculinities and how they might learn to adapt to the rapid socio-cultural changes of the twentieth century.

Crossing the Threshold

All of the traditional masculinities in this chapter succeed or fail in navigating the spaces of the Wild Frontier. The characters who act heroically demonstrate the necessary masculine prowess and performance demanded by lawless landscapes that remain relatively untouched by the influence of Leviathan, though some of them, like Hawkeye and Earl, ultimately continue to run in attempts to keep the advance of civilization just over the horizon. Inevitably, the frontier must come to a close and the encroachment of a modern American society will begin to overwhelm the landscape, consuming tribal sentiment and its connection to masculine identity fulfillment along the way. What it means to perform masculinity in meaningful ways will have to undergo a series of transformations and revisions, as emergent socio-cultural and economic forces place new demands and increasingly modern pressures on literary characters.

Together, the works in this chapter show the relative successes of a hero's journey that is achieved by way of tribal restoration. The boon that the hero achieves from the quest highlights the necessity of community and comes from the rejection of greed, selfishness, and de-tribalizing attitudes and beliefs that work to transcend the myopic and debilitating perspectives of Us vs. Them. The Wild Frontier still endures in American fiction and popular culture, much of which still carries the same conventions and evaluations of masculinities. However, as I will demonstrate in the next chapter, the traditional masculinities that once inhabited those Wild Frontiers begin to face new

challenges and trials with the unfolding of a new era in American history that
increasingly contributes to the ongoing detribalization of American society and
emergence of the skinwalker.

CHAPTER III – THE WANING FRONTIER

"Step in front of a runaway train – just to feel alive again."

-José González

Overview

With the closing of most Wild Frontier regions through the rapid expansion, settlement and industrialization of nineteenth-century America, the geographical settings and conventions of traditional masculinity-forging narratives begin to undergo changes in venue, and storytelling shifts to accommodate artistic preoccupations with emerging thematic concerns. Louis J. Budd comments on the literary climate in nineteenth-century America, noting that "Before the Civil War the major novelists had ignored current affairs. While *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) made a sensation, neither chattel nor wage slavery inspired a genre of social-justice fiction. The promise of romantic democracy to set all wrong matters right for whites still sounded believable" (34). Tracing the years following the Civil War, Budd continues: "In 1873 a depression ended the dream that the postwar prosperity would go on expanding forever" (34). Given such circumstances, both the real and the fictional conflicts depicted in the lawless, romantic Wild Frontiers of America's natural landscape begin to move into burgeoning modern cities where the numerous moral dilemmas surrounding chaos, criminality, violence, and death do not disappear with the spread of modernization but persist as major social and political issues. Although the mythological narrative elements inherent to the space of the Wild Frontier still, in some ways, remain embedded within the works discussed in this chapter, the frontier as a vast wilderness and uncultivated space has all but vanished, ushering

literary characters into timely settings that depict environmental forces as stemming from the ubiquitous effects of urbanization.

The increasing modernization of the United States during the nineteenth century enabled an unprecedented, systematized proliferation of government institutions, economic developments, and the mass-industrialization of the American workforce. Charting the impact of these life-altering changes on a historic, economic, and socio-cultural timeline, Kimmel notes that "In 1800 over 80 percent of American men had been farmers: by 1880 only one-half the nation's labor force was in agriculture . . . Large factories, not small shops, now dominated the industrial landscape" (*Manhood* 61). Additionally, the conclusion of the Civil War "ushered in an era of unprecedented economic transformation" and "between 1870 and 1900 industrial output in the United States increased by 500 percent" (*Manhood* 61). Putting the scope of these sweeping shifts in relation to the subsequent impacts on men's lives, Kimmel writes,

> Rapid industrialization, technological transformation, capital concentration, urbanization, and immigration – all of these created a new sense of an oppressively crowded, depersonalized, and often emasculated life. Manhood had meant autonomy and self-control, but now fewer and fewer American men owned their own shops, controlled their own labor, owned their own farms. More and more men were economically dependent, subject to the regime of the time clock. (*Manhood* 61)

With apparent discontent, American transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau issued caution concerning the burgeoning changes taking place around him and how those changes negatively affected peoples' lives along the trajectory America's socio-cultural

transition. In his 1854 publication of *Walden*, he famously concludes, "But men labor under a mistake . . . laying up treasures which moth and rust will corrupt and thieves break through and steal. It is a fool's life . . . He has no time to be anything but a machine" (3). A sharp-edged criticism of the extrinsic values accompanying industry resonates in Thoreau's passage, and his concern is evident. Nevertheless, throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, increasingly influential socio-cultural, industrial, and economic forces acted in concert, paving the way for a modernized America that would wield a remarkable degree of influence over people's lives, and of course, American literature. These sprawling transformations throughout America in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries thematically unify the primary works in this chapter and contribute to the shaping of the masculinities therein. This chapter will explore Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, which serves as a transitional text to bridge the gap between the Wild Frontier and the Waning Frontier, along with Frank Norris's *McTeague*, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, and Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*.

Throughout the years leading up to and following the Civil War, more and more American men and women became consigned to roles precipitated by gendered divisions in the workplace and domestic sphere. This separation had significant influence on America's social stratification, and "As the role of the father became more peripheral or intermittent, the complementary myths of the self-made man and the cult of true American womanhood fostered a narrow intensity of will, work, and self-reliance in the man" (Leverenz *Renaissance* 86). In spite of the socio-economic opportunities provided by growth and expansion, further consequences of this division of the sexes, for men and

women alike, included feelings of discontent, unrest, anxiety, and outright desperation.

Literary critic Donald Pizer recognizes a general consensus among scholars of this period

who agree that the interrelated literary movements of "realism and naturalism constitute a

critical response to the conditions of late-nineteenth-century American life" (*Cambridge*

15). Taking a more specific critical approach, Eric Sundquist "posits an American social,

economic, and political world so corrupt and dismaying that the only adequate response

by the writer of integrity is to seek escape into the farthest reaches of his imagination, as

do [Henry] James and [Stephen] Crane" (*Cambridge* 15). Such concerns had been

explored to varying degrees in earlier American literature but as the American landscape

continued to change, these concerns became more ubiquitously addressed by writers,

many of whom dispensed with the heroic glow and relative optimism situated within the

stories of Cooper's and Southworth's frontier traditions. Of course, not every work of

literature inspired by America's socio-cultural changes during the nineteenth century

reflects skepticism or cynicism, but the works in this chapter most certainly lean in that

direction, seemingly with a more nascent scrutiny than the writers of pre-Civil War

American fiction. For the characters in Chapter II, there remain avenues for escaping the

pressures of encroaching civilization and detribalization – either through physical retreat

from the impending march of industry, finding value, meaning, and purpose in family

and/or friendships – or in the path of the virtuous gunslinger setting out once again to

tame a hostile environment in hopes of restoring tribally inclusive morality and

democratic ideals. The works up for analysis in this chapter, by vivid contrast, anxiously

deflate idealistic notions of American exceptionalism, optimism, and the reconciliatory

"happy-ending' while simultaneously presenting tragically critical visions of Henry

Clay's myth of the self-made man and the pursuit of the American dream, both of which

become more pressingly interrogated as the nation neared the turn of the century.

Aside from the mass-scale industrial and economic changes that precipitated

wide-spread socio-cultural influence over peoples' lives, the moral cultures and tribal

sentiments that contribute to masculine identity formation in the liminal spaces of the

Wild Frontier also experience a shift. The moral cultures and prosocial tribal behaviors

that compel Cooper's, Southworth's, and Hunter's heroic characters give way, in this

chapter, to competing ideological forces that shape masculinities and depict numerous

characters who fail to achieve the psychological rewards of autonomy, connectedness,

and competence. Comparatively, the influence of morality and tribal sentiment

underscored in Chapter II becomes peripheral if not altogether non-existent for many of

the characters in this chapter. Instead, the post-war economic and ideological forces

situated within America's industrial and cultural progress, in many ways, stifle or

altogether supplant the cultural and biological influences that contribute to Hawkeye's,

Capitola's, and Earl's prosocial, meaningful masculine identities. The resultant narratives

shaped by this artistically-driven thematic pivot often lead to profound suffering and

tragedy for an abundance of characters throughout this period in American fiction while

simultaneously revealing an endemic cultural departure from the psychological benefits

enabled by tribal sentiments and connectedness. Accounting for gendered consequences

as part of this transition, Leverenz writes:

> Earlier ideologies of manhood stabilized self-esteem by linking it to
>
> institutionalized social structures such as class and patriarchy. The
>
> ideology of manhood emerging with entrepreneurial capitalism made

competition and power dynamics in the workplace the only source for

valuing and measuring oneself. Manhood therefore became much more

fundamental to a man's unconscious self-image. (*Renaissance* 85)

The ideologies of masculinity/manhood explored in Chapter II similarly become shaped

by honor and tribal sentiment; however, Leverenz's observations also reflect America's

movement along the path of de-tribalization and the waning of tribal sentiment, both of

which take a back seat to a socio-cultural emphasis on an individualism tied to the

marketplace. Where the previous chapter shows how moral cultures and tribal sentiments

shape meaningful masculine identities fostered by positive psychological individuation,

the socio-cultural values and ideals espoused by many of the characters in this chapter

seem to bring about only ruin, alienation, isolation, and death. Chapter II illustrates how

the optimal way for people to navigate the hostile, liminal spaces of the frontier occurs in

a pro-socially cooperative group, but this chapter shows how the conflicts inherent to

settings impacted by industry and commerce act as liminal frontier spaces that can disrupt

the meaningful functioning of interpersonal relationships and cause dysfunction within

groups. The process of de-tribalization in this chapter occurs primarily through the

modernization of American culture and society, making successful navigation of frontier

chaos all the more unlikely as characters seem increasingly motivated to fend for

themselves, and masculine performances become influenced by emergent socio-cultural

pressures and norms. Together, these interconnected socio-cultural and psychological

changes contribute to the characterization of what I term the Waning Frontier, a liminal

space that severely punishes masculinities that fail to rise to meet the unique challenges

therein.

The liminal space of the Waning Frontier explored in this chapter differs from the Wild Frontier in a few ways that need clarification. For one, the heroic glow of optimism and meaningful identity realization exists only on the periphery, if ever, in the primary works up for analysis in this chapter. Secondly, the restoration of a tribe and subsequent rewards of psychological individuation appear as almost entirely beyond the realm of possibility in this chapter, whereas the characters in Chapter II successfully navigate the chaos of the Wild Frontier, and in the process illustrate the value of masculinities informed by both biology and culture. The characters for analysis in this chapter, aside from Melville's narrator Ishmael, effectively provide nuanced cautionary examples of masculine performances that either fail to sustain themselves because of the violence and destruction they engender, and/or the limitations presented by socio-cultural paradigms. The biological impulses of the characters in this chapter reveal a number of glaring problems related to the performance of masculinity as well, with competition, diffidence, and honor negatively igniting the masculine proclivity for strength, violence, and aggression that ruins lives, rather than promote cooperative tribal sentiment and the upholding of virtue. Lastly, in terms of both the physical and socio-cultural landscapes that characterize the settings depicted in these works, representative tensions arise that emerge from the closing of the physical frontier, the decreasing salvific potential of the pastoral ideal inherent to the Wild Frontier, and the introduction of detribalizing industrialized forces that help shape the characters' existential crises. Where the narratives that engage the chaos of the Wild Frontier enable a relatively successful navigation of chaos, achieved through prosocial masculine performances, the Waning Frontier exists as a liminal frontier space that deflates the cathartic and restorative aura of

a heroic glow while underscoring the lack of tribal sentiment inherent to much of America's progression into modernity. Rather than escape into the wilderness of the continent for strengthening, growth, and identity realization, the characters in this chapter can only turn to either the chaos of the inhospitable sea or barren American landscapes riddled with the seemingly inescapable pressures of Leviathan, industrial progress, and relentless exploitation of the natural world.

The characters analyzed in this chapter experience the de-tribalization of American society, the symptoms of which men and women in the previous chapter manage to keep at bay not only through physical escape but through tribal sentiment, cooperative inter-reliance, and prosocial connectedness. Conversely, loneliness, alienation, isolation, and despair become more pressing thematic concerns, and they vividly illustrate numerous problems stemming from America's entrance into the modern era. And as men and women continued to enter, in many cases unwillingly, their respective workplaces and domestic occupations, the affluence, happiness, and satisfaction promised by the dawn of a new age in American prosperity could still remain frustratingly out of reach. In the spaces of the Wild Frontier, group collectivism promises a much higher chance of survival while opening paths to positive psychological individuation. And though affluence and modern technological advances free the individual from group dependence, this would-be liberation comes at a cost. Consequently, the psychological rewards of autonomy, connectedness, and competence further elude "the mass of men [who] lead quiet lives of desperation" (Thoreau 4). Echoing Thoreau's observation, though looking back from our current vantage point in

history, Junger critically examines the transformation of both civilization and American society:

> First agriculture, and then industry, changed two fundamental things about the human experience. The accumulation of personal property allowed people to make more and more individualistic choices about their lives, and those choices unavoidably diminished group efforts toward a common good. And as society modernized, people found themselves able to live independently from any communal group. A person living in a modern city or a suburb can, for the first time in history, go through an entire day – or an entire life – mostly encountering complete strangers. They can be surrounded by others and yet feel deeply, dangerously alone. (18)

Junger's and Thoreau's claims resonate loudly throughout the works in this chapter. Moreover, the certainty of an individual being better off in a meaningfully connected group recalls Marx's and Freud's recognition of escapist desires born of widespread discontent. And like them, Junger also recognizes our modern ennui when he comments on tribal sentiment being "such a rare and precious thing in modern society and . . . [how] the lack of it has affected us all" (xvii). It stands to reason that in the wilderness – or any frontier space characterized by chaos and/or hardship – characters like Hawkeye, Capitola, and Earl find meaningful alternatives to the discontent, alienation, and isolation that characterizes so many lives, despite the inevitable difficulties and dangers that journeys into transformative liminal spaces entail. Despite the difficulties inherent to such journeys, Junger adds insight into the nature of human strength and tenacity when he writes, "Humans don't mind hardship, in fact they thrive on it; what they mind is not

feeling necessary" (xvii). Accordingly, not feeling necessary and living outside of an inter-reliant group creates varying, profound problems for many of the characters in this chapter. Hardship, however, is what we evolved to endure as a group; and humans, given our proclivity for anti-fragility, remain quite good at it, but the more withdrawn and alone these characters become throughout their narratives, the more the catalysts of competition, honor, and diffidence contribute to the chronic violence, chaos, and destruction that persist in the liminal spaces of the Waning Frontier.[1]

Each work in this chapter explores the urgent desire to escape the debilitating confines of American society and return to something more simplistic, organic, even ancient. The freedom from the influences of Leviathan and civilization associated with the Wild Frontier, in these works, however, becomes more complicated, more elusive, and more fleeting. Herman Melville's epic, *Moby-Dick*, ironically and paradoxically employs the vast, open ocean as a frontier wilderness as dangerously hostile as any space in that of a Cooper novel. Yet, the men aboard the Pequod, in spite of the novel's date of publication in 1851 and their physical distance from American society, live entirely beholden to a captain who represents an arm of the American whaling industry, as relentless and bloodthirsty as the corporate machine he signifies. Melville, like Thoreau and Junger, interrogates the rapid changes taking place within American society, and he

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[1] The recent scholarship of Nassim Taleb outlines a framework showing how human biological and psychological resilience are strengthened and reinforced through internal and external stressors. I will explore this in more detail in Chapter IV.

accordingly presents a narrator in *Moby-Dick* who abandons civilization in exchange for a life of hardship at sea. Decades after Ishmael's catastrophic though enlightening journey, Frank Norris's eponymous character, McTeague, loses his dental practice, murders his wife, and while on the run from the authorities escapes the streets of San Francisco in a last-ditch attempt to return to the more simplified way of life that fostered him in his youth. Kate Chopin's Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening*, like Capitola Black, redefines herself apart from the debilitating influence of conventional gender roles while the call of the sea beckons her ever closer to release from the burdens of being. Cormac McCarthy's Llewelyn Moss in *No Country for Old Men* makes a desperate attempt to regain a semblance of control over his life by stealing a massive sum of money from a drug-trafficking cartel, fully aware of the enormous danger he will confront by doing so, risking everything in hopes of a more affluent life free from soul crushing, monotonous hours of unfulfilling labor. But where Hawkeye and Earl Swagger still have the option to escape their socio-cultural dilemmas, like Huck Finn who similarly lights out for the territories, or Capitola Black who cannot escape but manages to reconcile the dichotomous tensions of nineteenth-century gender roles, the characters in this chapter have nowhere left to run, and the influences of America's socio-cultural forces appear almost entirely inescapable.

Leviathan and the Frontier

Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* usefully bridges the gap between Chapter II and Chapter III, acting as a sort of pendulum that follows an increasing emphasis on specific thematic concerns such as capitalist industrialization, de-tribalization, and the calamitous

perils of masculinities shaped by self-serving impulses. *Moby-Dick* similarly outlines a situationally-prescriptive hegemonic masculine taxonomy and valuation that is consistent with how Cooper, Southworth, and Hunter evaluate their characters in the context of navigating frontier conflicts. Melville's novel also engages the thematic issues of tribalism, the desire for escaping civilization, and the systemic influences of American industry on masculinity and meaningful identity realization. And since the American frontier, in all its various incarnations and conflicts, renders liminal spaces that contribute to the shaping of masculinities, nineteenth-century life at sea presents a unique frontier wilderness of danger, adventure, escapism, and death. The frontier in *Moby-Dick* remains a Wild Frontier in obvious ways, but many of the thematic issues that arise throughout the novel connect to the issues of the Waning Frontier and foreshadow their prevalence in subsequent American literature in terms of geographic closure and the spread of modernity during the turn of the century.

Unsurprisingly, it takes a specific set of traditionally masculine traits to embark upon the demanding enterprise of whaling, but *Moby-Dick* provides readers with a prototypically complex view of gender and a compelling look at the masculinities necessarily enacted for men to not only survive but thrive or fail as whalers who must cooperatively promote the well-being of an inter-reliant group. And like the other primary works in this study, *Moby-Dick* elicits a social commentary that ranks characters among a hierarchy of masculine performances, revealing how Melville interpreted and valued the various models of masculinity needed to confront chaos and violence and join the company of a meaningfully restorative tribal group. At the same time, Melville also

depicts cautionary masculinities that act as counterpoints to the more aspirational models, thus illustrating the pitfalls and missteps that so often lead characters to their destruction.

Recognizing the connection between *Moby-Dick* and the frontier, Richard Slotkin notes that Melville "draws extensively on the mythology nearest to the consciousness of his audience, the myths of the western pioneers and hunters, Andrew Jackson, Davy Crockett, and Daniel Boone" (*Regeneration* 538). Moreover, the ocean, with all of its potentially hazardous, unplumbed depth and mystery acts as source of many conflicts in Melville's novel, as life at sea poses numerous threats to life and psychological well-being. Connecting his oceanic frontier to gender, Melville characterizes the sea as masculine (as opposed to the more commonly noted feminine rhetoric surrounding an Edenic frontier removed from Western progress and civilization), and as such it overtly provides the liminal space for the testing, proving, or reinventing of one's masculinity.[2] Melville writes that "the man-like sea heaved with long, strong, lingering swells, as Samson's chest in his sleep," and the narrator, Ishmael, muses on the contrast between femininity and the "murderous thinkings of the masculine sea" (404). By rendering the sea masculine, Melville imports a competitive space where performances of masculinity based on rugged individualism and self-reliance will be hardily tried and tested, and collectivist efforts must be depended upon for survival. We also learn from the outset of

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[2] Annette Kolodny's *The Lay of the Land* analyzes the rhetoric, imagery, and symbolism surrounding the American landscape and how its feminine characterizations connect to masculinist exploitation.

the novel that Ishmael – like Hawkeye, Earl, Capitola and many of the other characters in

this project – attempts to escape the debilitating confines of a potentially emasculating

and increasingly de-tribalized society. The first manifestation of the escapist impulse is

revealed by Ishmael and his longing to go to sea as his "substitute for pistol and ball,"

and to "prevent [him] from deliberately stepping into the street and methodically

knocking people's hats off" (Melville 18). In this passage, there is clearly a desire, if not

an urgent expression of both hostility and need for escape, and though the exact reasons

behind Ishmael's sojourn to Nantucket and subsequent departure from the continent

remain vague and somewhat withheld, a logical connection to the context of Thoreau's

mass of men leading quiet lives of desperation stays entirely within the scope of the

novel's thematic concerns regarding this chapter's historical and socio-cultural milieus.

The impulse for escaping the constraints of civilization is far from unique to

characters like Ishmael and Hawkeye; it extends to all of the protagonists in this study

and shapes interpretations of the American experience and Western civilization as a

whole. So, when Michael Kimmel writes that men in the nineteenth century generally

"struggled to build themselves into powerful impervious machines, capable of victory in

any competition and they ran away to the frontier, to the West, to start over, to make their

fortunes, and thus to remake themselves, to escape the civilizing constraints of domestic

life," he might not be entirely off the mark in his assessment (*Manhood* 32). However,

Kimmel overlooks the evolved human desire and adaptive need to live life as a

meaningful part of an inter-reliant group, regularly expressed in the experiences and

literature of frontier mythology which remain directly tied to the psychological rewards

of self-determination theory. And when looking at the cultural forces of the nineteenth

century that contribute to the malaise of men and women who felt trapped by enervating workplaces and confining domestic spheres, it comes as no surprise that many people harbored deep yearnings to escape and would eagerly set out upon quests in search of something perceived as far more meaningful.

Moby-Dick tells one such story of several men, the narrator Ishmael in particular, on a quest to discover meaningful masculine identity realization. A significant portion of this quest includes outlining and exploring systems of classification relative to the natural world and its larger connections to metaphysical interpretations of nature's incredible though sometimes terrifying beauty. Throughout the novel, Ishmael goes to great lengths to analyze all manner of marine life through means of a seemingly projected relationship between a Romantic divinity or transcendental ideal and the more brutal capacities of nature. Along the way in his existential search for truth, knowledge, and understanding, Ishmael presents a taxonomy of whales, along with a myriad of other creatures, seeking to arrive at some sort of comprehension of the natural world, the spiritual beauty and grandeur of the oceans, and everything else therein. Within his systematized classification of whales, leviathan mating rituals, and sailors' superstitions, among other numerous observations, Ishmael charts an exploratory map that can be read as a response to the European call for a uniquely American epic and achievement in artistic culture along with a compellingly astute foray into oceanography.

Employing the same sort of taxonomical delineation, Ishmael's investigation of the sea does not start and stop with marine life nor with Captain Ahab's monomaniacal, suicidal hunt for the white whale. In fact, Melville's novel offers comparative evaluations of the socio-cultural paradigms that typically govern whaling men and the various

iterations/constructions of masculinity aboard the Pequod. Aside from Ishmael's insights into various species of whale and philosophical musings on the oceanic characteristics of the natural world, he actively observes humanity, particularly the kind of men who board whaling vessels and wed themselves to the hazards of an uncertain life at sea. Life as a whaler, in Ishmael's eyes, is not for the timid or faint of heart; it entails a life of toil and brutality in which the cost/reward benefits remain anything but fixed. Given this knowledge, Melville paints a vividly masculine social setting predominantly inhabited by rugged, iron-willed men whose labor takes place in the ever-present shadow of death. If the American frontier can be interpreted as a site of testing one's physical and mental strength, then nineteenth century life on the ocean can be likened to twentieth-century sensibilities regarding an astronaut's time in outer space: what is known is finite, and ways to die lie in abundance. To put it another way, it takes certain aspects of traditional frontier masculinity to take up the enterprise of whaling, and *Moby-Dick* gives readers a compelling look at what type of masculinities necessarily become embodied for men to not only survive, but succeed or fail as nineteenth-century whalers, while simultaneously offering a complex social commentary that ranks men among a hierarchy of masculine performances, revealing how Melville interpreted and valued various models and aspirational ideals of manhood.

To this day, the American frontier is often romanticized and depicted as a space where "men can be men," invoking early nineteenth-century models of traditional frontier masculinity, like Hawkeye or Daniel Boone, who were connected to the natural landscape, standing apart from the dehumanizing potential of the capitalist market place and what was seen by many as an emasculating domestic sphere. The same escapist

impulse motivated by discontent and/or desperation evinced by Ishmael similarly applies to the Pequod's blacksmith, Perth. Brought to financial and familial ruin by his alcoholism, Perth also chooses to escape his failures in exchange for a life at sea, a space for potential reinvention and means of achieving competence, autonomy, and connectedness. As it does with Ishmael – and Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening* – the ocean seductively and soothingly calls to Perth: "'Come hither, broken-hearted; here is another life without the guilt of intermediate death'" (369). Again, the impulse to abandon a potentially emasculating and enervating culture, one in which the line between success and failure remains tenuous, compels many, and though this urge does not account for all the men's reasons for being aboard the Pequod, the connection between escape and the hope for reinvention in the liminal space of the frontier becomes crystallized through Perth and Ishmael nonetheless.

Regarding Melville's various depictions of masculinities and the types of men that serve aboard the Pequod, a description of Ahab's first mate, Starbuck, gives insight into a shrewd and cunning masculinity formed by caution and experience: "Starbuck was no crusader after perils; in him courage was not a sentiment; but a thing simply useful to him, and always at hand upon all mortally practical occasions" (102). This passage implicitly shows Starbuck's avoidance of excessive pride, bravado, and refusal to recklessly rush headlong into conflict without thought or calculation, all of which characterize potentially destructive attitudes and behaviors that can compromise the crew of a whaling vessel, though remain significant aspects of what compels Ahab to lead his men to their tragic, untimely deaths. Melville writes of the matter: "in this business of whaling, courage was one of the great staple outfits of the ship, like her beef and her

bread, and not to be foolishly wasted" (102). Following this passage and further reinforcing necessary masculine performances, the character Starbuck embodies masculine traits valued in this context as well. Starbuck – like Hawkeye, Earl, and Capitola – displays cautious, methodical intelligence, not the irrational, self-serving, or hasty impulses that lead to the destruction of Magua, Big Boy, the Le Noirs, and Ahab. Starbuck has learned from experience and necessarily adapted to the demands of a dangerous environment so that he might stay alive: "he had no fancy for lowering for whales after sun-down; nor for persisting in fighting a fish that too much persisted in fighting him. For, thought Starbuck, I am here in this critical ocean to kill whales for my living, and not to be killed by them for theirs" (103). The character Stubb, though "Good-humored, easy, and careless," remains just as steadfast as Starbuck in times of duress, maintaining both physical and mental command of his faculties. Melville writes of this character that "When close to the whale, in the very death-lock of the fight, he handled his unpitying lance coolly and off-handedly, as a whistling tinker his hammer . . . Long usage, had, for this Stubb, converted the jaws of death into an easy chair" (104-105). Such a reserved though calculated approach to a life at sea may seem like common sense, but the rash, self-destructive impulses that consume Ahab act as a counterpoint to this level-headed, tempered masculinity, offering a juxtaposition of the nuances inherent to the competing masculine performances in the novel.

Courage and strength must reside in whoever seeks to earn a living by venturing off to traverse the oceanic abyss, and not all risk-takers can rise to meet the challenge. Ahab and his crew tie courage to masculinity, and they explicitly condemn the cowardice of Pip, just as Capitola furiously criticizes her cousins for their failure to defend her

honor. The Pequod's crew and Ahab also deride such behavior, warning, on more than one occasion, "we haul in no cowards here" and "Shame upon all cowards" (391,400). Unfortunately, Pip's prolonged exposure to Melville's masculinized sea drives him into the arms of madness. In one particular scene, Pip goes overboard during a fight with a whale and gets left behind, floating and alone for an extended period in which "The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul" (321). Providing a contrast to Pip's cowardice, madness, and inability to live up to masculine standards of courage and psychological strength, recall Engel's list of nineteenth-century rugged characteristics of bravery, fortitude, and fearlessness. Such an interpretation is not meant to imply that Pip is not a sympathetic character, beyond any sort of redemptive or more nuanced reading, or that fear does not enter the minds of the frontier's most exalted heroes – Earl Swagger experiences profound fear on numerous occasions, but refuses to succumb to it – but Pip's masculinity stands in contrast to the strength and prowess displayed by the other, more competent crew members, rendering Pip less than capable of rising to the challenges of the whaling industry and falling short of the hegemonic, though no less necessary masculinities performed by the other men. For example, after carefully reconsidering the mission to hunt Moby Dick when discovering himself fully at the mercy of Ahab's monomania, Ishmael, rather than give in to despair or madness, summons the courage and strength to carry on: "Now then, thought I, unconsciously rolling up the sleeves of my frock, here goes for a cool, collected dive at death and destruction, and the devil fetch the hindmost" (189). None of the heroically masculine characters in Chapter II wholly give in to madness, fear, or despair in the manner similar

to that of Pip. Rather, they push forward and courageously rise to each occasion with attitudes that equate to Ishmael's exclamation of "the devil fetch the hindmost."

In her article, "Melville and the Architecture of Masculinity," Sarah Wilson argues that Melville consistently blurs the lines segregating the traditionally masculine work space and the femininely gendered sphere of domesticity, reminding us that in the nineteenth century "the separation of male work space and domestic space was becoming increasingly entrenched" (61). Complicating matters, she continues by asserting "Melville's fiction, from *Moby-Dick* on, deliberately fails to respect this separation" (61). While Wilson's argument convincingly sustains a close analysis of Melville's novel, citing the cleanliness of the Pequod in *Moby-Dick* and the labor entailed in this sort of nautical housekeeping, Wilson overlooks the emasculating tension that characterizes the Steelkilt and Radney episode in the novel which somewhat undermines her thesis. Consigned to work on a ship named the Town-Ho, the character Steelkilt receives orders by his superior, Radney, to sweep the ship's deck, but as Ishmael mentions in his recounting of the story, "he should have been freed from any trivial business not connected with truly nautical duties" (203). The episode culminates in a mutiny, and the cause of offended masculine pride/honor undeniably lies behind Steelkilt's revolt: "in all vessels this broom business is the prescriptive province of the boys, if boys there be on board" (203). From here, the interpersonal conflict escalates and a violent progression from resistance to all-out mutiny ensues. Again, Wilson's argument remains compelling and convincing, and part of what I am arguing reinforces her claim that Melville indeed blurs the markers of conventional gender performance; however, this small episode documents explicit resistance to domestic work perceived by a character as emasculating,

or at the very least, beneath his station and stature, which often amounts to the same thing. But even with consideration of this minor detail, the prevailing, hegemonic masculine performances of the male characters in *Moby-Dick* remain fluid and always open to multiple interpretations, particularly when the men of the Pequod consent to the ship's housekeeping duties – although Steelkilt refuses. And if one chooses to interpret the Pequod as a domestic space inhabited by men, it is important to note that "The spaces that American Renaissance writing marks out as the site of possible transcendence [or testing/reinventing] are not only the forest and the open sea" (Tompkins 170). Just as Capitola transcends the limits of confining gender roles in *The Hidden Hand*, Ishmael too comes to see the dangers of one-sided and potentially destructive performances of masculinity. And if the novel presents domestic space that offers a site of transcendence, it does so by situating domestic affairs within the context of successfully navigating frontier chaos and hardship.

The male body also exists as a site of masculinity and strength, both in theory and within Melville's novel. In this context, Melville's depictions of masculinity initially appear dependent on biological markers, but the body as a physical site of masculinity also becomes nuanced and fluid. For instance, Melville describes Starbuck as lean, even skinny, removed from the bigness and muscularity commonly associated with physical strength. However, resisting sheer brute power and size as the sole representations of physical prowess, Melville writes of Starbuck that

> his thinness, so to speak, seemed no more the token of wasting anxieties
> and cares, than it seemed the indication of any bodily blight. . . . He was
> by no means ill-looking; quite the contrary. His pure tight skin was an

excellent fit; and closely wrapped up in it, and embalmed with inner health

and strength, like a revivified Egyptian, this Starbuck seemed prepared to

endure for long ages to come . . . his interior vitality was warranted to do

well in all climates. (102)

On the other hand, and in keeping with Melville's evasion of one-sided interpretations,

the author effectively connects masculinity to the male body's more muscular utilities.

The famed character Queequeg immediately passes muster to work on the Pequod,

despite his non-white ethnicity and lack of hegemonically favored Christian devotion. In

the scene of his hiring by the Pequod's owners, Bildad and Peleg, Queequeg, in a

succession of rapid-fire motions, takes up a harpoon, points to a small target down the

length of the ship and "darted the iron right over old Bildad's broad brim, clean across

the ship's decks, and struck the glistening tar spot out of sight" (85). This convincing

demonstration of physical strength, competence, and dexterity prompts the formerly

skeptical ship owners to immediately hire Queequeg on the spot, eagerly paying him

"more than was ever given a harpooner yet out of Nantucket" (85). So, in this scene, and

the humorous scene in which he physically trounces the "bumpkin" who insults him,

Queequeg essentially utilizes strength as a marker of his masculinity, demonstrating the

idea that "Muscle is a bold advertisement: *I am not a rabbit. I am not food*" (Gottschall

68). Or, to put it less colloquially, "Masculinity is simply strength and toughness – of

body and mind" (Gottschall 74). The novel's contextual engagement with the whaling

industry, indeed, commodifies the male body as dictated by the physical hardships

encountered on the open ocean, and Queequeg, Stubb, and Starbuck are variously

characterized as masculine enough in this capacity to rise to the demands of their

commercial profession. By contrast, both Pip and Ahab fail to embody the aspects of masculinity regularly characterized as ideal for successful frontier navigation. Melville himself articulates the cultural relevance and utilitarian function of strength: "Real strength never impairs beauty or harmony, but often bestows it; and in everything imposingly beautiful, strength has much to do with the magic. Take away the tied tendons that all over seem bursting from the marble in the carved Hercules, and its charm would be gone" (294). By presenting male bodies formed by the hardships endured by his characters, Melville suggests that beauty and harmony emerge from the functional utility of masculinities in the moments of strong-willed equipoise required to navigate the frontier.

Perhaps the most interestingly paradoxical source of masculine tension and anxiety concerns the Pequod's enigmatic and monomaniacal captain, Ahab. Reading Ahab through the lens of gender studies, constructivist or otherwise, further reveals Melville's complication and evaluation of masculine performance. The most readily available signifier of Ahab's lack of physical masculinity is his missing leg. His body is scarred and the wholeness of the man incomplete, having lost his leg in an apocalyptic battle with Moby Dick. And while masculinity is not inseparably tied to the male body, as Capitola and Sally demonstrate, one might consider the fact that "Anatomy may not be destiny, but the belief that it is moulds most lives" (Bourke 9). Connecting the body to masculine identity as a matter of significance and even definition certainly holds true in the case of Ahab when Ishmael says of him, "It has before been hinted, perhaps, that every little untoward circumstance that befel him, and which indirectly sprang from his luckless mishap, almost invariably irritated or exasperated Ahab" (336). Clearly, Ahab

suffers from psychological trauma and remains tormented by the loss of his leg to the white whale. Developing the traumatic nature of Ahab's physical disability and mental distress, Melville writes of him that

> he had been found one night lying prone upon the ground, and insensible; by some unknown, and seemingly inexplicable, unimaginable casualty, his ivory limb having been so violently displaced, that it had stake-wise smitten, and all but pierced his groin; nor was it without extreme difficulty that the agonizing wound was entirely cured. . . . all the anguish of that then present suffering was but the direct issue of a former woe . . . (354-355)

Not only has Ahab been horribly disfigured, but he has arguably been castrated, if not literally, then figuratively, at the very least, which contributes to the extremity of his anxiety and monomania. Kimmel critiques Ahab in the same light, providing a reading of nineteenth-century masculinities in context:

> In Ahab, Melville provides a portrait of gendered madness, a blind rage fueled by sexualized obsession, the self-destruction of the self-made Marketplace Man. Here is a man driven to dominate, compulsively competitive, obsessively insecure – in short, the archetypal capitalist man, a 19th-century Type A powerbroker. His monomania, that obsession with domination that is the disease of the driven, is the 19th-century male version of hysteria. (28)

Ahab's masculine performance elicits a cautionary tale of a man wholly consumed by a burning, suicidal lust for revenge, and an example of scarred masculinity, both mentally

and physically. His notorious outburst, "I'd strike the sun if it insulted me," stems from an overwhelming sense of shame that arises from a reactionary compulsion to restore pride through means of violence, putting his life and the lives of his crew in jeopardy (140). For Melville, the male body may serve as a source of masculinity, but it can also act as a site of profound masculine anxiety. As sociologist R.W. Connell explains, "The constitution of masculinity through bodily performance means that gender is vulnerable when the performance cannot be sustained – for instance, as a result of physical disability" (54). Similarly, Melville identifies and explores a crisis of masculinity through Ahab, and he conclusively illustrates the potentially negative effects of defining masculine identity as a static, inflexible performance beholden to rigid meanings or interpretations.

By way of another counterpoint, Melville's character Captain Boomer serves as a foil in two primary ways to Ahab's shame and debilitating monomania. Like Ahab, Boomer lost a limb to Moby Dick; however, significant distinctions preside over the two men. First, Boomer lacks the same flaw of vitriolic pride that compels Ahab. On the contrary, Boomer has an obvious sense of humor and a generally amiable temperament. He too, like Starbuck and Southworth's Traverse Rocke, knows when to walk away from potentially fruitless and self-destructive conflicts. Boomer asks Ahab, "ain't one limb enough?" (339) Additionally, the rapport Captain Boomer shares with his surgeon suggests an intimate friendship, unlike Ahab who intentionally maintains a gulf of interpersonal distance while lording coercive authoritarian power and fear over his crew. Boomer recalls the amputation of his arm without the marked explosive fury and self-righteous indignation that colors Ahab's fateful encounter. Boomer, with fondness and

familiarity, remembers the care of his shipmate Dr. Bunger: "Oh, a great watcher, and very dietetically severe, is Dr. Bunger. (Bunger, you dog, laugh out! why don't ye? You know you're a precious jolly rascal.) But, heave ahead, boy, I'd rather be killed by you than kept alive by any other man" (338). The tone of this passage stands in direct opposition to Ahab's dark, anti-social temperament, although both he and Boomer have the shared horror/trauma of losing a limb to the white whale. A fundamental difference between the two men is that the loss consumes Ahab, whereas Boomer takes away from his tragedy a unifying, bonding experience with Dr. Bunger as opposed to isolating himself from his crew to nurse his rage in debilitating solitude. The alternative solution to the negative effects of isolation resides in the forging of a bond, and the fostering of tribal sentiment, something clearly shared between Captain Boomer and Dr. Bunger.

Rather than commit to representations of one-dimensional models of masculinity, Melville continues to destabilize conceptions of masculinity on multiple fronts. Of course, Melville's understanding of gender significantly predates current scientific data and postmodern theorizing on the subject, but his recognition of the complexity and nuance of performativity exists nonetheless. Sarah Wilson argues that the novel "proposes a multiply sited version of masculinity that resists the abstraction and circumscription of gender roles taking place then in the United States" (61). By way of an example, Melville projects human gender performances onto whales in chapter 88, "Schools and Schoolmasters," as he describes a sexually competitive male whale as a Lothario and an "invader of domestic bliss" who infiltrates the Turkish harem of female whales, forcing the older, ousted male whale to depart "all alone among the meridians and parallels saying his prayers, and warning each young Leviathan from his amorous

errors" (306). In this passage, projecting human behavior onto whales naturalizes sexual competition, which reveals elements of cultural and biological truths but overlooks the fact that whales are animals, incapable of the complex reasoning or accountability that humans possess. In the same fashion, conflict between sexual competitors also carries the potential to engender damaging irrationality and override accountability. A similar authorial projection occurs in the following chapter, "Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish." Regarding the matter of whaling and claiming ownership in the hunt, a "waif" is universally agreed upon to settle disputes concerning who has the right to claim a whale; Melville then compares this practice to the marriage market, reducing a woman to a state of property when she has been metaphorically harpooned by a man who ultimately lets her go, "and therefore when a subsequent gentleman re-harpooned her, the lady then became that subsequent gentleman's property, along with whatever harpoon might have been found sticking in her" (309). Such a characterization of gender roles, no doubt, invokes the lack of female agency and autonomy during the nineteenth century; however, Melville merely presents a spectrum of possibilities concerning the variance of gender construction and performance in these examples.

For the male characters in the novel, Melville's complex rendering of masculinities often avoids the simplicity found in the previous example of "whale masculinity." Ultimately, Melville resists static masculine performances, and the author's complex views become apparent through his subversion of heteronormative, hyper-masculinity in two integral scenes. The first episode concerns the encounter between Ishmael and Queequeg at the Spouter-Inn. Lodgings at the inn are quite crowded, forcing Ishmael and Queequeg to share a bed, prompting the following homoerotic encounter:

"Upon waking next morning about daylight, I found Queequeg's arm thrown over me in the most loving and affectionate manner. You had almost thought I had been his wife" (36). The imagery of two men embracing, as if in a marriage bed, certainly challenges notions of nineteenth-century heterosexual propriety. Kimmel writes that this scene offers a contrast to the novel's "violent passions," arguing that the "chaste, yet eroticized, homosocial fraternalism that characterizes the purified male bond" can be read as an alternative to the divisive competition inherent to the capitalist marketplace (51). Or, as Kimmel further remarks, "To Melville, those bonds were impossible if one adopted the competitive drive of the marketplace" (51). Kimmel's observation offers a thematically revealing conclusion regarding masculine performance, though he overlooks a significantly pivotal scene that just as meaningfully qualifies as a "purified male bond," and perhaps offers a more fully realized ideal than Melville or Kimmel may have envisioned as an aspirational example of a more meaningful masculinity, liberated from the cut-throat space of competitive, economically driven forces. And although the profession of whaling undeniably embodies and reflects the darker nature of a capitalist marketplace, some of the men aboard the Pequod devote themselves to a more communal, collectivist enterprise, as opposed to the dog-eat-dog individualism that characterizes many professions.

Ironically, the violence inherent to whaling and the competitive drive of the marketplace unite the men of the Pequod in unexpected ways. In chapter 94, Ishmael narrates the process of squeezing lumps of spermaceti back into their liquid form, a necessary part of the whaling business when preparing their commodities for the market. His narration throughout the scene remarkably projects a tone of elation, even ecstasy,

connecting him to a collectivist and homosocial bonding, or what Kimmel characterizes as a "purified male bond." Ishmael recalls,

> I squeezed that sperm till I myself almost melted into it; I squeezed that sperm till a strange sort of insanity came over me; and I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-laborers' hands in it, mistaking their hands for the gentle globules. Such an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling did this avocation beget; that at last I was continually squeezing their hands, and looking up into their eyes sentimentally; as much as to say, - Oh! My dear fellow beings, why should we longer cherish any social acerbities, or know the slightest ill-humor or envy! Come; let us squeeze hands all around; nay, universally into the very milk of sperm and kindness. (323)

What this passage amounts to, aside from an obvious masturbatory, homoerotic reading of the text, offers a homosocial bond that transcends the violence, unhealthy competition, and ill-will Ishmael views as characteristic of many men, including himself: "Your true whale-hunter is as much a savage as an Iroquois. I myself am a savage, owning no allegiance but to the King of the Cannibals; and ready at any moment to rebel against him" (222). Yet in this moment of profound revelation, he comes to see collectivism, love, and altruistic behavior as an aspirational means of attaining a more meaningful masculinity through tribal restoration, removed from the hyper-masculine pitfalls of rage, envy, divisive competition, and vengeance. Ishmael arrives at this epiphany in the following passage:

Would that I could keep squeezing that sperm for ever! For now, since by

many prolonged, repeated experiences, I have perceived that in all cases

man must eventually lower, or at least shift, his conceit of attainable

felicity; not placing it anywhere in the intellect or the fancy; but in the

wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fire-side, the country;

now that I have perceived all this, I am ready to squeeze case eternally.

(323)

What separates the spermaceti scene from much of the rest of the novel resides in the

cautionary masculinities that fall outside of such a collective love, connectedness,

respect, and charity towards fellow men, qualities that Melville clearly privileges as

virtuous components of what it means to be masculine and a meaningful part of a pro-

social, inter-reliant group. And like the other texts in this study, this epiphany arrives in

the liminal space of the frontier where individuals might potentially transcend the

restrictions imposed by socio-cultural forces and work together to navigate the chaos and

hardships of the frontier.

Race and Masculinity

Further complicating his characterizations of masculinity, Melville also confronts

issues of race and ethnicity in the novel. The intersection of race and masculinity in

Moby-Dick presents tensions and contradictions that arise when juxtaposing white,

hegemonic masculinities with non-white masculinities.[3] From Queequeg's racial

otherness as an islander, his tattoos, acts of cannibalism, and non-Christian faith and

rituals that further highlight his difference, to the enigmatic Fedallah's quiet intensity and

fanatical devotion to Ahab, non-white males become rendered in extremes, sometimes

presented as flat and one-dimensional, reduced to stereotypes, as evinced in the

characters Dagoo and Tashtego. A brief survey of the whaling industry and the larger

socio-cultural landscape sets the tone for problematizing racially-constructed

masculinities when Ishmael comments on the industry's status quo: "the native American

liberally provides the brains, the rest of the world as generously supplying the muscles"

(107). This passage speaks to the common nineteenth-century division of labor along

racial lines; whites retain their privilege in that they are typically the officers of a ship,

while non-whites provide the more physically menial labor. Given the historical context

of the novel, this social stratification appears onboard the Pequod as well, as evinced by

the fact that Queequeg can receive promotion in rank as a harpooner, but with his new

position comes even more grueling work, overshadowed by the implication that he could

never possibly ascend the ladder of upward mobility and become captain one day. With

Queequeg, Melville highlights socio-cultural norms by marginalizing Queequeg through

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[3] R.W. Connell explains how masculinities are often defined in relation to one another

and in relation to cultural hegemony. Non-white masculinities, for instance, tend to

emerge as marginalized masculinities within predominantly white dominated cultures,

such as America during the nineteenth century. Paul Brodtkorb Jr. similarly explores the

role and social dynamics of racial otherness among the male characters in *Moby-Dick*.

racial inequality. However, Queequeg's masculinity remains hegemonically competitive and subversive in other respects. Though unable to climb to the top of a ship's chain of command, he remains an elite warrior, just as capable, if not more so, than any of the other men on the ship, and as the narrative progresses it becomes clear that Ishmael has nothing less than the utmost respect for him.

The relationship between the white Ishmael and non-white Queequeg underscores the race-transcending intimate bonds of meaningful friendship, recalling the connectedness shared by the "man without a cross," Hawkeye, Uncas and Chingachgook in Cooper's novel. Chapter 72 solidifies the nature of such a bond as Melville writes about the pair being tied together by the "monkey-line:"

> for better or for worse, we two, for the time, were wedded . . . I seemed distinctly to perceive that my own individuality was now merged in a joint stock company of two: that my free will had received a mortal wound; and that another's mistake or misfortune might plunge innocent me into unmerited disaster and death. (255)

Of the two men, Queequeg certainly qualifies as the stronger, more capable and experienced whaler with Ishmael's downright laughable 777th lay serving as comparative monetary evidence. The reversal of a conventional nineteenth-century masculine hierarchy in the novel also works to destabilize the racial hierarchy. Ishmael, as a white man in the nineteenth century, would presumably embody the apex of hegemonic masculine ideals by virtue of the arbitrary accident of birth, yet juxtaposing his masculinity with Queequeg's challenges white-supremacist assumptions, and the superficiality of racial demarcation shatters. The same occurs in Melville's *Benito Cereno*

when the perceived superiority of Europeans comes crashing down in a cunningly orchestrated slave mutiny. As noted in Chapter I, in many cases, masculinities exist in relation to one another, and in *Moby-Dick*, for the sake of comparison, Queequeg outmasculinizes Ishmael in certain respects. In such a context, sociologist Todd Reeser writes that "male-male relations should be interrogated to determine whether one of the men functions as symbolic woman and stands for the absent or expelled women" (205). This relates to *Moby-Dick* in that no women occupy the Pequod, but Melville casts Ishmael as the more feminine or less masculine of the pair, comparatively underscoring Connell's claim that masculinities exist in relation to one another. Ishmael recalls of the stronger, larger, more muscular Queequeg, "he clasped me round the waist, and said that henceforth we were married; meaning, in his country's phrase, that we were bosom friends" (56). Even though it does not appear that Queequeg intends to emasculate or subordinate Ishmael in making this statement, words like marriage and the subsequent use of words and phrases like "bridegroom," "man and wife," and "loving pair" illustrate a dynamic that upends conventions of white male hegemonic masculinity and power, displacing Ishmael and raising the non-white Queequeg to the position of relative dominance. Subordinating a white man to a tattooed, non-Christian, cannibalistic man of color illustrates yet another example of how Melville's interpretations of masculinity resist immutability and static analysis.

Sinking the Ship

In *Moby-Dick*, Melville challenges many nineteenth-century assumptions and values surrounding masculine conventions and beliefs. Given the sophisticated complexity of Melville's male characters, along with his avoidance of masculine fixity of meaning in the novel, the author evaluates, raises, and deflates masculine performances as they function in relation to one another. Concerning Melville's novel and its place in history, David Reynolds offers the following commentary on *Moby-Dick*:

> it fully embodied its times and its culture. And yet the culture it reflected did not fully appreciate it. Melville's difficulty was one that Whitman would experience with *Leaves of Grass*: the fusion of variegated American themes produced a new kind of literary text that could not be comprehended by the very culture that nurtured it (291).

Perhaps a portion of this lack of comprehension was the democratic complexity and instability through which Melville rendered masculinity: potentially paradoxical, contradictory, fluid, resistant to any singular model or ideal. What emerges in Melville's novel, however, is a pointed emphasis on masculine ideals rendered as virtuous: strength, courage, selflessness, love, charity, esteem, and meaningful interpersonal relationships liberated from the competitive nature of capitalist individualism, hubris, and self-interest, in favor of a more collective and communal masculine identity. Melville also underscores the necessity of toughened masculinities required by the dangerous nature of the whaling industry, and it would not be too much of a stretch to add a revealing interrogation of masculine performances to the list of *Moby-Dick's* numerous thematic accomplishments.

Industry and the Waning Frontier

The sea as a frontier in *Moby-Dick*, removed from cities and industrial landscapes, exists as wild and untamed, but it becomes evident that Ahab and the men aboard the Pequod serve as both vehicles and agents of an American industrial economy and the reflections of its potentially calamitous missteps. This provides a number of thematic links to the landscapes within the works in the rest of this chapter and bridges the divide between the Wild Frontier and Waning Frontier. Steering this ship into port and disembarking into a city brings us into the heart of rising urban settings where the transformative spaces of the Wild Frontier exist exclusively on the margins of civilization, but not entirely beyond the reach of socio-cultural influences. The Waning Frontier emerges more acutely in the mind as an abstracted escape destination for the characters in the rest of this chapter. To frame this perspective another way: the frontier spaces in the rest of this chapter, though physically waning and almost non-existent due to the spread of industry and geographic expansion, still offer the dim possibility of escape and masculine identity realization through the potentially transformative navigation of chaos. However, the closing of the wilderness as the primary frontier and the subsequent effects of industry generate frontier spaces that cannot provide the salvific restoration in the ways that it occurs for the characters in Chapters II and IV. The liminal spaces that emerge in the following textual analyses include Norris's and McCarthy's barren wastelands, landscapes scoured by the progress of civilization and Chopin's sea, where salvation paradoxically resides in death. And so, from here the analyses will shift

to the thematic issues that arise well beyond the initial publication of *Moby-Dick* and move into the concerns that occupy the realm of literary naturalism.

Within current scholarship, fairly consistent elements of American naturalism have been outlined, perhaps most significantly: a plot of decline (though not typically from a "high" social position), and environmental and/or biological determinism that influences events and characters, typically to their detriment. Pizer explains that naturalist writers do explore upper-class characters and settings, such as Lily Bart in Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth*, while also imagining "contemporary middle- and lower-class life free from superficial notions of the ideal and supernatural as controlling forces in experience, and they too find man limited by the violent and irrational within himself and by the oppressive restrictions within society" (*Twentieth* 5). Alongside the emphasis on environmental determinants over supernatural forces, the work of Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, and Émile Zola is recognized as being widely influential in terms of how their theories shaped the literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Furthermore, the rise of the modernist aesthetic and existential anxieties surrounding "truth" began to usher in new intellectual discourse and modes of artistic expression such as existentialism and highly abstract visual art. Still, however, elements of naturalism persist throughout the literary output of the twentieth century with works by William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Zora Neale Hurston, John Steinbeck, Richard Wright, and Toni Morrison supplying analogous, deterministic thematic elements and concerns. Clearly, the naturalist thread of environmental determinism never truly disappears from storytelling and remains throughout both the modern and postmodern periods, continuing well into whatever label one chooses to stamp on the literature of

today. The point here is not to focus too much on issues surrounding literary periodization and classification, but rather to illustrate the socio-cultural and intellectual influences that begin to shape artistic production. For instance, within the rise of the contemporary post-apocalyptic zombie/vampire novel, genre heavy-hitters Cormac McCarthy, Colson Whitehead, Justin Cronin, and Max Brooks import scenarios from naturalistic and man-made environmental determinants that continue to thrive in narratives that also, interestingly, import transformative liminal frontier spaces. The same could be said about AMC's hugely successful series *The Walking Dead*. In all of these examples, society's and civilization's fall arrives at the hands of both natural and human calamity, and the resulting, indifferently hostile, frontier landscapes under which humanity bends in these tales, overwhelmingly changes and reshapes most of the characters involved. Tracing the same deterministic thread back to the late nineteenth century, Frank Norris's *McTeague* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* provide quintessential examples of the naturalist genre and share several overarching thematic similarities. *McTeague*, specifically, underscores the influences of burgeoning consumer capitalism and the intertwined environmental forces that result in seemingly inescapable violence, unstable identity formation, madness, superficial pursuits, and self-destruction. Furthermore, *McTeague* offers an interrogation of a debilitating capitalist environment which deploys established thematic frontier concerns as motives for escape, connecting the past to modern cultural dilemmas, while paradoxically suggesting that the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Norris's story begins with McTeague's childhood, working as a "car-boy" in the Waning Frontier of the Big Dipper mining camp where earning a hardscrabble living and

survival come by way of exploiting the resources within the natural landscape. This setting provides an effective example of how the Waning Frontier begins to usurp the Wild Frontier. Mac's youth in the Waning Frontier on the outskirts of civilization testifies to the detribalizing effects of America's socio-cultural influences on the working class as well, as Norris writes: "his father was a steady, hard-working shift-boss of the mine. Every other Sunday he became an irresponsible animal, a beast, a brute, crazy with alcohol" (5). The majority of the events in Norris's novel, however, unfold in the cityscape of San Francisco, but ultimately crescendo in a climactic and apocalyptic desert wasteland scene in Death Valley, which I will address later in this analysis. Both of these settings act as waning liminal frontier spaces in many ways. The streets of San Francisco, gilded with the veneer of refinement and modernity, also harbor the unthinkable violence, chaos, and human depravity that characterize narratives engaging the Wild Frontier, also bearing resemblance to Southworth's Rag Alley in *The Hidden Hand*. In his novel, Norris lays out a formative metropolitan tableau that leads many of the novel's characters to ruin, madness, violence, and death in ways that connect to the character milieus and masculinities explored in Chapter II. Looking out from the window of his dental office to the bustle of Polk Street, the eponymous character McTeague or Mac as others call him, passively, routinely, hypnotically watches the beating heart of the consumer, service-based commerce that shapes most of the novel's grisly tragedies:

> The street never failed to interest him . . . On week days the street was
>
> very lively. It woke to its work about seven o' clock, at the time when the
>
> newsboys made their appearance together with the day laborers . . . At six
>
> the great homeward march commenced . . . Day after day, McTeague saw

the same panorama unroll itself. The bay window of his "Dental Parlors"

was for him a point of vantage from which he watched the world go past.

(Norris 7-9)

Each day, McTeague absent-mindedly navigates the signifiers and movements of a well-oiled capitalist machine: buyers selling their wares, employees coming and going to and from work, automatons perfunctorily going through motions like half-sleeping hamsters on a wheel, not unlike in George Romero's film *Dawn of the Dead* where zombies unconsciously return to a shopping mall, satirizing humanity's impulsive, even pathological proclivity for consumptive behavior.

McTeague meanders through the endless cycle of his own routine, drinking steam beer and playing the six "lugubrious" airs on his concertina, passively drifting through life. In his essay, "*McTeague's* Gilded Prison," David McGlynn observes the particulars of Mac's Polk Street residence, "filled with images of gilded bars, from the colored liquids in huge jars in the corner drug stores, to the cigar stands in the vestibules of the barber shops," that testify to the "boundaries of his life" (26). The bustling, somewhat alluring scenes of commerce offer pedestrians the spoils of success, rendering an economy that rests on an ideology of consumption which not only influences the minutiae of the characters' daily lives but entangles them in interpersonal conflicts that end in horrifying results. And while goods and services seem to offer the promise of comfort and personal happiness, many of Norris's characters accept the status quo only to become crushed by it, begging the question, why do the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation? One attempt at explanation comes from Robert Parker's paraphrasing of Marxist philosopher, Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, in which Gramsci

> reasoned that the right maintained its hegemony, its dominating cultural
>
> influence and power, not so much by violence or coercion, as we might
>
> expect . . . But according to Gramsci, the more effective way to sustain
>
> hegemony comes through cultural leadership. The bourgeois capitalists'
>
> cultural prestige makes their way of thinking seem like common sense to
>
> the masses, so the masses come to identify with bourgeois ways of
>
> thinking, leading them to consent with bourgeois dominance. (Parker 218)

Much like the ill-fated protagonists in this chapter, some people simply lack the

imagination to see the proverbial forest through the trees, meaning they fail to recognize

any potentially problematic and treacherous influences within their own environment or

in their own behaviors. The influence of environmental forces, however, certainly fails to

address the biological imperatives at work in Norris's novel, yet environmental pressures

certainly play an equally pivotal role in shaping his characters.

Another factor to consider alongside the machinery of consumer capitalism and

the shaping of masculinities in *McTeague* arises from the relationship between class and

gender. David Leverenz suggests that "class dynamics become subsumed in gender

ideologies. More particularly . . . as the male workplace became quite separate from the

home, competition intensified, and men defined manhood much more exclusively

through their work" (*Renaissance* 72). Leverenz also conceptualizes manhood much in

the same way Kimmel does with regard to socio-cultural and socio-economic influences,

writing

> Manhood begins as a battlefield code, to make men think twice before
>
> turning and running, as any sensible man would do. Womanhood begins

as a domestic code, centered on child rearing. As collective fictions, these

codes function ideologically, representing a particular group's

prescriptions for behavior as if the norms were both natural and universal.

They serve to invigorate yet also to constrain the individual will for the

benefit of the group: so men will protect the group from enemies, and so

women will raise the children and solace the men. The great paradox of

manhood and of womanhood, as perhaps of any ideology, is that what can

be socially functional can also be personally dysfunctional. Men get

killed; women get stifled. (Leverenz 73)

Connecting and attempting to prove one's manhood amid the uncertainties of industry

becomes central to how masculinity functions ideologically in Norris's novel and in

America. And though the codes that uphold the evaluative criteria for success and failure

may persist as fictions, they nevertheless contribute to identity formation, as Leverenz

suggests, especially in the realm of the competitive American marketplace and with

regard to meeting the evolved human need for the psychological rewards of autonomy,

competence, and connectedness. In the case of *McTeague*, the American dream, Henry

Clay's ideal of the self-made man, and the Horatio Alger myth of upward mobility all

contribute to and compete with forces of environmental and biological determinism,

which tragically sabotages ideal, prosocial performances of masculinities and meaningful

masculine identity realization in the novel, unleashing the darker capacities of human

behavior. This sabotage persists as a product of what Leverenz characterizes as the

dysfunction of gender ideology. For characters in *McTeague*, well-being becomes

drastically undermined if not altogether annihilated by the socio-cultural values and

influences they reinforce and perpetuate, rendering the tragedies of their lives both products and casualties of insistent, class-based environmental influences directly linked to masculinity.

When defining success and happiness or meaning and purpose in accordance with achieving wealth and/or material accumulation, constructing an unstable identity based on such extrinsic values becomes increasingly likely and highly problematic. I should also point out that much of what follows in this study refrains from sweeping indictments of capitalism; that work remains in the hands of much more capable and qualified economic theorists. Instead, the claims made in the proceeding analyses intend to illustrate the consequences of Norris's characters uncritically adhering to socio-cultural values that potentially destroy lives. In keeping with this observational framework, Kiara Kharpertian examines labor, class, and identity in *McTeague*, stating "when identity relies on money, as many identities in the novel do, it is a class-based façade woven from an unending yet unfulfilling quest for capital" (159). This sort of never-ending quest significantly affects men and women alike in Norris' novel. McTeague's much referenced desires contextualize this façade, from lusting after a gold tooth sign to other material representations of the American dream – the house and kids, and even the consumption of his wife Trina as an object: "An immense joy seized upon him – the joy of possession. Trina was his very own now" (103). Norris introduces McTeague's wants as relatively harmless, but in attempting to attain his desires, the biologically masculine elements of his behaviors and attitudes – primarily strength, aggression, and a proclivity for violence – erupt in sexual assault, greed, covetousness, violence, and murder, elements that vividly characterize the environmentally deterministic aspects of the novel

and emerge as grotesque, corrupted masculine performances informed by both biology and socio-cultural pressures. Neither McTeague nor Trina achieve contentment or any permanent, meaningful satisfaction through ownership of objects, which reflects the economic law of diminishing marginal utility, underscoring the fleeting sense of attainment that accompanies compulsive consumption and hoarding.

As it so happens, once McTeague acquires Trina as the commodity he envisions her to be, his infatuation with what was once unattainable begins to disappear:

> . . . McTeague's affection for his wife was dwindling a little every day – *had* been dwindling for a long time, in fact . . . She was part of the order of the things with which she he found himself surrounded . . . it was no longer a pleasure to for him to kiss her and take her in his arms; she was merely his wife . . . She was his wife, that was all. (158)

Pushing this interpretation even further, Mac's consumption of Trina as a product or material good becomes manifested literally in the scenes where he viciously bites her fingers and the scene where he brutally murders and disposes of her as a mere obstacle so he can abscond with her hoarded bag of money: "The way he treats her resembles the way miners, with their machines, treat the mountains at the Big Dipper Mine" (Cavalier 129). Objectification and commodity fetishism apply to McTeague's oblique desire for a house and children as well, insomuch as their acquisition only reflects a pathological want of accumulation rather than seeking the intrinsic rewards of familial connectedness. More specifically, McTeague wants a house, not a home. Musing on the possibilities of such a future, Norris writes of McTeague that he "began to have ambitions – very vague, very confused ideas of something better – ideas for the most part borrowed from Trina.

Some day, perhaps, he and his wife would have a house of their own. What a dream! . . .
The dentist saw himself as a venerable patriarch surrounded by children and
grandchildren" (109). Norris's depiction of Mac's inner thinking detaches the
evolutionarily instilled rewards of familial, tribal sentiment and intrinsic value, reducing
McTeague's motives to extrinsic material wants. And in spite of the author's temporally
restricted knowledge of evolutionary theory, current scientific understanding applies to
the novel and literature as a whole when considering that

> what draws us to a work of art is not just the sensory experience of the
>
> medium but its emotional content and insight into the human condition.
>
> And these tap into the timeless tragedies of our biological predicament:
>
> our mortality, our finite knowledge and wisdom, the differences among us,
>
> and our conflicts of interest with friends, neighbors, relatives, and lovers.
>
> All are topics of the sciences of human nature. (Pinker 418)

By way of a reminder, applying new bodies of knowledge to texts that predate such
knowledge imparts new understanding, though not without eliciting the criticisms of
detractors, especially concerning the sciences. Nevertheless, much of what I am
attempting to argue throughout my analysis of *McTeague* and the scope of this project
remains akin to the universal footing that applies myth criticism, psychoanalysis, and
deconstruction theory to anachronistic works that were written without the insight of such
knowledge, though still rest on the claim that art can exist independently from the
cultures that produce it. In the case of *McTeague*, biology and culture collide. As a result,
self-interest and desiring something simply for the sake of fulfilling an ideal projected by
both McTeague's wife and consumer culture get mistaken for the meaningful attainment

of intrinsic needs and rewards. Of course, wanting or having a house and family are not necessarily poor aspirations, but the vague and abstract disconnect that characterizes Mac's motives suggests that he wants these things primarily for the status and appearance of success they confer. And as we see from the beginning of the novel, McTeague's contentment and happiness, not matter how unambitious, previously consisted of simple, rewarding pleasures, "to eat, to smoke, to sleep, and to play upon his concertina," living relatively untouched and unscathed by the influences that eventually subsume his existence (5).

The dehumanizing and detribalizing process of commodification also surfaces through Mac's best-friend Marcus, who half-heartedly courts Trina before her marriage to Mac, and only expresses a deeper interest in her after discovering she has won the lottery. He bitterly thinks to himself: "If you'd kept Trina you'd have had that money. You might have had it yourself. You've thrown away your chance in life . . ." (76). Marcus's thoughts also reveal the nature of his values and beliefs, as if money provides the only forward path in life. Marcus's superficial motives, like those of Southworth's Le Noir villains, highlight the novel's depiction of interpersonal and societal de-tribalization brought about by the self-interested pursuit of his extrinsic, culturally reinforced values. Marcus not only concedes Trina to McTeague as if she were mere property to be tagged by one of Melville's whaling waifs, but his petulant envy clearly surfaces as a result of failing to personally benefit from Trina's newfound wealth, a selfish impulse devoid of virtue, love, and meaningful interpersonal relation. The prosocial impulses compelling Traverse Rocke's routine offering of pro bono medical services in *The Hidden Hand*, on the other hand, provide a stark contrast to Marcus's attitudes and behaviors. Marcus –

like McTeague, Trina, Zerkow, and Maria – collectively shows how greed, envy, and an unquenchable lust for "things" begin to pave the way for complete de-tribalization, interpersonal conflict, alienation, isolation, violence, and tragedy.

Another aspect of how environmental determinism shapes Norris's characters comes from the American promise of socio-economic upward mobility through hard work and industry, perpetuated and reinforced by the novel's urban setting and the extrinsically motivated characters therein. Early in the story, Norris reveals that before McTeague began practicing his crude form of dentistry, he lived in a mining camp as a young boy. Moving further into the novel, we discover that Mac received his dentistry "training" from a travelling charlatan, subsequently making McTeague unqualified to practice in San Francisco, causing further instability to his identity. Accordingly, Kharpertian insists that "though McTeague can play at middle class domesticity for a while, his origin as a working-class miner is inescapable. The consequences of indulging this illusion are the exiles and murders that crowd the second half of the novel; when lower class characters aspire to upper class wealth, they lose personal, socioeconomic, and spatial security and violence ensues" (148). Kharpertian's observations apply to the characters in the novel that vehemently covet extrinsic pursuits, leading them to the implicit assumption that they too can achieve the ideal appearances and symbols of success, but they never take the time to measure the cost of their beliefs and actions because their desires are internalized and perpetuated as normal, even aspirational by the culture in which they move and live. And while Norris never quite affords his characters the agency or consciousness required to consider the costs of their beliefs and behaviors, the once peaceful lives of drinking steam beer, socializing, and moving through life

unimpeded by the detriments of biological and socio-cultural forces come violently

crashing down nonetheless when the necessary components align.

Divisive Competition

Yet another distinguishing factor of the environmentally deterministic element of

naturalism resides in the potentially divisive competition of the marketplace, which can

subvert the fostering of meaningful, cooperative interpersonal relationships. In

McTeague, competition creates tension between characters who might otherwise have

mutually beneficial, tribally inter-reliant relationships. Leverenz writes in a broader

context that "The greatest paradox in the triumph of the capitalist middle class is that its

collective success depends on maximizing individual competition, which thrives on the

zest for dominance and the fear of failure" (*Renaissance* 85). In the world of Norris's

novel, compulsive consumption and competition drive divisive wedges between people,

especially when competence is brought into question or subverted. Norris reveals how

McTeague's desire for the gold tooth sign to advertise his dental parlors solely arises

from contemptuous competition with another dentist. Fantasies about acquiring the gilded

sign excite McTeague, primarily for the envy and enmity it would potentially engender in

his competitor:

> What would that other dentist, that poser, that rider of bicycles, that
>
> courser of greyhounds, say when he should see this marvelous molar run
>
> out from McTeague's bay window like a flag of defiance? No doubt he

would suffer veritable convulsions of envy; would be positively sick with

jealousy. If McTeague could only see his face at the moment! (86)

This passage indicates the sort of relationship the two dentists have as a result of living in

a divisive competitive environment. Moreover, the fact that Mac takes pleasure at the

thought of emotionally distressing another human being reveals a sadistic way of thinking

that continually surfaces throughout his narrative arc. Where McTeague and the other

dentist might have alternatively agreed to a lucrative partnership between the two of

them, thereby potentially fostering friendship, expanding their enterprise through an

inter-reliant consolidation of industry, and cooperatively laboring under common

business goals, the dominant impulse that influences Mac come solely from the desire to

see the other man fail. While such a scenario seems unlikely or even naïve in the world of

Norris's novel, the competition between McTeague and the Other Dentist initially

resembles the kind of competition needed to foster industry and innovation, typically to

the benefit of each other's respective endeavors. But again, competition in *McTeague*

carries darker implications and typically ends in tragic results, as evinced through the

friendly sporting events at the scene of the picnic that ends in unrestrained savage

violence.

The competition of the free market and competition in general do not necessarily

require that people treat each other antisocially or with hostility, but tribal sentiments are

much more likely to be betrayed when cut-throat competition factors into social

interactions centered exclusively around perceptions of dominance. Once McTeague is

exposed as a fraud by Marcus, the other dentist, as a result of the tension between the two

men, capitalizes on the situation, using his advantageous position as an opportunity to

humiliate Mac and exploit him in his fallen situation. Following Mac's forced unemployment, his wife Trina refuses to draw from her hoarded savings to uphold their former middle-class lifestyle, and so they reluctantly have an estate sale as a way to generate money instead. The "Other Dentist," as Norris refers to him, attends and offers to buy the coveted gold tooth sign from McTeague. Enraged and humiliated, Mac refuses, responding as he so often does to insult: "You can't make small of me" (155). The fear of domination and dishonor resonates in such a statement. Mac then menacingly approaches his antagonist, "his great red fist clenching" (155). The other dentist, obviously aware of the impending violence, runs out of the apartment, but not before insultingly calling back to McTeague, "You don't want to trade anything for a diploma, do you?" (155) At this point, Mac and Trina realize that everyone knows the truth about Mac losing his practice and in the wake of the other dentist's retreating insult, "The humiliation was complete now" (155). Along with complete humiliation comes the complete subversion of competence, autonomy, and connectedness as well. Where Mac's identity, autonomy, and sense of competence once came from the stability and routine of his dental practice, the losses he experiences become that which fuels the capacity for violence lurking within him.

Biological proclivities and the competitive drives inherent to capitalism combine in ways that shape masculine performances and come between Marcus's and McTeague's friendship as well. Having only circumstantially "lost" Trina and her lottery winnings, in a drunken stupor and out of sheer envy, Marcus encounters McTeague at a bar and begins to rage, "I've been played for a sucker, an' now that you've got all you can out of me, now that you've done me out of my girl and out of my money, you give me the go-by . . .

'Do I get any of that money?' cried Marcus, persistently" (83). Jealousy and covetousness provoke the petty grievances of Marcus who could neither foresee Trina's good fortune nor anticipate that his best friend would stand to gain from it. Marcus cedes his half-committed, convenient courtship of Trina to Mac in the first place because he "could see very clearly that McTeague loved Trina more than he did" (35). In an act that Mac misinterprets as Marcus selflessly stepping aside, the reader learns more from Norris about the nature of Marcus's feelings: "The sense of his own magnanimity all at once overcame Marcus. He saw himself as another man, very noble, self-sacrificing; he stood apart and watched this second self with boundless admiration and with infinite pity. He was so good, so magnificent, so heroic, that he almost sobbed" (35). The emotional nuance in this passage provides revealing contextual details. Marcus's concession, while seemingly admirable on the surface of the gesture, affords him the opportunity to self-aggrandize and cast himself as a martyr to his friendship with McTeague, which only further stokes the flames of his resentment and hostility. Inevitably, the shouting and insults previously described in their first major conflict escalate between the two men, and competition and diffidence, just as Hobbes maintained, act as catalysts for violence, supplanting Mac's and Marcus's connectedness while inciting unnecessary interpersonal hostility and violence. When Marcus attempts to assault McTeague with a knife, competition and a desire for revenge elicit a violent masculine performance. Moreover, Pinker writes on the personality profiles of people, typically men, whose dispositions for violence accurately align with Norris's characterization of Marcus. Given Marcus's penchant for socialist activism, public rabble-rousing, and the marked increase in his oppositional temperament after losing Trina and her money, Pinker's insights fit Marcus

like a well-worn suit: "they are vindictive, easily angered, resistant to control, deliberately annoying, and likely to blame everything on other people" (315). Couple such attitudes and behaviors with masculine performances of strength, aggression, and an inclination towards violence and what emerges amounts to the toxic or grotesque masculinities of Marcus and McTeague that resemble the defining masculine characteristics of men like Magua, the Le Noir villains, Big Boy, and Ahab.

Later in the novel, Marcus tags along to a family picnic where the men leave the women for a time to take part in a marksmanship competition. After the match, the men return to the rest of the group, but "Their shooting match had awakened a spirit of rivalry in the men, and the rest of the afternoon was passed in athletic exercises between them" (129). The athletic challenges culminate in a wrestling match between Marcus and Mac, whose interpersonal conflicts and grievances have been festering like an infected wound all the while. Once the two commence with what should have been a friendly competition for the sake of sport and encouraging each other's success, the true nature of their feelings becomes apparent. With Mac's physical size and strength allowing him to dominate Marcus in physical combat, Marcus's humiliation erupts: "the hate he still bore his old-time 'pal' and the impotent wrath of his own powerlessness were suddenly unleashed" (132). Consumed by shame, Marcus then violently bites through Mac's ear as the two men flail about on the ground, but then, "The brute that in McTeague lay so close to the surface leaped instantly to life, monstrous not to be resisted . . . His only idea was to batter the life out of the man before him, to crush and annihilate him upon the instant" (132-133). In an unrestrained rage, McTeague violently breaks Marcus's arm, galvanizing the permanent rift between the former best friends. This rift becomes a

singular motivation for Marcus who eventually plays a major role in orchestrating Mac's professional ruin. Aside from turning Mac in to the authorities over his unlicensed dental practice, Marcus also reveals Mac's identity to the police and assists in the manhunt for McTeague after the discovery of Trina's murder. Moreover, Marcus does not choose his course of action because his moral code insists upon such action; he simply wants revenge on McTeague and to acquire the money he knows Mac took from Trina. Marcus tells the assembled posse, only in passing, that he knew Trina; his primary motives of greed and vengeance thus come to light: "This thing's a personal matter of mine – an' that money he got away with, that five thousand, belongs to me by rights" (237). In their final confrontation in Death Valley, Marcus catches up to the fleeing Mac and the drive for revenge that undermines the advantages of tribal sentiment and cooperation finally brings about both men's deaths, much in the same way the unyielding quest for revenge destroys Ahab and Magua. Moreover, the final scene of the novel teeters on the edge of complete absurdity, highlighting the ridiculousness of their motives, given their precarious situation in the space of the frontier. The two men, knowing they will likely die of dehydration in the middle of a vast and barren wasteland, still continue to vehemently pursue their own interests, which ultimately gets them both killed.

McTeague's masculine performance reveals much about how nature and nurture work in concert in Norris's narrative. A look at the biological factors at work in *McTeague* proves equally insightful. Like Marcus, McTeague certainly fits a specific profile, and it seems as though the novel presents him as a skinwalker in the making. Throughout the story, Norris characterizes Mac as a stupid, slack-jawed brute of an animal, clearly connecting these qualities to heritable traits and the brutality of his father.

Pinker also outlines the psychological traits that fit descriptions of McTeague when he observes that "individuals prone to violence have a distinct personality profile. They tend to be impulsive, low in intelligence, hyperactive, and attention-deficient" (Pinker 315). Mac certainly checks three out of four boxes here, similar to Marcus in fitting a profile. When proclivities for these traits become combined with environmental stressors, the roles of competition, honor, and diffidence, and the resulting masculinities most certainly carry the potential for chaos and destruction, as the novel so thoroughly demonstrates.

Extrinsic Motives

Norris renders his character, Zerkow, as a man whose greed consumes the totality of his being while caricaturizing a grotesque pathology compelled by extrinsic values: "It was impossible to look at Zerkow and not know instantly that greed – inordinate, insatiable greed – was the dominant passion of the man" (28). Moreover, Zerkow's mania fails to invoke any sort of utility or practical purpose, not unlike Melville's monomaniacal Ahab. Zerkow never entertains any thought of what he might do with newly acquired riches, but simply wants gold for the sake of wanting and hoarding, to no purposeful end other than mere ownership. J. Michael Duvall takes this claim another step, further revealing the interior of Zerkow's character:

> With Zerkow and his shop, the dominant association is not with an
> entrepreneurial spirit, upward mobility, and ultimately redemption
> [through class mobility and cumulative ownership], but with stasis and

death . . . In Zerkow's shop . . . 'junk' takes on its other prominent

meaning, not as potential utility, but as real disorder and pollution. (139)

Zerkow, like the many extrinsically motivated characters in the novel, surrounds himself

with useless material trappings that stifle and restrict positive psychological

individuation, disabling the rewards of competence, autonomy, and connectedness in the

process. And though these rewards seem far from possible in the world of Norris's novel,

perhaps that is the point. The resulting desperation allows Zerkow to violently assault and

eventually murder his wife Maria, a woman he only marries for her potential ability to

disclose the location of lost gold service pieces. In his paranoid delusions, Zerkow

believes that she knows the whereabouts of the gold and becomes singularly obsessed

with the service's location. But with each passing day, each of Zerkow's failed attempts

to glean any useful information from Maria only further fuels his obsession and increases

his anger towards his wife: "At length his continued ill success began to exasperate him.

One day he took his whip from his junk wagon and thrashed Maria with it, gasping all the

while, 'Where is it, you beast? Where is it? Tell me where it is; I'll make you speak'"

(137). Rather than give up on the idea of obtaining the gold service, Zerkow becomes a

grotesque caricature of what can happen to a person who places extrinsic values over

intrinsic ones. Moreover, Zerkow's physical domination over Maria underscores the fact

that the masculine strength, willingness to inflict violence, and iron-will that would be

cooperatively beneficial in the space of a hostile frontier can just as quickly explode in a

selfish, de-tribalized rage, just as it does with Big Boy, Magua, the Le Noirs, and Ahab.

Furthermore, Zerkow's lack of autonomy, competence, and connectedness as an

endlessly hoarding junk collector living in isolation further emboldens his desperate

mania, and ultimately transform him into the tribally disaffiliated skinwalker as explained by Junger.

The extrinsic pursuits of the characters in *McTeague* come at an alarming cost, heedless of Thoreau's warnings, or what Pizer describes as "the waste of individual potential because of the conditioning forces of life" (*Twentieth* 6). Again, such realizations may elide the world of Norris's novel; however, the author still presents a work influenced by a glaring lack of intrinsic values and what follows as a result. In fact, Marcus and even more so with Zerkow and McTeague evince the characteristic traits of a skinwalker, and their respective journeys entail identity realizations that amount to the birth of their status as one of these detribalized beings. Recall Junger's cultural exploration of the skinwalker myth and as with Zerkow and McTeague the skinwalker disaffiliates him or herself from the community/tribe through violent acts inflicted upon the community to which he or she belongs. For the characters in *McTeague,* the pursuit of hollow ideals leads to madness, violence and ruin, enacting the skinwalker mythos that becomes horrifically illustrated through the murders of Trina, Maria, and the final deadly confrontation between Mac and Marcus.

The Search for Freedom in the Frontier

Rather than through collectivism and tribal sentiment, McTeague, alone and on the run returns to a more primitive landscape that initially seems to offer the possibility for autonomy and competence. Granted, Mac is a wanted fugitive on the lam by this point in the novel, but the change he undergoes when he escapes the overtly capitalist

landscape of San Francisco is remarkable. Where McTeague's primary characterizations of dumb and animalistic persist throughout the majority of the novel, his return to his native soil in the space of the Waning Frontier facilitates an awakening. Norris writes:

> What strange sixth sense stirred in McTeague at this time? What animal cunning, what brute instinct clamored for recognition and obedience? What lower faculty was it that roused his suspicion, that drove him out into the night a score of times between dark and dawn, his head in the air, his eyes and ears keenly alert? (215)

As with so many of the characters in this study, entrance into the frontier elicits transformations as a response induced by navigating the conditions of chaos. Anticipating a counterargument regarding the nature of Mac's awakening, David McGlynn notes that

> It is tempting to read the description of the sixth sense as a purely animalistic faculty, like a deer sensing hunters, and to thereby argue that McTeague has returned to an even more brutish and animalistic state than he was in the city. Yet, McTeague's sixth sense allows him to take rational and deliberate steps to avoid his pursuers: he sleeps in his clothes and walks 'wide around sharp corners' (275). When at last he deciphers the danger pursuing him, he 'utter[s] an exclamation as of a man suddenly enlightened,' then gathers up his few belongings, including the birdcage, and flees. (276)

Mac's retreat from his shattered life on Polk Street to his former home at the mining camp represents a symbolic attempt to return to the Wild Frontier and a simpler, more clearly defined way of life characterized, potentially, by the autonomy and competence

achieved through work. Ironically, however, the mine itself is testament to civilization's

progress, industry, and the closing of the salvific possibilities and the pastoral ideal that

lie within the Wild Frontier. Upon returning to the mine, McTeague experiences a brief

respite from his life on the run: "The still, colossal mountains took him back again like a

returning prodigal, and vaguely, without knowing why, he yielded to their influence –

their immensity, their enormous power, crude and blind, reflecting themselves in his own

nature, huge, strong, brutal in its simplicity" (213). But further reflection reveals the

nature of this Waning Frontier: "Once it even occurred to him that there was a

resemblance between his present work and the profession he had been forced to abandon.

In the Burly drill he saw a queer counterpart of his old-time dental engine . . . It was the

same work he had so often performed in his 'Parlors,' only magnified, made monstrous,

distorted, and grotesque, the caricature of dentistry" (213). Though it exists on the

margins of society, the mine is an arm of capitalism all the same, and total escape from

its environmental influence and his crimes is next to impossible. Ishmael and Perth,

beholden to Ahab's will, arrive at the same logical conclusion. Ultimately, McTeague's

attempted escape to reinvent himself and begin a new life dissolves in the spaces of the

Waning Frontier, perhaps best realized in the barren waste of Death Valley where "There

was no change in the character of the desert. Always the same measureless leagues of

white-hot alkali stretched away toward the horizon on every hand. . . . McTeague could

look for miles and miles over its horrible desolation. No shade was in sight" (236).

Ultimately, this space provides no heroic glow, no hope, no salvific restoration, no

comfort in drinking steam beer, no concertina on which to play lugubrious airs, but only

the dead bodies of Marcus and McTeague, alongside a canary chirping away in its gilded prison.

Another Kind of Awakening

Published in 1899, the same year as *McTeague*, Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* depicts a liminal frontier space similar in nature to that of Melville's and Norris's. In Chopin's story, protagonist, Edna Pontellier – like Ishmael and Capitola – critically interrogates the conventions of prescriptive gender roles while seeking positive identity realization and a meaningful existence. Desiring a means of escaping societal constraint as both Capitola and Ishmael do, Edna's ennui and longing for something more meaningful than a life predominantly characterized by the roles of wife and mother stem from the socio-cultural limitations imposed on women in the nineteenth century. Like Capitola, Edna is included in this study because of the many ways in which she separates masculine performance from the male body and the fact that she must navigate a liminal frontier space. And like Capitola, Edna performs masculinity as a means of asserting her own autonomy and independence. However, where Capitola succeeds in reconciling stereotypical gender polarization through her actions while interrogating masculinities that fail to embody moral virtue/value, Edna's masculine performance generates power via autonomy, in part, through her awakening sexuality. But since this power proves only temporary because her sexual escapades, while empowering, remain fleeting, and the man she loves, Robert Lebrun, decides he cannot be with her because she is married, Edna's true power and autonomy paradoxically come through the strength of her conviction and willingness to enter the abyss, knowing alternatively that she can never

experience true freedom from the prescriptive roles expected of her, whether those roles arise from her Protestant upbringing or her status as somewhat of an outsider to the Creole culture that characterizes much of the novel.

While the sea in *Moby-Dick* functions as a liminal frontier space and destination for escape similar to that of the Wild Frontier spaces, potentially liberating individuals from the anxieties and pressures of the impending industrialized capitalist ethos, Ishmael's escape from societal influence becomes short lived, and Captain Ahab comes to fully embody the destructive potential of the marketplace, ironically leading the Pequod and its crew to their destruction. The desire for escape similarly applies to the lonely and existentially isolated Edna Pontellier; the sea beckons her much in the same way it calls to Ishmael and Perth, and for similar reasons. Like these Melville characters, Edna's attitudes and behaviors express a deep yearning for the freedom, competence, autonomy, and connectedness that reside in the space of the Wild Frontier and most often become enabled through cooperative tribal sentiment. But unlike the more successful characters, Earl, Hawkeye, and Capitola, Edna has nowhere to run and practically no one to turn to. Interestingly, the sea, or the frontier, calls to her in the same manner it calls to Perth and Ishmael. Taking an intimate stroll along the beach with Robert in Chapter V, Edna's "glance wandered from his face away toward the Gulf, whose sonorous murmur reached her like a loving but imperative entreaty" (13). The following chapter emphasizes this oceanic entreaty once more but increasingly develops the urgent gravity of the sea's beckoning more fully when Chopin writes: "The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in the abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation. The voice of

the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace" (14). And as in *Moby-Dick*, the connection between the sea, the frontier, and the possible reinvention of one's identity become paramount to Chopin's novel.[4]

The agency and freedom Edna longs for paradoxically resides in the liminal space of the frontier, which in Chopin's novel becomes manifested in the sea and its metaphysical connection to the abstractions in Edna's mind, where she begins to liberate herself from the grip of conventional femininity. Throughout the novel, her awakening leads her to the revelation and eventual conclusion that her conceptions of freedom, autonomy, and competence cannot be attained because of inescapable environmental and cultural norms. And rather than continue down the path of conforming to the latter, Edna reaches the conclusion that succumbing to the seductive call of the sea and wading into the abyss remains the one action totally under her control, the one thing she has the absolute will to see through. In her analysis of *The Awakening*, Nancy Walker argues that the narrative has significant naturalist genre conventions that feminist readings often ignore. In her essay, after outlining the relevant socio-cultural disparities concerning propriety among the Creole and white characters in the novel, Walker concludes: "There is, in Chopin's novel, no stance about women's liberation or equality; indeed, the other

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[4] Concerning matters of identity in *The* Awakening, Sandra Gilbert, for instance, argues that the novel elicits through Edna a second coming of the mythological Aphrodite as an alternative to what Gilbert characterizes as the masculinist and patriarchal myth of Jesus Christ. Lee Edwards explores the tensions that emerge between the socio-cultural norms tied to maternity, sexuality, and selfhood.

married women in the novel are presented as happy in their condition" (252). Walker's claim, however, overlooks the fact that a major female character, Mademoiselle Reisz, meaningfully – and happily – operates outside of the marital and maternal roles that restrict Edna and she lives her life seemingly every bit as contented as the married mother, Adèle Ratignolle, who clearly represents the aspirations and hallmarks of the Ideal Woman. While Madame Ratignolle finds fulfilling purpose and meaning in her roles as wife and mother, Reisz acts as a competent, autonomous foil to the ideology Madame Ratignolle embodies. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese writes: "As an artist, Mlle. Reisz stands for the possibility of female independence. Her life may be austere and frugal, but it is her own" (260). Although Edna enjoys the benefits and privileges that accompany her affluent position in life, the trade-off for comfort suggested by Junger becomes acute in Edna's life and along her path toward identity realization.

One of Edna's potential paths to positive psychological individuation emerges from her interest in the arts. By way of Edna's painting, sketching, and desire for independence, Mlle. Reisz also acts as an inspiration and mentor of sorts to Edna, offering her wisdom, telling her that if she wants to continue her endeavors and strive to become an artist then she will have to shoulder an immense burden: "To be an artist includes much; one must possess many gifts – absolute gifts – which have not been acquired by one's own effort. And, moreover, to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul. . . . The brave soul. The soul that dares and defies" (61). Mlle. Reisz demonstrably possesses the courage to tread her own path as an artist and musician, and she rejects the socio-cultural norms that would otherwise restrict and confine her. Reisz

words and ascetic distinctly imply that such a life requires personal sacrifice and a fair amount of hardship, as does any goal worth pursuing.

Moreover, Mademoiselle Reisz's masculine performance, an obvious and effective outlier on the continuum of sex differences, altogether challenges any sweeping claims regarding a woman's inclination towards domesticity or submissiveness. Chopin writes of Reisz that "She was a disagreeable little woman, no longer young, who quarreled with almost everyone, owing to a temper which was self-assertive and a disposition to trample upon the rights of others" (25). This description of Reisz's temperament reveals an interestingly relevant connection between testosterone and masculine performance and why sex-based traits of agreeableness typically reside more in women as "High-testosterone women smile less often and have more extramarital affairs, stronger social presence, and even a stronger handshake" (Pinker 348). The biological evidence presented by Pinker aligns with Mlle. Reisz; however, it also extends to Edna's powerful social presence: "There was something in her attitude, in her whole appearance . . . which suggested the regal woman, the one who rules, who looks on, who stands alone" (Chopin 84). Edna also engages in multiple extramarital affairs, and even her physical features assume a masculine quality: "She was rather handsome than beautiful" (5). Presenting further evidence of Edna's characteristically "unwomanly" attributes, she unleashes hyper-masculine aggression when contemplating her unfulfilling marriage to Léonce, taking off her wedding ring and throwing it on the floor, where she violently "stamped her heel upon it, striving to crush it" (50). And then, "In a sweeping passion she seized a glass vase from the table and flung it upon the tiles of the hearth. She wanted to destroy something. The clash and the clatter were what she wanted to hear"

(51). Walker concludes that Edna's awakening primarily amounts to a sexual awakening, but given the fact that masculinity characterizes much of Edna's physical and performative identity, her awakening becomes more nuanced than a realization and harnessing of feminine sexuality. It stands to reason that her attitudes and behaviors, which can reasonably be connected, in varying degrees, to the traits of rugged individualism, and her will to deviate from prescribed roles masculinizes her, particularly in comparison to the ideals embodied by the more conventionally feminine Madame Ratignolle.

When juxtaposing Edna with Madame Ratignolle, cultural distinctions and socio-cultural norms, as previously noted, also shape some of the gendered tensions in the novel. As Helen Taylor writes, "Chopin borrows from European women's writing and neatly transposes to Louisiana, by choosing a strictly reared, repressed Presbyterian heroine from Kentucky who marries into the relaxed New Orleans creole Catholic community that takes its vacations on a warm, sensuous island in the Gulf of Mexico" (303). And while many of Edna's ideas about feminine behavior clash with those of both Madame Ratignolle and Mlle. Reisz, and stem from her rural upbringing in a Protestant home, her impulses, desires, and biological proclivities serve as equally influential sources of conflict that subvert if not reject the traditions and norms of both cultural climates. For Edna, both nature and conflicting influences of nurture play their respective roles when it comes to her performance of masculinity.

De-tribalization, too, plays an influential role in the novel. Where inter-reliant tribal sentiment informs the aspirational masculinities in Chapter II and *Moby-Dick*, the Pontelliers' affluence and resulting interpersonal distance generate a cautionary

masculinity in Edna's husband, Léonce, and drives a polarizing wedge between the married couple. Rather than spend time with his wife and children, Léonce spends most of his time at a club socializing or away on business, and he is very much physically absent from the novel's narrative. His chronic absenteeism clearly demonstrates where things rank for Léonce within the various hierarchies he must navigate in striving to attain his goals, goals that clearly take precedence over direct involvement with his own family. Madame Ratignolle tells Edna as much, saying "It's a pity Mr. Pontellier doesn't stay home more in the evenings. I think you would be more – well, if you don't mind my saying it – more united, if he did" (66). Underscoring the disconnect between Edna and her husband, she immediately replies to Madame Ratignolle: "What should I do if he stayed home? We wouldn't have anything to say to each other" (66). Nothing about the social conventions of their day prohibits them from reciprocal enjoyment and growing together in each other's company. Instead, Léonce, as a poor substitute for connectedness, attends more fully to matters that resides outside of his home to support their affluent lifestyle and well-to-do appearances. Kimmel offers the following insight into why so many men behave like Edna's husband when he writes,

> There had always been, of course, a division of labor between the sexes, from hunting and gathering to agricultural to these early industrial societies, on both sides of the Atlantic. What was new – and distinctly American – were the strictness and the degree to which women and men were now seen as having a separate sphere. The home became entirely the domain of wives; husbands were even less involved than before. Men ceded both responsibility and authority over household management. . . .

Advice manuals once written primarily to fathers were now geared

exclusively to mothers. (*Manhood* 39)

In tandem with these significantly influential socio-cultural changes, social appearances,

fraternizing, and the anxieties pertaining to his business affairs, self-image clearly yields

a deeper sense of urgency from Léonce than the actual state of his marriage to Edna or

his relative absenteeism as a father. When considering humanity's evolved tendency to

develop domestic partnerships and strong familial ties, Greene concludes that "familial

love is more than just a warm and fuzzy thing. It's a strategic biological device, a piece of

moral machinery that enables related individuals to reap the benefits of cooperation"

(Greene 31). The benefits of cooperation, however, significantly diminish in the socio-

cultural context of the novel. After Edna tells Léonce that she intends to move into an

apartment of her own, he cautions his wife in a character-revealing way by asking her to

consider "what people would say" (85). However, rather than concern himself with the

state of his marriage, "He was not dreaming of a scandal when he uttered this warning . . .

He was simply thinking of his financial integrity. . . . It might do incalculable mischief to

his business prospects" (89). Furthermore, and in the more general context of

interpersonal disconnect, Margo Culley writes, "What we feel most keenly about Edna is

her remoteness from those about her – her husband, her children, her two female friends,

her two male friends. And her solitude is underscored by the dramatic action of the novel

as the significant persons in her life repeatedly leave her alone" (248). Tragically, the de-

tribalization enabled by modern cultural norms contributes to Edna's profound

discontent, and her awakening ironically leads her deeper into the isolation she already

acutely experiences. Edna's isolation becomes increasingly problematic for her because

although she actually begins to marginally acquire the human needs of competence and autonomy throughout the progression of her awakening and learning to swim, the psychological rewards inherent to both of these components cannot wholly alleviate the suffering of an isolated individual who stands alone, completely lacking in the necessary connectedness to others.

Concerning an alternative to the bleakness of existence precipitated by living apart from a meaningfully connected tribe, Chopin renders a world that seemingly sabotages Edna's ability to achieve the rewards of psychological individuation. Whether or not Edna even wants to become a part of a tribe emerges as an entirely reasonable question as well, but the implicit evidence provided throughout her relentless search for meaning certainly points in the affirmative direction. The bonds that she shares with her husband, children, friends, and lovers remain perfunctory at best, carried on for the sake of appearances. Again, the socio-cultural norms of her world restrict her to the prescriptive roles demanded of her, so like McTeague, Edna becomes painted into a corner where her biological impulses engender conflict with socio-cultural expectations. The only plausible solutions to her dilemma, apart from suicide, and given her limitations, amount to speculation on my part. For instance, perhaps through Edna's taking up residence in her own apartment, she might have pursued a career as an artist under the tutelage of Mademoiselle Reisz, rising to prominence and purpose in a manner similar to Theodore Dreiser's eponymous *Sister Carrie*. However, the literary convention of the woman as a failed artist – effectively represented during this period in the work of Rebecca Harding Davis and Charlotte Perkins Gilman – could certainly foil her aspirations along the way via hegemonic male interference, and in any circumstance, she

would still have to navigate the hierarchical demands that come with the pursuit of any goal she set for herself.

Successful navigation of *any* hierarchy, even one in which a person is an unwilling participant, requires competence and reciprocity. Similarly, the most effective way to successfully navigate the liminal space of the frontier almost entirely depends on competence and mutually reciprocal dependence on pro-social tribal sentiment, or reciprocal altruism; Hawkeye, Capitola, and Earl demonstrate as much throughout their own journeys. Edna and Léonce's marriage, as Chopin presents it, fails to accomplish this end, whether due to socio-cultural expectations or the hierarchies that restrict Edna's independence. The end result is the gulf between them, which amounts to Chopin's conceptualization of an abstracted frontier in Edna's mind and Waning Frontier that fits in the larger context of this chapter. Edna longs for something – perhaps the chaos and rewards that navigating the frontier confer, but that something remains intangible since she cannot run away to the Wild Frontier. As it stands, the only alternative or closet thing Edna envisions as a Wild Frontier arises through the call of the sea. A similar gulf of chaos opens up before the crew of the Pequod, McTeague and Trina, and it swallows them. The separation of spheres between the sexes, the machinations of industry, and the de-tribalization of society collectively sabotage desires and the ability to connect to something of meaningful value in both *McTeague* and *The Awakening,* and this sabotage contributes to the loss of autonomy, competence, and connectedness in the cases of both families.

Edna, like the other characters considered here, pursue various goals and they need a path to the goal because the journey towards and attainment of the goal provide

the necessary positive psychological rewards. The goal, or boon as it often becomes characterized in mythology and literature by countless artists, shows that pursuits should carry intrinsic value and be worth pursuing for the good of the individual and by extension the tribe as the means for improving the status quo. But, anything of value, intrinsic or extrinsic, necessarily implies a hierarchy, which entails making sacrifices to privilege attainment of the goal. The value or worth of the goal in literature typically gets determined by a character, but as the texts in this study show time and time again, extrinsic goals that take precedence over prosocial, intrinsic ones tend to open troubling pathways to ruin. Mademoiselle Reisz imparts such lessons to Edna. Pursuing the goal will strain and put pressure on an individual, so adapting and learning new skill sets becomes paramount. When Edna takes up learning how to swim, the daily strain and stress of attaining the skill makes a psychological impact on her: "A certain ungovernable dread hung about her when in the water, unless there was a hand near by that might reach out and reassure her" (27). But in slowly learning and progressing in her skill, Edna's competence and autonomy become realized perhaps more than at any other point in the story: "Edna plunged and swam with an abandon that thrilled and invigorated her" (27). However, when learning a new skill and adapting to novel circumstances, the possibility of pushing too hard remains ever-present: "She grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before" (27). In this scene, Edna nearly drowns, where in overestimating her ability, and "intoxicated with her newly conquered power, she swam out alone" (27). This sort of personal misapprehension and pushing oneself beyond ability characterizes Llewelyn Moss's recklessness in the next section of this chapter as well. And like Llewelyn, Edna believes

the risk is worth the reward. Alone in the ocean, "She turned her face seaward to gather in an impression of space and solitude, which the vast expanse of water, meeting and melting with the moonlit sky, conveyed to her excited fancy. As she swam she seemed to be reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself" (28). As I see it, the unlimited in this passage can refer to the transformative power often found within the liminal space of the frontier. Edna's newly acquired ability to swim empowers her and indeed contributes to the sense of competence and autonomy she experiences throughout her awakening. However, the psychological rewards she gains from her various demonstrations of agency in swimming, a sexual context, or otherwise clearly come up short of Reisz's standards and advice because the rewards themselves only exist for Edna in the isolation that characterizes her existence. Ultimately, Edna willingly and eagerly navigates the various hierarchies that contribute to her awakening, but she simultaneously refuses complicity in navigating the hierarchies that restrict her independence, primarily represented by her roles as wife and mother. This existential dilemma leaves Edna between the proverbial rock and a hard place. If she submits to socio-cultural convention, she must make concessions that threaten her freedom and sense of selfhood, but in acting with a courageous soul, as Mademoiselle Reisz puts it, Edna sacrifices gaining any interpersonal connectedness that she might otherwise attain outside of conformity, given the socio-cultural limitations imposed on women at the time. Whether reading Edna's death as a suicidal tragedy or a triumph, the fact remains that her autonomy and competence empower her with the strength and bravery to stand by the courage of her conviction. And in the de-tribalized, prescriptive world she inhabits, Edna's freedom and

independence paradoxically arrive by way of her swimming out into the ocean to die, the devil fetch the hindmost.

The masculine performances depicted by the women in *The Awakening* reveal much about the detribalizing effects of society through the stifling norms imposed on women. The conventionally feminine Madame Ratignolle eschews the quest for a tribe because she already lives as meaningful a part of one in the company of her friends and family, completely contented to embody socio-culturally prescriptive norms, though these norms certainly appear more relaxed than those that characterize Edna's Protestant, rural Kentucky upbringing. Mademoiselle Reisz exists as a masculinized spinster and eccentric who refuses to bow to gender norms and sees a life of affluence accompanied by potential domestic servitude as not worth the trade-off for her personal agency and artistic pursuits. Edna tragically finds herself pinned between the two poles that the other two women represent. On the one hand, her masculine performance carries the capacity to liberate her from expectation but also paradoxically undermines her status and position as an affluent wife and mother. Essentially, Edna's suicide amounts to an emancipation from this precarious state, but the cost could not come with a higher price.

The Death of the Frontier Hero

The restorative heroic glow within frontier narratives commented upon by Eliot West, remains conspicuously absent in *McTeague*, *The Awakening*, and in Cormac McCarthy's 2005 novel *No Country for Old Men*. While a contemporary frontier novel like *Pale Horse Coming* explores modern influences – such as that of the Western – on

frontier mythology, McCarthy's novel more pessimistically deploys modern concerns onto a barren frontier wasteland situated on the Texas/Mexico border, remarkably similar to Norris's scoured Death Valley imagery, thereby imagining a symbolic death of the heroic West that reveals "a continuing cultural dislocation . . . and individuals who either fail outright or run themselves crazy chasing unattainable goals" (West 122). The closing of the frontier and the subsequent changes wrought upon the America's physical and socio-cultural landscape become prominent in the text: "In McCarthy's late-capitalist denouement to the dream of the mythic West, animal prey becomes human prey, animal tracks become automobile tracks become signals, cattle-smuggling becomes drug-smuggling, and horses become off-road vehicles" (Malewitz 728). Similarly, in her Jungian interpretation of the novel, Maggie Bortz implicitly explains the elemental dynamics of the Waning Frontier in *No Country for Old Men*: the narrative

> unfolds in 1980 in the wild, scrubby borderlands of South Texas and Mexico. The landscape is a raw, barren land of sprawling desert plain, lava scree, red dirt, and creosote, sparsely inhabited by Mojave rattlesnakes, scorpions, and birds of prey. The image of the border itself suggests an unstable and volatile place between two worlds where the usual rules do not apply, a sort of psychological no-man's-land where consciousness and unconsciousness meet. (31)

Both West's and Bortz's claims effectively coalesce in McCarthy's novel to create a Waning Frontier space that allows the unceremonious and hero deflating death of protagonist, Llewelyn Moss, whose "heroic quest is about cash – [and] his spirit is literalized in currency" (Bortz 33). And so, *No Country for Old Men* exhibits in relation

to frontier mythology, a revealing cultural commentary that remains thematically consistent with the other primary texts in this chapter. On the one hand, the so-called heroic glow that informs much of Chapter II's novels can be interpreted as the "successful" initiation into a restorative, inter-reliant tribal group and leads to meaningful masculine identity realization. To a much lesser extent, a similar claim applies to the marginal individuation experienced by Ishmael, Edna, and McCarthy's character, sheriff Ed Tom Bell, whose dreams about his father express "a longing to live out an old, honorable myth that has become irrelevant in the modern world . . ." (Bortz 38). On the other hand, the cautionary masculinities and masculine "failures" in McCarthy's novel reinforce consequences of socio-cultural de-tribalization in which the disconnect between modern life and our evolutionary past significantly contributes to alienation and isolation, highlighting the modern, culturally individualistic, and highly problematic departure from the intrinsic human needs that enable positive psychological individuation and meaningful masculinity realization.

Standing in contrast to the heroic characters in Chapter II, Cormac McCarthy's major protagonists, Llewelyn Moss and sheriff Ed Tom Bell, represent anxiety and uncertainty when it comes to masculine identity individuation. Where Earl Swagger, Hawkeye, and Capitola successfully navigate and confront frontier chaos by way of masculine performances motivated by tribal inter-reliance, Llewelyn Moss provides an effective counterpoint to aspirational tribal sentiments. Unlike Earl, for instance, "Moss's unconsciousness of his own limitations, of any transpersonal ideals, and of the insurmountable evil he both confronts and secretly carries within him, costs him his own life; the collateral damage includes the deaths of his wife and the young hitchhiker"

(Bortz 33). Just as significantly, Llewelyn's reason for stealing the drug money he finds at the massacre site reveals motives fostered by the extrinsic values that dominate modern American culture and carry the potential to completely enervate the individual who cannot compete in the hierarchy of the marketplace, as it so happens with Captain Ahab, Marcus, and McTeague. Masculinities theorist Michael Kimmel comments on this societal transition into our modern socio-cultural milieu: "Participants in the marketplace, which promises orderly rational accounting, ultimately became preoccupied with a world increasingly out of control. To a young man seeking his fortune in such a free and mobile society, identity was no longer fixed, and there were no firm familial foundations to ground a secure sense of himself as a man" (*History* 39). As a blue-collar welder and Vietnam veteran, the American dream has eluded Llewelyn Moss, emasculating him in the process. Llewelyn's apparent lack of success becomes further evinced by his lower-class status as a resident of the Desert Aire trailer park and his desperate, extraordinarily dangerous attempt to make off with stolen money. He hopefully, though foolishly thinks to himself: "His whole life was sitting there in front of him . . . All of it cooked down into forty pounds of paper in a satchel" (McCarthy 18). For Llewelyn, the money would provide a means of reasserting some sort of control over his life and it would free him from the never-ending grind of a job that presumably offers no meaningful sense of purpose, which is completely reasonable to assume given the enormous risk he takes. But his desperate act comes at the highest cost, and he might have looked elsewhere for meaning and purpose, though such a tale, admittedly, would not make much of a novel. Nevertheless, Llewelyn's motives drift away from Earl's selfless, pro-socially motivated quest to destroy Thebes on behalf of the many non-kin inmates and the risks Capitola

takes out of a desire to help others. Moreover, Llewelyn, like Edna, faces his conflict alone, and also becomes completely outmatched as a consequence of his own hubris and inability to recognize the undeniable limitations of one against many, in spite of how rugged his masculinity may very well be.

Like Earl, Llewelyn possesses an apparent talent for combat and marksmanship. His father tells Sheriff Bell, "He was the best rifleshot I ever saw. Bar none" (293). And incidentally, like Earl's son Bob Lee, Llewelyn served as a sniper in the Vietnam war, a role that undeniably requires a hardened skillset that Hawkeye would surely admire. All of these men experience and survive combat, have proven themselves capable of checking the necessary boxes on the rugged individualist's checklist, navigated various functional and dysfunctional hierarchies, and all suffer from the psychological traumas of what they have seen and done. But what distinguishes modern frontier heroes like Earl – and Bob Lee – from Llewelyn Moss lies in the overarching theme of this chapter: the heroic ethos and aura that characterize traditional frontier masculinities shatter with the loss of tribal sentiment and an inter-reliant connectedness to others. Llewelyn's experiences upon returning from the Vietnam war look nothing like the hero's welcome Earl receives in the grand public ceremony where Harry Truman awards him with the Congressional Medal of Honor in *Hot Springs*. Granted, Earl attempts suicide shortly after the ceremony, but he lives and discovers renewed meaning and purpose in his wife, his son, Sam, his job, and his duty to the community. In fact, when Earl tragically dies in Hunter's novel *Blacklight*, he selflessly dies attempting to help another man who has strayed into a life of criminal behavior.

Llewelyn, on the other hand, lacks the tribal sentiments that inform Earl's masculinity and character. While talking with Llewelyn's father after informing him of his son's death, Sheriff Bell learns about Llewelyn's post-war experiences: "Llewelyn when he come home he went to visit several families of buddies of his that had not made it back. He give it up. He didnt know what to say to em" (294). Recalling the more vivid details of Llewelyn's homecoming, his father tells sheriff Bell:

> But aside from that they'd all done things over there that they'd just as soon left over there. . . . He smacked the tar out of one or two of them hippies. Spittin on him. Callin him a babykiller. A lot of them boys that come back, they're still havin problems. I thought it was because they didnt have the country behind em. But I think it might be worse than that even. The country they did have was in pieces. It still is. (294)

Again, the hero's welcome and prosocial tribal sentiments that await Earl upon his homecoming completely elude Llewelyn and he becomes a citizen in a culture that largely wanted to forget a drawn out, polarizing war. Junger further contextualizes the predicaments of veterans like Llewelyn when he writes,

> There are obvious stresses on a person in a group, but there may be even greater stresses on a person in isolation. . . . Most primates, including humans, are intensely social, and they are very few instances of lone primates surviving in the wild. A modern soldier returning from combat . . . goes from the kind of close-knit group that humans evolved for, back into a society where most people work outside the home, children are

educated by strangers, families are isolated from wider communities, and

personal gain almost completely eclipses collective good. (93)

This isolation accurately characterizes Llewelyn Moss's life, pushing him to an act of

desperation that leads to both his and his wife Carla Jean's deaths, certainly eclipsing the

collective good in the process.

Furthermore, such invalidating homecoming receptions and uncertain attempts to

assimilate back into civilian life espouse masculinities that potentially become

increasingly withdrawn and become characterized by loneliness and despair. As Junger

writes of this milieu,

Today's veterans come home to find that although they're willing to die

for their country, they're not sure how to live for it. It's hard to know how

to live for a country that regularly tears itself apart along every possible

ethnic and demographic boundary. . . . To make matters worse, politicians

occasionally accuse rivals of *deliberately* trying to harm their own country

– a charge so destructive to group unity that most past societies would

probably have just punished it as a form of treason. (124-125)

Given the markers of Llewelyn's post-war life, Junger's observations and the following

data-based conclusion not only apply, but actually foreshadows part of the novel's

narrative trajectory: "Men are more likely to compete with one another for status using

violence or occupational achievement . . ." (Pinker 345). And since Llewelyn does not

successfully compete in the space of the job market, he deploys his masculine faculties in

the space of the frontier through violence in a vain attempt to profit from stolen money,

relying solely upon his capacity for self-reliance: "he knew that he was probably going to have to kill somebody" (87). Again, the devil fetch the hindmost.

Concerning the depth or lack thereof regarding Llewelyn's interpersonal relationships, the details are sparse, but nonetheless suggest much of a life spent in isolation, his marriage to Carla Jean acting as the sole exception. McCarthy's narrative offers no hard evidence regarding Llewelyn's relationship with his parents or brother; his brother lives far off in California, his mother has passed away, and his father is every bit as laconic as his son. Evidence that would point in the other direction is admittedly lacking as well, but given Llewelyn's temperament, his miscalculated dependence on self-reliance, his homecoming experiences as a veteran, and the manner in which he jeopardizes himself and Carla Jean, it stands to reason that he not only overestimates his masculine prowess, but he also suffers from the lack of autonomy, connectedness, and competence otherwise supplied by inter-reliant tribal sentiment. Like Edna Pontellier in attendance at a party, and in spite of having a family, Llewelyn Moss, in many ways, stands alone.

Including and beyond Llewelyn, the masculine failures and cautionary masculinities in *No Country for Old Men* emerge, in part, as a consequence of tribal disaffiliation. The Native American myth of the skinwalker discussed in Chapter II and explained by Junger effectively surfaces in McCarthy's novel as well. The skinwalker or lone madman, as Junger characterizes him, not only resides in cultural myths across the world, but remains a staple of frontier narratives, and his violent disaffiliation from the group lies behind what makes him so monstrous. In recalling canonical precedents of tribally disaffiliated skinwalkers in frontier mythology that use their masculine energies

for the sake of their own selfish impulses, Magua, the Le Noirs, Ahab, and Big Boy readily come to mind. These characters, like McCarthy's Anton Chigurh, fit the description of skinwalkers in the tradition of this cultural myth in that their crimes are "murder and mayhem committed by an individual who has rejected all social bonds and attacks people at their most vulnerable and unprepared" (114). Chigurh, indeed, embodies the disaffiliated skinwalker myth, but where the heroic glow of their narratives brings Magua, the Le Noirs, and Big Boy to justice and punishment, Chigurh represents a postmodern aesthetic of contemporary existential malaise in that he is not stopped, but escapes at the end of the novel and will presumably continue to indefinitely exist as the lone madman, and by extension, a cultural archetype of evil.

Sheriff Bell recognizes this unsettling truism throughout his character arc: "Somewhere out there is a true and living prophet of destruction and I dont want to confront him. I know he's real. I have seen his work. I walked in front of those eyes once. I wont do it again" (4). Joseph Campbell explores the origins and various representations of the evil archetype from a Jungian perspective, providing insight into cultural mythologies that present and explore juxtapositions of the archetypal wise king and the tyrannical king, both of which become represented in terms of masculine performance. The wise king or senex represents the heroic ethos and virtue embodied by countless lauded protagonists over time, ranging from Odin and Tiresias to the likes of Hawkeye and Capitola. Campbell writes, "The hero, therefore, is the man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and historical limitations to the generally valid, normally human forms. . . . The hero has died as a modern man; but as eternal man – perfected, unspecific universal man – he has been reborn" (14-15). Such a description highlights the

transcendent qualities of the hero and how those qualities can become embraced and amplified in characters for the greater good of the tribe or community. The tyrannical king, by contrast, resides within the psyche and behavior of all people as well, and numerous mythological narratives insist that his influence, like Jung's archetypal shadow, must simultaneously be acknowledged and integrated to keep his malevolent forces at bay. Where "the mythological hero is the champion not of things become but of things becoming . . . the dragon to be slain by him is precisely the monster of the status quo: Holdfast, the keeper of the past" (Campbell 289). Holdfast or the status quo in McCarthy's novel, in part, represents a state of postmodern anxiety and ambiguity, expressed by Llewelyn's death and Sheriff Bell's deflation of the heroic ethos when he contemplates to himself: "I always knew that you had to be willin to die to even do this job. That was always true. . . . I think it is more like what you are willin to become. And I think a man would have to put his soul at hazard. And I wont do that. I think now that maybe I never would" (4). In this context, Bell knows that he will have to commit savage acts to confront the likes of Chigurh or any other so-called living prophet of destruction. The fact that the tyrant dwells inside of all people makes Bell experience profound psychological discomfort. Where Earl and other heroes willingly resort to violence to navigate the liminal space of the frontier, perhaps putting their own souls at hazard, Bell doubts that he carries that sort of masculine strength or heroic optimism within him, given his eye-opening experiences in war and as a police officer. In *Pale Horse Coming*, a similar situation arises, and Sam Vincent recognizes the moral conflicts that accompany the realities of confronting Thebes. Sam tells Earl, "I know you to be a moral man, a decent man, a good man. . . . But I must say it amazes me how quickly and well you

convert to the other side. It's as if your great gifts for action, well-conceived thought, for capability beyond all men, could go either way" (108). Of course, Sam eventually comes around to Earl's way of thinking and acknowledges the fact that instances arise in which upholding moral value judgments requires turning to the sword. Sheriff Bell, on the other hand, has an apparent inability to reconcile such moral dilemmas, thus complicating notions of the conventionally masculine frontier hero.

In the same context of masculinities, Chigurh invokes the image of the tyrannical king and a twisted masculine energy, facets of which emerge in Marcus, and more fully in McTeague through their respective self-serving manias that end in catastrophic violence. Moreover, Chigurh "is an irrefutable psychological truth that belongs to our culture. He represents something we should know about ourselves that remains unconscious, like a not yet understood dream" (Bortz 35). Such phenomena, like that of the skinwalker, clearly exist in our culture today, as Junger explains, and acts of seemingly random violence like Chigurh's are often the ultimate expression of tribal disaffiliation and represent an inability to suppress the motives of the tyrannical king, which seemingly become exacerbated by socio-cultural and biological influences working in tandem.

Aside from Chigurh's overtly violent rejection of tribal sentiment through his occupation as a monomaniacal hit-man, the much more pro-socially motivated Sheriff Bell invokes the tribal connection demonstrably lacking in Llewelyn: "His most authentic self is related to others. He sees himself as a shepherd to the people assigned to his care" (Bortz 37). When McCarthy writes his interior thoughts, Bell reveals that "I've thought about why it was I wanted to be a lawman. There was always some part of me that

always wanted to be in charge. Pretty much insisted on it. Wanted people to listen to what I had to say. But there was a part of me too that just wanted to pull everybody back in the boat. If I've tried to cultivate anything it's been that" (295). Two details from this passage offer insight. The first detail concerns Bell's impulse to seek competence and autonomy through a heroic masculine performance. In the context of men and women being compelled to go off to war for the benefit of others, a similar if not the very same impulse urges people to go into law enforcement. From a perspective of tribal initiation, Junger notes that "To the extent that boys [generally more than women] are drawn to war, it may be less out of an interest in violence than a longing for the maturity and respect that often come with it" (38). Considering the shame Sheriff Bell carries with him for deserting his fellow soldiers in combat during his service in WWII, his role as a police officer acts as a form of compensation and a means of ameliorating what he considers a deep personal failure of masculine duty. But where Llewelyn believes himself competent enough in his masculine performance to confront the violence and chaos that pursue him, not unlike Stephen Crane's Henry Fleming, Sheriff Bell lacks Llewelyn's optimism and naïveté. Bell's emergent perspective shaped by hard experiences in the war and law enforcement deflates the heroic glow, contributing to the overall tonal bleakness in the novel and the overarching characterization of how people change in the liminal space of the Waning Frontier: "I always thought I could at least someway put things right and I guess I just dont feel that way no more. . . . I'm bein asked to stand for something that I dont have the same belief in it I once did. Asked to believe in something I might not hold with the way I once did. That's the problem. I failed at it even when I did" (296). Capitola would not be impressed, but Bell lives in a very different and less romantically

informed world where honor, reciprocity, and masculine strength, no matter how competent the hero, can precipitate an inglorious, unceremonious death in the line of duty.

Interestingly, and in spite of Bell's less than heroic conception of the world, he has a meaningful and deeply connected relationship with his wife, Loretta. Where the details of Llewelyn and Carla Jean's marriage emerge only in terms of perfunctory loyalty, duty, and almost monosyllabic conversations, "Bell's retirement and renunciation of violence offer a new way of thinking about aging masculinity—one that centers on Bell's relationship with his wife Loretta" (Cole and Saxton 611). Furthermore, as the whole of this project attempts to make clear, "maintaining long-term loving relationships with partners, family, friends, and in community is essential to a good old age" (Cole and Saxton 611). Moreover, such maintenance proves essential to life in general when considering these elements as integral to achieving the connectedness found in tribal sentiment.

The artistic impulse towards tribal sentiment and meaningful masculine identity realization exists across a span of frontier works, ranging from *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Hidden Hand*, to later texts like *The Call of the Wild* and *Song of Solomon*. And though all of these texts are fairly diverse in terms periodization and the scholarly, postmodern emphasis on concerns with representation and intersectionality, *Pale Horse Coming* persists in the continuation of the same narrative, as does *No Country for Old Men*. These two novels, in particular, offer portraits of masculinities that underscore the necessity of tribal inter-reliance and the intrinsic psychological needs that are met when one is affiliated with a group that provides a deep sense of autonomy, connectedness, and

competence. These novels also present cautionary models of masculinity that depart from tribal affiliation and lead to the chaos that is quickly identifiable in the literature that often, arguably, mirrors life.

If this chapter shows us anything about the artistic reimagining of frontier spaces, it is that masculinities can be evaluated in fictional spaces where characters navigate hierarchies, whether aboard a whaling vessel or while traversing city streets shaped by capitalism and modernity. And, like kings, hierarchies carry the capacity to become tyrannical. This dysfunction plays out time and time again in varying degrees throughout all of the works in this study, though perhaps most pointedly in this chapter. Edna's situation in *The Awakening* speaks to this potential outcome through her refusal to navigate socio-cultural expectation and subsequent suicide. The truth of the matter remains, however, that hierarchies inevitably come together in these works when groups of people unavoidably interact and band together through aligned and/or competing interests. Generally, ever since our species no longer had to hunt its own food for survival, human interests became far more diverse and exponentially more complex, allowing room for cooperation to evolve alongside the motivations to attain goals beyond seeking food and shelter. Interests tend to collide, however, especially in the world of fiction, and as Greene writes, "nearly all cooperative enterprises involve at least some tension between self-interest and collective interest, between Me and Us" (21). The image of the tyrannical king expresses a consistent multi-cultural, psychological impression of what it looks like when Me becomes corrupt, yet this mythos comes with a silver lining: "The tyrant is proud, and therein resides his doom. He is proud because he thinks of his strength as his own; thus he is in the clown role, as a mistaker of shadow for

substance" (Campbell 289). The masculine energy of the hero's aggression, strength, courage, when merged with competence and reciprocity becomes the means of keeping the tyrant king at bay or of slaying the dragon. Functional hierarchies operate when the tyrant is suppressed, which primarily occurs through competence and reciprocity, not sheer power alone. Ahab, Marcus, McTeague, and Chigurh represent the corruption of masculine energies that potentially arise in the de-tribalized spaces of the waning frontier where biological impulse and socio-cultural influence not only fail to assist in the cooperative navigation of frontier chaos but amplify that chaos and bring about disastrous results.

The cautionary characters in this chapter reveal how masculinities become corrupted through socio-cultural influence and explode in biologically driven reactions, what Pinker characterizes as the logic of violence, "and why emotions and thoughts devoted to it may have evolved" (317). Moreover, he writes that understanding the logical of violence "is necessary to disentangle the knot of biological and cultural causes that make violence so puzzling. It can explain why people are prepared for violence but act on those inclinations only in particular circumstances; when violence is, at least in some sense, rational and when it is self-defeating . . ." (317). Examples of rational and self-defeating violence characterize many of the masculine performances represented thus far in this study and become crystallized through the imagery of heroes and villains in the liminal spaces of the frontier. The following chapter will examine the masculinities that must navigate similar milieus and dilemmas, attempting to reconcile heroic optimism with fatalistic determinism in the liminal spaces of the Post-Frontier.

CHAPTER IV – POST-FRONTIER RECKONINGS

"Society, you're a crazy breed – I hope you're not lonely without me."

-Eddie Vedder

Overview

Moving into the iteration of the liminal frontier space I call the Post-Frontier, this chapter explores four primary works connected by shared thematic concerns: Jack London's *The Call of the Wild*, Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, and Matt Ross's film *Captain Fantastic*. Individually, each work presents liminal frontier spaces as potentially salvific alternatives to socio-cultural influences while rendering the frontier as a site of masculine renewal/realization that enables positive psychological individuation. The role of the Post-Frontier settings in this chapter remain similar to the frontier spaces explored in Chapters II and III in that the chaos of the frontier elicits biological and cultural forces that shape the masculine performances of characters. In this way, the trajectory of each narrative reveals artistic attempts to reconcile certain models of masculinity with socio-cultural norms. More specifically, the narratives in this chapter pit both the biological and cultural influences that shape masculinity in conflict with one another, presenting the difficulties, ironies, and paradoxes that arise when the utilitarian aspects of our evolutionary past become expressed in a society that seemingly no longer needs such masculinities. The impulse to escape into the frontier persists in the primary works in this chapter as well, yet each work harnesses the escapist impulse more explicitly and urgently than the works in Chapters II and III. The major distinction between the frontiers in this chapter and the other chapters is that the influences of Leviathan and industry have ostensibly blanketed

America's socio-cultural landscape, so the characters in this chapter leave society and return to the frontier as an antidote to modernity and the negative aspects of potentially detribalizing affluence. As Kimmel writes, "men have been running away – off to the frontier, the mountains, the forests, the high seas, the battlegrounds, outer space – to retrieve what they feel like they've lost: some deep, essential part of themselves, their identity, their manhood" (Kimmel 20). However, the impulse for escape into the liminal space of the frontier in these works does not necessarily indicate a sweeping, compulsory flight from feminization, domesticity, or some lost part of manhood as a singular motivation. As Freud, Marx, and Junger argue, the discontent and ennui experienced by men and women alike speaks to issues in American culture and society that emerge both within and beyond feelings of emasculation/feminization. In fact, Junger's overarching claim that the affluence of modern society comes with a number of trade-offs continues to resonate, perhaps most fully, throughout the dichotomous tensions explored in this chapter. Moreover, humanity's evolutionary past, biological traits, and psychological needs also suggest incompatibilities regarding successful navigation of the existential dilemmas inherent to modern life.

A departure from civilization and a return to a primitive, often chaotic natural world or wild frontier unifies all of the works in this chapter as well. Just as the ancient sea calls to characters in *Moby-Dick* and *The Awakening*, offering release from the pressures of America's socio-cultural concerns, our ancestral past and the wilderness speaks to the characters in this chapter, similarly offering a return to humanity's tribal sentiments and a means of personal fulfillment attained through autonomy, connectedness, and competence.

The Call of the Wild depicts one of the few remaining Wild Frontiers of America's landscape and thrusts the protagonist, Buck, into a space that awakens the instincts of his evolutionary past, reconnecting him to the prosocial inter-reliance and collectivism that enabled the progress of civilization in tandem with the process of canine domestication. *Song of Solomon* imports a southern rural frontier space and the hunt in a wilderness that reconnects a young African American man with his ancestral past and racial heritage, providing him with a meaningful identity realization that resides beyond the dubious shelter of affluence and a debilitating cultural conformity to white hegemonic values that contribute to profound interpersonal rifts between his family and his black community. *Fight Club* unfolds in a modern urban setting shaped by corporate America and similarly attacks the commodification and market branding of masculinities along with the negative influences of consumer culture on American men, while looking towards a collectivist return to a utilitarian mode of living that fosters psychological individuation through the complete rejection and attempted destruction of the status quo. And lastly, *Captain Fantastic* paints the portrait of a husband/father who abandons modern society to raise his children in the wilderness and instill in them the intrinsic values he sees as lost to the influences of consumerism and a litany of other problems he associates with contemporary American lifestyles. All of these works offer transformative liminal frontier spaces that provide potentially salvific alternatives to the pressures of American society, while illustrating the lengths to which some characters will go to (re)define themselves in accordance with values and ideals that challenge normative assumptions about American life in our current day and age. Similar to the narrative trajectories for the characters in Chapters II and III, the characters in this

chapter seemingly have no place left to run, but the introspective journeys that emerge in these works provide potential solutions to reconciling the closing of the frontier and adapting to the pressures of modern American life. Another way to think about the works in this chapter resides in how each artist attempts to reconcile the heroic glow and relative optimism found Chapter II with the seemingly fatalistic determinism that characterizes much of Chapter III.

The frontier as a physical space in this chapter, in contrast to how it exists in Chapters II and III, has been effectively closed. Hobbes's Leviathan, government agencies, consumer capitalism, and sweeping cultural conformity to the values of modern America remain targets of criticism in these works, but the destinations for retreat remain inescapably tied to the reach of American socio-cultural influences. So, the questions that the works in this chapter engage in various ways amount to something like: how can an individual find meaning and purpose in a culture whose values and norms systemically foster interpersonal divisions while lulling individuals into the complacency of monotonous, alienating, and potentially harmful lifestyle routines? Each artist in this chapter approaches this question with pressing concern and with perspectives that grant insight into how masculinities might adapt to successfully navigate the pressures of life in contemporary America because the influences of America's hegemonic socio-cultural forces cannot be kept at bay forever – the works explored in Chapter II and Chapter III foreshadow the coming of this reckoning.

The roles of biological and environmental influences continue to persist in this chapter as well. For London's character Buck, masculine performance emerges as a means of survival and provides him with the necessary traits needed to navigate the

Alaskan wild. But by virtue of being a dog, Buck's masculinity is not as effectively

complicated by the myriad socio-cultural pressures that exist outside the primitive laws of

club and fang. Whereas Buck initially regresses into an ancient and sometimes amoral

way of life that demands survival above all else, the characters in the other works must

still compete with the more complicated and amorphous aspects of human culture not

governed by the savagery and basic survival strategies that primarily shape Buck's world.

The element of chaos remains highly characteristic of the frontier spaces detailed

in this chapter, and entrance into the liminal space of the frontier remains the catalyst for

a journey that leads to either meaningful personal growth and identity realization or

outright failure to rise to the demands of the journey. Interestingly, the chaos and disorder

that characterizes the frontier also speaks to the work of Nassim Taleb, who writes:

"Some things benefit from shocks; they thrive and grow when exposed to volatility,

randomness, disorder, and stressors and love adventure, risk, and uncertainty. Yet, in

spite of the ubiquity of the phenomenon, there is no word for the exact opposite of

fragile. Let us call it antifragile" (3). According to Taleb, antifragility "is beyond

resilience or robustness. The resilient resists shocks and stays the same; the antifragile

gets better. This property is behind everything that has changed with time: evolution,

culture, ideas, revolutions, political systems . . . even our own existence as a species on

this planet" (3-4). This way of thinking more pointedly elaborates on Junger's claim that

humans thrive during times of stress, hardship, and even the chaos of catastrophe. For the

characters in this chapter, the same phenomenon manifests because the affluence and

detribalization of modern society that tends to lead to alienation and isolation reveals how

"antifragility is the property of all those natural (and complex) systems that have

survived, [and] depriving these systems of volatility, randomness, and stressors will harm them. They will weaken, die, or blow up" (Taleb 5). Consequently, the masculine performances explored in this chapter underscore the salvific potential found in navigating the chaos of the frontier while illustrating the human need to both confront and embrace varying degrees of hardship.

In the space of the Post-Frontier, the reopening and/or entrance into the frontier provides characters with the necessary stressors and prosocial inter-reliance that shapes masculine performances that otherwise tend to atrophy in relation to increasing detribalization and modernity. Such dynamics serves as a reminder of where we come from along the lines of our evolutionary past and what people still need in their lives despite the many comforts and conveniences afforded by technological progress, progressive socio-cultural change, and affluence. Moreover, when masculinities are performed pro-socially amidst the chaos and stressors of the frontier, characters tap into the capacity to benefit and grow from conflict as a result, much in the way a muscle group responds to hypertrophy and strength training. Conversely, some of the masculinities represented in this chapter also negatively respond to the "systematic removal of uncertainty and randomness from things, trying to make matters highly predictable in their smallest details. All this for the sake of comfort, convenience, and efficiency" (Taleb 62-63). This amounts to what Taleb classifies as *touristification*: "What a tourist is in relation to an adventurer, or a flâneur, touristification is to life; it consists of converting activities, and not just travel, into the equivalent of a script followed by actors" (63). The consequences of this scripted safety and redundancy underscore the characters' milieus in Chapter III along with this chapter as well,

particularly when the narratives variously demonstrate the ways in which "touristification castrates systems and organisms that like uncertainty by sucking the randomness out of them to the last drop – while providing them with the illusion of benefit" (Taleb 63). Recall McTeague's dull complacency as he drifts through life as a passive observer before conflict arrives, Ishmael's impulse to escape society to intentionally shoulder the hardships of whaling. Similarly, Edna's only meaningful glimpses towards stimulation and growth arise from embodying the "brave soul" through her artistic endeavors, her sexuality, learning to swim, and the call of the sea/frontier. It is only when these characters face the conflicts of frontier chaos that they awaken, begin to feel alive, and move towards meaningful personal growth. Tragically, however, for those characters, their journeys lead to dead ends because the space of the Waning Frontier offers little in the way of salvation, and by the time the characters confront the nature of their respective realities, it is simply too late because they cannot escape the consequences of their actions or their respective socio-cultural limitations.

The frontier also instructively reveals which pitfalls to avoid during the ongoing process of self-realization and within the dynamics of peoples' interactions with one another. Masculine aggression, strength, courage, and toughness, when successfully integrated into the self, can greatly benefit both individuals and groups in the context of chaotic frontier navigation. And if the liminal space of frontier shows us anything, it reveals how people, when pushed hard and challenged by stressors, might grow to become better, stronger, more fully realized versions of themselves that contribute to a collective good. Humans thrive and excel under such conditions, but this comes with an important caveat worth mentioning. As Taleb notes, "Sometimes we see people having

survived trials and imagine, given that the surviving population is sturdier than the

original one, that these trials are good for them. In other words, the trial can just be a

ruthless exam that kills those who fail" (76). Considering Taleb's claim in the context of

the frontier, hormesis and Mithridatization appear likely under the umbrella of the heroic

glow in Hawkeye's, Capitola's, and Earl's narratives, but the more ubiquitous failures of

the characters of Ahab, McTeague, Marcus, and Llewelyn can just as likely speak to the

fact that chronic, inescapable stressors become harmful.[1] As Taleb writes, "Humans tend

to do better with acute rather than with chronic stressors, particularly when the former are

followed by ample time for recovery" (58). However, as seen in the contexts of Chapter

III, stressors chronically plague the characters and the "mild but continuous stress of a

boss, mortgage, tax problems, guilt over procrastinating with one's tax return, exam

pressures, chores, emails to answer, forms to complete, daily commutes – things that

make you feel trapped in life. . . . the pressures brought about by civilization" echo the

narrative arcs and dilemmas of McTeague, Edna, Ishmael, and Llewelyn in varying

degrees (Taleb 58-59). So, it seems that the antidote to detribalization and the debilitating

effects of modern America's socio-cultural concerns resides in the reconfigured spaces of

the Post-Frontier where successful masculine identity realization becomes enabled not

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[1] Hormesis, a principle derived from pharmacology, shows how small doses of harmful

substances, in many cases, become beneficial to organisms. In a larger context, this helps

explain how depriving systems and organisms of stressors can actually be harmful.

Mithridatization, Taleb explains, is the resulting robustness and/or antifragility that

occurs on a timeline of exposure.

only by prosocial inter-reliance but a willingness and drive to confront chaos in a morally cooperative context. The characters who navigate modernized, post-industrial America express the profound human need to engage elements of frontier chaos in a Post-Frontier America.

The Call of the Frontier

Jack London's 1903 novel *The Call of the Wild* acts as a bridge between frontier categorizations, similar to how *Moby-Dick* connects the thematic concerns and landscapes of the Wild Frontier to Waning Frontier spaces. In fact, London's novel embodies aspects of all three frontier spaces in this study, but the frontier in his novel also supplies the pathway to a space that enables salvific tribal restoration.

In addressing the obvious disconnect between a canine protagonist and a human one, Jacqueline Tavernier-Courbin instructively reminds us that London's novel remains "a brilliant human allegory" (238). At the time of the book's publication, London also engaged in a heated correspondence with Theodore Roosevelt, who "called London a 'nature faker' and accused him of shamelessly humanizing dogs in his novels and stories" (Gianquitto xxv). London's response to such a simplistic claim speaks, in part, to an overarching argument that runs throughout the whole of this project when he replies to Roosevelt in his essay, "The Other Animals," writing:

> Let us be very humble. We who are so very human are very animal . . . No . . . though you stand on the top of the ladder of life, you must not kick out that ladder from under your feet. *You must not deny your relatives, the*

> *other animals*. Their history is your history, and if you kick them to the
>
> bottom of the abyss, to the bottom of the abyss you go yourself. By them
>
> you stand or fall. What you repudiate in them you repudiate in yourself.
>
> (London xxv)

Just as this project maintains that both nature and nurture play significant roles in shaping our own humanity and, by extension, masculinities, London recognizes the equally relevant connectedness and kinship between humans and animals. Evolutionary behavioral scientist Gad Saad also comments on our current understanding of how humans still remain influenced by ancient, heritable biological impulses, taking issue with the blank slate theory as Pinker does and the claim that "humans are first and foremost cultural beings" (Saad 26). He writes that "There is no biological reason to think that the evolutionary processes that have generated the billions of species that have existed on earth are somehow nonoperative when it comes to humans. . . . The reality is that although endless cross-cultural differences exist, there are countless documented human universals . . ." (26). And in the related context of London's naturalistic tendency to highlight the brutal and amoral capacities lurking within humans and animals alike, his "beliefs were tempered by a deep love of humanity and a loathing for the cruelty that often characterizes man's treatment of animals and other men" (Tavernier-Courbin 239). Ultimately London's novel makes the case that understanding our own evolutionary past connects us to a human history that reveals much about our motives, desires, needs, and how we might go about realizing the best possible versions of ourselves while striving to attain goals that contribute to the betterment of everyone.

The Call of the Wild opens with London's depiction of Post-Frontier life and a civilized domestic space similar in nature to the settings of *The Awakening* and *McTeague*. Like Edna's and McTeague's lives in the beginning of their respective narratives, for instance, London's canine protagonist, Buck, lives a life characterized by relative comfort, routine, and a lack of physical hardship. In the opening pages, London looks to quickly and firmly establish the idyllic nature of Buck's life in the "sun-kissed" Santa Clara Valley of California when he writes "During the four years since his puppyhood he had lived the life of a sated aristocrat; he had a fine pride in himself, was even a trifle egotistical, as country gentlemen sometimes become because of their insular situation" (6). However, rather than become entirely coddled by the privileges afforded by such a life, Buck actively engages stressors and "saved himself by not becoming a mere pampered house-dog. Hunting and kindred outdoor delights had kept down the fat and hardened his muscles" (6). In this passage, so early in the novel, London works to establish the masculine traits, behaviors, and an implicit antifragility that sets the tone for much of the novel's impetus while foreshadowing Buck's proclivity for adapting to the demands of frontier navigation.

When compared to the other dogs who live alongside Buck in his home on Judge Miller's estate, a taxonomy of masculinities similar to those of Melville's and Hunter's becomes evident though the comparisons London draws:

> There could not be but other dogs on so vast a place, but they did not
> count. They came and went, resided in the populous kennels, or lived
> obscurely in the recesses of the house after the fashion of Toots, the

Japanese pug, or Ysabel, the Mexican hairless, – strange creatures that

rarely put nose out of doors or set foot to ground. (6)

In this passage, London offers juxtapositions that underscore the effects of breeding,

canine domestication, and how dogs' ancestral past and instincts now tend to lie dormant,

if not all but disappear as a result of breeding, civilization, and comfort. Thinking about

Toots and Ysabel in the context of Taleb's work suggests their fragility arises as a matter

of consequence. Along with the forward progress of civilization and the closing of the

geographic frontier, "domestication" and socio-cultural changes influence human

behavior and psychology in a similar manner. Recall David Gamut, Traverse Rocke,

Capitola's cousins, Sam Vincent and Davis Trugood: their lives, attitudes, behaviors, and

moral psychologies evince a culturally progressive and evolutionary movement away

from the ferocity of masculine performances demanded by an immediate need for

survival. Davis Trugood in *Pale Horse Coming* embodies such a transition when he says

to Sam at the beginning of Hunter's novel, "And, frankly, I'm not a brave man. I'm a

man of desks. The actual confrontation, the quickness of argument, the thrusts of will on

will: not really my cup of tea, I'm afraid. A sound man understands his limits. I was the

sort of boy who never got into fights and didn't like tests of strength" (12). For young

boys growing up in the modern world, fighting and tests of strength have largely become

unnecessary and in some cases altogether avoidable. As with dogs and humans, certain

masculine traits certainly become less imperative as civilization, Leviathan, and moral

cultures change in relation to socio-cultural progress. Ultimately, Davis Trugood secretly

masterminds the violent assault on Thebes and kills his brother Cleon, but he makes it

clear from the beginning that for his plans to come together, he needs someone like Sam

to set his designs into motion: "That is why I am buying your courage as well as your mind" (12). The same masculine traits that Davis values in Sam and even more so in Earl become apparent in Buck as well and carry the same degree of value when it comes to successful frontier navigation. In short, navigation of the frontier, as I have continuously maintained, requires a harnessing of the masculine traits that characterize self-reliance and rugged individualism, and characters like Hawkeye, Queequeg, Earl, Sam, and Buck serve as testaments to this recurrent fact through others' immediate desires to acquire their assistance while inter-reliantly coming to depend upon their abilities when hardship, chaos, and violence arise.

Not consciously choosing to leave his sheltered, idyllic life on the judge's estate behind, Buck enters the frontier nonetheless. Like the tragic circumstances that befall Capitola and carry her to the dangerous slums of Rag Alley, Buck's entrance into the chaos of the frontier arrives by way of external forces, not personal choice or agency. Following his abduction and sale by Judge Miller's gardener's assistant, Buck must navigate an Alaskan wilderness as hard, savage, and marked by constant violence as any space in the traditional Wild Frontier, an enormous departure from the comfort and ease of his leisurely days on Miller's estate. Moreover, as it happens in Ishmael's and McTeague's journeys, Buck's frontier journey emerges as a consequence of socio-cultural and economic impulses. His abduction takes place to settle a gardener's assistant's gambling debts, and Buck's eventual role as a sled dog traversing the frontier arises from the demands of mining operations during the gold rush in the Klondike region of Alaska. London frames Buck's abduction and desirability – like Queequeg's and Earl's desirability – as a direct consequence of the demands of American industry,

commerce, and socio-cultural forces: "Thus as a token of what a puppet thing life is . . .
he came because men had found a yellow metal in the North, and because Manuel was a
gardener's helper whose wages did not lap over the needs of his wife and divers small
copies of himself" (23). In the context of these details, Buck's capture and sale directly
connect to the socio-economic needs and impulses of others whose motivations
underscore the far-reaching influences of industry.[2]

Mapping the formative pressures that characterize Buck's frontier conflicts, like
the inmates of Thebes and Capitola in Rag Alley, Buck must adapt or die, kill or be
killed. The naturalistic forces of environmental influence surface quickly for Buck when
London writes of his new life in the wild:

> He had been suddenly jerked from the heart of civilization and flung into
> the heart of things primordial. No lazy, sun-kissed life was this, with
> nothing to do but loaf and be bored. Here was neither peace, nor rest, nor a
> moment's safety. All was confusion and action, and every moment life
> and limb were in peril. There was imperative need to be constantly alert;

---

[2] Jacqueline Tavernier-Courbin examines how Jack London's socialist activism becomes
manifested in his fiction and essays, while also exploring how London believed his
writing would wield more influence than direct political action. Jonah Raskin looks at the
life of Jack London and how his experiences in America and abroad greatly influenced
his political leanings, not in any generic sense of group identity, but more pointedly
focused on individuals.

for these dogs and men were not town dogs and men. They were savages,

all of them, who knew no law but the law of club and fang. (15)

The elemental chaos of the frontier becomes clear in the novel, and London illustrates Buck's adaptability and proclivity for antifragility through his adoption and hardening of masculine qualities as his time in the wild drags on. Forced to fend for himself in order to survive, Buck begins to undergo a transformation:

This first theft marked Buck as fit to survive in the hostile Northland

environment. It marked his adaptability, his capacity to adjust himself to

changing conditions, the lack of which would have meant swift and

terrible death. It marked, further, the decay or going to pieces of his moral

nature, a vain thing and a handicap in the ruthless struggle for existence. It

was all well enough in the Southland, under the law of love and

fellowship, to respect private property and personal feelings; but in the

Northland, under the law of club and fang, whoso took such things into

account was a fool, and in so far as he observed them he would fail to

prosper. (21-22)

Ascending the ladder of masculinity as David Gamut and Capitola do, though their socio-cultural circumstances allow them to retain their respective moralities, out of necessity, Buck begins to reshape his masculine identity by adapting to the demands of his new surroundings. Failure to adapt to the chaos of the frontier, of course, can only lead to death.

Biological traits play a major role in shaping the outcomes of London's novel as well. Given the brutal nature of the Alaskan frontier, dogs like the previously mentioned

Ysabel and Toots, would likely die quickly in such a hostile environment. The biological impulses inherent to certain masculine traits can thrive in the chaos of the frontier, conferring advantages by degrees. For instance, Hunter writes of Earl Swagger's lineage and natural gifts and how those talents become fine-tuned assets in the midst of frontier chaos: "But more, it turned out they were a family of heroes. Their boys learned to shoot; they learned the hunter's patience, his stoicism, his courage, his mercy, his honor. They had a gift for the firearm, and more than a few of them took that gift off to war" (*G-Man* 1). In *Pale Horse Coming*, Hunter also writes of Earl's son Bob Lee and his apparent proclivities that will be cultivated with training and experience: "Bob Lee was a grave boy who had the gift of stillness when he so desired. . . . [he] had a talent for blood sport, the ability to understand the messages of the land, to decipher the play of light and shadow in the woods, to smell the weather on the wind, though he was some years yet from shooting" (14). *The Call of the Wild* offers a similar passage concerning the symbiosis of nature and nurture regarding Buck's predispositions and ancestry, acknowledging the dual-influences of genetic inheritance and environment. Buck's father, "a huge St. Bernard," and his mother, "a Scotch shepherd dog," contribute to his size of "one hundred and forty pounds, to which was added the dignity that comes with good living and universal respect, [and] enabled him to carry himself in right royal fashion" (6). As in the case of naturalist writers like Norris and London, who both read Darwin and Spencer, London "believed in evolution and determinism, the influence of heredity and of the milieu, as evinced by much of his work and the abundant notes he left behind" (Tavernier-Courbin 239). Meanwhile, however, current scientific understandings offer much in the way of editing, revising, and clarifying the evolutionary impulses that

inform the works of American naturalist writers, enhancing and adding to the dynamics of how we analyze humanity and masculinities as depicted in artistic endeavors. For instance, while London's familiarity with evolutionary theory confines him to the scientific knowledge of his time, a proto-typical understanding of the forces of nature and nurture emerges in his fiction that aligns with current modes of thought and allows room for newer, more up to date interpretations of his works.

Interestingly, we now possess the benefits of scientific knowledge that eluded the thinkers and writers of London's time, as evolutionary theory and cognitive science remained in their developmental infancy. Resisting the absolute determinism that arguably paints characters like McTeague and Buck into a corner, current modes of thought complicate previous understandings, insisting "Biological determinism is an utter canard that has been propagated by people who otherwise have no understanding of evolutionary theory. For most human phenomena, genes interact with environmental contingencies, idiosyncratic talents and abilities, and unique life experiences in generating a given behavior, preference, or choice" (Saad 24). Pinker reaches a similar conclusion, writing that "The less-than-perfect predictability of behavior certainly gives the lie to the cliché that the sciences of human nature are 'deterministic' in the mathematical sense" (177). Moreover, "Contrary to what is implied by critics of biological *and* environmental theories of the causes of behavior, to explain behavior is not to exonerate the behaver" (Pinker 179). And so, while characters like McTeague and Buck appear beholden to inescapable fates, seemingly lacking in terms of agency or possibility, now "Evolutionary scientists espouse 'interactionism,' namely the notion that our genes *interact* with our environments in shaping our individuality" (Saad 24). This

understanding contributes to interpretations of masculinities in the spaces of the frontier
in that

> not only are we all products of both nature and nurture but also nurture
>
> exists in its particular forms because of nature. In other words, our
>
> biological heritage constrains the range of possible socialization forces
>
> that can shape us. This is why no culture has ever been found in which
>
> men are taught to be virginal, chaste, and judicious about their sexual
>
> choices while women are taught to be indiscriminate in their sexuality.
>
> Our common biological heritage dictates universal patterns of nurture . . .
>
> (Saad 24-25).

Frederick Jackson Turner intuitively understood this dynamic as well, as noted in Chapter
I when he mentions how the pioneer shapes and becomes shaped by the environment.
Accordingly, the chaos, danger, and violence that characterize the liminal spaces of the
frontier draw out and encourage trait adaptability when it comes to the innate and
environmental influences of masculine performance. Unlike Toots or Ysabel in *The Call
of the Wild*, both of whom would undoubtedly die in the Alaskan wild, Buck, by contrast,
carries the proclivities necessary for environmental adaptation, and it seems as though
London, like Turner, anticipates the fact that current evolutionary theory accounts for the
environment in relation to gene expression. Gad Saad's explanation of epigenetic
mechanisms helps account for Buck's successful navigation of the frontier when he
writes: "Genes interact with the environment in part via our epigenome in yielding
unique individuals who are products of both nature and nurture" (25). More importantly,
it appears that London somehow understood this reality, given that Buck's journey and

adaptability coincides with Saad's observation when he writes that "evolutionary processes (e.g., natural selection) take place within a given environmental niche. Evolution is a mechanism that is defined by the fact that it operates within a given environment in shaping unique adaptations. Thus, evolution explicitly recognizes the importance of environmental realities" (25). The environmental realities confronted by Buck include the law of club and fang along with the myriad hostilities that also accompany frontier navigation, all of which contribute to genetic interactionism in the forms of Buck's ancestral awakening, adaptability, and overall change throughout the process of London's narrative.

Failure to Adapt

Buck's journey into the wild places him into the ownership of four different sets of masters, and through their characterizations, contrasts emerge that further underscore the necessity adaptive qualities of prosocial masculine performance in relation to adapting to the frontier.[3] London's cautionary characters Hal, Charles, and Mercedes have no experience to speak of with regard to the harsh, northern climate and continually fall short when confronted with each new challenge presented by the frontier. Mercedes'

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[3] Jacqueline Tavernier-Courbin notes that instead of London dramatizing the socio-cultural dilemmas of his time in *The Call of the Wild*, he explores Klondike types via the sets of masters that sequentially own Buck, thus revealing traits and characteristics to be considered in the context of navigating the wild.

fragility and lack of masculine traits stand out in particular as Hal and Charles prepare for their journey into the wild: "Mercedes cried when her clothes-bags were dumped on the ground and article after article was thrown out. She cried in general, and she cried in particular over each discarded thing. She clasped hands about knees, rocking back and forth broken-heartedly" (London 51). Aside from her attachment to things that have no function or purpose in the frontier, incompetence plays the most disastrous role for the group, echoing David Gamut's initial shortcomings before he adapts to the demands of frontier navigation. London writes of the group:

> Not only did they not know how to work the dogs, but they did not know how to work themselves . . . Arctic travel became to them a reality too harsh for their manhood and womanhood . . . the fire remained unbuilt, the camp half pitched, and the dogs unfed . . . And through it all Buck staggered along at the head of the team as in a nightmare. (54-56)

London's juxtaposition of character traits become revealing, as Buck's masculine qualities are magnified and tested when he shares scenes with the softer, affluent, and more inexperienced masters whose unwillingness and failure to adapt compromises the welfare of the group. London continues to underscore the contrasts, writing: "Buck felt vaguely that there was no depending upon these two men and the woman. They did not know how to do anything, and as the days went by it became apparent that they could not learn. They were slack in all things, without order or discipline" (53). Much in the way Southworth characterizes the apparent helplessness of Marah and Clare in contrast to Capitola's masculine adaptability and agency in *The Hidden Hand*, "Mercedes nursed a

special grievance – the grievance of sex. She was pretty and soft, and had been

chivalrously treated all her days . . . It was her custom to be helpless" (London 55).

John Bruni offers further insight into London's portrayal of Mercedes and the

dual influence of nature and nurture, writing that though her flaws exist in connection to

the grievance of sex, as London puts it, "they are not completely located in her biology"

(33). Bruni continues, observing that

> In the confines of domesticity, Mercedes has accepted her ingrained
>
> helplessness as part of her female identity. . . . Thus London attempts to
>
> offer an explanation for her most outrageous act, that which epitomizes the
>
> callousness and wastefulness of the culture of consumption, her insistence
>
> on riding on the sled when she is tired, making the load the dogs must pull
>
> almost unbearable. (33-34).

And so, while Mercedes might be read as a casualty of stereotypical femininity, London

makes it a point to insist on the influences of culture and environment in shaping

individuals as well. Her brother Hal and her husband Charles come under the narrator's

same degree of scrutiny:

> Charles was a middle-aged, lightish-colored man, with weak and watery
>
> eyes and a mustache that twisted fiercely and vigorously up, giving the lie
>
> to the limply drooping lip it concealed. Hal was a youngster of nineteen or
>
> twenty, with a big Colt's revolver and a hunting knife strapped about him
>
> on a belt that fairly bristled with cartridges. This belt was the most salient
>
> thing about him. It advertised his callowness – a callowness sheer and
>
> unutterable. Both men were manifestly out of place, and why such as they

should adventure the North is part of the mystery of things that passes

understanding. (London 48)

The fact that these two men perform superficial masculinities, hiding behind their guns,

knives, and facial hair reveals much. Through nothing more than the possession of

accoutrements, Hal and Charles attempt to embody the masculine strength and

ruggedness that they clearly lack. Instead, they rely upon cosmetic signifiers to display

what they perceive as markers of masculinity.

The superficial veneer of an attempt to embody masculinity through things

inevitably confronts a harsh and unforgiving reality. Eventually, prolonged exposure to

the incompetence of the trio jeopardizes Buck's and the other sled dogs' lives, which

leads to the chronic suffering of the group as a result. As Bruni also writes, "The tragic

outcome of these three drives home London's point that a process of over-civilization,

which leads to a culture of consumption, depletes the reserves of masculine vitality

needed to meet the demands of the natural environment" (34). Life in the harsh and

unforgiving wilderness clearly requires strength, discipline, and leadership, qualities

these characters clearly lack. Because Buck's new masters romanticize and underestimate

the frontier, failing to learn and adapt to their circumstances, they become cautionary

casualties of the frontier. Against the better judgement of Buck and a couple of wary

onlookers, they attempt to cross a body of water where a thawing patch of ice collapses

under their weight and pulls them all underwater to their deaths.

The other masters throughout Buck's frontier navigation also serve to delineate

and comparatively evaluate the masculinities in London's novel. The most compelling

relationship between man and dog in the space of the frontier of *The Call of the Wild*

emerges between Buck and the character John Thornton and the masculine performances that cooperatively influence the two. And even though Buck's journey into the wild remains tied to the influence of America's Leviathan, "Despite the real function of dog as work animal, however, there exists between man and dog in London's Klondike a deep and passionate love – nowhere is this more apparent than it is in the profound relationship between Buck and John Thornton . . ." (Gianquitto xxiv). In fact, Buck and John become the embodiment of prosocial tribal connectedness through their intense love for one another. However, for London, "such all-powerful love displaces the fundamental command of nature to preserve the self and the species. Such a love demands a loss of borders between the self and the other, a loss that can potentially enact the destruction of the self" (Gianquitto xxiv). Such self-destruction or putting oneself at hazard for the sake of love also exists in Cooper's novel when Uncas attempts to save Cora, sacrificing his own life to save hers. The same applies to Earl with his years of service in the war and his mission to liberate Thebes. Capitola similarly risks life and limb in prosocial ways that underscore the moral psychology of tribal sentiment, and in these examples, along with that of Buck and John, meaningful connection and interpersonal relationships offer artistic representations of how masculine performances become deployed for the benefit of others and the successful navigation of frontier chaos.

Tribal Connectedness

The relationship between Buck and his final master, John Thornton, provides the most aspirational masculine performances of the story. Because much of what unifies the

thematic elements of the text revolves around the gold rush and the use of dogs as a labor force, this suggests that neither Buck nor John completely leave the influences of civilization as the reach of Leviathan remains pervasive in their lives together. Mark Seltzer writes of the novel that "The twin principles of gold and the machine are the economic principles that put bodies in motion across the landscape of the great white male North" (167). However, once Buck falls under the ownership of John Thornton, ideal masculine performances become realized nonetheless, thus challenging the economies of individualistic survival and competitive brutality.

John Thornton shares the masculine qualities embodied by Hawkeye and other Wild Frontier heroes in that "he asked little of man or nature. He was unafraid of the wild. With a handful of salt and a rifle he could plunge into the wilderness and fare wherever he pleased and as long as he pleased" (74). Furthermore, when John saves Buck's life from the incompetence of Hal, Charles, and Mercedes, London's canine protagonist begins to experience a profound change: "Love, genuine passionate love, was his for the first time" (62). While living on Judge Miller's estate, Buck relationships with humans are described as a "pompous guardianship" in the case of children and "dignified friendship" in the case of the judge (62). But "love that was feverish and burning, that was adoration, that was madness, it had taken John Thornton to arouse" (62). Moreover, John saves Buck's life, and Buck saves his on multiple occasions in return, thus reinforcing the evolutionary value of reciprocal altruism, prosocial inter-reliance, and a meaningful connectedness enacted through masculine performances of strength and courage. John's rugged individualism and self-reliance also speak to the worldview presented within London's novel in that these qualities, along with "the theory of

atavism, which supported a return to past hereditary traits, addresses popular anxieties about the loss of the frontier and the resulting depletion of American masculine vitality" (Bruni 25). Bruni raises the issue, however, that the "eruption of violence at the end of the novel collapses London's utopian vision of the frontier as a place that promotes and supports a deep-seated ethic of cooperation between men and dogs" (26). Such a claim warrants consideration because *The Call of the Wild,* arguably, represses the historical violence inherent to frontier mythology, "that is, the belief that the frontier was discovered rather than colonized" (Bruni 26).

The events of the end of the novel erupt in violence, indeed. A Native American tribe of Yeehats discover Thornton's camp and slaughter him, his sled dogs, and his companion Hans. Scholarly interpretations of the novel presented by Amy Kaplan and Christopher Gair present arguments that London's narrative carries "nationalistic fantasies and imperialistic desires" insomuch that white men of European descent venture into the wilderness of the north to exploit the land and resources of indigenous populations, often while killing those inhabitants in the process (Bruni 26). These claims also underscore the tensions that arise between tribal life and Western civilization explored throughout this project. While John Thornton, on the surface, exists as an admirably prosocial masculine frontier hero, it is difficult to ignore his motivations for venturing into the Alaskan wilderness, namely the search for gold and wealth. And although John's impulses appear relatively benign since he and his companions somewhat eschew the overtly damaging enterprises of colonization and industrialized mining, the impulse that compels him should not elide interrogation. Ultimately, John can represent the colonizer who intrudes on native soil and meets violent conflict as a result.

And though Buck and John provide instructive lessons for navigating the frontier through tribal connectedness, the same connectedness and masculine performances of another tribe ironically bring about John's death. As noted by Junger, romanticizing tribal sentiment in its entirety should be guarded against, and as Bruni frames this idea in the context of London's narrative, "guided by an ideology of capitalist acquisition, a national investment in the belief of progress could be maintained by refashioning acts of rugged male individualism into the dreams of a civilized and disciplined imperialism, dreams built on desires for new frontiers to seek out and conquer" (45). Similarly, as I hope to have illustrated throughout the course of this study, tribalism carries the potential to create Us versus Them conflicts in a number of ways. On the one hand, tribal sentiment often provides the pathways to positive psychological individuation and meaningful masculine identity realization; however, as *The Call of the Wild* suggests, the positive aspects of tribalism also remain subject to the attitudes and beliefs of socio-cultural norms such as capitalism's industrialized relationship to conquest, demonstrating both the utilitarian and cautionary possibilities of merging masculine performances with various tribal impulses. John and Buck embody the beauty and harmony of rugged individualism and self-reliance enacted for the benefit of others, but so do the Yeehats whose land has been encroached upon by interlopers seeking fortune at the expense of their own land and well-being. As it occurs in several instances throughout the works in this study, tribal sentiment often, if not always, exists well within the reach of Leviathan's influences, both directly and indirectly, for better and for worse.

(Re)Discovering an Ancestral Past

Departing the Alaskan wilderness and moving into a more contemporary Post-Frontier liminal space, Toni Morrison's 1977 novel *Song of Solomon* addresses many of the thematic concerns associated with her entire body of work, several of which unexpectedly align with the contexts of this chapter and larger project as a whole. The majority of her novels explore the plight of African American women and their navigation of two distinctly different Americas divided along the lines of racial inequalities while confronting issues of social, cultural, and familial conflicts. Two particularly interesting features of *Song of Solomon*, however, concern Morrison's narrative emphasis on a male protagonist and how she imports a liminal frontier space as a means of his achieving positive psychological individuation. In the narrative arc of the novel, the protagonist, Milkman Dead, initially sets out on an errand to reclaim his father's gold, but instead discovers something of much greater intrinsic value: a meaningful masculine identity.

Sheltered by a life of relative affluence, Milkman's existential dilemmas emerge as a consequence of becoming detached from his ancestral heritage and meaningful familial connections. The effects of this disconnect alienate and isolate the young man, separating him from his own community in the process, tragic in its own right; however, his conformity to the predominantly white hegemonic values insistently projected by his father, the aptly named Macon Dead, only further exacerbates the bleakness of Milkman's existence as a lost man with no sense of place, purpose, or connectedness. As with so many works in this study, the contemporary socio-cultural American landscape acts as a source of interpersonal and individual conflict, but in the case of her novel,

Morrison situates the influences of such an environment within the socio-cultural context of the black community Milkman and his family occupy. Similar to Morrison's 1977 debut novel, *The Bluest Eye*, and her Nobel Prize winning *Beloved, Song of Solomon* also explores the pain and suffering that characterizes many African American experiences. Another feature of what makes her novels so compelling resides in how Morrison simultaneously holds the mirror up to the black community, forcing the novel's critical concerns to look both outward and inward, holding characters accountable for their own actions and behaviors in spite of the myriad hardships they must navigate by virtue of being black in America.

In *Song of Solomon*, the Dead family represents the embodiment of the colonized mind imparted by cultural conformity to white hegemonic values and ideals, and through his journey or narrative of descent into the American south, Milkman comes to redefine his masculine identity as something of value and meaning by way of escape, self-realization, tribal initiation and restoration, all in the liminal space of a Post-Frontier America. And although Milkman seemingly cannot help but assimilate to his father's perpetual reinforcement of extrinsic values, his journey into the frontier provides him with an awakening that reclaims a meaningful black masculinity that looks to reconcile the violently militant ideology endorsed by his best friend, Guitar Baines, and the systemic influences of consumer capitalism, racism, shame, and social inequality.

The early chapters of the novel introduce the appropriately named Dead family, where residing at the head of the household sits Macon Dead, a financially well-off African American businessman. In spite of his success, however, Morrison characterizes Macon as a dogmatic and tyrannical father/king, entirely beholden to the consciousness

and values of a white middle-class hegemony. Like a living advertisement for the American dream, Macon projects his adopted ethos onto his entire family, particularly his children, Milkman, First Corinthians, and Magdalene. In his drive for a financial success achieved through conformist cultural assimilation, however, Macon abandons his own heritage and identity by substituting intrinsic family values and connectedness in exchange for idealizations of wealth, power, status, and material gain. Atop his soapbox, Macon lectures his son in what amounts to a process of indoctrination: "Let me tell you right now the one important thing you'll ever need to know: Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too. Starting Monday, I'm going to teach you how" (55). This passage highlights the values Macon carries, and he also clearly defines both himself and the people around him in relation to extrinsically motivated pursuits and power. The consequent detribalization and connectedness that accompanies such sentiments and behaviors create much of the novel's conflict, and as Morrison articulates on the subject of superficial materialism, she concludes: "I think what we really want it to be *held* . . . But we don't know that so we surround ourselves with material things – and they become substitutes for a lack of feeling, of caring" (Denard). Morrison addresses the existential plights within *Song of Solomon* in a revealing manner that speaks to the thematic concerns that emerge in the Waning Frontier. Again, the individualistic, detribalizing motives that gain increasing traction throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in America contribute to the discontent that Marx, Freud, and Junger acknowledge as extremely pervasive and highly problematic in American culture.

Song of Solomon also interestingly illustrates the negative consequences of a black individual striving to achieve and maintain white hegemonic ideals at the expense of personal happiness and well-being. Exploring the elements of race, trauma, and shame in Morrison's body of work, J. Brooks Bouson writes specifically of *Song of Solomon* that:

> Just as the narrative rejects the false pride of Dr. Foster [Macon's father-in-law], so it rejects the arrogance of Macon Dead. A representative of the upwardly mobile, self-made black capitalist class, Macon, in his 'drive for wealth' (28), assumes a white-identified role as he actively exploits poor blacks in the Southside area of a town where he is a slum landlord. . . . Macon, who is a 'colored man of property' by the age of twenty-five, espouses the ethic of materialism . . . In his opportunistic materialism and class elitism, he identifies with the hated white aggressor as he 'behaves like a white man, thinks like a white man' (223). Even as the narrator describes Macon's success as a capitalist, it works to undercut his prideful arrogance. (81)

Putting his ideals on display and revealing his hubris in the process, Macon takes his family out for Sunday drives in his luxury car and parades his success in front of his own, comparatively far less affluent black community: "These rides that the family took on Sunday afternoons had become rituals and much too important for Macon to enjoy. For him it was a way to satisfy himself that he was indeed a successful man. . . . Others watched the family gliding by with a tiny bit of jealousy and a whole lot of amusement, for Macon's wide green Packard belied what they thought the car was for" (31-32).

Further crystallizing claims surrounding the problematic conflation of meaningful

identity realization with materialism and the other extrinsic values that contribute to

Macon's identity, Bouson writes:

> *Song of Solomon* is addressed, in part, to middle-class African Americans,
>
> especially males, who have a kind of amnesia about their cultural history –
>
> about the shame and trauma of family histories rooted in slavery – and
>
> who, in donning the mask of bourgeois (white-identified) 'pride,' come to
>
> see poor blacks as stigmatized objects of contempt. Like *The Bluest Eye*
>
> and *Sula*, *Song of Solomon* deals with the troubling issue of internalized
>
> racism as it crystallizes black cultural anxiety about the class and color
>
> hierarchies within the African American community. (75-76)

Like so many of the characters throughout this project, Macon's identity primarily exists

in relation to hegemonic socio-cultural standards, including race and class. What

distinguishes Macon from the many other characters' similar milieus in this study,

however, is his and his family's blackness, which, according to Bouson, can problematize

meaningful identity realization altogether. Instead of looking for meaning, purpose, and

connectedness within his own black community or tribe, Macon alienates and isolates

himself through the divisiveness of competition, contempt, and internalized racism that

fosters his superiority complex. Furthermore, Macon's relentless pursuit of self-made

success, while reasonably benign in some contexts, instead causes him to lose sight of the

people around him and the intrinsic values that enable personal fulfillment and meaning.

And as evinced through the character arcs in Chapter III, the consequences of Macon's

values similarly contribute to loneliness and isolation while betraying the rewards of competence, autonomy, and connectedness.

Macon is so ashamed of his sister Pilate, in fact, that he treats her with the same contempt that he projects onto other individuals within his social sphere. During one particularly self-involved exchange, he rebukes Pilate's lifestyle and non-conformity simply because he sees it as potentially detrimental to his own life: "Why can't you dress like a woman? . . . What are you trying to make me look like in this town?" (20) Macon's emphasis on appearances and superficial notions of propriety not only contribute to his personal sense of shame but marginalize his own sister. Morrison writes: "He trembled with the thought of the white men in the bank – the men who helped him buy and mortgage houses – discovering that this raggedy bootlegger was his sister" (20). Because Macon lives entirely beholden to the appearances and definitions of success disseminated by white gatekeepers, his primary concerns focus on impressing others and improving his social standing in an American governed by white ideals and values. Tragically, upholding those values comes at the expense of sacrificing the bonds of family, friendship, and prosocial tribal connection.

Even the advantages conferred by white privilege remain subject to the influences of an industrialized capitalist environment, but navigating such a landscape includes an additional and entirely different set of problems when seen through the eyes of the African American characters in *Song of Solomon*. By way of a damning catch-22, Macon, by the sheer accident of birth, has little choice but to conform to the prevailing hegemonic norms in pursuing his aspirations for upward mobility and success. To gain access to and succeed in the marketplace, he must essentially become a commodity that

he can sell via his own self-image to gate-keeping whites, but because of his blackness,

Macon already has the odds stacked against him. Achieving upward-mobility for the

black men in the novel – and America as a whole – poses challenges with regard to

accessibility and of course the obstacles presented by racism and classism. Morrison

illustrates as much through the characters Guitar, Porter, and the numerous economically

and socio-culturally disadvantaged black men that Milkman knows and meets on his

journey into the American south. Analyzing this social stratification and inequality in the

context of the novel's socio-cultural and historical milieus, Jordanna Matlon writes:

> Black men desired, but all too often found themselves painfully incapable
>
> of living up to the American dream of a tidy, well-tended house and home
>
> supported by a husband and father's income. In contrast to mainstream
>
> white society, the labor market for black men tended to be unsteady and
>
> paid little . . . black men are in fact in dialogue with white society's ideals.
>
> However, they constantly find their own resources are inadequate to
>
> achieve these ideals and they search for alternatives in their stead. These
>
> are not parallel value systems; they are attempts to cover up a deeply-felt
>
> sense of shame. (36).

This sense of shame provides a major source of conflict in Morrison's novel, and within

the context of the black community on which it focuses. The characters could never fully

live up to the aspirational standards or ideals whose very foundations often rest upon the

arbitrary "merits" of skin color, so characters like Dr. Foster and Macon find themselves

conforming to the superficial ideals that remain plausibly within the realm of attainment,

such as material consumption and the accumulation of wealth. As the novel illustrates,

creating an identity in accordance with such ideals becomes exceedingly problematic because the ideals derive from white, hegemonic socio-cultural arrangements and so a black man, consequently, becomes injured in multiple ways. One of the most damaging effects such social stratification brings to bear elicits a profound sense of shame and self-loathing, both of which characterize Macon Dead, as evinced through the manner in which he projects his feelings onto his own family and community.

Macon's alienation and isolation from his family and community arise because he sees himself as embodying his espoused definitions of success whereas so many others around him have failed. As a result of his perspective, Macon refuses to associate with his community unless it concerns collecting the rent or taking an opportunity to denigrate someone for their apparent lack of success in relation to his prescriptive set of standards. Consequently, he projects internalized shame onto his children as well, forbidding them from associating with their socially inferior aunt Pilate, thus simultaneously perpetuating a cycle of perceived supremacy:

> Because his black middle-class privilege depends on a lifetime connection to White mainstream society, Macon secures favorable treatment from law enforcement officers, when his son is apprehended by the police after attempting to steal Pilate's alleged gold. Knowing the system and its corrupt nature, Macon bribes the police to get his son released. . . . Macon also exemplifies the practices of bourgeois parents, who exhibit their children in a show of superiority to poor Black families. (Lobodziec 47)

Through his attitudes and behaviors, Macon's complicity becomes an agent of his own amorphous antagonist. Consequently, he takes his shame, frustration, and anxieties out on

his wife Ruth, his sister Pilate, his children, and the members of his community. Because Macon cannot fully embody the ideals of a white hegemony due to his own racial standing, it necessarily follows that he cannot fully achieve the standards of masculinity that accompany those prescriptive ideals. Macon's masculinity, therefore, becomes emasculated by his own dogmatically held beliefs and convictions. Arriving at another impasse, Macon's perceived emasculation becomes increasingly exacerbated by the ostensibly incestuous relationship his wife has with her own father, Dr. Foster. Nonetheless, Macon conforms to white ideals by marrying Foster's light-skinned daughter, thereby acquiring a wife as a means of attaining status; however, given the dubious nature of such circumstances, Macon comes to completely resent Ruth. I turn again to Bouson, who writes that "While Macon marries Ruth to bolster his own class standing, he soon comes to view her as a source of shame and an object of disgust. . . . Macon's feelings for Ruth lead him to shun her sexually" (82). In denying his own sexual impulses, Macon becomes emasculated and metaphorically castrated in a biological context as well, as his shame and resentment render him impotent and unable to desire the wife who emerges as the singular object of contempt. He altogether refuses intimacy with his wife until Pilate gives Ruth an aphrodisiac to administer to her sexually disinterested husband. Interestingly, though unfortunately, the values that Macon espouses even work to undermine him on a biological level.

Another aspect of Macon's and the Dead family's debilitating milieu emerges from how the community treats them as a response to their condescending attitudes and behaviors. Tragically, the family lives in alienation and isolation, effectively shunned by their own community, left to keep company with not much beyond their own resentments

towards one another and their affluence. In the eyes of the community, the Dead family

amounts to what generally gets branded with the racial epithet of "Uncle Tom" because

of the whiteness they come to represent and conspicuously attempt to embody. Again,

such negative perceptions actively strip Macon and Milkman of stable or authentic

masculine identities, reducing them to an emasculated state that separates both men from

the very community that might otherwise provide a source of comfort, pride, and

selfhood – or autonomy, competence, and connectedness. Like that of McTeague,

Marcus, Trina, and Ahab, Macon's cultural conformity and projected ideals create

suffering for both himself and the people around him. And as it concerns Macon's son

throughout the first half of the novel, Milkman consistently longs to escape from his

family and community, both of which act as sources of shame, emasculation, and the

humiliation generated by reactionary responses to his indifference and airs of superiority.

Macon's driving ethos not only creates polarization between his family and the

community, but within the confines of Macon's own home, the alienation and isolation

become even more apparent.

Behind the closed doors of the Dead household, Macon's pretensions affect his

family to the point of inflicting psychological trauma. Morrison illustrates the

interpersonal dynamics of the oppressive, hostile domestic space created by Macon when

she writes of him:

> Solid, rumbling, likely to erupt without prior notice, Macon kept each
>
> member of his family awkward with fear. His hatred of his wife glittered
>
> and sparkled in every word he spoke to her. The disappointment he felt in
>
> his daughters sifted down on them like ash, dulling their buttery

complexions and choking the lilt out of what should have been girlish
voices. (10)

In the midst of this tyrannical environment, Milkman tries to shape his own identity and come of age while living in the shadow of his menacing, unrelenting father. As with Edna Pontellier, confusion and a crisis of identity emerge as a consequence of failed attempts to live up to prescriptive standards. Yet, in spite of his passive-aggressive, half-hearted attempts to subvert his father, Milkman fails to avoid becoming a product of his environment and shares similarities with his father. Morrison writes: "Milkman feared his father, respected him, but knew, because of the leg [he has a limp], that he could never emulate him. So he differed from him as much as he dared" (63). Milkman's sister, Magdalene, remains keenly aware of the more significant and consequential similarities between her brother and her father: "You are exactly like him. Exactly. . . . You think because you hit him once that we all believe you were protecting her [Ruth]. Taking her side. It's a lie. You were taking over, letting us know you had the right to tell her and all of us what to do. . . . You are a sad, pitiful, stupid, selfish, hateful man. (215-216) Magdalene's completely warranted and provoked attack on Milkman's lifestyle choices and self-defeating masculine performance suggests that the only thing that makes him a man is a symbolic usurpation of his father's authority. Magdalene unloads her embittered feelings on her brother, seeing him for what he has become under the influence of their father. Magdalene fully knows the extent to which her father's will has impacted her and her family as she recounts the humiliation one of the particular Sunday drive during her childhood:

There were other children there. Barefoot, naked to the waist, dirty. But we stood apart, near the car, in white stockings, ribbons, and gloves. And when he talked to the men, he kept glancing at us, us and the car. The car and us. You see, he took us there so they could see us, envy us, envy him. Then one of the little boys came over to us and put his hand on Corinthians' hair. She offered him her piece of ice and before we knew it, *he* was running towards us. He knocked the ice out of her hand into the dirt and shoved us both into the car. First he displayed us, then he splayed us. All our lives were like that: he would parade us like virgins through Babylon, then humiliate us like whores in Babylon. (216)

As noted, Milkman deeply wants to walk a different path than that of his father, attempting to forge his own identity because he knows he cannot possibly live up to the entirety of Macon's relentless demands, even if they regard superficial differences such as facial hair or his limp. But the fact remains that Milkman's perspective is so out of touch with reality because of his father's conditioning that he runs the risk of becoming the very likeness of the man he fears and resents. His best friend, Guitar, knows this every bit as well as Magdalene knows it.

Though Milkman and Guitar grew up together, they come from entirely different worlds. One the one hand, Milkman lives in the shadow of his father's expectations and the constant pressure to live up to his cultural ethos. On the other hand, the much more socio-economically disadvantaged Guitar vehemently rejects the values that Milkman and his family represent. The destructive and extremist impulses of *Fight Club*, explored in the next section of this chapter, in part, echo the vitriolic lashing out at society that

Guitar represents. However, because Guitar is an African American man in the 1960s, he occupies a very different social sphere than Palahniuk's white narrator. Similar in nature to the destructive goals of Project Mayhem in *Fight Club*, Guitar pledges his loyalty to a violently militant terrorist organization called the Seven Days, whose primary motive consists of exacting revenge on white people in response to racial discrimination and the horrible brutalities endured by the black community at the hands of white antagonists. In confidence, Guitar tells Milkman that the Seven Days targets and kills white people as one of their goals, prompting Milkman to open up the possibility that some of the targets might not deserve to die or that they might even be innocent. Rejecting Milkman's sympathies and line of interrogation, Guitar unflinchingly concludes:

"There are no innocent white people, because every one of them is a potential nigger-killer, if not an actual one. . . . Milkman, if Kennedy got drunk and bored and was sitting around a potbellied stove in Mississippi, he might join a lynching party just for the hell of it" (155-156). Following his indictment of the white race and white hegemony, Guitar shifts his rhetorical focus to a contextually relevant evaluation of Milkman's father:

> There are all kinds of people in this world. Some are curious; some ain't; some talk, some scream; some are kickers and other people are kicked. Take your daddy, now. He's a kicker. First time I laid eyes on him, he was kicking us out of our house. That was a difference right there between you and me, but we got to be friends anyway . . . . (102)

As the tone of their conversation escalates, Guitar continues expanding the scope of his indictments, shifting his criticism to Milkman: "If things ever got tough, you'd melt. You're not a serious person, Milkman" (104). Ultimately, Guitar's accusations cause

Milkman to reflect on the nature of his own character, and in a rare introspective moment before his transformative journey south, Milkman wonders: "Maybe Guitar was right – partly. His life was pointless, aimless, and it was true that he didn't concern himself an awful lot about other people. There was nothing he wanted bad enough to risk anything for, inconvenience himself for" (107). A reasonable conclusion to draw from his self-reflection suggests that Milkman became this way, indifferent and apathetic, because everything has always been handed to him, and he can take everything for granted, secure in his insular middle-class bubble. At the same time, Milkman's lack of purpose and meaning informs a type of callowness that invokes Taleb's concept of antifragility insomuch as Milkman never really tests or pushes himself to the edge of or beyond any personal limitations, avoiding any stressors, conflict, and hardship at all costs. Consequently, his capacities for growing and strengthening in the face of hardship and acute stressors have atrophied by way of his affluent complacency, leaving him disconnected and detached, aimlessly drifting through life.

Another way of considering a situation like that of Milkman's leads to the logical conclusion that some people simply refuse to rock the metaphorical boat when the sailing is relatively smooth. Carol King explores the predicaments that can arise in such a context, claiming that "Middle-class blacks, desiring status in a society resembling their oppressors, distance themselves from poor blacks, and often abuse them in the same manner that whites do. If these elitist blacks can't be equal to whites, they can at least be superior to poor blacks" (206). And whether or not Milkman chooses to accept it, he embodies this form of black elitism, refusing to challenge it, and Guitar refuses to implicate himself in what he considers complicity. In one particular scene, Milkman sees

himself as meaningfully reaching out to Guitar, offering him inclusion and a chance to join his family on a trip to the affluent waterfront, telling him "You're welcome everywhere I go. I've tried to get you to come to Honoré" (103). Guitar, not one to hide his disgust, explodes in response to Milkman's well-intended though oblivious entreaty: "Fuck Honoré! You hear me? The only way I'll go to that nigger heaven is with a case of dynamite and a book of matches" (103). Again, Guitar refuses to associate himself with what he views as cultural complicity with the enemy and instead chooses to create his own identity through a tribal connection to his black community and the Seven Days, along with its militant terrorism he sees as combating the systemic forces that oppress and brutalize his own community. To Guitar, the stakes and the costs are clear, no matter the holes that emerge in his line of flawed reasoning. For Guitar, his "justification of the Seven Days and his frantic questions about the law strike a chord because the novel clearly frames them within the history of slavery, lynching, and segregation" (Medoro 6). Moreover, Guitar clearly sees Milkman as an accomplice to the white hegemony and socio-cultural elitism, and in this novel, like in many of the primary texts in this study, characters long to escape their cultural prisons, but doing so requires the both the processes of unlearning and learning anew.

Flight and escape recur as themes in *Song of Solomon*, and the impulse behind both reflect the literal and/or metaphorical shedding of cultural trappings that prevent the means of meaningful identity realization. Guitar addresses the core of this fact when he tells Milkman, "Wanna fly, you gotta give up the shit that weighs you down" (179). And throughout the novel, the thematic elements of flight and escape becoming increasingly urgent. Early in the novel, the desire for escape through flight first emerges through the

character Mr. Smith who takes his own life by leaping from a building, symbolically flying to a freedom found in death, an act that parallels Edna's desperate though paradoxically empowering final swim. At an early age, Milkman also longs for the gift of flight, but becomes devastated when he learns that he remains firmly tethered to his environment. Morrison details this aspect of Milkman's youth, writing, "when the little boy discovered, at four . . . that only birds and airplanes could fly – he lost all interest in himself. To have to live without that single gift saddened him and left his imagination . . . bereft" (9). Connecting this emotional emptiness to theories on masculinities, "It has become an accepted tenet of American gender myths that men find their freedom and individuality by escaping the constraints of society, which are represented by women and their ensnaring demands" (Krumholtz 205) And while this claim certainly applies to Milkman in some respects, particularly concerning his cousin Hagar and his coddling mother Ruth, it overlooks the egalitarian prosocial sentiments along with how and why women like Edna and Capitola also desire escape as well. However, for Milkman, Krumholtz's claim fits and speaks directly to the emasculating, coddled relationship with his mother, Ruth, who breastfeeds her son well beyond the normal age of weaning, and hence his infantilizing nickname. Furthermore, Milkman also feels trapped by the strained relationship with his cousin Hagar, who also contributes to his desire to flee. She wants a romantic relationship with Milkman and attempts to actually kill him on more than one occasion. Aside from the hegemonic cultural values that contribute to Milkman's already unstable masculine identity, Hagar's possessive and controlling behavior places additional pressure on the young man. Before she makes another attempt

on his life, Milkman journeys to the south and into the frontier on the errand to retrieve

his father's gold, thereby escaping the volatility of his precarious situation.

Milkman's journey south – into the frontier – lies at the crux of *Song of Solomon*

for several reasons. His exodus and flight into the liminal space of the frontier becomes

the necessary apocalyptic catalyst that shapes him into the man he becomes, liberating

him from the values that warped his character and gave him nothing more than an

unstable identity removed from autonomy, connectedness, and competence. As he

initially sets out on his journey, images of gold enter his mind and his motives still

remain consistent with his father's teachings and values. However, Milkman's

perceptions begin to change once he enters the small, rural community of Shalimar, the

site of Morrison's frontier space. Like Edna, Milkman experiences an awakening, and as

he travels further into the south and deeper into the frontier;

> slowly he loses the material accoutrements of white existence – the clothes,
>
> the watch, the car, the possessions and protections that hide his own
>
> blackness from himself . . . But Milkman's transformation from a white
>
> vision to a black one needs more than a shedding of externals; it requires
>
> the profound encounter with blackness that occurs on the hunt. (Krumholtz
>
> 212)

Milkman clearly needs more than a simple disowning of his possessions to achieve a

meaningful identity, and his encounter with the character Saul and the other black men he

meets at an old, run-down service station provides the first real test of his life, a test that

has stakes and requires him to stand on his own two feet and take the first steps towards

his becoming:

> They looked with hatred at the city Negro who could buy a car as if it
>
> were a bottle of whiskey . . . His manners, his clothes were reminders that
>
> they had no crops of their own and no land to speak of either . . . They
>
> looked at his skin and saw it was as black as theirs, but they knew he had
>
> the heart of the white men who came to pick them up in the trucks when
>
> they needed anonymous, faceless laborers. (266)

During the course of this sizing-up, masculine posturing and displays of dominance ensue, peacock feathers in full plume: "Milkman provokes Saul to battle over the symbols of manhood . . . Milkman must exchange the 'heart of a white man' for the 'heart of a black man'" (Krumholtz 212). And only through the rite of initiation can Milkman discover the empowering, meaningful masculine identity he craves. Extrinsically speaking, Milkman enjoys the benefits and advantages of affluence, but his contrived identity, tenuous masculinity, and the black community that rejects him all combine to contribute to his existential poverty and the consequences of tribal disaffiliation. However, his "journey into an African American south [frontier] strips him of superficial external moorings and submerges him in the communal and spiritual culture of his larger family. With his initiation, Milkman moves from a passive, irresponsible ignorance to an active, authentic, and liberating participation in the corporate life of black community" (Lee 110). This sort of communal, prosocial tribal bonding mirrors the connectedness espoused by many of the characters in the larger scope of this study, and while on the formative hunting journey into the wilderness with the black men of Shalimar, Milkman's transformation and reshaping of a meaningfully connected black masculinity truly begins.

As the men set out into the wilderness, they see the humor in Milkman's awkwardness and lack of competence, as his affluent city life disconnects him completely from the hardships, trials, and antifragility that the other black men in the hunting party presumably navigate on a regular basis. Once he enters the frontier, Milkman resembles David Gamut who tries to keep up with Hawkeye in the wilderness of upstate New York. The same applies to Hal, Charles, and Mercedes, all of whom illustrate the disconnect between affluence and hardship, fragility and antifragility. The black men of Shalimar, in contrast to Milkman, represent masculinities that successfully navigate the space of the frontier through the prosocial, inter-reliant bonds of a tribal culture fully aware of its precarious and vulnerable situation. What has not killed these men has indeed made them stronger and more competent in comparison to Milkman. During the group's trek into the wild, a bobcat sighting ignites the chase, and the hunt begins. In the chaos of the hunt, the ill-equipped and inexperienced Milkman finds himself alone and lost, but a profound moment of genuine introspection, and the signifiers of his awakening begin to transform him:

> There was nothing here to help him – not his money, his car, his father's reputation, his suit, or his shoes. In fact they hampered him. . . . he thought he understood Guitar now. Really understood him. . . . Feeling both tense and relaxed, he sank his fingers into the grass. He tried to listen with his fingertips, to hear what, if anything, the earth had to say, and it told him quickly that someone was standing behind him and he had just enough time to raise one hand to his neck and catch the wire that fastened around his throat. (277-279)

For the first time in his life, Milkman possesses an awareness of the hostile, chaotic world he actually inhabits, and he finally reckons with the paradox of simultaneous vulnerability and potential for antifragility that comes with being a black man in a racially polarized America. This epiphany comes not a moment too soon and saves his life, giving him the opportunity to ward off the lurking Guitar's assault, who followed Milkman south with plans of stealing the gold.

Shortly after fending off and escaping Guitar's murderous attack, Milkman discovers the rest of his hunting party and sees they have victoriously treed the bobcat. In traversing the wilderness, connecting with it, and defending himself, Milkman has successfully navigated the frontier, saved himself from a vicious attack, and become stronger, wiser, ready to be reborn in the skin of his newly strengthened, regained black masculine identity. Through the hunt and the triumphant emergence from chaos, the symbolic initiation rites may begin. The successful hunting party skins and dismembers the bobcat in a ritual that recalls our tribal ancestry and an ancient time removed from modern socio-cultural concerns and pressures. The transformative process empowers Milkman with self-realization and the positive psychological rewards of autonomy, competence, and connectedness: "Like the wildcat who is killed during the hunt, Milkman acts as both the hunter and the hunted . . . The ritual of skinning the cat is written as a call and response . . . Milkman receives the cat's heart, symbolizing his rebirth as a black man, aware now of the danger and the power this identity entails" (Krumholtz 215). Through initiation and ritual, Milkman's rebirth now allows him to see himself and the world through new eyes. He arises from the frontier, able to face the world with a new understanding, empowered by a new identity, the rewards of

antifragility, and the knowledge that he now possesses the ability to walk into chaos, embrace it, and emerge stronger than ever before.

Meanwhile, as Milkman experiences the profundity of his awakening, Guitar continues to lie in wait, planning to steal the gold from Milkman in an effort to further the cause of the Seven Days. The time of the confrontation, like that of Marcus's and McTeague's, arrives, and the reborn Milkman rises to meet the challenge head on. But because the ending of the novel remains ambiguous as it concerns the results of the final confrontation between Milkman and Guitar, interpretations of the climactic scene go in various directions, not unlike the various readings of Edna's death. However, Morrison herself offers the following on the ending of *Song of Solomon*:

> Happy ending? I thought it was a book of absolute triumph . . . Because a man learns the only important lesson there is to learn. And he wins himself. He wins himself. And the quality of his life improves immeasurably. Whether its length improves or lengthens is irrelevant. And his friend knows he has improved. His friend knows that, and the two of them know it. I was thrilled with that. (Denard)

Song of Solomon, like all works of literature, remains open to multiple interpretations; however, Milkman's successful navigation of the frontier and the positive psychological individuation he experiences as a result become undeniable. Milkman certainly breaks free from the conformity and debilitating cultural pressures that stem from a white hegemonic ethos, and he subsequently realizes and claims ownership of his newly empowered black masculine identity by reconnecting with his ancestral past and members of his larger African American community. Unlike his father, or the other

cautionary masculine figures in this project, Milkman reshapes himself for the better.

And though some might view the ending of the novel as lacking in terms of explicit and

definitive conflict resolution, Toni Morrison's interpretation of the ending resonates well

beyond the art she creates, testifying to the value of navigating the frontier to discovering

a meaningful masculine identity attained through prosocial connectedness, autonomy,

and competence.

Wasted Potential

Returning once again to the socio-cultural warnings presented in *Walden*, Thoreau

cuts to the quick of this particular section when he writes: "And when the farmer has got

his house, he may not be the richer but the poorer for it, and it be the house that has got

him" (21). And although Thoreau's insistent mantra "Simplify, Simplify!" still speaks

with just as much relevance to the consumer culture of today, an overwhelming number

of American men answer the call of relentless product marketing while household credit

card debt continues to climb and some men define themselves and their masculine

identities via the commodified images of consumerism. Completely abandoning the

images and ideals of America's compulsory consumer spending, however, the men in

Chuck Palahniuk's 1996 novel *Fight Club* wholly reject the commodity fetishism and

superficial definitions of masculinity ubiquitous to American culture near the end of the

twentieth century. Essentially, the characters in the story awaken from a collective

slumber to confront the reality of their hollow lives and begin devising ways to exact

vengeance on the agents of America's corporate economy, a manifestation of Leviathan

itself, ultimately hoping to bring about the ruin of consumer capitalism and a return to inter-reliant tribal culture. Throughout the characters' various forays into the liminal frontier spaces of chaotic and apocalyptic self-destruction, violence, and domestic terrorism, the novel's major protagonists, the narrator/Tyler Durden seek a widespread socio-cultural return to a Wild Frontier and pastoral ideal as a means of ushering in the salvific possibilities found in the meaningful masculine identity realization that becomes enabled by inter-reliant, utilitarian tribal sentiment.

Masculine identities, let alone any identity, primarily defined in relation to the accumulation of material possession, often put individuals in precarious and untenable circumstances. Interestingly, however, consumption in its broadest sense evinces connections to both biological and cultural impulse. In his study of the many relationships between human evolution and consumption, Gad Saad writes that "Humans possess a ravenous consummatory appetite. Most individuals will typically make hundreds of consumption-related decisions in any given day" (11). As shown in the previous analyses of Milkman and McTeague, however, commodities beyond basic survival resources often fail to meaningfully fulfil the psychological needs of many people. Again, I am not suggesting property ownership or affluence necessarily corrupts people – context always warrants consideration. But, taking the torch from characters like Milkman, who discovers a new and reimagined direction in life for himself, *Fight Club* also taps into the cultural desire to transcend capitalist ideals of masculinity and create identities that stand apart from potentially harmful socio-cultural norms and influences. Because capitalism and its related agents – or Leviathan – exist(s) amorphously, the men in the novel turn to violence and chaos in an effort to feel alive and maintain a communal,

tangible sense of purpose that rejects the status quo, rather than continue to patronize the meaninglessness and isolation inherent to living within the confines of a materialistic existence. Instead of forging fake and commodified identities like the cautionary examples made of Macon Dead and Léonce Pontellier, the characters in *Fight Club* subvert hegemonic pressures and reshape their masculinities in ways that unite, not divide them. In fact, Fight Club and Morrison's Seven Days are both terrorist organizations that violently lash out at society, seeking to overthrow the powers that be, but the obvious distinctions and motivations that exist between the two groups matter because the Seven Days concerns itself with systemic racism and barbaric cruelty, while Fight Club aims to topple a capitalist system that essentially sells lies but altogether refrains from wholesale, indiscriminate murder. The fabricated, yet dominant ideals of masculinity woven into the very fabric of American consumer culture have the potential to enervate many people, and as Palahniuk's novel shows, a life lived in blind accordance with such ideals effectively alienates and isolates the characters, who in turn react with violent, destructive behaviors, looking to restore feelings of competence, autonomy, and connectedness.

Manhood, For Sale

Given the profit driven aims of marketing, advertising, and social media, men and women alike are constantly inundated with images of what the ideal man or woman should look and act like. On the surface, such prescriptive engineering and manipulation of gendered appearances might seem relatively benign; after all, consumers possess the

relative autonomy and free will to spend their time and money as they please. However, profitability remains the highest priority for many businesses, and what better way to increase revenue streams than by coercing the consumer into a position that essentially encourages corporations to prey on fear and insecurity while pushing idealized models of masculinity – or femininity – into the consumer's face. Companies write copy and market images of how to look and what to buy, but goods and services can fail to provide meaningful or permanent satisfaction, so we keep pulling out our wallets, practically begging for more, attempting to fill the void that some tragically try to fill with drugs and alcohol. Even on a fundamental level, such consumer impulses and habits must contend with the economic law of diminishing marginal utility.[4]

By setting standards and telling people how they should look, many will naturally listen for fear of not living up to normative standards adopted by their family members and peers, especially if they already fail to fit the prescriptive mold. Interestingly, however, culture and biology have their respective roles to play concerning our

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[4] In economics, the law of diminishing marginal utility can be effectively illustrated through the following consumer-based example: If Bob buys six slices of pizza, the first slice rewards Bob with satisfaction/happiness because he is hungry; therefore, the utility of the food is at a premium. The second slice, however, loses satisfaction/utility because Bob's hunger increasingly diminishes. If Bob were to eat all six slices of pizza, it is likely that Bob will not feel well and will not want to eat pizza any time in the near future. The utility value, happiness, and satisfaction derived from commodity consumption tends to apply to most goods and services.

consummatory appetites. While culture shapes markets, products, and images in hopes of

influencing consumer behaviors, "the great majority of consumption acts can be mapped

onto one of four Darwinian overriding pursuits, namely, *survival* (preference for the fatty

smoked meat), *reproduction* (offering flowers as part of an elaborate courtship ritual), *kin

selection* (buying a gift for my nephew), and *reciprocity* (organizing the bachelor party)"

(Saad 12). Each of these Darwinian drives function within the realm of utility and desire

while simultaneously navigating the pressures within spheres of cultural influence.

One of the first characters introduced in *Fight Club*, Bob, represents a complicit,

hegemonic model of masculinity. Bob presumably worked hard in the gym to shape his

body into a monolithic image of manhood. However, Bob's path to a shredded physique

lacks foresight and the necessary attention to the intrinsic value of actual health: "Big

Bob was a juicer, he said. All those salad days on Dianabol and then the racehorse

steroid, Wistrol. His own gym, Big Bob owned a gym . . . The whole how-to-program

about expanding your chest was practically his invention" (21). Like McTeague's,

Marcus's, and Milkman's initial milieus, Bob's version of masculinity stems from a

potentially damaging socio-cultural ideology, leading Bob to become a caricature of

commodified, unhealthy masculine ideals, which, in turn, exposes their untenability,

superficiality, and potential for harm. When the narrator meets Bob in a support group for

men with testicular cancer – the narrator attends support groups as a means of treating

insomnia – Palahniuk writes that "Bob cries because six months ago, his testicles were

removed. Then hormone support therapy. Bob has tits because his testosterone ration is

too high. Raise the testosterone level too much, your body ups the estrogen to seek a

balance" (17). After all he puts himself and his body through, Bob destroys the physique

he aspired (and took shortcuts) to achieve. His quest for muscle mass included incredibly detrimental sidesteps that damaged his mental and physical health, all for the sake of appearances. Bob also experiences devastating interpersonal loss of his tribe/family; his wives divorce him, "He'd been married three times. . . . Fast-forward, Bob said, to the cancer. Then he was bankrupt. He had two grown kids who wouldn't return his calls" (21-22). Bob loses his testicles to cancer, and as in the cautionary examples of Milkman, McTeague, and Ahab, becomes damaged physically, psychologically, and interpersonally by the very system of ideals and industry he has patronized. Consequently, Bob comes to embody the polar opposite of the masculine ideals he sought to achieve. He literally loses a defining characteristic of biological masculinity, and he grows enormous breasts that effectively replace his testicles. Because Bob subscribes to culturally dominant norms encouraged by the capitalist hegemony, he becomes a martyr to yet another cautionary tale, sabotaged by the very ideals that previously, but only temporarily provided him with a seemingly stable, powerful masculine identity. Bob, in some ways, rose to the pinnacle of a prescriptive masculine ideal, and everything still managed to fall apart. Moreover, where Queequeg's size and strength enable him with utility-based masculine performance suitable for frontier navigation and the demands of a highly dangerous profession – one might have a difficult time picturing Queequeg oiled down and flexing in front of a mirror – Bob's motivation remains exclusively tethered to aesthetics and selling his chest expansion program. By contriving the ideals of how men should look, think, and feel, corporations manipulate male consumers by making them feel inadequate, in tandem with emasculating them for not owning and using their vast assortment of products.

Companies have an agenda of turning a profit, so idealized masculinities regularly coincide with marketing strategies that sell models of manhood.

Capitalist, consumer-based notions of masculine identity and imagery are not limited to exploitation of the male body. While companies like Best Buy and Williams Sonoma offer a variety of products that promise convenient solutions to modern living, many of these gadgets and technological innovations do not amount to anything of paramount necessity, leaving only superfluous material accumulation at the end of the day. Still, people shamelessly and proudly buy the nifty little wares meant to entertain us and/or convey success, comfort, and status. Consumers then become invariably surrounded by their wonderful toys, isolated and enslaved, as Thoreau warns, and get tucked away inside domestic spaces, in "a sort of filing cabinet for widows and young professionals" (Palahniuk 41). The narrator of *Fight Club* recognizes the near pathological monotony of his own routines and daily habits: "I wasn't the only slave to my nesting instinct. The people I know who used to sit in the bathroom with pornography, now they sit in the bathroom with their IKEA furniture catalogue" (43). From there, the reality of the compulsive consumer's dilemma becomes tragically apparent: "you're trapped in your lovely nest, and the things you used to own, now they own you" (44). Unfortunately, total conformity to such a culture empirically shows us that "The 'greed is good,' 'shop 'til you drop,' 'whoever dies with the most toys wins' ethos that marks free market capitalism is not conducive to genuine human happiness. What it generates in ever increasing levels – even among its more successful strata – is stress, heart disease, loneliness, depression, and the waste of human potential" (McChesney and Foster 5). What often emerges from the manic and perhaps even

unconscious race to keep up with the Joneses becomes a situation where happiness and well-being get conflated and/or mistaken with the pressures of conforming to a potentially damaging status quo. It happens to Milkman and Macon Dead much in the same way it happens to the men of *Fight Club*, pushing them to the brink of an existential abyss. The state of helplessness and sense of falling into an oblivion created by the hollow pursuit of appearances serves as a major catalyst in Palahniuk's novel, and the painful awareness of such a reality pushes the men to confront the nature of their situation. After intentionally destroying his lovely nest and everything therein, the narrator reaches an insightful epiphany: "It's only after you've lost everything . . . that you're free to do anything" (70). As this revelation begins to inform the rest of the novel, the narrator's introspection encourages him to reject masculine norms and seek out something other than a life of somnambulant isolation. Similar to Milkman's transcendent journey into the frontier, the narrator of *Fight Club* devises a way to transcend hegemonic capitalist ideals of masculinity and pave the way for his own and others' entrance into the transformative liminal space of the frontier.

A New Tribe

Creating, joining, and participating in Fight Club becomes the means by which the narrator and other men in the novel choose to reject the ideals that have commodified, emasculated, and castrated them, empowering them to assert their own control and reinvent their own identities that stand at odds with marketed models of masculinity: "fight club isn't about looking good" (51). Because capitalism and its projected values of

masculinity are not literal physical entities, but disembodied ideas and culturally constructed norms that drive the industry – aside from the evolutionary bases for consumption – one cannot simply blow up the economy, the hegemony, or the ever elusive and potentially dehumanizing "system." Taking an alternative and subordinate approach, the men of Fight Club turn towards self-inflicted violence upon themselves and each other in an effort to feel alive and maintain a communal sense of purpose, as opposed to living in isolation within the capitalist competition that keeps them at one another's throats like Marcus, McTeague, and the Other Dentist. The very order and egalitarian nature of a tribe like Fight Club provides Palahniuk's characters with an outlet that expresses their frustrations with their environment and gives them a tangible, physical means by which they can reconstruct their identities and nullify their perceived emasculation. The men have uncovered what they see as the true nature of the competitive marketplace and reduce it to what it really is: a frontier of chaos and violence where men beat the piss out of each other. What brings these men together resides in their shared suffering at the hands of corporate exploitation. The narrator tells us, "Most guys are at fight club because of something they're too afraid to fight. After a few nights, you're afraid a lot less" (54). Fight Club essentially becomes a place where men tap into their potential antifragility as well. Fight Club provides an empowering escape from their meaningless lives: "Who guys are in fight club is not who they are in the real world" (49). The scars, bruises, and broken bones acquired during the bouts at Fight Club amount to physical, symbolic markers and initiation rites of breaking free from the standards that define masculine image and appearance. The beaten and tattered men stand in direct contrast to the well-groomed and polished images that capitalism sells via

advertising and magazines like *GQ*. The scars from fighting serve as a reminder to the men that they have control and power over their own masculine identities; they have the ability to reshape themselves. Furthermore, this type of self-destruction, while seemingly pointless and barbaric on the surface, comes with the caveat that these men become antifragile: empowered, better, and stronger in terms of who they want to be and in terms of positive psychological individuation. These cuts and bruises also, ironically, become substitutions for the designer labels sold by corporations and commodify what it means to perform masculinity. Instead, of continuing to navigate the chaos of the marketplace, the men choose to create a primitive and ritualistic frontier space that elicits the benefits of antifragility and through which they actively reject the perceived usurpation of their dysfunctional masculine identities. The narrator takes a moment to sarcastically reflect on his navigation of their newly formed frontier: "Me, with my punched-out eyes and dried blood in big black crusty stains on my pants, I'm saying HELLO to everybody at work. HELLO! Look at me. HELLO! I am so ZEN. This is BLOOD. This is NOTHING. Hello. Everything is nothing, and it's so cool to be ENLIGHTENED. Like me" (64). Hardship, physical violence, and self-destruction reshape the identities of the men in the novel, and the paradox becomes evident. Through the chaos of violence and the intrinsic benefits that come from their prosocial connections, Fight Club provides the men with something concrete to lean on and ground them, as opposed to the fleeting utility, isolation, and emptiness of extrinsic values.

The men in Palahniuk's novel essentially become slaves to appearance, and they have become trapped in a metaphorical prison, surrounded by walls constructed with the bricks, mortar, and barbed wire of America's dominant extrinsic values. These men

realize they have been duped by corporatized industry, hence the urgent and desperate need for an outlet and to enter a frontier space that fosters the process of meaningful identity reformation. Men placed in such confining positions will inevitably and invariably react. Robert Lewis Clarke similarly recognizes that

> By negotiating and performing various masculinities, prison inmates create new forms of empowerment through which social transformations take place. We see that correctional institutions allow inmates spaces for negotiation of the terms of confinement by expanding the minimums of personal agency afforded by imprisonment through communities of support. These communities configure competing paradigms of masculinity by defining alternative pathways of rehabilitation. (63)

In the context of *Fight Club*, these "spaces" and "pathways" reside in the liminal frontier space of Fight Club itself and what it sets out to create: a frontier where men define themselves on their own terms, and a pathway to reshaping fulfilling rather than hollow masculine identities. Similar to men in a literal prison, the male "inmates" of a competitive consumer-based economy create their own system of power and meaning with the genesis of Fight Club, having come to the realization and recognition that they inhabit a metaphorical prison or panopticon, policed by the norms and ideals of socio-cultural values.

Achieving recognition, however, remains one of the biggest obstacles to overcome, as material comforts can pacify and lull many into complacent, indifferent states of being, through promises of success, status, and comfortability. We see the dull complacency of routine manifested in the life of the narrator, who mindlessly drifts

through life working a job that he comes to resent: "You wake up at Air Harbor International. Every takeoff and landing, when the plane banked too much to one side, I prayed for a crash . . . You wake up at O'Hare. You wake up at LaGuardia. You wake up at Logan" (25). Putting a finer point on living life on a treadmill, "This is your life, and it's ending one minute at a time" (29). But in rejecting social norms and the regime of the time-clock, the characters in *Fight Club* overcome the potentially blinding obstacle of pacification, and instead choose to reshape their identities while ascribing new, purposeful, though chaotically self-destructive roles for themselves. In contrast to the disembodied ideals of consumerism, Fight Club gives its members something to hold onto: definitive rules and standards. Palahniuk writes: "What we have to do, people," Tyler told the committee, "is remind these guys what kind of power they still have" (120). This kind of power, although destructive, gives the men an alternative form of control and does so on their universally agreed upon, cooperative terms. This control gives them the freedom and autonomy to rise above the ideals that capitalism attempts to sell, restoring the pride lost through shame. Fight Club isn't about the individual male (or "rugged individualism," that pits men against each other) and the illusion he has been fed that tells him he is special or unique; rather it is about a communal bond, rejecting a shared antagonist, and a cathartic exorcism of frustration through masculine performance. The narrator tells the reader "nobody should be the center of fight club . . . Nobody's the center of fight club except the two men fighting" (142). Nor are the two men fighting for the purpose of chalking up wins: "Nothing was solved when the fight was over, but nothing mattered . . . You fight to fight" (53-54). While this type of violence appears base and vulgar, it still retains an integrity and intrinsic value that circumvents the dead-end

capitalist ideals these men have come to loathe, while fostering the potential rewards of meaningful growth through antifragility and prosocial connectedness. The narrator makes an important distinction between aesthetic/cosmetic vanities and utilitarian masculine performance in that "Fight club gets to be your reason for going to the gym and keeping your hair cut short and cutting your nails. The gyms you go to are crowded with guys trying to look like men, as if being a man means looking the way a sculptor or an art director says" (50). Again, these men see the value in pursuing strength and fitness as functional and utilitarian, ruggedness for its own sake. And the primary way to acquire fitness in the gym comes through reaping the benefits of antifragility, pushing through muscle failure, fatigue – physical and mental – to become better, faster, and stronger over time.

In the space of a new frontier within their newly created system/tribe, the men in Fight Clubs share a common bond, similar to the internal suffering that brings them together in the first place. Only now their collective pain is externally manifested and purged, exposing the competitive nature of the marketplace and its destructive potential: "Bruised eyes, cut lips and broken noses produce modes of recognition, a group identity, and a sense of belonging between the men when they are outside of Fight Club. In daylight hours, fellow members nod and wink to one another in recognition and in shared acknowledgement of shared belonging and secrecy" (Iocco). One might wonder if Ishmael, Marcus and McTeague would join such a club. Eventually, the men of Fight Club evolve their system of power, taking their subversive and tribally connected doctrine of masculinity a step further, creating what they call Project Mayhem, the primary goal of which is to destroy the corporate institutions that assist in the creation

and peddling of contrived consumer ideals. And through Project Mayhem the men devise methods of attacking the grounded, tangible, and physical components of the materialistic system that essentially stripped them of their identities and emasculated them. Capitalism regularly shifts and elides pointed identification, but its companies and commodities remain easy to spot. With the genesis of Project Mayhem, these men now have something physical to target.

Throughout the process of transforming and refocusing the aims of Fight Club, the men actively attempt to reshape their own masculine identities by attacking the material symbols of what has both emasculated and arguably enslaved them. Unable to destroy amorphous ideals, the men identify physical scapegoats as an alternative pathway to change. They conceive Project Mayhem, and as a result begin to take a more proactive, albeit destructive communal effort to sabotage the machinations of capitalism regularly insinuated into their daily lives. For Palahniuk's characters, acceptance or tolerance of socio-cultural norms no longer remain viable options. The model of masculinity that they reconstruct through Fight Club and Project Mayhem "lets men destroy harmful masculine gender roles, rather than letting harmful masculine gender roles destroy them" (Lee). The men of Fight Club recognize and blame consumerism for stripping them of their masculine identities. They lash out, not only by trying to destroy the current system of ideals, but the agents of their identity commodification, one piece at a time, beginning with the material symbols of the dehumanizing hegemony. The opening scene of the novel shows us the sort of physical destruction that the men aim to accomplish: "The demolition team will hit the primary charge in maybe eight minutes. The primary charge will blow the base charge, the foundation columns will crumble, and the photo series of

the Parker-Morris Building will go into all the history books" (14). This building represents a notorious hub of capitalist enterprise; therefore, the men opt to destroy a tangible entity that symbolizes a cornerstone of their emasculation, castration, and self-loathing. As a group, they continually work to destroy a number of actual entities and symbols of corporate America, like Starbucks and other similar faces of the industrial machine that have commodified and exploited them. The steps taken by the men stem from situational recognition, just as Ishmael, Edna, Milkman, and Ben Cash in the following section finally see the horrible truth and reject it, wholly. However, Palahniuk's characters take matters further and go on to act in a prosocial though exceedingly destructive manner. For instance, the curriculum of Project Mayhem includes "homework assignments" that afford the men the opportunity to strike back at the companies and jobs that have stolen their time, money, lives and identities:

> The night of the Hein Tower assignment, you can picture a team of law clerks and bookkeepers or messengers sneaking into offices where they sat, every day . . . they used passkeys where they could and used spray canisters of Freon to shatter lock cylinders so they could dangle . . . trusting each other to hold the ropes . . . risking quick death in offices where every day they felt their lives and one hour at a time . . . The next morning, these same clerks and assistant accounting reps would be in the crowd . . . listening to the crowd around them wonder, who would do this, and the police shout for everyone to please get back, now, as water ran down from the broken smoky center of each huge eye. (121)

Project Mayhem provides the men with the means to reassert themselves by giving them power and control, the very power and control that was stolen from them through capitalism and its concocted ideals concerning masculinity and what it means to be a man. Masculinities theorist Todd Reeser asserts a similar claim when he writes: "One discourse around masculinity that has arisen in recent years depicts masculinity as wounded, as effeminized or effeminate, as victimized, or perhaps even as queered, and consequently expresses the need to masculinize men and recreate a less effeminate form of masculinity" (33). In the novel, the men that take matters into their own hands, reinventing manhood in ways that give them a collective sense of purpose. It is through Fight Club and Project Mayhem that these like-minded characters come together and attack the very things that have collectively emasculated them and deprived them of a meaningful masculine identity, autonomy, competence, and connectedness, but they manage to accomplish these ends without becoming murderous skinwalkers like Ahab, Big Boy, and McTeague.

For the narrator of the novel, emasculation generates a projected response that embodies an entirely different form of capitalistic masculine ideals. The narrator, in his seemingly resultant mental illness, breaks from reality and creates Tyler Durden, a manifestation of what the narrator feels he lacks and needs. In creating this new archetype of power and masculine identity, the narrator constructs a subordinate and subversive masculinity that becomes an agent of change. Tyler is intelligent, capable, knows how to apply chemistry, mathematics, and create weapons of destruction, such as napalm: "One, you can mix equal parts of gasoline and frozen orange juice concentrate . . . Ask me how to make nerve gas. Oh, all those crazy car bombs" (13). This passage

shows how the narrator feels that he misappropriates his potential on materialistic endeavors and consequently turns his talents to acts he sees as prosocial and meaningful: "I see the strongest and smartest men who have ever lived . . . and these men are pumping gas and waiting tables" (149). Tyler remains an extremist in many respects, but he rejects the status quo and dead-end streets that lead to wasted potential. He becomes free in every way the mindless consumer is not, and he goes to great lengths to impress the liberating benefits of such freedom upon the men he meets and brings into the fold of his tribe.

While Tyler becomes the mechanism through which the narrator seeks to create and reinvent a new system of power, another cause of the narrator's sense of emasculation bears consideration, specifically castration anxiety. In this context, the narrator's "melancholic sadomasochism is the product of what he perceives to be the feminization of late capitalism; as a corporate drone, he feels victimized by a culture that has stolen his manhood" (Ta 266). Lynn Ta continues: "Victimized and feminized by his culture, a melancholic Jack (narrator), therefore seeks to recover what he perceives to be his lost masculinity by resorting to violent measures and in doing so, splits into a sadistic (and masculine) Tyler who criticizes and punishes a masochistic (and feminine) Jack, all the while engaging in erotic self-flagellation" (266). Because the narrator becomes metaphorically castrated (Bob, quite literally) by culturally contrived capitalist ideals, he desperately wants to reclaim his manhood. Ken Kesey explored a similar type of symbolic castration in his novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, that echoes the capitalist castration in *Fight Club*. Similarly, the antagonist of Kesey's work, Nurse Ratched, "represents Kesey's fears of a cold war era that fosters an impotent, feminine

American masculinity through a climate of fear and conformity. McMurphy's violence toward Ratched becomes analogous to a rape act, meant to free the inmates from an impotent manhood" (Meloy 3). This sort of reaction parallels the reactions we see from the men in *Fight Club*. Because capitalist culture has literally, figuratively, and symbolically castrated the men in Palahniuk's novel, they react in kind. When Palahniuk's characters discover "The police commissioner wanted a crackdown on what he called gang-type activity and after-hours boxing clubs," this provokes quite a response, as Fight Club restores masculine identity like nothing they have ever experienced (163). In response to the new police agenda, they confront the commissioner, threatening him with castration if he doesn't call off the hunt. The narrator promises retaliation: "I'm whispering in his most esteemed police commissioner's ear that he better stop the fight club crackdown, or we'll tell the world that his esteemed honor doesn't have any balls" (165). In threatening the commissioner with castration, the men enforce the code of an eye for an eye. If the cops want to strip them of the manhood they have painstakingly reclaimed, then they will take theirs in return. The violence here ultimately suggests that existing models of masculinity fail to provide the basic needs of psychological individuation, yielding an impulsive desire to restore autonomy, connectedness, and competence through the rejection and destruction of the hegemonic status quo.

By and through creating their own system of power, part of which rests on concept of antifragility, the men of *Fight Club* set out on a destructive yet prosocial crusade to reinvent themselves with new masculine identities and an existence that gives meaning and purpose to their lives. Conversely, the narrator concludes: "Advertising has

these people chasing cars and clothes they don't need. Generations have been working in jobs they hate, just so they can buy what they really don't need" (149). Consumers can become so preoccupied with accumulating useless things that they lose sight of the potential for a purposeful and meaningful way of living. And as Tyler Durden so succinctly puts it, recalling Junger, Marx, Freud, and Thoreau: "We don't have a great war in our generation, or a great depression, but we do have a great war of the spirit. We have a great revolution against the culture. The great depression is our lives. We have a spiritual depression" (149). Tyler, the narrator, clearly share these sentiments with many, many others. And because so many men enthusiastically join Tyler in his rebellion, he can amass an army whose primary goals consist of overthrowing the hegemony; this mass-mobilization reveals a fundamental flaw within America's current socio-cultural structuring. We have seen the debilitating consequences of total cultural assimilation. However, through resistance, collectivism, and tribal sentiment, the men of *Fight Club* gain a sense of purpose through the intrinsic value inherent to antifragility and the hard work dedicated to their cause of reinvention. Palahniuk writes of the characters' collectivist endeavors: "Teams of Project Mayhem guys render fat all day. I'm not sleeping. All night I hear teams mix the lye and cut the bars and bake the bars of soap on cookie sheets, then wrap each bar in tissue and seal it with the Paper Street Soap Company Label . . . Tyler's rented house on Paper Street is a living wet thing on the inside from so many people sweating and breathing. So many people are moving inside, the house moves" (130,133). These men now act as a unified tribe, no longer part of the individualism projected and fostered by capitalist consumerism. They work together, not against or in divisive competition with one another – like McTeague, Marcus, and the

Other Dentist – rejecting individual, anti-social motives. Their community embodies a rejection of the capitalist values that lead to isolation through divisive competition. The rules of Fight Club and Project Mayhem reinforce a collective enterprise, taking any sense of individualism or entitlement away: "The new rule is that nobody should be the center of fight club . . . Nobody's the center of fight club except the two men fighting" (142). The men are united under a common banner and subordinate masculinity that rejects the fabricated and arbitrary standards that exist for the purpose of generating a profit while preying on male competition and insecurity.

One of the ironies of *Fight Club* emerges from the relationships that subjugate the men to another kind of social stratification, namely the egalitarianism that typically accompanies tribal living. The men of Project Mayhem follow a specific, seemingly militaristic dress code consisting of all black clothing and shaved heads, which allows for the erasure of individuality. The individualism that allegedly gives one an identity becomes rejected for the greater common cause of the group. In this context, Reeser writes that "One paradox of masculinity as ideological is that it often gives the illusion of freedom, whereas in fact it is this very imagined freedom that insures subjugation and hides its own arbitrary functioning. The only freedom, in actuality, is the freedom to accept or reject forms of masculinity" (25). The catch twenty-two of relative autonomy shows that "masculinity resembles capitalism, which also seems to be predicated on the idea of freedom . . . But in fact, we are subjugated by the very desire to earn money and to buy products while convinced that we are free" (Reeser 25). Because the men in *Fight Club* still remain beholden to a version of subjugation within their reinvented system of power and relative freedom, the men essentially conform to what they see as the lesser of

two evils. And in the case of Fight Club, they at least make the choice for themselves. By reacting in this manner, the men are inadvertently coping with the fact that "The independence of masculinity can never be achieved . . . since it is dependent on an unlimited chain of others" (Reeser 38). Every standard, ideal, and projected value that they turn to ultimately leads to the formation of an identity they refuse to accept, except in Fight Club: "As long as you're at fight club, you're not how much money you've got in the bank. You're not your job" (143). By creating and espousing the rules of Fight Club and Project Mayhem, the men create a tribally egalitarian enterprise that stands in direct opposition to the values they have all chosen to reject, creating prosocial bonds, not divisiveness between "individuals" competing for the latest iPhone or luxury car as a means of acquiring status symbols that allegedly confer happiness and success. An interpretation of the cinematic adaptation of the novel argues: "One prominent reading is that *Fight Club* is an anti-capitalist, antisocial screed; a rejection of capitalist values, of commodity-centered living, and of bourgeois materialism" (Henderson 144). Yet, such a singular analysis omits other equally revealing interpretations. But, as it turns out, the men do resort to a seemingly socialist, though no less tribally connected alternative, providing the characters in the novel avenues by which they can meaningfully connect, identify with one another, and reshape identities that reject the capitalist ideals working against truly rewarding relationships between men. With the hegemonic standards influencing the men of *Fight Club*, isolation and alienation through competition reach a logical conclusion. Ahab, Marcus, and McTeague underscore this fact and thunder it from the past.

The characters in Palahniuk's novel primarily turn to cultural norms and influences for shaping their identities, because like McTeague and Milkman, the men of *Fight Club* lack the meaningful role model of a father or any positive male role model to guide them. And in his quest to hit rock-bottom and become antifragile, the narrator suggests, as men, that "Maybe we didn't need a father to complete ourselves" (54). The narrator continues to elaborate, "Me, I knew my dad for about six years, but I don't remember anything" (50). This situation also characterizes the other men of Fight Club: "What you see at fight club is a generation of men raised by women" (50). Because these men have no meaningful model of masculinity to provide guidance, they turn to hyper-masculine frontier-based ideals that reject the commodified values that bring McTeague, Marcus, Ahab, and Macon Dead to ruin. These men adopt more immediate, tangible, and utilitarian masculinities, rather than continue to define masculinity in accordance with status quo. Connecting their burgeoning masculine ideals to the liminal space of the frontier, *Fight Club* imagines a reopening of the frontier, a return to the Wild Frontier and the pastoral ideal, "stalking elk past department store windows and stinking racks of beautiful rotting dresses and tuxedos on hangers; you'll wear leather clothes that will last you the rest of your life" (125). The men of Fight Club clearly want to live with purpose, utility, and meaning, so they ultimately attempt to destroy the detribalizing markers of civilization that would usher in the reopening of the closed, Wild Frontier and allow them to live as Cooper's characters once did, actualizing the benefits of prosocial tribal inter-reliance that necessarily emerge in spaces disconnected from affluence and the pressures of Leviathan.

Class structure also plays a major role in shaping the masculinities in *Fight Club*. Aside from the narrator, his alter-ego Tyler and most of the other men in the novel represent a blue-collar, working class demographic, which allows them to easily sabotage consumers through the jobs where they continue to labor in vain. As a way of underscoring the tensions of socio-economic class disparity and the frustration this engenders, Palahniuk writes: "Tyler and me, we've turned into the guerilla terrorists of the service industry. Dinner party saboteurs. The hotel caters dinner parties, and when somebody wants the food they get the food and the wine and the china and glassware and the waiters . . . And because they know they can't threaten you with the tip, to them you're just a cockroach" (81). This passage highlights just how a class-based hegemony can subordinate and marginalize the working class, and it comes as no surprise to see the men go to disgusting lengths to booby-trap the dinners of the condescending, bourgeois capitalist elite. The blue-collar/white-collar dichotomy in the novel reveals the significance of how socio-economic status also informs masculinities: "class is a crucial factor in the construction of masculinity and argues that the connection between property and occupation as indicators of class and masculinity are crucial" (Gruss 152). Like McCarthy's character Llewelyn Moss, the working-class male characters in the novel lack fulfillment in the workplace and presumably fail to attain status and the "lovely nest" filled with expensive products, a constant reminder of their inability to keep up with the Joneses, which imparts feelings of inferiority regarding their more "successful" bourgeois counterparts. Nevertheless, both classes of the men as members of Fight Club realize the nature of the roles they occupy, and all react. With a knife held to the police commissioner's testicles, demanding that he call off the police initiative to take down

emerging chapters of Fight Clubs nation-wide, Tyler threateningly reminds him: "The people you're trying to step on, we're everyone you depend on. We're the people who do your laundry and cook your food and serve your dinner. . . We control every part of your life" (166). The reality of this empowering statement gives the blue-collar man his agency back to him, providing a means of control over the derision and oppression of the capitalist elite. These men wield power, in spite of their socio-economic status and exercise it with force, among other means of sabotage and domestic terrorism. The primary agenda of Fight Club and Project Mayhem becomes increasingly clear throughout the narrative arc of the novel: "The goal was to teach each man in the project that he had the power to control history. We, each of us, can take control of the world" (122). Through Fight Club and Project Mayhem, the men reclaim their power and attack the symbolic and literal sources of their collective existential crises: capitalism and all of the identity robbing ideals perpetuated by the affluent hegemony.

Fight Club satirizes capitalist dreams in an all-out war on a system that carries the potential to manipulate and dehumanize its patrons. The novel viscerally illustrates that the accumulation of material possession fails to meaningfully define the individual, but rather subjects the male consumer to states of alienation and isolation, providing no genuine sense of masculine identity realization. Through mayhem, destruction, and the reopening of the frontier, *Fight Club* follows the path of psychological individuation by rejection of the status quo and turning to chaos and hardship for the reshaping of masculine identities on one's own terms. The men in the novel condemn the ideals projected by the amorphous institution of corporate consumerism, although they once ironically perpetuated the very same system. Ultimately, they see the follies in their

acquiescence and react by creating their own aspirational, antifragile masculinities. These men awaken to understand, as Tyler puts it, that they work in jobs they hate to buy things they do not need. Consequently, they attack the physical entities they see as representative of capitalist oppression and lies, in an effort to reclaim what has been stolen from them, restoring pride and a sense of power. Through Fight Club and Project Mayhem, the male consumers cooperatively come together under the banner of new tribe, ready and willing to confront the chaos of the frontier, and they refuse to allow capitalism to continually play the role of parasite in their lives any longer. And through the process of introspection, pain, self-discovery, and the reshaping of prosocial, fulfilling masculine identities, these men come to realize that they still possess the power dictate the course of their lives, not the potentially damaging enterprises of diminishing return.

Captain Fantastic: Into the Primitive and Back

The sole movie for analysis in this project, Matt Ross's 2016 film, *Captain Fantastic*, brings us full circle, conceptualizing recurring thematic concerns and serving as the most recent artistic vehicle for the frontier and the interrogation of America's socio-cultural milieus in this study.

The film's protagonist, Ben Cash, a father of six, lives with his wife and family, almost completely off-the-grid on a sprawling parcel of land they bought in the wilderness of Washington state. The unconventional couple chooses to live and raise their children in accordance with the values and ideals they see as possessing the most intrinsic worth and clearly view as lacking in contemporary American society. In a letter

to her mother, Ben's wife Leslie reveals her reservations and concerns about their drastic, life-altering decision, but abandons her doubts, telling her mother, "What Ben and I have created here may be unique in all of human existence. We created a paradise out of Plato's *Republic*. Our children shall be philosopher kings. It makes me so indescribably happy. I'm going to get better out here. I know I will because we are defined by our actions, not our words" (01:28:01-01:29:00) The course of the film also illustrates that Ben and Leslie are both highly educated people – Leslie abandons her law practice to pursue her utopian dream – and not to be confused with shiftless, stereotypical hippies spending their days in idle chatter while cursing the system. Their criticisms of American culture become quite apparent through the values, education, and skill-sets they instill, but they undeniably walk the walk as well, truly living by the courage of their convictions. Essentially, what Ben and Leslie create in *Captain Fantastic* becomes a frontier space in a Post-Frontier America where they hope to see their children grow, thrive, and flourish beyond the influences of potentially harmful socio-cultural norms. Ben and Leslie's life together comes with an important caveat though: Leslie suffers from severe mental illness, and the collective ambitions for their family, however, get put on hold and become complicated by Leslie's tragic suicide, the catalyst that brings the children out of the wilderness and forces them into the world, ironically compelling them to navigate what amounts to a new frontier for them, that of the modern American landscape and all of its socio-cultural pitfalls.

Ben and Leslie's abandonment of society and sojourn into the wilderness of Washington state with their children entails a number of sweeping reforms, beginning with the decisions to raise and homeschool their children in the wild, suggesting both

contempt and distrust of Leviathan and its many agents. Rather than live in a cul-de-sac or an apartment and subject themselves to the regime of the time-clock, they teach their children how to hunt, fish, climb mountains, fight, and survive in the space of a Wild Frontier. Together, they have domesticated and carved out a space to live and meaningfully grow in the wilderness. The markers of working long, hard hours for survival and many projects of sustainability characterize their home. They have a garden with fruits and vegetables to tend. They have built a water purification system, and a schedule posted for the delegation of daily chores. They water crops, and after a successful hunt they all clean the deer as a group; all must work and pull their weight according to his or her ability. And as in the Wild Frontier, excess and superfluities remain non-existent beyond family photos, books, and general décor harvested from the wild. The general imagery of the family's home conveys a sense of utility and practicality, a place where intrinsic values, inter-reliance, and prosocial tribal sentiments form the bedrock of their lives.

As the opening scene of the film comes in to focus, we see masculinities in their most ancient forms quickly come to light in a sequence of events echoing the survivalist primitivism that ubiquitously characterizes *The Call of the Wild*. Paralleling the salvific and restorative initiation of the hunt in *Song of Solomon* as well, the oldest son proves himself capable of embodying the self-reliance and rugged individualism necessary for frontier survival, providing a source of food that will help sustain his family. Covered in mud from head to toe as camouflage for stalking prey, the eldest of Ben's children, a young man named Bo, kills a deer, not from a tree stand or with a bow or a rifle, but with a knife, a prosocial act intended to feed his family and one that Hawkeye would

undoubtedly admire. Following the successful kill, all of his younger siblings emerge

from the trees, similarly covered in mud, as they too partake in lessons and rituals of the

hunt, tagging along to learn and receive instruction from their older brother's example.

They all look on as their father cuts out the deer's liver, handing it to Bo, saying "Today

the boy is dead. And in his place is a man" (00:04:28-00:04:38). The father then

ritualistically smears patterns of the deer's blood down the face of his son who takes a

bite of the fresh organ, undaunted in his determination, while the younger siblings all

look on with glowing approval and admiration. Such a scene invokes Junger's work

insomuch as "modern society has gravely disrupted the social bonds that have always

characterized the human experience," and the disasters, hardships, and chaos inherent to

life in the frontier "thrust people back into a more ancient, organic way of relating"

(Junger 53). Like Hawkeye, Earl, Capitola, and Buck, Bo proves that he possesses the

masculine qualities necessary to navigate the frontier he and his family inhabit and

depend upon for survival while making prosocial contributions that benefit the group

while conferring the psychological rewards of competence, autonomy, and

connectedness.

The masculine performances and traits informed by rugged individualism and the

need to competently traverse the frontier while promoting Taleb's concept of antifragility

also characterize Ben's daughters. Ben puts all of his children through various forms of

rigorous hand-to-hand combat training, with one such exercise consisting of learning how

to wield vicious looking carved down sticks that serve as non-lethal, though still quite

dangerous daggers. The sisters must train and fight just as the brothers do, and their

father remains hard in spite of their sex, allowing no room for metaphorical "girl

pushups." Once Vespyr breaks through her sister's defense and stabs Kielyr during a

sparring match, Kielyr's frustration mounts, and she rebukes her father's praise of

Vespyr's attack, defiantly asking "How is that good?! She just fucking stabbed me!"

Their father replies without any sort of comfort or coddling, clearly attempting to harden

his daughter to the chaos and uncertainty of combat: "Then learn to defend yourself"

(00:08:49-00:09:15). The small children learn to fight too, though without the skill and

ferocity of their older siblings who clearly possess a stronger command of their

developing abilities. Still, they train alongside their elders, learning to push themselves

towards mastery of the necessary physical skills and masculine traits. Ben also leads his

children through the intensities of strength and conditioning training, not unlike the men

in *Fight Club*. As Taleb writes, providing a relevant connection to the physical and

mental stress inherent to the rigors of physical exertion, "It is easy to see things around us

that like a measure of stressors and volatility: economic systems, your body, your

nutrition (diabetes and many similar modern ailments seem to be associated with a lack

of randomness in feeding and the absence of the stressor of occasional starvation), your

psyche" (4). To reap the benefits of such stressors, the entire family also engages in high

intensity interval training, jogs up mountain slopes, performs sets of pushups, planks, and

subject their bodies to the limits of strength and endurance, pushing through intense

fatigue and the trembling of muscle failure. All the while, harnessing the antifragile

capacities of the human body and mind continues to make them faster, stronger, and

increasingly fit to survive in the frontier as they adapt to and overcome mental and

physical stressors and barriers. And in this way, the children's masculine performances of

strength, aggression, and courage provide meaningful growth, cooperation, and prosocial tribal inter-reliance, as they all depend on one another in the wilderness of the frontier.

The intensity of Ben's training regimen extends beyond taxing of the body and mind through physical activity to include a breadth and depth of intellectual pursuits as well, giving their bodies the necessary time to recover through well-balanced nutrition, meditation, musical pursuits, and a wide-ranging academic curriculum that spans the arts, sciences, and learning to speak multiple languages. Around the fire after a hard day of training, chores, and hunting deer, the family gathers to read by firelight. Each of Ben's children engage a spectrum of works in this scene: *The Brothers Karamazov, Guns Germs and Steel, The Fabric of the Cosmos,* and *Middlemarch*, to name a few. Ben clearly instructs his family with an effective, diverse curriculum that promotes critical engagement and thinking, not just a regurgitation of facts lacking in contextualized significance. The intellectual acumen of the children surfaces often in the film, but perhaps most pointedly during the scenes in which the family visits Ben's sister-in-law and her family after Leslie's suicide. Leslie's sister Harper, and her husband David, clearly represent America's middle-class status quo in many respects. They live in an affluent suburb, their two young boys distractedly play handheld video games at the dinner table, and the many signifiers of a typical middle-class American household become easily identifiable.

As expected, the most revealing aspects of this visit emerge through colliding juxtapositions of the two families. Ben stands at odds with his in-laws on the matter of raising his children, and both David and Harper express their concerns over Ben's unconventional parenting. David tells Ben that "The kids need structure, stability. They

need to go to a real school" (00:54:12-00:54:20). Harper takes a decidedly more reactionary stance: "For Christ's sake, you're gonna get them killed . . . Your kids are without a mother now. I don't think you have any idea what you're doing to them" (00:54:20-00:54:30). Ben, of course, doubles down in his convictions: "I'm saving their lives. That's what I'm doing" (00:55:00-00:55:10). He continues, and the ideological tension escalates, "Is knowing how to set a broken bone or treat a severe burn ridiculous . . . They have the cardiovascular and muscular endurance of elite athletes." Harper: "Who cares!? They're children. They need to go to school. They need to learn about the world" (00:55:20-00:55:35). Ben then calls the kids down for a demonstration in which Harper and David's sons fail miserably. Neither of them can articulate the significance of the Bill of Rights, let alone define it, yet Ben's much, much younger eight-year-old, Zaja, begins to issue an accurate recitation. To further his point, Ben interjects and says he's not looking for a regurgitation of memorized amendments, and he asks Zaja to tell him about the content of the document in his own words, which leads to an erudite comparative analysis of the rights of China's citizens and those of the U.S. Harper can only concede: "You made your point; we get it" (00:57:15-00:57:17). In spite of Ben's unconventional methods, his children clearly have the advantage when it comes to education, which underscores not only the value of critical thinking but takes an effectively provocative jab at America's socio-cultural and educational norms.

By way of providing the necessary contrast, however, the seemingly ideal veneer of Ben's utopian vision and frontier navigating antifragility begins to crack. During a harrowing rock-climbing ascent up a cliff face, the son Rellian falls, smashing one of his wrists against rocks and breaking it. Ben, ever the stalwart masculine leader who pushes

his children onward, tells his injured son, "There's no cavalry. No one will magically appear and save you in the end" (00:36:14-00:36:18). They eventually make it up the cliff in the rain, shivering, wet, and quickly tend to Rellian's wrist, but this scene also illustrates how the concept of antifragility can break down and become reckless with small children who find it difficult if not impossible to refuse their father's demands. Rellian, in particular, nurses a bitter grudge towards his father throughout the film, blaming Ben for Leslie's death, while also challenging his father's lifestyle and parenting methods. As Pinker puts it, "So it is with parents and children: one person's behavior toward another has consequences for the quality of the relationship between them" (399). Another contextually similar moment in the film involves the scene where Vespyr falls from the roof, attempting to convince the runaway Rellian to come home, and suffers what could have easily been a catastrophic injury. Ben watches in horror, and a recognition of the truth to his in-laws' arguments appears to sink in further. The doctor at the hospital makes the urgency of the situation real when showing Ben Vespyr's x-ray, a few millimeters away from either complete paralysis or death. This clearly overwhelms Ben with emotion and the increasingly awakening recognition that his children are just that, kids, and his responsibility to them should perhaps take their safety more fully into account. Pinker offers his insight on parenting when he writes that "Childrearing is above all an ethical responsibility" (398). Ben accordingly begins to more fully consider the ethics that come with being a father, and the fact that his children could become injured or worse as a consequence of his parenting causes Ben to seriously evaluate his thesis for living. Demanding masculine performances of strength, courage, and toughness from children, in spite of the risks for harm, make Ben question his own motives and methods,

leading him to the realization that the frontier, for all of its promise and potential for intrinsic reward, can still lead to disastrous, even fatal results.

Apart from the physical dangers Ben and his children learn to navigate in the wild, unintended though no less debilitating social consequences play their part in shaping his children as well. Bo's interpersonal interactions appear painfully awkward when he briefly meets a few young women at a service station, and he stands rigid, speechless and slack-jawed as they attempt to make flirtatious small talk. Knowing his father has seen the encounter, Bo overcompensates for his awkwardness after they depart, reverting to his political ideology and likely incompatibilities with the girls as an excuse to avoid further interaction. Though Bo's education and abilities in the frontier rank him next to the likes of Hawkeye or Capitola, his lack of social skills sets him apart in less than flattering ways. And in spite of getting accepted into all the prestigious Ivy schools he applied to, he knows the shortcomings of his life and clearly wants new experiences that exist beyond books and the lessons in navigating the Wild Frontier. The tension between father and son comes to a head as Bo's sheltered socio-cultural ignorance makes him increasingly frustrated and hungry for experiences outside of what his father and mother have taught him. He confesses, begging his father: "I just want to go to college." Ben, however, cannot bring himself to understand: "You speak six languages, you have high math, theoretical physics; what the hell are these people gonna teach you?!" Then Bo, nearly in tears, gets to the heart of the matter, practically screaming at his father: "I know nothing! I know nothing! I am a freak because of you! You made us freaks! And mom knew that; she understood. Unless it comes out of a fucking book, I don't know anything about anything!" (01:18:30-01:19:12) Again, for all of Bo's accomplishments

and apparent masculine prowess, he wants to live a life beyond the relative isolation of the frontier. Although Bo demonstrates human antifragility in navigating the wilderness, he becomes fragile in terms of socialization and experiencing the larger world beyond his life. In such a context, Taleb writes "When you are fragile, you depend on things following the exact planned course, with as little deviation as possible" (71). And because Bo's social skills occupy a state of fragility, he craves change: "When you want deviations, and you don't care about the possible dispersion of outcomes that the future can bring, since most will be helpful, you are antifragile" (71). While Bo's prosocial tribal experiences with his close-knit family testify to the autonomy, connectedness, and competence of successful frontier navigation, the world beyond his home remains a vast, uncharted frontier unto itself, one he desperately wants to explore, thereby enriching his life with the endless possibilities of experience and growth that invaluably benefit an individual.

The end of the film casts a nod in the direction of reconciling two extremes, the one of total conformity represented by Ben's in-laws, and the other of the complete socio-cultural rejection embodied in life off of the grid. After Vespyr's tragic fall, Ben and his family undertake a newly adopted way of life that allows him to retain custody of his children but requires him to walk a sort of conciliatory middle-ground that will keep his children relatively out of harm's way, at least somewhat removed from the chaos of the frontier they have always known. The film's final scene shows a new home, a house in a rural landscape. Elements, imagery, and vestiges of the Wild Frontier and the pastoral ideal color the scene: a chicken coop, crops, flowers, a sprawling rural landscape also bearing the hallmarks of modern civilization and domesticity. By now, Bo has left

the family to see the world and experience life, so his absence from the scene and the family confers the promise for hope, change, and a willingness to navigate a new, post-frontier space. The final shots of the film situate Ben and his remaining children around a kitchen table, preparing breakfast, packing school lunches, and attending to homework. All remain silent; no one speaks during the scene, and yet all appearances seem to convey contentedness. The final moments of the film show Ben casting a glance out of the kitchen window, looking toward what? Likely, Ben's gaze envisions the future and the knowledge that life in the chaos of the Wild Frontier has come to an end.

For characters like Ben, Earl, Capitola, and other seemingly admirable frontier heroes, the frontier can and does inevitably close, but the lessons and character shaping experiences therein do not necessarily have to disappear altogether, and perhaps help us navigate the dilemmas inherent to America's modern socio-cultural dilemmas. The prosocial, tribally connected relationships between characters in the spaces of post-frontier America illustrate the human need to integrate masculine identities with the psychological rewards gained through competence, autonomy, and connectedness. As it is presented by the artists in this chapter, the detribalization of modern America carries the potential to isolate, alienate, and destroy individuals who might otherwise thrive in the company of others. Each work in this chapter not only underscores the value of collectivist efforts, but also reveals the calamitous missteps of characters who seek to define themselves in accordance with extrinsic values. And while the physical space of the frontier has come and mostly gone, leaving behind ways of living that seem archaic and even pointless, the trade-offs remain clear. The trappings of affluence, though liberating in many ways, directly and indirectly undermine basic human needs that

become best realized through a willing, collectivist navigation of hardship. So, the frontier, as it exists in the minds of artists, carries an intrinsic value that rewards those who actively seek out the chaos and uncertainty therein, regardless of how that liminal space arises in the past, present, or future of American life.

CHAPTER V – THE ROLE OF THE FRONTIER

"Stepping through my shadow – forty-six and two are just ahead of me."

-Tool

Closing Remarks

As it stands in the works of many American artists, from the infancy of American fiction up to the present, the frontier continues to shape the thematic elements of storytelling as we move forward into the future, carrying the hopes, fears, and uncertainties that color the twenty-first century. Amazing technological achievements, social progress, and unprecedented levels of affluence now characterize the United States in ways that previous generations could only imagine. This observation is not to blindly or naively imply that American culture, society, or masculinities resist the need for interrogation and criticism, but when examining artistic representations of humanity along with the myriad dilemmas and complexities that ostensibly mirror life, one can see how potential solutions to many socio-cultural predicaments, old and newly emergent alike, instructively reside in the liminal spaces of the frontier depicted throughout America's frontier mythology.

Another fairly recent narrative that accomplishes these ends and fits within the ever-evolving spectrum of frontier mythology is Stephen Hunter's 1994 novel, *Dirty White Boys*. As a frontier narrative, *Dirty White Boys* combines a hero's journey and the heroic optimism that characterizes the Wild Frontiers explored in Chapter II, but also anxiously deflates the heroic aura therein by incorporating the existential ambiguities and detribalized impulses that comprise much of Chapter III's thematic concerns. Additionally, this Hunter novel seemingly attempts to reconcile some of the biological

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and socio-cultural influences that arise in the works explored throughout Chapter IV, particularly the tensions that emerge from the clash of nature and nurture through the masculine performances of individuals attempting to navigate life in modern America. The bulk of the story takes place in and around a vast expanse of rural highways, strip-malls, and backroads of the Oklahoma plains in the early 1990s, with the protagonist, state trooper Bud Pewtie, echoing the rugged individualism and self-reliance of Hawkeye, Earl, and Capitola. Adding a bit more complexity, however, to such clear-cut depictions of virtuously heroic masculinities, Bud also embodies and contends with the more selfish impulses that characterize many of the villains in this study, paradoxically rendering him a problematic construction of a frontier hero, similar to McCarthy's ill-fated Llewelyn Moss or Hunter's racist, reluctantly heroic character Charlie Hatchison in *Pale Horse Coming*.

Hunter's prose casts Bud as a strong, capable, aggressive, and courageous, though deeply flawed and troubled man. His demonstrations of prosocial cooperation, duty, and courage under fire as it concerns his job and his loyalty to the safe-keeping of his small-town community become complicated by his involvement in an extramarital affair with his partner's wife that ends in bitterness and estrangement from his own wife and two sons. Adding to Bud's tumultuous domestic affairs, chaotic frontier elements of the story develop even further when Bud becomes charged with hunting down three escaped convicts who embody the skinwalker tradition and cut a path of violent devastation across the pastoral, idyllic Oklahoma landscape.

The novel's primary antagonist and agent of chaos, Lamar Pye, one of the story's most compelling characters, interestingly embodies the issues that arise in regard to

nature, nurture, and masculine performance as Lamar, a hardened and dangerous criminal, is the illegitimate son of the great Earl Swagger. As Sam tells Earl in *Pale Horse Coming*, the line between the masculine performances that define heroism and criminality is a tenuous one, and the proclivities and socio-cultural conditions that characterize literature's most exalted heroes can also produce horrific masculinities that end in tragedy, as seen with Norris's eponymous *McTeague*, Ahab in *Moby-Dick*, and Big Boy in *Pale Horse Coming*, to name a few. Along the narrative arc of the novel's twists, turns, and confrontations with frontier violence, Bud must also deal with the existential dilemmas presented by the increasing detribalization of his home. Throughout the process of his frontier navigation, Bud works both with and against those in his tribe, revealing types of hardship and chaos that emerge in Wild, Waning, and Post-Frontier spaces while presenting masculine performances that work cooperatively for the sake of prosocial virtue and the collective good, but enacting those performances that also undermine his loyalty and interpersonal relationships within his family. In short, Bud's masculine performance keeps him alive and helps him navigate frontier violence – along with the help of his peers in law enforcement – but the heroic glow that characterizes Hawkeye, Capitola, and Earl becomes deflated in *Dirty White Boys* by a marriage and family life that no longer gives Bud a meaningful identity or a fulfilling sense of place and purpose. Similar to Tyler Durden's claim about the men of *Fight Club*, neither Bud or Lamar have a Great War to fight, no Great Depression. Their war is an existential war, and their respective depressions relatively define their lives. Ultimately, Bud navigates facets of all three frontier spaces explored in this study, as does Lamar with his own tribe of criminals, but whether or not either of them succeed in performing masculinity for the

sake of a tribe and meaningful masculine identity realization remains open to interpretation, suggesting that some tribal sentiments simply cannot be sustained, especially when the pressures and complications of modern life are taken into account. By the end of the novel, Bud willingly loses his family and marries his dead partner's widow to begin a new life. Yet, through all of this, Bud seemingly arrives at some sort of happiness and positive masculine identity realization. This most certainly comes at a cost for Hunter's character, who essentially trades one familial tribe and sense of belonging for another, and the guilt and shame that accompany his decisions will undoubtedly haunt him indefinitely. In *Dirty White Boys*, Hunter effectively complicates both the frontier hero and the frontier villain, but he also complicates the nature of the frontier by rendering the conflicts therein decidedly less binarized in terms of nature/nurture and good/evil, forcing the reader to decide how to evaluate a contemporary hero's journey through a frontier that ends somewhere between the happy ending and the tragic one – and whether or not it is possible to reconcile masculine performances that paradoxically unify some tribes, while disbanding and forsaking others.

Because the demands of time and reasonable space force me to omit compelling frontier narratives like *Dirty White Boys*, there still remain numerous novels and films that can be read and analyzed through the approaches I explore in this dissertation, including, in no particular order, *World War Z*, *The Descent*, *Into the Wild*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and the films *The Big Lebowski*, *Sorry to Bother You*, and *Leave No Trace*. Each of these stories and their characters engage the thematic concerns and frameworks outlined in this project and would likely provide unexpected, if not novel readings of frontier mythology in terms of

masculinities and the trajectory of the frontier as a vehicle for identity realization. For instance, it would be interesting to look at Nathaniel Hawthorne's Hester Prynne, Roger Chillingworth, Reverend Dimmesdale, and Pearl in terms of tribal sentiment, masculine performance, frontier navigation, moral psychology, and masculine identity realization. And while America's frontier narratives, in some ways, continue to move away from the foundational frontier spaces and conventions developed by a number of nineteenth-century writers, frontier scholar Gerald Thompson accordingly reminds us that, "as the United States ages, the importance of the nineteenth-century frontier as a vehicle for self-definition will diminish. Still, most psychologists, like most historians of an earlier generation, recognize that formative experiences have a great impact on the nature and character of the adult" (120). Although the space of the Wild Frontier, as Thompson argues, may lose a significant degree of sway over American literature and art, allowing room for the exploration of newer, more timely and socio-culturally relevant frontier spaces, "Tribal myths, the myths that create national character, are formed when nations undergo the creation process – they arrive early in the life of a people, a tribe, or a nation – and they last as long as the people themselves last, far beyond the actual conditions that create the mythology. There can be additions or subtractions, but national mythology remains constant at the core" (120). In terms of this project, a national mythology and a trajectory of masculine performances – for better or worse – indeed remain present in the primary works I explore, but this national mythology also effectively reveals an evolutionary past that illustrates a proclivity for prosocial tribal sentiments that meaningfully allow characters to navigate the chaos and hardship of liminal frontier spaces.

The arts in America continue to reflect the mythological traditions of the frontier along with how those traditions remain embedded within all manner of storytelling across our contemporary narrative landscape. From the technological innovations flaunted in the current generation of video games, to science fiction, war films, and thrillers, the frontier persists as a liminal space in which America's socio-cultural concerns become played out in existential and interpersonal dramas that continue to simultaneously echo and chart the paths of human history through artistic representations that engage the many deep-seated connections to our evolutionary past.

The word "frontier" tends to evoke certain sets of prescriptive images that likely come to mind – the cowboy or gunslinger riding his trusty steed off into the sunset after taming a hostile town, for instance – but much of this genre-based imagery fits into a larger conceptualization of the frontier as a whole. Conceptualized to function as a liminal space, the frontier may include but also transcend the tropes and conventions of any one particular genre, such as the Western, while retaining its overarching, monomythic qualities such as the hero's journey and the archetype of the tyrannical king. The wooded mountain forests of upstate New York, the swamps of Mississippi, the plains of Oklahoma, and the barren wastes of American deserts all fit the mold of a traditional, Wild Frontier landscape wherein stories often depict an idealized – if not altogether romanticized – path of conquest, settlement, and spread of civilization over an entire continent. The freedom, autonomy, and self-reliance afforded and often rendered necessary by expansionist movement across lawless, hostile geographic settings have all collectively worked to establish and provide artistic vehicles for exploring overarching thematic concerns that help to comprise the three primary spaces of the frontier along the

trajectory of American literary output. Regardless of the similarities and differences among various physical settings – within the emergence of newer, industrialized frontier spaces, and the socio-cultural tensions depicted therein – characters must inevitably contend with significant degrees of hardship and chaos in America's frontier narratives. Moreover, even though the spaces of the Wild Frontier reach impending closure and succumb to the increasingly prolific pressures of Leviathan's influence, the fictional heroes and villains in frontier narratives still continue to navigate liminal spaces that engage the ever-evolving dialogue surrounding conceptions of American frontier mythology, the emergence of new socio-cultural concerns, the performance of masculinities in relation to both.

The frontier often exists as a relative wilderness and untamed landscape through which chaos and hardship encourage the development of self-reliance and rugged individualism, both of which carry capacities for the hallmarks of virtuous, prosocial masculine performances as depicted in an abundance of fictional and non-fictional narratives. Concerning the frontier and notions of American exceptionalism – which often become interpreted in the context of negative, imperialist connotations of self-reliance and rugged individualism – an abundance of interdisciplinary scholarship examines this ground with many culturally driven masculinist beliefs attempting to support the inevitability, if not divinity, of manifest destiny. Such attitudes can be found throughout a range of temporally and contextually situated American philosophical texts, including John Winthrop's 1630 "City upon a Hill" sermon, the Monroe Doctrine, and John Quincy Adams's influential – though eventually reconsidered – advocacy of continentalism. Given that such a context often anchors ideas of American

exceptionalism, "Critics might rail that the frontier myth is dangerous and destructive, but based upon the history of other nations and cultures we would seem to be stuck with it. Like an unsavory relative, it's ours, for better or worse" (Thompson 120). And while nationalism and the impulses of imperialism shape much frontier mythology, the masculine performances scattered across such an expansive narrative terrain do not necessarily elide aspirational models of prosocial virtue or behaviors and attitudes that provide cautionary examples that illustrate how one might learn from the pitfalls of divisive sentiments.

Within the scope of my analyses, however, a number of truly *exceptional* characters emerge throughout the realm of frontier narratives, some of which reinforce the negative connotations inherent to definitions of American exceptionalism – like the imperialist drive of the French and Indian war as depicted by Cooper, London's narrative of Alaskan land exploitation, and the dominant white hegemonies interrogated by Morrison and Hunter. Interestingly, some of the frontier narratives in this study also reject and transcend the drives of Leviathan, cultural hegemony, and empire, as seen at times through Ishmael in *Moby-Dick*, and even more pointedly in *Captain Fantastic* and *Fight Club*. Many of the stories and characters in this study provide performative examples of what it means to be pro-socially exceptional through performances of masculinity that harbor little to no regard for the influences of nationalistic impulses and/or Leviathan, while other characters present cautionary tales of how masculinities can produce and/or become products of exceptional pain, suffering, and tragedy, all of which circle back to the negative implications behind many notions of American exceptionalism. So, given these many elements to consider, exceptionalism might be

reframed to both include and sometimes even transcend nationalism and imperialistic motivations. Given the path of American history, however, the driving forces of conquest and the spread of Leviathan become unavoidably entwined in these narratives. Meanwhile, some of the more canonical stories side-step or gloss over the fact the United States was largely built on the backs of slaves and on lands stolen from indigenous peoples, whose stories and experiences now lack historical representation, if not memory in a number of ways.[1] All things considered, however, because hardship and chaos help to comprise and define the liminal spaces situated in frontier narratives, masculine performances inevitably become necessarily enacted in the stories told. The frontier, as it exists in the works in this study, becomes a space where *because* of chaos and hardship men and women must strive to collectively resist selfish impulses while moving towards prosocial conflict resolution that demonstrates cooperation in spite of disagreements and even interpersonal animosities.

Throughout and following geographic conquest and the removal of Native American populations, the loss of tribal culture as an alternative socio-cultural (and

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[1] Elizabeth Ammons's essay "Expanding the Canon," for example, examines how and why many literature courses that teach the literary movements of realism and naturalism often overlook or altogether omit the writings of multicultural authors such as Charles Chesnutt, Sui Sin Far, Zitkala Ša, and Anzia Yezierska. I would add to Ammons's argument that their works can undoubtedly be read in the light of this project as well, likely adding nuance and additional depth to frontier mythology, representation, and experience.

evolutionary) influence and means of stratification reveals a number of issues that arise along the various pathways towards America's civilization. The evolved tribal impulses and interconnected moral cultures that enabled humanity's cooperative, inter-reliant progress as a species, by means of cultures of honor and cultures of dignity, eventually become strained through the socio-cultural shift to adopting more independent, individualistic, and potentially isolating social structuring. The relative freedom inherent to this structuring affords an immense liberation from group dependence and an immediate need for inter-reliance, but Junger effectively outlines the consequences of the social trade-offs that tend to accompany affluence. Some of these consequences experience artistic development in *McTeague*, *The Awakening*, *No Country for Old Men*, and *Song of Solomon*, all of which depict characters that demonstrate a cultural departure from prosocial, cooperatively meaningful inter-reliance, precipitated, in part, by modern America's industrialized, hegemonically capitalist landscape. The resulting masculine performances woven into these works can be linked to emergent industrial and socio-cultural changes in America, rendering an increased frequency in isolated and alienated character representations that become more pointedly explored throughout much of American literature. Additionally, a spectrum of both prosocial and selfish biological impulses, in tandem with the influences of America's socio-cultural pressures, combine to generate masculinities that tend to stand in fairly binarized opposition to one another. Under the umbrella of this project, aspirational masculine proclivities and/or performances of strength, courage, and aggression tend to navigate chaos and hardship optimally and most effectively. Furthermore, it appears as though the current thematic inspirations and concerns that contribute to the production and shaping of American

storytelling continue to investigate attempts at sorting out means of meaningfully transitioning and/or assimilating gendered performances into the prosocial, interpersonally connected context of an ever-changing socio-cultural landscape.

While the tribal sentiments and impulses portrayed throughout the works in this study carry potential antidotes to loneliness, isolation, alienation, and despair, the darker side of tribalism that works to rip apart and destroy human cooperation operates in the liminal space of the frontier just as ubiquitously. The brutal white supremacy depicted in *Pale Horse Coming* and the indiscriminate killing of innocent victims by the Seven Days in *Song of Solomon* both provide examples of tribal sentiment gone astray and used as a means to justify violence and wholesale slaughter. And while an argument can be made that Junger romanticizes tribalism in problematic ways, the fact remains that there is something of value inherent to tribal culture when it transcends the attitudes, beliefs, and opinions, that otherwise divide people. And if a solution to such negative tribalism exists, it likely resides in the adoption of what Joshua Greene terms metamorality: "a higher-level moral system that adjudicates among competing tribal moralities, just as a tribe's morality adjudicates among competing individuals" (Greene 147). More specifically, Greene writes that "we come equipped with automated behavioral programs that motivate and stabilize cooperation within personal relationships and groups. These include capacities for empathy, vengefulness, honor, guilt, embarrassment, tribalism, and righteous indignation. These social impulses serve as counterweights to our selfish impulses" (147-148). Following a similar thread, Junger acknowledges that the word tribe is difficult to define; nevertheless, his approach resides in "what we can learn from tribal societies about loyalty and belonging and the eternal quest for meaning" (xvii).

Such a claim implicitly suggests that both good and bad scenarios, allegiances, and outcomes emerge from tribal culture; however, the goal for the creators of frontier narratives and the audiences that consume them – consciously or unconsciously – involves a critically introspective and interpersonal separating of the wheat from the chaff. Just as masculine performances carry positive and negative characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors, the same applies to tribal sentiment and culture. But does this mean that we should throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater? Probably not. Junger, also reminds us that in times of hardship and disaster people tend to band together to navigate suffering and chaos in a group because we strategically evolved to do so and we also reap the psychological rewards inherent to such connectedness. Ultimately, the narratives and characters explored in this project instructively reveal how masculine performances embody the aspirational, collective ways of being needed to navigate the hardships inherent not only to frontier chaos, but inherent to the burdens of being, old and modern alike. At the same time, the pitfalls and missteps made by characters in frontier mythology also serve as reminders of what unifies, divides, helps, and harms individuals which, at the very least, allows room for critical thought, if not models of masculinity that provide guidance.

The optimism and heroic glow that characterizes early frontier stories becomes evident in the works and Wild Frontiers explored by Cooper, Southworth, and Hunter, all of whom offer masculine performances of strength, courage, aggression, and even violence that become enacted for the collective good and the sake of upholding moral virtue. By contrast, the same authors offer masculine performances influenced by selfish impulses and motives that undermine the psychological rewards attained through being a

meaningful part of a group. And for the most part, the masculinities in their selected novels seem fairly straightforward in terms of presenting and artistically evaluating what constitutes a positive or negative model of masculinity. The heroic masculinities and relatively happy endings in these frontier narratives begin to wane, however, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when naturalist writers like Norris, Crane, London, and Chopin remove such rose-tinted glasses in favor of examining forces of nature and the more sinister, though logical capacities of humankind while simultaneously interrogating the machinations of America's socio-cultural dilemmas. Thus, these artists continue the passing of a thematic torch of sorts, from characters like Magua, Montcalm, the Le Noirs, and Big Boy to Ahab, McTeague, Marcus, and Chigurh, all of whom echo the biological, psychological, and socio-cultural realities that inform the distinct frontier spaces found throughout the catalog of American fiction.

The effects of frontier closure produce the liminal space of the Waning Frontier in tandem with a waning of tribal sentiment. Industrialization, capitalism, and the increasing separation of men and women relative to respective, gendered work and domestic spheres, all function together to illustrate thematic literary concerns that characterize America's entrance into the modern age while foreshadowing the logical relevance and urgency of the same concerns in the decades to come. Divisive competition in the marketplace, greed, envy, and violently selfish impulses all combine to render a convergence of biological and cultural influences that provide cautionary examples of masculine performances gone horribly awry, deviating from or altogether rejecting the tribal sentiments that would otherwise potentially lead to positive psychological individuation along with collective well-being. Melville, Norris, Chopin, and McCarthy

effectively render this timeless drama in their works, illustrating how the masculine proclivity for and connection to strength, aggression, courage, and violence, in the space of a detribalized Waning Frontier can lead to death, destruction, or become stifled by prescriptive gender norms, a vivid contrast to selflessly heroic prosocial masculinities and meaningful identity realizations.

The liminal spaces of the Post-Frontier continue to invoke the socio-cultural influences that emerge along the path of American progress, and the characters who confront hardship and chaos must do so by (re)connecting with the lessons and realities of our ancestral, evolutionary past in order to successfully navigate the isolating and debilitating pressures that accompany modern American life. *The Call of the Wild*, although problematic in terms of overlooking or downplaying historical narratives of conquest and land exploitation, still illustrates the means by which tribal sentiment and prosocial connectedness benefit not only the self but the welfare of the group. The results of such a narrative, once more, lead to meaningful masculine identity realization. London's novel, however, comes with a caveat that necessarily begs the question of how masculinities can transcend the potentially harmful effects of tribalism and forces us to look for ways of cooperatively reconciling polarities that arise from the capitalist and imperialist impulses tied to conceptions of Us and Them. The marginally hopeful masculinities presented in the context of our modern place in time – Tyler Durden, Milkman, and Ben Cash – invoke the possibility for masculine identity realization, so long as they possess the strength and willingness to confront the chaos and hardship that allows them to change, learn, grow, and succeed in performing masculinity through inter-reliant, prosocial means.

Our current understanding that physical, psychological, and biological factors cause a person's – or dog's – genes to interact with physical and socio-cultural environments helps to explain why being part of a group or tribe unlocks genetic potential in frontier spaces characterized by hardship and chaos. In a modern world where the once sharp edges of life have been softened and sanded down in many ways, technological preoccupations, industrialized food production, affluence, and other numerous agents of Leviathan have the capacity to foster isolation and somnambulant states of being, along with an unwillingness to confront anything that pushes an individual towards acute chaos and/or hardship, let alone mild discomfort, such as the case may be. Navigating the frontier, on the other hand, invokes and confers the rewards of antifragility, strengthening and improving those who embrace the stressors found in chaos and hardship of all sorts, so long as the chaos and hardship remain acute and not chronic. Stepping out from the other side of the frontier via the path of prosocial navigation affects and even changes people through reaching back into our evolutionary past and tapping into the desires and motivations that compelled human beings for thousands of years and undeniably contributed to our survival and growth as a species. This framework certainly applies to the fictional characters explored in this study, at the very least, and often does so for both the good of the self and the good of a group or community.

The possibilities and directions for the analyses in this project offer a number of potential avenues for further study. A deeper examination of race and queer identities in regard to the liminal spaces of the frontier would contribute to an understanding of how the frontier becomes conceptualized, functions cross-culturally, and opens pathways for

insightfully complicating masculinities, though I suspect there remain a number of overarching tendencies that humans invoke when it comes to successful frontier navigation. For instance, though many African American and Native American experiences remain comparatively different in relation to many white European experiences, our common tribal ancestry, evolutionary past, mechanisms for survival, and prosocial connectedness likely overlap and mirror one another in an abundance of contexts. Another interesting topic that merits exploration in this context might include Earl Swagger's father, Charles Swagger, whose violent adventures and sensational frontier traversal in Hunter's novel *G-Man* become further strained by the fact that Charles is a (mostly) closeted gay man navigating predominant heterosexual norms during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Hardship, in varying degrees, unifies the human experience and the characters in this project, as depicted in both the arts and in the lives that art presumably aspires to represent.

As a brief side note, analyses of frontier mythology and exploring representations of masculinities in our current generation of video games would likely prove interesting as well. Currently, the gaming industry is one of the most far reaching and lucrative forms of entertainment, and the characters and stories depicted in many newer releases over the last several years demonstrate increasing artistic sophistication in terms of narrative, plot, setting, and character development, to say nothing of the monumental technological leaps that enhance a gamer's experience. Hugely successful titles such as *The Last of Us*, *Horizon Zero Dawn*, *Red Dead Redemption 2*, and the highly anticipated *Days Gone* all present hostile frontier spaces that shape and test masculinities in ways that many still believe to be the sole province of literature and "high art." Humanities

scholars are already beginning to cross into this world, and the analyses and discussions surrounding various games appear to be quite compelling, offering potentially fertile ground for examining both the biological and socio-cultural elements that continue to shape all manner of storytelling.

The role genetic proclivities have in shaping ideologies is a subject that would also make a fascinating addition to the scope of this project. For instance, in examining the darker side of identity politics that informs the closed-door, exclusionary tribalism threatening prosocial connectedness and inter-reliance throughout the works in this study, one final socio-cultural/evolutionary connection worth pondering also warrants consideration and carries enormous consequences. As Pinker explains ideologies in the context of heritability, "liberal and conservative attitudes are largely, though far from completely heritable. . . . Liberal and conservative attitudes are heritable not, of course, because attitudes are synthesized directly from DNA but because they come naturally to people with different temperaments" (283). Pinker's accounting for the heritability of political attitudes relies on several studies of identical twins who were separated at birth, and when "tested in adulthood, their political attitudes turn out to be similar, with a correlation coefficient of .62 (on a scale from -1 to +1)" (283). These and other similar findings discussed by Pinker – cited by Junger as well – suggest that our adult political ideologies are linked to approximately fifty percent (give or take, depending on the study) genetic influences. To put it another way, our political leanings and temperament are often understood as equal products of nature and nurture. Furthermore, in discerning that people, in part, inherit particular dispositions, Pinker continues: "When it comes to attitudes that are heritable, people react more quickly and emotionally, are less likely to

change their minds, and are more attracted to like-minded people" (283). Crystallizing

how this knowledge fits within the biological and socio-cultural scope of this study, along

with the tensions that arise from the many Me vs. Us predicaments depicted in the

primary works, Pinker also concludes that

> The modern theory of evolution falls smack into the social contract
>
> tradition. It maintains that complex adaptations, including behavioral
>
> strategies, evolved to benefit the individual (indeed, the genes for those
>
> traits within an individual), not the community species, or ecosystem.
>
> Social organization evolves when the long-term benefits to the individual
>
> outweigh the immediate costs. . . . Reciprocal altruism, in particular is just
>
> the traditional concept of the social contract restated in biological terms.
>
> (285)

Such an assessment should help further clarify where this framework might fit in terms of

my own or other similar studies. Pinker writes that humans were never solitary beings,

nor did we

> inaugurate group living by haggling over a contract at a particular time
>
> and place. Bands, clans, tribes, and other social groups are central to
>
> human existence and have been so for as long as we have been a species.
>
> But the *logic* of social contracts may have propelled the evolution of the
>
> mental faculties that keeps us in these groups. Social arrangements are
>
> evolutionarily contingent, arising when the benefits of group living exceed
>
> the costs. With a slightly different ecosystem and evolutionary history, we
>
> could have ended up like our cousins the orangutans, who are almost

entirely solitary. And according to evolutionary biology, all societies –

animal and human – seethe with conflicts of interest and are held together

by shifting mixtures of dominance and cooperation. (285)

Accordingly, the roots of liberalism and conservatism, along with the various strains and

iterations that have evolved over time and socio-cultural change implicitly, if not overtly,

occupy each work in this project, and both are decidedly necessary in the healthy

functioning of a democratic society. Moreover, in the context of surviving, let alone

successfully navigating many frontier narratives, a character has to be able to protect and

defend his or her self, and he or she must also be willing to protect and defend others.

These ancient human needs and impulses comprise the respective bases of conservative

and liberal thought, embedded in the biological and socio-cultural evolution of humanity

as a species, as both are equally effective strategies for survival. Both perspectives confer

advantages and disadvantages, but both become optimally realized when enacted in

concert. These genetically evolved survival strategies spill over into religious, political,

racial, and gendered tribalism in very apparent ways, with the current fight over border

security providing a ready-made example that reflects both ways of thinking.

Interestingly, the shouting matches and denigration that erupts from both sides of

an increasingly vitriolic and polarized political aisle, regardless of the subject matter, tend

to take a back seat, if not altogether vanish, at least temporarily, when disaster and

tragedy descends, as it so often and unexpectedly does. Catastrophic occurrences – or

frontier spaces – also level the playing field in that social class and status defined by

wealth, race, gender, sexuality, or any combination of the thereof tends to disappear when

chaos and hardship arise, which neutralizes many socio-cultural disparities, taps into the

advantages of gendered survival skills, as shown in the Nova Scotia mining disaster explained in Chapter I, and provides the utilitarian avenues through which masculine performances informed by either liberal or conservative thinking work cooperatively for the benefit of a singular tribe that transcends interpersonal differences. A rich man or woman can demonstrate bravery in the face of danger in the same way a poor man or woman – or anyone on the gender spectrum for that matter – can rise to meet the very same challenges. Race knows no boundaries or limitations in this context either. Cooperative and harmful masculinities alike, when performed in the chaotic spaces of the frontier, speak to humanity's evolutionary past and a connection to our socio-cultural experiences. And so, when masculine performance necessarily arises to confront chaos and hardship, the aspirational goals of navigating such frontier spaces ought to consist of taking pause and considering whether or not a particular behavior or action would contribute to the welfare of someone else. Our current time and place in history rarely forces most people to consider what they would give their lives for, and we are undoubtedly very fortunate to occupy such a position. However, as Junger writes, "What catastrophes do – sometimes in the space of a few minutes – is turn back the clock on ten thousand years of social evolution. Self-interest gets subsumed into group interest because there is no survival outside group survival, and that creates a social bond that many people sorely miss" (66). Many, if not all of the works in this study illustrate the overarching need for the deeply meaningful human bonds and connectedness attained through prosocial masculine performances, if and when the need for such performances arises. Furthermore, frontier spaces provide a vehicle for an inter-reliant realization of human virtue, morality, and aspirational masculine performances that underscore the

intrinsic value – and utility – of tribal sentiment, connectedness, and prosocial behavior when confronted with overwhelming hardship, chaos, and the harmful masculine performances that subvert and remain antithetical to the rewards of both self-determination theory and the interconnected advantages of cooperation. Such revelations reflect not only a channeling of our ancestral past, the socio-cultural progress and errors of human civilization, and the monomythic qualities within storytelling, but our shared evolutionary history as well.

This study ultimately attempts to cross theoretical thresholds explicitly and implicitly presented by a number of scholars that seek to further our understanding of humanity's complexity. My goal is to connect those ideas to discussions and analyses of masculinities that further our understanding of both how and why masculinities function as they do in times of conflict and duress. Junger's tribal framework connects to masculinities in that it helps explain the ways in which humans evolved to perform masculinity in life threatening circumstances. Pinker's scientific analyses provide an understanding of how we are products of nature and nurture without relegating us to the realm of determinism, thereby enhancing our understanding of how biology and culture interact. Taleb offers insight into why humans often fall into the categorical designation of antifragile; we tend to get better and stronger when confronted with stressors. Without stressors, fragility and even atrophy are likely to occur. Kimmel and Connell explore the importance of the socio-cultural forces that shape masculinities and define them in relation to one another, while Marx (Leo) offers insight into the existential malaise that characterizes life in an industrialized modern world, suggesting that a number of tensions exist between our biological impulses and the culture in which we live and move.

Hopefully, my contribution to literary analysis through implementing the various

approaches employed in this study illustrates that masculinities should not be discussed

solely in terms of power and privilege but extend to include the myriad impulses and

motivations that inform the human experience. The performance of masculinity and

masculine roles help us understand the dynamics of frontier spaces which provide an

insightful staging ground through which authors and readers might recognize and

evaluate how masculinities function when exposed to hardship, chaos, virtue, and vice,

all of which remain unavoidable facets of life and storytelling. Cautionary characters like

Magua, McTeague, Big Boy, and Ahab, fit the description of typical antisocial alpha-

males (big and/or bullying) in comparison to conspiring, sneaky antisocial betas (who

also attempt to selfishly to steal from, exploit, and undermine collective welfare of the

group), like Montcalm, the Le Noir villains, Marcus, Cleon – the warden from *Pale*

Horse Coming – and even the conformist in-laws in *Captain Fantastic* in several ways.

Similarly, a character like Chigurh becomes a representative for the modern concerns

surrounding masculine performances gone horribly off the rails and that erupt in violent

chaos in the middle of anywhere and nowhere U.S.A. Contrasts and potential solutions to

these tribally disaffiliated masculine performances arise through characters like Hawkeye

and company, Earl, Capitola, Ishmael, Milkman, Tyler in his "Tyler" kind of way, and

Ben Cash. These characters navigate the chaos and hardship of the frontier through the

kind of prosocial connectedness that invokes positive psychological individuation

through putting the welfare of the group above the limitational wants and desires of the

self.

Through identifying and exploring the three primary spaces that arise in America's frontier mythology, a number of overarching thematic connections and pathways that unify the works in this study become clear. The space of the Wild Frontier fosters the heroic optimism that accompanies the progressive and populist myths of the frontier. This space depicts aspirational masculine performances embodied not only by the characteristics of tribal sentiment, rugged individualism, and self-reliance, but the democratic ideals that ostensibly comprise the bedrock of America's national character. However, the paradoxes and ironies that arise in the Wild Frontier remain evident as well. Self-serving impulses, nationalism, and imperialistic motivations all characterize the historical context of the Wild Frontier narrative, implicitly and explicitly, providing insight into the patterns of many biologically and socio-culturally informed missteps. This space also provides contexts of chaos and hardship that often enable and require masculinities to transcend political ambitions, ideological biases, and selfish behaviors that elicit destructive interpersonal conflicts. While the Wild Frontier can also provide the pastoral landscapes that encourage inter-reliance and prosocial connectedness needed to navigate such terrain, the subsequently emergent space of the Waning Frontier arises as a more barrenly hostile and unforgiving space where the landscape lies beholden the negative consequences of industrialization and modernity. The biological and socio-cultural influences represented in the Waning Frontier, in many ways, speak to the difficulties that emerge when masculinities are forced to navigate and assimilate into an increasingly de-tribalized existence. Lastly, journeys into the spaces of the Post-Frontier reveal the antifragility of characters through their intrapersonal and interpersonal reckonings with Post-Frontier American life. The hardship and chaos navigated in the

liminal space of the Post-Frontier presents alternative and potentially salvific means of living, offering instructive lessons to take away from the mistakes made in the Waning Frontier. In the postmodern world we now inhabit, the Post-Frontier encourages characters to tap into their evolutionary past and reintegrate masculine identities through the shared experiences of collective, restorative norms.

By way of a few more closing remarks, all of the narratives in this project present characters who actively seek, stumble onto, or become forced into navigating some form of frontier. What often emerges as a result in these works might be described as a collective norm of experience or a shared fate that arises through confrontations with chaos and hardship. And, perhaps most significantly, high stakes are involved. Junger insightfully describes the human evolutionary path of navigating such scenarios: "If there are phrases that characterize the life of our early ancestors, 'community of sufferers' and 'brotherhood of pain' surely must come close" (55). In the specific context of this study, however, it is the frontier that becomes a source of chaos and hardship that shapes the collective norm of experience, illustrating the ways in which humans carry the evolved proclivities for cooperation that might transcend otherwise selfish motives. In this light, the frontier narrative acts as a conduit that shows how gender performance, in many ways, reflects the profound relationship between nature and nurture. And when the shared fates of the characters in the frontier narrative become characterized by acute hardship, their experiences tend to be even more profound in terms of identity realization, while status markers like race, sex, and wealth tend to become equalized and individuals are primarily evaluated on the basis of character. If one assumes the arts have an evolutionary function that stretches all the way back to the time of cave paintings and

drum circles in which people dance in unison around a fire, it may very well stand to reason that through art we find connections to the same neurochemical, psychological, and socio-cultural rewards that the frontier narrative elicits. In the frontier, autonomy, competence, and connectedness buoy the group. And as evolutionary sciences theorize, anything that makes us feel good likely carries a functional, utilitarian purpose. Perhaps we continue to be drawn to frontier stories because they are as old and timeless as humanity itself. And maybe, by immersing ourselves into the triumphs and failures of frontier navigation, we are tapping into a shared ancestral past that unifies us all and tells us something about who we are and who we have the potential to become.

Finally, we all navigate frontiers in some capacity, willingly and unwillingly. But if frontier mythology and the masculinities portrayed therein can teach us anything, it is that pushing through chaos with strength, courage, compassion, and cooperation tends to promote the growth of the self, the group, and our species, allowing us to realize the potential of who we might aspire to be in spite of life's inevitable hardships and difficulties. When environmental stressors and biological proclivities combine to shape prosocial masculine performances in the liminal space of the frontier, the resulting masculinities, as portrayed by the artists in this project, offer guideposts that show the ways to virtue and interpersonal connectedness. Strength, courage, aggression, and loyalty – when empathetically deployed for the sake of others – shows us the intrinsic value of both how and why masculine performance remains tied to the evolutionary history of humankind.

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