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## “Slaves With White Collars”: Persistent Performances of Masculinity in Crisis

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*Recent trends in popular culture suggest an emerging discourse of professional masculinity in crisis. This essay examines two illustrative films, *Fight Club* and *In the Company of Men*, whose characters bemoan the impending demise of the masculine businessman. To revive him, they (re)turn to what we call a “civilized/primitive” masculinity, embodied by the hardened white man who finds healing in wounds. This subjectivity shrouds the race and class hierarchy on which it rests by overtly appealing to gender division. The current discourse of dominant men in crisis bears remarkable resemblance to historical narratives of masculinity in decline. Ultimately, we argue that this pattern reveals chronic conflicts embedded in particular performances of masculinity and thus, potential vulnerabilities in patriarchal capitalism. **Keywords:** masculinity, *Fight Club*, *In the Company of Men*, civilized, primitive, gender, race, class, sexuality, labor identity, professional*

The whole generation is womanized; the masculine tone is passing out of the world; it's a feminine, a nervous, hysterical, chattering, canting age, an age of hollow phrases and false delicacy and exaggerated solicitudes and coddled sensibilities, which, if we don't soon look out, will usher in the reign of mediocrity, of the feeblest and flattest and the most pretentious that has ever been.

Basil Ransom, *The Bostonians*, 1886 (qtd. in Rotundo 252)

I swear it's not a world of men [...] It is a world of clockwatchers, bureaucrats, office holders. It's a fucked-up world. No adventure in it [...] We're the members of a dying breed.

Ricky, *Glengarry, Glen Ross*, 1992

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From sitcoms to social movements, commercial campaigns to scholarship, we are witnessing the growth of interest in men as men. Increasingly, US representations of manhood converge on the claim that masculinity is in the midst of crisis. The rise of men's movements like the Promise Keepers and mythopoetic men, not to mention popular television programs like *The Man Show*, suggest the broad resonance of this crisis narrative and the perceived need for curative forms of manliness. Though scholars have begun to examine the alleged crisis (e.g., Horrocks; Robinson), few have attended to the particular role of work, and those who have tend to stress working-class frailties (e.g., Faludi; Fine, Weis, Addeleston, and Marusza).

In this essay, we spotlight the performance of a subjectivity that has drawn little direct discussion. Specifically, we trace an emerging discourse that offers identity politics to white/collar<sup>1</sup> men. To focus our analysis of this freshly politicized subjectivity, we explore two illustrative yet distinct film performances: *Fight Club* and *In the Company of Men*. The discourse that weaves across these texts mourns the imminent collapse of the corporate man, over-civilized and emasculated by allied obligations to work and women. To rebuild this haggard creature, the films (re)turn to what we call a "civilized/primitive" masculinity, embodied by the hardened white man who finds healing in wounds. This resilient figure obscures the race and class hierarchy on which it rests by explicitly appealing to gender division, if not outright misogyny. The current discourse of dominant men in crisis bears conspicuous resemblance to other historical discourses, such as a similar narrative of threatened masculinity in play one century ago. Ultimately, we argue that this pattern reveals chronic conflicts embedded in the ongoing performance of white/collar masculinity and so, potential vulnerabilities in patriarchal capitalism.

### Organizing Masculinity

Research on masculinity has become a truly interdisciplinary venture, including feminist analyses that span rhetorical, historical, psychoanalytic, and sociological perspectives. Below, we clarify our interest in the meeting of dominant masculinities and labor identities. We begin by establishing our conception of masculinity and, more specifically, the role of discourse and performance in the social construction of gender. We then narrow our focus to professional masculinity, drawing upon relevant historical and contemporary discourses of gender, labor, and identity to theorize enduring dilemmas that appear to haunt white/collar performances. Our theoretical frame integrates insights gleaned from three principal literatures: masculinity and film studies, feminist and critical organization research, and historical accounts of masculinity rhetoric.

#### *Studying and Defining Men and Masculinity*

Scholarly interest in masculinity continues its dramatic rise. A recent proliferation of monographs, anthologies, and journals confirms the development of a diverse body of work that interrogates gender identities and explores how masculine forms relate to patriarchal systems.<sup>2</sup> This research has generated pivotal insights that inform our work. For example, masculinity may be conceptually detached from

actual male bodies (Cheng “Men”) and broadly defined as “the set of images, values, interests, and activities held important to a successful achievement of male adulthood” (Jeffords *Remasculinization* xii). Masculinity is not a stable or unified phenomenon; its meanings shift over time and in relation to culture, context, and person (Spitzack “Production”). Multiple narratives of manhood abound at once, and the subjectivities and practices they enable engender differential, consequential performances of power and resistance (Corey; Mechling and Mechling; Nakayama “Significance”). More specifically, theories of intersectionality push us to recognize that gender identity is inevitably raced and classed (C. Crenshaw; K. Crenshaw; Dace; Orbe). Thus, talk of “men” and “the masculine”—however generalized—always refers to a type of masculinity (Dines; Eng; Wiegman).

Most masculinity studies coalesce around a concern shared with feminist scholarship: the need to mark masculinity and men as gendered subjects. In particular, scholars challenge the invisibility of dominant masculinities, since all forms of manhood do not enjoy similar privilege. Hence, the term “hegemonic masculinity” has come to capture the socially constructed, institutionalized yet shifting form of masculinist identity that systematically dominates femininities and alternative masculinities (Connell “Big Picture” and *Gender*; Donaldson). Ironically, studies of hegemonic masculinity run the risk of re-centering the subject they seek to dismantle: white, heterosexual, middle-class men (Robinson).<sup>3</sup> Not oblivious to such danger, many masculinity scholars assume the risk to shatter illusions of homogeneous, indelibly privileged male selves (e.g., Eng; Mumby; Spitzack “Theorizing”). In a similar vein, we stress how popular performances of masculinity offer identity politics to middle-class, heterosexual, white men. Accordingly, we do not directly study men *per se* but rather discourses of dominant masculinity.

### *Masculinity as Discourse and Performance: Filmic Fragments*

By “discourse,” we refer to temporarily fixed (i.e., predictable but not determined), coherent (though also conflicted), abstract, and dispersed social narratives about people, objects, and events. Multiple discourses (e.g., of masculinity and race) circulate and intersect at once, although some enjoy greater institutional support, and so, “look” and “feel” more persuasive than others (Hall “Signification” and “The Work”). Discourses generate possible conditions in that they enable ways of seeing, being, and doing (Laclau and Mouffe). In dramaturgical terms, they supply social actors with roles and scripts, with rough guides to public and mundane performances of identity and social relations. Discourses—of gender, for example—come to life and assume concrete form as we perform and thus, affirm or revise the possibilities they offer. In this sense, accomplishing gender necessarily entails performance, whether improvised in the mundane moments of everyday life or memorialized on screen for countless witnesses (Butler; West and Zimmerman).

Appearing in various mediated forms, discourses are dynamic and partial. While we may select various texts (e.g., popular films or literature, interview data) for analysis, we do not presume that any one contains nor completely represents a discourse; rather, apparently discrete texts can be understood as fragments of larger narratives (McGee). Attention to complementary *and* contradictory strands enables a contextual analysis, for texts do not exist in cultural vacuums but become

promiscuous players in larger social structures. Although various public texts comprise cultural discourses, we stress popular culture, and specifically, film. Our discursive approach to film highlights vocabularies and ideologies of masculinity, necessarily excluding empirical claims about male behaviors or psyches. This is not to say that we see no connection between filmic and other performances of gender, such as those found in mundane interaction. Rather, we take interest in film performance as it shapes the social imagination, extending invitations to “new” performances of subjectivity in everyday life. In short, we treat film as a meta-performance wherein actors recognized as such articulate gendered possibilities for social actors. We are especially concerned with how film performances both highlight and obscure intersections of masculinity with other facets of identity. This focus reflects our aim to understand how “representational intersectionality” operates in popular performances (K. Crenshaw). In other words, we explore how “symbolic images applied to different race, class, and gender groups interact in maintaining systems of domination and subordination” (Collins 33). When not qualified in political terms, masculinity discourse tends to summon a homogenous, static image that is white, middle-class, and heterosexual (Mandziuk).

Guiding our venture is a considerable body of work on gender and film.<sup>4</sup> In particular, some feminist film scholars criticize a tendency to take masculinity as given, thereby perpetuating the notion that it is a fixed entity occupying the space of privilege (e.g., Cohan and Hark; Wiegman). In an effort to rupture its silence and normativity, these authors investigate performances of masculinity in film, targeting race, class, and sexuality as central poles around which masculinities converge and diverge (e.g., Beavers; Dyer *White*; Jeffords *Hard*; Tasker “Fists”). Not surprisingly, this work extends the larger interest in hegemonic masculinity, demonstrating the flexibility with which it co-opts discourses of race, class, and sexuality without depositing its white, heterosexual, and middle-class footing.<sup>5</sup>

To complicate masculinity, some film scholars have turned to the male body, observing contrasting bodily depictions and their relationship to dominant and subordinated identities.<sup>6</sup> This work has uncovered the centrality of hard bodies to hegemonic masculinity (e.g., Jeffords *Hard*; Tasker *Spectacular*; and S. Willis). Additionally, it indicates visual pleasures available through voyeuristic attention to the male body and heterosexual anxieties aroused by male-on-male gazing.<sup>7</sup>

### *Masculinities That Work*

The masculinity and film literature yields crucial insights, but a key question remains understudied: How do forms of labor facilitate distinctive masculine performances? Certainly, film scholars acknowledge the importance of work to masculinity. Yet they tend to stress a limited range of working (class) subjects, as evident in their extensive attention to action films featuring soldiers and police officers. While Jeffords provides a convincing chronicle of the reign of hard-body masculinity in the 1980s, she does not address connections with professional identity (*Hard*). Similarly, Robinson’s provocative account of white male crisis rhetoric concentrates elsewhere, though the book’s cover figures a white businessman, briefcase and cell phone in tow. Such cursory attention to labor, much less the professions, is striking, particularly given professed scholarly interest in the meeting

of masculinities and class. Moreover, work has anchored US white, middle-class manhood since the early 19th century (Rotundo; Trujillo).

Organizational scholars are poised to provide the most nuanced treatment of masculinity and work. Though they have begun to do so, the majority of gendered organization research addresses the professional dilemmas of white, middle-class women.<sup>8</sup> This work guides us to the import of two historical formations: the discourse of separate spheres (i.e., public and private) and the discourse of gender difference (i.e., masculine and feminine as complementary opposites).<sup>9</sup> Still today, these notions intersect in a manner so familiar as to barely necessitate review. The public realm is commonly seen as the legitimate site of production and politics, the more “natural” turf of men/masculinity. Divorced from “real” labor, the private sphere is linked to intimacy, sexuality, reproduction, emotion, and domestic concerns, deemed the expertise of women/femininity (Martin; Mills and Chiaramonte). Feminist scholars compellingly contend that the discourses of public-private and gender difference come together to naturalize workplace control and exclusion of femininities (Acker).

While these accounts enhance our understanding of some women’s subordination, they also neglect a different consequence of the same discursive union. Namely, some men are expected to travel competently across spheres, although the masculine is aligned with only one. As the spheres are thought to entail opposing demands and habits, white masculine subjectivity bears a sort of schizophrenia or double bind. Consequently, many men may struggle to negotiate selves that work in public and private. Recent scholarship indicates another layer of the paradox: expectations for civilized *and* primitive male selves in public *and* private arenas (Bordo; Robinson; Rotundo). At least in the US, the civilized-primitive dualism evokes slippery evolutionary images of man-savage-animal, tinged with racial hierarchy (Bederman). Though diluted, such racist meanings hang on the tips of our tongues, and the dualism still serves as a powerful way to (racially) mark approaches to violence and sexuality (e.g., primitive release, civilized restraint) (Orbe; Sloop). Moreover, the dualism remains one of the primary ways we distinguish types of work (e.g., manual or mental labor), suggesting that constructions of class are also deeply raced.

Forms of public labor have long been coded in terms of how they blend masculinity with the primitive-civilized. For example, organizational scholars have begun to explore how blue-collar labor produces a primitive masculinity replete with images of raw physicality—hard, hands-on work performed by dirty, sweaty bodies (e.g., Collinson; Gibson and Papa; P. Willis). Accordingly, working-class subjects enjoy (suffer?) closer ties to primal, near-bestial savagery and sexuality (Gherardi). Such coding will likely shape the way in which masculinity dilemmas manifest themselves. For example, primitive blue-collar masculinity can dominate the “soft” private and even “soften” (i.e., feminize, make impotent) its white-collar superiors. Simultaneously, it is prone to charges of being uncivilized, which depict working-class men as dumb, juvenile, or overgrown brutes.

Since white-collar labor leans toward the civilized pole, we might expect scholars to find mirror-image vulnerabilities. To the contrary, the burgeoning literature on managerial masculinity implies that corporate life furnishes a persistent, resilient home for white male dominance, despite dramatic changes in capitalism and the

organization of work.<sup>10</sup> Like film theorists, then, organization scholars tend to presume intact the uniform, enduring, and seamless reign of businessmen. In addition, they have scarcely begun to address race (Ashcraft and Allen; Nkomo). We seek to redress these oversights by problematizing the performance of white/collar masculinity.

*Professional Masculinity: Voices of Crisis from the Turn of the Centuries*

As we hinted above, white/collar masculinity is susceptible to feminization, given its reputed lack of physicality and bureaucratic sterility, suppression of the body, self-imposed discipline, and obligatory ingratiation. Perhaps tellingly, professional discourses summon the primitive and civilized at once. Consider this dizzying array of business imagery: the corporate jungle, the rational actor, unbridled competition and aggression, self-discipline and impulse-control, intellectual (i.e., “clean”) labor, dog-eat-dog world. We argue that white/collar masculinity straddles both primitive and civilized poles; to overstress one is to risk failure at the other and, therefore, to render masculinity, professionalism, or whiteness suspect. In this sense, a chronic anxiety plagues professional identity, as it is no simple feat to perform hard and soft, primitive and civilized at once, especially given their varying depiction as unequal opposites. For help in this thorny endeavor, white/collar masculinity depends on affiliation with other gender, race, and class discourses. For instance, it can appeal to images of dark savagery or working-class men as powerfully primal *and* subordinate (i.e., professional minds dominate primitive bodies). At times, it can affiliate with white women, who become a taming force that nurtures the advancement of civilization. Upon inspection, each alliance sparks its own vulnerabilities. For example, if civilization is emphasized and associated with whiteness, white women can stake a claim to equality; if an essential male primitive is stressed, men of color and diverse class can do so. How can professional masculinity draw on these discourses without undermining itself? How can white/collar masculinity retain its race, class, and gender dominance all at once? How are these tensions discursively and performatively managed? Or perhaps first, how *were* they managed?

*From Civilized Restraint to Primitive Passions: Turning the Last Century.* This is not the first time that public representations of dominant masculinity in crisis have circulated in the US. For example, a similar surge of crisis discourse surfaced around the turn of the last century. That wave is worth reviewing not only due to arresting parallels, but because “our lives a century later are still bound by this reshaping of manhood” (Rotundo 222). Attention to historical context can expose the political economies that give rise to particular gendered discourses—or, put with different emphasis, the political and material circumstances that such discourses struggle to manage.

Rotundo identifies a change in hegemonic masculinity between the 18th and 19th centuries: from a communal manhood based on moral community obligations to a self-made manhood proven by individual work achievement. In the late 19th century, the notion of masculinity in crisis swept the country. The principal fear was that men, especially white professionals, were overcivilized to the point of impending extinction. Two key changes in capitalist labor arrangements lay at the core of

the crisis narrative: (a) the increasingly bureaucratic nature of work minimized opportunities for entrepreneurial achievement, trading independence for subordination to other men; and (b) women began to infringe on the public sphere (Bederman; Rotundo). Among other ways, the crisis narrative materialized in a medical discourse of “neurasthenia,” a nervous disorder thought to result from overcivilization and, specifically, too much mentally stimulating work. The US saw an outbreak of male neurasthenia diagnoses between 1880 and 1910, and those deemed at greatest risk “were middle- and upper-class businessmen and professionals whose highly evolved bodies had been physically weakened by advances in civilization” (Bederman 87). Widespread worry about the alleged disease flagged a puzzling paradox: “Only white male bodies had the capacity to be truly civilized. Yet, at the same time, civilization destroyed white male bodies. How could powerful, civilized manhood be saved?” (Bederman 88).

In response to the crisis narrative, public discourse of the time embraced “natural” male passions long disciplined out of white men. As Bordo summarizes, “fantasies of recovering an unspoiled, primitive masculinity began to emerge, and with them, a ‘flood of animal metaphors’ poured forth to animate a new conception of masculinity. White men drew on the images and ideology of the savage Other to help them articulate this emerging construction of ‘passionate manhood’ ” (249). In the new subjectivity, “savages and animals fade together,” as “middle-class men [...] were drawn to both groups for the same qualities” (Rotundo 229). What became of white civilized professionalism amid this turn to the primitive? Bederman argues that, rather than discursive division or death, it allied with the primitive, joining contradictory notions of manhood with “‘civilization’s larger narrative of millennial advancement toward a higher race and perfect manhood” (218). But white/collar man’s anxiety would persist, for his was a conflicted and contestable right to the primitive.

*Modern Man’s Neurasthenia? Contemporary Cries of Crisis.* Recently, abundant public and scholarly discourse has converged on another so-called masculinity crisis (Faludi; Horrocks; Robinson). Those who trace it to work stress the fragility of working-class identities, weakened by economic and social conditions (e.g., Fine et al.). We tease out a strand of discourse that has garnered less attention. Specifically, we argue that public performances of white/collar masculinity in crisis are gaining momentum and bear startling resemblance to themes from the last turn of the century. Consider the rash of recent films that portray mounting tension between professional men and work: *Falling Down* (1989); *Glengarry, Glen Ross* (1992); *Disclosure* (1994); *Wolf* (1994); *In the Company of Men* (1997); *Office Space* (1999); *American Beauty* (1999); *Fight Club* (1999); *The Big Kahuna* (2000); and *Boiler Room* (2000)—to name a few. In contrast to the usual films featuring men at work, this trend suggests that corporations amount to an increasingly inadequate stage that stifles and emasculates the performance of white/collar masculinity. Evidence suggests some similarities to the early 20th century, even a familiar yearning for the primitive. Bordo details how “today, with many men feeling that women—particularly feminists—have been pushing them around for a couple of decades, the idea of a return to manhood ‘in the raw’ has a fresh, contemporary appeal” (251).

Across most current scholarship, then, the hegemony of white/collar masculinity

appears relatively smooth, even when marked. Despite growing testament to the ambiguities of masculinity, we continue to neglect how even the most dominant forms require relentless maintenance. This gap becomes pressing in an age of patriarchal and managerial capitalism, for which the professional subject is a central character (Deetz and Mumby). The dearth of attention to white/collar dilemmas also contributes to the continued invisibility of multiple intersections in masculinity. Accordingly, we highlight how professional masculinity depends upon discourses of race, class, sexuality, and labor.

### Healing Wounds: Violence and the Civilized/Primitive

To interrogate white/collar masculinity, we selected two films that shoulder its tensions and manage them in seemingly contradictory ways: *In the Company of Men*, a critically acclaimed independent film, and *Fight Club*, a Hollywood blockbuster based on the best-selling novel of the same name. Two questions organize our analysis: How do the films stage the masculinity crisis, and what performances bring comfort and resolution?

#### *The Wounds of the White/Collar Man*

As soon as we meet them, the men of both films inform us that something has gone wrong. Women and work are at varying degrees of fault, and the situation is dire. Below, we trace how the films convey the professional man's breaking point, and we identify common themes of crisis.

*In the Company of Men.* This film follows the lives of two corporate men on a six-week assignment at a non-specific company in Anytown, USA. In the opening scenes, we meet the two central characters, clad in standard business attire and waiting in an airport courtesy lounge. Howard—a glaringly insecure, sulky man recently promoted to manage the project—marvels that he has just been slapped by a woman from whom he simply asked the time. Chad Piercewell, an attractive and swaggering figure, is Howard's old college friend and new underling. For Chad, the slap epitomizes the sorry state of businessmen's lives. In the airport, on the plane, and in a restaurant at their destination, the two men proceed to mourn the "doom" they face "as a race—men like us, guys who care a smidgen about the workplace, their women." They trade tales of abandonment and rejection by the women in their lives, interspersed with cautionary words about vile colleagues and maddening corporate politics. Howard observes that "everything—work, these women—feel like they're getting out of balance, don't they?" Chad concurs, "Yeah, they really do, Howard [...] We ought to do something about it." Soon after, Chad professes the urgency of the situation: "Circle the date on this one, big guy. If we keep playing along with this pick-up-the-check, can't-a-girl-change-her mind crap—we can't even tell a joke in the workplace—there's gonna be hell to pay down the line, no doubt about it. We need to put our foot down pronto." Despite Howard's formal rank, Chad immediately surfaces as the alpha male. He almost single-handedly articulates the crisis and aggressively solicits Howard's help in addressing it. Howard meekly assents, interjecting the occasional "I hear ya."



It is thus in the first few minutes of the film that work and women are linked together as the cause of professional men's impending downfall. In brief, women expect men's sensitivity in romantic and work relationships, as well as their financial support. Yet women offer nothing but ingratitude and abuse in return. Men give and give, while women bite the hand that feeds them. What's more, corporations have become a sterilized den of thieves, thanks in part to women's invasion and a merciless corporate elite. Women control us; corporations consume us; and if this continues, the common businessman will soon be extinct. The situation demands immediate action. And—make no mistake—that action is a noble struggle to reclaim something lost, to restore a rightful order.

*Fight Club.* This film begins at its end. The two main characters, a nameless narrator and Tyler Durden, are engaged in a conversation laden with tense expectancy. Immediately, the intimacy between the two is apparent, as are the profound differences that divide them. The narrator sits small and tentative, curiously un/dressed in his boxer shorts. Tyler stands in a pose that exudes militaristic power; and in his sleeveless tight shirt and low-slung camouflage pants, he vibrates with a sexual intensity enhanced by his hardened body and muscled arms.

In flashback style, the narrator takes us back to a time when he was a numbed shell of a man. Corporate servitude engulfs him. He is locked in a sterile, white/collar world where mere imitations of life abound: "Everything's a copy of a copy of a copy." Bureaucratic objectification and meaningless existence emerge in techno-jargon, as he dully asks his boss: "You want me to deprioritize my current reports until you advise of a status upgrade?" Corporate control threatens complete takeover; even scientific dreams of space exploration can only produce "the IBM stellarsphere, the Microsoft Galaxy, Planet Starbucks." Service to the company enables a second crippling factor: an obsession with material perfection as defined by corporate gods. This all-encompassing materialism sucks men into illusions of identity. Wondering what "kind of dining set defines me as a person," the narrator seeks to create the perfect home, an absolute replica of a catalog image. Consumed by consumption, young businessmen are, in Tyler's words, "by-products of a lifestyle obsession" who occupy ornamental bodies and spaces (Bordo; Faludi).

Part of a "generation raised by women," Tyler and the narrator suffer from the absence of men in their lives. They are children of divorce—of fathers who abandoned them to "franchise" new lives and families. They are victims of fathers' false promises about careers, marriage, and social responsibility. Even God, the ultimate father, is absent and uncaring. A sense of utter disposability and despondency floods their experience. Nobody's heroes, they enjoy no great moment in history, for the noble wars of the past belong to other men. As Tyler later proclaims, "Our great war is a spiritual war [...] Our great depression is our lives." These young men are not simply denied access to the masculine; they are invaded by femininity on all sides. Early in the film, the narrator frames his tale around women: "I realized that all of this [...] had something to do with a girl named Marla Singer." Beyond the physical presence of women, the feminine threatens to overtake. We witness the narrator battle his insomniac stupor with feminized tools, including "Martha Stewart" materialism, sleeping pills, meditation, and therapeutic

retreats to his “inner cave.” Weak and impotent, he finds temporary relief in a new addiction, support groups. During his first attendance—to a testicular cancer group called “Remaining men together”—he meets Bob, a one-time body-building champion now literally castrated. Nestled between Bob’s “bitch tits,” the narrator finds release through sobbing, temporarily curing his insomnia. The threat of the feminine emerges further in the form of Marla, another “tourist” on the therapy circuit. Her presence at the support groups disrupts the narrator’s relief, plunging him back into insomnia and desperation.

In short, *Fight Club* codes the corporate world and all its trappings—bureaucratic sedation, materialism, isolation, deception, and the crushing presence of things feminine—as a force that kills men. Tyler captures this subordination when he asks, “Now, why do guys like you and I know what a duvet is? Is this essential to our survival in the hunter-gatherer sense of the word?” As Tyler explains, young men have become “slaves with white collars,” stuck in “jobs we hate, so we can buy shit we don’t need.” They must mobilize and fight to regain control, if not life.

*Producing the wounded corporate figure.* Despite different takes on whether corporations are conducive to masculinity, the white/collar men of both films are united by their search for more dignified, satisfying identities, if not outright revenge. They share a keen sense that work and women are not as they once were. Jobs are more competitive; corporate environments are increasingly cruel and hygienic; and the possibility of a secure future looms ever distant and unsatisfying. Women bear the blame for many of these changes, and their intrusions and orders have become unbearable. Specifically, women have feminized and disabled men with conflicting demands for emotional, financial, and political support and sensitive, over-civilized behavior. To make matters worse, “woman” is the ultimate source of men’s corporate bondage; it is largely because of her that men subject themselves to the whims and abuses of an elusive, all-powerful, corporate elite. It is no longer tolerable that her insidious presence grows with her confusing list of demands. In theoretical terms, she is unraveling an ambivalent web of dominance, duty, and resentment that has long sutured relations between white, middle-class masculinity and femininity (Lyman; Rotundo). Or, as film critic Hershenson puts it, “the old roles continue to crumble” and “you’re pretty much on your own, buddy” (par. 3).

Given this discourse of wounded businessmen, it is not surprising that the central characters of each film define their quest as resistance to an oppression that, as one film critic noted, is “worth rising up against” (Smith par. 2). They do not experience the crisis in their lives as a disruption of male privilege that might facilitate more inclusive social relations. On the contrary, they perceive it as injustice and violence—a thing expected but denied, a promise wrongly snatched away (Hearn “Organization”; Linstead). In this way, men’s collective corporate dominance becomes eclipsed by the individual man’s personal experience of powerlessness (Hamada; Horrocks).

As to what must be done, the characters concur on a few points. First, any “new manhood” premised on men’s exploration and development of the traditionally feminine is grossly insufficient. They fear their status as drained, cloned, impotent “yes men” who perform meaningless work at others’ bidding. They mourn the passing of an age when work was a world of adventurous, virile men. As one critic

of *Fight Club* remarked, “Nice is over and hard is where it’s at” (Watson par. 2). Second, they believe their load is too heavy, and something must give. Chad takes a first step to freedom when he lets go of caring: “You know why I’m still chipper? Big grin on my face, Howie? ... Because I realized something [...] I do not give a shit, not about anybody.” Meanwhile, Tyler liberates the narrator from the promise of corporate success, the throes of materialism, and all debilitating fears, goading him to hit bottom: “It’s only after we’ve lost everything that we’re free to do anything.” Both films imply that if one rejects the rules of the current game, he becomes free to write, play, and win his own game. However, this requires a radical switch from a passive to an active approach to life. Chad announces, “Life is for the taking, is it not?”

At the end of the day, a man who continues to obey the rules will be an impotent, feminized bureaucrat who has sold his soul to borrow the power of others. It is in imaginative, daring manipulation of the rules or bold, outright rebellion that a real man can be made. Next, we trace two disparate paths toward healing the wounded white/collar man. While *In the Company of Men* depicts a professional jungle ruled by the sadistic warrior, *Fight Club* nurtures a corps of masochistic soldiers who burn that jungle to the ground.

### *Business as Sadistic Sport*—In the Company of Men

As Chad and Howard sip scotch and commiserate over their crisis, Chad devises a “refreshing” and “very therapeutic” scheme to “fuck somebody up for good” and “restore a little dignity to our lives”:

Say we were to find some gal [...] just vulnerable as hell [...] disfigured in some way [...] just some woman who is pretty sure that life—and I mean a full, healthy sexual life, romance, stuff like that—is just lost to her forever. Anyhow, we take a girl of that type [...] and we both hit her. You know, small talk, a dinner date, flowers [...] see an ice show, something like that. And we just do it, you know, you and me, upping the ante all the time. And suddenly she’s got two men; she’s calling her mom; she’s wearing makeup again. And on we play and on and on. Then one day, out goes the rug and us pulling it hard. And Jill? She just comes tumbling after [...] Trust me, she’ll be reaching for the sleeping pills within a week, and we will laugh about this ‘til we are very old men.

Though initially hesitant, Howard consents by the end of the evening like a kid caving to peer pressure. Soon after, Chad meets Christine, a young deaf woman employed in the company’s typing pool. Given her evident vulnerabilities, Chad concludes that she’s a perfect target and takes her out. Goaded by Chad, Howard agrees to court her as well. The rest of the film follows Chad and Howard’s pursuit of two shared and parallel projects: they work, date Christine, and swap stories about both. Before long, it becomes clear that the twin projects are proceeding differently. Howard develops what he sees as genuine feelings for Christine, while Christine falls for Chad. Even worse, Howard’s first management assignment unravels; he and Chad discuss faulty reports and other mishaps that perturb the guys at the home office. Ultimately, Christine rejects Howard, proclaiming her love for Chad, and Howard is demoted from his management position. Chad callously discards a devastated Christine, returning home to a promotion and his live-in girlfriend. Despite his cruel cons in business and romance, Chad’s world only

improves. Despite Howard's tireless efforts to be "the good guy" (at least in his eyes), his world collapses. The film concludes with a smug and smirking Chad, enjoying his lover's services, juxtaposed against a pathetically collapsing Howard, whose strident screams—"Listen to me ... Listen, listen, listen!"—fall on Christine's deaf ears.

What can we learn about healing white/collar masculinity from such a disturbing tale? We begin by elucidating the film's depiction of dominant and subordinate, potent and impotent, masculinities. Chad's character reveals that performing victory over and at the expense of opponents is the core passion and proof of manliness. Any man is entitled to compete, but only those with "big, brass ones" can win. Climbing the corporate hierarchy is the only game that counts, and all other contests are mere training for the ultimate competition among men. So how does a man win the all-important sport of business, thereby earning and flaunting his superior balls?

From the striking contrast between Chad and Howard, we learn that a potent man carefully and constantly hones specific aptitudes. Chief among these is a fundamental suspicion of everyone. Throughout, Chad cautions Howard to expect betrayal—to "watch your back," "cover your ass," to "be careful" of this "bunch of vultures" hovering to "feed on my insides"—citing various company men to build his case for an ever-vigilant, always-defensive ethos. Chad's paranoia does not discriminate; he warns that one should be especially wary of the company of women, who are all made of "meat and gristle and hatred just simmering." Women lie in wait to ambush men, and they'll "kick you straight in the teeth" just "when you start to feel sorry" for them.

A basic distrust and disgust for humanity calls for a second key aptitude: ruthless, unflinching, impenitent violence toward others. To sustain his startling ability to "not give a shit," Chad objectifies the targets of his violence. When presented with personalizing details about someone, Chad routinely dismisses or ignores the information. For example, when a co-worker cagily observes that Christine is a "nice girl [...] types like 95 a minute [...] she's kind of pretty," Chad rises to leave and retorts, "Anyway, see you later," in the shrill, dolphin-like tone with which he imitates Christine's voice. Chad paints all people as useless caricatures, pure enemies to be decimated, disposable things. Frequently, he whets and validates his paranoia, rehearsing the dehumanization of possible targets. In one scene, for instance, with co-workers, he reviews colleagues depicted in a company newsletter: "I hate this guy. Oh, I hate that guy too. He's a little bastard [...] Oh, I hate that dude right there [...] one of those from Pittsburgh. Oh, he sucks dick [...] Oh man, I despise that dude. Sales rep from Indiana [...] Now, he's a new breed of fuck, like a special strain of fucker. Oh, I hate that little prissy cocksucker." Importantly, a wary and violent stance is more than a necessary survival strategy for the corporate winner; it is his primary source of pleasure. Chad's newsletter review is far more than an angry, vicious outburst. It is playful, cunning, and hilarious; and he joyously savors the moment. Likewise, with a twisted smile, Chad eagerly asks his various victims "So how does it feel?" and relishes their palpable shock and pain. In this sense, the vigilant violence practiced by the corporate victor is profoundly sadistic.

Thus far, the corporation is characterized as a specific sort of jungle; it's a

kill-or-be-killed, every-man-for-himself world in which only the strongest survive. Accordingly, a successful businessman sees himself as perpetually wounded and all others as the possible cause. For white masculinity, “the threat of castration is everywhere present and everywhere hidden” (Holmlund 153). For this reason, the corporate jungle entails guerilla warfare, which real men enjoy. Success under these conditions requires a third aptitude: relentless self-interest, often cloaked as partnership. That is, a man must be politically savvy enough to know when his interests can be served by temporary alliance with others. Such coalitions require a form of hypocrisy: the effective performance of feelings one does not allow himself to actually experience. Chad brilliantly executes this feat with Christine and Howard, who respectively mistake him for a sincere lover and friend. Chad further displays his charlatan skills in the newsletter scene described above. When his amused and admiring co-workers ask if he likes a colleague who just left the room (and with whom he had just exchanged pleasant conversation), he casually responds, “Him? You kiddin’ me? I hate that prick.” Throughout the film, Chad’s capacity for persuasive kindness followed by swift malice goes unrivaled. As he observes to his girlfriend at the end of the film, “When I get working, I can sound like practically anyone.” Conversely, one of Howard’s key frailties becomes his inability to discern performance from authenticity. With both Chad and Christine, he confuses instrumental alliance with meaningful relationship and, worse yet, falls prey to his own feeble performances.

Victory amid corporate guerilla warfare requires an additional aptitude for constant and stringent control of self and others. In Chad’s words, “Never lose control [...] that is the total key to the universe.” As indicated above, a man of suspicion and sadism keeps a tight reign on the emotions he feels, much less publicly displays. He also disciplines his body such that, ironically, it appears to require no control. For example, Chad limits himself to more refined forms of violence: clever verbal attacks, never physical brawls. He wears the corporate uniform with comfort and confidence, head and shoulders erect, body rarely prone. In striking contrast, Howard’s body appears in endless disarray. We watch him eat, defecate, and vomit; and these bodily functions seem exceptionally awkward and time-consuming, akin to a “leaking” feminized body (Trethewey). Moreover, we see and hear that Howard stoops to physical scraps with women, which create a visual effect more akin to a “catfight” than domestic violence. And while assertive Chad grabs every opportunity to seize an upper hand, bumbling Howard tends to babble on toward embarrassment.

Finally, a man who would win the corporate game never retreats to the petty comforts found in the company of boys. In the film, corporate losers are synonymous with boys. Two characters vividly occupy this position and expose the perils of a boy’s world. The most prominent is Howard, tellingly referred to as “Howie” by Chad. We listen to Howie vie for freedom from his mother and ex-fiancé; we then watch him brace for similar bondage when he recycles an old engagement ring and shops for china with Christine in mind. The second character is a Black intern, who appears in a brief and poignant scene discussed later. For now, it is sufficient to note that Chad assails the intern group as a “bunch of juvenile fuckers” who mistake work for “summer camp” and “still want their mommies wiping their bottoms every time they go potty.” Hence, a boy’s world is suspect because it is

subject to domineering women and because its members are too infantile and negligent to comprehend the rules that distinguish life in the company of men.

In sum, a man who is susceptible to human trust and care, whose conscience impedes violent pleasures, who cannot uphold the masquerade, and who lacks control of himself and others is a despicable figure—a corporate loser, a soft boy. Howie embodies this pitifully impotent creature. By the film's conclusion, he loses more than his managerial voice and metaphorical balls to a virile corporate warrior; he is literally rendered silent by a gullible, feminine “handicap” who dared to claim the right to choose among suitors. Whereas *In the Company of Men* marks the corporate world as the space in which real masculinity can emerge, the players of *Fight Club* treat corporations as the very site that tames, emasculates, and so, must be destroyed.

### *Masochism: To Wage War Against the Corporation—Fight Club*

Over beers at a local dive, Tyler reframes the recent explosion of the narrator's condo and possessions. The loss is opportunity, not tragedy: “I say never be complete [...] I say let's evolve.” Devoid of the material goods he so desperately sought, the narrator should see the demolition as freedom. Intrigued but skeptical, he wavers, unable to let go of his perfectly dissatisfying life.

Emerging from the bar, Tyler invites the narrator to hit him. With that first hesitant punch, they launch “Fight Club,” an underground club “for men only” in which pairs of men brawl to the cheers of on-lookers, gladiator-style. Its exponential national growth attests to its resonance, and men everywhere are drawn to it as a site that exposes and celebrates men's wounds. Eventually, Fight Club evolves into war, and Project Mayhem—a militaristic venture in which Tyler and his all-male corps fight the corporate enemy—is born. Meanwhile, we witness the narrator's increasing attraction to Tyler and his jealousy over Tyler's relationships with others, including Marla. We also see the narrator's growth, from slumping to swaggering, as well as his moral struggle with Tyler's boyish and reckless approach to life. The film climaxes when we learn, with the narrator, that he and Tyler are literally the same person. In his desperate attempt to escape his sedated life, the narrator created a persona embodying all he is not. With this split personality, the narrator and Tyler manifest the classic double bind of masculinity (Bordo; Robinson; Rotundo). As the film ends, the narrator attempts to heal himself, ironically by killing Tyler and turning to Marla.

The narrator and Tyler's youthful approach to healing includes various escapades into mischief and malice. Defining manhood as boyish rebellion, the film promotes a visceral manliness in which men strip their corporate attire and (re)turn to a primitive age filled with physical contests. Adventure replaces work, and pranks expose social niceties. The antithesis of masculinity is the man afraid to fight, controlled by social demands rather than raw instinct. Such men are mindless robots.

An initial step toward men's “evolution” entails rejection of materialism and conspicuous consumption. If, as Tyler believes, “the things you own end up owning you,” then a simplistic life devoid of “things” enables growth. Violent and complete separation is necessary, and Tyler models a life free from senseless spending.

Suddenly homeless, the narrator moves in with Tyler. Living in a dilapidated house, filled with bare, stained mattresses and rust-red water, Tyler and the narrator cut themselves off from the material world. This lifestyle frees them from the hold of image-based masculinity promoted by the likes of Gucci and Calvin Klein. Tyler helps the narrator as well as the men of *Fight Club* and *Project Mayhem* see that “You are not your job, you’re not how much money you have in the bank, you’re not the car you drive, you’re not the contents of your wallet, you’re not your—*fucking-khakis*.”

Evolution requires this brutal honesty to expose and reject the lies of fathers. Ultimately, men must uncover social myths and fabrications about masculinity. Tyler forces men to hear the truth: “We’ve all been raised on television to believe that one day we’d all be millionaires and movie gods and rock stars, but we won’t. And we’re slowly learning that fact, and we’re very, very pissed off.” Reveling in their anger at this betrayal, the men of *Fight Club* and *Project Mayhem* join Tyler in sharing these difficult lessons. Tyler’s chant—“You are not special; you are not a unique or beautiful snowflake”—becomes a lesson shared among the soldiers of *Project Mayhem*. Only upon learning these truths can men sever the ties that enslave them and unleash their stifled selves. A primary arena for such enlightenment is *Fight Club*.

Prior to joining *Fight Club*, members are living lies, performing a fraudulent masculinity akin to femininity. This emasculating masquerade emerges in the narrator’s early addiction to therapy groups, where he finds life by mimicking disability and impending death. A phony pretending to be wounded, the narrator craves the pain he witnesses in others. Tyler provides the cure in *Fight Club*. In brutal, bloody fights, the narrator learns to feel and wear pain with pride. Unlike the “bitch tits” that prove Bob’s pain, the bruises, scars, and blood the narrator sports stand as virile wounds. A far cry from the zombie-like plod that plagued his early life, he is soon strutting down the street, parading ugly bruises and utter disregard for social decorum, openly scoffing at colleagues obsessed with corporate efficiency and whether they can “get the icon in cornflower blue.” In stark contrast to stuffed-shirt corporate conformity, the narrator becomes deliberately disheveled, shirt untucked and tie askew. Rather than acquiescing, the narrator flaunts disrespect, finally bullying his boss. He reflects on his own behavior, “I used to be such a nice guy.”

*Fight Club* adds more than fleeting bruises and scars; it engenders a ritualistic and masochistic fascination with pain (Robinson). Violence is a stimulating addiction. The narrator and Tyler bask in its glow, pushing the body to its ultimate limits. We witness Tyler pour lye onto the narrator’s hand and hold him still until he can relish the exquisite pain. We watch Tyler viciously beaten, begging for more with orgasmic overtures: “That’s right Lou, get it out [...] ooh yeeeah [...] ooh Loouu.” Why this masochism? Burned and beaten, the narrator learns the limits of his body and uncovers new strength. Even as he hits bottom, he is not defeated, evincing a warrior-like mentality in which he refuses to die. Parallels to Schwarzenegger’s and Stallone’s hard-body, action-adventure masculinity, in which wounds are redemptive, are compelling (Jeffords *Hard*). As Savran maintains, white masculinity has developed a pain fixation, “torturing himself to prove his masculinity” (par. 4).

Importantly, *Fight Club* and *Project Mayhem* enable the creation of male bonds and intimacies, advancing evolution by recentering men in men's lives. Joy emerges among the men as they roll around, punching, beating, touching each other. As victims, they forge bonds in their shared identity. Victor and defeated embrace, anticipating their next encounter. These ties that bind prepare men to engage battle and defeat the corporate enemy. And *Project Mayhem* provides the site. A sort of boot-camp, *Project Mayhem* spawns an army of soldiers—young men with shaved heads and black uniforms who destroy corporate art and coffee franchises, who start fires in corporate buildings, who infiltrate local businesses. That war must be declared and corporations defeated is more than metaphor. *Project Mayhem* becomes a tightly organized, minutely planned operation (ironically, bureaucratic in structure). It allows neither weakness nor vulnerability; it accepts neither tears nor regret over casualties; it admits no diversions to its ultimate goal—destruction of the corporate enemy and liberation of its subjects. Men and masculinity will not be under siege.

Haunting the narrator throughout much of this war is the (feminine) fear of uncontrolled excessive masculinity. While the lure of the hard body is desirable and the moral quest to regain it important, the rebellious mentality of Tyler is often frightening and intense. Ultimately, the narrator knows that the wild boy must be contained, and thus the film concludes with the narrator's recognition of and gratitude for the lessons learned. With this realization, he destroys Tyler.

For Chad, Tyler, and his narrator apprentice, sadistic or masochistic violence awakens a businessman's taste for virility and pleasure. Next, we consider how these complementary tales of hegemonic masculinity—one that dominates, one that resists the corporation—respond to the contemporary discourse of crisis.

### Across the Films: Traces and Implications of the "New" Professional

#### *Modern Neurasthenia: Managing Masculine Double Binds*

The films do not simply cure modern neurasthenia tensions; rather, they relish a perpetual sense of anxiety and unrest. First, neither film articulates the reconciliation of men's public and private selves. *In the Company of Men* marks the private as indulgent excess—a source of softening or weakening that disables a man's paranoid violence. For instance, Howard is ultimately ruined by myriad vulnerabilities to private virtues (e.g., morality, love), regulating figures, (e.g., mothers, fiancés), and bodily leaks. Trifling with the private stunts his capacity for sadism and renders him an incompetent manager—of his work, his ties to women, and even his own body. He caves and confesses the plot against Christine when he smells defeat and, ostensibly, when he begins to care for her. It is no coincidence that these sensations develop simultaneously. In a Chad-like logic, Howard is foolish enough to seek solace and healing in private relationships, or at least in their public markers. Thus, in the face of corporate loss and an increasingly shaky friendship with Chad, he is frantic to possess romance and prove some semblance of virility. Chad designed the game with this in mind, for he enticed Howard with assurances that "no matter what happens after [...] jumped over for promotions, wife runs off with some biochemist [...] we would always have this thing to fall back on. Could always say,



‘Yeah fine. But they never got me like we got her.’” In this light, even if Howard could win Christine, it would prove a hollow victory. For in the company of real men, the private realm we know is dead, resurrected in the image and service of the corporate jungle.

*Fight Club* offers another way to maneuver. Neurasthenic from corporate over-civilization and engulfed by the private to the point of symbolic castration, the narrator literally develops a split personality to reconcile the competing demands of masculinity. His discovery of the primal pleasures of fight helps him to overcome his fears and to see, accept, even cherish his wounds. By forging male intimacy through violent contact and a shared goal or moral quest, *Fight Club* and *Project Mayhem* offer men—especially young ones who live in the shadow of great heroes and memories—the opportunity to play at war and learn its manly lessons. Emerging from this military space, which has historically lent men a public/private means to foster hard bodies, the narrator can engage the private and reach out to Marla with fewer fears of future emasculation.

In brief, whereas Chad scorns the world of women, saving a mask to perform within it, *Fight Club*’s narrator destroys Chad’s corporate jungle and returns to the private a stronger man. Yet both films remain leery of the private as a safe space for masculinity. Both reify the need for hard bodies and public balls as a kind of armor against the private. And, though in opposite ways, both mark the resilient male body as a public figure and corporate product.

Second, neither film consistently embraces nor rejects the primitive and civilized. Indeed, the characters approach this masculine dialectic as a constant juggling act. On the one hand, both films ironically imply that men must rediscover the primitive to rescue civilization. Concurrently, these primitive habits must be curbed by civilized norms. Rationality, restraint, and strategic duplicity package the primitive in civilized form *In the Company of Men*; in *Fight Club*, vague notions of morality, honor, and human connection serve as civilizing tools. We contend that, despite manifold differences, both films construct a civilized/primitive subjectivity that allows professional men to hold conflicting selves together in temporary, partial, adaptable, and strategic performances, however loose their grip might be. For example, Chad alternately performs calculated control with apparent sensitivity (e.g., courting Christine, befriending Howard) and raw aggression-derived genitalia: “Listen, you got a pair the kind that men are carrying around, you practically wear ‘em on your sleeve. That’s what business is all about—who’s sporting the nastiest sac of venom and who is willing to use it.” For Chad, “the idea that real manliness (and sexuality vitality and zest for life) is to be found outside man-made culture is merged with the idea of the workplace as the man-made jungle where a man might realize himself, if he’s the right sort of animal” (Bordo 253). In a different civilized/primitive performance, Tyler embodies a primal physicality, rationalized by his social consciousness; later, his primitive club assumes militaristic, near-bureaucratic form. Determined to erase external controls of men, Tyler ironically assumes the role of corporate father, ruling over a rule-governed and hierarchical entity. Eventually, the narrator internalizes Tyler’s lessons in primal pain but slays his primitive excess in the name of ethics. In sharp contrast to the other characters, Howard remains the archetypal neurasthenic, a transparent impostor who confuses strategic performance with an “authentic” self. As he succumbs to, or becomes, the perform-

ance, he cannot adjust to changing primitive/civilized demands and, consequently, gets consumed by both.

In sum, the films cast the primitive/civilized as a masculine dialectical tension with many possible and creative performances. Central to managing this dialectic is the elusive quest for an ideal blend of control and excess. At various times, Chad, Tyler, and the narrator portray a keen sense of the shifting faces the two may take, the fine line between them, and the dangers wrought by too much of either. As a result, the characters develop adoration *and* loathing for control and excess—a flexible stance that allows them to invoke one to tame the other and, thereby, to manage shifting accountabilities to the primitive/civilized.

Ultimately, we argue that neither film moves to heal the battered white/collar man. While *Fight Club* incessantly pushes him to reopen his wounds and celebrate them as spectacle, *In the Company of Men* harbors the ubiquitous threat of bruises to fuel the fire of violence directed outward. Put simply, the wounds don't need to be healed; they *are* a healing force, creating an already broken and thus unbreakable professional body. Hence, the display of wounds becomes indefinitely central to the performance of professional masculinity, which finds stimulation in the notion that it too is injured (Jeffords *Hard*; Savran). In this sense, civilized/primitive subjectivity stakes a claim to identity politics for white/collar men (Robinson). Below, we consider how this professional character plays with other politicized subjects.

#### *Gender, Race, Sexuality, Class, and the Civilized/Primitive*

*For men only, but which ones?* While some (e.g., white) masculinities and femininities lay claim to diverse dimensions of the civilized (e.g., scientific rationality, private virtues), the films insist that only men can access the primitive. The primitive emerges as a suppressed male essence, which is presumably available to all men. Significantly, across the films, only white men get to teach the primitive, and their primary pupils are other white men. However, two strikingly parallel scenes depict pupils of color. In the first, Chad chastises a young Black intern—one of the “juvenile fuckers” at “summer camp” alluded to earlier. The pretense of their meeting is that Chad is graciously showing the intern the ropes, “rolling out the opportunity” for him to “hang with the money people.” When the intern shrugs off Chad's initial advice, Chad demands gratefulness from his student: “You know, I could've held back on this [...] let you figure out life all on your little lonesome. But I think I would've been doing you a disservice [...] cherish this.” Chad stresses his confusion over whether the intern's name is “Keith” or “Keif” and sniggers at Keif's pronunciation of “axe”: “Let me give you a professional tip. The word is *ask*.” With his arm around Keif, Chad informs him that he needs “the big brass ones” to climb the corporate ladder: “Let's see 'em then, these clankers of yours.” When Keif hesitates and mumbles a disbelieving protest, Chad removes all doubt of his command: “Show-Me-Your-Balls!” After Keif complies, Chad asks him to fetch a cup of coffee on his way out: “Black's fine.”

Like Chad, Tyler excels in his role as teacher, even with the most difficult lessons. Viewers watch as Tyler, embarking on a “human sacrifice,” drags an Asian/American clerk out of the convenience store where he works, pushes him to his knees, and holds a gun to his head. Perusing the clerk's wallet, Tyler announces,

“Raymond, you are going to die [...] There’s going to be nothing left of your face.” Tyler discovers Raymond’s school ID and asks, “what’d you study, Raymond?” Violently shaking, Raymond stutters, “st-st-st-stuff,” at which Tyler hits Raymond with the gun, demanding “I asked you, what’d you study?” Unsatisfied with the answer, Tyler continues, “ Why? [...] What’d you want to be, Raymond K. Hessel?” As the clerk continues to sob, Tyler cocks the gun and repeats, “The question—Raymond, was—What—Did—You—Want—To Be?” Finally, Tyler releases Raymond, warning that he will return to see that Raymond is pursuing his goals. Mockingly, as Raymond runs off, Tyler taunts, “Run, Forrest, Run.” Questioned by the narrator as to the point, Tyler proclaims assuredly that Raymond’s life will now have meaning.

In both powerful scenes, the tone of white men’s teaching takes a dramatic turn that reveals the ways in which civilized/primitive masculinity entails racialized performance. With their primary and most serious (white) pupils, the teachers devote extensive time and adopts a tone of relative equality and intimacy. Tyler acts as a buddy mentor who guides his chief trainee through the primitive; Chad too engages Howard as a chummy peer and a possible player, despite his agenda to the contrary. With men of color, the tone is contrastingly brief, distant, condescending, and violent; and the relation shifts from mentor-apprentice to (abusive) father-boy or tyrant-minion. These peons apparently necessitate a harsher hand and deserve to be put in their place. As such, both films invite audiences to gaze upon these racially marked and crumbling bodies. We watch Keif nervously undo his pants; we witness Raymond shaking and sobbing. While both films provide space to morally question these violent moments, they simultaneously fix or mark racial difference as visibly and immediately other (S. Willis).<sup>11</sup> Moreover, both scenes underscore the inability of these pupils to rightfully claim civilized/primitive subjectivity. Keif could have it all if only he would stop “screwing around,” start using his head, and speak professionally (i.e., get civilized, where civilized equals white). Raymond could find a new life if he would stop blubbering like a sissy and grab his future by the horns (i.e., get primitive in pursuit of career achievements—a whitened primitive, not to mention an ironic message for a work-suspicious film). The films’ reliance on familiar racial imagery here (e.g., Black man as dumb primal brute, Asian man as over-cultured and effeminate) needs little elaboration (e.g., Dines; Eng).

The notion of white men as teachers of the primitive is telling, for it rejects the conventional discourse of the primitive as the domain of dark savage rapists (Bederman). We suggest that white masculinity can now appropriate the teaching role precisely because the emerging ideal embraces a *civilized*/primitive masculinity. This flexibility in itself marks whiteness, for dark masculinities are granted access only to savage primal modes or feminized civil ones (Dines; Eng). It is also notable that the mentors of both films grant white pupils more serious and sustained attention. These insights come together in Chad’s depiction of the masculinity crisis: “OK, well we’re doomed then, seriously, as a race.” Chad characterizes white/collar men as an advanced civilization, entitled to “put our foot down” and damned unless they do. In this light, going primitive becomes a means of (white) race preservation. Handily, the primitive no longer threatens to taint the white man

with dark savage excess, because the sophisticated white primitive retains a firm foothold in—and, actually, aims to serve and protect—civilization (Bederman).

*In the Company of Men* self-consciously exposes raced and classed restrictions as to which men can pull off the performance of civilized/primitive subjectivity. In addition to the Chad-Keif scene, we hear Howard denounce his working-class heritage as a quaintly impotent “Norman Rockwell” life. *Fight Club* appears less self-conscious about its class and racial limitations. With its more visually diverse membership, *Fight Club* extends a civilized/primitive brotherhood to men of all ages, races, and classes. Indeed, a Black man enjoys pummeling the narrator in one scene (though the narrator is in the midst of explaining that *Fight Club* is not about winning or losing). And oddly, while *Fight Club* develops in response to professional neurasthenia, its members are increasingly working class. By mid-film, for example, Tyler pronounces the significance of his army of men as he threatens to castrate a police commissioner: “Look, the people you are after are the people you depend on. We cook your meals; we haul your trash; we connect your calls; we drive your ambulances. We guard you while you sleep.” The centrality of anti-materialism to *Fight Club* also reaches out to men of diverse class. At the same time, it erases racial wounds, subordinating all other injuries to those inflicted by a faceless corporate capitalism. Strategically here, through the creation of all-male clubs with trans-racial memberships, the discourse co-opts contemporary ideological debates, particularly racial ones, to its own ends (Hanke; S. Willis). Men of color are invited to act, but only in those secondary roles approved by white directors. A similar effect is produced by the film’s age appeals. Although men of various ages initially flock to *Fight Club*, most of the key players that emerge are young, lean, white boy-men. And besides the MTV-feel of the film, the main source of identification between the narrator and Marla is a kind of “Gen X” despondency: drifting young adults discarded by divorced parents, disillusioned by American dreams, skeptical of traditional work ethics, and so forth. This youthful emphasis further serves to conceal the white, middle-class character of this generational narrative.

*The feminine, effeminate, and manly desire.* The masculine identities and bonds that surface in the films are opposed to and explicitly deny the feminine. Women and things feminized appear soft, weak, hypersensitive, overcivilized, frazzled, psychobabbling, indecisive, disabled, unduly restrained yet too excessive—dripping with private (non-)sensibilities. Paradoxically, women and the feminine are also decidedly threatening, for they pose seductive entrapment. Worse yet, they rule the private realm but then refuse to be contained there. Their strides in the company of men exacerbate men’s neurasthenic anxieties. It is this final and most recent violation that seems to spawn the intensified loathing and vigorous misogyny at work in these films. Simply put, femininities are menacing because they are intruding, exposing, captivating, captive-making, and necessary all at once (Horrocks). Donning the primitive helps a man stand strong amid the feminine, in part because it restores his control of it. The evolution of the relationship between Marla and the narrator nicely illustrates the point. Initially, Marla calls the shots, assertively defending her therapy group turf. Yet as *Fight Club* grows, she becomes increasingly neurotic and dependent. By the film’s end, the relation of control has flipped: Marla feels ruined

by the newly alive and virile narrator, who then rescues her and, by implication, earns her affection.

The enhanced misogyny that suffuses both films is also colored with race hierarchy. While all men may join the war, invitations are neither equal nor sufficient to disrupt racial superiority (Wiegman). As hinted earlier, Tyler's first "human sacrifice" victim becomes the symbolic equivalent of a whimpering woman, whereas Chad dismisses Keif as an ignorant boy. As such, the Asian/American clerk is a far cry from the male primitive, while the Black intern is little but primal. These scenes surface more than the import of historically racialized access to the civilized and primitive. Namely, masculinities of color are also evaluated according to their degree of closeness to things feminine. And femininities are all the more odious when expressed in a male body. After all, the obese, castrated Bob is the only Project Mayhem soldier to die in battle.

As the latter point implies, the racist and misogynist civilized/primitive is also homophobic, as revealed by Chad's choice of profanities (e.g. "prissy cocksucker") in the newsletter review scene. And while *Fight Club* flirts with the homosocial, it concludes with compulsory heterosexuality (Wittig). Yet, in seeming contradiction, the civilized/primitive can engender homoeroticism. For example, the male bonds built in *Fight Club* are joined by homosocial desire (Roper; Sedgwick). Tyler's beautifully virile physicality brings this hunger to *Fight Club*. His flamboyant apparel, ranging from vibrant vintage to hipster to camouflage to a pastel coffee-cup bathrobe, marks him as spectacle. In scene after scene, the camera hovers lovingly over his sculpted, tanned, near-naked form, as it struts around the house or writhes around on a filthy floor, interlocked with various men. That men patently adore Tyler's body is made permissible in interesting ways. First, the narrator's relationship with Tyler is fraught with the symbolism of heterosexual courtship and marriage. On their first evening together, Tyler directs the narrator to "cut the foreplay" and ask if he can spend the night. The conclusion of their first physical brawl is laden with sexual imagery: With glazed, satisfied expressions, the two share a cigarette and a beer, musing, "We should do this again sometime." After the men move in together, the narrator's cynical references to "playing Ozzie and Harriet" depict the two as a less-than-ideal married couple. We watch the narrator gaze at Tyler in the bathtub; we observe his possessive and admiring smirks when he watches Tyler fight. Later, the narrator interprets Tyler's budding interest in a young, lithe, beautiful, blonde Fight Club member—referred to as "Angel Face"—as a sort of extramarital affair. Like a spurned lover, the narrator nips the affair in the bud by destroying Angel's face in a fight, proclaiming an "inflamed sense of rejection." Meanwhile, the potential for romantic relations between Tyler and the narrator is denied by Tyler's "sportfucking" of Marla, coupled with the narrator's own muted attraction to Marla. Here, we are assured that the homoerotic is not the homosexual, while the heterosexuality of both men gets affirmed. The narrator is hardly the only man in the film who gazes on Tyler with yearning awe; but Fight Club soon adopts the frame of war, which construes such desire as hero worship and the intense physical intimacy of bonds forged in battle. But only the white male body appears worthy of worship. Although all members arrive with an "ass made of cookie dough" and come away "carved out of wood," Tyler's stylishly primal and brutally militaristic body remains special

throughout, supporting Jeffords claim that hard body masculinity was never meant to include anyone but white men (*Hard*).

*In the Company of Men* also toys with the homoerotic in a less frequent and visible but more explicitly racialized way. Arguably, Chad's interest in Keif's balls reflects his curiosity about the mythic genitalia of Black men (hooks *Outlaw*). Chad bluntly deflects any such reading by avowing, "I'm not a homo, Keith," and recasting the scenario as an evaluation of whether Keif is "man enough" for management. This frame negates Chad's possible desire and diffuses the threat of primitive Black bodies and sexuality, affirming the superiority of Chad's civilized/primitive masculinity in the name of corporate prowess. Taken together, the human sacrifice and Keif scenes emasculate the bodies of men of color and enforce the entitled strength and beauty of the white male body. This is not surprising, for discourses of the dangers of Black male bodies (Dines; Orbe), of the lewd nature of Latino bodies (Berg), and of the feminized Asian/American male bodies (Nakayama "Show/down") encumber the formation of a civilized/primitive body of color.

In sum, the characters of both films use intensified—and, usually, misogynistic and homophobic—gender division to seduce a civilized/primitive brotherhood composed of all races and classes. However, it seems that the "unfortunate" inability of all but white men to adapt to both sides of this malleable self will preclude them from potent performance. Through such powerful discursive tactics, professional masculinity can once again manage to morph yet retain its gender, race, and class dominance all at once.

### Conclusion

Thus far, we have traced two parallel yet divergent threads of a contemporary discourse of white/collar men in crisis. Like the crisis narrative a century ago, these fragments are all about manhood threatened by feminizing forces. But this time around, corporations are figured as *the* emasculating force, sterilized by women's civilization. This novel motif suggests the need to attend to the ways in which work enables and constrains the performance of hegemonic masculinity.

White men have long been construed as public characters. In the 19th century, the stage shifted from community to work, where it has largely remained until now. The crisis narrative that ensued eventually rescued business by crafting it as a jungle of men, fertile ground for potent masculinity (Bederman; Rotundo). Today, amid serious public clamor for quality of work life and fashionably derisive caricatures like Dilbert, corporate ground seems ever more barren. In short, contemporary discourse casts suspicion on the white collar, as well as the notion that a man is defined by his professional achievements and material possessions. In the discourse chronicled here, white/collar masculinity alternately appears as socially destructive, as hinted by *In the Company of Men's* satirical tone, or as personally dissatisfying, as in *Fight Club*. As noted earlier, these films are part of a recent surge of works that explore the failings of white/collar masculinity. Arguably, many of these films—such as *American Beauty* (1999), *Office Space* (1999), and *Wolf* (1994)—also take up with the neurasthenic tensions analyzed here and depict disabling contradictions between corporate life and a potent masculine self. Ours may well be a time when hegemonic masculinity flirts with a new public home.

In this sense, the critique embedded in the rise of such films is penetrating, pushing men to seek other options. For example, both films analyzed here open space for criticizing hegemonic masculinity, especially *In the Company of Men*, whose tongue-in-cheek caricature is captured by Chad “Piercewell.” While *Fight Club* does not extend the same invitation, the narrator and occasionally Tyler perform discomfort with moral excess. And in the final moments of both films, we are left with empty images: Howard screaming at the deaf Christine, Chad gloating in the sexual adulation of his lover, radical Tyler destroyed by the narrator, and a dazed and confused narrator. We submit that these spaces constitute a window of opportunity through which to re-vision dominant masculinity. Whereas corporations have long supplied an institutional anchor for white, middle-class masculinity, they now ironically become the force that strips this weary subject of his manhood. In this way, the characters’ perceptions of personal powerlessness—however whiny, victimizing, or otherwise perilous—facilitates the sort of resistance that could undermine patriarchal, managerial capitalism, which depends on white/collar men to devote themselves to a game they will likely lose (Donaldson). If the present discourse continues to gain steam, we suspect that the nature of corporate commitment will have to change or white, middle-class masculinity may drift toward another public base.

Lest we sound too optimistic, we acknowledge at least two discursive hitches to sustainable resistance. First, the essay reveals the tremendous historical weight and contemporary pressure of the neurasthenic paradox, which demands that white/collar men (among others) simultaneously perform accountability to conflicting expectations for civilized and primitive selves in public and private arenas. Alternation between soft, sensitive and hard, violent masculinities constitutes one cultural means of managing this dilemma. Indeed, violence has become a familiar balm for embattled professional men (Hearn “Organization”; Linstead). We maintain that feminist and other calls for masculinity transformation must take seriously the difficulty of navigating this tension.

A second catch follows our analysis of the political relations at work in the film. Specifically, even if white, middle-class masculinity begins to dislodge from corporations, there is no reason to believe it will lose hold of its race, class, sexuality, and gender dominance. Consider, for example, what we learn about possibilities from the film tales. In general, we are offered four potential subject positions: (a) the debilitated neurasthenic (i.e., Howie, early narrator); (b) the eternally suspicious and sadistic corporate fighter (i.e., Chad); (c) the wild, masochistic boy rebel, playfully and maliciously violent (i.e., Tyler); and (d) the morally conflicted young man who killed him, only to (re)join with a woman (i.e., “evolved” narrator). Option one is immediately undermined, and the others are never embraced. To different degrees, these faulty performances of masculinity concede the inevitability of the hegemonic masculinities they seek to disrupt. Certainly, *In the Company of Men* is less at fault in this regard, yet even it depends on the audience to supply a critique frame and to connect its more and less subtle dots between gender, race, homophobia, and classism. That not everyone can or will do so becomes evident in some public reactions to the film. One viewer, frustrated by a recent romantic break-up, noted, “I actually walked out of the movie with a smile” (Kohn par. 5). Another critic

observed that Chad is “so charming that he’s irresistible, but what a poisonous man—just the type who often makes it in business” (Hershenson par. 9).

Alone, these twin caveats leave us with a final caution: Hegemonic masculinity remains an elastic, “historically mobile relation” (Connell *Masculinities* 77). Temporarily itinerant, perhaps. In search of a more supportive stage. But definitely not daunted.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Throughout the essay, our use of “white/collar” is meant to mark the masculinity’s race and class profile, without subordinating one to another.

<sup>2</sup> In addition to journals such as *Men and Masculinities* and *Journal of Men’s Studies*, see for instance, Brittan; Brod and Kaufman; Hearn and Morgan; Kimmel and Messner; Segal; Scidler *Rediscovering* and *Unreasonable*; and Stecopoulos and Uebel.

<sup>3</sup> This concern is shared among scholars of whiteness, for whom the parallel fear of reinscribing white dominance exists in tension with the desire to render it visible (e.g., Flores and Moon; Projansky and Ono).

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Byars; de Lauretis *Alice* and *Technologies*; Mulvey “Afterthoughts” and “Visual”; Penley; Powrie; and van Zoonen.

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Bird; hooks *Reel*; Jeffords *Hard*; Tasker “Dumb” and *Spectacular*; and S. Willis.

<sup>6</sup> See Bordo; Dyer *White*; Kirkham and Thumin *You Tarzan*; Ray; and Tasker “Fists.”

<sup>7</sup> Such arguments are explored in Cohan; Dyer “Rock”; Fuchs; Neale; and Stukator.

<sup>8</sup> For discussions of masculinity and work, see Alvesson; Cheng *Masculinities*; Collinson and Hearn “Naming”, *Men*, and “Men”; and Mumby. Studies of women and work include Ashcraft “Empowering” and “Managing”; Buzzanell; Konek and Kitch; Marshall; Pringle; Rosener; and Trethewey.

<sup>9</sup> For an extended account of the rise of these formations and their implications for masculinity, see Rotundo.

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Burris; Hearn *Men* and “Deconstructing”; Kerfoot and Knights; Kilduff and Mehra.

<sup>11</sup> As we later clarify, *In the Company of Men* marks race more self-consciously and purposefully than *Fight Club*, where it appears incidental.

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