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COO450134

"Along the Verge: The Issue of Essentialism Versus Social Constructionism Within the Domain

of Contemporary Masculinity Studies"

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1.9.2013

In an attempt to seek direction and establish a sense of existential purpose, much of the human race is and has been in a constant pursuit of improving our methods of understanding its surroundings. Many theories and lenses have been introduced and removed from society throughout time. Thanks to this process, some concepts have been left behind and enshrined within textbooks as relics of history. However, among the outdated philosophical ideas left stagnant by the educated minds of the present, one concept was oddly resurrected in the contemporary era of scholarship. The idea, initially conceptualized by Aristotle and later named "essentialism," is that all human beings share defining traits. While it is often understood as a method of defining the human being, it is not limited to this understanding alone. In fact, it has been used as an exclusionary tactic against more specific groups including, but not limited to, men, women, African Americans, and any other compartmentalized groups of people. Its resurrection and inspection by scholars has reconfirmed the belief that this idea is outdated and belongs in the past, especially with the rise of civil rights and the push for human equality. Being unable to be defined or compartmentalized is itself what makes us human, not the ability to be generalized or compacted into a surface level understanding. This understanding, and its detrimental effects, is no stranger to the field of postmodern masculinity studies. For example, when applying essentialist gender theory the contemporary text *Fight Club*, by Chuck Palahniuk, the results from the use of the lens are a weak analysis at best. Rather than relying on the stereotypical understandings of gender that essentialism provides, what allows for a far more thoughtful and enriched analysis of *Fight Club* is a reading which is rooted in social constructionism, or the idea that identities and traits are constructed over time and outside of compartmentalization.

Before analyzing both essentialism and social constructionism, it is best to explore both sides of the debate for the sake of clarity. In the most basic sense, social constructionism and essentialism are two contrasting epistemologies. An epistemology is a philosophical stance on the origin of meaning. On one hand, there is essentialism, or the idea that certain groupings of people have a set of essential traits which bind them together, weaving a common thread among them in the process. On the other hand is social constructionism, or the idea that all meaning is constructed within the mind. Expanding on the topic of social constructionism is Michael Crotty's text *The Foundations of Social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process*. He explains how "constructionism is an epistemology embodied in many theoretical perspectives," better known as analytical lenses (3). While they are great in number, some of the more popular theoretical perspectives include feminism, historicism, and postmodernism. In direct opposition to the understandings of meaning in which essentialism fosters, social constructionism supports the belief that "there is no objective truth waiting for us to the discover it" (8). Rather, "truth, or meaning, comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world. There is no meaning without a mind. Meaning is not discovered, but constructed" (8-9). In theoretical perspectives where identity, behavior, and traits are important, such as masculinity studies, feminist theory, and queer theory, essentialism is often disregarded in favor of social constructionism.

An example of social constructionism's role in a theoretical perspective can be found in feminism, where the topic of whether or not feminine traits are inherent or learned has been the subject of intense debate. Moreover, an essentialist view of female behavior would claim that all women have a set group of traits which bind them together. Perhaps these traits could be that

women are overly emotional, communal, favor crying in times of stress, and other sorts of behaviors which heavily rely on stereotypes. Contrary to that understanding is a social constructionist understanding of female behavior, which would claim that feminine behavior is not inherent or set since birth, but rather learned and constructed over time. This same style of example works with other theoretical perspectives as well, ranging from postcolonialism to structuralism, and from Marxism to masculinity studies.

Social constructionism gained footing as a result of questioning gender normative behavior, sometimes referred to as heteronormativity, and the origin of identity, and the compartmentalization of the genders. Providing some background on the stereotypical behaviors of the genders and the formulation of identity is Cordelia Fine's text titled *Delusions of Gender: How Our Minds, Society, and Neurosexism Create Difference*. She makes note of some of the stereotypes surrounding women, casually dismissing how "girls have long hair, girls are pretty, girls wear dresses – that kind of thing" (227). As harmless as they may seem to be on a surface level, stereotypical traits such as these often greatly influence the lives of those on either side of the gender divide. Furthermore, Fine elaborates further, explaining, "as we've seen, children are born into a world in which gender is continually emphasized through conventions of dress, appearance, language, color, segregation, and symbols" (227). Oftentimes, children are aligned with certain essential traits very early on in an attempt to comfortably fit them into either one compartment or the other, masculine or feminine. Metrosexuality, tomboyism, and even androgyny are frequently assaulted or examined in a state of confusion, because they do not safely or fully fit into any one compartment, but rather blur the lines between genders. Fine then notes how everything that could indicate whether one is male or female suddenly becomes "a

matter of great importance," and that "at about two years of age, children discover on which side of the divide they are located" (227). These sorts of understandings of gender are from where social constructionism stems. Essentialist traits serve to limit and confine, and largely to act as a filter to dictate who belongs where, and on what side of the gender divide. This emergence of social constructionism is not without its curiosities, with many questions attempting to grasp a fundamental understanding of essentialism.

While an essentialist understanding of gender may first appear to be a one-dimensional, clean, and organized, it is typically not without some level of confusion, conflicting gray areas, and ambiguity. In her text titled *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler explores some of these complex issues surrounding gender. Initially, she asks the question, "Is there 'a' gender which persons are said to *have*, or is it an essential attribute that a person is said to *be*, as implied in the question 'What gender are you?'" (10). In other words, from where come these traits? If an essentialist understanding of gender is to be believed, the traits are inherent and present since birth. However, how can "we refer to a 'given' sex or a 'given' gender without first inquiring into how sex and/or gender is given, through what means?" (9). The primary issue in assigning a gender to a person, according to Butler, appears to be how such a trait is determined. Given that assigning a gender seems to be critical, it is important to question the criteria for qualifying for a gender, and who has the authority to do the assigning in the first place. The realization that even essentialist understandings of gender must first be constructed is crucial in this ongoing debate, because it illustrates that social constructionism sets the foundation for essentialist gender theory. In other words, even the list of essential traits must first have been constructed by humans. Pressing forward, Butler questions, "how and where does the construction of gender take place?"

(11). After reexamining the fundamentals of essentialist gender theory, someone or some people must have constructed a grouping of traits which were deemed essential. The key problem with this realization is that it raises the question, "what is the manner or mechanism of this construction? If gender is constructed, could it be constructed differently?" (10). Given the varying styles of masculinity and femininity, and how they change over time and remain fluid, the only way an essential list of behavioral traits can be created is through some sort of construction, whatever that may be or fully entail. A significant indicator of social constructionism being the foundation of gender normative behavior is noted by Butler, who explains, "if gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes, then a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way" (9). In other words, a clear sign that gender is constructed would be that a gender would not be represented in any one single way, but rather an expansive variety of ways. Even when examining masculinity alone, it is abundantly clear that there is no one set kind of masculinity, but rather a great many. No matter which side of the coin is adopted and defended, essentialism or social constructionism, a form of engineering must take place. For essentialism, the list of essential traits which define men and women must have come from somewhere, most likely the minds of men, while social constructionism relies on people constructing meaning as well as their own identities. Essentialism, in its purest sense, is effectively dismantled and debunked as a standalone approach to gender theory.

Essentialism and its Self-Defeating Nature

It can be argued that these universal traits which contemporary scholars denounce are defensible. In her text titled "Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism," Martha Nussbaum argues in support of essentialism. She explains that she

understands it as "the view that human life has certain central defining features" (205). However, it is the use of words such as "certain" and "central" that leaves her ideological opponents skeptical. The idea that there can only be a certain number of defining features for human beings as a whole is insulting not only to microscopic minorities located around the globe, but also the idea of what it means to be human. Part of the beauty of the human race is its intricacy and its inability to be summarized. It is outside the bounds of language, no matter how many the central defining features. In addition, there is no accurate way of determining what is central to the human race as a whole. Majorities cannot accurately speak for minority groups, and minority groups cannot speak for each other without the risk of compartmentalizing. Essentialism, it appears, is a inadequate approach to the complex topic of the human race. Those who side with essentialist understandings of people are damaging in promoting their surface level understanding of others.

The beauty of and appreciation for the human race stems not from a supposed common thread that unites us all, but rather the reality that no such thread can exist. Essentialism is a self-defeating idea that plays no part in a world of compassionate and respectful humans, or thinking, rational humans for that matter. No matter what the example provided, there is no one single trait that can be applied to the entirety of the human race. Rather, there can only ever be a common thread that unites differently sized fractions of the population and creates borders for the rest of the human race. This practice has been used throughout history, ranging from minor examples as small as schoolyard politics to examples as large as the rise of Naziism. The reality is that there are no qualifiers for being human, because, once there are, they are immediately abused. The very fluctuation in what it means to be human, or even a man, over the years is further proof that

it is only a simple definition which can be altered and transformed to fit the needs of the dominant. With that being said, it can be asserted that essentialism is a relic of the past, and remains a stagnant topic. Those who disagree with the concept are simply stating the obvious, and those who agree with the concept promote hurtful, historically ignorant and self-defeating surface level understandings of others.

Essentialism and the Resulting Stereotypical Understandings of Masculinity Studies
With essentialism being both defined and debunked, it is only appropriate to examine the negative effects of attempting to sew a common thread through the domain of masculinity studies. Masculinity and its many definitions are a literary gray area, because they are often blurred by ambiguity and shape shifting identities. While there are standard understandings of masculinity which stem from stereotypes and essentialist understandings of the word, contemporary masculinity is not so easily defined. Despite the attempts of some, a concrete definition is difficult to place, because masculinity is in a constant state of change. Some of these changes may be rapid and chaotic, while others may extend over centuries of time. Adding their own theories on masculinity to the ever-growing field of masculinity studies are David Collinson, Jeff Hearn and Kaja Silverman. Collinson and Hearn's essay "Naming Men as Men" focuses on the power of groups as well as the prevalence of structured and institutionalized dominance. Shifting focus, Kaja Silverman's "Masochism and Male Subjectivity" explores alternate meanings behind male violence and masochistic behavior. Together, these theorists allow for improved understandings of essentialism in regards to masculinity studies as well as various texts due to their offering of new or altered perspectives.

If essentialist understandings of male power are to be believed, it can be assumed that

even though women in select first world countries have made strides within recent decades, male dominance is still an institutionalized, organized and well structured force. In David Collinson and Jeff Hearn's essay "Naming Men as Men," the subject of modern male dominance is explored. Their focuses are on how masculinity relies on groups for power, the dangers of groups, masculinity's identity within itself, and how men implement a strategic and well structured resistance against women and their rise in power. Their proposed theory reacts against the entry level understanding of gender studies which claims for women to have risen in power and men to have declined. Their research shows how men still use groups for power, exclude others, and label anyone outside of their way of thinking as "inferior." They push the belief that differences in power as a result of gender are still thriving in contemporary society. In addition to finding information, Collinson and Hearn arrive at a number of questions to ask when examining a text: should unities or differences be the focus of analyses, and how are they related? Their essay also questions the prominence of structured and organized dominance, and where it can be found within a text. Collinson then stresses "we would argue for the need to examine *both* the unities and differences between men and masculinities as well as their interrelations" (153). Through the investigation of both sides of the issue, more is understood about the issue and the numerous complexities by which it is surrounded. Collinson further explains that "by examining these processes *simultaneously,* we can develop a deeper understanding of the gendered power relations of organization, the conditions, processes and consequences of their reproduction and how they could be resisted and transformed" (153). Focusing on not just dominant masculinity but also its less popular forms allows for an exhaustive yet thorough understanding of male dominance in contemporary society. After applying Collinson and Hearn's theories to a text in an

attempt to better understand present day masculinities, readers and viewers alike are potentially able to both view dominance in a new light and ask new questions. However, after considering this text and its ideas, it is apparent that both Collinson and Hearn rely upon essentialist understandings of masculinity. Their work discounts the fact that many males do not seek domination or refuse to partake in structuring and layering their means of oppression. The text also does not consider the many intricate methods of female domination as well. Therefore, their research methods are inherently flawed thanks to their reliance on the supposed essentialist qualities which bind the male population.

While masculinity may appear to be a concrete and stable issue, it is often subject to change. Collinson explains this issue in stating "it is important to acknowledge the way in which masculinities can change over time, could be shaped by underlying ambiguities and uncertainties, may differ according to class, age, culture and ethnicity, etc" (153). Men and the many descriptive traits which aim to define them experience changes both fast and slow, and sometimes undergoes changes which last for generations. In other words, by pointing out these traits of masculinity studies, it is questionable as to why Collinson and Hearn were trying to define the domain in the first place. Examples of this fluidity are found in hairstyles, physical fitness, and social standing. Male hairstyles often change frequently, greatly differing from one decade to the next; masculinity being defined by physical fitness is almost always in a slow moving state of change, and men have often found themselves in positions of power and dominance in society throughout time. Due to frequent changes and the difference they bring, it is difficult to determine where to focus when evaluating masculinity. It means that only a social constructionist understanding of the human male seems appropriate at this point.

Acknowledging division, Collinson explores the issue of differing masculinities and their effects. He stresses that the focus on "difference ought not to degenerate into a diversified pluralism that gives insufficient attention to structured patterns of gendered power, control and inequality" (153). At this point in his text, he appears to be in the intersection between essentialist and constructionist understandings of masculinity. With that being said, he does entertain the other side of the argument. He explains the opposing viewpoint in stating "a focus on multiple masculinities should not 'deflect attention from the consistency of men's domination of women at systematic and organizational levels, from the continuation of materials, structured inequalities and power imbalances between the sexes'" (153). While it is important to focus on and explore domination as a standalone issue, it is also potentially equally as important to not limit one's focus. In certain instances, but not in every instance, it is true that examining the structure of male dominance reveals "asymmetrical relations of power between men and women" (153). This issue is still quite important and persists today even, despite the many decades of progress made by women's rights groups. Collinson hypothesizes that this lingering imbalance between the two sexes is a result of "structured domination" (153). Meaning that, according to Collinson and Hearn, whatever male dominance remains is deliberate as opposed to by chance, thus solidifying their belief in essentialist masculinity studies. According to them, the presence of not simply domination and power, but structured domination and power indicates a deliberate effort to remain in control. While theorists and rights activists may differ in their opinion on how best to focus on masculinity, both sides provide for what they feel is both crucial and insightful research.

Much of male dominance in contemporary society is thought to stem from power in

groups. Collinson explains how "men's power in organizations is maintained through their unification and identification with each other" (153). However, this is merely a blanket statement and seems as if it is a surface level understanding of masculinity at best. According to them, strength in numbers helps maintain dominance in various ways, such as resources and validation. With many men helping maintain dominance, it is clear that more resources are being used for the effort. Simply enough, the more men targeting the same goal, the better the results. Yet, this understanding discredits the many men who are outside of wanting to dominate, or who could care less. Additionally, Collinson and Hearn believe that men functioning in groups can validate their motives and opinions by constantly reinforcing themselves. A man acting out on his own may potentially stop to question himself, whereas a group of men are more likely to stay united in their beliefs and actions. Both authors further examine men in groups, stating, "men are frequently united, though not necessarily consciously, by dominant sexuality, violence and potential violence, social and economic privilege, political power, shared concerns and interests and culturally based values" (153). Whether it is a conscious effort to stay grouped or not, men often find themselves together and united due to their similarities. For example, many men are similar in that political power tends to historically lean in their favor. Also, men have typically earned more money than women throughout history. Similarities are thought to help bind men together and unite them in their similar interests and experiences. Yet, what this statement does is offers a great deal of evidence in support of the belief that both authors are viewing masculinity studies through the lens of essentialism. This is showcased in the text many times, but no one instance is greater than the aforementioned quote.

Unfortunately for these authors and their essentialist approach, using groups and large

numbers for power also has its downsides. They touch on the issue that "the idea of a unity of men is *also* problematic" (154). Some findings support the idea that groups tend to have a major weakness: exclusion. There is evidence for "white heterosexual able-bodied men [excluding] other kinds of men" (154). In fact, even according to Collinson, it "remains a major issue" (154). While it is clear that similar men stereotypically bind in groups for power, the exclusion of select varieties of men reinforces the idea that a constructionist understanding of males is better and has less of a potential to create controversy. With this issue being detected and recognized, Collinson states, "these differences must be examined" (154). According to Collinson, it is important to analyze how these "unities *and* differences between men and masculinities" overlap (154). With the existence of so many differing masculinities, the best way to understand contemporary masculinity as a whole is by investigating their numerous similarities and differences. Only then, when there is an individualized approach which is rooted in social constructionism being used to better understand the many groups within the domain of masculinity studies, is masculinity able to be better understood to the fullest possible extent.

In conclusion, Collinson and Hearn wrap up their investigation of structured masculinity on a introspective note. Even though both sides have been explored, one viewing masculinity as a single issue and the other viewing it as a complex series of relations and intertwining factions within itself, it is best to attempt to see masculinity in both ways, or even all ways. Despite the fact that, at the end of their text, Collinson and Hearn feel that this would allow for the most complete understanding of contemporary masculinity and its issues, what is revealed is a schizophrenic approach to the topic. In the beginning of their text, their claims and understandings were, by their own words, the equivalent of essentialism. However, as if their

entire text turned into an introspective learning experience, they both begin to entertain the idea of seeing all sides of masculinity studies. While the entire use of this article appears to be scatterbrained and lacking in focus for the authors, it reveals a major issue: that essentialist understandings of masculinity are self-defeating.

On this same note are the issues of physical suffering in regards to masculinity, what it essentially means to be a man, and stereotypical behavioral traits. In Kaja Silverman's "Masochism and Male Subjectivity," she reacts to Freudian gender theory and explores physical abuse and its various understandings. Paying no attention to the fact that Freudian approaches to psychology have been abandoned for the better part of a century, she presses onward in applying these theories to modern masculinity. She urges whoever examines a text to answer the question, "what is it precisely that the male masochist displays, and what are the consequences of this self-exposure?" (36). Such a question applies directly to Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, due to physical violence being at its center. According to Silverman, it is important to explore texts and attempt to find instances of male masochistic behavior, as well the consequences of putting on such a display. On one hand, such behavior can be regarded as liberating, but on the other hand, it can say more about the man than originally intended.

According to Silverman, the problems faced by men in contemporary society are relatively easy to comprehend on a surface level, yet they are difficult to truly understand. Silverman explains this belief further, noting how "when a woman doesn't identify with a classically female position, she is expected to identify with a classically male one" (34). However, though she can identify with a classically male position after failing to identify with a stereotypically female one, she is unable to fully understand what it means to be a man.

Silverman furthers her idea, stating, "the girl's identification with the male position does not imply an identification with activity" (34). In other words, by using fantasy, she can take on the role of a man without becoming active in a masculine way. What results from both pretending to be masculine and attempting to become a man is a paper thin understanding of male identity. According to Silverman, this reliance on stereotypes and understanding what are perceived to be essentialist masculine traits suggests that understanding masculine identity is out of the question for not just women, or those deemed as being "outsiders," but for everyone. In other words, what it means to be a man cannot be simplified or limited to a select few behavioral traits.

Silverman's focus on masochism and the meanings surrounding physical violence stems largely from outdated ideas courtesy of Sigmund Freud. The sight of physical violence in stereotypical masculinity and films such as *Fight Club* suggests the presence of what Freud called "the beating fantasy." First mentioned by Freud after observing the behavioral issues found in women, the beating fantasy has slowly crept its way into masculine studies. According to Silverman, men sometimes insert "themselves in the masculine version of the beating fantasy" (34). Examples of this are found in *Fight Club* and numerous other Hollywood films where physical violence and fighting are core issues. What is less known is the meaning behind the masochistic practice, and how it actually relates to femininity. Given that Freud first found evidence of the beating fantasy in women, Silverman believes the male masochistic version of this behavior to suggest a desire to become feminine. She explains that "the male subject thus secures access to femininity through identification with the mother" (34). Through being beaten and suffering physical pain, men are apparently able to relate and identify with their mothers who may have also been subjected to this treatment. Oftentimes, she notes, the focus on behalf of

the male subjects is centered around "pain and humiliation" (36). In addition to the beating

fantasy, she argues that "some effort is made to conceal the *homosexual* content of the conscious

fantasy," and yet "no corresponding attempt is made to hide its *masochistic* content" (35). She

feels that this effort to hide certain aspects of masochism displays what is acceptable and

unacceptable within the behavior. For example, in *Fight Club* the narrator and his friend Tyler

Durden often visit their underground boxing clubs in order to experience pain and receive

physical abuse. At face value, the practice itself may be considered socially unacceptable, but

there is even further meaning surrounding certain practices that suggests there are rights and

wrongs within the behavior. The practice of purposely experiencing pain is not a simple issue,

and within it are many meanings and understandings. Furthermore, similar to what was

explained by Collinson and Hearn, Silverman's text focuses on the essentialist understandings.

One such idea is the idea that men stereotypically desire physical suffering. The issue with this

idea is that it does just as predicted: it excludes. With this understanding, it could potentially be

understood that males who do not desire physical pain are seeking refuge in classically female

lifestyles. There is a great chance that masochism and subjectifying oneself is just one more way

of understanding the complex domain of masculinity studies.

　　　　The aforementioned theories explained by Silverman, Collinson, and Hearn can be

applied to various texts. Briefly examining *Fight Club* through the lenses provided by the

theorists allows for a new understanding of the film. For example, Collinson focuses on the

reliance on groups by men and how they are a source of control and power. In Palahniuk's *Fight

Club*, the narrator and his alter ego Tyler Durden form a group based around physical violence

and masochistic behavior. After establishing their underground boxing club, they are able to form

rules and set guidelines for living. Their power and influence are greatly expanded after finding a common thread and unifying. In fact, though the men in the film act violently and subject themselves to pain just as Silverman pointed out, the presence of groups precedes the formation of Fight Club. Early in the film, the narrator attends various support groups in order to cry, a requirement for temporarily curing his troublesome insomnia. The reliance on groups for power and control is not necessarily always violent in nature and can be used for achieving something as simple as getting a good night's sleep. So, within an instant, the understandings provided by these theorists are flipped and contorted in ways that simultaneously validate and invalidate themselves. This malleability illustrates how weak their theories are, and exposes how, after all, they remain just that: mere theories. The provided theories within the whole of this supporting tangent are not the only ways, but rather some ways of viewing the intricate topic. There is no be all or end all of understanding something as complex as masculinity, and certainly no essential traits, but rather just competing ideas, their framework, and the evidence provided by the theorists who introduce them.

<div align="center">**The Historicizing of Masculinity and its Fluid State**</div>

Before examining what it means to take on a constructionist approach to a text rich with issues in masculinity studies such as *Fight Club*, it is important to provide historicizing, contextualizing, and clarifying supplemental information on masculinity studies' past. To put it simply, the domain at hand is both being continuously reengineered and in a state of continual growth. Much of what exists today comes as a direct result of the studies of the past. In other words, theorists have worked with aggregated information, and are often in a state of borrowing, sharing, and influencing. Without these foundations being constructed over the course of years or even

decades, the newly developed theories of the present may not exist as they do in their present

state. For example, if it were not for emergence of feminism in the nineteenth century, the

foundation for second-wave feminism in the 1960's may not have even existed as history

presents it. However, with not only its emergence but also its strengthening, the stage was set for

another wave to sweep the country nearly a century later. As a result of feminism's ascension, the

focus of some scholars was turned towards the opposite sex, thus founding what is present day

masculinity studies. While the question remains unanswered if the emergence of masculinity

studies from within feminism damaged or helped the latter, what is certain is the expansion of the

field. By studying masculinity, the field of gender studies is effectively doubled in size due to its

inclusion of the second sex. Since its appropriate birth from feminism, masculinity studies has

taken a firm hold of some branches of academia, and appears everywhere from classroom

discussions to published anthologies. Similar to its predecessor, masculinity studies and its

fluidity, ever-changing identity, definition, and stereotypes are the subject of debates which span

not just literature and film, but the study of societies both past and present.

  The recent engagement of masculinity studies by scholars both professional and amateur

is owed to the greater field of gender studies, or specifically the second wave of feminism found

in the mid twentieth century. However, similar to feminism, masculinity studies has also suffered

from its own set of stereotypes. For example, in Rachel Adams and David Savran's 2002 edition

of *The Masculinity Studies Reader*, they begin the anthology with the quote, "a man never begins

by presenting himself as an individual of a certain sex; it goes without saying that he is a man"

(Adams and Savran 1). The quote originates from *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir, and is

key in understanding the stereotypes surrounding masculinity. The quote explains a man's

presence as powerful and striking, as if all who are in the company of a man are aware of that fact, and are also awe struck. Even though this idea may still endure at times, modern masculinity studies suggests that men are no longer so easily defined. Also, Adams and Savran address how scholars should examine masculine identities. Early in masculinity studies, "the implicit subject of the western intellectual tradition was to concentrate on woman" (1). In other words, similar to how much of women and feminism was understood by examining their relationships with men, masculinity studies was also understood merely by its relationship with women. However, there is a "growing body of scholarship devoted to addressing this historical imbalance by locating men and masculinity as the explicit subjects of analysis" (1). One key way of better understanding masculinity studies is to reexamine the way in which attempts have been made to define it. Indirectly, Adams and Savran's text supports the idea that masculinity studies is beyond conventional definition. It cannot be defined by its relationships with other groups, or even as a standalone entity. The very existence of a definition supports essentialism, because a definition is a listing of what something is. If a man falls outside of that definition, no matter how broad, it may be assumed that he is somewhere outside of the realm of man. This issue is the key problem in attempting to put a label on men: no matter the breadth, defining men is exclusionary.

While it may first appear that masculinity and male studies have always been the focus of history, they have only been under close examination in the few decades since the rise of feminism. In the short time it has been under investigation, methods have been changed, done away with and even invented. Adams and Savran explain that "masculinity studies is a product of the major reconfiguration of academic disciplines that has taken place since the 1960's. Borders

have been redrawn, new methodologies have emerged, and many of the old disciplines have been rethought and reconstituted" (1). Despite its short life, it has been subject to numerous changes both minimal and significant. Even the heightened awareness of masculinity studies has influenced its understanding. Adams and Savran state that there is "a new self-consciousness about the theoretical and methodological assumptions underlying traditional disciplinary formations" (1-2). Many narratives within masculinity studies have been dominated by a handful of theories or methods, but recently these approaches have greatly changed. Additionally, even though the aforementioned quote suggests otherwise, Adams stresses that gender studies is not static. In fact, they note that "scholars in many disciplines have sought to denaturalize de Beauvoir's observation that 'it goes without saying that he is a man,' by demonstrating that masculinities are constructed, mutable, and contingent, and analyzing their many and widespread effects" (2). Given its delicate nature and ability to be easily altered, it is important to grasp the concept that gender studies is a fluid entity and not one whose properties are concrete. With that being said, masculinity studies' attributes are not excluded from changes due to outside influence, and many of its properties stem from earlier feminism.

Given its rise as a result of feminism-oriented gender studies, masculinity studies shares a similar past and focus to that of feminist studies. Adams and Savran explain, "taking its lead from feminism, masculinity studies is thus dedicated to analyzing what has often seemed to be an implicit fact, that the vast majority of societies are patriarchal and that men have historically enjoyed more than their share of power, resources, and cultural authority" (2). In other words, despite their focus being on opposite sexes, feminist and masculine studies often relate due to their mutual interest in the power of men. In addition, Adams and Savran theorize that

masculinity studies owes its existence to the relatively recent rise of feminism. They explain how "any historical account of the field's development must commence with the ascendancy of second-wave feminism during the 1960's and the consolidation of women's studies in the academy during the next decade" (3). It is due to feminism's newfound prominence in academic settings and its near unification that masculinity studies gained its voice. The strengthening of feminist studies brought masculinity studies to light, but by the time this had occurred, it was clear that much of its history was not left intact. Adams and Savran state that studiers of masculinity wish to do as feminist theorists have and take on "the project of historical recovery" (3). Scholars focusing on feminism wished to bring "attention to unrecognized female authors, artists, and power political agents, as well as the previously invisible histories" (3). It can be said that modern masculinity studies not only owes its existence and current state to feminism, but also that it borrows heavily and regularly from its predecessor. The two may focus on opposite sexes, but they are one in the same, often sharing both methods and approaches.

In order to better understand the current state of modern masculinity studies, its past in relation to second-wave feminism must be examined. Adams and Savran explain how "in the 1970's, the revolutionary import of the feminist insurgency in the streets, the voting booth, various professional arenas, and the academy was not lost on a generation of men who had been either actively involved with or sympathetic to the New Left" (4). This means that, when this wave of feminism rose up significantly and was found prospering in various locations throughout our society, a sizable number of men were right alongside them helping these women ascend. The rise of feminism in the twentieth century was not a solitary project in which only women contributed to its success. In fact, men played a moderate role in the process. After the rise of

feminism was secured for the most part, many men in addition to male and female scholars began to turn their gaze towards masculinity studies. Additionally, the resulting rise of masculinity studies was not only helped by the existence of the feminist movement, but was aided by the gay rights movement as well. Adams and Savran explain the situation in stating, "although this early men's movement was primarily a response to feminism, its political urgency was undoubtedly heightened by the emergency of the gay liberation movement at the end of the 1960s" (5). With these two somewhat unexpected allies helping secure its ascension, masculinity studies was well on the way to being brought into mainstream public consciousness. In addition to being related to both the feminist and gay rights movements in terms of its ascension, the rise of masculinity studies shares similar traits in its mechanics.

With masculinity studies being brought into the mainstream public consciousness, it began to be noticed and tackled by scholars. As a result, it started showing up in academics and taking on new shapes. Adams and Savran explain, "at the same time that the first-wave men's movement was consolidating, scholars in a number of disciplines began to introduce the critique of patriarchal masculinities into their work" (5). However, this consolidation is troubling, because it appears as if the stray ends of masculinity studies were scrapped in favor of letting it contort and bend into its dominant form. If there were ever a word for pinpointing laziness in regards to resisting compartmentalization, it is consolidation. In addition to this point and similarly to feminist studies, masculinity studies began to firmly plant itself in academia thanks to the attention of scholars from various fields of study. The work surrounding masculinity studies in this time period is typically not without praise for its predecessor. Adams and Savran explain that work on masculine studies "repeatedly acknowledges its debt to feminism" (5). Yet,

despite the many thanks for establishing the foundation on which masculinity studies would rise, these works were also thankful for many men. Work was sometimes dedicated "to the male audience that had largely been neglected by feminist discussions of gender" (6). In other words, while it was undoubtedly grateful for all feminist studies had done, works within masculinity studies sought to target and thank those left unremembered after their predecessor's rise. Given its ever-changing identity and focus, masculine studies has been in a constant state of transformation ever since its late twentieth century rise.

Unlike its identity during the earlier portion of its rise, present day masculinity studies is subject to debate which leaves certain questions unanswered. Later in time, some scholars fully rejected previous approaches to masculinity studies by suggesting their own. Adams and Savran state that "unlike the masculinity studies that emerged during the late 1980's, most of these critics implicitly or pointedly rejected psychoanalytical accounts of gender, preferring to understand sexual oppression in the context of economic and social history" (5). While these newer approaches are perfectly acceptable, it leaves some scholars questioning the validity of such approaches as well as their usefulness in comparison to older approaches. No matter the answer, what matters is that present day masculinity studies, thanks to there being so many approaches, is more widespread and rooted in constructionism than ever. Adams and Savran make note that "evidence for the rapid spread of masculinity studies during the last decade of the twentieth century is everywhere in the many academic conferences, topical anthologies, and courses now being offered on masculinity" (7). This realization illustrates both the success of masculinity studies' rise, and its exponential growth. However, despite its success and new approaches, one question still remains: "does masculinity studies represent a beneficial extension of feminist

analysis or does it represent a hijacking of feminism?" (7). With its rise stemming from feminist studies, did masculine studies end up helping its predecessor or hurting it severely? For those seeking concrete answers, these questions are frustratingly open-ended with much evidence to support either side of the argument. On one hand, the rise of masculinity studies helped to double the size of gender studies with its inclusion of the other sex. However, on the other hand, it is argued that the desperately needed attention of feminist studies was prematurely stolen away, if even partially. Adams and Savran's question is where many who judge the history of masculinity studies are left stuck in debate, but, after all, what is unarguable is its presence within present day.

In Stephen M. Whitehead's 2001 edition of *The Masculinities Reader,* an anthology comprised of numerous essays on masculinity studies, one of the key issues tackled is "masculinism." In the essay titled "Masculinities and Masculinism," by Arthur Brittan, he explains the behavioral issues of men, the ever-changing nature of masculinity and its relationship with all outside forces by which it is influenced. Brittan states, "how men behave will depend upon the existing social relations of gender. By this I mean the way in which men and women confront each other ideologically and politically" (52). Similar to the idea that it is impossible to be a rebel, because a rebel's defiant actions are solely defined by their opposition to the dominant narrative, the behavior of men is defined by women. The dominant narrative which defines how a man should act is altered and modified in direct relation to how women act. To further illustrate his belief, Brittan explains, "gender is never simply an arrangement in which the roles of men and women are decided in a contingent and haphazard way. At any given moment, gender will reflect the material interests of those who have power and those who do not" (52). In

other words, current behavioral traits found in men were not always this way. Whoever happens

to control the dominant narrative in society also greatly influences the direction and identity of

masculinity. Outside of the influence of the dominant narrative, masculinity studies is also

influenced by other forces. Brittan states that masculinity "does not exist in isolation from

femininity – it will always be an expression of the current image that men have of themselves in

relation to women. And these images are often contradictory and ambivalent" (52). This theory

illustrates how man's idea of masculinity changes so much in relation to femininity that it even

has the potential to contradict itself and disprove or put into jeopardy what it once established.

On the subject of change, Brittan pushes further into masculinity's inability to never set still.

Continuing where Rachel Adams' thoughts on change within masculinity left off, Brittan

examines the mechanics of change itself. He explains that, while masculinity never changes in

that it "is always local and subject to change," it is this process of change that is so thought

provoking. Brittan explains how there are different methods of change, and that some changes

are differently timed than others. He explains this by stating, "some masculinities are long-lived,

whilst others are as ephemeral as fads in pop music. However, what does not easily change is the

justification and naturalization of male power; that is, what remains relatively constant in

masculine ideology, masculinism or heterosexualism" (52-53). He explains how masculinity is

able to experience changes both swift and lengthy, yet also contains elements which are

seemingly invulnerable to change, as if they are borderline essentialist traits. After giving

examples of aspects which never seem to change and others which change swiftly, Brittan

explains how certain portions of masculinity change over a great length of time. He writes that

"masculinity refers to those aspects of men's behavior that fluctuate over time. In some cases

these fluctuations may last for decades – in others it may be a matter of weeks or months" (53).

An example of a change which takes decades to occur is male style. Both the hairstyles of men

and general fashion have changed greatly over the past few decades, consisting of styles that

look feminine, stereotypically masculine and even androgynous. Brittan notes how, after this

great amount of change, "male identity is a fragile and tentative thing with no secure anchorage

in the contemporary world" (53). In one sentence, Brittan pinpoints the greater issue at hand

when it comes to defining the domain of masculinity studies: there is no secure anchor, or one set

trait which defines a domain as fragmented, fluid, and malleable as this. Present day masculinity

is unique in the sense that goes beyond traditional uniqueness. It is no longer a well defined and

easily explained pattern of changes unique to the changes found before it, as if it ever were one

but in the minds of essentialist scholars, but is instead at a point where it can be anything or take

on any shape for absolutely no reason at all. Twenty first century masculinity is seemingly in a

world of its own, where identity is difficult to accurately pinpoint.

The anthology *Performing American Masculinities: The 21st-Century Man in Popular

Culture*, edited by Elwood Watson, attempts to explore present day masculine studies in order to

better define what some scholars refer to as a spontaneous masculinity outside of explanation and

prediction. Margaret C. Ervin's essay "The Might of the Metrosexual" focuses on the modern

man, and contrasts it with traditional masculinity. She explains how there are two narratives

within masculinity: the dominant narrative which has been around for some time, and the

modern narrative. Ervin explains how some authors have written comical works on the

difference between the two. She states how she examined the supposed threat to masculinity in

"a guidebook parody titled *The Badass Bible*. It portrays the threats posed to traditional

masculinity, or 'badass' masculinity" (67). Acting like a "badass" is the type of behavior that most associate with traditional masculinity. However, given modern day masculinity's ability to be unpredictable, "many of the rules set down in this handbook deal with the necessity to act spontaneously" (67). However, it is stressed that "by virtue of the fact that the book is a parody, the notion is mocked" (67). In other words, *The Badass Bible* is aware of trends in modern masculinity, and therefore uses this heightened awareness for the purpose of comedy. After poking fun at these new trends in masculinity, the text then jokingly attempts to reestablish a more traditional dominant narrative by providing "a depiction of the badass, the avatar of hegemonic masculinity" (67). While it may seem that the focus of the text is purely to be comical, it is not. Ervin explains that there are many opportunities to study the text for a deeper truth, as opposed to merely admiring the jokes which it provides. She states that there is the "potential of the unattainability of badass stature" (67). This statement is true because such status is absolutely absurd. According to Ervin, the very notion of becoming the type of badass the traditional narrative has established is nearly impossible due to the requirements. She explains how "*The Badass Bible* makes it clear that being a badass is all about being ready for a fight, not necessarily starting the fight, but being ready to physically retaliate for the slightest cause" (67). This idea is not only legitimately dangerous and jeopardizing of self-preservation, it is self-destructive. In conclusion, while the traits of the modern day man and the metrosexual strongly go against what it traditionally means to be a man, any comparison of the two helps further validate the former. The spontaneity and seemingly unpredictable behavior of the modern man is safer, less absurd and much more easily obtainable than that of stereotypical man.

Venturing deeply into the field of film and cinema, the anthology *Masculinity: Bodies,*

Movies, Culture relates current theories in masculinity to modern movies. Krin Gabbard's "Someone is Going to Pay: Resurgent White Masculinity in *Ransom*" investigates instances of masculinity in contemporary cinema. She notes how, despite modern man's unpredictability and spontaneity, some behavior is still easily understood. For example, she explains how "an early scene in *Ransom* (directed by Ron Howard in 1996) presents an image that powerfully symbolizes the masculine anxieties of both the hero and the film" (7). Interestingly, the creators of the film do not disguise these anxieties or attempt to make them more subtle. Instead, Gabbard feels as if they are blatantly presented. She recalls a scene, explaining, "with its two large circular balloons, the contraption is also a metaphor for Tom's prominent but threatened masculinity: his 'balls'" (8). The scene which Gabbard explains is one featuring the kidnapping of a man's child. Once the man's son is kidnapped and taken by the film's antagonists, the obviously arranged balloons pop due to being struck. In addition, she explains that there are further allusions to men being without their testicles, or their manhood. Gabbard makes the point, "because of the long association of hair with sexuality, baldness often symbolizes castration" (16). While this instance of male anxiety is more subtle than the last, the two are still quite blatantly presented for anyone with a mild knowledge of film to recognize. Gabbard's review of the film *Ransom* illustrates that, while it is possible be aware of the difficulty in defining masculinity thanks to its fluctuating identity, it is still sometimes presented traditionally thanks to the fostering of essentialist understandings of the domain. At this moment, despite it being in a state where it shares pieces of the old and new blended together to create a unique whole, understanding the field in essentialist terms is notoriously difficulty to break free from, as Gabbard has pointed out in length. In other words, having an awareness of what one is doing

incorrectly does not necessarily mean that the incorrect behavior will cease.

Modern masculinity studies not only owes its existence to second-wave feminism, it also shares many traits with its predecessor. With its nearly impossible to concretely define identity, fluid nature and application to numerous academic studies, masculinity studies is often the subject of investigation and close examination. Even the level of change found within masculinity is studied intensely, because of its ability to vary in terms of speed. In fact, it is not guaranteed that certain changes even have to occur at all for certain aspects of masculinity. Moreover, similar to the very nature of change within itself, present day masculinity is at a unique state, because of its nearly seamless inclusion of elements from both the past and present. Since the heightening of the mainstream public's awareness of the issue, masculinity studies has permeated its way into many fields of study in a way strikingly similar to that of women's studies.

Fight Club and Masculinity Within the Domain of Literary Criticism

Having examined essentialism and its misuse in regards to masculinity studies, the history of the domain, and the detrimental effects of these traits on a field seemingly full of endless meanings and interpretations, it is crucial to investigate how recent literary critics have personalized their use masculine theory. With the framework for the material set, the chosen text and focus of this strengthened understanding of masculinity studies is Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, a film that was widely released in 1999. Since its theatrical debut, *Fight Club* has been the subject of debate, especially within the focus of masculinity. The film features a blend of the old and new in terms of approaches to masculinity and its meanings. The narrator and Tyler Durden, the film's two main male characters, are each other's polar opposites and give each other meaning. Given

its contribution to the study of male bodies in contemporary society, the numerous ways in which

a man's actions can be interpreted within masculinity studies or the shifting of male identity,

Fight Club has been the subject of moderate scholarly review.

Literary critics often focus on identity within *Fight Club*, partly due to the actual storyline

of the film and also due to the fluid nature of masculine identity. The issue of identity and its

definition is at the center of Alex Tuss' "Masculine Identity and Success: A Critical Analysis of

Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley* and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*." Similar to the

points in which the character Tyler Durden makes within the film, Tuss explains how "the

American Dream and the concept of success play central roles in American depictions of male

accomplishment and masculinity in contemporary American culture" (93). According to this

theory, contemporary men are supposedly driven to both rise in social status and acquire enough

possessions to feel as if they have achieved their goals: a house, a car, and anything else that may

satisfy the requirements of the American Dream. Tyler Durden warns of these wants and desires

throughout *Fight Club* with an emphasis on how said items do not construct a man's identity. It

means that, by his own words, Tyler himself rejects essentialism in regards to masculinity. While

a man can never become his possessions or allow them to represent him, they do so far too often.

Venturing away from the idea that possessions define the man, Tuss explores the new

ways Palahniuk defines masculinity. He states that Palahniuk presents "new ways to view

masculinity and the means whereby male behavior merits respect and recognition" (93). As if to

veer away from allowing possessions to construct a man's identity, Tuss explains that behavior

itself may be a better way to judge a man. Furthermore, only after judging a man by his actions

can others determine the amount of respect he is owed and how well recognized he should be

within society. Also, this seemingly forgotten criteria by which to judge others leads viewers to balance between the traditional and the contemporary definition of masculinity. In other words, by not simply judging a man for his possessions but also by his actions, Tuss feels as if the viewer is left with a new "context in which to consider what it means to be male and what constitutes success in contemporary America" (93). The new method allows for the audience to examine the main characters more completely, thus allowing for a more accurate understanding of the breadth of masculinity.

According to Tuss, the presence of the old and contemporary methods for understanding masculinity results in a struggle within the viewer. In another way to complicate the matter, the traditional and contemporary definitions often borrow from each other. For example, Tuss explains that "defining masculinity in terms of success in contemporary America involves both the historical and the conceptual when attempting to arrive at some conclusions" (93). At times, viewers are left with not an exclusive theory, or an essentialist understanding, but instead a blend of the two. He further explains that "while the traditional notions about masculinity and success persist in twentieth-century America, they are increasingly susceptible to the efforts of individuals who seek to recast the terms in subversive and reinterpreted forms" (94). In other words, both methods of understanding are rarely isolated. Lazily crafted blanket statements do not belong in the vicinity of a topic as complex as this. However, after all of this, Tuss does believe Tyler Durden to be a significant revision of male success (94). Masculine identity is constructed in a variety of ways, but Tuss explains how *Fight Club* presents masculinity in a contemporary manner.

With much of the focus being on the hypermasculine character Tyler Durden, Tuss turns

his attention to the unnamed narrator. Tuss explains how the narrator serves an interesting purpose in the film due to his representation of the stereotypical average man. He notes, "the narrator in *Fight Club* experiences a similar negative impact and alienation from the culture of the 1990s … but in his case that alienation prompts his 'proleptic imagination' to give birth to an alter ego" (96). In other words, while the narrator may be physically weak and largely imperfect while in comparison to Tyler Durden, he has the special ability to use his mind and utilize his imagination. From his insecurities and sufferings spawns his alter ego who serves not as universal perfection, but as perfection in the eyes of the narrator through all of his torment. Even the narrator's own mental projections are incapable of being essentialist portraits of the male figure. The narrator searches out "more masculine, but divergent, male personae to achieve their ultimate success," and he finds it in Tyler (96). Once his alter ego is established and present, the narrator appears to finally seize control of his life weather he knows it or not. He conforms to the traditionally violent dominant narrative by wanting to destroy every scrap of history, therefore providing himself the opportunity to become an artist and rewrite his life and redirect his future (96). If stereotypical masculinity is power and authority, the narrator achieves this status whether or not he is aware of it. The explosion which burns and destroys all of the narrator's possessions is actually "Tyler Durden's response to a culture that renders the narrator a cipher, a consumer of products, the very sort of feminized man that American males feared from the turn of the century" (96). This moment in the film represents the beginning of an internal revolution, because the narrator is not only taking control and fully rejecting society's instructions, but he is doing it in the most stereotypically masculine fashion: by blowing it all up. Tuss further explains how "the brutal immediacy of destruction, like the brutal immediacy of the individual combat in

Fight Club, liberates the narrator and makes him an icon for all the other alienated and angry white men who flock to be members of Fight Club" (97). With his violent and chaotic acts of what he perceives to be defiance, the narrator calls out to all other lonely, caucasian, and blue-collared workers who feel isolated in these urban centers. He gives many of them an outlet for their pent up rage stemming from a culture whose dominant narrative has feminized them in a traditional sense. From this point, Tuss ventures inward and begins to focus less on the physical actions of the narrator and more on the mental.

According to Tuss, the mind is to blame for the chaotic events which occur in the film. If it were not for the essentialist thoughts of the narrator, Fight Club and all of the events leading up to its creation would have never occurred. According to Tuss, the narrator is odd in that he uses his mind. He examines how "waking up as a different person becomes the imaginative trigger that unleashes the Durden alter ego, a persona the narrator sees as 'an artist'" (97). With narrator's alter ego being freed by his own imagination, the event is stereotypically masculine because he takes the reigns and puts his ideas into action. Tuss then states, "the same imagination ignites the narrator/Tyler's rebellion against the world that will not father him; rather, it crassly supplies him with the externals for life, ignoring the values and conscience needed for a young man to grow and succeed" (100). Within an instant, the old ideas of what it takes to "grow and succeed" are thrown out, and the narrator begins to live on his own terms. In addition, Tuss also explains how the narrator is not inexperienced in using his mind to achieve his goals. For example, he mentions the instance of the narrator's "manipulation of the individuals who populate the many support groups he attends, even though he suffers only from insomnia rather than any of the devastating medical conditions he encounters" (99). The early exploitation of others is thought to

be a test run for the drastic events to come. Once the narrator experienced early success, he imagined to life a different "person in a different place in order artfully to undermine the social order and the "tiny life" of single servings" (99). By doing this, he "sets Tyler free" (99). While much of *Fight Club* tends to focus on traditionally masculine images of muscles, battle-hardened bodies and wounds, Tuss stresses that much of the film stems from the mind of the pasty white and physically weak narrator.

Turning away from the broader definition of masculinity and its many interpretations, other literary critics specifically focus on where Tuss' article left off: the male body, its changing meanings and its relationship with stereotypical masculine control. In her article titled "Virility and Vulnerability, Splitting and Masculinity in *Fight Club*: A Tale of Contemporary Male Identity Issues," Caroline Ruddell focuses on the importance of identity with a specific focus on the male body. She explains how the characters in the film "are often rendered out of control of their own bodies by becoming either literally split in two or metaphorically" (493). In other words, she makes the argument that the characters in *Fight Club* can be viewed as lacking self-control. This idea especially applies to the unnamed narrator who is often performing tasks and even sometimes acting against his own wishes while he sleeps. With that being said, Ruddell ventures further into the issues surrounding the male body.

Speaking broadly about the male body in both film and television, Ruddell explores the shifting nature and changing of the male body and its meanings. She explains how "the use of male bodies and masculinity has been the subject of much discussion in film and television theory for man years" (494). It means that, according to Ruddell's research, the use of the male body in film is not a recent phenomena. It has been studied long enough to notice how it has

changed, "shape over recent times" and has experienced, "shifts in meanings" (494). Similar to what other masculine theorists have noted, the male body itself has actually changed in terms of physical shape. Additionally, Ruddell continues with the idea that "the male body, and its relation to shifting gender roles, has become increasingly used as a tool" (494). For example, in *Fight Club*, the muscular body on Tyler Durden is used as a tool to demonstrate want, desire and the contrast between the bodies of the main characters. Returning to the previous issue of lacking self-control, Ruddell also explains that the body reflects "cultural anxieties surrounding identity," and how it can contribute to a "split identity" (494). With the various meanings tied to the male body, it is often regarded as a tool in cinema. In fact, it is such a useful tool that it is even able to determine identity outside of the film.

The male body within *Fight Club* contains many meanings. However, what interests Ruddell is not simply how it can create meaning in the film, but outside as well. For example, she explains how "the use of Brad Pitt in the role of Tyler Durden is telling in that he has, over recent years, become one of Hollywood's most famous and attractive stars" (495). Given that Tyler Durden's role in the film is to be the perfect traditionally masculine man, the fact that Brad Pitt is used to fill the role means that he must be who many late twentieth-century Americans regarded as being close to perfection. Furthermore, the use of Brad Pitt's muscular body creates contrast between the two main characters. Ruddell notes how "the Narrator is smaller in build," and that he is not nearly as well built as his alter ego (495). In fact, the narrator is so weakly built in comparison to Tyler it seems as if, "all of Tyler's attributes are grounded in his masculinity" (495). She means that, if both bodies are examined, there is so much contrast between the two that Brad Pitt's body cannot help but take on the role of being the epitome of masculinity.

According to Ruddell, despite the film's insistence that a man's body does not create meaning, it certainly does in this case. She feels as if the film goes as far as making us look at Tyler, because "he is created as a bodily object of spectacle" (496). With the male body resulting in so much meaning within the film, Tyler must certainly be the most powerful of the men. Moreover, being positioned at the top is what creates the aforementioned wants and desires. Ruddell notices how his character puts himself on display in order "to seduce the Narrator and [spectators]" (498). As a result of dealing with emasculation and being feminized in combination with their mundane jobs, the men who see Tyler cannot help but become more like Tyler. In the case of the narrator, he wishes to actually become Tyler and transform his identity. To sum up her thoughts on the topic of Tyler, Ruddell ends by noting how the want and desire to transform does not rest solely with the narrator. Actually, she explains, "he takes the Narrator away from his obsession with furniture and clothes" (499). As if to rip him away from his comfortable world, Tyler brings the narrator to a hyper masculine world of "no comfort" filled with "many other men" (499). In other words, the desire to have the narrator become more masculine rests in the minds of both characters. Tyler wishes to better the narrator, and the narrator longs to become the image of stereotypical male perfection and dominance.

When explored further, the representation of hypermasculinity through the use of muscular male bodies reveals new meanings as well as unintended consequences. David Buchbinder's article "Object or Ground? The Male Body as Fashion Accessory" pushes for a deeper understanding of masculinity through the studying of the male body and its possible meanings. Initially taking a historical approach, Buchbinder's article focuses on the portrayal of the male body in advertising. He explains how, while on a public bus, the narrator asks Tyler

Durden, "Is *that* what a man looks like?" (221). The man in question is a model for "Gucci men's underwear," and is in outstanding physical shape. Despite the fact that Tyler laughs at the idea of said model representing the ideal male body, he himself is also in great physical shape. Whether or not Tyler means to, his body supports the idea that male "bodies have become not only the objects of spectacle, but, in the most common representations, spectacular objects" (221). According to Buchbinder, these muscular works of art define "the ideal male body and, by implication, masculinity itself" (221). In other words, while *Fight Club* does indeed present multiple understandings of masculinity, it indulges in essentialism. Given Tyler's negative response to a Gucci advertisement, it may not be his intention to represent the perfect male body, but he does so anyways. This fact stems from the realization that the body of Tyler and Gucci model are mirror images, and that the men surrounding Tyler are enveloped in wanting to become made in his image.

The use of male bodies and muscular imagery in cinema not only creates new meanings, but also is meant to primarily affect men. Buchbinder feels that "the representation of [the male] body has been intended for men's consumption" (222). While this idea first appears to be odd, the fact that male bodies influence other males continues with the masculine theme of control and self-containment. It means that, according to Buchbinder, muscular male bodies influence other men. Nowhere in the scenario do women come into play, because men do not tone their bodies primarily for the enjoyment of women. While a traditionally attractive body may draw women in, the overall result is boost in self-confidence for the man. Furthermore, these muscular male bodies have taken on new heights in cinema within recent years. No longer are traditionally attractive men somewhat fit or athletic; rather, they are living, breathing muscular "fortresses"

(222). Buchbinder explains how "these bodies are not merely muscular and powerful; through their strong definition and the consequent hardness of the lines and planes of the body, these male forms become self-contained" (222). He stresses that this level of physique represents the traditional masculine desires to be self-sufficient, in absolute control, and powerful.

With the presence of so many hardened male bodies in movies such as *Fight Club*, *300*, and others, their intended meaning may become lost or distorted. Buchbinder explains, "the exhibition of the male body runs the risk … not only of rendering that body passive to the gaze, as the female body has traditionally been, but also, therefore, of feminizing it" (223). He means that, with these muscular male bodies being displayed everywhere, the public may become desensitized, which could lead to a feminization of the male body. While Tyler Durden sets the bar quite high in terms of extreme fitness, there is a serious risk of this heightened state becoming normalcy if every other man follows suit. Therefore, similar to what women have endured over time, men will be forced to continuously push harder and strive to have what is a nearly unobtainable body. If this possibility becomes a reality, the meaning of the male body could be altered in a way that men such as Tyler and those who wish to become him did not intend.

A Practice in Social Constructionism: An Anti-Essentialist Interpretation of *Fight Club*

On the flipside, an interpretation of *Fight Club* outside of essentialism provides for a drastically different understanding of the text. When this approach to masculinity studies is abandoned in favor of a social constructionist understanding of the domain of masculinity studies, the text takes on a far different meaning. Much of the aforementioned meaning is either lost or changed. Using this tactic of presenting both sides is integral in illuminating the reality of how damaging

essentialism really is. Even when those who are using it or studying it have a sense of awareness, it still results in scholarship and interpretations which are far more watered down than they have to be. For example, simply studying *Fight Club* and all it contains with the understanding that only the traditional aspects are worthy of examination results in poor research. It is important to instead see beyond these surface level meanings and traditional understandings, so that deeper issues may potentially be investigated. With that being said, a social constructionist approach to *Fight Club* provides for vastly different interpretations of the events and visuals featured in the film.

During the late 1990's, a belief that consumerism and purchased goods could make a person both happy and existentially complete was on the rise. While it did not begin during the time period, it certainly reached new heights by the decade's end. This is suspected as being due to two reasons: an increasing ease in manufacturing, and the rise of sales via the internet. Stereotypes suggest that it is women who benefit from continuous purchasing, and that only women surround themselves with decorations and home goods. However, also during the 1990's was a sharp rise in metrosexuality. Men who were unable to embrace masculinity found themselves turning to the socially acceptable practice of embracing classical femininity. It means that, instead of acting out in a stereotypically male fashion, men were able to become obsessed with style, interior decorating, and achieving happiness through consumerism. Such matters are the focus of *Fight Club* (1999), a film directed by David Fincher and based off of a novel written by Chuck Palahniuk. Similar to many other men of the time period, the film's narrator finds himself obsessed with the shallow and stereotypically feminine lifestyle of purchasing goods in order to feel comfortable and happy. It is often learned to be a lifestyle with little reward or

purpose.

In the film, select early scenes display the narrator in moments of addiction. His addiction to purchasing and brand names demonstrates his need for consumption. These scenes also show the narrator in a celebrated state of heightened femininity. When speaking of his possessions, he is not shy about how proud of himself he is due to his collection of goods. On the topic of femininity, the narrator appears to take on a more feminine role given his passion for buying items. Typically, if a man cannot embrace a stereotypically masculine identity, a common place to turn is to a classically female position. This act works for women as well, with women embracing a male identity being a practice in "tomboyism." The position which the narrator embraces is feminine, because purchasing home goods, furniture and interior decorations is an essentialist understanding of a task best suited for a female. Traditional men are not supposed to have a sense of style, fashion, or decoration. However, given the momentum of late 1990's culture and the rise of metrosexuality, or the process of straight men becoming feminine, such actions became relatively normal. The rise of femininity within men is a direct result of modern capitalism and consumerism, with both on the rise during the time period.

Masculinity's ability to be both fluid and changing continued unceasingly into the 1990s, and masculine identity ventured to new places as a result. Thanks to the emergence of hypercapitcalism as the decade progressed, women as well as men found themselves purchasing more than ever. This rise in consumerism is a result of a few events: the residential utilization of the Internet, streamlined manufacturing, and global marketing. With these three combined, buying goods became quick and easy, as well as affordable. In fact, the affordability and accessibility of products created a demanding culture which began to create meaning around

purchases and possessions. Feelings ranging from completeness and comfort to superiority were results of this new found desire to consume. A new piece of furniture or stylish bedding could make a consumer feel comfortable or even superior to those without as many goods or an equal quality of goods. The narrator of *Fight Club* demonstrates these traits in select early scenes where he discusses his belongings.

In the opening scenes of the film, the narrator displays his knowledge of fashion and how the world of consumerism has him pleasantly enveloped. When the viewer first sees the narrator's apartment, it is presented in a manner that is strikingly similar to a magazine. A magazine-style description and price tag appears on nearly every item his home. This scene displays how the feminized man sees his possessions: by brand and by price. However, as much as it would seem that the lifestyle of the narrator would reflect his stellar collection of belongings, it does not. During the scene in which the apartment is displayed, there are a few interesting cinematographic elements. For example, while the apartment does look similar to a interior decorating magazine, it also looks similar to a hotel. Most all of the colors in his apartment are bland greens and grays, with little to no definition present. The bland nature of his home could reflect the reality of expecting too much out of purchased goods. When they are truly examined, sofas and decorations do little to improve a man's life. Nothing looks like it is for comfort, just style and looks. In addition to his knowledge of decorating, the narrator demonstrates his knowledge of colors as well. At one point, his manager walks into the room, and the narrator can only think to himself, "It must have been Tuesday, he was wearing his cornflower blue tie" (*Fight Club*). As his alter ego would later acknowledge, this sort of knowledge is not crucial to the survival of a man. In a basic sense, it is unnecessary. Yet,

according to the narrator, these issues envelope him and take the place of the final frontier. In other words, they are what he perceives as being the future. For example, he states, "When deep space exploration ramps up it'll be the corporations that name everything: the IBM stellar sphere, the Microsoft Galaxy, Planet Star Bucks" (*Fight Club*). At first, it seems as if these names and their associated celestial bodies are only used in order to illustrate the power of corporations, but they mean more. Space is regarded as the final frontier, and with that being said it is understood that it is the direction in which humans are going. According to the narrator, we are heading towards a future of corporate-owned heavens, where massive amounts of space is purchased until civilization is surrounded. This understanding of corporations is not far fetched, because, as he displays in this and later scenes, purchasing goods is his world and seems to be the direction in which he is going. To get a better understanding of how feminized he is, his narrations provide the viewer with detail.

The film's narrator goes into great detail when discussing his belongings and his willingness to purchase them. As he sits on his toilet while looking through a catalog of items, he explains, "Like so many others, I had become a slave to the IKEA nesting instinct" (*Fight Club*). The nesting instinct he mentions in this scene relates strongly to the aforementioned comfort found through buying new things. Similar to the idea that the heavens will soon be occupied by corporations, the supersaturation of products in our lives makes him feel comfortable. By purchasing goods from stores such as IKEA and filling his apartment with them, he feels safe. Hence, the "nesting instinct." As positive as this sounds, what is hidden underneath the surface of his narrations is a transition from masculinity to femininity. Traditionally, the nesting instinct is associated with women and their need for security and comfort, especially once their children

leave. Therefore, the idea that a man would need to feel the same way shows the current state of acceptable masculinity. Continuing onward, he notes, "If I saw something clever, like a little coffee table in the shape of a yin yang, I had to have it," while looking at elaborately designed dust ruffles in his magazine (*Fight Club*). His knowledge of products exceeds far beyond amateur, and he makes this clear when listing off some recent purchases. He mentions the "Johanneshov armchair in the Strinne green stripe pattern," and "the Rislampa wire lamps of environmentally-friendly unbleached paper" (*Fight Club*). Again, he makes sure to make use of not just fine details but also brand names. Additionally, as if this display of knowledge is not enough, he becomes existential over his products. He states how "I'd flip through catalogs and wonder, 'What kind of dining set defines me as a person?'" (*Fight Club*). Being able to judge a person simply by what they purchase is bad enough, but allowing for it to become a indicator of character and self-worth is all the worse. In other words, the narrator has become shallow and weak, allowing for purchases to build his character as opposed to displaying it genuinely. Further elaborating, he explains, "I had it all: even the glass dishes with tiny bubbles and imperfections, proof they were crafted by the honest, simple, hardworking indigenous peoples of wherever" (*Fight Club*). This statement subtly suggests that the viewer should judge him positively, because he not only owns environmentally-friendly items, but also because he supports indigenous people from foreign countries. According to his purchases, he is a man who cares about the world. Meanwhile, he says this to the viewer while on the phone waiting to buy something else. While on the phone, he holds for some time and hears the message, "Your call is important to us" (*Fight Club*). This statement is another display of the shallowness of his life and consumer culture. His call is not important to the company he is on the phone with, because if it were, it

would be a real person saying it and not a machine recording. A further display of the shallow and traditionally feminized nature of his life is his fridge. He does not even have food in the fridge, which shows the priority of buying stuff as opposed to even eating. Unlike stereotypical men who are innately strong and hypermasculine, he requires belongings and feminine desires in order to feel comforted. For a moment of the film, viewers are able to see just how important his belongings are to him while he has them. However, the true importance of his belongings is learned once he experiences loss.

While the narrator first expresses his feminine desires by praising his belongings and stating their existential importance, his love for consumerism reaches new heights when his items are taken away. When the narrator arrives at an airport after returning home, it is clear that he has lost his luggage. The look on his face is not one of anger or confusion, but one of being dumbfounded and utterly lost. With his mouth hanging open and eyes wide, he looks blankly at his surroundings as if a piece of his life has been taken away. Perhaps, to veer away from his feminine lifestyle of surrounding himself with fashionable belongings is too difficult. His reliance on purchases in order to feel good about himself and his life may border on addiction. In addition, he then approaches a security personnel and inquires about his missing luggage. Unfortunately for him, the airport employee must not subscribe to hypercapitalism or a reliance on belongings, because the missing luggage is of little or no concern. But the feminized narrator states, "I had everything in that suitcase" (*Fight Club*). Oddly, by "everything" he simply means name brands and belongings. To traditionally masculine and essentialist men, these items would not rank as being so important, because they are not on the same plane of understanding as the film's consumerism-loving metrosexual narrator. He states that his "everything" was "My CK

shirts, my DKNY shoes, my AX ties" (*Fight Club*). This line is crucial for two reasons: he knows the abbreviations of the brands quite well, and his devotion to designer brands does not pay off because he looks bland despite wearing supposedly superior clothing. Again, it is clear that the feminine world of fashion and consumerism are shallow and only create false meaning. This initial loss serves as a test run for the narrator, because his possessions would be violently ripped from him soon after this incident.

After returning home from the airport, the narrator notices that his condo is engulfed in flames. He explains the scene, stating, "a volcanic blast of debris that used to be your furniture and personal effects blows out of your floor-to-ceiling windows and sails flaming into the night" (*Fight Club*). With every single possession he owns gone except the clothes he is wearing, he experiences total loss. Examining the cinematography of the scene, the look on his face seems as if someone he loves has died. Arguably, if death is the total removal and permanent inaccessability from something loved, then he did in fact experience a death. The only things he loves have been destroyed. To further the presence of death in this scene, a hotel worker kindly says, "There's nothing up there. You can't go into the unit, police orders" (*Fight Club*). Seemingly concerned, he then asks, "Do you have somebody you can call?" (*Fight Club*). Similar to the his reactions to losing his belongings, it is still similar to someone dying. Where the narrator should not care as much as he does for his items, because he should be a stereotypical and essentialist portrait of a man, he still does. At this point, his world literally comes crashing down and he chooses to speak to Tyler about the incident.

In one of the final discussions about the loss of the narrator's belongings, he and Tyler Durden sit at a bar and evaluate the issue. Seemingly bored, Tyler listens as the narrator explains,

"I don't know, it's just when you buy furniture, you tell yourself "That's it, that's the last sofa I'm going to need. Whatever else happens, I've got that sofa problem handled" (*Fight Club*). As if he is unconcerned with the issue at hand, Tyler continues to listen but with an appearance that suggests a total lack of interest. The narrator continues, "I had it all, I had a stereo that was very decent, a wardrobe that was getting very respectable. I was close to being complete" (*Fight Club*). These lines are telling, because they display the existential meaning behind the narrator's feminine habit of purchasing things. The focus on completeness through purchasing raises the question: even in terms of femininity, how can a series of purchases make anyone feel complete? Happiness typically plays a role in completeness, and it is clear how one can be temporarily happy by buying things, but the narrator clearly was not happy even before losing his possessions. Perhaps this fact is why he states that he was only "close to being complete," not that he was actually complete. This closeness suggests that there is indeed an addiction to consumerism, or that there always needs to be just one more distant purchase in order to obtain happiness at last. After hearing what should have been an important story, Tyler humorously states, "Shit man, now it's all gone" (*Fight Club*). At this moment, Tyler brings him back to his what he argues is reality, saying that these things are not essential to a man's survival "In the hunter gatherer sense of the word" (*Fight Club*). While possessions can certainly help a man survive in the right situation, these dust ruffles and decorations do nothing to improve the quality of the narrator's life or help him survive. To the narrator's amazement, he states that men should not worry about "sofa units and your Strinne green stripe patterns. I say never be complete. I say stop being perfect. I say let's evolve and let the chips fall where they may" (*Fight Club*). This moment in the film is a crucial turning point, because Tyler has effectively planted a seed within

the narrator's mind: that it is possible, in fact even more possible, to obtain happiness through letting go, embracing traditional masculinity, and surviving in a less concerned manner. To end his response to the narrator, Tyler says, "The things you own, end up owning you" (*Fight Club*). With that being said, the narrator is caught in a moment of deep introspection just before the scene ends, implying that Tyler's brief words have triggered something within him. Perhaps it is at this moment that the narrator sees the futility in embracing femininity as a man, the shallowness of consumerism and its surrounding lifestyle, and the fact that continuously purchasing will not make him happy.

Fight Club's metrosexual narrator finds himself embracing a traditionally feminine position by buying fashionable clothing and brand name home goods. Similar to other men of the 1990's, he has been unable to take on a stereotypically male identity, resulting in his socially acceptable feminization. Quite literally buying into consumer culture, he spends his days in constant pursuit of the kind of happiness that purchasing new things is thought to deliver. However, even when he still has his items, it is clear that the culture provides for little happiness, and that it is a temporary happiness at that, because there is only a quickly disappearing thrill after buying something. After losing his belongings, Tyler enlightens him that his belongings are just that: mere belongings which serve no purpose to men who subscribe to essentialist masculinity, or even men who embrace a feminized masculinity for that matter.

In Conclusion: Reflecting on and Reviewing Contrasting Understandings of Meaning
After all of these claims and supporting evidence, it is important to take notice of how much more truthful and enriched analysis can be when it is conducted in a manner rooted in relativism and social constructionism. Rather than forcing texts such as *Fight Club* or *Ransom* to be

compartmentalized into a space where they may not fully belong, utilizing a social constructionist approach resists the use of cookie-cutter understandings of what are complex and intricate issues resting outside of definition and sweeping generalizations. While certain theorists do indeed have their well-constructed oppositional theories backed by research, what is also on the table are the competing ideas of other, equally as qualified theorists. This sort of realization points to the fact that all knowledge is not concrete and unchanging, but rather fluid, bonded with uncertainty, and resting somewhere in between "it depends" and "I don't know." Even though some wish to use lazy surface-level understandings of complex issues such as masculinity, it is important to remember that these theories are merely highly decorated blanket statements which are often limited and used to exclude others. Essentialist understandings of the male population are just that: one understanding among many. They are set on foundations comprised of constructed generalizations and stereotypes, and, like any structure set atop a poor foundation, they weaken and crumble under pressure. One such instance of pressure occurs when opponents of essentialist understandings point out how these theories are often exclusionary. Given that no theory is perfectly universal, these ideas effectively defeat themselves.

In conclusion, essentialist theories and universal understandings do not belong in academia or literary theory, because they tend to weaken analysis. Even though it is the focus of this paper, masculinity studies is just one example among many others. In this instance, both essentialist and social constructionist understandings of the text *Fight Club* were provided. The former resulted in analysis which was skewed and relied upon stereotypes. It resulted in the text being forced into inadequate compartments in order to "work." At best, aside from being lazily and messily stitched together, it simply provided for no new understandings. Stating that men

sometimes seek dominance and to oppress women brings nothing new to the table. However, on the other hand, the social constructionist approach to *Fight Club* explored a male population which was frustrated and feeling outcast from embracing a stereotypically male lifestyle. It pinpointed one of the causes for the rise in metrosexuality during the late 1990's. It provided for an approach which individualized the lenses used to examine the text and the topics at hand, and analyzed it outside of the sphere of essentialism. It provided for the chance to practice actual analysis, as opposed to doing the theoretical equivalent of smashing puzzle pieces together in order for them to fit a preset mold dictated by some person or people too lazy to approach the topic with an open mind. Historically, masculinity studies is a domain which has been and remains fluid and fragmented beyond consolidation, and, theoretically speaking, it is unable to be defined without ideological entanglement and self-defeat.

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