Rule Number 1: Do Not Talk About Fight Club

Heterosexual Masculinity's Subordination of the Feminine and the Queer in Chuck Palahniuk's Fiction after *Fight Club*'s (1996) Publication.

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Abstract

This thesis examines through the concept of hegemonic masculinity how Palahniuk's men control subordinate subjects (women, gay men, and queer people) in order to maintain a sense of power in the social sphere. Do behaviours of intragender violence and sex addictions as well as violent psychological and physical acts between men in Palahniuk's world strengthen the power dynamic in society? Or does this constant reliance on the attack of women, gay men and queer people merely highlight a collective weakness amongst Palahniuk's heterosexual men? Chuck Palahniuk's *Invisible Monsters* (1999), *Choke* (2001), *Haunted* (2005), *Snuff* (2008) and *Pygmy* (2009) will be used to assess how hegemonic masculine ideologies used in *Fight Club* are carried through into Palahniuk's later texts. The aim of this thesis is to point out similarities in the desires of Palahniuk's hegemonic men to establish control, as well as introducing queer people and the feminine as binaries vital to maintaining hegemonic masculinity.

Declaration

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Signed: [redacted] (candidate)

Date: 17/07/2024

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Where correction services have been used, the extent and nature of the correction is clearly marked in a footnote(s). Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

Signed: [redacted] (candidate)

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Introduction:

Those who consider reading Chuck Palahniuk should do so with caution. Palahniuk's flair for giving to his characters trauma, disgust, visceral pain, and suffering across his literature makes his work as repulsive as it is intriguing. Palahniuk tells his stories in such a way as to weed out those who are not willing to be patient and challenged, leaving those who stick around learning their ability to persevere through grotesque scenes of true stories that leave some asking their 'therapist […] for a copy of that story to help with [their] psychoanalysis' (Palahniuk, 2006, p. 407). Writer of the well-known novel *Fight Club* (1996), which was also adapted for film in 1999, Palahniuk uses his disdain for the heteronormative societal structure to create worlds whereby gender is lampooned for the reader's entertainment. His texts feature masculine men as homosexual 'bottoms', porn stars breaking gang-bang world records, and trans women with comically large breasts and plastic skin. Through Palahniuk's ruthless scrutiny of the cultural milieu in which his texts are written, one may realise the bleakness of the society they live in and are themselves implicated in the enabling of a masculine ideal that runs as an undercurrent through a society of women who are reliant on the male gaze for approval, and men who are reliant on the acquisition of sex and power to become truly masculine men.

The influence of the novel *Fight Club* and its movie adaption has been immense, especially from men looking for masculine guidance. Palahniuk (2018) discusses the cultural influence of *Fight Club* on his first appearance on Joe Rogan's podcast, *The Joe Rogan Experience*. He claims that because there are so few 'social model novels' made for men, *Fight Club* (and the subsequent film adaption) depicts 'to men a rawer kind of script in which to come together and talk about their shit' (Palahniuk, 2018). Through their need for what Palahniuk calls 'rough play', the men in *Fight Club* are given the opportunity to sort through

the vulnerable aspects of their identity without having to constantly show a hegemonic front to society.

Due to the fame of *Fight Club*, Palahniuk's later literature struggles to meet its popularity. Of course, this was never the intention: most readers and critics of *Fight Club* understand the text to be 'satire of anarchic male excess' (Clark, 2001, p. 418), mocking American men for their lack of direction but desperate need to be in control in the wake of the 'masculine crisis'. The masculine crisis arrived at the end of the twentieth century alongside third wave feminist demands that men become less stoic and embody a softer style of masculinity to maintain effective heteronormative relationships.

Studying *Fight Club* in my undergraduate dissertation, I noted how little recognition Chuck Palahniuk gives to other subject positions in this text. It was not until my interest in Palahniuk lead me to his wider body of work that I realised not only does he focus on gender performance outside the normative gender framework, but he also expands the ideas of violence, reliance and masculine fear represented in *Fight Club* in nuanced and complex ways. Further, it became clear that in comparison to *Fight Club*, there is minimal critical analysis of his later publications despite their expansion on the ideas that captured the attention of the public in *Fight Club*. Therefore, I believe it necessary to give the same attention to Palahniuk's later work, as *Fight Club* does not represent his developing exploration of gender issues from the late 20th century to the early 21st century.

Critical reviews of Palahniuk's literature are sparse and mainly concerned with *Fight Club* and its themes of masculine crisis, feminine subordination, and consumerism. However, there is critical literature concerning his novels published after *Fight Club* that use his work as comments on a potentially collapsing societal structure. Douglas Keesey in *Understanding Palahniuk* (2016) discusses Palahniuk's thirteen novels as stories that have a romantic disposition; exploring their illustrations of violence and sex to have specific social and

psychological meanings as it pertains to the making and maintaining of a gender performance. Boon (2003) in 'Men and Nostalgia for Violence: Culture and Culpability in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*' (which this text discusses) uses the image of boyhood socialisation to argue that the men in *Fight Club* rely on mimicry in the way of performing the style of masculinity of those which they consider men to perform their own gender successfully. This echoes Keesey's discussions on violence having specific meanings – the men in Palahniuk's texts perform and promote violence as a socialisation tool to identify their masculine identity. David McCracken's critical work on Palahniuk spans over eight years (2015-2023), exploring many of his texts as parodies, subversions of normative ideologies and heteropatriarchal views of female sexual freedom and agency. His 2016 work of criticism, *Chuck Palahniuk, Parodist* labels Palahniuk's literature as parodies, commenting on societal flaws that lack much acknowledgment in public discourse: for example, the porn industry, male violence, and the effect mentorship in martial arts has on these violent tendencies men experience. In this text, McCracken describes Palahniuk's use of 'contemporary parody [as] not necessarily "ridicule" of previous work, but instead it should call attention to that pre-existing source and then take advantage of that previous meaning to communicate a new meaning' (p. 6). This thesis agrees with this sentiment as it can be argued that most of Palahniuk's literature is a parody of *Fight Club*. The meanings established concerning masculinities in *Fight Club* are reworked in his newer literature which uses subordinated subjects to communicate new meanings surrounding the pressures of gender performativity for not only men (as expressed in *Fight Club*), but every gender in society. McCracken, Boon and Keesey have used *Fight Club* to establish a foundational argument regarding Palahniuk's use of Parody to explore uncomfortable societal issues. However, my thesis does not argue that these texts are the romantic, ultimately positive novels that Keesey believes them to be. Instead, I will be building on the argument that

because the issues raised in *Fight Club* resonated so strongly within the novel's imagined society, his texts after the publication of *Fight Club* parody these foundations established to communicate the struggles faced by women and men in attempting to conform to traditional, unrealistic standards of gender performance.

Palahniuk sits in the realm of transgressive fiction. His genre connects him to writers such as Bret Easton Ellis and Dennis Cooper. Palahniuk, Ellis, and Cooper create worlds wherein simulations of an overthrown societal structure creates a crisis of masculinity that threatens the entire concept of identity. Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991) manipulates the concepts of sex, porn, and violence to embody harmful gender stereotypes which are prevalent in pornography, much like how Palahniuk's *Snuff* (2008) explores the connection between sex, power, and societal expectations to prop up ideas surrounding a distain towards women from men. Annette Schimmelpfennig in *Deconstructing Bret Easton Ellis*: A Derridean Reading of the Fiction (2021), describes Ellis's characters as 'simultaneously poison and cure; they sabotage themselves but simultaneously feed on the self-destructive power of others to continue their depressing cycle of demise and resurrection' (178). This description of Ellis's work gives striking resemblance to both the narrator of *Fight Club* and Victor in *Choke*, both of whom use the vulnerable people in their lives to manifest worlds whereby they are simultaneously the destroyer and creator of both identity and its placement within the societal structure.

While Dennis Cooper's work reads as a much darker form of transgressive fiction in comparison to Palahniuk, both writers parody and blur the lines between erotic fantasy and their effect on their readers. Particularly in Cooper's novel *Frisk* (1991), the novel is crafted so that the readers give consent to become voyeurs to intense sexual fantasies and are thus

complicit in enabling a transformed view of normative society. Michelle Aaron's (2004) article, '(Fill-in-the) Blank Fiction', argues that 'there is no mystery about the content of a Cooper novel – and the readers' active and educated choice of this material – their consent to it – must to a certain extent be assumed; so too must their expectations and desires' (116). Transgressive fiction published during the time Palahniuk wrote the novels analysed in this thesis mimic this idea – there are many occasions where the reader is consenting to becoming a voyeur to rape, brutal sex scenes and bodily manipulation. But this is what we sign up to when we choose to read Palahniuk; in reading his work, we become voyeurs in fantasy worlds where we witness characters parody the concepts of gender identity, self-destruction, sexual freedom and violence to convey a message about a potentially collapsing concept of within the social structure.

'The first rule of Fight Club is: you do not talk about Fight Club' (Palahniuk, 1996, p. 50). And so, let us do exactly that. This thesis explores specific texts after the publication of *Fight Club*: *Invisible Monsters* (1999), *Choke* (2001), *Haunted* (2005), *Snuff* (2008) and *Pygmy* (2009) that explore the following aspects of gender: feminine oppression, trans invisibility, homosexual abuse and, of course, heterosexual masculine shame, fear, and violence. Using chosen texts from Palahniuk's body of work I will explore the ways in which masculinity in these texts maintains the oppression of subordinate binaries in order to preserve its dominant position in the hegemonic framework.

This thesis is divided into four chapters. 'Chapter 1: The Masculine' explores the texts *Pygmy* and *Choke*, the two novels most centred around the masculine experience. I will explore the subjects of rape between men and obsessions with sex and violence in order to argue that the phallus is the primary location of power and control for men, and the subsequent sexual abuse of homosexual men and women are a result of this fact. Chapter 2: The Homosexual will use *Pygmy* and the short story, 'Guts' from the collection *Haunted* to

analyse adolescent masculine sexual experiences and the fear of lost manhood as a result of anal sexual exploration. After exploring Palahniuk's male character, I will then move onto analysing Palahniuk's portrayal of women, as they work in Palahniuk's world as central to a man's performance of his own gender. Chapter 3: The Feminine, is focused on a single text, *Snuff*, and the analysis of the woman as a transactional sex object used in the exchange between men who are vying for hegemonic dominance. The main character's desire for sex is labelled obsessive and desperate, creating a vision of the woman who enjoys sex as a 'whore' who must be tamed. The final chapter of this thesis is Chapter 4: The Queer, which explores two texts, *Invisible Monsters*, and another short story from *Haunted*, 'Speaking Bitterness'. This chapter explores trans women in particular, analysed through the lens of both trans theory and essentialism to argue that the transgender body is an anxious situation, whereby the trans subject is expected to transition smoothly and perform femininity perfectly, or risk being critiqued for mocking feminine oppression by the characters in Chuck Palahniuk's literary world.

Despite my purpose of prioritising the analysis of ignored binaries from *Fight Club*, I will be placing my analysis of masculinity first due to its transferability between chapters. It is important that the foundations of masculinity are established first so that moving forward into the analysis of femininity one is already aware of the masculine framework within which these women sit. Furthermore, when viewed in chronological order, these texts form a timeline of the views of gender at the time they were written. *Choke* and *Invisible Monsters*, this thesis's oldest novels, are reminiscent of the ideas regarding gender presented in *Fight Club*. Alongside the other novels in this thesis the progression throughout is clear, which strengthens the argument that *Fight Club* was not the end of Palahniuk's ongoing critique of dominant gender structures. However, my decision to not place these in chronological order is based on my desire to separate male and female. In turn, women's performance of

femininity is intricately mimicked by transgender women to establish Butler's argument within the structure of my thesis that gender operates on the idea that performance dictates gender in Palahniuk's literary world. Chapter 4: The Queer is the longest chapter, containing three sections, two of which discuss the same text, *Invisible Monsters*. The ideas in this text surrounding gender and trans visibility are delicate and complex, as well are the character storylines, thus it was important to separate characters within texts in order to extract the full range of analysis from each character.

There are specific key terms used in this thesis. In discussing the fulfilment of one's gender through their sex, I use the theory of essentialism as described by Diana Fuss (1989) in her controversial book *Essentially Speaking*. Fuss defines 'essentialism' as 'most commonly understood as a belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the "whatness" of a given entity. In feminist theory, the idea that men and women, for example, are identified as such on the basis of transhistorical, eternal, immutable essences has been unequivocally rejected by many anti-essentialist poststructuralist feminists concerned with resisting any attempts to naturalize human nature' (xi). Within this thesis, Palahniuk's characters uphold essentialist thinking by separating trans women from their cis gender experiences on the basis of this believing in the 'fixed properties' of gender 'whatness'. Therefore, this thesis uses this definition in reference to any discussion of a subject being inherently programmed to perform the gender they were assigned at birth. I also use the term 'essence' in discussions of essentialism – Diana's argument that essentialism represents the 'true essence of things' is the definition I will use to analyse how Palahniuk debates trans identity in the eyes of cisgender characters. Gender 'essence' in this way represents the essentialist idea of one having a natural gender core, a viewpoint Palahniuk's cisgender characters argue in favour of. While this definition is conflated with essentialism, I do not make the argument that gender identity can be defined

by essentialism or biological determinism alone, which uses knowledge of the brain, hormones, and genetics to argue that it is not possible to veer from the sex you were assigned at birth (Greene, 2020), as this negates transgender experiences and does not reflect the ideas this thesis intends to explore. Further, Chapter 4 uses the term 'passing' in reference to Palahniuk's transgender women. There are varied definitions of 'passing. Some believe 'passing represents a rejection of socially imposed identities and the construction of new ones through constant performance […] [while] others view passing as more utilitarian in function, namely to ensure the survival of the one who passes' (Billard, 2019, p. 464). In this thesis, I will be using the latter definition, as the trans women in *this* thesis 'pass' due to a 'successful' performance of femininity that cloaks any indication of a previous assigned maleness. Furthermore, this thesis mentions many times the figure of Marilyn Monroe, specifically her gender performance as the 'perfect feminine' that Palahniuk's women look up to. Marilyn Monroe as the reigning 'sex goddess and holds the title of the 'queen of glam-our" (Łuksza, 2018, p. 58) is the image of Marilyn that Palahniuk focuses on. Despite much negative press she has received, as seen in this thesis through Cohen's (1998) argument that Monroe's presentation of femininity is altogether 'too much', Palahniuk maintains that Marilyn is the feminine version of Tyler Durden – who in Palahniuk's literary world is the image of 'perfect masculinity', a goal every man should strive towards. The multiple references made to Marilyn Monroe throughout the thesis argue the problematic nature of applying such a monolithic yet controversial feminine character in feminist discourse to women. The use of Marilyn creates a synergy between men and women foregrounding Palahniuk's view that both have unattainable goals that they must strive to achieve.

There are many main key thinkers of this thesis: Judith Butler (1986-1999) and their theories of gender performance, drag, and the sex/gender distinction, Julia Kristeva (1982) accompanied by Robert Phillips (2014) and their theories of abjection and sexual deviance -

which are used particularly in the analysis of gay and trans bodies, MacKinnon's (2003) ideas regarding hegemony as an unattainable idea, the relationship between the male and his masculine physical body, as well as his views on the connection between sexual objectification and the gaze of women, Susan Stryker's (2006) discussion of the link between transness and the monster trope in literature, Simone de Beauvoir's (2009) definition of the virgin being a respected object of exchange as opposed to the 'whore' that is an image of female slavery, bell hooks's (2005) discussion on boyhood socialisation being rooted in violence, Thomas Herbert's (2002) concept of American women being destined for sexual assault. Pascoe's (2005) 'fag discourse', Foucault's (1975) introduction of the Panopticon and the subsequent placing of women (and, at times, men) within it. And finally, Irigaray's (1985) system of exchange alongside Heike Steinhoff's *Transforming Bodies* (2015) to analyse how the women in Palahniuk's worlds are, in one way or another, trapped within a system that pushes attention seeking and artificial beauty as the desired aesthetic to negotiate power over women. Using these key thinkers in my analysis of Palahniuk's late 20th and early 21st literature post-*Fight Club* I will attempt to answer the following questions: how does the crisis of masculinity effect heterosexual relationships in Palahniuk's world? Are the women in these texts actually trapped in a panoptical structure run by the male gaze, or do they benefit from a system that encourages beauty and perfection? Following this, in what ways do Palahniuk's men use the panoptical structure to force women into a cyclical performance of femininity that constantly reaffirms their masculinity? Can the trans women of this thesis be viewed as anything other than a site of feminine satire in their enactment of hyperfemininity? How damaging is the image of Marilyn Monroe to Palahniuk's women performing femininity? And finally, how does Palahniuk expose the masculine ideal and the feminine ideal as uneasy contentious situations that will continuously breed anxious gender identities? Palahniuk's literature after the publication of *Fight Club* explores ideas that are

tough to swallow through the experiences of characters which are almost impossible to imagine. This thesis works to argue that the masculine binary presented through Palahniuk's literature is one foregrounded in weakness and fear. Without masculine reliance upon subordinate binaries, hegemonic masculinity cannot continue to maintain its supposedly immovable position in the societal gender structure.

CHAPTER 1: THE MASCULINE

Choke (2001), which precedes *Fight Club* (1996) and *Invisible Monsters* (1999) concerns a sex addict and ex-medical student, Vincent Mancini, who scams rich people by 'choking' in restaurants, encouraging them to donate money for his medical bills which he uses to pay his dying mother's care. *Pygmy* follows an adolescent foreign agent sent to America to destroy the country. During his time in America, he uses rape and sexual assault as ways of attaining and maintaining his power over Western bodies. Considered 'an uneven but still raw and vital book' in Janet Maslin's 2001 *New York Times* review, *Choke* has received little criticism, perhaps due to its similarity to *Fight Club*, leaving *Choke* hiding behind the success of its predecessor. *Pygmy* is considered 'sloppy yet smart' by Vandermeer (2009), believing it to be the novel that 'assembled all of the elements for creating a great *and* funny story… and then been unable to deploy them properly'. Almost nine years apart yet still discussing similar themes, *Choke* and *Pygmy* echo *Fight Club* in their obsession with upholding the unattainable hegemonic goal through sex, violence, and intragender battles between men. The main difference between *Fight Club* and this Chapter's chosen novels is their raw style of depicting the masculine psyche that is at times missed in *Fight Club* over the aesthetic of violent masculine brotherhood. The weakness and desperation demonstrated in *Pygmy* through the forced passivity of Trevor, and in *Choke* through Vincent's repeated sexual

exploits with female sex addicts brings us to the overarching argument that this thesis attempts to interrogate. That is, to be hegemonic in Palahniuk's world is to be manifest of the 'Tyler Durden ideal' (Palahniuk's physical embodiment of hegemonic masculinity), and to lack is to be inherently weak and feminised, where femininity is equal to subordination.

1.1: 'Fucking Your Way to the Top' – Sexual Assault and Masculinity in *Pygmy*

The penis in *Pygmy* is purposely and solely affiliated with violence, a comment on the notion that 'the word "phallus" is properly understood to indicate not a penis but its attributes - "intrusiveness, power, violence"' (Gardiner, J., 2012, p. 600). In this sense, the holder of the phallus is a holder of these attributes, and to utilise these attributes is to be in a position of hegemonic dominance. I argue that Pygmy turns his 'turgid weapon' (Palahniuk, 2009, p. 15) into a site of sexual brutality that has the potency not only to go beyond forcibly impregnating the female enemy (in this case, American women), but also to encroach upon Palahniuk's struggling Western men, brutally challenging their dedication to uphold the ideal of hegemonic masculinity. This Chapter will explore how, in the late 20th and early 21st century, the masculine crisis made hegemonic masculinity reliant upon *multiple* parties for continuous validation - the masculine, the feminine and the 'Other'. Consequently, this text creates a world whereby the colossal domain of hegemony becomes more fragile every time it requires reauthentication by these parties. A relationship of this kind forces a perpetual state of obedience to masculine will. Using the relationship between reliance, masculinity, and phallic power, this text argues that the masculinity presented in Palahniuk's world, in its admission of crisis, has become weak and dependent upon the practices of rape and sexual assault to preserve a masculine hierarchy. These arguments open up opportunities to analyse how the men in this text are affected when they become the victim of sexual violence by

another man; a sacrificial lamb reauthenticating another's phallic power. *Pygmy*, as a result, fortifies the importance of sexual violence against both masculine and feminine bodies to encourage the participation in the traditional, raw practices of hegemonic masculinity. Using sexual assault as a war tactic is not an unfamiliar practice during warfare. Rape and sexual assault are used as a '*compensatory mechanism*… a way of re-establishing the masculine equilibrium, of asserting to oneself and to others one's masculine credentials' (Deringer, 2021, p. 209). As Pygmy is immediately racially profiled as a subordinate 'Other' in the majority white American school he infiltrates, he is entering his own personal war zone whereby he must not only constantly prove his worth as an equal racial being, but also as a masculine body worthy of competing in the battle between American adolescent males for hegemonic manhood. This sentiment is reflected in the structure of the text; we are just shy of twenty pages into the novel when Pygmy performs his first act of sexual retaliation. When Trevor, (Pygmy's host brother's bully) verbally assaults Pygmy in a public bathroom, ''you come from one of those dick-mutilation places?' [...] 'whip it out pygmy' [...] show me what the witch doctor done to you…'' (16), Pygmy retaliates in a 'flash fire quick instant' (16) by aggressively and brutally anally raping him. The rape perpetrated by Pygmy is grotesquely methodical. Firstly, he knocks the victim unconscious; he positions the body and prepares it for penetration, in this case, he pins Trevor to the wall and arches his back to 'protrude bully anus' (17); he then uses his 'turgid weapon […] full deep, belly deep, ram until bully stand only on foot toes try to escape' (18).

The rape of Trevor is viscerally descriptive, Pygmy's broken language only adds to the intensity of the scene in the personification of his experience; his hands turn into a 'pointed snake head' (17), and of course, the repeated likening of his phallus to a 'weapon' creates the overwhelming feeling that Trevor will not be able to fight back. After the assault of Trevor, surprisingly, he verbally attacks Pygmy, calling him "a dead wetback" (19).

Pygmy responds by quoting 'political father Karl Marx, quote, 'history repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce" (19). Pygmy quoting Marx's reconditioning of Hegel's idea concerning a recurring event in world history (Žižek, 2009) is a direct critique on Pygmy's foreign view of American masculinities. Western men in this text who inhabit hegemonic masculinity believe they hold an impenetrable position in the social structure. Their decision to underestimate the foreign state of masculinities (Pygmy) and immediately place themselves at the top of the hegemonic tier list is their constant, repeated mistake. Pygmy quoting an 'Other' - the German philosopher Karl Marx – reinforces the idea that 'it is not just groups subordinated in a system of domination that are damaged, but that the dominant group is also damaged.' (MacKinnon, 2003, p. 15). Pygmy is aware that although they may sit secondary to Western hegemony, Western masculinity is not free from the threat of usurpation. The less masculine 'Other' – Pygmy – being aware of America's masculine crisis leaves Palahniuk's American men vulnerable to defeat. Therefore, in this case, raping Trevor is a scene of American hegemonic dissolution.

American masculinity under siege does not end at the mere act of rape. Pygmy describes the rape by repeatedly merging Trevor's body and the American flag, solidifying the notion that Trevor is the picture of the American masculine ideal that Pygmy is physically destroying: 'American flag, red [with Trevor's blood] and white stripes sliding to tile floor. Blue face, nose folded sideways, seeing stars [...] all time, mouth of operative me flogging English word *bitch* [...] electric-bolt eyes of bully bleeding water. Blue star of fighting anus leak blood into thin strips down white legs. Everywhere patriotic. Here so great American nation' (18). We learn later in the novel that Pygmy is taught 'for top method gain access government, attain power over individual, must operative merely engage enjoined sodomy with American [because] all American citizen hidden homosexual' (174). With this in mind, the image of Trevor's body and bodily fluids mimicking the American flag during sodomy is

validation to Pygmy that American patriotism is inextricably linked to homosexuality. The connection between Trevor's patriotism and his supposed gayness is intensified through the 'flogging close into cold blue ear [...] "Bitch" and "Bitch" and "Bitch"' while 'Electric-bolt eyes of bully bleeding water' (18). Kippax and Smith (2001) argue that during anal sex between men, there proves to be a 'binary logic: the receptive partner is passive and feminine and the insertive partner active and masculine' (418). While this 'binary logic' is not necessarily the common view amongst critics of queer studies, Kippax and Smith's argument helps us to see what Pygmy sees. That is, in this text specifically, as Trevor is raped, he becomes a passive, feminine body. The repeated assertion of the word 'bitch' highlights the submissive, feminine nature of being a bottom in Palahniuk's world. As Trevor is penetrated, his tears give the impression that he is aware of his own surrender. Thomas Peele (2001) comments on Palahniuk's tendency to connect homoeroticism and violence in his critique of *Fight Club*. Despite the clear heterosexual focus on Marla throughout the novel, Peele argues that the 'homoerotic element, however, simply will not go away (until the end of the film, when Durden and therefore the homoerotic element is eliminated)' (864), suggesting that Palahniuk uses the homoerotic element of his novels to symbolise despair and destruction. The sexual relationship between Trevor and Pygmy does not occur because Pygmy desires Trevor, it occurs because Pygmy desires Trevor's destruction because he believes it may improve his own masculine standing, and sex with the logic of insertive and receptive partners is Palahniuk's pathway to representing this idea. Linking this to the ideas of the rape of Trevor propping up masculinity, the violence enacted by Pygmy onto Trevor illustrates how violence between men in this text encourages the participation in the traditional, raw practices of hegemonic masculinity; the kind of 'rough play' Palahniuk speaks of in his interview with Rogan, only made more extreme in Pygmy.

This being said, it is imperative not to merely label Trevor as homosexual, or as a passive, feminine body, despite his passive position in anal sex and the mentality surrounding homosexual American masculinities that Pygmy has so strongly adhered to throughout the text. I argue that sexual assault between men, as established within the text, works to promote a system of power within insular groups, especially in environments of war whereby sexual violence 'becomes a rite of passage and is normalised as appropriately masculine and soldierly behaviour' (Fahlberg & Pepper, 2016, p. 676). Therefore, there is a very thin line drawn between sexual orientation and gender performance established amongst men that rarely blurs; that is, the male victim of male perpetrated sexual assault is, *in that moment*, the passive, feminised body, but this does not make them homosexual by ways of sexual orientation. If we are to say that the acts of sexual violence amongst the men in this text are merely steppingstones to inhabiting hegemony, there is nothing to say that the victim cannot use this attack as a threat, and therefore challenge to his masculinity that he *must prove untrue.* Trevor immediately turning to verbal abuse after he is raped is his first attempt at trying to regain a masculine position. We must remember that the nature of hegemonic masculinity in this text (especially in the face of the masculine crisis) is to constantly '[construct] [...] fantasy battlefields to prove its manhood under fire' (Kimmel, 1992, p. 678) yet ultimately understand that hegemony is a goal they may strive towards but never achieve, as masculinity lies within the struggle (MacKinnon, 2003). Thus, we cannot say that there is no redemption for the heterosexual male in this text victimised through acts that serve to 'demoralise, humiliate and dominate [them] through emasculation and feminisation' (677). Therefore, as long as Trevor is willing to continue his performance as a masculine body in the face of struggle, he has a chance at rehabilitation.

Trevor's most dramatic exhibition of his masculinity is at the school massacre where he murders multiple students dressed as foreign countries within the United Nations, an

unsettling comment on the state of relations between American and foreign masculinities. In a state of masculine decline, 'male victims may reaffirm their masculinity through carrying out risk-taking behaviour, physical violence and demonstrating an ability to care for themselves by not reporting the crime; all activities which aspire to re-establish or repair their 'broken' masculinity'. The desire to become the Western ideal of the violent hegemonic male in this text paired with the already established hostility between Western and foreign masculinities (Pygmy and Trevor) is encapsulated perfectly in this scene where foreign 'state ideology, language, laws, all of these blasted' (89) in order to restore the hierarchy of Western masculinities. Therefore, for Trevor to restore his American masculinity, he must not only prove himself as the most masculine body, but he must also defeat 'the foreigner'. Sri Lanka, East Timor, Egypt, Brazil, 'all best ideals of nation made steaming gray meatloaf' (90) in an attempt to perform a binary worth salvaging as some form of valuable masculine identity. By defeating the foreigner, Trevor demonstrates that in his environment American masculinity is supreme, and any attempt at soiling the view of American masculinity will be met with the traditional reaction of physical violence. Trevor proves through his receptiveness to the idea of masculinity as violence that he has the potential to embody the masculine hegemonic ideal. Pygmy quoting Karl Marx to attack Trevor's masculinity, then (both before and after Trevor's school shooting) quoting 'pugnacious visionary Vladimir Lenin, heroic aristocrat, say, 'one man with a gun can control a hundred without one" (89), shows even he notices the tangible difference in Trevor's masculinity. His willingness to be aggressive and violent as a man manifest of the hegemonic ideal is subtly admired by Pygmy here who sees Trevor embodying attributes of a hegemonic male.

Moreover, Trevor and Pygmy's relationship is akin to Narrator and Tyler Durden's in *Fight Club* (1996), Palahniuk's most famous novel. In the brotherhood of Fight Club and Project Mayhem the by-product of violence between men is highlighted; with violence comes

hegemony, and with hegemony comes masculine worth. All Tyler wants is to see from Narrator a 'willingness to do violent acts' (hooks, 2004, p. 59), to fight back, to be a 'man *in* power, a man *with* power, and a man *of* power' (Kimmel, 2007, p. 63). In this text, Trevor proves himself worthy by performing Pygmy's desires. Trevor being killed within the 'fantasy battlefield' discussed by Kimmel allows him to die with valour and avoid the consequences of his actions which promote hegemony. In *Fight Club*, Big Bob dies during a Project Mayhem mission, and finally they learn his name, Robert Paulson. They say this is because 'only in death will we have our own names since only in death are we no longer part of the effort. In death we become heroes.' (Palahniuk, 1996, p. 178). There is a sense of brotherhood and community established here as there's no more competition, no more battle. All that remains after death is the respect the living masculine bodies have for the one willing to die in the name of the fight. The relationship between Pygmy and Trevor becomes an atypical brotherhood whereby Trevor's mimicry of Pygmy's 'violence *is* [the] boyhood socialisation' (60) needed for both parties to participate in the gender politics of hegemonic masculinity. Boon (2003) asserts that 'men identify themselves as men by matching their behaviours with the behaviours of others whom they consider to be men' (269). To avoid the shame and embarrassment of being seen as subordinate by the hegemonic ideal (Pygmy), after his assault Trevor will always choose the fight in this fantasy battlefield with Pygmy. Therefore, people dying, or willing to die in this battlefield is to show that some men do not fear death as a direct consequence of attempting to attain a hegemonic level of masculine worth. Attaining the hegemonic ideal is a life-or-death battle, and to die is to show one's unremitting commitment to the cause. In maintaining Boon's argument that to be regarded as a masculine body is to mimic the masculine ideal you see, Trevor's 'heroic' death only increases the significance of the monolithic goal of American hegemonic manhood.

After the death of Trevor, Pygmy no longer has another willing male to compete against for hegemonic control. However, this novel consists of a tripartite relationship between Western masculinity, foreign masculinity, and the feminine: thus, the feminine *must* be analysed in this text as a significant source of affirming male intragender relations. If 'power relationships between genders and within genders [are centred around] 'the global dominance of men over women" (Demetriou, 2001, p. 340), hegemony is forever reliant upon the male always having the option to subjugate the female. Throughout the text there is repeated reference to the impregnation of the American woman in order to spread the foreign seed, a sentiment well-known in wartime practice. For Pygmy, the desire to impregnate the enemy manifests itself through rape fantasies or rape scenes masked in grotesque nonchalance. The two (nameless) women who are victim to Pygmy's most violent sexual fantasies are his host mother and sister, nicknamed Cat Sister, and Chicken Mother. To mark Pygmy's host mother as subordinate by nature, she is immediately labelled as a 'blinking chicken, chin of face bony sharp as beak (3). Pygmy also visually takes her medical statistics, 'guessing chicken mother to be 6.3 percent body fat. Blood pressure 182/120. Resting heart rate 93. Age 42.3 years. Inside six year, easy subject brain stroke dead' (4). Her delicate frame being identified before (or in this case, instead of) her name identifies her not only as a body that is easily bested, but a body so obviously weak that, to Pygmy, she's almost begging to be controlled. This is a sentiment we will see in Chapter 3 whereby women are taught to perform femininity so that the male views her as a weak body needing to be taken care of and controlled. This sentiment goes further when Pygmy succumbs to his sexual fantasies and violates Chicken Mother:

> Shoulders operative me brace mother thighs more wide, enable fingers this agent explore vaginal orifice. Discover ready lubricated copious flooded secretions natural mucus [...] finger discover contain moderate missile polish plastic emitting gentle shiver vibration. Through tissue vault, contractions heart muscle faint, irregular. (160)

The Madonna-Whore Dichotomy ‘translates into the more modern "bimbo/brain syndrome", whereby a woman can be either respectable or sexually desirable, either a "sex object" or a professional, but not both’ (Young, 1993, p. 273). Pygmy’s host mother is most known in the text for her constant use of sex toys causing a shortage of batteries in the house. Pygmy choses to take batteries out of Chicken Mother’s vibrator while it is inside her, disregarding his awareness of her collection of other sex toys under her mattress. When rape culture becomes embedded in an environment within which masculine aggression, violence and dominance over subordinate gender binaries are already behaviours of social practice, performing acts of sexual assault on subordinate binaries is rewarded with hegemony. Pygmy was raised in an environment where sexual assault was synonymous with the corruption and defeat of America, and the defeat of America meant the attainment of hegemony. Therefore, although there is little to no evidence of a sexual attraction between Pygmy and Chicken Mother as opposed to Trevor and, Pygmy cannot pass up the opportunity to violate the frail, unconscious, powerless female body. Thus, he reaches into Chicken Mothers vagina, through the ‘shiver vibration’ of her vibrator and the ‘contractions heart muscle faint, irregular’ (which is perhaps a misread orgasm) to pull the vibrator out and extract the battery. He then violates her again by placing the vibrator back inside her. While the rape of Trevor can be read as a clear use of sexual assault to feminise American masculinities – this assault occurs unexpectedly, as we (and Pygmy himself) expect Cat Sister to be assaulted instead. What we may surmise from this attack is that it is a most calculating attack that has been buried under the chaos of masculine psychological warfare.

The journey towards hegemony for the men in these novels operates under the umbrella of *incentive.* As hegemony is a goal that is ultimately unattainable (MacKinnon, 2003), Palahniuk’s men need encouragement to keep fighting for it. This means the men in Palahniuk’s world need to achieve realistic goals that are inherently tied with hegemonic

manhood that benefit them highly in the social sphere, so that they see the benefits of hegemony, and thus, continue the struggle. Being sexually or physically attractive, rejecting the more feminine characteristics of being overemotional, soft, and dependent, having a glowing sports record, competitive, violent, and aggressive (to name a few) (Cheng, 1999; Wetherell & Edley, 1999) are characteristics gained through the attainment of hegemony - all realistic goals that work as incentive for the willing male to achieve. For Pygmy, his greatest personal incentive is sexual domination of the enemy, regardless of gender. If we are to apply Herbert's (2002) view of sexual violence to the context of this text, Chicken Mother, in her sexual freedom, is the embodiment of feminine hypocrisy. That is, 'she assumes a false mantle of innocence and virtue, but that her conduct during the rape reveals that she yearns for it, and that she is actually 'very experienced" (35). Chicken Mother's façade is her physical fragility, which infantilises her and signifies a lack of sexual power, yet her constant use of sex toys signifies an unceasing readiness for sex. This hypocritical object presented to Pygmy provides the perfect incentive for Pygmy to re-authenticate his dominance. It would be a disservice to his masculinity if he were to pass up the opportunity to reaffirm his masculinity in the perfect setting; whilst Chicken Mother's husband and son sit unconscious, helpless to what is happening in front of them. There is simply no regard for the female body in this text as anything worth 'bothering with in a personally invested manner' (Mullins, 2006, p. 105), and arguably, there never will be. If 'daughters of American democracy are engendered in rape and are destined for rape, [and their womanhood] will be defined in the endless replications of this moment, in which the woman is hurt (only as "necessary") when the man penetrates her in defiance of her entreaties' (p. 29), there is no scenario in which the women in Palahniuk's world can experience sexual freedom as this text's men will always need to have the option of indulging in his sexual urges with her (see: *Snuff*). This encloses the female body in this text and its sexual liberty in the realm of hegemonic control wherein

men have the unwavering cathexis to manipulate the essence of female sexuality in order to facilitate his own masculine growth.

This text agrees with the sentiment that masculinity is defined through the relationship between reliance, rejection, and approval. For Pygmy, this is not a relationship, but a cycle that always comes back to a state of *reliance*. Pygmy relies on this cycle and uses it against his adoptive family, which allows him to compete for phallic dominance in Western society. Therefore, his unwillingness to put his hegemonic dominance at risk to prove it true in the face of a foreign entity leaves him vulnerable to a non-consensual display of phallic dominance to establish the hegemony of the perpetrator.

As masculinity must be constantly and routinely reauthenticated to ensure stability in the realm of hegemony, removing Trevor as the Western male able to authenticate hegemony leaves the Pygmy searching for an object to compare his masculinity against so as not to incidentally fall into a state of masculine decline, and he does this through the sexual assault of women. Upholding hegemonic manhood through intragender battles is no longer enough in the contemporary public sphere. If the feminist movement refuses to be subdued and women no longer find machismo desirable, it is only through violence that the men in this text are able to authenticate their masculinity. Therefore, Pygmy resorts to violence against the female body in order to become what Kimmel refers to as the man '*in, with* and *of* power' when the masculine body relied upon to utilise phallic power against and authenticate hegemonic behaviour became absent. Masculine hegemony in Palahniuk's world is not seen as a journey whereby simply dominating a group of subordinate objects is gifted with hegemony. As we see here, and as we will see in the next section with *Choke*, Palahniuk's texts showcase a kind of weak masculinity that is foregrounded upon dependence in domination through sex. As masculinity is still the sovereign binary in the public sphere, to prevent feelings of insignificancy he, nor the active parties involved in this relationship of

sexual reliance, rejection, and acceptance, are able to escape. All roads will and must, forever, lead to hegemony. *Choke* explores the idea that Vincent's fear of not being able to live up to masculine hegemony will result in him using his 'turgid weapon' in sex with women to have an object that is at once attached to him and constantly validating his masculinity.

1.2 'God is a Woman and You're Her Son': The Effects of Feminine Influence in *Choke*

Palahniuk enjoys indoctrinating his protagonists with the theology that masculinity is the fundamental principle in shaping social relations amongst genders; Tyler Durden, for instance, being the most known manifestation of this divine masculine ideal, as well as Pygmy, who bases his entire mission on this premise. *Choke* has a striking resemblance to *Fight Club*; Palahniuk maintains the same religiously hyperbolic narrative that comically comments on the state of masculine affairs. That is, much like Vincent (*Choke*'s central character) finds out, to be a hegemonic male you have to be (more or less) the son of God. Yet, this text does not attract the same level of adoration as *Fight Club*. What makes this text so unappealing to the male audience compared to its predecessor? *Choke* highlights the key psychological issues at the heart of the masculine crisis that, arguably, may never go away if men chose to hide behind *Fight Club*. *Choke* represents everything the man is not, and everything he is running away from. Vincent fights sex addiction, lacks masculine guidance, holds resentment towards his mother, but also has an unwavering connection to his mother, and holds insecurity about how he is perceived by women. This section will argue that Vincent must separate with his mother to identify himself with his father, and therefore, identify himself with masculine characteristics that he thinks he must embody (Diamond, 2004). This entrapment results in a reidentification with the mother, which he must use

instead to affirm his hegemony – a practice arguably destined to fail. Further, attempts within this text to use women's bodies through sex to consolidate masculine power (Irigaray, 1985), only expose masculine insecurity, lost selfhood, and turn these women into pillars holding masculine stability in place.

Choke is a novel devoid of both the father and the father figure. Vincent's mother, Ida Mancini, gatekeeps Vincent's father's identity until her diary reveals that Ida was, allegedly, impregnated by divine sperm and Vincent, is divine offspring. While this claim may be viewed as unrealistic, Vincent embraces the possibility of him being a hero to all men. Vincent believing he is a descendant of Christ is nothing more than an illustration of how men see hegemonic masculinity. Yet, the notion of being birthed with divine hegemonic potential is stripped away from him in Ida's death bed confession that "[she] stole [him] out of a stroller in Waterloo, Iowa. [Ida] wanted to save [Vincent] from the kind of life [he'd] get" (269). What we are interested in, is what effect this has on the adult Vincent that so swiftly transitioned from the child of purpose – Christ incarnate – to the child of purposelessness – an orphan. For Vincent to transition into manhood, identification with the father is *crucial*, as if he does not 'differentiate himself from his mother, he will be feminised' (360), unintentionally identifying himself with *her* instead. So, what does Vincent's 'mother' mean in her defence that she is saving him from the "kind of life [he'd] get"? Is she speaking of the kind of life within the nuclear family? The kind of life as a child with loving parents? The kind of life as a boy expected to become a refined version of his father?

Vincent expresses how he felt like 'the subject of [Ida's] social and political experiments' (118) throughout his childhood. Her argument that "what does it get you if you can square root a triangle and then some terrorist shoots you in the head? It gets you nothing!" (97) suggests that her ideologies lean towards extreme realism. Her attempts to

force feed, in the words of 'The Matrix', the 'red pill' – a pill that gifts you the unsettling truths about life – to her son and her irrational attitude infers that she holds an extremist feminist self-belief that she can singlehandedly build a man without the help of another. She also believes "the Enlightenment is over. What we're living in now is the *Dis-Enlightenment*" (98). A Kantian view of the Enlightenment argues 'that what is required in order to throw off the yoke of immaturity is the freedom to make public use of one's reason, where "public" signifies a publicly conducted argument in which all can participate' (Deligiorgi, 2005, p. 56). Ida uses her 'freedom' to openly oppose reason as it sits in direct correlation to masculine will. 'Rational masculinity', as Seidler (1994) describes it, is the idea that 'men could think of reason as their own and so legitimate the organization of private and public life in their own image' (3); this leaves the feminine and the queer forced to participate in a society that is built specifically for the male. To have society remade by way of reason is to 'lay bare a particular relationship between masculinity and our inherited forms of social and political theory' (1), a position that Ida attempts to expose in her comment on the Dis-Enlightenment. Through Ida's steadfast perspective on the importance of 'taking the red pill' and her individualistic behaviour, we see the Dis-Enlightenment to be an environment in which a woman is able to raise a male alone, implementing her own feminine bias, and if successful, build the 'new man' that the late 20th century called for.

Vincent is correct, he *was* a social experiment as a child, his mother's 'hostage' (118). Yet, deciding to adopt Ida's dogma is to ignore the nuances of the transition of boyhood into manhood; Ida's 'capacity to recognise and respond to her small son's maleness, [is] largely overlooked' (365) in her defiance of masculine power. Ida can only teach what she knows, the feminine sex role, one that negatively sides with the 'no-phallus [...] castrated' (Tseelon, 1995, p. 92). There is a moment in the novel where Vincent expresses his disdain for being male, exposing how he was taught to view his own manhood:

> ‘I mean, I’m just tired of being wrong all the time just because I’m a guy [...] how many times can everybody tell you that you’re the oppressive, prejudiced enemy before you give up and become the enemy [...] a male chauvinist pig isn’t born, he’s made, and more and more of them are being made by women [...] women are right, you’re wrong. You get used to the idea [...] any advantages men appear to have are pretty token [...] you can’t even hammer a nail with a phallus’. (118-9)

Vincent is therefore adopting the castrated mindset that his mother placed upon him. This monologue is exaggerated, victimising, and void of accountability. This melodramatic tale of the masculine position in contemporary society places the blame on women for their part in creating ‘chauvinist pigs’, for still expecting the embodiment of old manhood that they are trying to steer away from, and then publicly condemning it. In essence, for forcing men into crisis; a rhetoric heavily resembling the ‘red pill’ ideology that is progressively becoming popular amongst angry men in contemporary culture. It is interesting at this stage to note a full circle moment for Vincent. He is fed the ‘red pill’ by his mother in childhood, and subsequently, becomes a ‘red pill’ male in adulthood; a cycle which, unsurprisingly, places his mother at fault. Additionally, praising the power that women have in being child bearers and lessening his own phallic power by stating ‘you can’t even hammer a nail with a phallus’ reinforces the belief that ‘man’s misfortune is that his penis, the symbol of power, is in fact one of the most fragile and vulnerable organs of his body’ (Reynaud, 1981, p. 36) and the exposure of this fact simultaneously makes vulnerable the holder of the penis. This flippant comment on the practicality of the *phallus* rather than the *penis* suggests that Vincent is unaware of the power the phallus holds in sex domination.

Vincent feels like less of a man, but how may he realise his hegemonic potential if he is unaware of the ‘the fact [that] the penis isn’t a patch on the phallus’ (Dyer, 1985, p. 71)? In stripping Vincent of a father, Ida strips Vincent of understanding what it is to be a man. Believing that ‘women are already born so far ahead ability wise’ (119) places himself in a position in which he either identifies himself as masculine and admits that he is less than

women, or he identifies himself with women and admits he can never be masculine. Therefore, Ida's social experiment certainly did not create a man of whom is confident in himself as a hegemonic male with phallic power. It also did not create the embodiment of the 'new man' that third wave feminism called for. I believe what Ida created, in her cruel social experiment, was an exaggerated personification of the masculine psyche. A man scared that he will not be able to uphold hegemonic masculinity, that he will never understand phallic power, is in affect admitting that his only asset in society is his penis that is 'spongy, seldom straight, and rounded at the tip, while the testicles are imperfect spheres, always vulnerable' (30). Now, Vincent must become reliant on the one masculine entity that women lack in order to affirm his masculinity. Not the phallus, the penis; physically weak, but in the context of sex has the potential to garner immense masculine power.

When the penis becomes the sole signifier of masculine power, the heterosexual male becomes reliant upon the female and her body to validate the power of the penis through sex. In returning to Gardiner's definition of the word "phallus' [as] properly understood to indicate not a penis but its attributes - 'intrusiveness, power, violence", in order for Vincent to mimic phallic power, every sexual encounter must be intrusive, powerful, and violent. Luckily for him, hegemony in Palahniuk's world views women as only having value in that men can mould feminine weakness into dependence in order to facilitate their own masculine growth, and their 'bodies – through their use, consumption, and circulation – provide for the condition making social life and culture possible' (Irigaray, 1985, p. 171) as we see in *Snuff* (see: Chapter 3). Therefore, by regarding women as objects at man's disposal and effectively using his penis in sex, he is effectively mimicking phallic power *and* the hegemonic framework it sits within. Moreover, it is not as if Vincent is lacking 'action' in this text. In fact, he creates a roster of women to have sex with, all members of his sex addiction therapy group: 'Wednesdays mean Nico [...] Thursday is Virginia Woolf, first.

Then Anaïs Nin. Then there's just enough time for a session with Sacajawea. [...] Fridays mean Tanya' (214-15), 'Sundays mean Leeza' (16). Having sex with the addicts in his group is convenient, firstly, but it also gives Vincent a chance to have 'somebody addicted to [him]'. A mutual addiction (213). As Palahniuk writes in *Fight Club*, 'this isn't about *love* as in *caring*, this is about *property* as in *ownership'* (Palahniuk, 1996, p. 14). Having a female sex addict addicted to Vincent is to have a female belonging to him, always in need of him, always in need of what his penis gives her. *That*, is phallic power. Using female sex addicts to satisfy Vincent's own sexual addiction keeps women entrapped in his realm of addiction, thus maintaining their dependence on him as long as he needs them to to validate his masculinity. This is what we see in *Snuff:* Cassie's desire to have sex allows these men to use her for their own gain. The cyclical activity of having one's masculinity constantly validated by different women becomes its own addiction to Vincent, a ritual. And, as gender performativity consists of a constantly repeated, ritualistic performance of the characteristics belonging to a specific binary (Butler, 1999), Vincent's 'roster' works to constantly affirm his mimicry of phallic power and therefore grant him access to the realm of hegemony.

The use and consumption of female sex addicts to verify masculine prowess is convenient, and, to him at least, a worth-while use of his own addiction. But it is also very telling. Sanders (2008) makes the case that heterosexual male purchasers of sex play a vital role in the objectification of women, reinforcing their containment within the social sphere of which brands women as the compilers to man's will. 'The purchaser of sex [is] a dangerous and uncivil character who is an abuser of women' (174); if one is to maintain Seidler's perspective on 'rational masculinity', the men in this novel view women in the same image as they view the private and the public – made for them. In this way they see themselves as able to use women in ways that solely benefit them, which may cause immense damage to both the female body and psyche. To Vincent, 'even the most beauteous thing is only a joy for

about three hours, tops. After that, she'll want to tell you all about her childhood traumas' (16). Aspects of the female body (the mouth, the breasts, the vagina) are her only assets of use in Palahniuk's world; her mind is a disturbance to both her 'beauty' and her ability to be consumed by the male. Vincent purchases these bodies, and in return he receives a reaffirmation of his masculine power which only her vagina can give him. And of course, in the context of these women selling their bodies out of necessity, they have little to no benefit from this transaction.

However, what kind of shift occurs when the female is also a sex addict? When she also sees the genitals as the biggest asset to the male body? The attraction with the prostitute in this novel is that her purchase grants entry to a carefree environment – a 'rumpus room of the mind' (Carter, 1979, p. 13). What is to say that this cannot be the same for the sex addicted woman? Of course, there will always be the valid argument that as Palahniuk's society is moulded around men, there will never be a scenario, especially a sexual one, in which the male does not hold the majority, if not the totality, of the power and benefit (see: *Snuff*). This being said, the women in this text embody the third wave feminist attitude of emphasising the importance of women's sexual agency in both the public and private sphere (Ryan, 2001; hooks, 2006). Therefore, the sexual interactions in this text that are initially considered a solely beneficial 'purchasing' from Vincent of the female body turn into transactions of mutual benefit – these sex addicts will, in most cases, mutually profit from a sexual interaction. Thus, Sanders' notion that the purchaser of sex is uncivil and abusive goes both ways; as much as these women are at the will of the almighty male, women with sexual agency are able to reverse the power dynamics of sex. The old contract of sexual relations demanded that the man be the sole beneficiary of sex with a woman to maintain the hegemonic order of 'masculine' society. With the introduction of third wave feminism, however, when the woman can stand to gain from a sexual act – for instance when she

demands to be satisfied, or when she takes a more dominant position during sex – the male stands to lose. Sex is now yet another challenge of manhood in which *he must prove himself worthy to the woman*. Vincent understands, as a sex addict himself, that female sex addicts only require a strong, lasting erection. Easy enough for Vincent. Except, attached to the strong, lasting erection is an embodiment of an equally strong, lasting, virility; a weak, fleeting erection is indicative of one's weak, fleeting, masculinity. The pressure of always performing at your sexual peak as a male is something Vincent struggles with as a sex addict now having to perform for sex addicted women who expect intense sex regularly. His hesitance to actualise Gwen's rape kink especially highlights his 'red pill' attitude towards women being overly demanding concerning how they would like to orgasm. That is, simply, "what about *my penis?"* (175). Vincent feels as if has a duty to follow through with Gwen's imagined rape because it is a rare opportunity for him to embody the masculine dominance that hegemonic masculinity is representative of.

The female desire in this text to have a rape, or heavily submissive fantasy fulfilled benefits her as it is seen as a reclaiming of her sexual power, but it is a pointless activity for a man upholding hegemonic masculinity as it only exposes his insecurities. "What about *my penis?*"; 'how about if she just shuts up and lets me rape her my way' (173); Vincent cannot take a back seat. It is his uncomfortableness in complying to Gwen's will, but his comfortability around Tanya, his Friday girl, that validates this sentiment. With Tanya, he is totally submissive in letting her use anal beads on him. Why then, is Vincent so comfortable with Tanya, but will not satisfy Gwen's rape kink when he is performing the role of the dominant, insertive partner? This is because while Vincent is in crisis, he struggles immensely with becoming the 'masked reveller mimicking what he is not' (Smith-Rosenberg, 2004, p. 1329); performing as Gwen's rapist does not make him feel powerful, in control, hegemonic. Her endless requirements of who he must become during the rape expose

that these requirements are simply a list of things he is not; “degrade me, you stupid idiot! Demean me, you jerk-off! Debase me!” (176). In defence of him having to be scolded for struggling to embody the rapist, he argues that ‘these horny sexaholic chicks, they have such a high tolerance. [...] They just can’t stop, no matter how degrading things get’ (172). Essentially, he is arguing that Gwen is asking for something that *no man* can give her. Once again, the spectre of ‘red pill’ victimhood creeps back into view to shield him from total emasculation. With Tanya, it is a wildly different experience. Having sex with Tanya does not expose who he will never be, it exposes exactly who he is - a man who is attached to his mother. Tanya gives him what he is missing: he becomes a ‘hostage’ once again, under the control of a woman who will tell him how and when to feel sexual gratification. Ida taught Vincent about “masturbating your way to freedom” (200), thus Vincent’s early sexual memories are inherently tied with his mother, and so sex with Tanya is nostalgic and comforting. This validates his masculinity in a way that satisfying a rape kink cannot because sex with Gwen is a test of masculinity which he will inevitably fail, but sex with Tanya is enclosed in an environment where he does not have to prove himself. He is safe, back in the arms of the mother he hates but is unconditionally connected to.

Fight Club describes the masculine crisis as the effects of being forced out of violence and into what men would regard as passive congeniality. This encourages communities centred around violence to be made, which in some way amends the masculine ideal the 90s feminist movement corrupted. *Choke*, however, barely speaks of violence as a way of bonding between men; perhaps the very thing that attracted so many male readers (or rather, watchers of the film) to make *Fight Club* their Bible. As this text is a more psychological insight into the masculine crisis (as such is *Pygmy)*, Palahniuk’s flair for giving his heterosexual protagonists a sizeable amount of delusion enhances the things we already see in the heterosexual male: fear, panic, inner turmoil. Without a father, Vincent has no option but

to do his best, to try and embody his phantom father whose masculine identity haunts his psyche as something he will always know of but never understand. Therefore, with every visit to his mother, every failed sexual encounter, every time he 'chokes', he adopts the 'red pill' rhetoric to express his upset, fear, and anger at his mother for creating a 'man' without a father. The next Chapter, 'The Homosexual', explores adolescent masculinities that hold the same fear that Vincent carries in manhood. Therefore, Vincent can be seen as the adult version of these children who through deviant expressions of sexual exploration stunt or totally negate their masculine growth as men.

CHAPTER 2: THE HOMOSEXUAL

Palahniuk's story 'Guts' in the novel *Haunted* (2005) and the most recent novel in this thesis, *Pygmy* (2009), are very similar despite their four-year difference. Originally in the March 2004 publication of *Playboy*, 'Guts' tells three stories of teenage boys caught in horrific masturbatory incidents. *Pygmy* follows the mission of a young foreign operative attempting to destroy America and the hegemonic structure that controls it. 'Guts' and *Pygmy* both use the heterosexual American to merge violence and the grotesque with homosexuality, which through Palahniuk's use of humour satirises vulnerable American masculinity. 'Guts' was received publicly with horror; Palahniuk claims at least 70 people fainted during his reading of 'Guts' (although he has no evidence of this claim). Critical reviews of 'Guts' not only express horror but disappointment; expressing that 'shock is being substituted for substance' (Kerr, 2005, p. 141). *Pygmy* receives a similar review in Jeff Vandermeer's 2009 piece in stating Palahniuk 'sacrifices complexity of character for satire'. However, Jeffery A. Sartain and Courtney Wennerstrom consider 'Guts' a story that successfully discusses male

psychology and masculinity, saying that it 'undermines contemporary culture's investment in a myth of masculine bodily autonomy by showing that male bodies, just like female ones, are penetrable, susceptible, and always intersubjective.' (p. 162). Despite Pygmy's reviews this text is no different. Placed together in this Chapter, these two texts exhibit the ways in which Palahniuk envisions these teenage boys as a warning of a future of soft, feminine, American masculinities.

2.1: 'I'm Not a Bottom, I'm a Verse!': Satirising the Homosexual Experience in *Pygmy*

The portrayal of homosexuality in *Pygmy* is wildly complex. Pygmy foregrounding his masculine performance in acts of sexual assault justified by the masculine ideal of his homeland (which is never disclosed) as we have seen in Chapter 1 formulates a discourse on non-Western masculinities that permit the performance of homosexual acts as a fundamental practice of reaffirming one's own hegemony. This section will interrogate a non-Western hegemonic ideal – post-Cold War Soviet masculinities – that encourage homosexual practices as a means of strengthening masculinity. I will use this particular ideal as it is an accurate depiction of the portrayal of Pygmy's masculinity in this text. Western homosexuality in this text is inherently likened to feminine subjugation. This arouses Palahniuk's willing hegemonic men wanting to solidify their hegemony through both the overpowering of the homosexual penis and the female, which the gay man becomes representative of in the 'similarity between the passive mode of sexual satisfaction desired by both homosexual men and heterosexual women' (Corbett, 1993, p. 346). If we are to say that in this text there is such a natural and unwavering connection between sexual desire and violence, but violence between *men* is the primary method of establishing masculine hierarchy, we cannot ignore

the possibility of, or the blatant refusal of, homoerotism in every intragender battle that involves the desire to perpetrate violence. In this section, I will argue that homosexuality is not a recognised sexual orientation in this text, but a site of ammunition and satirical parody. Labelling American men as homosexuals allows Pygmy to easily regard them physically and emotionally to women, therefore giving him the permission to mock US masculine failure. The most extreme example of this is Pygmy's diagnosis of Trevor's homosexual love for Pygmy as tantamount to Stockholm Syndrome. Knowing the fatal flaw of Palahniuk's American men is their refusal to validate the homosexual experience, the non-Western male is both aware of and complicit in the transmutation of forcibly feminised men into terminally segregated homosexuals.

This text works within the binary logic of 'bottoms' and 'tops' and its association with power. 'Being a bottom carried a stigma or perception because [one] might feel various negative effects: shame, humiliation, discomfort, and so on' (Allan, 2016, p. 58), compared to its counterpart, the 'top', who is seen as 'dominant through penetration' (Eichert, 2019, p. 413). This logic refuses to give credence to the sexual positions of the 'power bottom' (an aggressive receiving partner) and the 'vers' (a partner who enjoys performing as a 'top' or a 'bottom'), as both positions are in 'violation of [the] orthodox masculinity' (Snaith, 2003, p. 86) associated with penetrative power, and therefore must be excluded from working within the binary logic present in the novel. With this logic in place, Pygmy is able to define his sexual position as a 'top' as the antithesis of shame, humiliation, discomfort, and thus perform sexual acts whilst maintaining the power that comes with being a penetrator. In order to posit that it is Pygmy's foreign masculinity that enables him to assault Western masculinities without counterpressure, we must firstly examine foreign hegemonic ideals that allow homoerotic performance as a way of hegemony.

Throughout the text, Pygmy is forced to ingest racial abuse from the Americans. From the only name he is given, Pygmy, to the onslaught of racism at the hands of Trevor who labels him a 'wetback' (19) and a 'colored bitch' (12), to his host family who call him 'dirty, ragged, smelling like the dung cooking fires of his primitive homeland' (119) - Pygmy is never free from racial degradation. However, although we may analyse every racist remark directed at Pygmy in an attempt to ascertain which country he is from, racial slurs from the characters of this novel are greatly inaccurate when placed together. The term 'wetback' is typically used in reference to Mexican immigrants in America, and the term 'Pygmy' is used to attack those of 'othered' origin, such as those of African or Asian descent. Further, one's complexion is not always relative to ethnic origin. Therefore, it is almost impossible to decipher from the perception of the Americans in this text alone what country Pygmy is originally from; consequently, we cannot trust fully that the assumption we make of a masculine ideal in connection with their interpretations is at all accurate to Pygmy's masculine identity. In order to establish Pygmy's ethnic origin with the highest level of accuracy, we can only compare his masculine performance to the performance of specific foreign masculinities.

Post Cold War Soviet masculinities seem to be an accurate representation of the kind of masculinity Pygmy represents. While it is not the task of this thesis to delve too intensely into the political history of the Cold War, to analyse Cold War masculinities we must be aware of the gendered battle between the United States and Russia that determined the global masculine hierarchy in its wake. Post Cold War Soviet gender politics saw masculinities that 'demonstrated a willingness to fight and the capacity for combat' (Toch, 1998, p. 170) stunted in their inability to evince their worth as hegemonic men as a result of the natural feminisation that came alongside their defeat. Russia felt the pressure to rebuild the once unwavering essence of Soviet masculinity that has shifted into a retributive binary, whereby

they were forced to rely upon the destruction of other (specifically American) masculinities to heighten their own subject position. Their plan of retributive attack was to use art - such as the magazine *Krokodil* - to weaken the perception of American masculinities. By portraying 'foreign military authorities as feminized, queer, or in some way sexually deviant, *Krokodil* introduced an explicitly gendered framework for adjudicating Soviet military strength' (Fraser, 2019, p. 79). Aside from the most significant application of this approach (the diagnosis of Stockholm Syndrome), subtle moments of comedy, such as his host sister (Cat Sister) speculating 'I wonder what Trevor's like in bed…' (24) to Pygmy (who knows the answer), and his host brother (Pig Dog Brother) replaying the videotape of the school shooting over and over, 'advance, retreat' (108). Repeatedly recreating Trevor's death here parodies Trevor's attempts at reinstating his masculinity and reminds us of the irony of Trevor's gender performance.

After Trevor's assault, he confronts Pygmy with a 'snub-nose 38 caliber [...] two inch barrel' pointed at his own chest, and confesses his love for him. 'Trevor say how enamored strongly of this agent. Since violated by force, men's spa room of shopping mall. How never experienced such passion [...] own boundaries expanded' (60). This 'coming out' moment from Trevor simultaneously disintegrates the essence of American hegemony and satirises the validity of the practice of homosexuality. Trevor is the paradigm for American hegemonies in this text in his performance as the straight male 'thug bully loving brutal power' (61). While I do believe gay men have the capacity to be 'thugs' and prop up hegemony, Trevor's 'coming out' completely undermines the belief that Palahniuk's American men are the epitome of 'thugs' that love the power that accompanies brutality. Trevor proving Pygmy right, that 'all American hidden homosexual', (174) is detrimental to Trevor's future as he becomes vulnerable to the perpetration of Pygmy's comedically savage attempts at retribution that follow:

> ‘Mouth of operative me say, No love. Say how instead, bully suffer merely Stockholm syndrome. No able accept how possessed of no power, helpless, so reaction bonded alliance with aggressor. Form identity with oppressor. Typical victim psychology mechanism. [...] Trevor Stonefield no responsible, merely animal pawn. Ignorant puppet. Victim Western system. [...] This agent say much apologize, but cannot waste more seed within Trevor anus. Must retain so impregnate future offspring. Say, “Is no personal”’ (60-1).

Trevor is helpless, powerless, a victim, a pawn, a puppet and not worth sodomising with; this description is dangerously similar to Mullins’s (2006) definition of the female body, that is ‘to be exploited […] seen by the man here as weak, untrustworthy and not worth bothering with in a personally invested manner.’ (105). His helplessness is made worse by the reminder that despite Pygmy forcing him into the realm of gayness, he still cannot help Pygmy ‘impregnate future offspring’; he can never be the woman that Pygmy wants. What makes this moment so damaging are the satirical undertones that mock Trevor’s homosexuality. The staccato and misphrased method of foreign speech that Pygmy adopts turns moments of cruelty into moments of comedy; very similar to him placing the connective ‘and’ between him yelling “bitch’ and ‘bitch’ and ‘bitch” in Trevor’s ear while he rapes him. In this moment, Pygmy ending his rejection speech with “is no personal” humourizes the whole ordeal, expressions of contrition from him later in the text are invalidated in his enjoyment in the cycle of abuse. Trevor’s trauma repeats itself; being simultaneously attacked and mocked for his sexual orientation invalidates his experience as both a trauma victim and a homosexual man, which in turn validates the inviolable masculinity that Pygmy embodies.

Although Pygmy could very easily be manifest of the retributive post Cold War Soviet masculine ideology, we cannot say that Pygmy’s use of satire and desire to destroy American masculinities is solely a product of being a Soviet military male. However, Palahniuk’s bibliography is rife with disturbing satire, and the novels included in this thesis are no exception. Therefore, as feminisation and homosexuality are satirised and weaponised against men in an attempt to progress the masculine agenda of the Soviets, we may suggest

these components of masculine attack could be underpinned by a Soviet masculine mindset. Western masculinities in this text will always be fighting for international dominance against foreign entities who are no longer, or never were, in a masculine crisis as momentous as the American crisis of masculinity. It will never be known where Pygmy's indoctrinated ideologies originate, however, as long as we are aware that there are foreign masculinities that have the potential to embody what Western masculinities fear, we are aware that it is the mere presence of foreignness in this text that poses the threat to Western masculinity. Pygmy's presence in this novel as the foreign body naturally divulges Trevor's insecurities regarding his gender performance and homosexuality. Satire to mask the taboo of homosexuality during a gendered attack on a vulnerable Western body is therefore not exclusive to Soviet Russia; in this case we may argue that Palahniuk is - accustomedly - showcasing his obscure talent for lampooning the grotesque in the hopes of producing both disdain and entertainment.

Trevor's Stockholm Syndrome is one of the most grotesque forms of satirical masculine destruction Pygmy uses. The rape of Trevor extrapolates the discourse of the potential synonymy between sexual arousal during rape and homosexuality. The established belief in this text that a passive partner is feminine and an insertive partner is masculine during anal sex between men inextricably links the symbolic 'passivity' of homosexuality to the physical passivity of sexual assault. Homosexual men who are passive in anal sex are seen in this text by Pygmy as men who lack vital masculine characteristics; aggression, stoicism, phallocentcity. As Trevor being a 'bottom' is not public knowledge, if Pygmy can expose his homosexuality he will naturally unmask his hypermasculinity as a desperate, superficial show of attempting to uphold hegemonic power. Trevor's – in the words of Pygmy – 'bitch' behaviour is given to us in abundance in the scene where Trevor expresses his love for Pygmy. 'Bitch voice drone and drone'; "you won't have to say 'hi' at school or

anything [...] I'll understand"; 'blue eye both bleed water'; 'entire skeleton tremble' (60-1). Trevor is effortlessly performing the vital feminine characteristics of overemotional expression, self-submitting to the male, and physical frailty (Impett et al., 2006); therefore, he is effortlessly complicit in sustaining Pygmy's hegemonic performance. By using homosexuality to infer that gay men display essential characteristics of feminine performance, this text satirises, parodies, and objectifies the homosexual experience; Pygmy is mocking Trevor when he labels his emotional expression as Stockholm Syndrome.

Despite believing that all American men are homosexuals, Pygmy coerces Trevor into believing something worse, that is, the act of sodomy has such a profound psychological impact on the passive partner that they are forced into the will of their insertive partner. Bonded in terror, much like a Stockholm Syndrome victim with their captor, the passive partner (Trevor) is forever in fear that if the insertive member decides to no longer sodomise with him (which Pygmy does) the passive partner will be left enslaved to the indoctrinated feeling that 'survival is only possible through the love and compassion of the abuser' (Ahmad et al., 2018, p. 541). Now, not only is Trevor a male, gay, rape victim, but his diagnosis of Stockholm Syndrome by Pygmy also places his homosexuality in the realm of stereotypical femininity; people who are love dependent – 'essentially passive, physically frail and without agency' (Åse, 2015, p. 599). The consequence of 'being a bottom' in Palahniuk's fiction is that the passive partner must become servile to his aggressive, dominant, insertive partner; and as Higate and Hockey (2003) notes, 'lack of aggression is again correlated with femininity, inadequacy, and, ultimately and quite fundamentally, death' (17). As per Palahniuk's modus operandi, *Pygmy* shrouds moments of tragedy in obscure satire of the homosexual experience.

Illustrating sodomitic relations in a way that is so detrimental to the psychology of the gay man hyperbolises the effects of being passive during sex so much so that we absurdly

view Trevor as a Stockholm Syndrome victim. This homophobic agenda fed into the character of Pygmy then parodies this narrative of the 'fall of masculinity'; that is, the consequences of being trapped in effeminacy are so great that the 'victim' is so humiliated by his transgression that his 'fall' *must* - as Higate and Hockey notes - ultimately and quite fundamentally end in death. Hegemonic battles between Western males in this text leaves room for hegemonic recovery as the battle is insular, known, and fears are shared; it becomes clear throughout this novel that a foreign entity, outside the enclosure of Western hegemony, clearly has the power to feminise the Western male in a way that obliterates any hope of resurgence. Of course, it is possible that a gay man can present as not exclusively masculine and not exclusively feminine, yet there is simply no room in this text for ambiguous gender performance. Rejecting gender ambiguity forces the traditional feminine and masculine binaries to take precedence. In order to be regarded as masculine, Pygmy must simply conflate homosexuality with hyperbolised essential feminine characteristics and perform sex as a 'top' to know that he is not gay regardless of his performance of sodomy. Pygmy's gender performance in his head unwavering, every successful attempt at feminising Trevor's 'deviant' sexuality proves his heterosexuality true. The next section carries on the notion of sodomy being equal to femininity in young boys, arguing that the shame Trevor felt before he was killed is a signifier of a complete loss of masculinity just as much as the physical act dictates.

2.2 'Can I Still be Straight After This?': Infiltrating the Pseudoreality in *Haunted*'s 'Guts'

Whilst *Pygmy* transforms gayness into a subject of satire; weaponizing non-normative sexuality in an attempt to heavily distance hegemony from this 'transgressive' binary, 'Guts' – a short story in the novel *Haunted* (2005) – echoes this sentiment by making a statement on

the position of gayness within gender politics. The shame the boys in this story feel as a result of potentially exposed, or directly exposed, sexual deviance extricates them from embodying the ideal of hegemonic masculinity, as one cannot uphold hegemonic masculinity in Palahniuk's world with the fear of being exposed as a transgressive, inconsistent performer of a sacred ideal. Using Kristeva's (1980) theories of abjection and adolescents as sexually fluid objects, alongside Butler's (1999) theory that gender performance is 'internally discontinuous' (179) and Kozak's (2019) ideas surrounding the effects of shame and disgust on children who explore non-normative sexual acts, this section will argue that adolescent males represent the inconsistency of gender performance, that is, as Butler states, within its nature. However, this inconsistency manifest within the adolescent in this text proves problematic if boyhood interactions must mimic that of hegemonic manhood to demonstrate that doing so will predict the ability to achieve hegemony in manhood (hooks, 2004). This story identifies physical confessions of homosexuality alongside metaphorical confessions of homosexuality (admission of lesser manhood) to interrogate the notion that the male body in this text cannot carry shame, in this case gay sexual shame, forth into hegemonic manhood. Thus, they are punished for performing transgressive behaviours that threaten the institute of male hegemony.

The first story told in 'Guts' recollects the experience of an unnamed 13-year-old boy who hears about the sexual act of 'pegging' (penetration, usually of the male, with a phallic object, most commonly a dildo or strap on), and its subsequent arousal of the male G spot, resulting in more intense orgasms. Or, for those interested in the storyteller's definition, 'this is when a guy gets banged up the butt with a dildo' (12). As Kozak (2019) notes, 'since this activity [pegging] involves the penetration of the male body, it is considered non-normative, and the penetrating object becomes a symbol of disgust' (55); in this text, the child is also considered a 'symbol of disgust'. Kristeva argues that adolescents are akin to mythical

creatures that, in performing sexually deviant acts, echo the 'fluidity, i.e., the inconsistency, of a mass media society' and gender performance (Kristeva, 1990, p. 9). Adolescent male mythical subjects are also too naive and disconnected from the ideas of hegemonic masculinity to understand the affect of disgust such deviance of normative sexual behaviours would have on them and their gender performance in adulthood. Therefore, with Kristeva and Kozak's theories in mind it is difficult to directly accuse the boy of failing to uphold hegemonic masculinity for being sexually deviant, as it is within his nature as a naive mythical lapse in gender performance. Further, Kristeva notes that 'the adolescent structure opens itself to the repressed at the same time that it initiates a psychic reorganization of the individual – thanks to a tremendous loosening of the superego' (8). This infers that the boy is extremely susceptible to deviant behaviours outside heteronormative practice. This is especially the case for sexually deviant behaviours, as in the early adolescent period, children become 'little sex maniac[s] [...] always jonesing for a better way to get [their] rocks off' (12). It seems the boy has no issues exploring his sexuality outside the realm of heteronormativity as the embodiment of sexual freedom, outside the arena of the social contract of sexual morality. This being said, there are two main issues with the adolescent being the signifier of unrestricted sexual behaviour. Firstly, if hooks is correct in stating that 'adolescent sexual socialization [is] when he is required to identify his selfhood and his sexuality with patriarchal masculinity; it is the meeting place of theory and practice' (80), these adolescent boys are likely to become sexual deviant in their 'practice', forcing them to perform these acts in private. Secondly, some parents in 'Guts' adopt the 'I would rather not know' mentality to interactions with their children's trauma, maintaining their silence 'about the bodily trauma and shame that the boys undergo, hindering the ability of the reparative script to occur' (Kozak, 2019, p. 62).

Beginning with the issue of 'closeting' sexual deviance, childhood discussions of sex and sexuality are based upon naive assumptions of what they believe sex is. The boys in this text have a belief system on sex that is based on their consumption of adult made media, including soft porn magazines and porn websites and videos. Discourse between boys is expected to include a lexicon of bragging and talk of competition in performing the sexual media they consume. Moore and Rosenthal argue that 'boys who are not strongly motivated towards sexual gratification or who do not talk about – or brag – about their sexual experiences in this way risk derogatory labels that reflect [...] having homosexual leanings' (83). There is therefore a pressure applied to these young boys to perform, and then brag, about their sexual conquests, as a kind of 'rite de passage' (Coleman & Roker, 1998, p. 39) into manhood. In this environment where 'the blind [are] leading the blind' (67), where 'Chinese whispers' (24) are the main form of sexual discourse, one is inclined to believe that Kristeva is correct in her sentiment. The boy is 'one of those mythical figures' (8) reflecting the sexual deviance adults cannot indulge in, as he is not replicating adult sexual behaviours, but adult sexual performance of which is thwarted in the uninformed retelling of said performances between boys. This being said, as boys will mimic hegemony in boyhood to gain hegemony in manhood, they are permitted to perform these abnormal sexual acts, *but they cannot fail in doing so*. To fail at embodying 'strength, power and sexual competence' (Haywood & Ghaill, 2003) means that they fail to mimic fundamental principles of hegemonic manhood effectively, and thus fail to initiate themselves into hegemony in their adulthood. Why then, do these boys go forward in performing sexually deviant behaviours if they are aware that failure directly jeopardises their adult manhood? I argue that they do not know; these boys are completely unaware that their childhood gender performativity would define the way they feel about their gender position in adulthood. As adolescent mythical creatures performing everything they should not, it is unsurprising that they are ignorant to its

consequences, as it is within their nature to be naive creatures of impulse. Even if these boys were given the option of knowledge, they would, in their ignorance, most likely decide against it. Furthering this sentiment, it may be the case that regardless of ignorance, these boys have a responsibility to prove that they are the most sexually audacious within their insular community. This is because of what Pascoe (2005) refers to as the 'fag discourse':

> 'The 'fluidity of the fag identity […] is fluid enough that boys police most of their behaviours out of fear of having the fag identity permanently adhere and definitive enough so that boys recognise a fag behaviour and strive to avoid it'. (330)

This 'competition' spoken of between boys for the title of being the most sexually adventurous becomes an integral part of the child's identity, therefore, they are determined to do what it takes to become the most sexually audacious adolescent within their social group. Pascoe also defines for us what 'fag' behaviour includes: 'becoming a fag has as much to do with failing at the masculine tasks of competence [...] or anyway revealing weakness or femininity, as it does with sexual identity' (330). As established in 2.1, to be penetrated in Palahniuk's world is to abdicate power, and to be powerless is to be intrinsically feminine. Therefore, the boy performing anal penetration as a form of exploratory masturbation to become the most sexually adventurous is, much like Trevor, definitively 'fag' behaviour in this text. Yet, the risk in not at least attempting to compete with other adolescent males extricates them from their subgroup. The pressure to be overtly sexual to steer away from being labelled a 'fag' persuades boys in his community to go to the extreme to 'get their rocks off' (12), and thus continuously put their potential hegemonic manhood in jeopardy. Which, I argue, does not make these adolescents free at all, but trapped in a panoptical environment in which a hegemonic 'big brother' figure is always watching.

Moreover, this idea of talk between adolescent males leading to failed attempts at masturbation, and therefore, masculinity, introduces the second story told in 'Guts' - an

anecdote of a young boy who was told by his military older brother that Middle Eastern men 'get their rocks off' by inserting a 'metal rod inside the whole length of their boner. They jack off with the rod inside, and it makes getting off so much better. More intense' (14). So, naturally, this young boy tries this technique for reasons that are, unsurprisingly, almost identical to that of the boy prior. The thought of foreign, unknown, masculinities being more sexually experienced poses a similar threat to the young boy that it poses to Trevor in *Pygmy*, which is what Edward Said (2003) would define as Orientalism. He describes Orientalism as 'a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident." Thus, a very large mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, […] have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, epics, social descriptions and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, "mind," destiny, and so on' (10). Therefore, the realisation that there are other hegemonic masculinities aside from the Western ideal that they must compete against is an additional layer of masculine panic that these adolescents do not need to be privy to in this stage of his masculine growth. What this boy realises during this sexual experience is that 'things are getting too good [he] can't keep track of the wax [...] one good squeeze from shooting his wad when the wax isn't sticking out anymore' (15). In the incident he realises that he cannot keep up with the big boys, he cannot compete. And if he cannot compete in adolescence, why would he be able to compete in the limitive institution of hegemonic manhood?

This phallic object he inserts into his own penis is not exactly the confession of homosexuality that we see in the first boy's story. What makes this story a confession of homosexuality is the image of the 'missing phallus'. After losing track of the candle wax, the phallic object goes missing, 'he can't even feel the lump of it inside his pants' (15), it disappears, interred somewhere inside him. Not only is this a replicated comment on the

failed adolescent of which we have discussed in the first boy's story, this boy's story goes further in firmly illustrating the consequences of underestimating the power of the phallus. Using the phallic object of the candle wax, this story is a metaphorical warning of what may happen if the 'free' mythical creature is to take advantage of his freedom and go too far in his sexual transgressions. Barbara Creed (2005) speaks of the male monster as the signifier of a destroyed masculine symbolic order: 'to undermine the symbolic is to create a disturbance around the phallus, to create a sense of phallic panic (xvi). The threat that this boy's sexual transgression poses triggers this phallic panic. Presumably heterosexual adolescents attempting sexually deviant acts under the guise of Kristeva's mythical 'freedom' completely undermines the stringent conventions of masculine hegemony. In this way, one may argue that gay men are, in this text, an embodiment of the male monster; banished to purgatory as a response to being a major threat to hegemony. And these boys are, unintentionally on their part, direct examples of the 'homosexual' monster that seeks to undermine the establishment of hegemony. This phallic object present in both stories can also be read as a weapon with the power to demasculinise its victim, much like Pygmy's phallus. Inserted into the victim, these phallic objects are physically damaging, instead of arousing, to the male body. Piers & Springer (1971) say that 'shame occurs when a goal (presented by the Ego-ideal) is not being reached [indicating] a real "shortcoming" (147). The goal for these boys, as a result of their Ego-ideal presenting them with the image of the hegemonic male to mimic, is sexual competence. Therefore, having intimate sites invaded and inhabited by the phallic object leaves the adolescent confronted by the reality of his own transgression. That is, the damage the phallus inflicts on these boys accosts them with their own 'failure to reach [their] own potentialities' (149), it accosts them with their emasculation. And this attack, this invasion, is done out of necessity. The institution of hegemony must protect itself against potential infiltration and subsequent destruction. It must kill the transgressor; it must kill the monster.

One may wonder: it was the choice of these boys to transgress, how have they become victims? To answer this question, I will echo Kristeva's argument that adolescent boys echo the fluidity and inconsistency of society and add to this using Kozak's (2019) comments on parent's views of heteronormative ways sexual exploration, and their involvement in their child's shame and embarrassment for deviating from those normative behaviours. I will also be using Butler's argument that gender performance is discontinuous meaning that lapses in gender performance are inevitable, and therefore, 'these sites could become sites of resistance to heteronormativity as the performance temporarily ceases to be invisible and gender's construction (re)surfaces' (53). I have argued earlier in this chapter that being a mythical 'free' adolescent with the power to sexually transgress without the repercussions of hegemonic gender identity condemning you is permitted and indeed a valid interpretation of the adolescent. However, I have also stated the possibility of this 'freedom' being anything but that. These boys are expected to mimic hegemony consistently; failure to do so means to be a failure in hegemony. The gender performance these adolescents act out in their naivety is constantly being watched by other men. The panopticon may be watched by fathers, older brothers, and other male figures that these boys look up to. Henceforth, this 'choice' to sexually transgress is turned against them in a metaphorical showing of the power of the phallus. Instead of succeeding in their masturbatory experiences, they are in pain, damaged, emasculated, never to repent. A cruel lesson on the consequences of underestimating the power the phallus yields.

What makes this situation worse for these boys, if that is at all possible, is the inclusion of those who do not have a 'tremendous loosening of the superego' – adults. The final story told has a larger emphasis on the social consequences of sexual transgression. The unnamed child tells the first-person account of his enjoyment in the practice of masturbating under water in the pool of his family home. Most notably, his enjoyment in sitting on the

circulation pump to stimulate his anus - 'as the French would say: Who doesn't like getting their butt sucked?' (16). After ejaculation, he performs what he calls 'Pearl Diving' - collecting the 'big, fat, milky globs' (16) of sperm to avoid impregnating his sister, 'or, Christ Almighty, [his] mom' (16). He continues to perform this sexual act which heavily insinuates his – commonly homosexual – enjoyment of anal stimulation, until one day, his anus becomes trapped in the circulation pump, and he prolapses, leaving him with 6 inches of intestine. While he vividly describes his story of being brutally 'gutted' (19) by his swimming pool, he constantly refers to the public consequences of his actions:

> 'One minute you're just a kid getting off, and the next minute you'll never be a lawyer. [...] You can see a long bright-orange ball. It's the kind of horse-pill vitamin my dad makes me take, to help me put on weight. To get a football scholarship. [...] Even with my guts unravelling out my ass, me holding on to what's left, even then my first want is to somehow get my swimsuit back on. God forbid my folks see my dick. [...] Here's the kid they hoped would snag a football scholarship and get an M.B.A. Who'd care for them in their old age. Here's all their hopes and dreams. Floating there, naked and dead. All around him, big milky pearls of wasted sperm. […] Both my friends, the wax kid and the carrot kid, they grew up, got big, but I've never weighed a pound more than I did that day when I was thirteen. [...] My dad just told the pool guy it was a dog'. (16-21)

These references made throughout the story directly contradict what is expected of him as a man - an academic failure, an athletic failure, thin, a disappointment to his parents. Teegan Bradway's (2017) analysis of 'Guts' calls attention to a heteronormative fear realised – 'wasted sperm'. She argues, 'the 'wasted sperm' stands for the wastedness of non-reproductive sexuality and, of course, of the wasted life of the child that strayed from the path of heteronormative futurity, which would've produced the proper integration into masculinity' (236). So not only does this boy's sexual transgression create a literal separation from the ideal of masculine hegemony in it going against heterosexual normative principles, but it also creates a physical separation. The boys separation from his sperm which later impregnates his sister, and his separation from his intestines during the masturbatory incident

argues a sense of horror associated with queerness, that Bradway argues ‘is less the corruption of masculine heterosexuality than the revelation of queer experimentation to heteronormativity’s public gaze’ (236). Even if this boy’s shame is contained, his transgression will always be physical, and thus always visible for heteronormative society’s gaze.

Furthermore, the repetition of ‘their’ in reference to his future infers an expectation to prioritise his reputation. In his father refusing to retell his son’s story and his mother previously noting “you didn’t know what you were doing, honey. You were in shock” (20), it is evident that his parents feel a degree of embarrassment and shame towards their son’s choices. We may posit that not only are his parents embarrassed and ashamed of his actions, but they are also disgusted. His parents, alongside the parents of the other boys in ‘Guts’ see sexual deviance in terms of abjection. Abjection is a process by which ‘identificatory regimes’ (Phillips, 2014, p. 19) - which can be defined in this context as the system of heteronormativity – excludes objects they believe are beyond classification. In other words, these parents extricate objects (their children) that they fear the mystery of; the mystery in this case being homosexuality. In this text, parental figures become complicit in the extrication of transgressive adolescents into purgatory. They are entirely complicit in ‘[striking] the homosexual, the scapegoat, the sign of chaos and crisis’ (Reid-Pharr, 1996, p. 373) in favour of preserving the normative system in place, controlled by the ‘constraining hand of hegemonic masculinity’ (Frosh, et al., 2002, p. 261). The first’s boy’s mother never mentions seeing the carrot in the midst of his laundry, it is ‘that ghost carrot hovering over all of them’ (13). The second boy’s ‘folks don’t come to visit’ (14) him in hospital after his incident. This boy’s mother refuses to believe that he was of sound mind, and his father refuses to acknowledge that it even happened. Afterall, ‘Some deeds are too low to even get a name. Too low to even get talked about’ (13).

The trouble with these parents being complicit in the extrication of their deviant children into the realm of purgatory is that their shame is transferable. They express their feelings of shame and embarrassment through silence. This creates a defamiliarization in which the child interprets the silence as a validation of their actions that are transgressive and shameful, which resultingly highlights the taboo and creates strangeness between parent and child. Kozak (2019) notes that 'the "Guts" characters are shamed for their engagement in non-normative sexual acts as their invisible heteronormative male privilege is exposed and consequently threatened' (54), and I argue that parents are the marker in this text for the threat that Kozak speaks of. Within the pseudoreality that adolescent children live in, the child will look up to his parents as the image of *reality* - the reflection of heteronormative society. The mother the picture of the perfect woman, the father propping up hegemonic masculinity. In protecting the conventions of normative society, parents must question 'whether such a transition to adult status [sexual deviance] can be accepted as a normal event or whether it is defined as deviant. [...] What are 'approved' freedoms and responsibilities for adolescents through the age ranges from early puberty to the late teens' (39). Once again, these 'mythical creatures' are not free, but constantly policed within the family cohort, the one environment where the child *should* feel the freedom to perform sexually deviant acts without judgement.

Yet, any attempt to threaten the sanctity of heteronormative society triggers the heteronormative privilege their parents benefit from; therefore, the deviance of their children threatens normative sexual practice. Infiltrating the pseudoreality that these children live in entirely thwarts the essence of being a child, that is, as Kristeva states, to echo fluidity, to echo the freedom that one lacking in Super-Ego has. And yet, the Super-Ego of the adult cannot help but police the ethical decisions that do 'not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite'' (20). They cover up transgressions that causes

their children's suicides and shame. 'They put some pants on their kid. They [make] it look… better. Intentional at least. The regular kind of sad teen suicide.' (14). In doing so to these young boys, swallowing their parental shame, and passing it onto their children, they stress the importance of purgatory as a consequence of deviance. In this, they also stress the importance of protecting the institution of hegemony.

Horrocks (1994) argues that 'according to some feminists, men enjoy power, influence, domination, lord it over women and other men, and generally feel like the king of the castle' (144). These boys do not yet have the privilege of embodying this image they feel it their duty to become representative of. Yet, I believe the adolescent in this text is a *metaphor* for what Harrocks is arguing, these boys are recklessly embodying a binary that they do not know they can ever become. Even though these stories are *real*; gathered during various conversations with rather emotionally generous members of the public, we cannot directly assume the retellings of true sexual traumas is a direct correlation to gender performance. Yet, Palahniuk retelling these stories for these men may be an attempt on his part to help these men escape their shame. This being said, one cannot escape the consequences of incidentally devaluating the phallus. If the metaphoric connotations of the phallus remain, 'in part, aggressive, violent, penetrating, goal-directed, linear' (Flannigan-Saint-Aubin, 1994, p. 239) connotations, its power becomes monolithic, not to be misinterpreted with an object to be bent to accommodate ambiguity.

'Guts' exposes the harsh reality of gender performance. That is, much like the sentiment so heavily adhered to in *Fight Club*, once you're in, you're in. This story does not apply the same black and white binary logic to gender performance as in *Pygmy*. There is certainly room for ambiguous gender performance in this story, it is a tale of equivocal gender expression. Adolescents are naive, confused, impressionable, longing to be 'grown up'. Their mistake in this story was attempting to live up to the hegemonic ideal Palahniuk's

society promotes while not understanding what it means to be a representative of this ideal, leading to actions that mirror the nature of the subject: naïve, confused, and sexually deviant. The phallus in this story is forced to subscribe to transgressive behaviours, forced to penetrate the male body to which it belongs to. The consequences of this are, as we have seen, a physical assault on the adolescent body which marks it, brands it; its scar exposing to the world the sexual deviance that initiates him into purgatory in adulthood. If these boys are forbidden become the insertive partner during sex, it is the role of the female to fulfil this role for them. The next section explores Palahniuk's 2008 novel *Snuff* and the way in which the sex positive female body is used as site of constant sexual activity to validate any man's masculinity.

CHAPTER 3: THE FEMININE

This chapter focuses on *Snuff*, the 2008 novel documenting a mature porn star's (Cassie Wright) Swan Song, a 600-man gang bang. The reader seldom hears Cassie's voice over the dark cloud of male anxiety that follows through into this text from *Pygmy* and *Choke*, overwhelming this text throughout. *Snuff* was received hesitantly, especially by women who believed the portrayal of Cassie Wright did no favours for contemporary feminism. Lucy Ellmann's 2008 *The New York Times* article describes the book and Cassie's desperation, shallowness, and lustfulness as 'a dishonest throwing of the reader to the wolves', saying 'every [character's] action is clichéd' and Palahniuk 'has allowed the failings of the culture he criticises to infect his own work'. McCracken (2020) recognises Ellmann's arguments in his book *Chuck Palahniuk and the Comic Grotesque* but maintains that '*Snuff* might be the perfect novel for a new configuration of porn' (64) because it 'balances reader preconceptions about sexuality with deeper issues concerning mainstream ideological dictates

related to pornography' (49). The biggest fear concerning *Snuff* is that it panders to the male ego which backfires on contemporary plights such as #MeToo. This chapter uses *Snuff*'s contentiousness to excavate ideas surrounding the female body and the woman's control of it, as well as the effects the adult film industry has on both Cassie Wright's communal body and Palahniuk's societal view of female sexual freedom.

3.1: Cassie Wright: The Ultimate Sex Weapon

If women's bodies in *Snuff* are designed to please the male voyeur (Mulvey, 1989), the porn industry was made for the male gaze. If women in porn are aware that they are always being watched by the male, they then must always perform for his sexual satisfaction. Further, this text pays most of its attention to the male and his masculine anxiety; consequently, I will be arguing that Palahniuk's men sexually control women to keep them in a position of weakness in order to consistently give the vulnerable male opportunities to validate his masculine strength. This chapter will focus on Cassie Wright as representative of the woman as a sex object. I will be using the differing opinions of Dworkin (1997), and Califia (1988), as well as post-feminist pro-porn advocates such as Annie Sprinkle to interrogate the sex worker's state of agency in an environment that wants, and often times forces women to lean into traditional views of female sexuality. Further, using Attwood's (2005a) notion of the hierarchy of bodies – the 'fashion body', 'ordinary body' and 'porn body', I will argue that so long as women in Palahniuk's world keep falling into the trap of putting their bodies up for consumption through porn, they are accepting their fate as non-sentient bodies used solely to consolidate masculinity. Regardless of Cassie's attempts to gain power through sex, if she is being watched through the male gaze, she is always working for *him* rather than herself.

Although this text may argue against female sexual autonomy in porn, there is a degree to which sex work can be viewed as an autonomous act for women. There is an intense debate surrounding women in porn; regardless of the sex worker's reasoning behind her career choice, many feminists such as Wepener, Learnmonth, McLeod and Chikte discuss whether sex work 'constitutes a form of voluntary sexual labour or involuntary sexual objectification' (Wepener et al., 2013, p. 750). Dworkin holds the belief that sex work is at the core of the sexualisation and commodification of women's bodies and sexuality. Whereas Mowlabocus & Wood (2015) describe that this is the normative and dominant narrative in the reading of porn – one that[expects women to live up to pornographic fantasies in 'acts such as anal sex and facial' (118). In this sense sex becomes a labour of sexual objectification whereby men are expecting women to service them in ways that are normalised to them through their constant consumption of porn. Califia, on the other hand, describes the role of the sex worker as an agent of defiance, going against the proscribed views of female sexuality in an attempt to gain agency. Annie Sprinkle is a former sex worker, porn director and performance artist who believes post-feminism argues a move away from the goals of feminism, thus constituting a move away from patriarchal control. In support of Califia's statement, she believes we can remove women from sexual politics to allow them to construct their own identities, this includes women's ability to evade judgement in sexual politics for their sex work careers. Yet, Corsianos (2007) questions 'whether "women" can have agency/subjectivity in their sexual lives when they live in a world where for the most part patriarchal images of the female body are created and promoted' (867). There is merit in Sprinkle's argument through subcategories of mainstream porn where the woman is the only party that orgasms in sexual acts with men, as well as instances of group sexual acts where men have sex with women, but also perform sexual acts with other men, going against the hegemonically masculine code of conduct that must shun any 'homosexual behaviour'. This

way, the man is sacrificing his potential hegemonic status in an attempt to make room for the visibility of feminine sexuality and sexual power. This being said, Corsianos raises the important question of 'whether "women" can experience "sexual agency" when they appropriate patriarchal definitions of sexual performances of female bodies […] as promoted in mainstream pornography' (871). Cassie Wright answers this question within the text by showcasing her sexual agency with a monumental moment of sexual expression. Cassie Wright simply expresses her desire to make history by having sex with 600 men, and the men come running. Her sexual power lies within her body; the fact that she was not forced to perform this act proves she has the agency to decide the ways in which she chooses to express her sexual identity. Even Mr 600, a willing member of this event, expresses that there 'wasn't a performer at that shoot that didn't love Cassie Wright and want to help her make history' (4). Thus, it can be argued to an extent that it is the men in this scenario that are simply bodies used to aid in the completion of a goal aspired to by a woman who is an active agent and able to express her sexual identity how she wishes.

Further, with reference to the notion of a woman being labelled as either the virgin or the 'whore' (which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3), although Cassie's profession as a sex worker labels her as a 'whore' who does not benefit from any attention or desire in the system of exchange, it can be argued that these men are doting on Cassie because of their obsessive sexual attraction to her, which she uses to her advantage in the sex industry. To ready herself for her performance in *Emergency Room Back Door Dog Pile*, Cassie 'spent six months shadowing an endocrinologist […] studying his demeaner and body language' (9) so she can truly embody the character she plays in the film. When the adult film is released, it is noticed by Mr. 137 that 'Cassie Wright is the only performer who knows the correct way to work a speculum' (10). As these men agree to help Cassie in her quest of making history, arguably they inadvertently express their willingness to be subordinate to

female sexual desire. While this argument is valid, Cassie struggles to disprove concretely the idea that a woman can perform for a man through pornography without submitting herself to the male gaze and appropriating patriarchal definitions of female sexuality. Cassie's determination to perform her role successfully directly assumed a determination to satisfy men. The word 'perform' here is multifaceted, if she does not 'perform' her role professionally, then she cannot 'perform' for the man sexually, this desire to be a successful porn actress is what submits her to appropriating patriarchal definitions of how a woman should perform for a man.

If 'performing' her role successfully makes Cassie, within herself, feel sexually free and agent, that internal feeling of freedom is completely valid. If she *feels* personally empowered enough that she is comfortable performing sex acts in porn with men without it distorting the view of her own sexuality, then she may call herself a woman in possession of sexual agency. However, running the intentions of the male participants of this text parallel to the woman's sexual performance, the societal view of the woman who sexually performs with the male changes to being neither an active agent nor free. There is a difference between agency and free will and they should not be conflated. It is possible that an individual – for example, Cassie Wright – may have the agency to perform the 600-man sex act. However, this does not give her free will within society. If agency 'references an individual's power to make choices regarding his or her actions within given circumstances, […] agency is not 'free will'; an individual may possess free will but lack agency (Ditmore et al., 2010, p. 29). If agency requires external influence, free will refers to the absolute capacity to make choices independently without the influence of external factors shaping ones decision making. Cassie is not considered an agent of free will because acts performed by women that are considered feminine benefit the male in the social sphere more than they benefit her, which means that every decision she makes is influenced by an external factor – it must pass through masculine

hegemony first. Cassie believes that 'a real movie star is willing to suffer' (71); by 'suffer', Cassie is referring to the constant physical pain porn stars endure to continue performing. Mr 600 comments on this 'suffering' being shown on the tv in the green room, watching Cassie perform the gang bang he says, 'the fact nobody's walked out, it's testimony to what dudes will endure for a piece of ass' (78). Watching Cassie suffer for the sake of male sexual pleasure is disturbing, but in their desperation to be a part of history – or rather, to validate their masculinity – they continue watching, waiting for their chance to have a hand in her suffering. Cassie's desire to please the male voyeur takes precedence over her desires. Therefore, we may see Cassie's choice to perform this historical sex act as possibly an act of agency, but not one of free will, meaning that we cannot consider her decision an act driven by the post-feminism that Sprinkle speaks of that is opposed to masculine or political influence in female sexual identity.

If we are to consider Cassie as an active agent, we must in tandem consider Cassie as a female sex worker who must actively and continuously reject and resist dominant ideologies of female submission during sex in order for her to be considered holding any form of agency. Mohanty (2003) discusses how 'Third World women's writings on feminism have consistently focused on the idea of the simultaneity of oppressions as fundamental to the experience of social and political marginality and […] the crucial role of a hegemonic state in circumscribing their/our daily lives and survival struggles' (52). Through writing, Third World women attempt to reject social norms and oppressive dogmas at the time, working toward a sense of feminine freedom. If we apply this notion to Cassie's experiences, attempting to make history as a sex worker can be seen as her attempt to reject social norms that place women in the oppressive position of being an object of voyeurism. If this is the case, Cassie's 600-man sex act becomes a multidimensional obstacle that forces her to be both rejecting and accepting of her condition simultaneously, arguably not an expression of

oppositional agency. If 'all women live in sexual objectification the way fish live in water' (MacKinnon, 1989, p. 340), in every sexual interaction the sex worker demonstrates the possibility of being used regardless of her will, and in this text she is. Cassie is either completely delusional in her belief that she may have sex with 600 men and retain her feminine agency, or she is making a mockery of the idea that a woman can have any form of agency during sex at all, ending up dominated and ravaged by the male body: 'after the fifteenth dude, Cassie Wright will look like a missile crater greased with Vaseline. Flesh and blood, but like something's exploded inside of her' (4). This voyeuristic view of Cassie's body after having sexual encounters with as little as fifteen men insinuates the intentions of hegemony in the porn industry. That is, they do not want to do the 'whore' a favour here: her body is there to be exploited in any way men see fit, whether she likes it or not. Further, if sex with these men are separate sexual encounters, each sexual encounter gives the male the opportunity to show a different way in which he can establish dominance during sex, repeating to the sexualised object over and over again that she may attempt to establish some kind of oppositional agency in sex, but there are, and will continue to be, endless opportunities for the woman to lose her power in this manner.

This image of Cassie's injured body, hollow yet excessive in flesh and blood; is an unconcerned and swiftly ignored comment on the wounded female body. While the longstanding medical opinion of women's bodies are that of it being a body of excess, it is also forcibly made into a body of excessive leakage. Centuries of discourse surround the connection between the female body and an excessively 'leaky vessel lactating, menstruating, exuding in all directions' (Blud, 2017, p. 33), which signifies that women are excessive and thus weak; men lack so thus are strong. More specifically, it is the place to which meaning is inscribed onto the female body; that is, a weak and vulnerable body that is taken advantage of through the violent penetration of the vagina which solidifies strength and dominance in both

the phallus and masculine status. It is not only Cassie that is a wounded woman in this text, the ‘stopwatch girl’ recounts other instances of porn actresses attempting to achieve a goal of having sex with hundreds, and at times thousands of men: ‘Sabrina Johnson took on two thousand men, fucking until she hurt so bad the crew had to pack ice between her legs as she sucked off the remainder of the cast’ (7). If this novel argues in a dark, comic, way that all women are weak, excessive, and are used through penetration to prop up hegemonic masculinity before being passed on to the next sadistic male, we may argue that this text links violence to the wounded leaky vessel. Sabrina Johnson was not allowed to stop her sex acts just because she was in physical pain. If her body is the primary site of significance, when her vagina is too damaged to continue as the palimpsest of male desires, the male created another wound on her body that can visibly prove it has been excessively damaged by the strength of the phallus. In the case of Sabrina Johnson, and as a tradition in most cases of sexual foreplay, the throat is the secondary location to which women may become a leaky vessel. In some instances, women have the thought that it is their obligation to perform oral sex on their male sexual partners. For example, one patient George Awad (2000) worked with expressed her belief that ‘she was meant to be a doormat and was supposed "to be fucked ... to grovel and give someone a blowjob while I am on my knees," and that she was supposed to suck "dicks" for the rest of her life’ (186). Further, through aggressive penetration you may induce a female’s period, to ejaculate inside her is to tie her to you in childbearing, and to cause damage to the inside walls of the vagina is to remind the female that, if followed by the male orgasm, that damage and pain is satisfying. This sadistic undercurrent to sex indicates that Palahniuk’s woman, in Cassie’s words, must be ‘willing to suffer’, she must always be prepared to be in pain, to sacrifice herself for male satisfaction; and with this male sexual satisfaction comes feminine validation. Therefore, this wound never heals, it never closes, it is being constantly reopened, reused, and reinscribed by the phallus.

Palahniuk makes the argument that Cassie must accept that she carries a cause of hegemonic masculinity. Thus, she must understand that because she carries this monumental signifier of male power, men have the right to control and protect her, but also have the power to discipline her if she wishes to escape male control. However, what does this control do to the image of the sex worker labelled as a 'whore' for allowing multiple men to repeatedly wound her for their gain? Palahniuk brings attention to an extremely important discourse that on first glance has little to no correlation to the narrative: 'it's hard not to picture Cassie Wright on the set, sunk into a bed of white satin, by now clutched and smeared and smudged, darker and darker with every performer. Minstrel Porn' (14). One purpose of minstrelsy was to depict black people as sexually promiscuous; black women as hypersexual objects begging to be penetrated, and black men as sexually violent and aggressive with disgustingly large penises in order to portray white men as upholders of a hegemonic ideal. Roediger (2017) discusses how the 'antebellum cultural expectation that males would be sexually aggressive gained much less attention than 'promiscuous Black women [who] were probably more popular than those emphasizing the sexuality of Black men (147). In mentioning minstrel porn, I argue Palahniuk is using the idea to make a comment on the transition from Madonna to whore (Stanko, 2013). Once the Madonna, pure and white like Cassie's satin bed sheets, decides to have sex, she becomes the 'whore'. The more the 'whore' has sex, the more her pure whiteness becomes stained and smudged with semen, blood, sweat, and dirt, getting darker and more noticeable after every sexual encounter. Therefore, the more Cassie has sex, the closer she gets to the image of the hypersexualised 'exotic' black woman who is historically the most sexualised object of desire for white men who feel they naturally have the right to claim her simply on account of her blackness, which was synonymous with 'whoreish' behaviour. This dehumanising image of the black woman which still holds some precedence today is projected onto the white woman in this scenario to

indicate how her physicality and her sexual identity are inherently linked. Monique Mulholland (2017) discusses arguments by post-colonial and critical race scholars, who argue 'contemporary constructions of normative sexuality rest on an enduring history of colonial forms of gazing: the sexualities of Indigenous, 'non-western' and colonised people were historically cast as other to those of white, western subjects, sexualities that were fetishized, stereotyped, and objectified through orientalist frameworks' (595). The orientalist distinction between non-Western and Western men to elaborate on male sexualities in *Pygmy* can be applied to *Snuff* within a different context using Mulholland. Using stereotypes of non-Western female sexualities, Cassie in this text represents those cast as Other, in this particular case the sexualised black woman who represents the antithesis of whiteness. Therefore, once one imagines, quite easily according to Mr. 137, Cassie smudged and caked and stained enough so that she resembles the hypersexual erotic object of voyeuristic and sadistic desire present in 'minstrel porn', she becomes the object created solely for the gaze, entertainment, and sexual fulfilment of the white man; the only binary who is always readily available to uphold hegemonic masculinity.

Cassie is objectified and presented as a desperate 'whore', indeed, but it can also be argued that she does not help herself in this respect. Cassie expresses to her daughter, Sheila, that it was never her dream to become a porn star, yet her repeated reference to the wife of Roman Emperor Claudius Valeria Messalina as well as Marilyn Monroe suggests that Cassie is obsessed with the image of the famous 'whore'. Messalina was known during her time married to Emperor Claudius for her uncontrolled promiscuity and deceitfulness driven by greed and jealousy, making her one of many famous Roman prostitutes who are cited in literature, defining the woman who enjoys sex as a sly and deviant woman. Cassie attempts to emulate Messalina in everything she does: 'for my part, I've tried to pace the gang bang the way Messalina would, spreading out the ugly yogurt-yankers, the old and obese bone-honers,

the dirty and deformed gland handlers as far as possible.' (72). Cassie rounds up men in a systematic way that attempts prove she is capable of attracting 'every man', without having it known that she can only attract what she classifies as 'ugly yogurt-yankers' in this stage of her career. Cassie wants to maintain this perfect equilibrium between the Marilyn and the Messalina, perfectly feminine yet sexually seasoned and slightly wild in her methods. This way, she may maintain her social standing as the prototype of feminine gender performance whilst simultaneously having the ability to sexually satisfy and validate hegemony. The positive and negative effects of becoming a Marilyn are discussed in *Invisible Monsters* (See: Chapter 3.2) through the lens of trans and cis experiences. Through the lens of heterosexual pornography, Cohen's (1998) discernment on Marilyn being altogether 'too much' does not completely transfer here. Cassie needs to be 'too much' during sex – 'too much exposure, too much willingness to undress' (259). These are words spoken by Cohen to negate Marilyn's gender performance but are requirements of women during sex in order for the male to take charge. Marilyn's voice is unrefutably the most well-known aspect of her gender performance, since it is through her voice we are told she is helpless, she wants to be dominated, and most importantly, she *enjoys* being subordinate. Further, Messalina is known for many things: sexual prowess, deceit, treason, greed, overindulgence. By mimicking Messalina's sexual antics Cassie is successfully portraying herself as a sexually promiscuous woman at a similar level to Messalina which, to those in the porn industry, is an admirable achievement indeed. However, in mimicking Messalina's antics Cassie misses a vital aspect of Messalina's personality undermines her performance as the Marilyn – overindulgence. Von Stackelberg (2009) believes there is a 'satisfying moral symmetry to the tale; Messalina, indulging her every desire, overreaches herself to become the victim of her own excess, dying in the gardens she herself has killed for' (596). Becoming a victim of your own excess is something Cassie struggles with constantly; she does not know when enough is enough in

terms of wanting sex, and now she is in a position where she has no choice but to submit herself to 600 men – or rather, however many it takes to kill her. In having sex to excess, Cassie undermines the famously feminine Marilyn voice by relocating where she would like to be seen and heard. By relocating her voice from her mouth to her body, Cassie tells the male that her body is the most important aspect of her being. Therefore, Cassie cannot tell anybody through her Marilynesque voice that she is all these perfectly feminine things – too willing, too vulnerable and in need of control – because her body now speaks for her. An open wound, readily available to be constantly reinscribed, a palimpsest that tells many stories, but never hers.

Von Stackelberg notes that despite Messalina's fatal flaw of overindulgence, there is a sense of moral symmetry at the end of her story. There is, on the other hand, no moral symmetry for Cassie at the end of the novel. Messalina dies as a result of her excessive behaviour, her death signifying both the success and the fatal errors of performing the role of the salacious 'whore'. Cassie almost has this in her death; her death would have signified ironically a performance of the 'whore' so successful that it killed her. However, she is bought back to life; resuscitated in order to complete her goal, or rather, *his*. Her forced resurrection argues that this was never about Cassie. Her death would have solidified her historic position as a Marilyn or a Messalina, but her forced resurgence means she will never become either; although her body gave in, the men were not done using it. Therefore, Cassie does not have the same moral symmetry because her tale centres not around her, but the men she has sex with. This aspect of her life, her almost triumph, will be forgotten while the male applauds her for her resilience in sacrificing herself to become the 'best in the business' for validating masculinity.

The simple act of giving her body to men is not the only sacrifice Cassie makes. The men in this text are far from masculine dominance and further from attractiveness; the aggregation of men on set waiting to have sex with Cassie are of extremely low-quality:

> 'Dudes getting called back to do their bit – the wrangler announces their numbers, and these performers stroll back for their money shot still chewing a mouthful of caramel corn, their fingers burning with garlic salt and sticky with the frosting from maple bars. […] reaching into the fly and elastic waistband of boxers to stroke their half-hard dicks. Candy colored fingers. Tangy ranch-flavored erections.' (2)

The men having sex with Cassie are visually grotesque, undistinguished, 'unsuccessful' (in the view of hegemonic masculinity), stuffed with too many steroids, classless, injected with too much Botox and wearing too much tan to be at all considered attractive; they could not be further from being upholders of the hegemonic ideal. However, while Cassie is portrayed negatively in the novel, this image of the disgusting non-hegemonic male receives little critique. This is because a woman's body, her gender performance and her sexuality are constantly surveyed under a magnifying glass, while masculinity continues to be unscrutinised, giving men the freedom to either hide their lack of masculinity or showcase their dominance in any way they see fit. In masculine hegemony, the woman is a tool for heightening masculinity, therefore being picky is not necessarily an option for unattractive men who cannot attain more attractive women. Arguably the more attractive the woman, the more gained from having sex with her. Irigaray (1999) discusses how 'a *commodity – a woman – is divided into two irreconcilable "bodies":* her "natural" body and her socially valued, exchangeable body, which is a particularly mimetic expression of masculine values' (63). Therefore, the higher your social value in Palahniuk's world, which to follow masculine values is based heavily on physical attractiveness, the higher value partner you will attract. As it pertains these lower quality men, through showing their ability to convince *any* woman

to have sex with them, they are in a position to heighten their masculine standing and edge closer to upholding hegemonic power.

For a woman in this text, her attractiveness and her sexuality are dependent on the men she has sex with. Cassie is praised throughout the text for being the best at what she does, but there are no indications of her beauty in the present day. The way Cassie is spoken about throughout the text signifies that she is old and used, and because of these things, she is unattractive: 'the runoff of eyeliner and mascara tracking the spidery wrinkles from her eyes to her chin, her face shattered by the network of branching black cracks' (193). Cassie is an extremely sexual being in her old age, but this does not negate her invisibility as a woman. It is no accident that this comment on her aging face is made in her most vulnerable moment, fighting to gain back attention through penetrating herself with a dead Mr. 600's penis: "Upstage me… you prick piece of shit.' […] She pounds her pussy down snarling, 'You stole my biggest scene you rat bastard' (193). We are reminded that not only is Cassie invisible because she is acting as the palimpsest of male desire, but she is also invisible because as an older woman the men in this text view her as 'devalued, socially excluded, and oppressed in specific ways related to [her] identity as 'woman'' (Fileborn, 2016, p. 497). Her unattractiveness to these men in comparison to the peak of her fame is a result of her age and thus she is devalued and invisible compared to younger, more favoured women in the porn industry; her desire to hold on to her previous attractiveness through this historic act only devalues her further and strengthens her position as a 'whore'. Kitzinger (1995) discusses the argument that unattractive women are more likely to be sluts because "they're not really great looking [so] [. . .] maybe they take whatever they can get." [Unattractive women have] no self-respect, probably came from broken homes, and [are] just looking for attention' (189). Attempting to hide the fact that Cassie is only able to attract less attractive men through mimicking Messalina's behaviours reveals Cassie's reality that she is only mimicking

Messalina because she needs to justify to herself the reason why she cannot get any better. The idea that "the damaged love the damaged" (25) within this text suggests a mutual recognition between Cassie and the men arriving to sleep with her that they are both damaged goods in the social sphere. The main difference between the view of Cassie as damaged goods and the contrasting portrayal of the 600 men is that the man's phallic power may be damaged, but the penis is not. Through penetration he has the power to garner phallic power, whereas the damaged woman is never freed from her duty as the signifier for male dominance. Porn in this sense 'reduces women to 'sexual objects' [by the male purchasing and repurchasing] power and control over her body' (Sander, 2013, p. 174) in his penetration of her. Despite her attempts at regaining control, the vagina as the signifier of male dominance will always come second to the power this signifier gives men.

This 'power' that the phallus yields is often viewed as a violent power, and this violence is almost always directed toward women. Violence against Cassie in this text may come as a result of her using her sexual power to refuse her position as the palimpsest of male desire: 'when women refuse to exercise their masculinity validating power for men, many men feel lost and bereft and frantically attempt to force women back into their accustomed role' (Pleck, 2004, p. 60) of being. Throughout this thesis there are many instances of visceral physical sexual violence against women that support Pleck's argument. Although there is no violent rape and degradation scene present in this novel, it does not mean that we cannot apply Pleck's theory to the idea that the presentation of Porn in this text is a subcategory of sexual relations between men and women that can be interpreted as violence against women regardless of whether the sex scene focuses on visceral non-consensual violence or not. Men in this text who lack a masculine social standing watch the porn act live on screen to take away the masculine anxiety they have, to feel confidant and accepted. This idea may be connected to Irigaray's (1985) notion of the system of exchange

whereby women are traded from male to male in a system that consolidates bonds between men and their individual masculinities. Irigaray believes that 'through their use, consumption, and circulation – [women] provide for the condition making social life and culture possible' (171). This can directly be linked to the porn industry in this text in which, through the use, consumption (through watching the gang bang live) and circulation of Cassie's body, the social life and culture of violently suppressing female sexual autonomy can be made possible. The constant passing about of Cassie, the 'whore', in porn creates the foundation necessary for men to uphold the characteristics of individual masculine power. Further, as it pertains to their gender performance, the repeated 'symbolic or ritualistic [performance of the 600-man 'gang bang' consolidates] the internal bonds' (Butler, 1999, p. 50) between men; every male participant is mimicking or competing against other masculinities they see in the waiting room. This is why violence against Cassie is so likely to occur, once seen by one man it must be re-enacted. Whilst we see in Chapter 2 these ritualistic bonds reaffirmed so that the primary positions of masculine and feminine are constantly viewed in direct opposition, in this text we see the masculinities of these men being reaffirmed through the kinship they build in sexual relations with the same woman; much like we see in the relationship between Marla, Tyler and Narrator in *Fight Club.*

Furthermore, the idea in this novel that a woman needs to be penetrated in porn we understand that there is an image of a specific body that represents this desire. Attwood (2005a) argues that there is a 'crude hierarchy of female body representation. The 'fashion body' – angular, 'naturally' beautiful, closed, self-possessed – denotes women at the top of this hierarchy, the 'porn body' – curvier, artificially enhanced, open, and contorted – is next, and the ordinary women – flawed, anxious, in pursuit of the ideal – are located at the bottom' (90). If we place Cassie and what her body represents in this hierarchy, she sits as the 'porn body', that is 'open' and ready for the men in this text to dominate to reaffirm her submission

to him. Even if Cassie consents to being the 'porn body' used to uphold hegemonic masculinity, the gang bang feels animalistic; Cassie being the submissive signifier of phallic dominance for these men creates an image of animalistic sexual desire that resonates with the men in the back room as they watch Cassie's gang bang live on screen. It is this allusion of violent and animalistic masculine desire that makes every one of Cassie's porn scene a signifier of violence against women. The concept of having to control this aspect of sex is central to the discourse of Cassie sacrificing her freedom in placing her body in the hands of 600 men. Attwood (2005a) notes how the male body in pornography is 'mechanized as a piece of equipment' (5) to reach the goal of verifying virility and dominance over women. Throughout the text there are references supporting this belief: 'hair gel, bronzer, plastic razors, folding pocket mirrors. They do push-ups, their tidy whities streaked brown [with fake tan]' (13-14); the men in this text, some ex-porn stars, are aware of the style of hegemony they must performance when on camera. This is their opportunity to reaffirm, or to newly uphold their hegemonic masculinity through performing this image of the male equipped to penetrate and force the woman into submission that Attwood is referencing. However, with upholding hegemonic masculinity on camera comes the suggestion that they are the most important person on camera – that every sexual interaction was made for them. Mr. 600, also referred to as Branch Bacardi, an ex-co-worker of Cassie and father to her only child, comments that in Cassie's sexual peak, she had the choice to 'lick anybody in the world. But, looking around this room here, the motley collection of dicks they cattle called today, I'd say how her career's turned out the other way around. […] today, anybody in the world can lick her' (26-27). Cassie has forfeited her rights to autonomy because her career is ending, and now it is the opinion of the men in line to have sex with her that she is a used commodity in the system of exchange. 'If Cassie Wright fucks six hundred dudes, she's a world-beater, […] but if Cassie fucks 599 dudes, she's just a big slut' (30); and what use is a

big slut in society? To volunteer herself to male control and subsequently heighten his masculine position, maintaining hers as inferior. Cassie's body as a vessel through which masculinity is obtained and maintained names the male as the primary object of importance during sex; this notion is emphasised by the ratio of male to female voices throughout the text. Cassie does not have her own voice, as the only woman who speaks both for herself and Cassie is her daughter, Sheila, an orphan who does not use her birth name and lacks any solid identity at all. Out of thirty-five chapters in the novel, only nine are from a feminine perspective. There is a sense of shame being forced upon Cassie at the end of the novel for her subordination to the male and her desperate and unladylike desire to have a lot of sex. Seidler (1993) argues that 'violence against women is encoded in [men's] genes, always has been, always will be, amen' (132); if this is the case, the violence present in *Snuff* is centred around Palahniuk's men being able to continuously open this female wound, take control over her narrative by silencing her through sex, and repeating this process until it is clear that the masculine body, the phallus, and the male ego are of relentless strength.

This text presents the reader with a controversial opinion; just as Messalina favoured unattractive men, women who enjoy sex will always settle for a 'disgusting man' – who is grotesque in many senses – in order for her to satisfy her ravenous desires as a slut, a 'whore', a desperate prostitute. This gives the male the endless opportunity to validate his masculinity through these women who, in begging to have sex with them, are placing themselves into the position of subordination, and so the male relinquishes blame for this subordination. The male's decision to take advantage of this situation in women suggests an agreement between the binaries of male and female that sex between them is a transaction whereby the person gaining is always the male; a notion carried through this thesis in texts such as *Pygmy, Invisible Monsters* and *Choke* whereby male characters will use sex to climb

the hegemonic ladder. This text argues that every man, hegemonic and the oppositional grotesque, are given at one point in their masculine careers the opportunity to control a woman sexually. If you can repeatedly control a woman of any level of attractiveness through sex, you are well on your way to embodying a hegemonic ideal. The concept of control over women by men in this novel is central to the pornography they create. Cassie is placed in a position where she has relinquished her body into the control of 600 men, and this is exactly the image that pornography itself intends to have; the woman must be secondary in needs, control, autonomy, and the man must be completely in control of her, himself, his phallic power, and his virility. The pleasure men take in the view that women are constantly looking for sex as it is in their nature is demonstrated throughout the text through the overwhelming male voice which paints the picture of the sexually active woman as the desperate slut the male must tame. Therefore, when Mr. 137 says he cares for her, or when Mr. 600 says all the men here today are here to *help* Cassie Wright, there is an overwhelming inference that they are not referencing her work, her potential, or her desires. They are instead referencing her ability to make a struggling man embody hegemonic masculinity solely through their penetration of her. Through her constant penetration she has degraded herself into nonsentience, now merely an open wound to which these men inscribe their own meanings. The next chapter continues the sentiment that the body is an open wound through the evaluation of the human body as aa flawed site of construction that Palahniuk's men mould to suit the requirements of hegemonic masculinity. Through surveillance, the maintenance of unattainable ideals, and sex, Palahniuk's queered women are forced to perform a style of femininity that entraps them as objects of masculine desire.

CHAPTER 4: THE QUEER

This chapter explores this thesis's oldest text, *Invisible Monsters (1999)* alongside the short story in *Haunted* (2005), 'Speaking Bitterness'. *Invisible Monsters* follows the chaotic life of the narrator, Shannon McFarland, an ex-model who shot her face off to escape the expectations of beauty, as well as her rocky relationships with Brandy (who at the end of the novel is revealed to be her brother, Shane) and her oldest friend Evie, another surprise trans character. 'Speaking Bitterness' tells the story of a trans woman's cold welcome into a woman's trauma support group and her subsequent rape and mutilation by cisgender women who believe her entry into the group is offensive and triggering to their 'feminine trauma'. Originally rejected twelve times, *Invisible Monsters* became popular after *Fight Club* proved Palahniuk's work worthy of success. Therefore, *Invisible Monsters*, which gave Palahniuk his second biggest commercial success, is reminiscent of the underlying questions in *Fight Club,* as a review in *The Guardian* writes, *Invisible Monsters* toys with the idea that 'men and women are fundamentally different kinds of humans and that those differences are finally decisive'. Although Kerr (2005) believes *Haunted* shows glimpses of 'what made *Fight Club* such an entrancing debut […] ultimately the complexity of the structure and the constant deviation into story after story blunts this edge'. On the other hand, Steinhoff in her 2015 review of *Invisible Monsters* deemed the text an 'eerie pre-cognition of contemporary developments as well as a timely reaction to the developments of its own time' (87). Pairing *Invisible Monsters* with the short story 'Speaking Bitterness', this section recognises the connection between trans visibility and gender performance, and investigates how the nuances of the female identity affects trans women.

4.1: ‘Where’s Shane?’ Transness and Hiding in Plain Sight in *Invisible Monsters*

Much like Cassie Wright, Brandy Alexander is a chaotic character, to say the least. Constantly using her body to connote a sense of feminine success, Brandy attempts to materialise the image of the perfect woman. This section will explore Brandy Alexander’s transness as simply a performance of femininity to escape what she actually identifies as – a gay man. In doing so, Brandy emphasises the Marilyn Monroe archetype as the only correct way to perform femininity. I will be using Butler’s (1999) notion of gender performance needing to signify an illusion of an internally organised gender identity along as well as Daly’s definition of ‘essentialism’ (as defined in the introduction) to argue that Brandy’s gender performance sits in direct contention with her ‘gender core’. Although Brandy identifies as a gay man, by presenting as a trans woman she faces troubles that are inherently female; as soon as she portrays herself as a woman, she must endure the pressures of sustaining feminine perfection alongside cisgender women. Therefore, I argue that the issues that the cisgender women in this text and subsequently, this thesis, face come as a direct result of the heteronormative structure that forces women to embody an unattainable image of feminine perfection.

Brandy’s method of feminine gender expression in *Invisible Monsters* is a constant discourse throughout the novel, but only explained in the closing wherein it is revealed that Brandy identifies as a gay man (Shane), not a transgender woman. Brandy does not transition because she *feels* she was born in the wrong body; Brandy transitions because ‘it’s just the biggest mistake [she] can think to make. It’s stupid and destructive’ (258). Brandy becomes the ideal image of femininity without having to feminise her stereotypically more masculine features, for example her ‘enormous’ hands that are ‘beaded with rings to make them look even bigger’ (23). The reader constantly questions throughout the text: how can Brandy be

both perfectly feminine and covertly masculine at once? In Brandy Palahniuk creates a body that passes as a woman, and identifies as a cisgender gay man, which makes her an extremely complex subject to deconstruct; she is a body representing everything and nothing at once. Butler says that "the body' appears as a passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed or as the instrument through which appropriative and interpretive will determines a cultural meaning for itself' (Butler, 1999, p. 12). Female bodies are historically regarded as passive mediums through which cultural meaning is inscribed, we see this through Shannon (in this text) and Cassie (in *Snuff)* who are bodies moulded to perform in Irigaray's (1985) system of exchange where hegemonic masculinity is constantly affirmed and validated. If cisgender women are passive bodies, I argue Brandy's body becomes an instrument through which her appropriation of gender creates cultural meanings of femininity. Brandy's body is a transforming body; not only is she physically and constantly merging the cisgender male and the ideal female body, but the performance of her non-conformity follows suit with her method acting of different characters on her adventures with Shannon, 'sometimes, twice in one day, [they] have to live up to a new identity. A new name. New relationships' (64). Brandy's shapeshifting body exhibits a sense of gender expressive freedom that allows her to escape her former identity as a gay man and constantly evade exposure in being a trans woman. The idea of gender expressive freedom is supported by Bornstein's discussion of the humiliation of non-conforming bodies. Bornstein argues that 'humiliation is a whip of the defenders of gender' (Bornstein, 1994, p. 88), this fear is what encourages subjects to conform to heteronormative gender scripts. She follows by expressing that 'humiliation is sanctioned at virtually every level of culture: people can laugh at a transgendered person, but when there is no fear of being humiliated […] there's less opportunity for the culture to exert control' (88); this is what Brandy uses to her advantage to seem gender conforming and attain expressive freedom. For Brandy to avoid humiliation as a transgender woman, she must

appropriate and perform gender so well that her perfect femininity distracts from her obvious male features. And she does so successfully by mimicking Marilyn Monroe – a figure that Palahniuk uses in many instances as the symbol of perfect femininity. Brandy rejects the queer space she sits in and strives to become Marilyn because the less she is seen as obviously transgender, the less she is humiliated, the further away she is from homosexual maleness, and the more she is accepted as a conforming body in the heteronormative structure.

The trans women in Palahniuk's texts (*Speaking Bitterness* and *Invisible Monsters*) tend to adopt the hyperfeminine as their chosen method of gender expression, yet this appropriation of hyper-femininity has a direct effect on the cisgender women with whom they interact. If Brandy identifies as a gay man, her trans femininity sits in the realm of drag as she is mimicking what she believes femininity represents without the intention or desire to become the woman behind the performance. Whilst performing her hyper-femininity, her more harsh features are forgiven in favour of her beauty and sexual prowess; she is then considered to be a 'passing' woman as these are characteristics favoured in society mostly by men who inhabit hegemonic masculinity. Therefore, when Brandy performs her femininity in the public sphere, she is regarded as a woman and therefore has a hand in the maintenance of the heteronormative gender structure. Greaf (2015) notes that 'while presenting their female gender identity, drag queens may receive similar reactions and treatment that women in our patriarchal society receive if they are perceived as 'passing" (657). Not all drag women are passable in public opinion: however, those who are may be treated in the same way that straight cisgender men treat cisgender women. Therefore, drag women will begin to adapt their behaviours to align with the way that they are being treated. The most interesting example of this is Brandy's voice. As part of her transition, Brandy attends speech therapy to match her voice to her new feminine identity. Speech therapy is an extremely important, but

often forgotten aspect of the male-to-female transgender journey; trans women often feel as if their low voice 'belies their true femininity' (Babajanians, 2019, p. 56). Training one's voice to adopt a higher pitch and alter the tone of voice to favour a more 'feminine' quality of speech will allow the trans woman a smoother integration into the feminine sphere. Brandy attends speech therapy where she learns the inflections of feminine speech: "keep your glottis partially open as you speak. It's the way Marilyn Monroe sang "Happy Birthday" to President Kennedy. It makes your breath bypass your vocal cords for a more feminine, helpless quality' (47). As we see throughout this thesis, Marilyn is the archetype of feminine gender performance, therefore this is the model of hyper-femininity that Brandy must strive for. Voice is not simply the cognitive practice used by all able humans, it is an imperative factor in the forming and maintaining of social relationships. Your tone, your vocal range and your vocal inflections all stand to demonstrate your agreeability, your gender identity, and thus, your status in society. Ultimately, the goal is to identify through your voice that you are likeable, you are male or female, and where you stand in the social hierarchy. Individuals during social interactions will perceive others as either powerful or subordinate in relation to their own standing, based heavily on voice (Birchwood et al., 2004; Hayward, Berry, & Ashton, 2011). Men who uphold hegemonic masculinity in Palahniuk's worlds would desire a deeper voice with base and a more straight-forward, monotonous tone, the illation being that a voice such as this is powerful and threatening, therefore indicating a higher social standing and commanding respect. Yet the women in this text are taught to adopt a breathier, 'helpless quality' of voice to indicate that they are subordinate subjects who require support. And it is not only that Brandy should mimic the helplessness of Marilyn Monroe's voice, but she should mimic everything else that she represents, thus presenting herself as the archetype of the perfect cis woman. Lisa Cohen (1998) says:

> ‘Marilyn has: too much written about her – too much sex about her. There was too much breath in her voice and there were too many drugs in her body. Too much vulnerability, too much trouble, too much exposure. Too much willingness to undress, […] her clothes were much too tight […] too childlike, too stupid […] too, too much. (259)

Brandy’s speech therapist, who is herself a woman, believes that Marilyn is the formula trans women must aspire to when attempting to achieve feminine perfection. Yet Cohen, another woman, believes that Marilyn’s hyper-feminine gender performance is all together, too much – not at all representative of the kind of woman cisgender women should aspire to become. MacKinnon (2003) argues that ‘though not all men practise it, it would be fair, nonetheless, to observe that most men benefit from hegemonic masculinity’ (10); many of these benefits stem from encouraging women to be too willing, stupid, vulnerable, and childlike, as these acts make women the perfect targets to ‘yield to him their natural and social value as a locus of imprints, marks, and mirage of his activity” (177). Although Cohen is valid to argue that Marilyn’s and therefore Brandy’s gender performance exaggerates the expectations of perfect femininity, to willingly exude helplessness through voice is to express that you do not want power as a woman, you are happy being weak. Brandy being taught the ‘Marilyn way’ by her female speech therapist consolidates the notion that bonds are created between women through teaching one another to perform gender with the goal of maintaining the hegemonic structure. Cisgender women in this text recognising, and in some cases encouraging, the Monroe archetype suggests an understanding by cis women that the best way to be identifiable as a woman is to be an attractive asset to masculine hegemony. This self-perpetuates the idea that the world belongs to men, and thus, so must they.

Brandy’s intense craving for attention is another aspect of her hyper femininity that feeds into this self-perpetuated idea that women belong to masculine will. It is made clear that while Brandy is in the room, everyone else is living on ‘planet Brandy Alexander’ (76). Brandy takes a very forceful approach to garnering mass attention, from her ‘plumbago lips’

(28) to her 'torpedo breasts' (25), she is a hard character to miss. Shannon, a cisgender woman, is in awe of her: 'Brandy's voice, I barely hear what she says. At that instant, I just adore Brandy so much. […] Brandy is my instant royal family. My only everything to live for' (57). Brandy's mystique argues that there is a certain allure that comes with the perfect feminine that attracts attention like no other binary. Perhaps it is the sparkles, the glamour, the sensory overload that is a beautiful woman with large breasts, doe-eyes, and a breathy, helpless quality to her voice. As I will analyse in much more detail in 3.3, as an aspiring model Shannon only values feminine characteristics that capture men's attention because she synonymises these characteristics with career success, much like how Cassie Wright synonymises her ability to make a man climax with her success as a woman. Alongside her obsession with the unhealthy supermodel standard, Shannon's naivety towards the meaning of femininity convinces her that if trans women are striving towards the Marilyn archetype, then it must be the only performance of femininity worth striving for. This being said, I argue that Brandy does not aim to satisfy male voyeuristic obsessions with the female body on camera. Brandy, ironically, does not intend to stand out at all, the best way for her to avoid exposure is to blend in. It is her perception of what femininity is as a cisgender male alongside what she is taught by cisgender women that encourages her to become the perfect, beautiful woman that Shannon aches to be.

I argue that Brandy manages to garner so much attention as a trans woman because she refuses to be, in the words of Bornstein, humiliated. But this kind of humiliation is not for being obviously non-gender-conforming, it is instead the humiliation of being a gay male. MacKinnon argues that 'because the body is so obviously there, and it is so obviously physical, the suggestion is that if it is male, its masculinity is natural' (5). When Brandy was male and publicly heterosexual her masculine essence was her only method of performing gender to hide her homosexuality. However, when her sexuality was forcibly exposed, it was

almost as if she had been castrated; forcibly feminised and no longer able to use her maleness to conceal her sexuality. Brandy was outed as a gay man when she fell ill with a sore throat, her parents tested her for strep throat which revealed she had gonorrhoea, 'I was 16 years old and had the clap. My folks did not deal with it well' (189). Her humiliation stems not only from this moment but of her parents' reaction, 'they yelled about how diseased I was being […] by 'diseased' I think they meant 'gay' (189). This reminds us of the parents in 'Guts', who feel a sense of disgust at their son's sexual explorations. Now Brandy's male body is so obviously there, but now so humiliated, she feels a sense of failure in not living up to the natural essence Fuss argues men and women are programmed from birth to embody. As hegemonic masculinity in Palahniuk's text make no room for homosexuality in its formation, any illusion of disobedience to hegemonic performance results in the public devaluing of the insubordinate subject. Butler believes that one of the main purposes of performing gender is to 'create the illusion of an interior and organising gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality' (173); this cannot be done if Brandy has been humiliated out of this heterosexual obligatory frame. Brandy as a gay man is a situation synonymous with 'disease', disgust, queerness, and monstrousness in the eyes of Palahniuk's society lead by hegemonic masculinity. We may infer therefore that Brandy's situation as a gay man is a constant state of humiliation that reminds her of her inability to perform the gender she was assigned to perform. Therefore, it may be easier for her to lean into the humiliating 'proto-feminine identity [boys] have initially formed' (Horrocks, 1994, p. 89) with their mothers and become a woman; arguably being feminine through transness seems to her a much more stable situation than to be feminine through manhood. Brandy's 'drag' trans body does indeed 'effectively [mock] both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity' (174) because she is purposely using the stereotypes associated with hyper-

femininity such as the Marilyn archetype to avoid humiliation as a transgressive physical body while at the same time getting as far away from the humiliation of gay manhood. If the body is 'an object of social practice' (Messner, 1990, p. 214), Brandy becoming this physically hyper-feminine figure aids in the social construction of her false identity, edging her closer to what hegemonic masculinity needs from women, and further away from what hegemonic masculinity expects from men.

It was never Brandy's intention to encourage or regress contemporary feminism on behalf of cisgender women; to blame Brandy for such a crime is to ignore the obvious traumas she holds within her gender performance. Brandy's goals were always clear: to be destructive, to hide, and to do it in any way possible. Her identity as a gay man and her fear of exposure and humiliation creates a caricature of femininity that is constantly praised, this section argues that Brandy's mimicry of feminine gender performance is only accepted because it corporealizes the desires of women and puts them on a pedestal. If brandy were to perform femininity somewhat unsuccessfully, she may have received a different reaction such as we see in 3.3,'Speaking Bitterness'. Of course, her actions have a direct effect on the cisgender women she interacts with, Brandy is essentially a walking Barbie doll; the ideal of the perfect woman incarnate. But in the analysis of her gender performance, one realises that she is not creating a new way of performing gender, she is simply mimicking what is required of women, and what she sees cisgender women wanting for themselves. That is, the desires men who uphold hegemonic masculinity have for women to be the perfect Playboy bombshell, and cisgender women's competitive desires to be, aesthetically, the woman that every woman wants to be, and every man wants to be with. The next section explores the desires of men further in the modelling world where Brandy's friends, Shannon, and Evie, are trapped within a matrix that surveys and expects a constantly perfect performance of femininity.

4.2 'No Questions Asked, and No Going Back': Losing One's Trans Identity and Entrapment Within the Beauty Matrix in *Invisible Monsters*

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler deconstructs the sex/gender distinction by arguing that gender is 'a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of […] a natural sort of being' (Butler, 1999, p, 33). These repeated acts, or in other words, performances of gender, settle subjects into binary categories 'within a highly rigid regulatory frame' (33). Therefore, men and women will dress and act to fit into the framework of gender performativity. Shapeshifting from displaying corporate dominance to pure, natural feminine beauty, the modelling world is no stranger to remoulding the female body to actualise a particular artistic vision. Evie, the transgender woman in *Invisible Monsters,* is bound up in a fashion modelling matrix whereby emphasised femininity is the only way of performing gender to fit into the rigid heteronormative framework. Women's bodies in the modelling world are policed with the idea that aesthetic perfection and perfect feminine gender performance are synonymous. And so, women become stuck in this matrix eternally attempting to reach a level of emphasised femininity, or feminine perfection, that does not exist. Or rather, it only exists within the male gaze, meaning 'in modelling there are no prescribed organizational rules or codes, yet there exists normative gender scripts which models must perform' (Entwistle & Mears, 2012, p. 321) to satisfy the hegemonic expectations in place in Palahniuk's literary world. These are the rules *women* must abide by, whether trans or cis. This section will use Foucault's concept of the Panopticon alongside Butler's ideas surrounding gender performance to define what the modelling world expects of women and how these rules are created through the male gaze. I will also be using Zhang's argument concerning successful or unsuccessful deceiving as a trans person. While I believe this argument steers toward an anti-trans narrative and does not reflect the view of transness

in the real world, using Zhang to analyse characters in Palahniuk's world gives insight to the ways in which Evie and Shannon can be viewed as flawed women; through one's transness and the other's destroyed natural beauty.

Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1975) describes a circular structure where habitants of many kinds are secured in cells that are backlit to make every cellmate visible to the watcher, but the watcher invisible to the cellmates – a Panopticon. The general concept of the Panopticon is that when cellmates are unaware of when they are being watched, or even if they are being watched at all, they begin to police themselves to behave in tandem with the potential watcher's preference. This way, habitants of the Panopticon will naturally behave themselves and needn't be watched at all, as the presence of a known 'inspector […] would not be as effective in deterring them from transgressing as would the 'invisible omnipresence" (Bentham & Bozovic, 2011, p. 23) that the Panopticon provides. The concept of the Panopticon does not begin with Foucault, Bentham wrote the 'Panopticon Letters' in 1786, and since then the concept has become a popular literary conceit, particularly to illustrate the confinement of women in society. Stories such as Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, specifically 'The Clerk's Tale' and 'The Knights Tale', Angela Carter's 1984 novel *Nights at the Circus*, and Palahniuk's *Invisible Monsters* all use the concept of the Panopticon in different ways to discuss the 'uncanny analogy between the inmate and a woman as ones who sense themselves under surveillance' (Stanbury, 1997, p. 284); thus making them feel as if their gender performance is constantly being surveyed under the gaze of an omnipotent being, who is, in Palahniuk's fictional world, always male.

Palahniuk turns the modelling world into a simulation of the Panopticon whereby women 'voluntarily' place themselves under self-surveillance to become the ideal that is desired by men. However, if hegemonic masculinity is an unattainable goal for men, why must feminine perfection be sold to women as an achievable ambition? Shannon expresses

how the performance of perfect femininity is 'all *mirror mirror on the wall* because beauty is power the same way money is power the same way a gun is power' (16); synonymising beauty with materiality infers beauty to be a tangible goal, something easy to achieve, which make Palahniuk's women that fall short of such a standard feel like a feminine failure. We may return to MacKinnon's (2003) notion of the male experience which 'must always fall short. Masculinity is just out of reach. It becomes *ideological*, a goal to strive towards, but not ultimately attainable. Thus, being a 'real man' is precarious, always under threat, even from within. It involves struggle' (7). Why must the women in this text be kept from the reality that despite all their efforts, they can never be perfect in the male gaze? Within the hegemonic framework of the novel, beauty is – much like masculinity – a subjective ideal reworked and forced upon reality. Because hegemonic masculinity in Palahniuk's narratives always expects *more*, the men in his narratives become victims of their own power, and in expecting what is unattainable for themselves, they feel it only fair that women are burdened with the same pressures: more beauty, more sex, more subservience. Thus, perfect femininity in this text also becomes ideological, a goal to strive towards, but not ultimately attainable, yet women cannot know this. The role of the modelling industry is to disguise this harsh reality in a way that makes women feel as if they are winning by becoming 'a self-policing subject, self-committed to a relentless self-surveillance' (Bartkey & Meyers, 2014, p. 107); or in other words, by becoming a model. In pursuing a career reliant upon an omniscient surveyor, Shannon and Evie are trapped in a perpetual state of dependence on this figure to constantly validate their femininity. Brandy does not involve herself in the modelling world, and so she is not surveyed as intensely as Evie who remains in a vulnerable position because she is a transformed body which must also comply with the standards of feminine perfection. The focus on her sexualised female body in particular being an important marker of her identity as a woman.

Entwistle & Mears speak on how modelling 'places primary emphasis on the body' (324); aside from height, weight, measurements and facial symmetry, models are taught to use their bodies to sell in situations where their bodies have no connection to the item being sold. For example, Shannon and Evie explain, 'to model different sized products, they'd tell you to draw an invisible sight line from yourself to the item […] for a stove, draw a line from your breasts. For a new car, start the invisible line from your vagina (71). The connection made here between the vagina, breasts, and a miscellaneous object perfectly encapsulates the notion of women being docile subjects performing gender to compliment male sexual desire. A man struggling with his masculinity needs to feel like the beautiful woman will come with the car; or rather, many women just like her will be at his disposal if he were to purchase it. Arguably, this is about sex. If Shannon and Evie can successfully suggest through silent bodily movements that sex will come as a result of a man purchasing an item, *he will buy it*, and they will be reassured that their sensual gender performance breeds male satisfaction. If this cycle continues, the model becomes visible as an archetype of feminine perfection – her gender performance conflating with her sense of self, engulfing her identity. In this text, perfect femininity is an unachievable concept for the cisgender woman who is seen as inherently flawed; trans women on the other hand are mouldable, Brandy is testament to the extent to which trans women can be moulded to become the representation of feminine perfection. Caught up in these acts that only serve the men solidifies Evie's transness in docile femininity, as once women start to merge their sense of self with this unattainable ideal, 'the better a model's performance, the more invisible her efforts' (Mears, 2008, p. 431). That is, when Evie becomes rooted in a timid and subservient style of femininity through modelling, she becomes typical of the 'object' that women who model are regarded as, a state of *being* instead of *performing*. Therefore, the more she leans into this style of gender performance the less one notices the efforts of the trans woman to reach the point of

performing femininity so perfectly. At this stage she becomes almost like a Barbie doll; simply a perfect woman, no questions asked.

This is an uneasy situation for Shannon, who is always in the process of remodelling herself, or in being remodelled for the male gaze. Yet, for Evie working in the beauty industry, this situation seems ideal. This text discusses trans invisibility and how 'passing' as a cisgender woman is a way for Evie to 'attempt to avoid discrimination, scrutiny, or as a self-affirmative step in identity development (Anderson, et.al, 2017, p. 45). Evie, Shannon, and Brandy constantly speak about how 'attention is attention' (53); Evie does not "feel real enough unless people are watching" (69). There is an unspoken expectation amongst women that they must naturally stand out and attract attention; an expectation Marilyn Monroe effortlessly lived up to. Yet, Evie wanting to attain this level of feminine mystique may allow her to 'pass' so that she is no longer seen as trans. In this 'self-affirmative step in identity development' she is also able to forego the fear of being discriminated against. The title of this novel is polysemantic; invisible cisgender women who feel unwanted, invisible cisgender women who become grotesque, invisible desires that are drowned out by the sound of camera's flashing on a runway, trans invisibility through the endeavour to embody feminine perfection and pass as a cisgender woman. While Evie's success in modelling is seen as an achievement for the trans community and their visibility in the text's social sphere, Evie does not identify as transgender, she identifies as a cisgender woman. Returning to Mears' statement that 'the better a model's performance, the more invisible her efforts', I argue that if performing perfect femininity flawlessly shifts Evie's gender performance into something she *is* as opposed to something she *does*, Evie's attempts to pass as a cisgender woman comes at the cost of her losing her trans identity.

Evie's transness is invisible throughout the text: indeed, it is only at the closing of the novel that it is revealed she is a trans woman. Shannon tells stories of her past with Evie that give subtle suggestions of her transness, in particular her clear unease surrounding basic feminine concepts such as makeup, 'she'd wear shades of lipstick you'd expect to see around the base of a penis. She'd wear so much eyeshadow you'd think she was a product testing animal' (69). Her femininity is met negatively in comparison to Brandy, who throughout the text struggles to understand the negative connotations with stereotypical femininity. For example, to get out of legal trouble at the border, Brandy 'pokes the lipstick around the edge of her big plumbago mouth' immediately assuming that 'a condom and a breath mint' (65) will solve all her problems, insinuating that sex and beauty is a woman's only power, as Palahniuk says, 'the same way a gun is power'. Evie, on the other hand, is supposedly a cisgender woman, so any failed attempts at performing femininity in such simple areas as makeup are met with harsh judgement. It can be argued that "doing' beauty is a vital component of 'doing' femininity […] and working towards achieving those conventional standards are an accepted (and expected) part of what women do by virtue of being 'women" (Lazar, 2011, p. 37). Therefore, when we speak about Evie's ability to 'pass', we are discussing the pressures that she faces to not just 'do' vital feminine performative acts, but to perform these conventional standards so well that she *becomes* a woman. Bornstein (1994) writes: "Most passing is undertaken in response to the cultural imperative to be one gender or the other" (125), and this is absolutely the case in this text. Brandy is performing her transness in a much more free and almost satirical way in comparison to Evie, who feels so much pressure within the beauty industry to conform to the 'fashion body' (Attwood, 2005a, p. 90) beauty standards that are so rigidly enforced. She has no choice but to hide her transness, or disown it completely in favour of being accepted, with no questions asked. Although Brandy feels she must conform to the sexual stereotypes that men prefer in women

which places her in a vulnerable position, she is to be envied when viewing both Evie and Brandy's transness in tandem. Brandy's gender performance is rooted in transness; she may be able to pass and be considered female, but she lives with the constant fear that somebody will remove her ability to pass and send her back into the queer territory transness sits in. Evie, on the other hand, should not fear being exposed as transgender because *she will always be regarded as woman*. Sucked into the beauty matrix and watched intensely, she is forced to conform and perform for the male with no flaws visible, and so her transness disappears in her fierce dedication to feminine perfection. In her place is Shannon, who becomes constantly anxious about her position as the queered body as a result of her accident: 'Manus [Shannon's ex-fiancé] sat looking at the black-and-white glossies […] turning them upside-down and right side up the way you would one of those mystery pictures where one minute you have a beautiful woman, but when you look again you have a hag' (39). Shannon replaces Evie's role of having to prove herself worthy of being a woman and having her identity centred around her ability to perform femininity better than her cisgender best friend.

Shannon notes that 'the Cottrells know Evie will never make the big-time runways' (116); although a successful performance of femininity does not rely on cisgender womanhood, Evie's family holds the essentialist view that she is incapable of reaching the standard of feminine gender performance that they think cisgender woman have within their 'essence', and Shannon holds onto this essentialist view to gain feminine superiority over her even after her accident. If Evie is to prove them wrong, she must close the gap between trans femininity and cis femininity, effectively making her transness invisible and Shannon's queerness visible. Zhang (2022) discusses how "passing" as cisgender presents a 'double bind whereby the transgender person who passes is an insidiously successful deceiver, while the transgender person who does not pass is a monstrously unsuccessful deceiver, it also often becomes a metric to measure the legitimacy of trans identity' (26). When Shannon finds

out about Evie's transgender identity, she says, 'Evie was a man. And I saw her implant scars. Evie was a man. And I saw her naked in fitting rooms' (269). Zhang's comments here border anti-trans thinking, and while this thesis does not subscribe to the idea of the trans person as a 'deceiver' in any way, this novel simulates a world wherein cis characters feel deceived by trans characters in many ways. Therefore, we may use Zhang's comments in this chapter as a reflection of Palahniuk's fictional society, rather than a comment on reality. Shannon's response here justifies this point, as her repetition of the ignorant phrase 'Evie was a man' suggests that she feels shocked, and arguably deceived by a trans woman infiltrating her space. Evie's attempts to 'deceive' are so successful that a possibility of a trans identity never crosses the minds of the people around her. This idea of Evie being an 'insidiously successful deceiver' is reminiscent of the character of Tristessa in Angela Carter's (1982) *The passion of new Eve*. Tristessa's performance of a woman argues that of course the perfect female archetype would be a man, because only men know what they expect the view of the perfect woman to be. If we liken Evie to Tristessa, although different in their transsexuality, through Evie's transness in this text she becomes the 'male [colonisers of female experience.' (Carroll, 2011, p. 248); appropriating femininity through performances Evie knows men support to 'deceive' cisgender women into accepting them into society. If Evie then is the 'successful deceiver', what does Shannon become? This novel supports the feminine logic of having an imperfect woman and a perfect woman as her feminine mentor. For example, Brandy as the mentor to Shannon, and before the accident, Shannon as the mentor to Evie. Therefore, after Shannon's accident the roles switch – the 'insidiously successful deceiver' becomes the mentor for the now monstrously unsuccessful appropriator of femininity. Shannon's gender performance after the accident can be likened to a transgender body because it is unrecognisable as a binary figure; Manus opted for an upgraded model once Shannon's accident left her aesthetically monstrous, and the upgraded model he traded

Shannon for was Evie. Even the heterosexual male cannot detect a hint of maleness within Evie but regards Shannon's cisgender female body as disgustingly grotesque. Zhang's sentiment that a 'successful deceiver' of gender performance legitimises a gender identity is valid in this text, but only goes so far. When one is simply performing, and 'passing' as Evie is, her transgender identity is legitimised through her 'deceiving' feminine gender performance. Yet, Evie is not once questioned on her gender identity, it even goes as far as Evie becoming the perfect archetype of a woman when Shannon became the queered monstrous feminine. I therefore argue that instead of the trans 'insidiously successful deceiver' Zhang speaks of being validated through their feminine gender performance, it actually negates their transness completely, making it seem, for Evie at least, that her transness is a steppingstone to which she may reach her goal of embodying cisgender womanhood. This, for Evie especially, is the only way to embody femininity.

While it may be more difficult for the trans woman in Palahniuk's literary world to be accepted within the female modelling community as, depending on the time of her transition, it may be harder for her to hide her more masculine features (Brandy's hands, for example), this does not mean that cisgender women do not fear feminine failure just as much. Even the cis woman cannot be verified as 'woman' unless she subscribes to the 'normative gender scripts' that emphasised femininity encourages. Shannon, a cisgender woman, and Evie, a trans woman, both struggle with the expectations of emphasised femininity and the societal consequences if one is unable to perform this role. This section argues that despite attempts of gaining a stable feminine gender identity, women are constantly vulnerable to this ideal being stripped from them solely on account of their physical appearance being compromised. We realise through the character of Shannon that although there is an essentialist view that one's 'essence' naturally supports their gender performance, this does not guarantee one's

position in the category of ‘perfectly feminine’. As Evie’s body represents, the female body must be constantly open for surveillance and refurbishment; she is a constantly transforming body that must always make room for the will of the narrative’s hegemonic framework. This next section expands on the idea of the female body being open for surveillance through the character of Miranda who is physically inspected by essentialist cisgender women who attempt to disprove that trans femininity is at all comparable to cis femininity.

4.3: ‘No Dicks Allowed’: Trans Exclusion From Femininity and Biological Determinism in *Haunted*’s ‘Speaking Bitterness’

The notion of biological determinism is central to ‘Speaking Bitterness’, which argues that the trans woman cannot be regarded as a ‘passing’ female if as she is (in their eyes) inherently aligned with cis maleness. Miranda’s physical appearance, her misunderstanding of the meaning of feminine trauma, and her lack of lived experience as a cisgender woman extricates her from the realm of typical femininity that cisgender women control. This story clearly outlines a well-established view of what it means to be a cis woman in Palahniuk’s fiction: to be in pain. Using Simone de Beauvoir’s (2009) discussion of the virgin and the ‘whore’, alongside Kristeva’s theory of abjection, Scarry’s theory of the body in pain, and Butler’s concept of ‘being’ and ‘having’ the phallus, this section will argue that Miranda’s womanhood in this text is always lacking, as she carries with her the privilege of not having what the women in this novel call a ‘horror story’. This anti-feminist view is underpinned by cisgenderism, which Erica Lennon and Brian J. Mistler (2014) define as a ‘cultural and systemic ideology that denies, denigrates, or pathologizes self-identified gender identities that do not align with assigned gender at birth as well as resulting behavior, expression, and

community. This ideology endorses and perpetuates the belief that cisgender identities and expression are to be valued more than transgender identities and expression and creates an inherent system of associated power and privilege' (63). The cisgender women in this story feel a sense of power and privilege over Miranda for being able to experience the behaviours and expressions that come with aligning with your assigned gender at birth. I will also argue that Miranda can never be 'passing' to the cis women in this story; she represents instead a separate binary signifying an unwomanly body without trauma, which is inherently monstrous, excessive, and lacking at once. This section reads the trans woman through the focal point of masculine fetishization that turns Miranda's trans body into a 'reified and clichéd view of women' (Moi, 1999, p. 7). Miranda, in this text, carries an albatross around her neck: although she is forced to repent for her crimes of being male after she transitions into womanhood, it is never made clear that Miranda participated in any of the hegemonically male behaviours that create trauma for women. The sexual assault of Miranda is simultaneously a retaliation against the male for their crimes against the female body, and an induction of Miranda into the realm of womanhood, castrating phallic power and inducing female trauma, thus replacing one binary 'essence' with another.

The introduction of this story begins by stating that 'to men, a woman is either a virgin or a slut. A mother or a whore' (258). The placing of 'women' into two specific subcategories reminds the reader that in this text, the female body must be a projection of her sexual identity for the male to separate her into the categories of 'respectable' or 'sexually deviant'. Those who are seen as 'respectable', virgins, are kept as such under the protection of a father and/or brother until they deem her ready to be placed into the system of exchange (Irigaray, 1985). The 'sluts' are extricated from this system of exchange and repeatedly regarded as a man's 'brief possession [which adds to the male's] sexual and masculine reputation' (Mullins, 2006, p. 106). The main difference between the two, as explained by

Simone de Beauvoir is that the virgin, who becomes the married woman, is 'respected as a human being', but in contrast, 'so long as the prostitute is denied the rights of a person, she sums up all the forms of feminine slavery at once' (569). The 'slut' being denied respect as a human being removes her worth as a non-sexual commodity deserving of exchange, and so she is left vulnerable to sexual violence and exploitation at the hands of the male. Within the male-controlled system of this narrative, female gender performance in this text continuously caters to the title allocated to the female subject: the virgin, or the 'whore'. To cater to this system is to aid in the consolidation of masculine authority, thereby stabilising masculinity as divine in the social order. Further, Butler's (1999) notion that men 'have' the phallus, but women must 'be it' sums up Miranda's entrapment in cyclical gender performance perfectly. Men have a phallus, and this phallus is supposed to become the signifier of masculine power. This can only be made possible through the recognition of lack from the opposite binary – women. 'Being' the phallus – according to Butler – is to be 'the reflector and guarantor of an apparent masculine position [becoming] precisely what men are not and, in their very lack, establish the essential function of men' (58). What Butler recognises within this 'continuous circulation' (58) of reflection is a state of 'radical dependency' (57), initiated from the male binary. Butler argues that the male subject grounds this masculine power in a state of 'illusory autonomy' (57), in other words, he uses the woman as a validator of his masculinity, reliant upon her to make him feel as if his masculine power is inherent in his 'having'. Whilst women have the authority to unground men in ceasing to validate masculine power, this system entraps women in a state in which her gender performance is being simultaneously decided and reaffirmed through her validation of his masculine power. Therefore, if she ceases to validate his gender identity, she risks losing her own.

Miranda's physicality is the perfect representation of what men would regard as a 'whore':

> ‘Here’s every male fantasy brought to life in a kind of Frankenstein monster of stereotypes: The perfect round breasts. [...] The mouth, a perfect pout, greasy with lipstick. The pink leather skirt too short and tight for anything but sex. He speaks with the breathy voice of a little girl or a movie starlet. [...] It’s the kind of whispery voice *Cosmopolitan* magazine teaches girls to use, to make men listening lean closer.’ (260)

The description of Miranda’s body connotes a sense of weakness; the fact that her body looks as if it has been made for sex signifies a constant readiness to become subservient to male desire. In Emma Heaney’s (2017) analysis of memoirs, letters, and narratives from Magnus Hirschfeld’s case studies,[1] she critiques the way in which trans women were regarded sexually in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In her analysis, she makes the case that the experiences of the women within the case study showcase how ‘trans status was used against women to coerce them into sexual relationships, and trans women were often assumed to be sex workers simply because they were trans’ (170). Whilst ‘Speaking Bitterness’ was written much later, and is a literary reimagining of the trans experience, the women in this story apply these assumptions noted by Heaney onto Miranda in the same way the anti-trans narrative was applied to the women in this case study. As the cis women in this text apply their views of cisgenderism onto Miranda, they claim sexual exploitation as their own, a *cisgender* experience – there is no regard for the possibility for trans women to experience their own forms of sexual exploitation throughout history. Therefore, Miranda being a ‘male fantasy brought to life’ (260) is only viewed here as her mimicking cis ‘horror stories’. If Miranda must have a cisgender lived experience, the women in this text segregate Miranda by illustrating that she is not in touch with the lived experience of cisgender women

[1] Magnus Hirschfeld was a German physician and sexologist during the early nineteenth century who ran the institute for sexual science. Heaney’s (2017) work comments on his work of interpreting signs of gender for the truths they may reveal concerning trans women.

in the same way she is with cisgender men. Therefore, Palahniuk creates a situation where Miranda may empathise with cisgender women, but this empathy does not compare to the lived experience itself, and therefore Miranda can never feel a sense of community with these women. When the women in this story see Miranda mimicking a category of feminine gender performance that has been imposed upon? cisgender women and continues to be damaging to femininity (the 'whore'), they are validated in their insecurities that they are unworthy, weak, and unstable in the eyes of men unless they commoditise their body for worth.

With the feminist categories of the 'virgin' and the 'whore', women decided to 'dress like a whore', meaning to dress suggestively. Many women in contemporary culture have participated in 'SlutWalks' where they 'dress like a whore' in protest to challenge the misogynist conflation between assault and the presentation of the female body (Carr, 2018). Making one's sexual identity undisclosable through dressing provocatively regardless of sexual activity in this text emphasises the notion that the physical representation of the 'whore' and the 'essence' of the woman are not mutually exclusive. Therefore, although Miranda dresses like a 'whore' she has the right to renounce the masculinist assumptions associated with the word . However, as Miranda *is* a woman, why is her decision to dress as she likes, which is reminiscent of the 'whore', such an issue to the women in the novel? The women in the support group see Miranda's decision to dress in a sexually provocative manner as a *parody* of the 'whore'; a comment on the uncaring nature of men towards the suffering woman who is labelled worthless and refused protection in society. This notion is supported by Miranda's clear lack of knowledge and lived experience in pain and suffering; the women express, 'he doesn't have any horror stories [...] this kind of sex mimicry, this gender parroting, is the worst insult' (261-2). Although Miranda is a woman, and has always felt as such, it is the opinion of the women in the text that she could have presented as masculine prior to her transition to benefit from the embodiment of masculine hegemony.

These women believe that Miranda had social status for the simple fact of being male; her penis allowed her the opportunity to evade the pressures of beauty standards, sexual trauma and trying to equalise oneself with an almost untouchable gender opposition. As the women in this text feel that the beauty standards, traumas, and oppressions women experience are constructed by men, the cisgender man is arguably indoctrinated to believe that to be constantly pressured and oppressed is a natural position for women, and thus they continue to encourage these damaging rules that women must abide by. Therefore, when Miranda presents herself as the embodiment of the beauty standards that hegemonic men construct and promote, she does not walk into the women's group as a woman, she walks in as 'the example of a person who has been "brainwashed' by gender ideologies' (Messerschmidt et. al., 2018 p. 60), the personification of the male view of women. Miranda demonstrates through her body that the male creates the realm in which he exists; it caters to him, and so must she.

The women within the group believing that Miranda dresses provocatively to garner attention exposes their own conditioning within Palahniuk's world, in which they internalise the view that they are passive objects created to satisfy the voyeuristic male gaze (a sentiment Evie and Shannon also believe in). Laura Mulvey's (1989) view that 'woman displayed as sexual object is the leit-motif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip tease [...] she holds the look, plays to, and signifies male desire' (62) strengthens the argument that Miranda knowingly chooses to perform her femininity in a way that situates her in line with male desire. Because of course, Palahniuk's version of patriarchy assumes that a woman's sole objective is to be desired by the opposite sex. The support group believe that as a man, Miranda adopted the belief systems that benefitted her at the time, and that the masculine belief in women's passivity and objectification followed her into her transition to womanhood. As she transitions, she learns that being a woman often comes with feeling

passive and out of control, and she begins to feel these things too. If 'in this world all agents and identity are male and all objects to be desired are female' (Oliver, 2017, p. 451), but there is a space within which the queer body can move between the two (the queer marginal space spoken of earlier), the trans woman in this text identifies with a more fluid perspective of gender roles. She may be taught to adopt the position of male voyeuristic desire and move to the female role of being an object of such desire as she transitions from male to female, understanding the feelings of power and passivity at once. Miranda is a woman who has chosen to present and perform her gender in a way that makes her comfortable, as a cisgender woman would, and therefore she is within her rights to feel the effects of being 'ogled, groped, undressed by the male eyes' (265) as a result of this independent choice. But the women in this 'support' group do not feel this way. In aligning themselves with the principle of cisgenderism, these women become aggravated by the thought of a male-to-female transgender woman joining the female binary without having to undergo their violent and traumatising initiations into womanhood and then claiming to feel 'ogled, groped, and undressed' by the male.

While this notion is damaging to the women in this story, they are also damaging Miranda by assuming that 'being male' has had an effect on her psyche, an assumption that makes no room for the possibility that Miranda has never felt like a 'male' at all. The idea of masculine thought being ingrained in Miranda's psyche would not allow her entry into the realm of femininity - but if this were the case, she equally would not feel a sense of belonging as a trans woman in the male binary. Consequently, Miranda lives within a queer space which diminishes her opportunity for gender expression, as she can be regarded as male, or female, or neither by individuals who feel it is their right to judge and define her gender identity for her. Miranda is a woman situated in this text as 'solely used to reflect a reified and clichéd view of women', which allows her to be categorised alongside Brandy, a 'caricature' (259)

of femininity. This viewpoint completely negates the trauma and violence against Miranda, which Richmond, Burnes, and Carroll (2012) define as 'interpersonal (violence that occurs between, at least, two people), self-directed (violence that is self-inflicted), and collective (violence that is inflicted by larger groups of people/institutions' (45). Miranda is constantly verbally abused because she has 'oppressive phallic yang energy' and is told her gender performance stems from 'men [wanting] all the perks of being female, but none of the bullshit' (262). I argue that Miranda's trans trauma perpetrated by these women has been ignored and justified because these women want to escape male control. And so, they infer that there has been a universal rejection of the style of femininity that is reminiscent of the Marilyn in order to gain a sense of separation from 'oppressive phallic yang energy'. The violence perpetrated against Miranda no longer becomes about her, but rather what she represents.

Cisgender women are situated within Palahniuk's fiction in an enclosure of male desire where clichés are created for the trans woman to replicate. This representation raises concerns about whether there is a way in which the trans woman can perform her femininity without insulting, mocking, or triggering the cis woman. If Miranda is the physical embodiment of everything the male wills the woman to become, it infers that a cisgender female body that fails to typify the almost impossible standard of the 'perfect woman' is a defective, monstrous body. And if Miranda's presence indicates 'that the natural [female] body is unsightly, not attractive, and needs to be changed' (Ussher, 1989, p. 38), her presence in the support group constantly verifies the women's anxieties regarding their physical inadequacy. Kristeva's concept of abjection dictates that 'abjection is constructed through the non-recognition of what is close to it: nothing is familiar to it' (Kristeva, 1982, p. 129), and transness may be viewed in a similar light. The trans body is uncanny; both complete and defective, familiar yet strange, perfectly constructed yet monstrous and grotesque. Miranda's

outwardly perfect and simultaneously grotesque female form represents Palahniuk's cisgender female body as a grotesque state which reminds them of their feelings of abjection toward themselves, and the disgust regarding their own bodies. The transitioning, or transitioned body in this text challenges all that is normative, it defies 'the borders of systemic order by refusing to adhere to clear definitions of sex and gender [the abject then serves] as a cleaving point of abstruseness and unease—separating, pathologizing, and psychologizing trans subjectivity' (Phillips, 2014, p. 20). However, in using the abject to protect themselves from Miranda's grotesque unfamiliarity, these women not only reject but fear and actively attempt to destroy the monstrous body before them.

The rape and mutilation of Miranda's artificial body can thus not only be seen as a female retaliation against the archetype of the perfect body that men perpetuate, but also an attempt at destroying the trans defective, unwomanly body:

> 'The breasts are too perfect. Both the same size and not too far apart. They look engineered. [...] the exact set of breasts a man would choose. [...] Thumbing the nipple, she says, 'Everybody, you've got to feel this - God it's so gross' [...] It's like… I don't know… bread dough?" [...] [Miranda's labia] is too frilly [...] the flesh doesn't look soft enough and the color's too pale, not pink or light brown [...] perfumed. Not the way a pussy is supposed to look'. (263-5)

The women in this story believe that Miranda's 'masculine upbringing' indoctrinated the belief that designing her female body to meet the demands of masculine desire will transition her smoothly into the female sphere. 'Any real woman's gonna have stretch marks. Gray hairs. Cheesy cellulite thighs' (266), but Miranda is 'engineered'; her breasts are perfect and motionless, a comment on the male view that naturally hanging breasts are unsightly, and her vagina is perfumed, aggravating the already established notion that women 'are brought up in a society which tells us that our bodies smell' (Smith, 1987, p. 21). This 'perfect' body reflects the view in this story that all 'real' cisgender female bodies must be unsightly,

unattractive, and in need of changing; the women's judgement of Miranda's body highlights women's trauma in being pressured and expected to change their 'flawed' bodies to achieve 'perfection'. This inspection of the surgically perfected female body drives the cisgender women to rape Miranda, and it is at this point that we see the connection between the abject, pain, and excess. For Scarry (1985), the body in pain becomes at once empty of herself yet excessive as a mass of flesh in pain. To be contrastingly empty and excessive at once is a situation inherent to women who are historically viewed as an excessive leaky vessel whom through childbirth, menstruation, and sexual assault become bodies naturally inscribed with pain. In this sense, *Miranda is not a body in pain*. Her engineered overt femininity makes her an excessive body, yet her lack of 'womanly' pain creates an abject body that only bears an uncanny resemblance to a woman, thus simultaneously making her both 'woman' and monstrously 'not woman' . Although Miranda's trans body itself is not excessive in the way a cisgender woman's body may be, one may suggest that Miranda's exaggerated femininity is her excessive quality. If 'woman is, on the one hand, a tempting ghost that seduces but can only be seen at a distance [in her emptiness], and, on the other, an excess of flesh and body fluids that disgusts and repels' (Fournier, 2002, p. 63), the core of a woman is dichotomous in this story whereby the cisgender woman (the ghost) is coming face-to-face with her disjointed other, (the excessive woman) Miranda. This corporeal confrontation between the woman's two selves breeds this hatred from the cisgender women of this story towards both themselves and the abject object before them.

In linking the woman coming face-to-face with her disjointed other, we may discuss Stryker's (2006) discussion of Mary Shelley's 1818 classic *Frankenstein* as a connector between the monster and the trans woman. As she quotes Mary Daly and Janice Raymond's arguably anti-trans comments on the connection between Frankenstein's monster and trans women, Stryker argues:

> ‘It is a commonplace of literary criticism to note that Frankenstein’s monster is his own dark, romantic double, the alien Other he constructs and upon which he projects all he cannot accept in himself; indeed, Frankenstein calls the monster “my own vampire, my own spirit set loose from the grave” (Shelley 74). Might I suggest that Daly, Raymond and others of their ilk similarly construct the transsexual as their own particular golem?’ (245)

This rebuttal to ideas spurred by cisgenderism directly connects to Palahniuk’s story – if we liken Mary Daly and Janice Raymond to the literary characters of the cisgender support group, these women could also be constructing Miranda as ‘their own particular golem’ by regarding her as an excessively feminine, yet unfeminine body which lacks pain. Stryker’s comment on the experience and suicide of Filisa Vistima, that ‘in this case, not only did the angry villagers hound their monster [Filisa] to the edge of town, but they also reproached her for being vulnerable to the torches.’ (246); this mimics the way the women in this narrative torture Miranda for being a trans woman, but also for not claiming her monstrousness, for not knowing that she would never be accepted. Therefore, we may argue the cisgender women in this story are not only repulsed by the ‘less than fully human’ (Stryker, 2002, p. 245) woman stood before them, but also feel abjection towards that which Miranda represents for all women in Palahniuk’s world. That is, their fear of not being accepted for their rejection to, or inability to conform to, the feminine beauty standards placed upon them that considers them ‘real women’.

Further, tied to the abjection of the engineered trans female body in this story is the conflation between pain and certainty. Scarry believes that ‘to have great pain is to have certainty; to hear that another person has pain is to have doubt’ (7). As it pertains to the experience of womanhood in this story, whether it is pain inherited through birth or pain caused by the lived experience of being woman, this pain – as we have seen in Herbert’s (2002) analysis of American women – must come without consent. This story argues that if

Miranda does not know great pain, her womanhood is always in doubt. Whilst reading Palahniuk's work one may notice repeated interactions between the concepts of transness and masochism; in this text Miranda is seen as 'using [cisgender women]. The way a masochist goads a sadist [...] 'In this case, 'no' does mean yes. It means 'yes please'. It means, 'slap me". (264). To become certain in her womanhood, Miranda must become familiar with the concept of pain as it is tied to the female binary, yet is calling this masochistic invalidating the trans female experience? These cisgender women synonymising this necessity with a masochistic desire disconnects Miranda from cis women indefinitely, as this interrogation of whether the trans woman fully understands womanly pain or rather merely enjoys the act of suffering casts doubt on the validity of her womanhood. It is not enough to these women for Miranda to simply feel passive just because she transitions and so is ogled for her hyper-feminine aesthetic. If the womanhood of these women is rooted in trauma, being passive to the male gaze is only the beginning of what it means to be regarded as woman. If Miranda wants to be considered a woman in Palahniuk's world, she *must* experience feminine trauma against her will – therefore, labelling Miranda as an abject, monstrous body exuding sexual intent makes her an easy target for assault.

Miranda's 'bread dough' nipples and pale frilly vagina creates a Frankensteinesque silhouette of sexual curiosity, especially considering the taboo surrounding the exposure of the breast: 'nipples are no-nos, for they show the breasts to be active independent zones for sensitivity and eroticism' (Weitz, 2003, p. 156). The cisgender women exposing Miranda's independent and erotic zones whilst they still maintain their upright, artificial form not only strips her of her autonomy within the group, but the exposure of her perfectly upright breasts upholds their position as 'firm and stable objects that phallocentrism desires' (156). As there are no men in the group, the phallocentric gaze allocated to the breasts and vagina passes on

to the women who are not used to such open exposure of the breasts in a public setting, thus they treat Miranda's manufactured breasts and genitals as abject objects of sexual curiosity.

After Miranda is branded as a mockery of the female body whose sexual assets are solely used as sites of sexual curiosity, the women within the 'support' group have the opportunity to dismantle and examine the female body through the male gaze:

> 'It's our turn, and we don't know where to begin' [...] 'Somebody pokes at 'Miranda' with a car key [...] someone holds the flashlight, pushing it forward [...] the flashlight, the little halogen lightbulb must be hot, because he's squealing, squirming so hard it takes all of them to hold him down. To hold his legs about and force him open for a look'. (265-6)

Returning to Herbert's (2002) analysis of American women cited in Chapter 1, women in his view are 'engendered in rape and are destined for rape, [and their womanhood] will be defined in the endless replications of this moment, in which the woman is hurt (only as "necessary") when the man penetrates her in defiance of her entreaties' (29). Miranda's initiation into womanhood this way fortifies his claim, as only through rape is she considered woman. Miranda begs the women to stop: "Miranda' is sobbing, saying: No. Saying: Please stop. Saying: It hurts.' (267). Miranda feels as if she can decide when it is over, that her voice holds weight, as if she has the right to fight back against the perpetrator, as if she has any rights at all. The conquering of Miranda's body in this context is a harsh reminder: *women must shut up and take it*. Moreover, the willingness to mutilate the transgender woman without giving her the chance to be initiated into womanhood herself by a man shows the importance of the infliction of pain on the female body; if a man is not available to be the perpetrator of the sexual assault that is destined for them, the woman will fill that role. The women in this story refuse to let Miranda sidestep the initiations into womanhood in the same way they believe she has sidestepped the punishment for the crimes of being male.

However, what makes these women angry enough that they would be so willing as to fill in for the role of the male rapist, to perpetrate an act that is every woman's nightmare to endure? Hegemonic societal structures attempt to suppress and deny women's sexual pleasure to prevent female sexual liberation: therefore, many women come into their womanhood having less knowledge of their own sexual pleasure, prompting them to explore their sexual organs in adulthood. One may perceive the rape of Miranda as a woman's voyeuristic observation of her own genitals - becoming more aware of the sexual organ they have long been encouraged to deny. However, the venomous rhetoric within which this rape takes place argues that these women have little interest in the female trans identity regardless of their discontents with Miranda's transness. What these women are actually attacking is the symbolic meaning of the vagina, that which is created and owned by the man. And since the women in this story regard Miranda as an artificial female body with a male 'essence' who carries the sins of her manhood into her female body, they are not only attacking the vagina as created and controlled by the male, but they are also attacking the male that made it.

Palahniuk thus situates the trans woman in this text as a vehicle by which women express their resentment towards both themselves, and the men around them. By raping the trans female body and mutilating female sexual organs, these women retaliate against their enclosure in the male-dominated sphere and their body's containment in the system of exchange. Their aggression towards the female body also speaks to the subconscious hatred they have towards their own bodies that arguably do not belong to them; mutilating Miranda is an attempt to regain control over their sexual organs. But this attempt is in vain; this text's women feel that they simply do not have the social standing to fight back against men in the public sphere. Therefore, attempting to 'rape the man back' through the mutilation of Miranda situates women as reliant upon acts of suffering, and therefore men, to stabilise their feminine position. It suggests an understanding that the trans woman in this narrative plays a

role in the social sphere as simultaneously the image of the castrated man and the woman 'made to suffer' (Beauvoir, 2009, p. 657). As the definition of womanhood is understood insofar as how hegemonic masculinity measures the image of the woman, Miranda must endure a painful act of initiation, and a constant reaffirmation that she belongs to the male and relies on him to substantiate her position as an object of the voyeuristic gaze of men.

Conclusion

This thesis has examined the notion that Palahniuk's portrayal of hegemonic masculinity is not an independent framework. It constantly requires validation from every gender that sits in direct opposition to it in order to prove its dominance within the heteronormative structure. Chapter 1 of this thesis analyses the ways in which masculine men stay 'men' within their own community. Using MacKinnon's (2003) argument that the desire for hegemonic masculinity is a power turned against oneself, using rape and violence these boys damage each other in order to protect their own status as men. Using Pygmy's reliance on his phallus to gain power over American masculine bodies, Palahniuk comments on the state of American masculinities. That is, American masculinity is a weak structure that has little stability to persevere itself in the face of a masculine challenge. Therefore, as hooks argues, their willingness for violence is their only way of expressing their desire to 'do gender' (Butler, 1999, p. 33) – to be real men. Vincent Mancini in section 1.2 is the personification of a man who does not use his masculine psyche. The only masculine object Vincent uses is his penis as he uses his vice to his advantage, turning female sex addicts into sex slaves. As what Sanders (2008) describes as an abuser of women, Vincent's purchasing of sex from these women validates his masculinity as having power in sex is to be in control of the female body, which is a vital aspect of hegemonic masculinity.

This idea is carried through into Chapter 2 which explores the ways in which the masculine uses the feminine body through sex to attain a sense of masculine worth, using Allen's description of 'tops' and 'bottoms' being representative of insertive and receptive power. Pygmy uses his host mother's naïve sex positive attitude against her by raping her under the assumption that she would enjoy it, given her constant desire for the feeling sex gives her. Section 2.1 argues that men use sex as a way of attaining masculine status. The adolescent boys analysed in this section under the lens of Kristeva's theory of abjection are all under the assumption that explorations of sexuality lead to more sexual knowledge, which places them in high regard within their male peer group. However, using Kristeva's notion of the adolescent being a mystical creature and thus, a sexually free agent as well as Teegan Bradway's notion of the fear of transgressing from heteronormativity, I make the argument that sexual freedom leads to sexual deviance, and within the rules of hegemony, sexual deviance is synonymous with homosexuality. The shame these boys feel for naively appropriating homosexual behaviours does not remain private. Their family and physicality are constant public reminders of their deviant behaviours, which extricates them from upholding the characteristics of a hegemonic male.

Chapter 3 analysed Palahniuk's women. I debate whether the female porn star has agency, free will, or neither. I conclude by arguing that Cassie Wright as a porn star is an object of sexual slavery with her performance in porn constantly reaffirming her position in sex and the social sphere as subordinate. Using debates surrounding whether or not the porn industry grants women sexual freedom or dictates their positioning as slaves to man's sexual satisfaction, I argue a similar notion discussed in Chapter 2. That is, due to Cassie's sex positive attitude, she is regarded as a 'whore' and therefore, her decision of when to have sex, or whether she wants to have sex at all is no longer her decision to make. Further, Attwood's (2005a) argument that there is a three-tiered hierarchy of female body representation aids in

the argument that once Cassie makes it public that she is synonymising her sexuality with her identity, she becomes representative of the 'porn body', and thus acts as a signifier, an object, a vital creator of the masculine power of the men around her. This idea carries forward into Chapter 4 where the women in *Invisible Monsters* are trapped within the panoptical structure that intends to make 'fashion bodies' out of 'ordinary women'. Section 4.1 analyses how Brandy's view of femininity is directly correlated to Marilyn Monroe's performance of femininity, and so her voice, her body, her aura – everything must be Marilyn. This is so that she gives the illusion of what Butler (1999) refers to as an 'organising gender core' (p. 173) and thus, avoids exposure as a gay man. Palahniuk makes a comment on the danger of the Marilyn archetype through Shannon desiring to become Brandy after her accident. In section 4.2, the idea of the beauty matrix argues that the more the cisgender woman aspires to become perfect (what the trans woman can prosthetically create), the more she is uncomfortable within her own cis womanhood. Shannon and Evie's bodies are constantly surveyed by the male gaze who considers Evie 'passing', allowing her the opportunity to be the cisgender woman she dreamed of being. Shannon, on the other hand, used to strive towards this goal – her desperation to escape the beauty matrix turned her into a monstrous figure that does not pass as a cis woman regardless of her female 'essence'. Prioritising her body over her voice turned her into what Zhang refers to as a monstrous deceiver, unable to compare to the non-cis competition within the matrix. In the final section of this chapter, the women in Miranda's support group are entirely vulnerable and insecure in her presence as they feel a sense of abjection towards the figure of Miranda who is both familiar as an object they identify with and the monstrously grotesque. Miranda choses to embody the Marilyn archetype, and immediately she is representative of everything the cisgender woman is not. Stryker aids in our argument that he cisgender women in this text fear Miranda because they see the prototype of the woman as seen through the male gaze; this makes them

uncomfortable, disgusted, angry within themselves. Miranda's rape was therefore not just an attempt to give Miranda a horror story, these women were attacking the image that Palahniuk argues is so damaging to femininity in his literature. That is, the image of the woman as created, enforced, and protected by men who uphold hegemonic masculinity.

Palahniuk's world simulates a crisis of masculinity in the late 20th century caused an intragender battle between Palahniuk's fictional men regarding their separate ability to maintain their masculine standing in the face of a challenge. Vincent and Trevor, as well as the 600 men want to have sex with Cassie Wright argue in this thesis that it is not that simple; sex and violence are the only ways men in Palahniuk's world can confidently and constantly validate their masculinity. Masculinity is an entirely fragile binary that demands a constant validation, and these men are representative of the fact that most men cannot have this constant validation unless they partake in extreme ways of garnering hegemony. The modelling world in Palahniuk's texts attempts to argue that there is a sense of free-will involved in its system, yet this is entirely untrue. The use of Foucault's panopticon when analysing the texts in this thesis show that these women are constantly surveyed by men, which in turn forces them to constantly survey themselves. This creates and maintains a cyclical structure that forces these women to regard themselves as inherently flawed, constantly in need of remoulding in order to fit the criteria of the 'perfect woman' that the male gaze desires. Through his fiction, Palahniuk exposes the masculine ideal present in *Fight Club* that heterosexual men look up to as not only inherently flawed, but inherently dependent. Without the subordination of the feminine and the queer, masculinity sits as an uneasy, contentious situation that will continuously produce anxious, weak, broken men.

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