MEN IN BLACK
Androgynty and Ethics in The Crow and Fight Club

The subject of this essay is popular gothic narratives of masculinity as they have appeared in mainstream culture over the last fifteen years or so. Although such narratives often take their cue from goth subculture, the modes of masculinity they articulate resonate beyond the limits of a particular subcultural time and place. Indeed, such narratives, I will argue, have been germinating ever since the culture of the Enlightenment began to impose new and deeply gendered understandings of heterosexual coupling, reproductive difference, and ethical dividedness onto our experience of modernity.

Gothic narratives obsessively rehearse a male desire for completion, dramatized by a male experience of pain—a pattern I will elucidate in the gothic rock music of the Cure, in James O'Barr's 1992 graphic novel The Crow; and, finally, in Chuck Palahniuk's 1996 novel Fight Club, and David Fincher's 1999 film adaptation. Motivating these narratives is a desire for androgynty, a term that in recent feminist and queer theory has, to a large extent, been eclipsed by alternative concepts such as transgender, gender preference, and gender performativity. Although androgynty has various meanings, not all of which warrant recuperation, the term, I will argue, has the potential to speak to the ethical cast of post-Enlightenment gender and sexuality in ways that these postmodern substitutes do not. Gothic narratives thus suggest the importance of reevaluating this underused notion.

Postmodern feminist and queer theorists understandably seek to overturn a coercive regime of heteronormative and complementary gender roles. In many respects their aims resonate with Donna Haraway's provocative 1985 "Manifesto for Cyborgs." The cyborg, wrote Haraway, "is a creature in a post-gender world. . . . Unlike the hopes of Frankenstein's
monster, the cyborg does not expect its father to save it through a restoration of the garden; i.e., through the fabrication of a heterosexual mate, through its completion in a finished whole” (67). My point in citing Haraway is not to dismiss her powerful insight into postmodernity. But I do want to emphasize that the male subject of goth-influenced narratives is not a creature of a postgender world, but is, rather, precisely like Frankenstein’s monster. That is, he remains deeply wedded to a prelapsarian dream of heterosexual completion, produced in the special gothic form of an incorporation of the absent feminine—a scenario that I call “Frankenstein’s Lost Brides.” Although these gothic narratives do indeed spring from an identifiable postmodernity—including the late-capitalist and transnational modes of production that have dramatically proliferated since Haraway’s “Manifesto”—the particular gender dilemma they rehearse is one of demonstrably romantic provenance. For this reason, gothic narratives of masculinity serve to instruct theorists of gender, sexuality, and postmodern ethics to return to questions of androgyny in what remains a starkly gender-divided world.

A single glance at any man’s or women’s magazine illustrates today’s relentless stress on sexual difference: the banal but ubiquitous logic of women from Venus and men from Mars. Men, wrote a columnist in a 1995 issue of Men’s Journal, “feel outclassed in the feelings department.” Biology dictates that they fixate on “ball,” “beer,” and “wimmin,” while the other sex cultivates “poetry,” “higher thoughts,” and “feelings” (Blount 1995, 31, 34). Since the mid-1990s, gendered scripts of this kind have rigidified and proliferated. Incommensurable sexual difference has become the common sense of advice discourse on romance and marriage; has been legitimated by popular theories of evolutionary psychology (see Herrnstein Smith 2000); and, most importantly of all, perhaps, has become integral to a lucrative economic strategy in which gendered products are marketed to gendered audiences, via gendered media—all trends that serve to enhance the impression that what gender is, nature itself has dictated.

Yet for all its connections to today’s allegedly postfeminist and neoliberal consumer culture, the idea of incommensurable sexual difference derives from the eighteenth century, when, as Thomas Laqueur has shown, it provided the foundation of a new “natural” order. Female nerves, argued one mid-Victorian physician, “are smaller,” “more delicate,” and “endowed with greater sensibility” than male nerves (qtd. in Poovey 1988, 213–14). Such accounts of women’s physiology helped to situate them as the ideal domestic complements for men in the public sphere. Male sensibility, by contrast, was subordinated as nineteenth-century masculine nature was increasingly defined in terms of rational faculties, competitive instinct, and heterosexual desire. This ideology of incommensurable sexual difference coincided with an ideology of incommensurable ethical difference. As Seyla Benhabib (1992) has shown, Enlightenment theorists inserted a rift between male and female domains, masculinizing a public world of civilization and culture and feminizing a private world of nurture and reproduction. As the sphere of justice, the public sphere “move[d] into historicity,” while the private sphere of care and intimacy was viewed as “unchanging and timeless” (Benhabib 1992, 157). Moral and political theorists thus came to presume a deep-seated incompatibility, predicated on gender, between ethical relations as conceived in generalized terms (involving a universalized abstraction of rational and rights-bearing individuals), and as conceived in concrete terms (involving a particularized understanding of individuals based on their life history, personal views, and emotional constitution). The effect of this split between “justice” and the “good life” was to relegate considerations of difference and particularity to the private sphere and, in so doing, to undervalue intimacy, nurture, and care.

This problematic ethical divide was also internalized as a split within privileged male subjectivities. Thus, according to Benhabib, the bourgeois-liberal male has, since the eighteenth century, been “divided into the public person and the private individual.” Caught in the conflict between incompatible gendered spheres, the bourgeois masculine subject “strives for unity” (158). Like Frankenstein’s monster searching for his lost bride, he longs for a dialogue that cannot take place, not least because a crucial aspect of his ethical competence—his ability to recognize the other in his or her particularity—has been denigrated, privatized, and, to a large extent, foreclosed.

Post-Enlightenment gender and sexuality in this dominant form has been vital to capitalist development for more than two centuries. Yet it has also bred a profound “gender dysphoria”—a history of masculinity and its discontents—even among those straight, middle-class white men whose social preeminence it has authorized. Almost since its inception, therefore, normative masculinity has provoked concerted resistance of a particular kind. In the nineteenth century, gothic, romantic, and aesthetic discourses reclaimed aspects of the feminine as a foundation for male alternatives. So far from subordinating male sense perception, Charles Baudelaire, Walter Pater, and Oscar Wilde enjoined their readers “to linger wherever there is ‘an echo of poetry’ or ‘a quiver of life’” (Baudelaire qtd. in Foucault 1984a, 41); to “get as many pulsations as possible” (Pater 1980 [1868], 190); and to “spiritualize” their senses (Wilde 1985 [1890], 161).
Nietzsche’s Zarathustra spoke of his “pregnant” wisdom and described the new creator androgynously, as both life-bearing mother and newborn child (1894 [1891], 85, 87). Implicit in the parturient Überman and the Baudelairean aesthete is a desirable linkage between androgyous physiology and creative power. Yet women themselves are relegated by Nietzsche to reproductive functions. Likewise, the Baudelairean aesthete is never a bona fide androgyne, or masculine woman, but always a man—a man who, by way of liberating himself from bourgeois constraints, reinvents himself through androgyous possibility. As art historian Griselda Pollock (1987) has argued, cults of aestheticism, from the Romantics to Cocteau, present art as a kind of parthenogenesis to be harnessed for men’s empowerment. Art is androgyous, but the artist is presumptively male (Pollock 1987, 87–88).7

In the late 1970s a new incarnation of androgyous masculinity claimed to represent what Wilde called “the artistic temperament in our inartistic age” (1895 [1890], 12). A bricolage of the hyperromantic, goth youth culture culls freely from subcultural antecedents such as glam and punk; from the works of Gothic literati such as Ann Radcliffe, Baudelaire, Algernon Charles Swinburne, and Bram Stoker; and from taboo sexual cultures including queer, porn, B/D/S-M, drag, and blood sports. Although youth of both sexes are drawn to the subculture, goth’s most arresting stylistic signature is, arguably, the conspicuous display of androgyous masculinity.8 Male goths’ appropriation of various feminine signs—for example, long or teased hair, makeup, flowing skirts, bridal costumes, jewelry—aims to enunciate a correspondingly feminized (which is to say, gothicized) interior: a realm of forbidden depth, antirationality, and sensitivity stolen from the feminine.9 Goth-influenced narratives—in fiction, pop music, film, and graphic novels—thus cultivate a feeling, crying man: a postmodern evocation of aesthete, dandy, and tragedian.

For all of these reasons, goth masculinity is in many respects an ideal subject for a postmodern theory of gender performativity. Like the drag artist or lipstick lesbian, the male goth is a figure who troubles gender, “enact[ing],” in Judith Butler’s words, “the very structure of impersonation by which my gender is assumed” (1991, 21; cf. 1990, 145). As inveterate cross-dressers, goth men may be seen to occupy the “third” position described by Marjorie Garber (1992, 11): not a third sex, or third term, but “a space of possibility” that opens once the contingency of gendered identities has been exposed (11). More than a quintessential performer, the goth male is also ideally suited to take up the aesthetic mantle proposed by Michel Foucault in his final works on an ethics of the self. “To be modern,” writes Foucault in an affirmative echo of Baudelaire, “is not to accept oneself as one is,” but to practice a positive dandyisme—“to take oneself as an object of a complex and difficult elaboration” by turning one’s body, feelings, and very existence into a “work of art” (1984, 41–42). To be modern, one might argue with such thought in mind, is to be goth.

Yet these ways of reading goth masculinity are the ones I want, at the very least, to complicate. The problem is not only that goth’s transgender moves, like many nineteenth-century precursors, are almost wholly centered on male performance. It is also that goth—inflected narratives of male subject constitution, with their fixation on loss and pain, cannot be fully grasped by an ontologically deficient postmodern theory of gender and the ethics of gender pluralism. Think of Tim Burton’s Edward Scissorhands (1990), a goth-inspired fable in which the artist-hero is, Frankenstein-like, driven out of the suburban, to mourn his lost love in creative isolation. Think of “Just Like Heaven,” the 1987 video by the gothic rock band the Cure, in which a male speaker dances with a transparent bride. Although this evanescent beloved promises to “run away” with him, the speaker wakes to find that she has been “stolen” and—significantly—“drowned . . . deep inside [him].” Hence, like Edward Scissorhands, the speaker is left, to quote another Cure lyric, “looking for something forever gone / but something [he] will always want” (1992).

Indeed, Cure lyrics provide a valuable key to exploring goth’s subject-constituting narratives. On “Untitled,” the final track off the band’s brooding 1989 Disintegration album, the speaker laments: “I’ll never lose this pain, never dream of you again.” Notice that while the ostensible object of the speaker’s yearning is irrevocably lost—“’I’ll never dream of you again’”—what is found and concretized is the speaker’s indelible “pain.” In the next stanza, as though to enact an extravagantly romantic and anti-postmodern moment of possession, a “hungry” monster—“the devil’s fertility”—“climb[s] deeper inside of” the speaker to vampirically “gnaw [his] heart away” (1989). In so doing, this pain monster achieves what the implicitly female object of the speaker’s heterosexual desire has never done. Whereas she has disappeared, the gothic monster has filled—if not fulfilled—the desire for presence. Although the speaker can no longer even dream himself as the subject of romantic completion with a female counterpart, he is, nevertheless, unalterably and incurably fixed as the man who feels and cries. Pain has become the credential of his artistic parthenogenesis, his subject-constituting androgyne, and, therefore, of his masculine self-determination.10 But—and here is a crucial question for my analysis—can a theatrics of male suffering sustain such self-fashioning when pain is asked to compensate not only for proscribed male feeling, but also for that responsibility to otherness which has been split off from masculine ethics and ascribed to a feminized ethic of care?
In what follows I explore this question by contrasting a comparable goth narrative of masculinity—James O’Barr’s 1989 comic book series, The Crow—to a “postgoth” alternative, Chuck Palahniuk’s 1996 novel, Fight Club, and David Fincher’s 1999 film adaptation. The context for such comparison is the mid-1990s shift away from the goth-influenced masculinity that flourished in late 1980s and early 1990s youth culture and toward the comparatively hardcore masculinity that still dominates today. The stakes of this shift, as I have elsewhere argued (Goodlad 2003), are not insignificant. Although the androgynous style and theatrics encouraged by goth-influenced youth culture are subject to the limitations of a male-centered aesthetics, such “alternative” commercial media nonetheless facilitated female co-participation, tolerated nonheterosexual and antibinarizing notions of gender and sexuality, and promoted progressive political causes of various kinds.

The goth-influenced narratives of the late 1980s and early 1990s thus foregrounded cross-genre styles and androgynous themes that are rarely pronounced in postgoth counterparts. As Abigail Solomon-Godeau (1996, 74) notes, “different historical moments” give rise to differing fantasies of masculinity. And yet, though goth and postgoth variations on masculinity offer many important contrasts, the point of the present analysis is that both kinds of narrative spectacularize male pain and—in so doing—both articulate a desire for androgyny that neither fulfills. In this way, both goth and postgoth narratives expose the tenuousness of any mode of androgyny that is imagined as a voluntary appropriation of feminized traits. Clearly, notions of androgyny as an ur-gender, a duality of male and female, or a transcendent form of male identity are neither useful nor sustainable.

Nonetheless, what do we make of the recurrent male desire for feminized feeling that gothic narratives of masculinity articulate—a desire rooted in a post-Enlightenment history of ethical impoverishment? With their tendency to embrace pluralistic understandings of gender and self-heroizing modes of expression, today’s queer and feminist theorists do not lend themselves to answering or even posing such questions. The readings of The Crow and Fight Club that follow thus aim to elucidate the potential importance of conceptualizing androgyny, which may as yet have a useful part to play in theorizing gender and ethics at the turn of the millennium.

“We do not recognize our souls until they are in pain”:
Blood and Tears in The Crow

First serialized in 1989, James O’Barr’s The Crow was republished as a graphic novel in 1992 and dramatized on film in 1994. O’Barr’s text borrows lyrics and other tropes from the Cure, as well as many other gothic icons. In the film, a Cure song accompanies the scene in which the resurrected hero, Eric, applies cosmetics to complete his goth stylization. Yet there are also important differences between O’Barr’s and the Cure’s variations on the man who feels and cries. The loss and pain that, in the Cure’s music, derive from communicative failure are, in The Crow, tied to atrocity. The human Eric was the victim of an appalling tragedy: his fiancée Shelly was brutally raped and murdered by a gang of drug-crazed thugs while helpless and half-dead—lay watching. This traumatic experience becomes the catalyst for his gothic transformation into a visibly androgynous, but deeply split, figure of the undead. Through the mediation of a supernatural crow, Eric rises from the grave to avenge and mourn his loss. Blood and tears signify the effulgence of agonized feeling; yet, although both are exuded by the same body in pain, blood is the fluid of “masculine” vengeance, while tears bespeak “feminine” mourning.

Significantly, Eric’s ostensible androgyny is constructed in opposition to the complementary gender roles of normative love. Obsessively flashing back to life before the atrocity, the undead Eric cherishes a romantic ideal that is conventional in the extreme. Shelly is a soft, blonde, and deeply ungotic female: eager for marriage and family, moved to tears by It’s a Wonderful Life, and dependent on Eric for protection. The Eric of the past is her strong, handsome, and handy fiancé, complete with toolbox. Shelly and Eric renovate a Victorian house, while he teases her about marriage only to surprise her with an engagement ring (figs. 1 and 2). In one flashback, Shelly says, “Eric, I feel so safe when I’m with you,” and Eric promises “never [to] let anything happen to” her. Yet this telling remembrance is narrated just after the graphic depiction of Shelly’s being beaten, repeatedly raped, shot in the head, and then raped again while dead—all of which occurred while the mortally wounded Eric looked on helplessly.

What is disturbingly clear, though, is that the traumatic obliteration of this romantic pairing, the loss of this perfect bride, has been all but inevitable. The multiple significations of the Crow—the Poe-like bird who enjoins Eric to forget the past, Eric’s own undead persona, and the narrative as a whole—all depend on it. The very banality of Eric’s relationship with Shelly—“so beautiful,” “so sweet and kind,” “so soft and innocent”—betrays an ideological construction fraught with instability. During one recollection of the atrocity, Eric “can not remember why” he failed to help his “sobbing” beloved. Such episodes suggest that Shelly, for all her halowened perfection, is like the elusive woman in many Cure songs: a feminine simulacrum; a bride always already lost. The mocking crow amplifies this
effect, urging Eric not to "look" back at the violence, to "break . . . off" his compulsive mourning, all the while spurring further painful remembrance.

Here, as in so many gothic narratives, feeling is itself the ultimate object of male desire. Pain accommodates male will-to-feeling because it can be produced on the surface of the body and, at the same time, inscribed within the body, as intense subjectivity. Whether it is the futile yearning of the Cure’s speaker, the violent physical pain of Eric’s vengeful masculine persona, or the emotional pain of his feminized mourning, pain is the paradoxical hinge of male identity. As depicted in gothic narratives, feeling as pain is at once excruciating, excruciatingly desirable, and excruciatingly absent. In The Crow this paradox is emblematized by morphine (fig. 3)—the drug to which Funboy, the most sympathetic of the vicious gang wiped out by Eric, is addicted. Before forcing Funboy to overdose, Eric injects an entire cubic centimeter of morphine directly into his own heart. When Funboy exclaims, Eric replies. "We do not recognize our souls until they are in pain." As in the Cure’s lyrics, pain is thus posited as the antidote to the existential emptiness left in the wake of failed heterosexual coupling. Ironically, however, morphine is a painkiller—productive of insensibility. Hence, when Eric plunges two hypodermic needles full of morphine into his breast, he reifies—by way of nullifying—the pain upon which his identity depends.

Androgyny is both the sign and the desired effect of this subject-constituting pain. The androgynous man who feels and cries was stifled by the gender conventions that made Shelly’s and Eric’s union so ostensibly perfect. Tears in particular, and pain more generally, were, in the paradisical world before atrocity, the special province of soft, vulnerable women like Shelly, not the strong men who idealize and protect them. O’Barr’s narrative resists this constraint on male feeling by annihilating—and deifying—women (figs. 4 and 5). Just as the transparent bride of the "Just Like Heaven" video materially disappears, so Eric’s fiancée becomes a lost angel and bride of death. Moreover, like the bride of the song—"drowned deep inside of" the male speaker—Shelly’s femininity is reincorporated in Eric’s androgynous gothic persona.

In The Crow, however, the androgynous body is, at least superficially, disavowed: the incommensurability of its masculine and feminine components graphically expressed in Eric’s polymorphous incarnations. While the masculine Eric is a hypermuscular, sometimes monstrous killing-and-bleeding machine, wreaking merciless vengeance with Rambo-like efficiency (fig. 6), the feminine Eric, crying for his lost love, is soft and pretty (fig. 7). What is interesting, however, is the degree to which the masculine Eric is himself androgynous. Although the body of the killing machine is
recognizably macho, the repeated, self-inflicted, and explicitly Christ-like mortification and penetration of Eric's flesh—the spectacularization of his wounds, his sentence, and his pain—blur the distinction between masculinized blood and feminized tears. In one particularly telling sequence of images (fig. 8), a flashback of the kissing lovers is followed by the loading of a gun: in the final image Eric—his muscular body scarred and penetrated by bullets—nearly swoons in an ecstasy of pain. In a sense, this is Eric's most purely androgynous moment: the apotheosis of his desire to fill and be filled; to be soft and invulnerable; to kill and to love; to conquer and to submi.; to be and to feel. In a complementary image (fig. 9), lines from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poignant Sonnet 43—"and if God choose, I shall but love thee better after death"—are ironically epitomized by a hypodermic needle and a bottle of morphine, the butt of a gun and an array of bullets, and, in the center, an open tube of lipstick. The ostensible referents of these signifiers—painlessness as pain, violent death as penetration, androgyny as masquerade—are interchangeable; endlessly deconstructed and reconstructed by the romantic dream (never realized, but never relinquished) of transcending gender, death, and psychological emptiness.

In the final graphic sequence of The Crow, Eric returns to the cemetery...
where his and Shelly's tombstones lie beside one another. Eric and Shelly kiss, only she is now, for the first time, visually marked as dead: dark-haired and dark-clad. Presumably Eric has joined Shelly at last, in death or eternity. But in the closing image an androgynous gothic figure walks off onto a dark and barren plain. He is very much alone.

Men in Black: Postgoth Masculinity in Fight Club

It is significant, perhaps, that the 1994 movie version of The Crow, for all its acclaimed goth aesthetic, focused on Eric's violent revenge, not his self-mortifying pain.13 Two years later, Chuck Palahniuk published a cult novel that signaled the dawn of a discernibly "postgoth" phase in gothic narratives of masculinity. Such narratives are gothic because they continue to figure an identifiable gothic style and counterculture, but they are also postgoth because the masculine persona they privilege is normatively, even excessively hard, and, as a result, only obliquely androgynous. Rather than feeling, crying men, the males of these narratives are embattled but tearless; rather than goths per se, they are men in black—men whose dark-clad style bespeaks a quest for self-determining power without obvious recourse to androgyny. Yet what most closely ties these postgoth men in black to their feeling, crying precursors—what gives the lie to their indifference to androgynous possibility—is their common relation to pain. By 1999, the year that Palahniuk's novel became the movie Fight Club, mainstream youth culture had drifted far away from goth's androgynous male style and toward a hardcore alternative in which pain—grievling, physical pain—offers the only viable medium of subject-constituting male feeling.14

Palahniuk's tale of two Tyler Durdens, dramatized onscreen by actors Ed Norton and Brad Pitt, is perhaps the most intriguing case of split personality since Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Both book and movie are narrated by an unnamed corporate minion (Norton's role) whose三角关系 relations with a rebellious male foil (Pitt's role) and a young woman named Marla (portrayed in gothlike fashion by Helena Bonham Carter) create the framework for the story. Only near the end do we learn that Tyler Durden, the subversive anarchist who launches Fight Club and becomes Marla's lover, is the narrator's own split-off personality. Hence, Fight Club offers a postgoth variation on The Crow, with each Tyler representing a different mode of masculinity, while the split itself dramatizes the ongoing quest for androgyny in some form.

When we first meet the narrator he is the emblem of soulless yuppies: a low-ranking corporate cog who lives alone in an airtight condo, priding himself on IKEA decor. Corporate living is seen to entail an anes-
for heroic "self-destruction" (49). This is the same voluntaristic power that enabled O'Barr's Eric to turn pain into heroizing transcendence.

Nor is Fight Club absent its own variation on the man who feels and cries—though one purposely distinguished from the Frankenstein monster's desire for heterosexual completion. Before his split into Tyler, the narrator found refuge in what we might see as the fetishized manifestation of a suppressed ethic of care: the subcultural world of therapeutic support groups. Posing as a victim of brain parasites or tuberculosis, he experienced mutual recognition within a close community of the sick and dying. Significantly, though, it was at Remaining Men Together, a support group for castrated survivors of testicular cancer, that he was able to cry. This special bond was made with Big Bob, an ex-body builder who, due to hormonal imbalance, possesses "bitch tits" (17). "New sweating tits that hang enormous, the way we think of God's as big" (16).

In the Cure's and O'Barr's gothic narratives, romantic completion was endlessly deferred by the bride's unattainability, with painful loss itself becoming the substitute. Male feminization was thus depicted as an isolated experience of emotional intensity—stoked by desire for an absent other, but never enacted as an experience of concrete otherness. Fight Club's narrator thus experiences a blissful plenitude in Big Bob's embrace that the goth heroes only yearn for: "Bob was closing in around me with his arms, and his head was folding down to cover me. Then I was lost inside oblivion, dark and silent and complete, and when I finally stepped away from his soft chest, the front of Bob's shirt was a wet mask of how I looked crying... This was freedom" (22; figure 10).

With such passages in mind, one might argue that Palahniuk has not so much rejected the myth of romantic completion as shifted its parameters from heterosexual to same-sex bonds. Significantly, Fight Club's prolific but "impersonal" male relations are explicitly presented as a substitute for deficient paternal bonds (54): a sign of the postgoth shift from mourning lost brides to mourning lost fathers. Certainly, in the wake of the movie's success, fight club subcultures have sprung up in gay as well as straight male communities. Any reading of Fight Club that ignores its plea for homosocial intimacy, even homosexual love, would be shortsighted in the extreme.

Yet it is also important to recognize that Marla's sudden appearance is what destroys the bond with Bob, triggering the split into Tyler Durden, and the shift from the support groups' ethic of care to Fight Club's Nietzschean self-heroization. At the start of the novel the narrator makes clear that the disturbing concluding events "[are] really about Marla Singer... "I want Tyler. Tyler wants Marla. Marla wants me" (14). In one reading of this triangle, the narrator's attraction to Marla threatens his misogynistic disdain for heterosexual marriage and the loss of male friendships to which he connects it (62). In another, the narrator longs for queer intimacy, which is inhibited by Tyler's heteronormative desire for Marla. Yet, since Tyler and the narrator are actually the same person, there is also a more Foucauldian level of meaning. Here the narrator's desire for Tyler speaks to the conditions for self-heroization: the self's relation to the self. For "modernity," writes Foucault, "does not 'liberate' in his own being... but rather 'compels' him—much as Palahniuk's narrator is compelled—to face the task of producing himself" (1984a, 42).

Whichever of these readings we prefer, Marla is always situated as interloper: a lone female figure in a male landscape; a figure whose overarching sexual alterity means, to the narrator, that "there's no way she can be my friend" (66). It is from Marla's perspective, therefore, that we can recognize Big Bob's castrated and tit-endowed body as pointing beyond the disabling antinomies of post-Enlightenment sex/gender. More than a feminized man, Bob is neither a voluntary gender trouble, like a goth or drag artist, nor an androgynous pure and simple. Rather, Bob might recall us to Freud's theory of fetishism (Freud 1927). The fetish object, Freud insists,
does not symbolize the fetishist’s own phallus, but the phallus that his or her mother never had. This maternal phallus is uniquely powerful since unlike one’s own phallus—which can always be lost—one’s mother’s phallus allows one to disavow the root difference that constituted the very possibility of loss (Freud 1927; cf. Grosz 1995). In Lacanian terms, Big Bob is thus identifiable as a variation on the phallic mother: what Tim Dean describes as a “position of plenitude, beyond division.” 30 Paradoxically, then, as a castrato with “bitch tits,” Big Bob is not just a transgender figure, but the particular transgender figure who, from the narrator’s perspective, negates sexual difference entirely, enabling a rare experience of “freedom” beyond normative constraints. Marla’s appearance, then, triggers the split into Tyler, a figure whose overmasculinity makes heterosexual relations with Marla tolerable. But gone with that split is the novel’s most visionary response to masculine discontent: a vision in which Big Bob and the narrator paradoxically “remain men together” by facing down difference as androgynous subjects, “beyond division,” across an intersubjective ethic of care—a point to which I will return.

Brutally self-destructive though it is, the spread of the Fight Club subculture provides a temporary stasis. Simply put, it allows men to “remain men together” by beating the shit out of each other, resolving the problem of their empty bourgeois lives, and enabling Tyler and Marla to have great sex. This fantasy of Fight Club as a permanent subcultural refuge from masculine discontent is, of course, deeply ironic (though it is perhaps not surprising that the irony is lost on the frat boys and gay men now beating the shit out of each other in real-life fight clubs across the land). 31

Significantly, the novel’s ugly turn, from black comedy to disturbing allegory, is triggered by another encounter with a gender-ambiguous man. “Put him in a dress,” the narrator says of this “angel-faced” novice, “and he’d be a woman” (128, 123). His response is a sudden impulse “to destroy something beautiful” (123): to disfigure the newcomer’s feminine visage. This unsettling turn toward destroying the other—as opposed to the emancipatory self-destruction that has hitherto characterized Fight Club—leads Tyler to “take [it] up a notch” (123). Within hours of the narrator’s brutal assault on the feminine newcomer, Tyler (as though envious of the new relationship) invents Project Mayhem. In this militarized, fascistic spin-off from Fight Club, Tyler recruits cadres of black-clad disciples to join him in a Nietzschean effort “to blast the world free of history” (124), to raze civilization and begin anew. As the narrator looks on helplessly, Fight Club’s self-heroization lapses into demagoguery and mass hero worship. By the time he realizes that he is Tyler Durden—responsible for murder, arson, and a plan to blow up at least one major skyscraper—the narrator is unable to deter his fanatic followers, although he is nearly castrated and beaten to death as he tries. Significantly, it is also at this point, for the first time since Big Bob’s embrace, that he cries.

Here is where book and movie diverge to offer two different conclusions to this disquieting postgoth narrative. In both cases the narrator “kills” Tyler through a kind of botched suicide. But in the movie, the narrator joins hands with Marla as a nearby skyscraper goes down and music from the gothic-punk band the Pixies plays in the background. Presumably anarchy has worked on some symbolic level. Although there is no certainty of a new civilization’s dawning, what is clear is that, thanks to apocalypse, Frankenstein’s monster has at long last found his bride. This romantic conclusion—with the happy couple suitably dressed in black—is doubtful of great appeal to fans of gothic youth culture. In the book, by contrast, there is more emphasis on Marla’s companions, the support group members who have risked their lives to help her save the narrator. “All the bowel cancers, the brain parasites, the melanoma people, the tuberculosis people are walking, limping, wheelchairing toward me,” chanting. “Let us help you” (204). Despite Marla’s overtures, there is no bonding moment between her and the narrator. Instead the narrator ends up in an asylum where he refers to his male psychologist as God—as though having found his lost father at last. Although Marla writes to him, and awaits his return, he does not want to go back just yet. For every once in a while an orderly with a black eye says, “We miss you Mr. Durden”; or another “with a broken nose” whispers, “We look forward to getting you back” (208). Fight Club goes on, in other words, offering powerless men transcendence through self-destructive pain.

Androgyny and Ethics at the Turn of the Millennium

In this essay I have argued for a telling likeness between two kinds of gothic narrative. The conspicuously androgynous goth narratives of the 1980s and early 1990s delighted in figuring straight, male heroes who, in a pleasurable paradox of sorts, feminized themselves through painful mourning for their lost brides. In postgoth narratives such as Fight Club, an unacknowledged desire for the feminine is articulated more obliquely, through hypermasculine self-destruction. Both kinds of protagonist are ardent gender performers, practicing an intense “aesthetics of existence” predicated on a Nietzschean/Baudelairean “will to heroise” the present” (Foucault, 1984a, 40). Gothic era and postgoth narratives of masculinity thus illustrate how Foucault’s ethics of the self and Butler’s theory of gender performativity are subject to the same dilemma. Both theorists enthusiastically endow
postmodern subjects with a potential for liberatory self-invention. Yet in
to exhorting individual performative breaks from the norm, both theo-
rists evade crucial questions of social situatedness and ethical competence.
Hence, neither theory can predict whether the emancipatory gender out-
law or self-inventing hero will be a lipstick lesbian, a masochist athlete, a
vampiresque goth, or—more ominously—an übermasculine fascist bent on
nihilistic fantasies of destruction.

Recent critiques have begun to question the ontological coherence and
political efficacy of the human subject theorized as either voluntary per-
former or self-heroizing aesthete. Thus, Pierre Bourdieu (2001) has ar-
gued that a resistance reduced to "individual acts" "expect[s] too much for
the meager and uncertain results" it is likely to obtain (viii). Indeed, Bour-
dieu's crucial concept of the habitus—which invites a rigorously historicized
and material account of the situated human subject, encapsulates precisely
what many critics find lacking in Butler's theory of gender performativity.33
These include Joseph Valente and Molly Anne Rothenberg (1997) on the
dearth of social context (289). Michael Warner (1999) on the metaphysical
presumption of an otherwise unexplained queer resistance (155–7). Toril
Moi (1999) on the resort to "theoreticism" (59). Jay Prosser (1999) on
the dematerialization of the body (21–60), and Amanda Anderson (1998)
on the "evasion of normative explicitness" (3). Indeed, Prosser's "fleshy"
focus invites us to read the gender dysphoria depicted in Fight Club as a kind
of derailed transsexual experience: Palahniuk's narrator rebels against his
male anatomy first by identifying with Big Bob's "beyond sex" alternative,
and eventually by pulverizing his flesh one gruesome fight at a time.34

It is also true that, for all their antiessentialism, Butler and Foucault
remain curiously caught up in the same romantic dilemma that dooms
Frankenstein's monster to yearn for completion. The Enlightenment valor-
ized the classical ideal of man as public citizen, while liberals such as Hegel
theorized a more sociable man who thrived in civil society. Still other strains
of romanticism asserted more privatistic notions of masculine individu-
ality. For many romantics, "self-development, self-expression, and artistic
creation" were predicated on a radical detachment "from mundane exis-
tence" (Rosenblum 1987, 69; cf. Kymlicka 1990, 258). Romanticism of
this kind constructed a monadic subject whose privileged selfhood was con-
stituted in opposition to society. Of course, Foucault and Butler do not
explicitly posit a prediscursive authenticity; rather, Foucault follows the
radical romantic moves of Baudelaire and Nietzsche, asserting private self-
vention, whereas Butler proposes "disidentification" with "regulatory
norms" (1993, 4). Still, by presuming that such resistant capacities are

somehow latent and ready to mobilize, both Foucault and Butler seem tac-
tily to depend on the prior existence of what Anthony Appiah (1994) calls
an "authentic nugget of selfhood," which, like "the notion that I can simply
make up any self I choose," fails to account for the social situations in which
identities, resistant or otherwise, are formed (155).34 For Appiah, selves are
dialogically constituted through culture, social institutions, and relations
with others. Although we "do make choices," Appiah writes in an echo of
Karl Marx, "we do not determine the options among which we choose" (155).
Appiah thus asserts the same stress on "social conditions of possi-
bility" that underwrites Bourdieu's notion of the habitus and a materialist
feminism such as Moi's (Bourdieu 2001, 9).

Stripped of such social embedding, the self-heroizing monad is onto-
logically deficient. What psychic resources, asks Benhabib (1992, 218),
account for the resistant will that Butler describes? What kind of political
agency, asks Tim Dean (2000, 71–72), can be exercised by subjects consti-
tuted in terms of the "imitative generation of reality effects"? For resistance
to become politically effective, argues Michael Warner, "it has to find some
articulation, some scene of action, and some normative force of its own." Yet,
in Butler's formulation, individual resistance is theorized as both the effect
of and the antidote to the subjectivizing effects of a dehistoricized "power"
(Warner 1999, 155).36

The theory of gender performativity that provokes such questions is the
same theory that authorizes gender pluralism as a progressive ethical and politi-
cal strategy. Pluralism is the predictable response of any position that, like
Butler's, construes the affirmation of two sexes—male and female—as en-
tailing the metaphysical grounding of, and thus a capitalization to, biological
determinism, gender binarism, and heterosexist oppression. Pluralism also
provides an answer to the exclusion that is seen invariably to attend the con-
stitution of subjects through "identification with the normative phantasm
of 'sex' " (1993, 3). Of course, no one who supports tolerance, diversity,
and sexual dissidence will wish to dissent from a politics enjoining prefer-
ence. Yet, as the cited critiques suggest, the project of gender pluralism is not
in itself adequate to describe the democratizing effects toward which it
aspires.

More than a decade ago, Warner cautioned cultural critics against an
"expressivist pluralism" that would fetishize difference for its own sake,
aspiring to a "representational politics of inclusion and a drama of au-
thentic embodiment." In such a politics, "marginal styles of embodiment"
would take on a "hyper-allegorized form" in which their presumptive rep-
resentation of "'race' or 'gender' or 'sexuality' " would be taken to signify
"inclusion and authenticity" (Warner 1993, xix). It is to counter such unabated expressivist tendencies that I urge the rethinking of androgyny as an ethical category. For such a notion of androgyny could, I believe, help to elucidate the ethical impoverishment of certain genders and to distinguish between mere representational politics and a substantive commitment to justice and care.

In her very smart book Female Masculinity (1998), Judith Halberstam provides an interesting example of how pluralist urges have come to underwrite some of the most provocative work in feminist and queer theory. Notably, Halberstam begins by rejecting the limitations of a prior conception of gender pluralism, Garber's notion of the third. As Halberstam sees it, "thirdness" merely balances the binary system, while "homogenize[ing] many different gender[s]... under the banner of 'other'" (28). Instead, Halberstam seeks both to "make masculinity safe for women and girls" and to eradicate binarism completely: "to make gender optional," to cultivate "gender preference," "to account for the multiple genders that we already produce and sustain" (268, 27). This commendably ambitious program involves several unaddressed tensions. For one thing, the mission "to make masculinity safe for women and girls" contradicts the vision of infinitely variable genders. The first begs the question of how masculinity can be made safe for women and girls when it is by no means clear that it has ever been safe for men and boys. The second project returns us to gender pluralism, the utopian potential of which Halberstam, like many others, tends to assume rather than elucidate.

Why theorize female masculinity as a multiplicity of genders rather than as a flexible form of androgynous self-fashioning? To be sure, when androgyny is understood as a normative gender—an obligatory synthesis of male and female identities—it risks further reifying a binary structure that is already too obdurate. Yet it is worth noting that in Gayle Rubin's (1975) seminal feminist account, androgyny is not figured as a prescribed mixture of the masculine and feminine, but as the entire absence of gender. An androgy nous society, writes Rubin, is "genderless (though not sexless)," for in it "one's sexual anatomy is irrelevant to who one is, what one does, and with whom one makes love" (204). For Rubin, androgyny is what is left when sex is stripped of its power to ascribe gender and when, as a result, gender withers away. By contrast, the project of gender pluralism is less concerned to discount gender than to eradicate the starting point of sex. Thus, for Halberstam, the recognition of "multiple genders" may at long last expose the "failure of 'male' and 'female' to exhaust the field of gender variation" (1998, 27). In Rubin, the delinking of sex and gender is seen to render sex innocuous while consigning gender to the dustbin of history. In Halberstam, gender is harnessed—one might say refined—so that it may batter the dualism of sex with its freewheeling multiplicity. Ironically, then, whereas Rubin is ready to bid adieu to masculinity, Halberstam embraces it believing that, through its multifarious appropriations by queer women, masculinity can become the kind of gender to end males (and females) as we know them.

But what is the evidence for such belief? From the vantage of Warner's analysis one may note a curious likeness between Halberstam's expressivist utopia—"a system of gender preferences [that] would allow for gender neutrality until such a time [as a person] announces his or her or its gender" (Halberstam 1998, 27)—and the myth of the free market under neoliberalism. Both assume a neutral context that purports to allow individuals to exercise unfettered choices, and, in so doing, both tacitly subsume some variation on the romantic faith in the "authentic nugget" that presumably directs such choices. Yet, as Bourdieu, Moi, and Appiah want to remind us, the choices we make are limited by the options we find in our particular situations. The all too obvious fact is that female reproductive functions continue profoundly to delimit the choices of many (perhaps most) women. Then too, under the reigning neoliberal governmentality, as Warner has demonstrated, choice tends to go hand in hand with intense normalization. In a world in which the corporate-backed powers that be promote a sanitized public sphere, alternative identities cannot be sustained by privatized choice alone. Rather, such identities require "the circulation and accessibility" of repressed knowledges, and "the public elaboration of a social world that can make less alienated relations possible" (Warner 1991, 171; cf. Warner 2002).

To be sure, Halberstam's claim that women's constitutive contributions to masculinity have been erased is a crucial one. Yet in redressing this historical lacuna she stresses the importance of pluralism: "What we recognize as female masculinity is actually a multiplicity of masculinities, indeed a proliferation of masculinities, and the more we identify the various forms of female masculinity, the more they multiply" (1998, 46). Such a claim is, of course, undeniable (by the same token, there are, doubtless, many gothic masculinities, female as well as male, beyond those described in this essay). Yet it is one thing to attend multiplicity in order to expose the contingent features of gender, and another to imply that the sheer multiplicity of a particular gender formation—in this case female masculinity—imbues its appropriation with a radicalizing potential. The danger of having it both ways, as I think Halberstam wants to do, is that one need then never bring
"masculinity" to book. Hence, while "the unholy union of femaleness and masculinity" can indeed "produce wildly unpredictable results," many of them compelling, it remains the case that "masculinity" has functioned historically as a means to authorizing ethical and emotional impoverishment (46). Likewise, though "femininity" has never reliably warranted relations of care or attention to otherness, it has reliably exempted "masculine" subjects from burdening themselves with such concerns.

Of course, a world made safe for but dykes, drag queens, goths, dandies, and other transgenders cannot but be preferable to one that represses the aesthetics of existence. At its best, pluralism is the product of a society that is committed to an ethic of tolerance, but it is not in itself a basis on which to promote such tolerance or, indeed, to promote any other ethical commitment that might underpin democratic social relations. In the absence of the transformative conditions specified by Warner, what—outside of some myth of the invisible hand—assures us that more genders will necessarily provide us with better genders? Is it not, after all, possible that a new proliferation of female masculinities might trigger an ever greater surge of hypermasculine cult identities among men? How can we be certain that stylistically performed gender preferences will liberate us? That their subversive effects will induce the kind of political culture that critics want but do not always specify? By contrast, a rethinking of androgyny invites us to visualize a positive ethical agency that gender pluralism, with its implicitly negative (neoliberal) conception of freedom, does not.

Whereas the theory of gender performativity has thus tended to promote pluralism, Foucault’s ethics of the self has exerted a somewhat different influence. The notion of self-aestheticization as a means of resistance is profoundly appealing, but without a rigorous account of gender (and other social situations), such a theory tends to reproduce the "substitutionalism" common to Western philosophy. Thus, the self-inventing subject does not pluralize gender but, rather, affects to transcend it in much the same way as did many nineteenth-century precursors. That the unengrammed dandy Foucault valorizes is beyond the reach of many people suggests, at the very least, that ethical self-fashioning must be buttressed by commitment to substantive equality across lines of gender, race, and class. When Foucault proposes that "everyone's life become a work of art," he envisions a radical democratization of aesthetics (1984a, 350–51), yet his focus remains fixed on the practices of abstract individuals. Thus, like the self-fashioning heroes of gothic narratives, Foucault’s ethical subject lacks an attention to difference that would attach him (or her) to the aestheticizing projects of others.

Nonetheless, a notion of androgynous ethical competence could provide an opportunity to reconcile Foucault’s ethics of the self with a recuperated universalist ideal. Such a project could align Foucault’s vision with Benhabib’s efforts to revamp communicative ethics. What Benhabib values in the communicative approach is its determination to elucidate the conditions required for democratic dialogue and mutual respect. Yet this intersubjective project, which has been elaborately theorized by Jürgen Habermas, remains hampered by its attachment to the rights-bearing individual, or generalized other. As a disembodied abstraction, the Habermasian subject lacks the competence to achieve mutual understanding, a goal which, for Benhabib, "requires us to view each and every rational being as an individual with a concrete history, identity and affective emotional constitution" (1992, 159; cf. Young 1987 and Fraser 1991). To achieve what Benhabib calls an "interactive universalism," communicative ethics must rid itself of its masculinist (and other dominant) biases, acknowledging the embodiment and embedding of human subjects. Thus, in a way that fuses a notion of habitus to a refuged ethics of the self, Benhabib defines universality as "the concrete process in politics and morals of the struggle of concrete, embodied selves, striving for autonomy" (1992, 153).

Gothic narratives of masculinility illuminate such a project. For centuries, philosophers, aesthetes, and gender dissidents of many kinds have struggled to overcome the disabling split between public and private selves. But their efforts have been thwarted by a chimerical ideal of universality, which is itself underwritten by a flawed rendering of sexual nature. Romanticism too often intensified the rift in masculine subjectivity by driving the male monad into an ever—more privatized struggle to realize his "authentic nugget"—a doomed monologue that is captured by the Cure's account of "hopelessly fighting the devil futility." Aestheticism too often offered the illusion of dialogue through a cult of male sensibility that, as expressed in gothic narratives, offers feminizing pain as a substitute for the unrecognized female other. Today, a neoliberal society encourages rights-bearing monads to submit themselves to a normalized public sphere, limiting self-expression to private consumption. In Fight Club this leaves the masculine subject to find solace either in the support groups' fetishized feminine ethic, or in destructive subcultures of hypermasculine self-heroization.

Motivating all of these narratives, I believe, is an unmistakable desire for androgyny, by which I mean ethical undividedness. And that undividedness stands for the ethical competence to overcome centuries-old binaries and their alienating effects. The androgyny toward which gothic narratives look forward may thus be compatible with the queer and Lacanian position "outside the" that Tim Dean (2000) exhorts us to think more
about. Yet another framework for androgyny so conceived is found in Stephen K. White's (1991) attempt to integrate the feminist elucidation of care with the antimonist critiques of Martin Heidegger, Theodor Adorno, and Jacques Derrida. Both feminists and postmodernists, White explains, articulate "a moral-aesthetic" responsibility to otherness that is able to temper the Enlightenment tradition's "moral-prudential" responsibility to act. The latter responsibility, with its universalizing capacity to coordinate activity is indispensable, but it must never be permitted to displace the equally important responsibility to otherness, with its particularizing capacity to disclose worlds (20–22).

Although androgyny thus figured would seek to reclaim human competences from a bourgeois taxonomy that divides ethics along lines of gender, it need not take the form of a romantic quest for completion, sublation, or symmetry. In Bourdieu's account of sexism, the "social world constructs the body as a sexually defined reality and as the depository of sexually defining principles of vision and division" (2001, 11). It is in this way that the socialization of human subjects takes on a binaristic structure—as though the ethical underpinnings of a universal perspective were incommensurable with those of a concrete perspective, as though emotion were inconsistent with the ability to reason, as though attention to otherness need be a stumbling block to action. Deconstructing such ostensible binaries involves the disentangling of diverse ethical capacities from the sexual divisions that have organized them. Androgyny as I have conceived it is well suited for such demystifying labors: precisely because it is not itself a gender, it can function as a regulative ideal for the experimental play of genders. Androgyny so formulated culls from an ongoing history of desire for undividedness: its function is to render explicit the multidimensional and dialectical features of an ethical competence and the material and social conditions necessary for realizing them.

Such a notion of androgyny, which seeks to cross differences in sexual embodiment without prescribing a unitary gender as such, may fairly be thought of as a transitional term. That is, the ethical capacities that androgyny describes might eventually shed their present and historical association with gender. Under such circumstances the idea of an "androgynous" ethical competence would become obsolete—a vestigial marker of past ideologies in a genderless or postgender society like those envisioned by Rubin and Haraway. Yet in the far less utopian present, androgyny can provide a conceptual space for normative explication and social specification even as gender continues to operate as a category of resistant and multifarious play. Thus, whereas gender can be understood as a relatively plural category inviting freewheeling stylization and experimental modes of embodiment, androgyny can be developed as the frame through which we imagine what we require of subjects when we long for intersubjective competence, democratic possibility, and publicly elaborated social worlds.

Notes

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2. In the eighteenth century, as universalistic claims for human liberty and political equality threatened to disrupt traditional hierarchies, "arguments for fundamental sexual differences were shoved into the breach" (Laqueur 1987, 18).

3. Note that the perceived connection between an ethic of care and feminized spaces such as the home was itself ideologically constructed: as Rita Felski (1995) has argued, the domestic sphere, though "often portrayed as a domain where natural and timeless emotions hold sway," has been "radically implicated in patterns of modernization and processes of social change" (3).

4. For a discussion of the absolutized split between justice and the good life, which occurs with Kant, see Seligman 2002.

5. Dean, paraphrasing a recent edition of the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, explains that "gender dysphoria... refers to persistent anxiety, depression and distress concerning one's gender identity" (2000, 64).

6. "'Everything about a woman is a riddle,' says Zarathustra, 'and everything about a woman has one solution: that is pregnancy'" (Nietzsche 1954, 66).

7. Thus, according to Baudelaire, "Women cannot distinguish between soul and body, whereas the dandy creates a more and more perceptible divorce between the spirit and the brute" (qtd. in Cagnier 2000, 14).

8. Here, in the context of gothic subculture, I use androgyny and androgynous in a conventional sense—to designate the perceived blending of so-called masculine and feminine styles and psychological attributes. This conventional usage is distinct from the particular ethical understanding of androgyny I develop later in this essay.

9. Note that what is appropriated is not only a fetishized "feminine" interior, but also an entire technology of the feminine, a range of self-fashioning techniques to which few modern men, apart from the nineteenth-century dandy, have had access. Writing about a similar (though not identical) appropriation in heavy

10. Compare to James Hannaham's (1997) description of the lead singer of Joy Division, another band tied to goth subculture, whose voice "said nothing if not that Ian Curtis was an ordinary man in extraordinary pain" (94).

11. On such grounds feminists have described androgyne as "a patriarchal desire for wholeness" and a male "fantasy of unity" (see Fayad 1997, 59–60). Fayad's first quotation is a paraphrase of Kristeva 1987; the second is a quotation from Cixous and Clement 1986 (84). Androgyne is also theorized as a patriarchal construction in Weil 1992.

12. All subsequent quotations are drawn from O'Barr, an unpaginated edition of The Crow.

13. On the whole, the movie is both more involved in staging violence and less involved in deifying women, though the trope of the lost bride remains a factor. The wedding is now set to have taken place the day after Shelly is killed, and her bridal dress and other bridal paraphernalia remain to remind Eric of his loss.

14. On the contemporaneous shift in alternative music, see Goodlad 2003. Fight Club's postgoth resort to the subject-constituting properties of physical pain is anticipated in "Hurt," a song by the goth-influenced industrial band, Nine Inch Nails: "I hurt myself today / To see if I still feel / I focus on the pain / The only thing that's real." "Hurt" was memorably covered by Johnny Cash in 2002.

15. Note the shift from a goth mourning for lost brides to a postgoth mourning for lost fathers. "If you're male and you're Christian and living in America," the narrator explains, "your father is your model for God. And if you never know your father, if your father bails out or dies or is never at home, what do you believe about God?" (Palahniuk 1999 [1996], 141; see also 134, 186).

16. As the following analysis will make clear, I seek to expand upon Henry Giroux's (2000) reading in which Palahniuk’s critique is shown to be reactionary and dangerously antifeminist (cf. Giroux 2001, chap. 3). Focusing almost entirely on David Fincher's film, Giroux rightly argues that Fight Club represents a white, heterosexual male "identity crisis of unparalleled proportions," a "generation of men condemned to corporate penage whose emotional lives and investments are mediated through the allure of commodities and goods." (2000, 5, 7). Fight Club does indeed fall short of the progressive pedagogy to which Giroux looks forward: its critique of neoliberalism lacks nuanced attention to class and race, and the film undoubtedly glamorizes violence for some viewers. Yet Giroux goes further by arguing that Fincher offers an unironical and ultimately celebratory mirroring of the social pathologies the novel depicts.

17. Clearly, writing in 1996, Palahniuk did not regard the first Gulf War as having provided such an opportunity; one must assume that in the current post-9/11 climate, especially in the wake of the aggressive Bush doctrine and the war in Iraq, the possibility of battlefield heroism has been reintroduced in the minds of some contemporary youth.

18. On the ethic of care, see Gilligan 1982; Benhabib 1992, esp. chaps. 5 and 6; and White 1991, esp. chap. 5. Yet another way of reading the emasculation that Fight Club depicts would connect it to the masochistic white masculinity described by David Savran (1998). For Savran, such masochism works by providing a symbolic equivalence between femininity and blackness: "It allows the white male subject to take up the position of victim, to feminize and/or blacken himself fantasically, and to disavow the homosexual cathexes that are crucial to the process of (patriarchal) cultural reproduction, all the while asserting his unimpeachable virility" (33). See Locke (n.d.) for a reading of Fight Club that unpacks the representation of white masculinity, arguing that the film (especially through its depiction of the racially hybridized Tyler), "deploys the categories of black and Asian to serve as markers that signify either too much or too little virility" (2).

19. It should be noted, though, that Marla is also represented in the context of a range of gendered problems, including a disturbing obsession with aging and cosmetic surgery. Hence the narrator's misogynistic "flight from the feminine" (Giroux 2000, 7) is at least partly motivated by the alienating effects of commodified sexual difference. Giroux's claim that Marla exists purely to "make men unhappy, and to service their sexual needs" is more pertinent to the film, which is less involved than the novel with representing women's gender-related dilemmas. That said, the claim that Fincher is complicit in "sanctioning violence against women" (Giroux 2000, 7) may underestimate the film's potential to spark critical reflection on masculinity.

20. As a mythic figure, the phallic mother embodies "the phallus in the form of unlimited jouissance," and, therefore, is "ungendered in the sense of . . . not being subject to sexual division" (Dean 2000, 89).

21. Needless to say, such cults provide support for Giroux's argument that Fight Club fails utterly to "rupture conventional ways of thinking about violence" (2000, 10).


23. Toward the end of the novel, the narrator is nearly castrated and, in a near-suicidal series of culminating fights, he is beaten until he cries and "his tongue drops to the floor" (Palahniuk 1999 [1996], 200–201).

24. Appiah is responding to Charles Taylor's formulation of authenticity and to the self-inventing strategies of Oscar Wilde, but his comments are also relevant to Butler and Foucault.

25. According to Marx's well-known dictum, "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past" (1846 [1852], 97).

26. Warner goes on, "It is only a slight exaggeration to say that for Butler, people have all along resisted, just by having psyches and bodies, the norms that form them" (1999, 155; cf. Anderson 1998, 11).

27. This contradiction derives from a terminological ambiguity: Halberstam writes of female masculinity both as one among many genders, and, at the same time, as
an overarching rubric for a multiplicity of genders. By visualizing "masculinity" as pluralized and multifarious, it becomes possible to theorize it as a nonbinary, gender formation. But can one adopt such a stance without simultaneously authorizing a panoply of male masculinities?

28. Halberstam rejects the concept on comparable grounds: "Androgyny always returns us to [a] humanist vision of the balanced binary in which maleness and femaleness are in complete accord" (1998, 215).

29. Note the similarity between Rubin's position and one aspect of Halberstam's multi-faceted utopian formulation: "to make gender optional" (Halberstam 1998, 27; cf. 273).

30. Although all feminists are doubtless aware of this fact, it is not clear how the project of liberalism articulates demands for the specific material resources that are necessary to warrant many female choices. For an interesting "thought experiment" on gender equity, see Fraser 1996, which argues that the only practicable way to achieve gender equity is to make sure that men do their share of "primary care-work" (235). Women's material conditions, in other words, depend not only on their own preferences but also on those of men.

31. Significantly, Halberstam recognizes that the "dual mechanism of a lack of care for the self and a callous disregard for the care of others seems to characterize much that we take for granted about white male masculinity"; yet, for her, the masculine tendency to inflict "extreme physical damage" on self and others makes it "hard to be very concerned about the burden of masculinity on males" (1998, 274). Halberstam thus appears to assume that femaleness and/or queerness automatically offsets the undesirable features of masculinity, an assumption that seems to me to entail the unintentional essentialization of female sex and/or lesbian sexuality.

32. Benhabib argues that the Western tradition is "substitutionalist" because the universalism it defends is defined surreptitiously by identifying the experiences of a specific group—white, male, property-owning adults—as the paradigmatic case of the human (1992, 152–53; cf. Brown 2001, 9).

33. Note that Butler (1996) has undertaken a comparable critical project. Yet, the radicalized inclusivity Butler hopes to achieve is looked for at the linguistic level, prior to the democratic conditions and ethical capabilities to which the concept of androgyny I am describing might be anchored.

34. See, for example, Habermas 1984, for this attempt to revise Enlightenment moral philosophy, shifting its grounding from the monologic reason of the Kantian subject to the communicative situation of subjects in dialogue.

35. The appeal of "an identification 'outsidex'," "Dean explains, is its potential to elude "symbolic alienation and subjective division" (2000, 90–99)—in other words, the same perceived incompletion that plagues the heroes of goth and post-goth narratives. For my purposes, what is most important about Dean's Lacanian argument is its skepticism toward any political strategy that relies exclusively on the diversification of performed gender and sexual norms (see also Dean 2000, chap. 6).