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Reformed Men: Alternative Masculinities in Experimental American Literature

By

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A.A., Prairie State College, 2017

B.A., Governors State University 2019

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

With a Major in English

Governors State University

University Park, IL 60484

2022

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Abstract

Gender is an integral aspect to one's lived experience; however, the collective understanding of gender is constantly being redefined. Consequently, the expectations attached to a particular gender identity are also being questioned. Current gender discourse calls attention to the fluidity of gender and experiences which diverge from traditional representations of gender. This thesis discusses works of contemporary experimental American literature from the perspective of masculinity studies. As a whole, masculinity studies seeks to address issues related to traditional male depictions in literature. This thesis aims to show how authors utilize traditional and experimental narrative elements to present alternatives to prescribed masculine identities. The novels discussed are as follows: *The Brief Wonderful Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Diaz (2007), *Invisible Monsters Remix* (2012) by Chuck Palahniuk, and *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men* (1999) by David Foster Wallace. Though all of these novels present bold--sometimes disturbing--depictions of men and might even appear to put them on a pedestal, their work does not celebrate them. In presenting these types of men, the authors work to address confining perspectives of prescribed masculinity. The men of these novels do not need to act a certain way or possess certain characteristics to be considered a man. They often undergo experiences which challenge their--and the readers'--perception of social roles. Furthermore, the use of experimental elements adds to the authors' ability to present alternative masculinities. By toying with the conventions

of the novel, they are able to create a narrative space where social norms are challenged and a space where different ways of being can exist.

Keywords: Masculinity Studies, Alternative Masculinities, Contemporary Literature, Experimental Literature

Introduction

When used in tandem with literary studies, gender studies can become a tool for decoding and understanding overarching social attitudes about gender. Current gender discourse calls attention to the fluidity of gender and experiences which diverge from traditional representations of it. In a discussion of gender identity in 2011, historian and bioethicist Alice Dreger asserts that, as gender studies makes advancements, “the more we have to admit to ourselves that these categories that we thought of as stable anatomical categories that mapped very simply to stable identity categories are a lot fuzzier than we thought” (“Is Anatomy Destiny?”). Gender is often an integral aspect to one’s lived experience; however, the collective understanding of gender is constantly being redefined. Consequently, the expectations attached to a particular gender identity are also being questioned. Considering this state of flux which gender and gender expectations are in, it is worthwhile to explore developing fields within gender studies and how they can be used to understand cultural artifacts like literature.

A relatively new field within gender studies is men’s studies. In broad terms, men’s studies focuses on analyzing topics relevant to men. In “Concepts of Masculinity and Masculinity Studies,” Todd Reeser discusses the origins of men’s studies in the 1980s. Reeser writes how, in the early years of men’s studies, its scholars were primarily concerned with, “responding to sex role theory, in which the male sex role was taken as a uniform, stable, and normative configuration to which actual males do or do not conform” (14). In this early perspective of masculinity, men’s studies scholars viewed the masculine experience as monolithic and unchanging. However, as the field developed

over time, the perspective of male identity changed. That is, masculinity is now viewed as multifaceted and changing, and scholars hold the idea that there is no singular way of being a man. As a result of such a new perspective on masculinity, men's studies also seeks to address issues related to social assumptions about male identity. Regarding the shift in men's studies' perspective, Reeser writes how, "The [traditional] male sex role is problematic in the sense that traits or qualities taken to define that role are based on shared ideas about what a man is or ought to be" (14). Society often deems behaviors such as aggression, hypersexuality, assertiveness to be masculine and sets them as the standard for men. Alex Hobbs in "Masculinity Studies and Literature," has similar observations as Reeser, and furthers his claims by elaborating on the damaging effects of presumptions about masculinity. Hobbs posits, "It is essential that men are part of the gender debate, not simply for the sake of parity, but because presumptions about masculinity are damaging" (384). Hobbs believes it imperative that preconceived notions about masculinity be reframed as they can actually cause harm rather than help men. Conceptions about the male sex roles and masculinity reject nuance about the lives and unique experiences of men in favor of generalizations. This limits the agency of men as they must either subscribe to rigid roles or their quality of life will immensely suffer.

Broadly speaking, masculinity studies holds a position on the outlier of gender studies. This outlier status is partly due to what Reeser refers to as a traditional invisibility. Reeser writes that, "Masculinity's traditional invisibility, it was widely thought, was one way in which it maintained its power: by denying implicitly or explicitly that men were gendered, they could escape close scrutiny or the need to change" (Reeser 16). The traditional invisibility of masculinity prevented the social

perception of men from developing as masculinity was thought of as an unchanging ideal rather than changing. Harry Brod tackles a similar concept in “The Making of Masculinities: The New Men’s Studies,” stating, “While women have been obscured from our vision by being too much in the background, men have been obscured by being too much in the foreground” (40-41). By holding a position of social power, men have had gender expectations imposed upon them and this prevented any deviations from the norm. The considered a man and live in a society with rigid gender expectations, they must constrict their identities to fit the prescribed social identity. The propagation of masculine stereotypes in conjunction with a hesitance to recognize the diversity of masculinity are what partially caused men’s issues to be overlooked in gender discourse.

Men’s studies scholars actively reject the notion of rigid male roles and expectations. They work towards addressing them in their scholarship. For instance, a keystone area of study in men’s studies is hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity consists of “how particular groups of men inhabit positions of power and wealth and how they legitimate and reproduce the social relationships that generate their dominance” (Carrigan et al. 592). By analyzing hegemonic masculinity, men’s studies scholars explore the sociological roots which create and sustain male positions of power and allow for them to be challenged. Rather than attempting to justify and promote a universal, unchanging, set of masculine ideals, Men’s studies seeks to deconstruct them and present alternatives. These alternative masculine identities, opposed to the traditional perspectives of masculinity, do not have a static set of characteristics one must ascribe to be considered masculine. Instead, alternative masculinities recognize the diversity of men’s lived experiences.

Considering the goal of men's studies and how it aims to address the dangers of prescribed masculine identities, I find it relevant to discuss the relationship between men's studies and feminist studies. Brod captures the relationship by asserting, "The new men's studies... does not recapitulate traditionally male-biased scholarship. Like woman's studies, men's studies aims at the emasculation of patriarchal ideology's masquerade as knowledge" (39-40). Brod's assertion captures the link between the two fields and how they resemble each other. Men's studies does not consider itself in opposition to women's studies. Instead, it sees itself having similar goals as the field in addressing and working to resist the detrimental effects of the patriarchy.

In men's studies' pursuit of resisting patriarchal influence, however, it should be noted that the field is not attempting to merely co-opt feminist concepts. In "Masculinities and Literary Studies," Josep Armengol acknowledges men's studies' relatively new position in literary studies. Additionally, Armengol comments that it is not enough for scholars to "adopt and start imitating feminist perspectives, aims and resolutions." Rather scholars, "must try to develop their own counter-discourse against patriarchy" (427). To resist patriarchal influence, men's studies must develop its own practices, policies, and principles as a field and use them to enact change.

Within literature, the goals of men's studies (or masculinity studies when referring to literature) remains largely similar. Reeser writes how—in the context of literature—a men's studies perspective has the capacity to, "reveal aspects of masculinity that might not come out or be visible in daily life or in other types of cultural artifacts" (11). Instead of seeking to play into the conceived notions of masculinity, masculinity studies aim to challenge the boundaries of what it means to be a man and what is

considered masculine. James D. Riemer comments on how approaching literature from a masculinity studies perspective can yield new insights into masculinity. Riemer notes how there is, “a multiplicity of ideals of American manhood, some of which at times conflict with one another” (290). Masculinity studies can yield alternative conceptions of masculine identity. These perspectives of masculinity are fluid and not easily categorized—a stark contrast to a single masculine identity. Furthermore, Riemer writes that a masculinity studies perspective has a “concentration on the personal” which “reveal[s]the ways in which manly ideals can restrict and complicate men’s lives, often interfering with the satisfaction of their basic human needs” (295). Part of masculinity studies analyzes the constrictive nature of prescribed masculine roles and show their effects on men and their inner quality of life. However, the field’s concerns do not stop at merely pointing out the shortcomings of these ideals. Hobbs expands on masculinity studies’ goals, writing how masculinity studies focuses on,

the way masculine stereotypes can restrict a character’s experience or expression. Critics attempt to open up the narrow confines of accepted masculinity; they identify negative representations of men, such as misogynists and seek to highlight positive alternative forms of masculinity. (Hobbs 390).

In addition to providing a more diverse and intimate perspective of the masculine experience—something overshadowed by rigid perspectives on masculinity--masculinity studies also showcases alternatives to detrimental forms of masculinity. By doing this, the field works against patriarchal beliefs and diversifies what individuals consider to be the masculine. From the masculinity studies perspective, being a man is not dependent on

displaying traditionally masculine characteristics and behaviors, rather it is flexible and changing.

I find masculinity studies an effective lens to view contemporary literature from because of their similarities. Contemporary literature is known for pushing boundaries of content and form. Specifically, experimental contemporary literature employs practices such as unnatural narrators and disjointed structures. These tactics push the boundaries of writing to create unique work and are even used to comment on literature itself. Experimental literature has the capacity to evolve literary understanding, to make “alternatives visible and conceivable, and some of these alternatives become the foundations for future developments, whole new ways of writing, some of which eventually filter into the mainstream itself.” (Bray et al.1). By challenging mainstream literary practices, experimental literature yields new innovations for readers and writers alike. This quality of contemporary experimental literature of promoting alternatives echoes masculinity studies’ desire to present alternatives in regards to masculinity.

Both masculinity studies and contemporary literature seek to show diversity of experiences—whether lived or fictional. Ronald Sukenick in “The New Tradition of Fiction” posits that “the form of the novel should seek to approximate the shape of our experience” and that “fiction is one of the ways we have of creating ourselves and the lives we lead” (37, 40). Suckenic believes that the novel form has potential to reflect and explore genuine life experiences and identity. Considering how masculinity studies attempts to reveal the complexity and diversity of men’s lives, it makes sense to view experimental literature—literature which is itself diverse and complex—from the perspective of masculinity studies.

This thesis aims to analyze works of experimental contemporary American literature from a masculinity studies perspective. I aim to analyze three male authored novels which are controversial for their depictions of masculinity. Each novel contains characters whose sense of masculinity is detrimental for either themselves or for those around them. However, rather than celebrating these detrimental models of masculinity, I argue that the works actually resist them in favor of alternative masculinities. This resistance is accomplished through various elements of each text—specifically character, narration, and structure. The novels which will be discussed are as follows: *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Diaz (2007), *Invisible Monsters Remix* (2012) by Chuck Palahniuk, and *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men* (1999) by David Foster Wallace.

Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* tells the story of the titular character—a hopelessly romantic young Dominican man. This text tackles the Dominican model of masculinity which prides aggression and hypersexuality over anything else. Diaz resists this notion through the central male characters Oscar and Yunior who carry characteristics that contrast with traditional depictions of Dominican masculinity which demonstrates characteristics such as hypersexuality and aggression. Diaz then utilizes textual elements to further emphasize the concept of alternative identities.

Palahniuk's *Invisible Monsters Remix* follows a supermodel in her life after being horribly disfigured. Unlike the original novel, which was edited to have a more linear flow of story, *Invisible Monsters Remix* follows the author's original design and creates a delightfully disjointed narrative. The fractured nature of the narrative not only reflects the

main character's journey of self-discovery, but also identities of the men in the story. Palahniuk utilizes this novel to illustrate the confining effect of prescribed masculine identities for gay men. His novel then suggests how the only way to resist such influence is through assuming an alternative identity which exists beyond social boundaries.

Lastly, Wallace's *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* is a fictional collection of interviews by a nameless interviewer. The collection walks the fine line of being equal parts humorous and obscene. Wallace greatly toys with narrative form and depicts a diverse range of male experiences. Wallace presents a flawed depiction of men who serve as an alternative to more destructive male identities.

Through my analysis of each novel, I aim to show how each author uses their work to present alternative masculinities. Furthermore, I will also pay particular attention to how each author manipulates elements of their text to reinforce or emphasize their conception of alternative masculinities. With my analysis of the texts, I hope to address how masculinity studies can help explore literature and its representations of masculinity within it.

The term "experimental literature" has an abundance of possible meanings depending on the scholar who uses it. When charactering this type of literature, I find Bray et al.'s ideas about what experimental literature should accomplish as an artform to be helpful. They write that experimental literature should pose, "fundamental questions about the very nature and being of verbal art itself. What is literature and what could it be?" What are its functions, its limitations? (1). Experimental literature, through its content and form, is capable of promoting a meaningful discussion and develop literature as a whole. Such experimentation is featured in metafiction and unnatural narratives. I

find that these forms heavily transform literary conventions and promote reader engagement. For the purposes of analyzing the aforementioned novels, I use the term “experimental literature” to refer to metafiction or literature which employs unnatural narrative elements.

I draw my understanding of metafiction from Patricia Waugh’s definition in *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* and Mark Currie’s definition in *Metafiction*. Waugh writes, “Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (2). Metafiction, per Waugh’s definition, does not attempt to retain the illusion of its established reality, rather it seeks to underscore its artificiality. Similarly, Currie observes metafiction’s status as a “borderline discourse, as a kind of writing which places itself on the border between fiction and criticism” (2). Both conceptualizations of metafiction emphasize how a text, by calling attention to its artificiality, can evoke a larger discussion about the act of writing itself. However, it should be noted that, because a metafiction acknowledges its own artificiality, it does not completely reject realism. Waugh remarks how, “very often realistic conventions supply the ‘control’ in metafictional texts, the norm or background against which the experimental strategies can foreground themselves” (18). Metafiction and realism are not clashing practices but are often used in conjunction with one another.

I base my definition of unnatural narratives primarily on Jan Alber’s conception of it in “Impossible Storyworlds and What to Do With Them” and Brian Richardson’s work in “Unnatural Narrative Theory.” Alber posits that unnatural narratives are

narratives which include seemingly impossible events—physically, logically, and beyond—which “radically deconstruct the anthropomorphic narrator, the traditional human character, or real-world notions of time and space” (Alber 80). Texts featuring unnatural narratives employ elements which defy traditional narrative elements.

Richardson observes that unnatural narratives are ones which, “defy the presuppositions of nonfictional narratives, the practices of realism, or other poetics that model themselves on nonfictional narratives and that transcend the conventions of existing established genres” (389). Richardson’s concept of unnatural narratives coincides with that of Alber’s definition in characterizing them as narratives which feature implausible or impossible elements and uses them to achieve a specific effect. For instance, an author who employs unnatural narratives can utilize them as “original vehicles for representation... Unnatural forms are an exceptional way to express extraordinary events and they produce a different, challenging kind of aesthetic experience.” (Alber et al. 365). By embracing untraditional elements of narrative, authors can explore the experiences of socially marginalized or suppressed individuals. In featuring these elements have the capacity to challenge both the conventions of narratives and social norms.

Sukenick writes that when creating a new tradition of fiction “it takes form to destroy form” (40). To advance the collective understanding of literature, its conventions need to be disrupted. A fitting tool to achieve this disruption is the subversion of literature’s conventions. Both metafiction and unnatural narratives allow for writers to either expand upon or challenge established writing conventions. Metafiction, while not completely abandoning realism, calls attention to its own artificiality. Waugh, while discussing metafiction, writes that it can help explore the “arbitrary linguistic system and

the world to which it apparently refers” (Waugh 3). As a result of this practice, metafiction allows room for the author to move outside the confines of narrative and to foster discourse about literature as a whole. Unnatural narratives, while somewhat similar to metafiction, brings the impossible to the forefront by “deliberately impeding the constitution of storyworlds” (Alber 80). Metafiction and unnatural narratives both adopt the form of the novel, yet they do not necessarily ascribe to established practices and, instead, transform them. Consequently, these forms of fiction have the potential to destroy (as Sucknick might say) the conceptions of literature and convey new ways of looking at it and aspects of the human experience such as gender.

The link between gender studies and literature is undeniable and can be an invaluable tool in understanding society as a whole. As the collective understanding of gender is developing—especially when considering developing fields such as men’s studies—masculinity studies lends itself to be used alongside a type of literature which promotes development in literary scholarship.

The Vulnerable Men and Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* chronicles the life of the titular character, a young Dominican American boy growing up in New Jersey. Narrated primarily by Oscar's friend Yunior, the novel traces the lives of both Oscar and members of Oscar's family. Diaz's work is rife with distinct characters, a torrent of pop culture/genre references, and fantastic elements—all of which culminate in a dynamic text. Diaz's work received critical acclaim and controversy because of its brash and humorous insight into the Dominican American experience. Furthermore, Diaz's novel also provides commentary on alternative conceptions of masculinity in relation to more traditional models of masculinity.

Diaz uses his novel to underline alternative masculine identities over traditional Dominican ideals of masculinity. Diaz approaches alternative masculinity through multiple facets of his novel. Though, at times, it seems as though Diaz is celebrating more traditional perspectives of masculinity by heavily featuring them in his novel, I argue Diaz is doing the opposite. Within his novel, Diaz casts alternative masculinity in a more positive light than traditional masculinity. He makes particular content and structural choices in order to achieve such an effect. Diaz accomplishes this through his novels' characters, narration, structure, and its fantastic elements. Diaz uses metafictional and unnatural narrative elements to challenge the gender expectations for Dominican men. This chapter aims to focus on the novel's characters, narration, the unique use of footnotes, paralleling narratives, and use of fantastic elements in Diaz's novel. Through Diaz's manipulation of these storytelling elements, his work creates a space for

alternative masculine identities to be represented. In doing this, the novel also works to challenge patriarchal beliefs about Dominican masculinity.

Before delving into how Diaz's novel addresses the issue of alternative masculine identities, I find it worthwhile to discuss the Dominican model of masculinity present throughout the novel. It is relevant to discuss Dominican masculinity because it is the identity which many of the characters are weighed against. Within his novel, Diaz presents Dominican masculinity as patriarchal in nature. In an interview with author Juleyka Lantigua in 2007, Diaz spoke about his novel with regards to the issue of masculinity. Diaz asserted that "We're accepted as long as we conform to what we are expected to be...You're Dominican only if you do this, this, and that...As a Dominican man, you're socialized to be a playboy." (83-84). Diaz sees Dominican men as having certain expectations and roles imposed upon them by their culture (one of which is to be hypersexual). Diaz's assertion reflects the circumstances of the men in *Oscar Wao* as they are pressured to fit into the cultural expectations to be considered a true Dominican man. Yunior indicates these cultural expectations early in the novel, as he remarks that in a Dominican family, one is "supposed to have Atomic Level G, was supposed to be pulling in the bitches with both hands" (24). Per this observation, one can glean that Dominican men are supposed to be domineering, hypermasculine, hypersexual beings. This Dominican cultural expectation aligns with a patriarchal model of masculinity as it aims to keep men in a space of social superiority over women. Dixia Ramirez, in "Great Men's Magic" captures the predicament of *Oscar Wao*'s characters, as they are torn between who they are and what their culture expects of them. Ramirez writes how the men of *Oscar Wao* face, "not only with patriarchal structures of power but also the

suffocating pressure of performative masculinity...Dominican masculinity and femininity is a central concern of the novel. Those who do not conform are violently punished” (384, 395). In order to survive in Dominican culture as a male, one must be able to fulfill these demands. If one does not or cannot meet these expectations, they suffer significantly within their own homes and within their community. The Dominican masculinity within Diaz’s novel is an unforgiving and inflexible one. It bases itself on behaviors which promote male dominance over women. Furthermore, this model of masculinity punishes men who cannot fully display these expected behaviors/characteristics. It is this model of masculinity which Diaz works to resist through his novel.

Diaz clearly presents an alternative to the Dominican masculine identity via his novel’s characters. This notion is embodied through its central male characters of Oscar and Yunior. These characters fall short of the expectations for Dominican men in some capacity. In doing this, Oscar and Yunior become instances of alternative masculinity.

Oscar serves as the opposite of the Dominican male ideal. In his interview with Lantigua, Diaz writes that Oscar is “the concept of the real version of everything that we’re performing against--at least as a Dominican man of color’ (83). Oscar’s existence works against the cultural assumptions about Dominican men. This notion is illustrated frequently in the novel as he is observed to be unlike the typical Dominican male. In one instance, Yunior remarks how Oscar, “couldn’t have pulled a girl if his life depended on it. Couldn’t play sports for shit, or dominoes, was beyond uncoordinated, threw a ball like a girl” (19-20). By the standards of the stereotyped Dominican man, Oscar is submissive and romantically inadequate. He is unable to perform the most basic characteristics of

Dominican men. However, simply because Oscar does not ascribe to cultural roles does not mean that he is presented without redemptive qualities. While Diaz does depict Oscar as a flawed male, he also provides nuance to his characters--primarily in regard to his relationships.

Diaz presents Oscar as connected with his emotions and yearning to establish a genuine connection with the women of his life. In his relationship pursuits, Oscar is noted as possessing an, “affection—that gravitational mass of love, fear, longing, desire and lust...[that] broke his heart everyday” (23). Rather than seeing women as a means of attaining sex, Oscar appears to want to form a connection with them. His desire for connection and feelings of immense love is often to his own disadvantage as he is liable for heartbreak and endangering his own wellbeing. This notion is clearly illustrated in the relationship Oscar has with Ybon. When Oscar visits the Dominican Republic, he passes the time by talking with his neighbor Ybon (a former prostitute). Yunion describes Oscar’s time with Ybon and how Oscar yearns for her, “Did they ever fuck? Of course not...He watched her for the signs, signs that would tell him she loved him...It seemed to Oscar that he was one of her few friends” (290). Rather than relentlessly pursuing sex with Ybon, Oscar forms a legitimate connection with her based on mutual interests. While, yes, he does want to engage in sexual intercourse with Ybon, he never makes an aggressive attempt to be with her. Though Diaz has Oscar diverge from the Dominican ideal of masculinity, he does not portray it as inherently negative. With Oscar, though he is not hypersexual or overtly masculine, he is more concerned with intimacy and showing vulnerability with others. Yunion faces a similar situation as Oscar in their relationship with Dominican masculinity.

Similar to Oscar, Yunior is portrayed as differing from prescribed concepts of masculinity. Yet, Yunior differs from Oscar in the sense that he is able to subscribe to some aspects of the Dominican model of masculinity. Several times within Diaz's novel, Yunior makes mention of his sexual liaisons. He even possesses such an awareness of women to where he attempts to coach Oscar on how to navigate relationships. In this regard, Yunior aligns with Dominican masculine expectations. He fulfills the notion of Dominican men being hypersexual and concerned primarily with sex. Although Yunior fits into a traditional masculine role due to his sexuality, he is unable to completely align with it.

Yunior's inability to truly embrace Dominican masculinity is largely due to his association with Oscar. In spending time with Oscar, Yunior develops an affinity for genres such as sci-fi and fantasy, which Yunior previously notes in the novel as contributing to Oscar's social difficulties. Yunior remarks, "being a reader/fanboy (for lack of a better term) helped him [Oscar] get through thorough days of his youth, but it also made him stick out in the streets of Paterson even more than he already did" (22). The state of being a "fanboy" works against Oscar's attempts to be accepted by his community. By sharing Oscar's interests—ones which ultimately contribute to Oscar's nerdiness and social isolation--Yunior faces a similar type of dilemma. Oscar and Yunior become aligned with each other, and Yunior, simultaneously, places himself further away from embodying the idealized form of masculinity. Robert K. Fritz in "Gender and Genre Fiction in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*" explores Yunior's interests and how they relate to Dominican masculinity. Fritz observes that Yunior's interests in and references to genres are his way to demonstrate "those aspects of his personality that do

not conform to the model of Dominican- American masculinity presented in the novel” (208). According to Fritz, possessing an interest in genre inhibits one from aligning with Dominican masculinity.

The reader witnesses the effects of Yuniór’s interests as spending time with Oscar eventually prompts Yuniór to reframe how he approaches relationships. In particular, Yuniór’s attitude towards Oscar’s sister Lola changes. At first, Yuniór initially approached Lola as he would any other woman referring to their relationship as a “fling” (169). As the novel progresses and he spends more time with Oscar, Yuniór changes substantially. This change is most evident at the end of the novel, when Yuniór expresses his attitude towards Lola. Yuniór seems to want to have an authentic connection with Lola. Yuniór remarks, “I used to have this stupid dream that shit could be saved, that we would be in bed together like the old times....and I’d finally try to say words that could have saved us ____ ____ ____” (327). This shift from ladies’ man to a more thoughtful romantic suggests that his time with Oscar has affected him profoundly, and Yuniór begins to care about sustaining a connection with Lola. Like with Oscar, Yuniór’s diversion from the masculine ideal is not presented negatively. Though Yuniór moves away from the qualities which make him a “true Dominican man” he develops a more caring identity. While Oscar and Yuniór do not fit the definition of what is considered masculine in their culture, they nonetheless possess worthwhile characteristics. They represent an alternative masculine identity which is based on connection and vulnerability with others, rather than one which relies on a physical connection.

Through the characters of Oscar and Yuniór, Diaz presents the reader with variations of the masculine identity. Through Oscar, the reader sees a masculinity which

is the exact opposite of the Dominican masculine ideal. While the Dominican masculine ideal is based on attributes such as assertiveness, confidence, and hypersexuality, Oscar's masculinity is based on characteristics of connection and intimacy. Similarly, though Yunior's masculinity does align with the masculine ideal in some regards, he nonetheless does not meet the standards of the masculine ideal. These two different depictions of masculinity show the diversity of the masculine experience. Rather than fitting into one category of characteristics, the existence of Oscar and Yunior's characters resists traditional masculinity and evokes the idea of a caring and evolving masculinity.

The narration of *Oscar Wao* furthers the notion of alternative masculinity in contrast to Dominican masculinity. As previously noted, Yunior is the primary narrator of Diaz's novel. Diaz uses Yunior's narration to depict the shift from a more traditional masculine identity to one which is sympathetic and vulnerable. The shift in narration reflects Yunior's progression as a character within the narrative. Ultimately, it shows how one is not confined to rigid gender roles.

Yunior's initial narration is characterized by its brash and colloquial quality. His narration is not a strict telling of events, rather it is rife with expletives and slang. Yunior uses this language in a way which reinforces the traditional Dominican masculinity. Specifically, he uses it to insult Oscar and deride him for his inability to align with masculine expectations. For example, when Yunior describes one of Oscar's close friendships, he mocks Oscar's situation. Yunior remarks, "Poor Oscar. Without even realizing it he'd fallen into one of those Let's-be-Friends Vortexes, the bane of nerdboys everywhere" (41). Yunior uses an array of colorful language to represent Oscar's hopeless situation and poke fun at it. In this way, Yunior uses his narration to not only

depict Oscar's shortcomings, but to also insult him. In another instance, when Oscar is being interrogated by Ybon's boyfriend, the captain, Yunion comments on Oscar's appearance. He observes "because he was a homely slob, because he really looked like un maldito pariguayo who had never had no luck in his life, the captain took Gollum-pity on him" (290). In this moment, Yunion once again calls attention to Oscar's unmanliness in a disparaging way. According to Yunion, the only reason why Oscar is able to avoid the complete wrath of the captain is because he is so unmasculine that the captain believes Oscar to be a non-threat to him. These examples are a microcosm of the disparaging nature of Yunion's early narration.

Despite starting off as derisive and insulting towards Oscar who does not align with masculine expectations, Yunion's narration eventually begins to shift. Throughout the course of the novel, Yunion gains a more intimate and caring quality to his narration (likely a result of him getting to know Oscar better). This transition begins subtly at first, when Oscar attempts suicide and Yunion observes how Oscar's family reacts to it, remarking "I begrudged the motherfucker. A heart like mine, which never got any kind of affection growing up, is terrible above all things" (185). Seeing how Oscar's family comes to his aid in a time of crisis forces Yunion to become sentimental and reflect on his own upbringing. Later in the novel, Yunion's narration becomes more outwardly caring towards Oscar. Yunion's narration reflects his character growth from someone who attacks someone for their apparent lack of masculinity to sympathetic of their struggles. Through the narration, the reader witnesses the literal transition away from more stereotyped masculine behavior. This shift in focus from traditional masculinity is further

reflected in the structure of *Oscar Wao* which Diaz uses to emphasize alternative masculinity.

Another notable characteristic of Diaz's novel is its structure and how Diaz uses it to emphasize alternative masculinities. One way he does this within his novel is with his use of footnotes. The text features a total of thirty-three footnotes--many of which provide the reader with Dominican history. In writing, footnotes are typically used to provide readers with information without diverting from the main body of text. In "At the Margin of Discourse: Footnotes in The Fictional Text," Shari Benstock discusses the nature of footnotes in writing. Benstock writes, "footnotes are physically more constrained than the primary text: they are minimal, skeletal, succinct, their purpose being to elaborate on the text without engulfing it" (204). In other words, the information within footnotes is often considered supplemental to the main text. Technically, the text could be understood without the footnotes if needed. One might even say that an author's use of footnotes creates a hierarchy within the text where the most important information is contained within the body and the less important information is contained within the footnotes. Diaz plays upon the notion of footnotes signaling a lower importance within the text to challenge instances of traditional Dominican masculinity which are imposed on men. He does so by placing hypermasculine characters in the footnotes (a position of lower status) while featuring men who fall short of the hypermasculine ideal in the main text. In this regard, Diaz foregrounds alternative masculine identity through the structure of his novel.

As previously mentioned, the footnotes in *Oscar Wao* are used to give the reader more insight into Dominican history. Specifically, these footnotes focus on the life of the

Dominican dictator Trujillo. The footnotes are not an objective perspective of history. Instead, the Dominican history is told from the perspective of Yuniors who, as previously established, is far from formal. Yuniors presents an unapologetic and graphic account of Trujillo's history which runs parallel to the main story.

Trujillo's is presented as fitting the mold for what a Dominican man should be. Yuniors remarks, "At first glance, he was just your prototypical Latin American caudillo...[he was known for] making ill monopolies out of every slice of the national patrimony....for fucking every hot girl in sight, even the wives of his subordinates, thousands upon thousands of women" (20). From Yuniors's telling of history, Trujillo fits the cultural expectation for Dominican men as he is a sexual, dominating, and authoritative man. However, what is particularly noteworthy about Yuniors's description is their exaggeration of Trujillo's reputation. An excellent example of such exaggeration is when Yuniors introduces Trujillo, noting he is, "A portly, sadistic, pig eyed, who bleached his skin, wore platform shoes, and had a fondness for Napoleon-era haberdashery...came to control nearly every aspect of the DR's political, cultural, social and economic life" (2). Yuniors description of Trujillo captures the wide extent of the dictator's authority over the Dominican people and simultaneously derides Trujillo through the critical depiction of his appearance. While Trujillo does possess immense political power, his gaudy manner of dressing makes him look comical. It casts the imposing figure in a less threatening light. Trujillo's placement in the footnotes combined with Yuniors's exaggeration of the dictator's status creates an interesting juxtaposition. It suggests that, in spite of his many conquests and domineering status, Trujillo--the living embodiment of the Dominican male ideal—is worthy of mockery. This notion is further

compounded by the fact that Yuniór and Oscar's stories occupy the main body of the text. Díaz's choice of placing these alternative masculine identities in the main text suggests that he wants to prioritize them. By having the novel's footnotes exclusively focus on the traditionally masculine Trujillo, it is as though Díaz is trying to devalue the impact of traditional Dominican masculinity in favor of alternative masculinities represented by Oscar and Yuniór.

Another way Díaz emphasizes alternative masculine identities is by paralleling the stories of his characters. In particular, Díaz parallels the narratives of Oscar's family (mainly women) alongside the story of Oscar himself. Oscar's own story heavily parallels that of his mother (Belicia) to the point where they resemble each other—so closely that they challenge the reader's suspension of disbelief. By having Oscar's story parallel his mother's, Oscar's identity becomes more closely aligned with women as he lives out the experiences of his mother before him. Through these parallels Díaz, reinforces the notion of Oscar's possessing an alternative identity—one which blurs the boundaries of gender. Belicia's and Oscar's stories heavily parallel each other in terms of their romantic misfortunes. In her youth, Belicia falls hopelessly in love with a married gangster and was unable to have a life with him. Similarly, Oscar falls in love with a woman whose boyfriend is a police officer, and he prevents them from being together.

The parallel of the two stories becomes strikingly evident at the conclusion of their respective relationships where they are each brought to cane fields and are viciously beaten. Despite the harrowing situation they are both in, Belicia and Oscar hold onto romantic notions about their partners and hope for escape. During her beating, Belicia has, "the fool's hope that her Gangster would save her...[she believed] he would visit her

at the hospital and they would be married, he in a suit, she in a body cast” (147-148). Belicia believes her love for the Gangster to be enough to save her. Oscar has a similar belief as his mother when he is beaten. In between blows from his captors, Oscar, “told them that what they were doing was wrong, that they were going to take a great love out of the world...he told them about Ybon and the way he loved her and how much they had risked and that they’d started to dream the same dreams and say the same word” (321). In the midst of the beating, Oscar clings to his love of Ybon and believes he can evoke sympathy from his captors. Both characters possess a deep emotional desire for intimacy with someone who cannot love them back. Having both stories running parallel to each other in the novel allows Diaz to show how alike Oscar and his mother are. Considering how a patriarchal perspective of masculinity seeks to show the difference between men and women, it is as if Diaz is using these two stories to challenge this idea. By showing how Oscar and Belicia carry similar experiences/mindsets as each other, Diaz rejects a traditional and patriarchal perspective on masculinity.

Diaz’s novel is also noteworthy for its use of unnatural narrative elements. My analysis of the unnatural in *Oscar Wao* is based in Katherine Weese’s work in “Tu no Eres Nada de Dominicano.” In her article, Weese posits that Diaz’s use of unnatural elements in the novel are used to denaturalize gender constructs. Weese’s article primarily focuses on the issue as it pertains to Oscar and Yunior’s characters. However, analysis of the novel intends to build upon it by focusing on the novel’s use of magical and comic book realism. Diaz’s use of the unnatural allows him to disrupt the notion of patriarchal authority and, instead provide a space for alternative masculine identities to exist.

The most notable unnatural element featured in *Oscar Wao* is Diaz's employment of magical realism and comic book realism. I find it appropriate to discuss these two issues in tandem with each other because of their potential to be used as means of subverting authority. A magical realist text portrays a grounded world which has elements of the supernatural or fantastic. In *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris speak to the nature of magical realism, writing, "magical realist texts are subversive: their in-between-ness, their all at once-ness encourages resistance to monological political and cultural structures, a feature that has made the mode particularly useful to writers in postcolonial cultures and, increasingly, to women" (6). Magical realist texts, in meshing elements of the ordinary and fantastic, create a literary space where boundaries are dissolved and a space which fosters alternative identity to exist outside of restriction.

Comic book realism, a concept coined by Daniel Bautista in "Comic Book Realism: Form and Genre in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*," functions similarly to magical realism. Bautista posits that texts which employ comic book realism, "irreverently mixes realism and popular culture... flaunts its status as text, parody, and pastiche in a way that foregrounds the importance of cultural mediation" (42, 50). In superimposing genre elements over an otherwise realist text, comic book realism allows for a writer to blend in the fantastic and the real—opening up possibilities for existence. Comic book realism, like magical realism, expands the realm of possibility in a text's narrative world. In doing so, these forms naturally lend themselves to being used as a means of challenging dominant social dynamics. With regards to *Oscar Wao*, magical realism and comic book realism work to subvert the notion of patriarchal authority.

The Fuku/Zafa dynamic is the foremost element of magical realism presented in *Oscar Wao*. Yunior writes that the Fuku is “generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically, the Curse and the Doom of the new world...it is believed that the arrival of Europeans on Hispaniola unleashed the Fuku on the world, and we’ve been in the shit ever since” (1). The Fuku serves as a generational curse which affects the Dominican people (Oscar’s family included) as the result of colonization and the advent of slavery. Counter to the Fuku is the Zafa, which Yunior remarks was the, “only one way to prevent disaster from coiling around you, only one surefire counterspell that would keep you and your family safe” (7). The Fuku and the Zafa are two opposing fantastic forces within the novel, which many of the Dominican characters accept as being part of regular existence. Besides simply being a way to reference Dominican history, Diaz’s treatment of the Fuku/Zafa also work towards the novel’s challenging of patriarchal authority. This is accomplished through the way the two forces are gendered throughout the text. The Fuku, a destructive, tyrannical force, is associated with patriarchal men while the Zafa, a protecting and guiding force, is associated with women.

Very early in the text, the Fuku is characterized as a patriarchal force by being closely linked to Trujillo. Yunior remarks that “the Admiral’s very name has become synonymous with both kinds of Fuku, little and large; to say his name aloud or even to hear it is to invite calamity on the heads of you and yours” (1). Yunior connects Trujillo, a man whose existence in the novel is defined by his patriarchal characteristics, to the cross generational curse. Diaz continues connecting the Fuku with men throughout the novel. Most notably, the link between man and Fuku is seen during instances where violence is perpetrated by men. For instance, in Belicia’s section of the novel, she is

having an affair with the gangster married to Trujillo's sister. Soon after the affair is discovered, Belicia is apprehended by Trujillo's officers. During her beating, "she looked up she saw that there was one more cop sitting in the car and when he turned toward her she saw that he didn't have a face. All the strength fell right out of her" (141). The faceless man is a manifestation of the Fuku which echoes throughout the generations. Later in the novel, the faceless man appears to Oscar, when he is being driven to the cane fields by the police captain's associates (both of which are men). Yuni6r notes that "They drove past a bus stop and for a second Oscar imagined he saw his whole family getting on a guagua...and who is driving the bus but the Mongoose, and who is the cobrador but the Man Without a Face" (320-321). In his delirium, Oscar sees the Fuku as a living being taking the form of a man. Both Belicia and Oscar's experiences work to illustrate how Diaz associates the Fuku with men.

During times which the Fuku is linked to men via the Faceless Man, the Zafa is also linked to women via the Mongoose (the Zafa). As previously mentioned, during Oscar's tribulation, the Mongoose appears to him at the same time as the faceless man. He sees the Mongoose as the bus driver (a role of guidance). The Mongoose also appears to Oscar during his suicide attempt. Yuni6r remarks that "Gold-limned eyes that reached through you, not so much in judgement or reproach but for something far scarier" (190). In this instance, the Mongoose is a being which offers a sense of deep self-understanding. During the aftermath of Belicia's beating, when she is close to death, the Mongoose appears to her with its golden eyes and dark fur. The Mongoose speaks to Belicia, "*You have to rise...You have to rise now or you'll never have the son or the daughter...The ones who await*" (149). The Mongoose works against the destruction of the Fuku,

prompting Belicia to not succumb to her injuries. It does so by appealing to her maternal status and promising future children. In Belicia and Oscar's experiences, the work of the Zafa offers each person an opportunity to survive the ravages of the Fuku. When the characters choose to live onward due to the Zafa's influence, they are actively rejecting the patriarchal influence of the Fuku. Through the gendering of the two forces within the novel--how the feminine Zafa overcomes the patriarchal fuku--Diaz alludes to the ineffectiveness of patriarchal authority. Though the Fuku/patriarchy seeks to oppress and destroy, it can never do so completely. This is because the feminine, or the Zafa, the feminine, will work to resist it.

In addition to magical elements, *Oscar Wao* also features an abundance of comic/genre references. These references--from Tolkien to the X-Men--contribute to the unique voice of the novel. Beyond adding a pop culture aesthetic to the novel, Diaz uses these references to comment on masculinity. This commentary functions in a similar way to the magical realist elements in the sense that they work to demonstrate the ineffectiveness of patriarchal authority. The use of such references allows for the possibility of alternative masculine identities to exist within the world of the text. Diaz accomplishes this by drawing on the conventions of the comic book genre--specifically the ones pertaining to male characters. Diaz makes ample comic book references to masculine comic characters and juxtaposes it with the less-than-ideal Oscar. In channeling these elements, Diaz calls into question the notion of a uniform masculine identity.

A notable trait of comics is their historical treatment of masculinity. To put it simply, comic books have a tendency to promote existing beliefs about what qualifies as masculine. Jeffrey A. Brown in "Comic Book Masculinity and the New Black

Superhero” writes that masculinity in comic books is the, “quintessential depiction of masculinity...incredibly popular comics are erasing the ordinary man underneath in favor of an even more excessively powerful and one-dimensional masculine ideal” (26). Comic books exemplify the characteristics one might associate with the typical male ideal. These men are not real people with diverse lived experiences but are, instead, uniform depictions of masculinity. This notion is clearly displayed when considering how comics approach characteristics such as the depiction of male physical prowess and how they are “traditionally linked to assumptions about male superiority” (27). Comic book men reflect patriarchal cultural beliefs about men. Brown delves further into comic depictions of men, specifically with how these men deal with vulnerability. Brown posits that comic book men are, “armored by muscles and by emotional rigidity and marked by a vehement desire to eradicate the softness, the emotional liquidity of the feminine Other” (27). These men do not humor emotion and instead, wholeheartedly reject it to retain social power. Rather than seeking to provide a grounded depiction of masculinity, comics gravitate towards exaggeration and traditionally masculine qualities. The men of comics are seldom the ones of everyday life, rather they are hyper-idealized, unchanging notions of a masculine ideal.

Diaz takes the comic book tendency of masculine exaggeration prevalent in comic books and uses them to subvert the idea of idealized masculinity. Diaz accomplishes this by constantly referencing popular comic characters in his description of Oscar’s life. When doing this, Diaz juxtaposes an idealized masculine figure of fiction with its reality via Oscar. One of the earliest references to comics in *Oscar Wao* is when Yuniore recounts Oscar's childhood and his interest in neighborhood girls. Upon Oscar breaking up with

one of his childhood girlfriends, Yuniór observes that “It seemed that from the moment Maritza dumped him--Shazam!--his life started going down the tubes. Over the next couple of years, he grew fatter and fatter” (16). Breaking up with Maritza causes Oscar to decline emotionally and physically—a prelude to his future struggles with women. Díaz references Captain Marvel, a hero from DC comics. The reference of Captain Marvel is significant because of the hero’s background. According to DC Comics, Captain Marvel’s alter ego Billy Batson,

is a normal human being and has the normal vulnerabilities and strengths of a boy his age... When he says the word ‘Shazam’...[a] magic force then empowers him while simultaneously transforming him into an adult superhero with abilities and traits of different figures...[Captain Marvel is] on par with being a demigod.

Billy Batson is an otherwise average boy who can change into a powerful man whenever he wishes by uttering a simple word. However, in the context of the story, the word used in comics to signal an instantaneous transformation to a powerful masculine figure is used to signal Oscar’s growth into a more flawed man. In another instance, while speaking about Oscar, Yuniór remarks, “You really want to know what being an X-Man feels like? Just be a smart bookish boy of color in a contemporary U.S. Ghetto...Like having bat wings or a pair of tentacles growing out of your chest” (22). Yuniór draws a comparison between Oscar and the X-Men, a group of superheroes. In their comics, the X-Men are known to be discriminated against by the public due to fear of their abilities (telekinesis, energy projection, etc.). Yuniór comparing Oscar to these characters creates an interesting juxtaposition. The comparison highlights Oscar’s otherness. Because he cannot align with Dominican masculinity, Oscar remains on the outlier of Dominican

culture. It also works to highlight Oscar's own powerlessness. While the X-Men were discriminated against due to possessing fantastic—threatening—powers, it is Oscar's intellect and interests in genres which define him. It implies that the more traditional Dominican model of masculinity is so threatened by these characteristics that he is discriminated against. Diaz's comic references work to subvert the notion of an idealized masculine figure. The men of comics are renowned for their strength and beyond human abilities. However, when these figures are used to describe Oscar—a flawed depiction of man—the exaggerated and farfetched nature of these figures is evident.

Diaz's use of comic references is not the only fantastic genre Diaz employs to challenge idealized forms of masculinity. Diaz also makes reference to science fiction and fantasy. These references work in a similar fashion as the comic references—creating a space for more grounded depictions of men to exist. I want to call attention to a particular science fiction reference within the novel which does exactly this. This instance occurs on Halloween and Yuniór pokes fun at Oscar for dressing like Dr. Who. Dr. Who is a British science fiction television show about an extraterrestrial time lord exploring the universe. Yuniór remarks, "I couldn't believe how much he looked like that fat homo Oscar Wilde...which was bad news for Oscar, because Melvin said, *Oscar Wao*, quien es *Oscar Wao*...all of us started calling him that" (180). This science fiction reference is significant for a few reasons. Foremost, it is the instance when Oscar receives the name where the novel derives its title from. Next, similar to the comic references, it draws attention to Oscar's alienation from the larger Dominican culture. Based on the book's description, Oscar's costume is likely that of Tom Baker's version of Dr. Who. This version of the Doctor is dressed rather flamboyantly, with a very noticeable, brightly

colored scarf. This dress pattern is appropriate for Oscar, who is perceived by others to be flamboyant. Dressing up as Baker's Dr. Who also works towards furthering the idea of alternative masculinity. In an interview, Baker describes his approach towards portraying the Doctor and how he wanted the character to "have mannerisms that were somehow alien to those around him...the Doctor should have an air of naïve innocence about him...he had to seem vulnerable and therefore more interesting to an audience" (Haining 132). In Baker's opinion, his iteration of the Doctor is noteworthy for his sentimentality. Tom Baker's Doctor is depiction of a man who demonstrates qualities which are not traditionally associated with men. When Oscar dresses as the Doctor, he quite literally assumes an alternative masculine persona.

Yunior's reference to Oscar Wilde in describing Oscar's Dr. Who costume furthers the allusion to alternative masculine identities. Oscar Wilde was a late nineteenth century English author who was a controversial figure within London society with his novels which possessed homosexual undertones and overall risqué content. Eventually, Wilde was put on trial and eventually imprisoned for two years for committing homosexual acts (or "gross indecency" as it was referred to then). The association Yunior draws between the two comes from the way in which Baker's Dr. Who and Wilde's clothing choices resemble each other. Both individuals have flamboyant manners of dressing with eccentric clothing combinations and not conforming to fashion standards for men. On Wilde's life, it is noted that he possessed a "flamboyant dress, cutting wit and eccentric lifestyle often put him at odds with the social norms of Victorian England" (History). In other words, Wilde was a figure whose identity rested on the outlier of English society and effectively othered him. In comparing the two, Diaz is able to

provide a more definite—real world—instance of alternative masculinity to compare Oscar to. Though it may seem as though Yunior is using this reference to offend Oscar, it has different implications. With this reference, Diaz grounds the fantastic alternative masculinity of Baker's Doctor to the real-world alternative masculinity of Oscar Wilde. In building upon the genre reference initially presented, Diaz creates illustrates a more tangible example of alternative masculinity to readers.

Diaz's *Oscar Wao*—like Palahniuk's *Invisible Monsters Remix* and Wallace's *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men*—takes a multifaceted approach in its discussion of masculinity. Its characters (namely Oscar and Yunior) live within the context of Dominican culture and its ideals for what masculinity should be. However, these men do not completely align with these ideals and often exist in conflict with them—whether they are aware of it or not. They exist as alternatives to Dominican masculine identity as they are individuals who seek genuine connections with others. We see this notion clearly exemplified in the narration style of the novel. Readers view the world of *Oscar Wao* from the perspective of Yunior—someone who strives to live up to cultural expectations by pursuing what he believes to be normal behavior for a Dominican man. However, as he recounts the events of Oscar's life, the reader sees Yunior's demeanor shift from an uncaring and detached narration style to a sympathetic narrator. The structure of the novel further draws attention to the notion of the alternative masculine identity established in the characters. Diaz employs footnotes to further the distinction of Oscar and Yunior versus the Dominican male ideal. While the non-idealized men of Oscar and Yunior exist within the main body of the novel, the idealized Dominican men are sidelined via the footnotes at the bottom of the page. Then, Diaz employs fantastic

elements to further establish and characterize the dynamic between traditional masculinity and alternative masculinity. Lastly, Diaz uses the genre references to not only illustrate how Oscar stands in relation to Dominican ideals of masculinity, but he also uses them connect them with concrete instances of diverse masculinity. Diaz does not present alternative masculine identities negatively in his novel. While yes, he does emphasize the alienation these identities undergo—especially within one’s own culture—they are nonetheless represented positively. These alternative identities are shown to resist the patriarchal behaviors of traditional masculine identity (aggression, hypersexuality, etc.) in favor of more positive ones (intimacy, caring, etc.). The positive characterization of alternative masculinities is a shared characteristic of the novels featured in this thesis. In the next novel being discussed, Chuck Palahniuk’s *Invisible Monsters Remix*, alternative masculinity is illustrated as a means of escaping the personal restriction caused by socially prescribed roles.

The Mutilated Man and Palahniuk's *Invisible Monsters Remix*

Chuck Palahniuk's *Invisible Monsters Remix* follows a former fashion model named Shannon McFarland, who--after having her jaw blown off by a shotgun blast--undertakes a journey of self-discovery. Throughout Palahniuk's novel, the narrator faces a fractured and rather disturbing world. This quality is heightened by the unique magazine-like nature of the novel—one which thrusts readers back and forth among the chapters of the novel to put together its narrative. The reality Shannon faces is rampant with repressed identities, meaningless relationships, unending desire for beauty, and a constant consumption of prescription drugs. Though Palahniuk's novel largely centers around female characters, it is not devoid of a masculine presence. Furthermore, Palahniuk's novel works to address issues related to masculinity and alternatives to it.

In *Invisible Monsters Remix*, Palahniuk addresses the constraining effects of prescribed masculine identities. He does this in a similar manner as Diaz and Wallace by using the various aspects of his novel (characters, narration and structure), to convey this idea. Within his novel, Palahniuk characterizes socially prescribed forms of masculinity--specifically those related to gay men--in a negative light. Within the novel, such forms of masculine identity severely compromise one's sense of self and affects their well-being. The only way to achieve any semblance of healing or a fruitful life is to resist and distance oneself from prescribed masculine roles. Such freedom, according to the novel, can be achieved by embracing an alternative masculine identity. This alternative masculine identity exists outside of gender boundaries.

Before delving into Palahniuk's novel, I find it necessary to discuss the relevance of the "Remix" aspect of *Invisible Monsters Remix*. Rather than being a mere reprinting of Palahniuk's original novel, the remixed version is truer to the author's original plans for the novel. *Invisible Monsters* was supposed to be Palahniuk's first novel; however, it was rejected due to being deemed too graphic and difficult to follow. Instead, *Fight Club* (1996) was published as Palahniuk's debut novel, with *Invisible Monsters* eventually being published in 1999 with significant changes. The book was streamlined, and the changes were intended to make the work approachable for the everyday reader. In doing this, the novel was restructured, and parts were completely omitted. In the remixed version, the novel contains previously cut content which adds to the reading experience and its presentation of themes. It is a less restricted version of the text which allows for Palahniuk to be more experimental with his writing. As a result, *Invisible Monsters Remix* furthers some of the concepts (especially with regards to narration and the structure structure) present in the original work. Considering the state of the remixed novel, one can see how it adds dimension to Palahniuk's original *Invisible Monsters*. It not only makes for a more enthralling read, but it also allows for more discussion about the novel itself. I see this aspect of *Invisible Monsters Remix* particularly helpful in discussing aspects of the narrative such as its male characters.

Two male characters at the forefront of Palahniuk's novel are Shane and Manus. These characters occupy an integral role in the narrative as they are the presumed dead brother and former lover of Shannon respectively. These men serve as the driving force for Shannon's personal journey. Within the text, both men find themselves greatly constrained by prescribed masculine roles forced upon them by their surroundings. These

roles are based on stereotyped expectations for gay men and how they are supposed to behave. As a consequence of having such identities imposed upon them (whether by their families or their occupation), Shane and Manus undergo immense personal struggles. However, the way in which Shane and Manus react to their situations represent two reactions to the influence of prescribed identities. Shane represents someone who rejects prescribed identities and instead chooses to assume an alternative identity. Manus, conversely, represents someone who embraces a prescribed identity and seeks to live up to social expectations. The refusal/embracing of the prescribed identities ultimately affect each man's identity and whether they achieve healing. Through the characters of Shane and Manus, Palahniuk characterizes prescribed masculine identities as detrimental towards one's identity and those around them. Palahniuk also stresses the potential of alternative identities to mend the damaging effects of stereotyped male identities. This is most clearly demonstrated through Shane.

As previously mentioned, Shane is the narrator's brother. Shane occupies a unique position in Shannon's life as he is simultaneously present and absent within the novel. Though the narrator constantly references him and their childhood together, he is not seen as Shane per se. This is seen as readers learn Shane is actually a woman named Brandy Alexander (the narrator's traveling companion during the novel). Throughout the novel, Shannon rarely refers to Shane by name. She often refers to him as her "gay brother" who is "dead from AIDS" (267). Shane has no identity to his sister outside of his sexuality and his supposed promiscuity. The narrator's title for her brother is indicative of the larger dilemma which Shane faces. That is, he has a prescribed masculine identity imposed upon him by others. This identity is based on stereotypes associated with gay men—

chiefly sexual promiscuity. It is this prescribed identity which constrains and eventually drives Shane towards resistance.

The event which clearly demonstrates how Shane has a prescribed masculine identity forced upon him is when he is outed for having relations with a man. Upon learning this, his parents immediately begin to attack him, and start accusing him of being sexually promiscuous and being disease addled. Shannon hears her parents through the door and how the doctor told them there's "one way you could get the disease the way you have it ... We don't know what kind of filthy diseases you're bringing into this house, mister, but you can just find another place to sleep tonight" (62-63). In their altercation, Shane's parents take their stereotyped beliefs about gay male identity and force it upon their son. They promptly cut him off from the family because of their beliefs. According to them, because Shane is a gay man, then he must also be hypersexual and a carrier of disease. Their perception of gay men is limited to prevalent social stereotypes, which they then force upon their son.

The role prescribed by Shane's parents does not cease even when he is thought to be dead. This notion is strikingly illustrated during Christmas, when Shannon visits her parents. As she opens her gifts, she finds, "everything in my stocking is condoms, in boxes, in little gold foil coins, in long strips of a hundred... My only other gifts are a rape whistle and a pocket-sized spray canister of Mace" (54). These gifts, according to the narrator, are greatly influenced by her parents' perception of Shane. As they believed their son to be hypersexual, they buy gifts to prevent Shannon from ending up like Shane. Their limited perspective of gay male identity is further compounded as they partake in their own caricatured version of activism. Rather than using their membership in PFLAG

to support LGBTQ+ individuals, they use it to justify their own martyr complex. They see themselves as under attack for simply being associated with the LGBTQ+ community without doing anything for its advancement. This warped activism is best exemplified in how Shannon's father remarks "You Mother has a PFLAG bumper sticker, so we keep her car in the garage. Us taking pride in your brother has put us right on the front lines" (61). Though their parents claim to advocate for LGBTQ+ rights, they hide their activism because of their own fear of being lumped together with them and face any sort of backlash. The parents' limited perspective of the queer community began with Shane and carries on long after he has left their family.

The stereotyped gay male identity which Shane's parents force upon him naturally leads him to resist these roles and escape them. Shane does this with the help of the Rhea sisters: three drag queens who help Shane undergo gender reassignment and become Brandy. The narrator remarks on the significance of Shane's transition in relation to his past struggles, observing, "It's not everybody who gets a second chance to be born again and raised a second time, but this time by a family that loves her" (204). The surgery is not merely a means of changing the physical body, but also a way to begin anew. However, there is a caveat to the entire situation. What is particularly interesting about Shane's transition is that it was not the result identifying as transgender, but it is more of a need to escape his past life and the confines associated with it. Shane's sex reassignment serves as a reinvention of his past self—a way to write away past wrongs. In "Bullets and Blades: Narcissism and Violence in *Invisible Monsters*," Andy Johnson comments on Shane's situation, writing:

“For Shane, traditional definitions of sexuality and gender are too restrictive. He refuses to be bound by a closed system, especially one bound by language. His struggle, therefore, is not merely an internal one to reinvent himself, but also is against society as well. He is not content to let others define him; he must challenge their assumptions and their perceptions of reality too” (Johnson 66).

Shane’s sex change is emblematic of a larger resistance against socially prescribed roles. He does not want to fit in with any categories—especially those which others place upon him—so he will seek out an alternative identity. On becoming Brandy Alexander, Shane remarks, “I’m only doing this because it's just the biggest mistake I can think to make. It’s stupid and destructive, and anybody you ask will tell you I’m wrong.” (110).

Similarly, later the narrator observes that Shane only became a woman because “You [Shane] Couldn’t Think of Anything You Wanted Less” (124). The decision to become a woman was born out of a genuine need for escaping prescribed identities. To Shane, adopting the identity of Brandy Alexander would allow him to drastically change himself and effectively move away from the confinement he felt. Johnson further comments on Shane’s desire to be free from social constraints, writing, “Shane’s desire to challenge his reality surfaces early [in his life] ...he intentionally tests the assumptions built into American culture and language” (66). Johnson sees Shane’s refusal to conform to a specific gender as indicative of a desire to not conform to social expectations which he faces. Similarly, Andrew Ng discusses Shane’s choice in “Destruction and the Discourse of Deformity: *Invisible Monsters* and the Ethics of Atrocity.” Ng comments on how Shane pursues the sex change: “And Brandy, who used to be a man, transforms himself to look profoundly like a woman in order to escape the labels prescribed to “him” by

society” (26). In becoming Brandy, Shane places himself in a position unbound by labels that are forced upon him. This notion is evident when Brandy speaks to the narrator and remarks,

‘I’m not straight, and I’m not gay,’ she says. ‘I’m not bisexual, I want out of the labels. I don’t want my whole life crammed into a single word. A story. I want to find something else, unknowable, someplace that’s not on the map. A real adventure’ (Palahniuk 114).

Through assuming the Brandy Alexander identity, Shane is no longer constrained by the social labels or values pushed onto him. As Brandy, Shane creates a space for himself to exist in with a fluid identity.

The fluid state of Shane’s identity as Brandy is emphasized as his sex change remains incomplete within the novel. Johnson posits that Shane not completely transitioning to a woman (Shane has not had sexual reassignment surgery) has interesting implications on his identity. Johnson writes that Shane’s incomplete transition places him in “a liminal space, especially to those who would attempt to categorize him by gender or appearance” where he is uncategorizable to the world (68). Shane is neither wholly male nor wholly female, which makes him difficult for society to place his identity within the male/female binary. The ambiguous space that Shane occupies is echoed in Brandy’s appearance. Though Brandy for the most part has a female appearance, there are some noticeable unfeminine qualities about her. The most striking characteristic, as the narrator points out, is her hands which are distinctly masculine. The narrator describes Brandy’s appearance and how, “If you have to start with any one detail, it has to be Brandy’s hands...Beaded with rings, as if they could be more obvious, hands are the one part about

Brandy Alexander the [plastic] surgeons couldn't change " (4). Though Brandy tries to assume the identity of a woman, she does retain more masculine qualities. Consequently, Brandy's lies somewhere between the gendered lines—challenging what people consider masculine or feminine. The state of Brandy's body reflects Shane's desire to assume an alternative identity.

As Brandy, Shane is free from prescribed labels. Shane/Brandy is no longer the promiscuous victim their parents believed them to be, nor is he the object of contempt for his sister. The incomplete transition to Brandy serves as “deliberate rejection of the homogeneity of performative gender” and a way for them to pursue life without having to live up to certain expectations (Johnson 68). Furthermore, the transition allows Shane to reshape his sense of self in a more positive manner. This reframing is illustrated as Brandy serves as an emotional bedrock for her sister. While, before, Shane was put in a victim role by his family, as Brandy, he can be a source for others to derive support from. The narrator often goes to Brandy for guidance as she has undergone a similar situation as each other. Brandy understands what it means to be on the outlier of society. Shane's sex reassignment surgery and subsequent identification as Brandy Alexander worked as a means of resisting and eventually escaping a limiting prescribed identity imposed upon. Shane was characterized by passivity, but as Brandy--a fluid identity—they are able to derive a sense of fulfillment from life.

The freedom which Shane derives from rejecting the prescribed identity is something which Manus is unable to attain. The second most prominent male character in *Invisible Monsters Remix* is Shannon's former love interest Manus Kelly. Manus is a former vice detective who travels with the narrator and Brandy across the country.

Manus' former job consisted of patrolling gay cruising areas and arresting men who solicited sex from him. According to the narrator, Manus has this job because, "He'd never been this successful as a regular policeman and this way nobody ever shot at him" (169). This is something which Manus has a proclivity towards and one which he takes pleasure in doing. However, Manus is essentially fired for aging and becoming undesirable to the men. Similar to Shane, Manus has a stereotyped gay male identity forced upon him by his employers and the media.

As Manus attempts to effectively entice men, Manus attempts to make himself as attractive as possible. In an attempt to make these changes, Manus immerses himself in things he believes gay men identify with. Part of Manus's process consists of him changing his physical appearance and even studying pornography. Shannon remarks that while living with Manus, a regular sight would be "Manus with his magazines. His guy-on-guy porno magazines he had to buy for his job, he'd say. Over breakfast every morning, he'd show me glossy pictures of guys self-sucking...Then Manus would tell me, "This is what guys want"" (249). Manus eagerly studies what he believes to be the ideal for gay men and attempts to align with it. Manus' need to be attractive to other men becomes a fixation and his sense of identity becomes compromised. In his pursuit of appearing as an ideal gay man, Manus' identity and worth becomes linked to how many men he can seduce. If he cannot attract men, then he has no value in his field.

Manus' situation with his job aligns with the sexually promiscuous identity for gay men which Shane also faces. This is exemplified as Shannon remarks "It was after Manus couldn't get guys to approach him for sex that he started into buying man-on-man sex magazines and going out to gay clubs" (175). In working as a detective and trying to

play into the stereotype of gay men, Manus life becomes devoted to it. While Shane sought to avoid being associated with prescribed identities, Manus wants to play into them and will do anything to attain what he believes to be an ideal identity. In this regard, Manus limits himself as he tries to attain an unachievable ideal of masculinity. This ideal is unachievable because, as Manus ages, he becomes less attractive to men. Though he does everything to retain his youth and beauty, it nonetheless escapes him. Manus is caught in a seemingly endless pursuit of an identity and suffers because of it. His desire has implications on his relationship to others as well as his own personal wellbeing.

Manus' relationship with Shannon is greatly hindered in the sense that he cannot maintain a connection with her. This is a consequence of his concerns lying solely with his own attractiveness. In one instance, the two are sitting with each other and, instead of engaging in meaningful conversation with his significant other, Manus draws attention to his image. Shannon recounts how he would bombard her with questions such as "If I was a gay guy, did I think he needed to trim back his pubic hair? Me being a gay guy, would I think he looked too desperate?" (173). In this instance, Manus is more concerned with what he could do to be attractive to men rather than Shannon. In pursuing the attraction of men, there is a noticeable divide between him and the narrator—contributing to the degeneration of their relationship. Manus' difficulty in his relationship with Shannon is a microcosm of the larger issues he faces due to his pursuit of a prescribed identity.

Unlike Shane who sought to resist the identity imposed on him, Manus does not seek to do the same. Consequently, Manus' sense of identity is compromised. His need to appear attractive to gay men devolves into an obsession. Manus' unstable sense of self is reflected in his appearance. The futility of his pursuit is further demonstrated as his body

becomes physically changed as the story progresses and his mind becomes more and more unhinged. Near the end of the novel, Brandy and Shannon reveal that they have been secretly sneaking estrogen into his food. Consequently, Manus' body becomes feminized. Shannon reveals to the reader, "Manus cheated on me with Evie, but I still love him so much I'll hide any amount of conjugated estrogen in his food. So much I'll do anything to destroy him" (223). This change is significant because it shows the ineffectiveness of Manus' obsession with appearance. He strives to be what he believes to be an ideal man (muscled, well-kept), but his efforts are fruitless. Ng speaks to Manus' situation, writing, "feminized men are consistently depicted as hysterical, and they either take on exaggerated, cruel qualities, or are relegated to servile, comic purposes (as in the case of Manus)" (25). Manus, as a consequence of trying to embrace his role has his identity compromised by outside influences. His goals become complicated by Brandy and the narrator's actions who actively make him more feminine rather than masculine. Due to the women's actions, Manus' sense of self is unstable--fluctuating between his idealized perception of masculinity and the literal feminization of his body. Manus' dilemma serves as a stark contrast to Shane's character. While Shane had a masculine identity imposed upon him, he found a way to resist it by embracing the alternative identity of Brandy Alexander. Through Brandy, Shane could escape prescribed social roles and live freely. Manus, on the other hand, experiences a similar predicament as Shane, yet he chooses to embrace the prescribed identity. Manus actively plays into the expectations for gay men in terms of sexual promiscuity and becomes consumed by aligning with it. Consequently, Manus is placed in a position where he is never fully in

control of his own identity which is constantly changing (by his own hand or other people's influence). Manus's existence is forever at the mercy of outside forces.

Palahniuk's depiction of the two central male characters of *Invisible Monsters Remix* and their reaction to imposed identities provides insight into his perspective on prescribed masculine identity. Palahniuk characterizes the prescribed masculine identity towards gay men as a restrictive and suppressive force. This influence hinders one's life and their potential to lead fulfilling lives. Such immense restriction is what ultimately motivates Shane to seek out a sex change, and it is what places Manus in a seemingly never-ending cycle of attempting to please others. These characters—Shane in particular—demonstrate how the only way to resist the pressure of these roles and derive a sense of stability, is to align oneself with an alternative identity (in Shane's case, an alternative masculine identity). This identity does not fall within socially determined boundaries and lies somewhere between the masculine and feminine gender boundaries.

Both Shane and Manus's characters demonstrate the damaging effects of prescribed and rigid masculine roles. These men show how having such identities forced upon a person can compromise their identities and drive them towards escapism or endlessly chasing these ideals. Palahniuk continues his discussion of prescribed masculine identity as restrictive in other elements of his novel. Palahniuk uses the narration of *Invisible Monsters Remix* to build upon the idea of shifting identities which challenge the boundaries between masculinity or femininity. This is notably seen within the novel's central narrator Shannon McFarland and her rather unique approach towards narration.

The narration of *Invisible Monsters Remix* builds off the notion of defying rigid prescribed roles. As previously noted, the narrator of the novel is a former supermodel named Shannon McFarland. A notable characteristic of Shannon is her proclivity towards fluctuation. Besides literally assuming different identities throughout the novel in her travels (adopting and dropping names such as Daisy St. Patience among others), her narration also is known for its fluidity. I characterize her narration a fluid in the sense that it is often detached from events of the novel, and it often presents aspects of the narration in a warped manner. That is, Shannon's narration is distorted through its flat, detached, voice and her tendency to misrepresent facts. In doing this with her narration, she rejects the responsibilities of the narrator. This rejection of a prescribed role echoes how Shane aims to reject the masculine role he is placed in.

Palahniuk chooses to employ a narrative voice for Shannon which comes off as impersonal and somewhat difficult to define. In many ways, this type of narration echoes the concept of blank fiction, a type of experimental fiction present during the 1980s. In blank fiction, writers used prose which was flat and distant and focused on characters who were on the outlier of society. In "From Solid to Liquid *Invisible Monsters* and the Blank Road Story" Sonia Baelo-Allue connects *Invisible Monsters* to the concept of blank fiction. Baelo-Allue observes that seeing *Invisible Monsters* from the perspective of Blank fiction allows the novel to be "better understood within this aesthetic context... The main characters in this novel are the "monsters" that society rejects: the gay, the transsexual, the ugly, who seem to believe in self-destruction as a form of social liberation" (119). Baelo-Allue sees the content of *Invisible Monsters* as aligning with the trademarks of blank fiction. I see blank fiction as being appropriate for describing

Shannon's narration, because it resists the use of flowery or indirect language. Instead, her narration is direct and presents the grotesque in a matter-of-fact way. This is evident in instances such as the beginning of the novel, when Evie Cottrell's (Shannon's former friend) wedding venue is going up in flames and Brandy is shot. Shannon remarks, "it's not that I'm some detached lab animal just conditioned to ignore violence, but my first instinct is maybe it's not too late to dab soda on the bloodstain." In this instance the narrator is in the midst of a high-tension situation, yet she is concerned only with how to treat the bloodstain. Shannon is completely detached from this situation. This detachment is further compounded with the presence of a nameless fashion photographer's yelling. The events of the novel are paused, and Shannon hears the photographer yelling

Give me lust, baby.

Give me malice.

Flash.

Give me detached existentialist ennui.

Flash.

Give me rampant intellectualism as a coping mechanism (Palahniuk 286)

The photographer's yelling is meant to be a reference to Shannon's past as a supermodel. When Shannon was a model, it was a regular occurrence to have a photographer yell instruction on how Shannon is to behave—acting as an emotional guide of sorts. However, Palahniuk takes this concept and uses it to convey her mindset. They serve to signal her detachment from the events. She cannot immerse herself in the events of the narrative, so it is left to the photographer to tell her how to feel. In this way, Shannon's narration does not shy away from the grotesque, but seems unfazed by it. It also gives the

reader the sense that Shannon herself occupies an uncertain space as a narrator. As a narrator, she is expected to recount the events of the text, yet she does not and avoids them instead.

Other instances of the narrator's direct yet shifting narration style comes in the form of her pop culture references. Many times within the novel, Shannon will mention a popular movie (or someone else's recounting of a movie) or other cultural artifact to the reader. The recollection of films often contains incorrect or nonsensical facts about them. Minute details to the overall structure of the films will be vastly misrepresented by Shannon. Instead of attempting to correct such falsities, Shannon presents them in a matter-of-fact way. For instance, in chapter 3, the narrator talks about one of Brandy's favorite films, Brian De Palma's 1976 *Carrie*. Specifically, she discusses the infamous locker room scene where Carrie is teased for being afraid of her own menstruation. In the warped version of the film, Carrie is bullied by her peers, but instead "Her bloody limbs are everywhere, kicking and punching until the locker room is painted with everyone's blood" (17). Rather than being a scene marked by Carrie's personal torment, Shannon presents it as one of violence. The narrator further obfuscates the truth when revealing that the film (or the warped version of it) culminates when "Sissy Spacek climbs into a top-down 1966 Thunderbird convertible with Susan Sarandon, and the pair of them jump the Grand Canyon to a life of peaceful lesbian freedom" (18). Shannon meshes the story of De Palma's *Carrie* with another film, Ridley Scott's *Thelma & Louise*. How the narrator manipulates the narratives of the films keys the reader into the overarching nature of Shannon's narration. It is not necessarily concerned with presenting an objective perspective but will continuously shift. This type of narration underlines the

shifting identities of characters such as Shane. Though the reader expects Shannon as a narrator to be engaged in the story and provide an unbiased presentation of events, she is anything but. Shannon rejects characteristics associated with the role of the narrator, similar to how Shane rejects playing into a prescribed identity

The structure of *Invisible Monsters Remix* contributes to the notion of the healing aspect of alternative identities. As previously mentioned, Palahniuk's *Invisible Monsters Remix* possesses a rather unique narrative layout. Rather than following a linear narrative and having the events unfold in sequence, the story is purposely disjointed. Palahniuk has the reader shift throughout the novel frequently via prompts at the end of every chapter. For instance, at the end of chapter one, the reader is prompted to skip to the back of the book to read chapter forty-one to continue the story. If read this way, the events of the novel unfold in a logical manner. This quality is present in both the original and remixed versions of the novel. I argue that the layout of the novel echoes the notion of mutilation which is a prevalent theme within Palahniuk's work. Palahniuk uses the structure of *Invisible Monsters Remix* to underline the unexpected healing quality of mutilation. Palahniuk alludes to the act of mutilation through the novel's structure. Rather than following a linear layout, he purposely fractures it by employing frequent narrative jumps.

The theme of mutilation is a frequently occurring theme within Palahniuk's writing—whether overtly or subtly addressed. Andrew Slade in "On Mutilation: The Sublime Body of Chuck Palahniuk's Fiction" analyzes how Palahniuk employs mutilation within his novels. Slade posits that Palahniuk uses mutilation in a rather unique manner, writing how, typically mutilation in a Palahniuk text is "cultivated as a

practice of redemption and survival” for characters (62). Rather than being a means of destruction, mutilation works as the beginning stage of the healing process. Similarly, Ng holds similar beliefs about Palahniuk’s use of mutilation in his work. Ng posits, “The principle characters in *Invisible Monsters* perform violence upon their own bodies as a desperate resort to experience ‘aliveness’” (24). Palahniuk’s ideation of mutilation is not a tool of complete destruction, rather it is a tool of reformation—whether that be of the body or society’s ills.

By purposely harming oneself, Palahniuk suggest one can ensure their wellbeing. This process of mutilation is done by essentially deconstructing oneself down (whether figuratively or literally). By doing this, one can essentially reshape themselves and address past traumas. Johnson’s findings concur with Slade’s perspective. Slade notes how changes in characters within *Invisible Monsters* (and Palahniuk's works in general) only occur after instances of mutilation. Slade writes that change will “involve acts of violence. Blood must flow; flesh must separate to enact these changes” (62). Palahniuk even alludes to the healing potential of mutilation within the novel itself. The significance of mutilation is illustrated in the words of gossip columnist Rona Barret, who Brandy references early in the novel. Brandy remarks how “Miss Rona says the only way to find true happiness is to risk being completely cut open” (28). This blatant reference to mutilation serves to show how its importance in the narrative. Within the context of *Invisible Monsters Remix*, the act of mutilation serves as the impetus for understanding oneself and gaining control over one’s life (something which many of the men struggle with). This quality of mutilation is clearly demonstrated in Shane’s narrative arc. He uses self-mutilation as a means of gaining control over his life.

Shane's character demonstrates the idea of healing through mutilation. Shane's mutilation is the process of sex reassignment. On Shane's transition, the narrator observes how, "A sexual reassignment surgery is a miracle for some people, but if you don't want one, it's the ultimate form of self-mutilation" (111). Shane takes a procedure used by transgender individuals to live as their authentic selves and uses it instead as a means of harming himself. Beyond Shane literally calling the surgery an act of mutilation, there are various instances within the novel where the act of mutilation is associated with cosmetic procedures. In one instance, the narrator walks readers through the process of how facial reconstructive surgery works:

To make you a jawbone, the surgeons will break off parts of your shin bones, complete with the attached artery. First, they expose the bone and sculpt it right there on your leg.

Another way is the surgeons will break several other bones, probably long bones in your legs and arms. Inside these bones is the soft cancellous bone pulp.

(Palahniuk 89)

The narrator's description of jaw reconstruction is rather grisly and serves as a grotesque perspective of a process meant to heal. Once again, Palahniuk plays upon the juxtaposition between the mutilation and disfigurement which must occur during the surgery in order to change the body. The facial reconstruction is meant to make the face whole (an act of healing); however, it can only be done if other parts of the body are mutilated. This concept can be applied to Shane's character as it indicates "a longing for growth through violence. His rebirth involves the violence of surgery to change his gender" (Johnson 68). It is only by becoming Brandy Alexander that Shane can ever

achieve a stable sense of identity. The act of self-mutilation in Shane's case is not inherently negative. It is his mutilation of self which ultimately allows him to live outside socially prescribed roles—his ultimate desire. In becoming Brandy Alexander, Shane gains a self-understanding which was previously absent in his previous life--serving as a mentor figure for the narrator at times. Through Shane, Palahniuk uses the act of mutilation, changing one's body, to be a vehicle for self-exploration.

In a way, Palahniuk assumes the role of a plastic surgeon and the novel is the surgery--an act of violence in of itself. Palahniuk actively mutilates the conventional story structure that has a clearly defined beginning, middle, and end. In the course of reading through the novel, the reader performs drastic shifts from chapter to chapter. As previously mentioned, at the end of chapter one, the reader is prompted to flip near the end of the novel to chapter forty. After this chapter, they are prompted to go back to the front of the novel to read chapter two. The novel largely retains this oscillation between chapters throughout the novel, with it concluding at the center of the novel (chapter 21). In constructing the novel this way, it effectively reads inwards. The inwards reading of the novel echoes the notion of introspection—an inwards search towards understanding.

The act of inward reading and partaking in the mutilation of a more traditional narrative structure reflects the mutilation and eventual healing which Shane undergoes. Johnson writes that for “them [Shannon and Shane] self-directed violence provides the pathway to transcendence” (66). By attacking and deconstructing oneself, one can gain a stronger understanding of the world around them. This idea is reflected in the oscillating nature of the chapters as readers follow prompts to switch back and forth between chapters. In a way, readers are partaking in an inwards search for understanding (of the

narrative). In this scenario, the self-directed violence is the content of Palahniuk's work—it is the sexual, grotesque, and sometimes absurd world of the novel.

In reading the novel—thumbing through the chapters-- the reader becomes a participant in the violence of Palahniuk's text. By following the prompts, the reader eventually achieves the understanding of Palahniuk's world. They gain a more complete perspective of the novel's events than if they were to read the chapters in numerical order. The "healing" for the reader would be to experience the events of the novel in a logical order. By having the readers participate in the warped structure of the novel, Palahniuk allows readers to become fully immersed in it. In this way, they are not just reading about characters who are on a quest for understanding, but they become one to an extent. The reader becomes, as Slade puts it, part of "a search for modes of authentic living in a world where the difference between fake and the genuine has ceased to function" (62). The reader, like the characters such as Shane are searching for a genuine existence and must partake in mutilation in order to achieve this.

On a smaller level, Palahniuk uses individual chapters to reinforce the notion of an inwards search for understanding. For instance, in chapters 3, 16, and 36, the reader must hold the text to a mirror to read it as they are written backwards. To comprehend the text, the reader must literally perform an act of physical reflection. In terms of content, these mirrored chapters call attention to idea of reflection and its relationship to authenticity. This connection is apparent at the beginning of Chapter 3, when the narrator acknowledges the unusual nature of the mirrored chapters and remarks how "No this isn't a typographical mistake. It's that Kiss of the Spider Woman way we have of remembering ourselves instead of the truth" (16). The Kiss of the Spider Woman is a film

whose plot involves an imprisoned man being told a story from a film meant to distract him from the harsh realities of the world. Considering this reference, the narrators quote is likely a statement on how an authentic understanding oneself/the world, or truth, is clouded by a need for escapism. To achieve this authentic perspective is to take part in reflection, he uses the mirrored nature of the chapter to exemplify this idea, remarking

You, the put-upon reader, you just want to get through this story, only the author keeps putting plot obstacles in your way...*As if to say slow down!* All those hindrances, like the bones in a trout, they make you take time and actually taste something. (Palahniuk105).

Again, Palahniuk interrupts the flow of the story—effectively mutilating it even more to prompt his audience to look inwards. This act further fractures the already-fractured nature of the narrative. Palahniuk sees this as being significant because it is like “The way the stylist holds a little mirror so you can look at yourself in the bigger mirror... A reflection of a reflection equals the truth” (16-17). The mirrored chapters force the reader to slow down in the midst of a chaotic world.

Though disturbing and disorienting at times, Palahniuk’s novel nonetheless works to address larger identity issues. In particular, *Invisible Monsters Remix* works to present alternative forms of masculinity. He initially does this through the major male characters of his novel, Shane and Manus. Through these characters, Palahniuk shows the detrimental nature of prescribed masculine identities. He furthers this notion by showing how a way to resist the influence of prescribed identities—evidenced by Shane—is to assume an alternative identity. This alternative identity is not restricted to social expectations or labels. Palahniuk uses the narration of the novel to reinforce the idea of

an alternative identity and moving away from prescribed identities. Shannon's narration often works to defy what readers would come to expect of a narrator. Rather than being a means to clearly understand the novel, Shannon's iteration of a narrator purposely obscures aspects of it. In this regard, she resists the role placed upon her in favor of an alternative form of narration. This characteristic of Shannon's narration resembles the way Shane resists the masculine identity his parents hold. Lastly, the structure of Palahniuk's novel parallels Shane's mutilation and transition into Brandy Alexander. Palahniuk accomplishes this by employing the unique structure of the novel which forces readers to erratically shift back and forth within the novel to understand it. By employing such an experimental structure, Palahniuk effectively mutilates a more conventional narrative layout. This is meant to mirror how, in partaking in mutilation, Shane was able to achieve an alternative identity and beginning to heal from his past traumas. By mutilating the narrative structure, Palahniuk places readers in a similar position as Shane—on search for understanding which can only be achieved through mutilation. Like Diaz's work, Palahniuk's depiction of alternative identity works against the negative aspects of the prescribed identities. The next novel being discussed, David Foster Wallace's *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men*, alternative masculinity is depicted as a stark contrast to traditional masculinity.

The Flawed Man and Wallace's *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men*

David Foster Wallace's *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men* is a collage of various short stories and interviews with different men. These stories were originally featured in various publications across Wallace's career, and he eventually compiled them into a collection. In these stories, Wallace presents an array of men from different walks of life—from Nobel Laureates to restroom attendants. However, there is one unifying feature shared amongst these men—all of them possess some sort of adverse characteristics. These negative characteristics are often foregrounded within the stories. As the title suggests, the men at the center of Wallace's work are hideous—hideous, in the sense that they are sexist, prejudiced, etc. and can likely be deemed irredeemable to some individuals. The work's graphic content makes it the subject of controversy and scrutiny by readers and critics alike.

By making such morally questionable men the focus of the work, critics of *Brief Interviews* often argue that Wallace is attempting to celebrate these types of men. Critics might argue Wallace supports oppressive male identities and promotes them within his work. In "Personally I'm neutral on the menstruation point": David Foster Wallace and Gender" Clare Hayes-Brady comments on such an interpretation of Wallace's work. Hayes-Brady posits how "It is possible to accuse Wallace of misogyny or racism, given the overwhelmingly white masculine focus and characterization...Wallace's approach to gender and gender relations is not as simple as mere hostility, but it is inflected with ideas of power and narcissism" (64). Hayes Brady acknowledges the controversial nature of Wallace's subject matter and how he addresses it. While, yes, Wallace does make rather

questionable men the centerpiece of the novel—men who exhibit some truly detestable qualities—to suggest Wallace’s work is merely a blind praise of adverse qualities is a severe misinterpretation of it. While Wallace presents readers with striking examples of “hideous” men, he does so to achieve a larger effect.

This chapter argues opposite to the idea that Wallace’s text praises destructive male identities. While Wallace presents masculine identities which contain adverse characteristics, he ultimately does so in a way which actually reveals the shortcomings of these identities. In doing this, Wallace actually subverts the notion of a controlling and stable masculine identity. Instead, Wallace presents an alternative form of masculine identity. This alternative identity is implied by the text throughout the collection. In revealing the flaws of the “hideous” men, Wallace is simultaneously revealing the alternative to the oppressive masculine identity. Wallace uses the format of his work present an alternative to the detrimental forms of masculinity present in the collection. Compared to the “hideous” men, this alternative is flawed, self-doubtful, and unstable. This drastically different depiction of masculinity serves as a stark contrast to the masculine identity which is foregrounded in Wallace’s collection. In this way, Wallace’s depiction of masculine identity works to resist more traditional models of masculinity in favor of a more nuanced perspective.

Like the previous chapters, I intend to focus on the characters, narration, and structure of the stories in Wallace’s work. Because his work is a collection of different types of short stories and do not have a shared overarching narrative, I intend to focus on a few specific sections of it. However, I will reference sections within the collection where needed. The sections I intend to give particular attention to are as follows: “B.I.

#14,” “Forever Overhead,” “Octet,” “Adult World I & II,” and “BI #59.” In some capacity, these stories demonstrate how Wallace takes addresses the flawed alternative to the “hideous” men of his work. Regarding character, the chapter will discuss how Wallace uses the characters of his stories to depict flawed men with unstable senses of self. Then, I will discuss how Wallace’s narration reinforces this notion of instability and doubt present within the characters. Lastly, I will discuss how the structure of the novel—particularly Wallace’s experimental use of footnotes—helps to further such a depiction of men.

Before delving into how Wallace uses his depiction of men in *Brief Interviews* to subvert negative masculine identity, I find it worthwhile to define some of the general characteristics of the masculinity prevalent throughout the collection. In doing this, I am not seeking to provide a definitive characterization of the masculine identities in *Brief Interviews*. Instead, I am attempting to indicate some of the major characteristics which I see Wallace foregrounding in his work.

Foremost, I find the aspect of control prevalent in the stories within the collection. Nearly every story addresses the concept of control in some capacity. This control may manifest in control over time, control over another person, and even control over oneself. At times within the collection, Wallace takes the “hideous” aspects of the men even further and addresses taboo topics. For instance, there are men who hate their children because of birth deformities, men who use personal injury to leverage sex from others, and even men who derive pleasure from hearing about sexual assault. Another related characteristic of the men in the collection is their hypersexuality. Many of the of stories involve men discussing their past or even future sexual relations. Marshall Boswell

addresses the significance of sex in the lives of Wallace's men, writing, "sex becomes for Wallace's "hideous" men (and women) another means by which they can descend deeper and deeper into their self-made cages of self-consciousness and solipsistic dread" (183). Sex, or the pursuit of sex serves to further contribute to the struggles of the men in Wallace's work. Furthermore, this hypersexuality is intertwined with the notion of control as the men's sexual experiences often are based in control—whether consensual or forced. Considering these characteristics, one can see how Wallace's depiction of masculinity is in line with the traditional masculine identities present within Diaz's *Oscar Wao* and Palahniuk's *Invisible Monsters Remix*. Wallace's men, like the men of the other novels, have certain behaviors which are meant to define their identities. The characterization of masculinity in *Brief Interviews* is similar to Hayes-Brady's characterization of it. The writer posits, "Masculinity in Wallace's writing and characters is dominant, but subscribes to the myth of masculinity in crisis, attempting to narrate and occupy instead of converse and understand" (69). Hayes-Brady's sees masculinity in Wallace's writing as a dominating force which leaves little room for alternatives to it to exist. Wallace's version of "hideous" masculinity aligns with patriarchal notions about the male role with regards to male behavior. The men of the stories view their behavior as normal for men, so they do not question their actions—often pursuing their desires without question or trying to justify immoral behavior. Jon Baskin in "So Decide: *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men* as Philosophical Criticism" comments on this quality of Wallace's men. Baskin writes

what it means to be hideous, or morally ugly, will correlate closely with the inability to let go of this overhead, self-conscious self—a self that is "scared" by

thinking, but even more scared by admitting the limits of certain kinds of thinking (Baskin 94).

Baskin characterizes the men of *Brief Interviews* as being inflexible and unwilling to accept alternative ways of being.

At the surface level, the masculinity in *Brief Interviews* is an unrelenting and unapologetic force. It works towards enabling male domination over women and society as a whole. While Wallace seems to present a rather pessimistic perspective of masculinity within *Brief Interviews*—characterizing the men in a negative light—he moves beyond this perspective. Wallace uses rigid form of masculinity as a beginning point for a more nuanced depiction of masculine identity. Wallace begins to achieve such a representation of masculinity in the way he depicts his male characters.

As previously mentioned, the men of *Brief Interviews* live up to title of “hideous” they are given in the collection’s title. Their identities are closely tied to characteristics of control and hypersexuality. However, while Wallace initially highlights these adverse qualities of the men, they are quickly sidelined for a contrasting and flawed depiction of masculinity. Wallace portrays this alternative masculine identity as flawed. Such an identity is seen particularly in the stories “Forever Overhead,” “Octet” and “BI #59.” Within these sections, male characters who display traditionally masculine behaviors or desire more masculine pursuits are unable to achieve them. Consequently, these men fall short of the model of masculinity prevalent throughout the work and exhibit non-masculine qualities.

“B.I. #14” features the most blatant instance of a character’s masculine pursuit being overshadowed by their flaws. Within the interview, the man discusses his inability

to have a normal sexual interaction with a woman. The interviewee cannot do so because he has an unbearable urge to break the romantic tension by screaming “Victory for the Forces of Democratic Freedom!” at the top of his lungs every time he orgasms. His yelling seemingly comes from nowhere as he is not political by any means. Wallace’s choice in phrase is interesting because it evokes feelings of triumph; however, for the man, the phrase causes him to fail in his sexual pursuits. He comments on how “[the outbursts] cost me every sexual relationship I ever had. I don’t know why I do it...I can tell how bad it freaks them out, and I get embarrassed and never call them again” (17-18). The man is aware of how his actions create discomfort for himself and his sexual partners, but he is rendered helpless to his compulsion. The man’s screaming prevents him from attaining a complete sexual experience with a woman—something which could be considered a traditional masculine behavior. However, what makes him fall short of the masculine model foregrounded in the collection because he lacks control over himself. Consequently, the man’s lack of control ultimately prevents him from fulfilling his desires. His sexual pursuits are quite literally interrupted by a personal flaw. In a similar vein, the man from “B.I. #59” struggles with his sense of control and sexuality.

The man in “B.I. #59” does not have the same proclivity towards sexual yelling as the man from “B.I. #14,” he possesses a rather unique sexual desire that bridges into supernatural territory. The man desires to possess supernatural powers which would allow him to freeze time and have free reign over the women of his choice. He attributes his fantasy to his youth where he would watch the tv show *Bewitched* and see the protagonist exhibit supernatural abilities. Now, as an adult, he has a fantasy where he possesses power “over citizens’ wills and motion, over the flowing of time, the frozen

obliviousness of witnesses” (217). Essentially, he wants the power to freeze time to enact his masturbatory desires over helpless women.

The man’s fantasy in “B.I. #59” demonstrates a need for control over women and wishes to perform these sexual feats whenever he pleases. However, his masculine desires are left complicated due to his personal flaws. When describing to the interviewer the components of his fantasy, his thoughts are soon interrupted as he begins to exhibit self-doubt towards its viability. Notably, the man gets caught up in defining the mechanics of his powers and its finer details. For instance, when he discusses whether people would be able to witness when time is frozen, he remarks how, “All witnesses were not truly oblivious. This inconsistency was unacceptable in the fantasy’s logic of total power, and soon made successful masturbation to envisioning it impossible” (219-220). The man gets caught up in the minutiae of his fictional plans and becomes doubtful of their realism. In doing this, the conviction the man feels towards his fantasy of control becomes greatly overshadowed by his own perceived failings.

“B.I. #59” also keys the reader into a shared quality among Wallace’s male characters. Jon Baskin encapsulates this shared characteristic, writing that Wallace’s men are storytellers, “But they are united by an inability to tell a particular story without theorizing about or abstracting from the story they are telling” (90). Baskin sees the men of Wallace’s work as unable to effectuate their intentions without significant deviation. Though these men attempt to realize traditionally masculine pursuits, their efforts are rendered ineffective. This is seen clearly within the “B.I. #59” because he essentially loses control over his sexual fantasy and is consumed by his own doubt. This notion is further exemplified in the sections of the collection which are not interviews.

Another, less pronounced, instance of a male character's masculine pursuits being disrupted by personal shortcomings occurs in "Forever Overhead." Told in the second person perspective, this short story is unique in the sense that the central character is a young boy on his birthday during a family outing. His desire, unlike the previous two men, is not sexual in nature but it nonetheless represents a keystone masculine experience for him. The boy desires to dive into a public swimming pool by himself. Though it is a simple goal, it nonetheless holds a great importance to the boy. This desire signals a sort of transition for the boy, as he literally begins his dive into manhood and independence (the boy is turning thirteen). Boswell remarks how, "Like his budding sexuality, his desire for solitude is a new development, perhaps the product of his new self-consciousness" (202). Similarly, Baskin comments on the significance of the story taking place on the boy's thirteenth birthday, writing, "The thirteenth birthday, of course, reflects a turning point or an initiation; here it is marked also for its proximity to puberty and adolescence" (92). The boy is experiencing new developments—both of the mind and the body—in his transition to manhood and the pool trip (and the dive) is significant to him.

The dive is a monumental experience to the boy's development, and he strives to see his goal through. Regarding the trip itself, the narrator remarks, "This afternoon, on your birthday, you have asked to come to the pool... This is nice and you can't talk about why you wanted to come alone, and really truly maybe you didn't want to come alone" (6). Though it is not explicitly stated, the reader is meant to conclude that the trip and the dive is meant to be a sort of threshold for the boy—a pursuit to demonstrate his new masculinity. Hayes-Brady supports this notion, writing the boy at the top of the ladder,

“imagines the emergence from infantile narcissism into a balanced subjectivity and awareness of the Self as object” (72). Hayes-Brady views the boy’s trip as signaling a larger transition in his development. It is something he cannot describe, yet it compels him.

The boy’s desire to jump into manhood, like the men of the interviews is hindered. As the boy positions himself to take the dive into the pool, there is a noticeable slowing down of time. The narrator observes “Where you are now is still and quiet. Wind radio shouting splashing not here. No time and no real sound but your blood squeaking in your head” (14). The boy’s perception of time begins to slow down immensely—to the point where every minute detail of his surroundings is exaggerated. It is ultimately left ambiguous as to whether the boy took the jump or not. This occurrence is likely meant to signal hesitation on his willingness to dive (or, become a man). Though the boy begins his trip with a mission to exhibit his maturity into a man, he is put in a liminal space at the top of the diving board where he is neither fully a child nor is he a man. Boswell comments on how, at the top of ladder, the boy is “in a paralysis of thinking and self-doubt that is perhaps the most characteristic state for a Wallace character” (202). In his newly acquired self-conscious state, the boy strongly resembles many of the men in Wallace’s work. He is put in a position where he wants to achieve an ideal of masculinity—in this case, having control over himself—but cannot do so. The title “Forever Overhead” represents the boy’s in-between status. He attempts to control his own anxieties, yet he is ultimately rendered helpless because of himself. In this way, the boy’s character aligns with the men of “B.I. #14” and “B.I. #59.”

Through his characters, Wallace depicts a more layered version of masculinity than what is originally presented. While the men of Wallace's stories attempt to undergo traditional male pursuits relating to control or sex (or what they believe to be traditional male pursuits) they are unable to undertake them. This inability is a consequence of their own flaws which ultimately make them fall just short of a traditional masculine identity. As a consequence, the men's issues are left unresolved. The man from B.I. #14 is able to initiate sex with a woman, but he still is unable to maintain a normal encounter. The man from B.I. #59 has an idea of the elements of his control fantasy, but he cannot complete the fantasy in his head because he gets caught up in his own logic. The boy from "Forever Overhead" wants to establish his masculinity by diving into the pool alone, but he hesitates before doing so, and the story ends with the reader not knowing if he was successful. In presenting male characters this way, Wallace undercuts the masculine identity he establishes elsewhere in his work. While the men are intended to be direct and domineering, in reality they are not in control of their situations. Though the men begin their stories with a clear goal and demeanor to achieve it, their efforts ultimately wane. Their traditionally masculine identities dissolve from one which is idealized and stable into one which is flawed. This transition is further reinforced in the narration of the Wallace's stories which reflect changing identity.

Since Wallace's novel is a collection of different stories, it naturally lends itself to contain a wide variety of different types of narration and experiments with it. In many instances within the collection, Wallace employs experimental narration to tell his stories. These experimental tactics work to emphasize the notion of a changing masculine identity within Wallace's work. Wallace accomplishes this particularly in the stories of

“Adult World I,” “Adult World II,” and “Octet.” In these stories, Wallace employs experimental elements in narration to illustrate a transition in identity.

“Adult World I” and “Adult World II” are seemingly the only sections which directly connect to each other. These sections follow the disintegration of a couple’s relationship after a woman believes her husband is unfaithful to her. The first part of the narrative follows a more conventional narration style, as it is told from a third person perspective. However, once the story transitions to the second part and the wife finds out that her husband has been frequenting the Adult World adult store, the narration style shifts quite substantially. What was once a coherent narration of events soon becomes obscured and the story begins to be told as if it were merely an outline of events (a “schema” as it is referred to in the story) (183). For instance, when the wife discovers her husband’s secret, the narrator remarks how the wife has a “bldng realization that hsbnd is a Secret Compulsive Masturbator & that insomnia/ yen is cover for secret trips to Adult world to purchase/ view/ masturbate self raw to XXX films & images” (183-184). The wife is obviously shocked to find out where her husband has been sneaking off to and the realization unsettles her. However, the narration complicates the way the reader might interpret the events. Because of how the chapter is told, the reader does not get the sense of the woman’s shock because of the outline narration. It is strikingly bare and forgoes any sort of language which might resonate with a reader and convey the emotional impact of the scene. Instead, the reader is provided just enough information to get a sense of what is going on.

The choice in narration for the second part of the story helps convey the growing divide within the relationship between the man and woman. As the two grow apart from

each other the single narrative becomes two sections told in strikingly different ways. The narration also works to reemphasize the notion of a male identity which changes. The reader literally experiences identity changing at two levels. The first shift is the way the woman's perception of her husband changes from a faithful husband to a morally questionable man who frequents adult entertainment stores. Then, the reader sees the narration make a shift into a less refined state. What was once a fleshed-out narrative with complete sentences and words becomes fractured. Reading the two sections sequentially would give the reader the impression that the narration's identity itself has changed to become more flawed and incomplete. This not only likely mirrors the wife's perception of her husband and how it changes, but it also mirrors the other men of the novel. Much like the other men, the narrator possessed a clearly defined role—to tell the story. The narration does this effectively in “Adult World I” as the narration is complete. However, it eventually falls short of its role in “Adult World II.”

Another instance of experimental narration occurs in “Octet.” This story contains some of the hallmark characteristics of Wallace's writing, such as lengthy prose and an extensive use of footnotes. The section is intended to be a collection of pop quizzes which essentially work to interrogate the reader. These quizzes cover a variety of morally gray situations that the reader is to make sense of. However, the concept of the section does not come into fruition. The reader learns this as they are thrust into the role of author of “Octet” (presumably Wallace himself). The author states, “You are, unfortunately, a fiction writer. You are attempting a cycle of very short belletristic pieces...Maybe say they're supposed to compose a certain sort of 'interrogation' of the person reading them” (145). The author appears to have a clear vision for the section and how readers are

meant to interact with the text. However, this clarity is short-lived as the narration soon begins to spiral out of control. The author observes that after enough time working on the piece, “it ends up being a total fiasco. Five of the eight pieces don’t work at all---meaning that they don’t interrogate or palpate what you want them to, plus are too contrived or too cartoonish or too annoying or all three—and you have to toss them out” (146). The author does not see his works as providing its intended effect and he becomes more critical of it. Boswell comments on this aspect of “Octet,” positing,

This narrator continually interrupts the piece to describe his own difficulties in outing the series together, a description of artistic anxiety that itself takes the form of a series of questions for the reader. The story is therefore self-conscious about its own self-consciousness (Boswell 185).

Wallace takes the reader out a step further and uses the self-criticism of the author’s work to become a larger musing on authenticity.

In using the pop quizzes to speak to the reader directly, Wallace worries that his choice would “resemble the type of real-world person who tries to manipulate you into liking him by making a big deal of how open and honest and manipulative he’s being all the time” (147). By taking such a direct approach towards addressing the reader and their morality, Wallace wonders if his writing is having the opposite intended effect. Boswell speaks to this dilemma, noting, “Wallace demonstrates how self-professed “openness” can become an even more sinister form of deception” (184). Instead of genuinely reaching the reader, the author fears that it actually promotes an air of artifice. The narration of “Octet” works in a similar manner as the narration in “Adult World I&II.” It works to convey the concept of an identity which devolves over time. However,

“Octet’s” narration adds to this notion as it provides a tangible example in the form of the reader assuming the part of the author. In making this choice, Wallace not only makes the text more immersive, but it also provides the reader with a more concrete and accessible instance of a male whose flaws inhibit his pursuits.

The author seeks to create a work where he is able to guide the reader into confronting their own morality –a desire for control over how readers approach the text. However, the author is unable to achieve this because their own anxieties about appearing genuine become more and more evident throughout the section. The narration eventually becomes more concerned with musing on what it means to be authentic and how they are attempting to do so through the text rather than presenting it. The original intent for “Octet” is never fully realized because of the diversion into self-doubt. Like in the “Adult World” sections, the narration of “Octet” becomes a mirror for the male characters of Wallace’s stories. Wallace not only uses the narration of his stories to underline the notion of a shifting identity, but he also employs elements of his structure to do so.

The structure of *Brief Interviews* lends itself to the notion of moving away from a clearly defined masculine identity to a more nuanced one. Wallace accomplishes this by employing experimental aspects to the structure of his collection. By doing this, Wallace expands on concepts he presents at the character and narration levels of his work. In particular, I find it relevant to call attention to some of the more striking experimental aspects of his work: Wallace’s experimental use of footnotes and the interview structure of many of the stories within the collection. These experimental elements are clearly visible throughout the various interview sections, namely “B.I. #14” and “B.I. #59,” and

“Octet.” In these sections, Wallace is able to highlight the flawed nature of his male characters to his readers and even place them in their mindsets of justification.

Wallace uses the interview structure of many sections within the collection to reinforce a less stable sense of identity. In particular, Wallace toys with the interview structure by forgoing the conversational aspects of interviews. He does this by purposely omitting the interviewer’s voice in most of the interviews. With such a choice, Wallace draws the reader’s attention to the men’s character flaws. Additionally, he further plays with the interview structure via the pop quiz structure of “Octet.” With the pop quizzes, Wallace is able to further engross the reader in his work by placing them in a similar position as its “hideous” male characters.

The interview structure featured in Wallace’s collection is unique in that it does not ascribe to the concept of interviews as being conversational in nature or as a dialogue between two people. Instead, the interviews of *Brief Interviews* are strikingly one-sided. Most, if not all, of the dialogue from the interviewer is omitted, though, it is implied within the collection that the interviewer is a woman. In instances where the interviewer would interject, they are represented by the letter Q and blank spaces. In the interviewer’s silence, Hayes-Brady posits, “The silenced voice conducting the interviews, Q., is never given a name or a voice, but is subjected to tirades of abuse by more than one of her interviewees” (67). Though the interviewer is the one connecting thread between the interviews of the novel, they remain absent. This quality of the work helps establish the theme of sexism and female exclusion present throughout the collection. Furthermore, his structural choice creates an interesting effect on the reading experience, as every interview essentially becomes dominated by the interviewee’s dialogue.

The omission of the interviewer's voice allows for the reader's attention to be focused exclusively on the subject of the interview: the hideous men. Though it may seem Wallace places detestable characters in the spotlight through this omission, it also works to help reveal the flaws of the men in question. It even results in the flawed aspect of their characters to underline and exaggerate the men's shortcomings. For instance, in "B.I. #14", the man who screams every time he orgasms is understandably embarrassed by his proclivity. He and the interviewer have a discussion about his behavior. The man remarks,

What would you say if you just shouted, 'Victory for the Forces of Democratic Freedom!' right when you came?

Q.

It would be so embarrassing if it wasn't so totally fucking weird. If I had any clue what it was about. You know?

Q...

'God, now I'm embarrassed as hell.'

Q. (Wallace 18)

In this exchange, the man speaks to the embarrassment he feels. The interviewer asks questions to delve deeper into the issue; however, the reader does not know what they are asking the man. The interviewer's voice is noticeably absent, and the reader is ultimately forced to use context clues to fill in the missing information. From the context of the man's dialogue, the reader can infer that the interviewer is likely trying to calm him down. Furthermore, the omission of the interviewer's dialogue prompts the reader to focus exclusively on the shame the man feels about his behavior. It draws attention to the

true lack of control that the man has over his screaming during sex and how he does not fit in with traditionally masculine characteristics.

Similarly, in “B.I. 59” there is minimal indication of the interviewer’s input within the interviewer. Once again, the absence of the interviewer’s voice works to highlight the shortcomings of the man and where they differ from traditional depictions of masculinity. For instance, during the interview, the man undertakes a lengthy dialogue explaining his fantasy--going as far as to catalog the most minute detail of the woman’s “heavy clothing” (217). The dense, detail-riddled paragraphs coupled with minimal inclusion of the interviewer makes it feel more like rambling than a dialogue. Within the rambling, the man’s self-doubt becomes evident as he has difficulty defining his proposed supernatural abilities. The man notes,

“Trying to masturbate, I was agitated that my fantasy’s power had in reality succeeded only in halting the superficial appearance, and then only within the limited arena of the fantasy’s State Exercise Facility. It is at this time that the imaginative labor of this fantasy of power became exponentially more difficult” (Wallace 220).

The man becomes unsure of the parameters of his fictional powers to the point where he becomes frozen by his doubts. He does not know whether he will truly be in control of time or whether it will just look as though he can control it. Though the man dreams of attaining supernatural control over others, he cannot fully realize them due to the sheer amount of overthinking he does. Like the man in “B.I. #14,” the lack of interviewer dialogue further emphasizes the lack of control that the man has over his situation.

The one-sided interview structure Wallace uses helps further emphasize how the men of the stories differ from the initial masculine identity Wallace presents. Wallace further experiments with the interview structure in “Octet” via the pop quizzes. While these are not interviews per-se, they are intended to work similar to an interview. However, instead of the interview taking place between two characters, the pop quiz is meant to work as an interview of sorts between the author and reader.

Wallace uses the interview structure beyond the formally designated interview sections of the collection. In particular, Wallace notably employs the pop quiz structure in “Octet.” However, instead of omitting the interviewer and focusing on the interviewee’s responses, Wallace does the opposite in these sections. In these Pop Quizzes, the interviewer is the narrator, Q. and the interviewee is the reader. He presents readers with a series of quizzes where the reader is presented with a scenario and is asked to come up with an answer. Baskin comments on the nature of the scenarios and how “The decisions look disparate but are unified in the sense that we have difficulty figuring out how to judge them” (96). These quizzes are structured in a way where they have no clear answer. Ideally, when reading these sections, the reader partakes in a genuine moral dilemma.

An example of the moral ambiguity within the pop quizzes is in Pop Quiz 7. This quiz follows a mother, who, upon divorcing her husband, has the option to keep custody of her child or give it up. If she were to retain custody, she would maintain a presence in her child’s life; however, they would struggle financially. If she were to give the child up, she would have no presence in its life, but the child would be financially stable. At the end of the quiz, the mother decides to give up custody and the narrator then asks the

reader very simply “(A) Is she a good mother?” (135). This, of course, is a loaded question that has many factors to take into account. The goodness of the mother is subjective and dependent on the readers’ values. Since there is no one single resolution, the reader would likely provide a response similar to the men in other interviews. That is, the reader would have to perform a lengthy explanation to justify their choice on the morally ambiguous situation. It is more than likely whatever answer the reader comes up with would not be considered wholly moral. Therefore, the reader would have to do a lot of explaining and self-justification in order to answer the question. In doing this, they act similar to the “hideous” men. It resembles how the men of the novel often find themselves attempting to justify their own questionable behavior through lengthy responses to the interviewer’s questions.

The act of answering the pop quiz would mirror men such as the one from “BI #59” who tries to justify his control fantasy. Wallace, once again, subverts the interview structure to great effect. With regards to the quiz interview structure in “Octet,” they work to immerse the reader in the position of the novel’s hideous men. Boswell comments on the characteristics of Wallace’s writing and how the unique structure, “puts the reader ‘inside’ the story as a character,” (188). The structure allows the reader to become fully invested in the events of the collection through their participation. Like the men of Wallace’s collection who go on lengthy dialogues about morally questionable desires, the reader of “Octet” must also perform a similar act. This is because, as Baskin remarks, a single morally correct answer to the quizzes can be achieved, “by referring to prevailing rules or conventions, for such norms are either absent or they clash with one another such as to render them practically useless” (96). The pop quizzes of “Octet”

allows Wallace to bridge the divide between the reader and the men at the center of the novel.

The arguably most noteworthy characteristics of “Octet” is Wallace’s experimental use of footnotes. Like Diaz, Wallace uses the footnotes beyond their traditional use of denoting supplemental information and as a means of furthering his storytelling. In “Consider the Footnote,” Ira Nadel speaks to Wallace’s rather unique use of footnotes in his writing. Nadel posits that Wallace’s version of the footnote

generates a vibrant spatial dimension that physically embodies the complexity of the prose...The placement of the footnote either at the bottom of the page or as an endnote affects the reading experience, interrupting one’s reading practice to slow the pace and allow time to process ideas (Nadel 234)

Wallace’s footnote goes far beyond traditional usage in the sense it adds to the aesthetic of the work and the way the reader interacts with the text itself. Unlike Diaz, who uses footnotes to expound upon the personal histories of characters, Wallace uses footnotes to represent thought while also offering commentary on the writing itself.

In “Octet” the reader formally enters the perspective of Wallace in “Pop Quiz 9” with the words “You are, unfortunately, a fiction writer.” (145). The footnotes help to build upon this perspective, as they work as extensions of the author’s thoughts as he constructs “Octet.” Nadel further comments on Wallace’s footnotes, writing how they are “visual expression and confirmation of his nonlinear thinking...[The footnotes] demonstrate the active intellectual and creative energy of Wallace on and off the page while also exhibiting the double consciousness of the text” (219). The footnotes Wallace employs are very much extensions of himself—specifically his thoughts. Unlike the main

body of the text which often has a clear and directed focus, the footnotes are a space which his voice is not as confined. Within the footnotes, Wallace has a space where he can experiment immensely with his writing. In the case of the footnotes of “Octet,” they serve as a means to directly address the reader on the writing process.

For instance, Wallace uses one of the footnotes to further expand on the purpose of the Pop Quizzes, how “part of what you want these little Pop Quizzes to do is break the textual fourth wall and kind of address (or ‘interrogate’) the reader directly” (147). The footnotes work to develop the uncertainties of the male author by representing a longer, less restricted form of his thought. The footnotes, the representations of thought, are filled with uncertainty about the authenticity of their efforts. In using the pop quizzes to speak to the reader directly, Wallace worries that his choice would “resemble the type of real-world person who tries to manipulate you into liking him by making a big deal of how open and honest and manipulative he’s being all the time” (147). In attempting to reach the audience directly, Wallace is unsure of how it might come across in reality. This notion parallels the self-doubt present within Wallace’s characters and how they are unsure if they can achieve their masculine goals. In this way, Wallace might even be considered as embodying the alternative qualities he is writing about within the text.

Wallace’s *Brief Interviews* possesses an array of elements at the character, narration, and structural levels to demonstrate the idea of men transitioning from established conceptions of masculinity. Within the text, Wallace closely associates the “hideous” aspects of the collection’s men with traditionally patriarchal characteristics—specifically those of control and hypersexuality. However, he makes specific choices within the novel which reveal the flawed aspects of the men. By doing this, Wallace

provides an alternative to the “hideous” men of the collection. These men are unsure of themselves and their attempts at fulfilling a more traditional male identity are compromised. While this alternative masculinity Wallace provides in this collection is depicted as flawed, it works to negate the more destructive aspects of the “hideous” men by serving as a stark contrast to them. While the “hideous” men are dominating, sexual, and confident in themselves, their alternatives are the exact opposite of them.

Conclusion

Diaz's *Oscar Wao*, Palahniuk's *Invisible Monsters Remix*, and Wallace's *Brief Interviews* are all instances of contemporary American literature which address issues related to gender. Though all of these novels present bold--sometimes disturbing--depictions of men and it might seem that these authors are celebrating them, their work does the opposite. In presenting these types of men, the authors work to address confining perspectives of traditional masculinity. Each of these novels address and challenge previously established depictions of masculinity and present alternatives. The alternative masculine identities in these novels vary greatly from each other and represent marginalized masculinities. However, within each novel, these masculinities work as positive alternatives to traditionally masculine characteristics, or they may even serve as direct contrasts to more detrimental instances of masculine identity. The authors accomplish this presentation partly due to their experimental elements. The experimental elements serve as a means of furthering concepts within their work. In these novels, authors will often introduce alternative masculinity through their characters and use their experimental elements to emphasize or highlight them.

In Diaz's *Oscar Wao*, Diaz addresses the dominating and hypersexual conceptions of masculinity often forced on Dominican men. He uses his characters Yunior and Oscar to present a masculine identity which demonstrates opposing characteristics (vulnerability, emotional connection). He then utilizes experimental elements to further resist the notion of a patriarchal male identity. Similarly, in Palahniuk's *Invisible Monsters Remix*, Palahniuk addresses the constraining effects of

masculine roles on gay men. Palahniuk illustrates the notion of an alternative identity via his character Shane who assumes an alternative identity to escape prescribed roles. He also illustrates the destructive effects when one seeks to embrace a prescribed masculine role through Manus and his never-ending quest of seduction. Palahniuk then uses the immense experimentation with the structure of his novel to help mirror the search for self which Shane undergoes as seeks to escape prescribed roles. In doing this, Palahniuk allows his readers to experience the journey of one of his male characters. Lastly, Wallace's *Brief Interviews* presents a collage of different men with adverse characteristics. He presents these men in a satirical way which actually underlines their own self-conscious and flawed characteristics. He then utilizes experimental elements of his novel in a similar manner as Palahniuk-- to further convey these flaws and immerse the reader in the perspective of his "hideous" men. These authors all reveal the problematic and destructive effects of prescribed masculine identities. Furthermore, they resist such depictions of men through alternative masculinities.

When analyzed in isolation, these novels provide varying depictions of masculinity--from different cultural contexts, different sexualities, etc. However, when looked at together, one can see a commonality among them in how they view alternative masculinities in relation to prescribed masculine identities. These novels all cast alternative masculinity as working to correct the damaging aspects of traditional masculinity. While traditional masculinity in these novels is often depicted as confining and detrimental to man's public and private wellbeing, alternative masculinity is depicted in the opposite way. The authors present their versions of alternative masculinities as forces which resist the less amiable characteristics of traditional conceptions of

masculinity. From an alternative perspective of masculinity, one can be vulnerable, be free of social labels, or simply exist as a flawed individual. Alternative masculinity frees one from the rigid and unchanging restrictions of traditional masculine expectations.

The trend of resistance within these novels aligns with the current goals of men's studies. As mentioned earlier, part of men's studies seeks to challenge harmful depictions of men. The novels discussed in this thesis do exactly this and, instead, present diverse perspectives of masculinity. Though these novels often foregrounded traditional masculinity via their characters, these traditional depictions were subverted through the characters' arcs or the author's own experimentation. The male characters often undergo experiences which challenge their (and likely the readers') perception of social roles. Furthermore, the use of experimental elements adds to the authors' ability to present alternative masculinities. By toying with the conventions of the novel, they are able to create a narrative space where social norms are challenged and a space where different ways of being can exist. This type of experimentation would naturally lend itself to challenging the dominant status of traditional masculinity.

The novels discussed in this thesis are in line with current scholarship about gender. They reinforce the notion that the collective understanding of gender is constantly redefined. Specifically, within these novels, it is the understanding of masculinity and what constitutes it which is being reframed. While, previously, there were certain qualities needed to be considered masculine (hypersexuality, aggression, dominance, etc.), the novels work to disrupt this belief. Per these novels and their depiction of alternative masculine identities, men do not need to act a certain way or possess certain characteristics to be considered a man. This serves a starting point for

developing the discourse on masculinity studies. It shows how masculinity in literature--
much masculinity in general society--is beginning to be viewed as more fluid and
inclusive. The next steps for discourse should be related to further exploring the
intersection between this new perspective of masculinity and issues such as race and
class. In exploring these issues, scholars would likely gain a more nuanced perspective in
how they might affect individuals' perspective on masculinity.

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