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"Upon Life and All Its Random Injustice": The Post-Traumatic Masculinity of Superheroes, Villains, and Vigilantes in Graphic Novels, Television, and Cinema

Shana Marie Kraynak
Indiana University of Pennsylvania

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“UPON LIFE AND ALL ITS RANDOM INJUSTICE”: THE POST-TRAUMATIC
MASCULINITY OF SUPERHEROES, VILLAINS, AND VIGILANTES IN GRAPHIC
NOVELS, TELEVISION, AND CINEMA

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Shana Marie Kraynak

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

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Indiana University of Pennsylvania
School of Graduate Studies and Research
Department of English

We hereby approve the dissertation of

Shana Marie Kraynak

Candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Thomas Slater, Ph.D.
Professor of English, Advisor

Christopher Kuipers, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of English

Kenneth Sherwood, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of English

ACCEPTED

Randy L. Martin, Ph.D.
Dean
School of Graduate Studies and Research

Title: “Upon Life and All Its Random Injustice”: The Post-Traumatic Masculinity of Superheroes, Villains, and Vigilantes in Graphic Novels, Television, and Cinema

Author: Shana Marie Kraynak

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Thomas Slater

Dissertation Committee Members: Dr. Christopher Kuipers
Dr. Kenneth Sherwood

In this dissertation, I will trace masculine representation from the moment of national trauma inflicted by 9/11 up through the present, wherein post-traumatic and posthuman masculinity has been used as coping mechanisms for unrealistic expectations of gender. In particular, I aim to discuss film, television, and graphic novels as overlapping visual media, rather than as independent genres, because filmmakers and graphic novelists alike are concerned with story telling through cinematic techniques, including mise-en-scene and framing; camera and composition techniques such as depth of field, zoom shots, point of view shots, and high/low shots; dialogue (whether auditory in film or conveyed in speech balloons); and scene pacing in various constructions of editing, panel arrangement, or panel size.

The changing perceptions of masculinity as represented through the techniques I’ve stated in graphic novels and cinema can be tied to major changes in American culture. The texts show both the costs imposed on men and the societies affected by their actions. In other words, they show where the hyper-masculine response to 9/11 has brought us. The immediate post-9/11 representation of masculinity returned to the historical manly stereotype, confirmed once again by the American ideology of justified military aggression and violence. This aggression goes hand and hand with the revitalized John Wayne hyper-masculinity that appeared in our post-9/11 culture, as we clung to gender archetypes and

social constructions as a way to grieve, as a way to move forward, and as way to reinvent the America that we had let become so feminine and weak. But hyper-masculinity was not the only response to national trauma and perceived emasculation. I plan to show that despite the revival and re-construction of certain masculine ideals, many men felt the negative effects of being forced into gender normative behavior.

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Attach the stone of triumph!

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The events of September 11th, 2001 have been dissected time and time again as our wounded country has sought meaning in this tragedy. The desire to comprehend the actions of others as we feel pain is understandable, but in the immediate aftermath Americans did not just seek meaning abroad. Almost instantly, the blame was placed on an American lifestyle that had strayed from religion and traditional gender roles. Just one day after the attacks, Jerry Falwell blamed the “abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians [for] actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle [causing] God to lift the veil of protection which has allowed no one to attack America on our soil since 1812” (*The Terror Dream* 22). Falwell was not alone in his crazed attack on feminism and its supposed ill effect on our culture. To reaffirm traditional gender roles, images of a remasculinized culture pervaded news media, television, and film in the months and years following 9/11. When faced with trauma and tragedy, people desperately cling to perceptions of normality. Following a world-changing event like 9/11, any illusion of normality became a part of our nation’s healing process. The problem with this is that “getting back to normal” ostensibly means getting back to what society deems acceptable behavior, but where does the concept of “normal” or “acceptable” come from? Who decides what is or is not normal, especially when it comes to gender roles?

Answering these questions requires a theoretical perspective on social discourse. Cultural studies fulfills this requirement as it diminishes the binaries of high and low culture, making every cultural production a valuable object of study. It allows us to study beyond the text itself and ask questions about how and why the text was created. Most importantly,

cultural studies reveals that ideology and identity stem from a socially constructed reality. It provides a methodology that exposes the false nature of gender norms and representational stereotypes within works of popular culture. The work that follows will argue that there is a reciprocal relationship between culture and cultural productions—that cultural events shape cultural works and vice versa. Popular culture in the post-9/11 era reaffirmed and reconstructed the historical ideologies of masculinity, as shown in film, television, and graphic novels. These texts show how easy it can be for our culture to fall back into hegemonic representations of gender, relying on stereotypical masculine ideals of heroism in the face of apocalyptic trauma. Yet, simultaneously, products of popular culture also challenge these traditional and oppressive representations. Therefore, my major focus will be on the texts that do more to show the dangers of and alternatives to traditional gender definitions.

Stuart Hall explains that “meaning does not inhere *in* things, in the world. It is constructed, produced. It is the result of a signifying practice—a practice that *produces* meaning, that *makes things mean*” (Hall 24). Identity is shaped by these signifying practices. Everything we do, think, or buy is influenced by our position in society: “These elements—sounds, words, notes, gestures, expressions, clothes—are part of our natural and material world; but their importance for language is not what they *are* but what they *do*, their function. They construct meaning and transmit it. ... They don’t have any meaning *in themselves*” (Hall 5). In other words, meaning is constructed from the transmission and interpretation of signs; meaning is signified through a visual representation of our identity as a system of signs. We, as consumers, unknowingly buy into these signs as a way to construct an outward identity. One such construct of identity is gender.

Defining contemporary masculinity in terms of gender and representation requires a brief look back. Gender performances, which are socially constructed, will either react against traditional ideologies or confirm stereotypical perceptions. This means that men have been caught in the middle of an anxious push and pull either to perform the masculine roles expected in our society or to contest their oppressive nature. There is evidence to suggest that such contradictory forces made American men feel uneasy about the tenuous grasp on their own bodies and performances. Various twentieth and twenty-first century events—including deindustrialization, war, feminism, and 9/11—represent moments of emasculation, leading ultimately to a variety of hyper-masculine responses in popular culture.

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler argues that the body should not necessarily signify a gendered identity. It is a misconception that the terms male and female, masculine and feminine, and so on, are natural categories that form binary opposites. Instead, she argues that the perception of gender is socially and culturally constructed and that “sex is a biological structure, gender a social and ideological one” (During 175). The construction of a gendered identity leads to performances of masculinity and femininity, performances learned through and confirmed by dominant societal discourse and pop culture works that fail to distinguish sex and gender as separate concepts. Stereotypical masculinity and femininity, then, are learned behaviors rather than natural occurrences. These serve an ideological function in that categorizing the political body in one of two dominant identities “maintain[s] the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality” (Butler 378). Gender performances and social identity become the fabricated production of regulative discourse. As a result, in response to mass trauma, media

driven cultural narratives seek to maintain gender normative ideologies in order to perform a reassuring role.

In other words, gender roles, the way that we act, and the things that interest us are not “natural.” Instead, the construction of “gender, race, [and] class consciousness is an achievement forced on us by the terrible historical experience of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism” (Haraway 319). As a historical construct, patriarchy ultimately damages both genders. By separating gender categories into a black and white, all or nothing equation, there is no allowance for middle ground. Donna Haraway chooses the word “fiction” to describe gender (along with race and class) binaries. This is an accurate assessment of what’s at stake in taking works of popular culture at face value. We must look beyond the surface to understand that what we see in our culture and what is supposed to represent us does not necessarily speak the truth. Men and women alike are fraught with inner turmoil about their identities as they attempt to cope with the fact that our identities (and genders) are shaped by society.

Representations of gender in popular culture both respond and speak to the society in which these works are created. As major cultural events unfold, the repercussions are illuminated in entertainment, although not always overtly. As a visual construction, representations of masculinity in popular culture have always either confirmed gender ideology or reflected anxiety associated with gender norms and expectations. Film and television throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have depicted the trials and tribulations facing men in a culture in which the definitions of masculinity were constantly changing.

Historically, masculinity was a concept with simple characteristics:

A certain standard had been set in the past, and certain tests had made it easier to ascertain if one were a true man: the duel, courage in war, and more generally, the possession of willpower as well as the manly virtues of “quiet strength” and of an acceptable moral posture. (Mosse 191)

These tests of physical strength, endurance, and bravery are historical notions of tried-and-true masculinity.

It is an uncanny revelation to see how similarly our culture responds to moments of catastrophe, even in completely different times and circumstances. Following World War II, the media contributed to reinforcing traditional gender roles, just as I am proposing post-9/11 media has. Each time, the media responds to large-scale death and destruction by retreating to historical notions of victory and gender ideology. This tendency is not just seen in news media, but in all forms of popular culture.

In *Stiffed*, Susan Faludi focuses on the economic boost provided by U.S. Navy shipyards during World War II and the masculine work ethic that accompanies the gritty physicality of such a demanding and patriotic job, some of which was performed by women. These shipyards were symbolic of the war effort at home. While these jobs proved indispensable during the war, they were not in demand once the war was over. Not only were workers, especially women, forced out of work by the lack of demand, but men also faced difficulty in locating new employment. The men working in these labor positions abruptly became lost in a society that had once relied on their strength in order to succeed. The feeling of emasculation stemmed from feeling overshadowed by the real heroes of the war who returned to society having been part of a victorious brotherhood. Working women were seen

as being capable of providing for themselves and, therefore, many former shipyard workers felt as if they could not contribute to the household nor to society at large. Following World War II, “the frontier, the enemy, the institutions of brotherhood, the women in need of protection—all the elements of the old formula for attaining manhood had vanished” (*Stiffed* 30).

The end of World War II pushed American culture in many new directions. The feeling of unanimous, undeniable victory was short lived. Robert Kolker explains that World War II “created a churning discomfort, an uncertainty about the future and a lack of clarity about the past ... confirm[ing] how easily our myths of civility and order could fall” (137). In understanding and acknowledging that the world was not as untouchable and perfect as it may have seemed, Americans—especially men—sought a return to normalcy as a coping mechanism for anxiety. Traditional family roles were reaffirmed by popular culture. To begin with, “women were ... purged from the culture” (137). Having become financially stable and liberated from the role of the housewife, many women were resistant to the idea of going back to the way things were after the soldiers returned home. But despite their personal achievements and contributions to the war effort, women were essentially asked to return back to the household so that men could return to their former jobs and their former ideological standing. Popular media contributed to this narrative: “Movies, magazines, and newspapers once again extolled the importance of motherhood and family, the submissive role of women, the nuclear family in which the mother was anchored to home while father was free to move like a satellite out of the house, into the office and back” (Kolker 138). But even with a return to prewar family structures and gender roles, masculinity was still moving towards crisis, largely due to the perception that women had begun taking over.

One of the reasons for this takeover was the literal absence of men during World War II. Women became the breadwinners of the family and children grew up without the physical presence of a father during the war and without the emotional presence of one after the war. The man absent from his own culture also created a loss of purpose for the next generation. The pervasive fatherlessness during World War II deeply impacted America's youth: "the absence of so many fathers had been seen as a contributor to growing juvenile delinquency and other social problems" (Kimmel 163). Mothers were also blamed for rampant overprotection, raising defenseless (i.e., unmanly) children. Faludi calls this phenomenon the "unpassed torch." Boys without a strong father figure were not capable of learning how to become men. Social scientists blamed mothers for creating both gay and overly aggressive children, citing that the proper nuclear family structure would have averted these problems.

Film in the 1950s reflected culture's obsession with gender imbalance, whether through representations of a traditional family structures or nostalgic looks back at the American frontier. The hero archetype in popular culture helped to reaffirm dominant masculine ideals and behavior. Following a victory in World War II and facing threats of the Cold War, the western became a great escape for viewers who wanted to feel dominant and in control in terms of global dominance and, most importantly, masculine heroics. In the western, men were strong and victorious heroes: "In the evolution of the American myth system, the cowboy western provided an archetypal template for cleansing little villages beset by vicious evildoers" (Lawrence and Jewett 89). Facing and defeating enemies was an allegory for not just the international threat of the Cold War, but also of the threat of American women attempting to destroy masculinity. Overcoming evildoers in film represented American power to dominate at home and abroad.

One actor in particular, John Wayne, was the quintessential post-war masculine hero. In an acting career spanning an impressive five decades, Wayne played all kinds of tough guys, ranging from football players to cowboys to soldiers, always making the roles his own and choosing stories that he believed in:

As a symbolic educator, he developed a preference for stories in which his character mentored the next generation of heroes ... [H]e repeatedly demonstrated that transcending the deficiencies of mere law required a manliness liberated from female influence. (Lawrence and Jewett 91)

In other words, a man freed from the influence of women achieves heroic power. The western became an indispensable part of post-World War II culture because “composing our myths of the American frontier and the white man’s destiny” was a visual representation of white male dominance over women and outsiders (Kolker 183). By physically eliminating “savages, the heroic gunman of the western genre protected their communities, more specifically, their women who were centered in the domestic sphere. All of this imagery confirmed the American ideology of gender relations—that men were the great defenders of women, whose immobile place in the household is necessary for men to achieve a strong masculine identity. Many of Wayne’s films, then, served to support the role of strong masculine ideals and actions.

For instance, John Ford’s *The Searchers*, released in 1956, reinforces masculine strength and heroism, all while maintaining the patriotism associated with defeating othered, i.e., non-American, villains. Although the lead role is one of Wayne’s more complex characters, the timing of the film’s release along with Wayne as the starring character make it a highly relevant film for reference. John Wayne plays Civil War Veteran Ethan Edwards,

the quintessential American cowboy, as he seeks to rescue a damsel in distress (Natalie Wood) who has been kidnapped by Comanche Indians. To maximize Wayne's masculine character on his quest for vengeance (and defense of white Americans), director John Ford uses low angle shots of the cowboy so that he appears powerful and dominant. The violence in the film also harkens back to World War II "baptisms" of masculinity on the war front—where boys become men. Although the timing of the film reflects "the era of manhood *after* victory," it also reflects cultural concerns about racial integration and—at times—appears to justify genocide and racism all in the name of patriotism and masculine heroics (*Stiffed* 5). The danger here is that "the Western as a film genre and its self-conscious cult of inarticulate masculine heroism" influences the thoughts and behaviors of viewers (Connell 194). The image of John Wayne's masculinity shaped the way that men in American culture defined and measured their own masculinity. In a culture that no longer sought to conquer, men still needed a way to feel powerful. As the gender hierarchy continued to shift, the power of women was also considered a threat to manhood.

While one purpose of *The Searchers* was to define masculinity, it also defined the enemy and defended violence as a means to an end. Another of Wayne's films, *Big Jim McClain* (Edward Ludwig, 1952), defined Communism as America's enemy. Wayne's title character is an Un-American Activities Investigator who seeks to break up a ring of Communists in Hawaii, despite the fact that membership in the Communist party was not illegal. Still perceived as anti-American as a female takeover would be, McClain must do everything in his power to cleanse America of any negative influence, any behavior or beliefs that do not fit in with the dominant ideology present in the culture. McClain, as anti-communist hero, never wavers in his pursuit of what he considers right. According to

Thomas Benson, this film, like all of Wayne's films, speaks to the importance of character, although not necessarily in Wayne's personal character. Perhaps because Wayne did not participate in World War II, he felt it was of the utmost importance to choose those acting roles that most spoke to the ideals of masculine strength and patriotism. His persona, then, became an important part of defining American cultural values. Garry Wills argues that "Wayne did not just have political opinions. He embodied politics; or his screen image did. It was a politics of large meanings, not of little policies—a politics of gender (masculine), ideology (patriotism), character (self-reliance), and responsibility" (qtd. in Benson 137). As an American and masculine performer, then, Wayne's influence on American masculinity was great, but perhaps his own personal lack of active masculinity drove him to such performances.

Through various publications and cinematic releases, it is clear that there was a perceived masculinity crisis in the 1950s. *The Decline of the American Male* (co-authored by George B. Leonard Jr. and William Attwood, 1958) acknowledged potential problems in relation to women gaining equality in the workplace and at home. The very presence of texts like these in our culture shows that men were aware of their emasculation and were seeking answers to their failing masculinity. One chapter, entitled "Why do Women Dominate Him?", issued a warning that women's self-empowerment came at the expense of masculine power. Ultimately, women "were beginning to control [men's] sexuality. The subjugation to women and the pressures brought about by the culture had produced a broken shell of a man, without individuality, without power, overworked, stressed-out ... weakened and regimented, made impotent and recessive" (Kolker 138). The very notion that women were tipping the

balance of the gender hierarchy, simply demanding equality, diminished masculine prowess, further emasculated the man in American culture who had already lost a sense of purpose.

As the post-war concept of gender was becoming unhinged as a fixed category, films continued to reflect anxiety associated with these gender shifts. In particular, the films of Alfred Hitchcock began to explore psychological aspects of masculine anxiety and sexual insecurity. For example, *Vertigo* (1958) addresses

the decade's concerns with change and betrayal, with power and passivity, domination and servitude, and sexual panic. It quietly addresses all of these concerns and the culture's general sense of incompleteness, its feeling of unfinishable personal business, its pervasive anxiety ... [the film] personalizes the political by creating a deeply repressed man, contained by his fears and driven by his obsessions. (Kolker 14)

Scottie Ferguson (Jimmy Stewart), the film's main character, struggles with trauma induced by a failed rooftop police chase in which his own fear of heights caused the death of his fellow officer. Unable to overcome his fear and his guilt, he retires. Ashamed of his weakness, he is hired as a private investigator to follow Madeleine (Kim Novak), whose strange behavior was disconcerting to her husband Gavin (Tom Helmore). Scottie rescues her from a suicide attempt, saving her from a leap into the San Francisco Bay, but her second attempt is—or at least appears to be—successful. After developing feelings for Madeleine and being unable to overcome his fear of heights to save her from jumping from a mission bell tower, Scottie becomes immersed in depression.

Once he is released from the sanitarium, he encounters a woman named Judy who looks uncannily like Madeleine. Scottie becomes obsessed with Judy as the two spend more

time together. But because Judy doesn't look exactly like Madeleine and because Scottie wishes that she *were* Madeleine, he buys clothes for Judy and insists that she change her hair to look more like his lost love. His obsession to reclaim his own masculine power ultimately leads to this enforced makeover. By recreating Madeleine, he saves not only her life but also overcomes his own shortcomings.

Later, we discover that the Madeleine Scottie spent time with was not, in fact, the real Madeleine. Judy is a doppelgänger playing the role of Madeleine so that Gavin could get away with his wife's murder by having Scottie act as a witness to her mental instability before her staged suicide. The men in *Vertigo* manipulate the female identities around them for their own personal gain. Scottie asks Judy to reenact Madeleine's death so that he can save her, thus remasculinizing him. Unfortunately, a nun startles Judy and she falls from the bell tower. The film speaks to the dangers of obsession, control, and the lengths men in this era will go in order to assert their dominance.

Just a few years later, Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) is a prime example of the sexual panic induced by an exaggerated perception of female power. The film begins with Marion Crane's (Janet Leigh) secret affair with Sam Loomis (John Gavin), a man who will not marry her because of his personal debts. His inability to support her financially, despite the fact that Marion has her own assets to contribute, make him incapable of accepting an equal role in a relationship. Clearly Sam is embattled by his own shortcomings and unwilling to compromise what he sees as his responsibility as a man to have money and power over Marion.

Frustrated by Sam's insecurity and with her life in general, Marion decides to steal money from work and skip town. Along the way, the men she encounters treat her in such a

way that it is quite clear that they are uncomfortable with Marion's independence. The policeman who stops to investigate Marion's car ends up following her, suspicious that a woman travelling alone fell asleep on the side of the road. A man in those same conditions would not have been suspicious at all. And at a car dealership, the salesman is clearly uncomfortable that Marion has so much money to spend on a new car. Besides the point, of course, is that she has stolen the money, but why are these men so threatened by a woman who has control of her own life?

Exhausted from her drive, she stops at the Bates Motel to sleep for the night. She meets the awkward and indistinct caretaker, Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins); he doesn't appear to be threatening, although there is an obvious separation between the two in the way that this scene is cut. Norman offers to share his dinner with Marion, a somewhat juvenile meal of sandwiches and milk. Before he brings the tray of food down to the cabin, Marion can hear him arguing with his mother who does not want Norman to interact with Marion or share food with her: "I won't have you bringing strange young girls in for supper! By candlelight, I suppose, in the cheap, erotic fashion of young men with cheap erotic minds." After being accused of being gutless and available for a woman's "ugly appetite," he is a little rattled once he returns to the cabin, refusing to come into her room (a sexualized space) and suggests instead that they eat in the office (a gender neutral space). Norman's face is reflected in the window as he explains that his mother is not quite herself today, thus visually referencing the issue of fragmented identity yet to be explored. Norman's mother, then, prevents a heterosexual interaction with Marion and, as mentioned above, the scene in which Marion and Norman talk is physically separated by cuts that prevent the characters from appearing on screen together in any shot. As they discuss Norman's mother, he says that a

“boy’s best friend is his mother” (emphasis added). It is important to note here that Norman, a grown man, refers to himself as a boy. The overpowering influence of his mother has destabilized his identity as a man. Norman’s development was arrested at the hands of his dominating mother; rather than suffering from castration anxiety from the presence of a father figure, he identified with his mother, although this identification did not affect his sexual orientation. He appears to be sexually interested in woman, but Norman’s mother, whose identity he has assumed while he keeps her rotting corpse, prevents his heterosexual desires through extreme violence.

Although its main focus is identity fragmentation, I would argue that the film also destabilizes both male and female gender norms. The fragmentation of Norman’s identity is the most obvious because he is no longer the boy dressed in his mother’s clothing; he has become, instead, his own mother. By taking on a new gender, his masculine identity is depleted. Even his name, “Norm,” reflects the irony of the destabilized gender role. Not to be undermined, however, are the female characters in the film who assume power and authority over their own lives and the lives of others. Marion intends to be the financial knight in shining armor for Sam and, of course, Norman’s mother completely takes over Norman’s life. The film thus represents the dangers of gender stereotypes and voyeurism, as well as the threat of figurative and literal feminized takeover.

Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* (1976) is another film with an emasculated main character, one who reacts with extreme violence to a feminine takeover as well as political emasculation. Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro) is an honorably discharged Marine who suffers from PTSD and insomnia after returning from Vietnam. Unlike soldiers who returned from

World War II, Vietnam veterans were not celebrated as heroes. The “masculine honor” bestowed on World War II soldiers disappeared as the men returning from Vietnam were greeted by women not blowing kisses but indifferent or even hostile to his efforts. These women did not leave their jobs upon their arrival; many of them didn’t accept ... a renewed dependency on him, because about the time the men were off trying to prove their manhood by liberating an “oppressed” people ... their wives and girlfriends had decided to liberate themselves.

(Stiffed 29)

The returning veterans often found themselves seen as oppressors; additionally, their time spent abroad in a hostile environment did not feel like the “authentic” masculine experiences they learned about from films depicting World War II. As a result, the lack of an authentic wartime experience, combined with the lack of women to protect at home, eliminated the usual route to establishing masculinity. This background is essential in understanding the state of mind of a character like Travis, a complete outsider in his own country.

His role as a working class American man has become diminished, if not obsolete by the changing American culture. Unable to fill a role in a work force that has shifted away from industry and unable to give up his sense of masculine bravado, Travis drives a taxi at night, privy to a pessimistic perspective of crime and corruption. Although ideals of masculine heroism have changed, Travis is disgusted at the sight of the society to which he has returned.

Travis becomes fascinated with two women in the course of the film. The first is Betsey (Cybill Shephard), a woman volunteering on a presidential campaign. She ultimately rejects him after he takes her on a date to a pornographic film. It is particularly devastating to

Travis that he is rejected by someone who supports a presidential campaign because—in Travis's eyes—men aren't doing enough to keep the streets clean. The next woman he is fascinated with is the young prostitute Iris (Jodie Foster). He first meets Iris when she enters his taxi late one night, demanding to get away as fast as possible. Travis freezes, not used to having a woman need his help. Iris's pimp violently retrieves her from the taxi and Travis says nothing. Because he is unable to connect with women on a physical or emotional level, he feels powerless. He is rejected again and again and this powerlessness leads him to violent thoughts: "Now I see this clearly. My whole life is pointed in one direction. There never has been a choice for me." Women are the driving force behind his violence and he ultimately does attempt to rescue Iris after he has become a deranged, hyper-masculine version of himself.

He prepares tactically. He prepares his weapons. He even shines his combat boots before engaging in his mission. He also believes that what he is doing is beneficial for his society. But also, Travis enjoys holding the guns in macho poses and engaging in fake, threatening dialogue in front of the mirror. But these reflections are not reality. Travis is not that powerful of a man, as evidenced by his place in society and interactions with people. His masculine perception of himself only happens inside his home, in front of the mirror, as he has equipped himself with masculinity (threats, weapons, the illusion of battle).

Travis enters the brothel to save Iris, first shooting her pimp and anyone else who gets in his way. The shootout is reminiscent of the old Western style film with an othered villain ultimately defeated by the rugged American cowboy, ironically wearing a mohawk. We follow Travis through the darkness as he shoots another man, his expression crazed like that of a sociopath. As the bloodbath continues, we witness the action in slow motion or from

extreme high angle shots and are detached from Travis's perspective; we become voyeurs of the scene. At points, it is too dark to see the action but we know what is happening. At the end of the scene, Travis has killed everyone in his way and ignored Iris's requests to stop. He has taken her power away in order to make her a kid again; he "saves" her. The damsel herself was less grateful than horrified by Travis's behavior (again reflecting back to the reception of Vietnam veterans). Covered in blood and with nowhere else to go, he waits for the police to arrive and—ironically—becomes celebrated as a heroic masculine figure for what he's done. The twisting of Travis's hyper-masculine, hyper-violent rampage into a celebration by the media speaks volumes about Travis's perception of masculinity. It also speaks to how the media continues to shape our culture's perception of masculinity, despite the fact that "men are not permanently committed to a particular pattern of masculinity. Rather, they make situationally specific choices from a cultural repertoire of masculine behavior" (Wetherell and Edley qtd. in Connell xix). Standards of manhood, as represented by cultural norms and images in the media, create dangerous expectations, particularly when historical patterns of masculine behavior—like violence—become celebrated.

This mass media influence escalated in the 1980s as our culture became enamored with consumerism. As part of this development, masculinity came to be something that can be measured by financial rather than by physical accomplishments. The cultural notion of men emasculated by a sense of purposelessness in the work force, in the military, and at home in the face of newly-liberated women pushed men into what Faludi terms "ornamental culture." As opposed to an earlier era in which men contributed to a social system in authoritative domains (as husbands, providers, soldiers), "ornamental culture [swept] away institutions in which men felt some sense of belonging and [replaced] them with visual

spectacles” (35). Men had to prove their manhood with outer consumption rather than inner production: “the internal qualities once said to embody manhood—surefootedness, inner strength, confidence of purpose—[were] merchandized to men to enhance their manliness. What pass[ed] for the essence of masculinity [was] being extracted and bottled—and sold back to men” (*Stiffed* 35). Masculinity became an image—a visual display—instead of a demonstration.

Manhood became something to be measured by consumption, vanity, and even purposeless violence, all because men believed that these were the qualifications necessary for a successful masculine performance. Thus, the new man of the 1990s focused on commodification of his gender, capitalistic competition, and the desire to fit in to the society around him by constantly upholding an image of masculine prowess, particularly in response to the threat of femininity:

manhood was replaced gradually by the term *masculinity*, which referred to a set of behavioral traits and attitudes that were contrasted now with a new opposite, *femininity*. Masculinity was something that had to be constantly demonstrated, the attainment of which was forever in question—lest the man be undone by a perception of being too feminine. (Kimmel 81)

Demonstrating a performed, new masculinity is not something that all men were prepared to do and this anxiety can be seen in films like David Fincher’s *Fight Club* (1999) and Mary Harron’s *American Psycho* (2000).

Both films speak volumes on the value placed on consumption by men who don’t otherwise seem to know how to prove their worth to society. The narrator in *Fight Club* (Edward Norton) is unsatisfied with his white-collar job at an insurance company and seeks

fulfillment by decorating his apartment in the best that IKEA has to offer. In one scene, he sits on the toilet while reading through a magazine. He turns the magazine sideways as if to look at the two-page centerfold in a pornographic magazine, but we realize quickly that he is, indeed, looking at a furniture catalogue. The man immersed in ornamental culture fetishizes furniture instead of women. Later on, the narrator returns home from a business trip and finds that his apartment has been destroyed in an explosion, leaving him with nothing. Without the constructed identity of the stuff in his apartment, the narrator is ripe to be shaped into someone new. His new acquaintance Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt) helps the narrator to see that men are victims to a lifestyle obsession, that consumerism has nothing to do with survival and is, therefore, not important. Faludi explains this behavior as competitive consumerism:

By the end of the American century, every outlet of the consumer world—magazines, ads, movies, sports, music videos—would deliver the message that manhood had become a performance game to be won in the marketplace, not the workplace, and that male anger was now part of the show. (*Stiffed* 37)

The anger that goes along with ornamental masculinity comes in the form of fight clubs. The men are desperate for any behavior that allows them to use their bodies in a competitive situation alleviates the pain, anger, and frustration of in living in a world in which masculinity is no longer proven on physicality alone.

American Psycho makes a similar argument against consumerism and identity formation, ultimately using extreme violence as a metaphor to show how dangerous ornamental masculinity can be. Ultimately, even though the main character seems to have everything, the only thing he lacks is the most basic part of his humanity: “There is an idea of a Patrick Bateman ... but there is no real me. ... I am simply not there” (*American Psycho*).

In other words, Patrick Bateman (Christian Bale) is just a performance. Bateman, the man, is nothing more than an idea based on a set of characteristics that infer masculine success. Bateman has no identity, only a collection of desirable qualities and possessions based upon financial achievement.

The greed and disgust mentioned in the above quote references his placement within a consumer culture, a place wherein ornamental masculinity pushes for material conformity. According to his prescribed masculine performance, he must never let his mask fall away. To others, he must continuously appear to be engaged in competition because “the culture that they live in has left men with little other territory on which to prove themselves besides vanity” (Faludi 35). Little things like haircuts, business cards, and dinner reservations become status symbols by which Bateman can achieve victories for his manhood. In his head, however, his imagined violence against women speaks to his repressed anger at a culture that has pushed men into masculine insecurity.

Culturally mediated images of masculinity have become one of the main reflections of male gender anxiety. In the previous examples, the ornamental man struggled with how to display his masculinity and compensates by spending money on a certain appearance and lifestyle. Masculine anxiety ultimately led to a reaction against the feminization of manhood and the ornamental performance of new masculinity, as can be seen in various modes of cultural production that directly resist commodification of the masculine space and the masculine body, productions like *Jackass* (Spike Jonze, Johnny Knoxville, Jeff Tremaine), which aired on MTV from 2000 to 2002, and *The Man Show* (Adam Carolla, Daniel Kellison, Jimmy Kimmel), which aired on Comedy Central from 1999-2004. This resurgence of traditional and stereotypical representations of masculinity unveiled the domineering and

unsophisticated “dude.” The reality television shows *Jackass* and *The Man Show* are fraught with “real” men doing what “real” men love to do: hurt themselves, act stupid, laugh at each other, pull pranks, and sexualize women. They made no apologies for their behavior and viewers seemed like they couldn’t get enough. There have been several *Jackass* films, grossing millions of dollars. The men of *Jackass* were overly willing to put their bodies at risk in order to reclaim their own sense of masculinity. By creating their own reckless and unsophisticated lifestyle, they resisted consumerism and ornamental culture, largely by physically destructive means.

Michael Kimmel sees a correlation between increased equality for women and the masculinity crisis. While the men of the 1990s certainly attempted to reclaim their right to masculinity in their own gross and violent ways, there was also an issue with overt gender segregation as men tried to keep a tight hold on the last remaining manly occupations: “firefighters, police officers, and soldiers represented some of the last remaining resisters of gender equality” (Kimmel 277). On the other hand, the Patrick Bateman-esque businessman was still busy successfully climbing the corporate ladder. The isolation and pressure associated with corporatized, ornamental masculinity was still an anxious issue for men. Thus the 1990’s ended with the strongest images of masculinity segregated to two exclusive domains: physical male-dominated professions, which were seriously under siege, and the upper corporate ladder.

A shift in representation occurred after the events of September 11th, which “reversed the fortunes of both images of masculinity. The rehabilitation of heroic masculinity among the firefighters, police, and other rescue workers was immediate” (Kimmel 278). Media coverage following the days after the attacks showed image after image of the larger than life

firefighters, rescuing World Trade Center workers before the buildings collapsed. According to Faludi's research, the most widely circulated images were those of men rescuing women, although surely men and women equally needed help that day (and female first responders were on scene as well). So why privilege the circulation of one photo over another? Once again, women were purged from the visual record in an attempt to privilege the masculine gender as the predominant cultural image.

Peggy Noonan's opinion piece "Welcome Back, Duke," which appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* on October 12th, 2001 showed the immediacy with which our culture looked to revamp masculine identity. The subtitle, "From the ashes of September 11, arise the manly virtues," articulates that manly virtues were missing from our culture and it took a tragedy like 9/11 for these virtues to be reborn from the ashes. The manly men rose from the flames like the fabled phoenix, leaving behind the days of weakness caused by supposed moral decay and gender equality. Noonan declares,

men are back. A certain style of manliness is once again being honored and celebrated in our country since Sept. 11. You might say it suddenly emerged from the rubble of the past quarter century, and emerged when a certain kind of man came forth to get our great country out of the fix it was in. I am speaking of masculine men, men who push things and pull things and haul things and build things, men who charge up the stairs in a hundred pounds of gear and tell everyone else where to go to be safe. Men who are welders, who do construction, men who are cops and firemen. They are all of them, one way or another, the men who put the fire out, the men who are digging the rubble out, and the men who will build whatever takes its place. And their style is

back in style. We are experiencing a new respect for their old-fashioned masculinity, a new respect for physical courage, for strength and for the willingness to use both for the good of others. (Noonan)

Defining masculinity by virtue of physical strength not only defines what a man is (or should be) but also what a man isn't. This implies that the opposite of masculinity is feminine weakness. Not only do women not fit the characteristics of masculinity, but this definition excludes men whose occupations do not require pushing, pulling, or building things.

Noonan goes on to explain that "old fashioned" masculinity is returning because that's what saved us on 9/11. She argues that the images of firefighters and policemen confirmed what is great about masculinity and why it is great for our country to return to these ideals: "because manliness wins wars." And what is to blame for the lack of manliness in our country? Noonan actually half-heartedly blames herself for thwarting the attempts of a man who attempted to help her with heavy baggage in the past. She believes that every time a man offers to help a woman with heavy baggage on an airplane, for example, and is rejected so that the woman can assert her own strength, this pushes men away from chivalry. Each strong willed woman is responsible for displacing and damaging masculinity and is now responsible for stepping out of the spotlight and letting the manly man push and pull and build as much as he wants. It's no coincidence that the title of her article references John Wayne, a man whom she believes was similarly damaged and run off by feminism. Feminism came at the expense of masculinity and Noonan does not believe this is progress or an improvement. She, along with many others, welcomes a newfound John Wayne era of masculinity.

Celebrating traditional masculinity and heroism alleviated the pain caused by displaced or damaged masculinity. Returning to the historical image of masculinity confirmed again the American ideology of justified military aggression and violence. This aggression goes hand and hand with the revitalized John Wayne hyper-masculinity that appeared in our post-9/11 culture, as the media latched onto gender archetypes and social constructions as a way to grieve and as way to reinvent the America that we had supposedly let become so feminine and weak so that we could win the War on Terror.

J. Ann Tickner argues that war is considered a masculine activity, stating that “gender is a powerful legitimator of war and national security; [which drives] our acceptance of a ‘remasculinized’ society.” In order for the War on Terror to be successful, then, our military and our culture supported historical notions of gender ideology, privileging masculinity over femininity. Post-9/11, we also saw a resurgence of nostalgic World War II films like *Pearl Harbor* (2001) to churn up masculine patriotism. It is impossible to ignore the political implications associated with the “rehabilitation of heroic masculinity” in popular culture (Kimmel 253). Michael S. Kimmel discusses the ways in which George W. Bush’s reelection campaign reaffirmed the dominant roles of so-called traditional masculinity. Bush became the icon of the resurgence of rugged masculinity—a literalized cowboy—for the American public to rally behind. Having no doubt associated the Western cowboy archetype with the demeanor and behavior of Bush, it is clear that films have the ability to teach audiences about the relationship between gender norms and politics. However, film is not the only medium that has the ability to shape ideological practices and beliefs; comic books, too, reflect and challenge us.

The history of the comic book reflects our constantly changing culture. America's first superhero, Superman, made his debut in 1938, a turning point in the comics industry. The superhero was necessary during World War II because comic books were immensely popular amongst the troops, who read about Captain America's fights with Hitler to boost morale and a sense of patriotism. Once the troops returned home and the superheroes didn't have a realistic villain to fight, the popularity of comics fell off—not unlike the unpopularity of superheroes after 9/11, who largely felt unable to rescue a culture that felt so violently exposed and unsafe (Gabilliet).

While the comics of the early 1940s matched the “social values of the times,” the lack of readership pushed comics in a new direction towards the end of the decade: bloody crime and gory horror. Concerns over the “vulgar” content of these comics led to Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent*, in which he accuses comics of promoting violence, emasculation, homosexuality, and fascism. His “study” also implied that the majority of juvenile delinquents read comic books and, therefore, that comics were to blame for their behavior (although he didn't base his argument on any evidence). Ultimately, the boys of the baby boom suffered from absent fathers. Although physically there, “the fathers of that era often seemed remote, as unreal as those perfect dads on television, although not intentionally so” (*Stiffed* 5). Not only did soldiers return as changed men, but their entire world had changed around them. Men returned home to the suburbs and worked different jobs. Unable to make sense of his new life and unable to reconcile his wartime experience, the baby boom father had a difficult time reaching his son. The sons were enamored with various aspects of mass culture, including comics, but Wertham's accusatory rant helped the comics industry to fall, despite the fact that comics alone were not to blame for juvenile delinquency.

In response to *Seduction of the Innocent*, as well as concern over the graphic imagery in certain comics, a code was enforced that prevented certain words and images from appearing in a comic. While this did cause problems early on in terms of failing readership, ultimately comics creators gave up on attaining the comic code approval stamp and published without it; this turned out to boost sales. This is where alternative comics come into play in the late 1960s.

Often for sale in head shops and other unsavory locations, alternative comics gave counterculture a voice through a visual medium. Underground comix “divided themselves into five principle genres ... : pornography, humor, science fiction, visual surrealism, and feminism” (Gabilliet 81). In other words, these comics were saturated with social commentary and realism. At the same time, the 1970s and 1980s saw a new marketing technique for the superhero comics. Comic collectors were willing to spend extra money on limited editions and comic collecting while publishers were eager to expand and promote their products. The successful supply and demand of superhero comics and the high readership of underground comix proved that there was a viable market for adult comic book readers.

Although Art Spiegelman helped to popularize the term “graphic novel” with his Pulitzer Prize winning *Maus*, he was not necessarily the first to use it. The critical and commercial success of his novel, however, helped to legitimize graphic novels and comics. Slowly, graphic novels acquired their own section in book stores because the graphic novel audience was “largely among readers who did not frequent comic book specialty stores” (Gabilliet 98). Cultural and academic studies looked at comics and graphic novels as ways to investigate and legitimize sequential art. The dark, dystopic graphic novels

of Alan Moore and Frank Miller along with the factors listed above helped establish the medium as a “[versatile] mode of expression” (Gabilliet 107).

The contemporary graphic novel has fought to achieve legitimization as a non-disposable mass production. Since the 1980s, graphic novels have “expressed a diversity that ruptured with the dominant norms of the mainstream comic book industry” (Gabilliet 101). Although it is a difficult term to define, fraught with much criticism from inside and outside the industry, graphic novels as long-length forms of visual and verbal expression have, at long last, achieved legitimization. No longer viewed disdainfully as a lowbrow threat to high culture, graphic novels are an important area of study in what has become an image-dominated, visual culture. The graphic novel is a worthy place to explore the masculine body because the masculine performance itself has become a visual spectacle. By exploring representations of and resistance to hegemonic masculinity, comics and graphic novels can help us to navigate towards a more democratic manhood and, consequently, a more democratic society.

This dissertation will trace the fluctuations in American culture alongside the changing concepts and visual representations of masculinity in film, television, and graphic novels to show that representations of masculinity are politically-driven and artificial: “masculinities are configurations of practice structured by gender relations. They are inherently historical; and their making and remaking is a political process affecting the balance of interests in society and the direction of social change” (Connell 44). Because our culture is driven by and learns behavior from images in mass media, it is important for representations of masculinity and gender performance to suggest possibilities beyond the confines of normative structures.

Chapter two will focus on Alan Moore's graphic novel *Watchmen* (1988) and how it deconstructs both heroism and masculinity and, rather than shedding light, inflicts darkness on the superhero concept by showing us the dangers associated with vigilante justice imposed by unstable, fractured deviants. Not only does Moore create superhero characters that are immoral and violent, he also unravels the heroic masculine archetype. Many consider Moore's work to be indispensable to the field of comics because of the many ways *Watchmen* worked to redefine masculinity, heroism, good versus evil, and even the notion that good and evil can't so easily be separated. On top of cutting edge narrative content, the art of *Watchmen* took the mode of graphic storytelling to a whole new level, using structure and symbolism in an innovative, dramatic fashion. Generally keeping with a nine panel per page grid offers an authoritative symmetry; breaking from this grid for dramatic effect alters the pacing and increases moments of impact. Even the coloring of the pages—considered “ugly” by some—was a groundbreaking decision to represent non-heroic superheroes in a literal new light.

Looking at this pre-apocalyptic version of New York City will enable me to discuss the relationship between masculinity and apocalypse. It will also be significant to discuss the changes made in the *Watchmen* (2009) film adaptation. Firstly, the visualization of apocalypse in the novel is magnified by full-page splash panels, as opposed to the nine panel per page grid that appeared before the moment of impact. These full-page images of death are extraordinarily violent, graphic, and gruesome as bodies litter the sidewalks of New York City (and other locations). The film version tones down the gore and, instead, a flash of light de-visualizes the moment of apocalypse for viewers who are still sensitive to the apocalyptic images of 9/11. Similarly, the film's placement in a post-9/11 culture involves visually

rewriting some aspects of the characters, including the fact that graphic-novel Laurie is androgynous in appearance, if not overtly masculine in her depiction, while film Laurie is meek, gorgeous, and helpless. This reaffirms female gender expectations following the reconstruction of historical gender norms following 9/11.

Chapter three will focus on Brian K. Vaughan's graphic novel series *Ex Machina* (2004-2010), a realistic alternate history; but instead of approaching apocalypse as in Moore's fictional world, Vaughan's post-apocalyptic characters are trying to deal with the trauma inflicted personally and nationally from 9/11. Vaughan's post-9/11 New York City deals directly with issues of terrorism, vigilantism, masculinity, and heroism as the main character, Mitchell Hundred, moves from the superhero spotlight to the world of politics. *Ex Machina* interrogates what it means to be in a position of power in the post-9/11 United States and to what extent the image and event of 9/11 was manipulated for political gain. By incorporating key elements of nonfiction into the narrative, the series becomes, to borrow Elizabeth Rosen's term, "neo-apocalyptic," in that it serves as a real-life warning of how our culture's perception of hopelessness in a traumatic situation may lead to our own demise. Along with apocalyptic theory, Donna Haraway's cyborg theory will inform my discussion on Mitchell Hundred's particular superpower, the ability to communicate with and control machines. Cyborg theory will open the door for a discussion on the body as object, on the social and gender dimensions of technology, and on social feminism.

Chapter four will follow the plight of two striking contemporary characters, *Breaking Bad*'s Walter White, who was an extraordinarily passive and weak character until he was diagnosed with cancer and *Dexter*'s Dexter Morgan, a serial killer with a his own version of a moral code. With this traumatic diagnosis, Walt lost control over the last thing he really had

any power over: his body. He had a hypermasculine response to his diagnoses, refusing any help with payment for treatment, which ultimately led to his involvement with illegally cooking methamphetamine. As the show continues, hyper-masculinity and domination takes over Walt as he becomes more identified with his alias and cruel alter ego Heisenberg. He leaves devastation at every turn, making no apologies for his actions, actions supposedly aimed at helping his family. But we ultimately learn that he wasn't doing it for family. He did it simply because he "liked it." It made him feel like more of a man to be in control of such a powerful business, treating the people around him as expendable as he built his empire. Walt's transformation epitomizes the post-9/11 transformation of masculinity. Our culture privileged strength over intelligence, as represented by Heisenberg over Walt. He went from an awkward, tighty-whitey wearing embarrassment to an authoritative, manipulative, hypermasculine man whose ruthless pursuit of power caused the demise of those around him. This parallels the trajectory of the U.S. following 9/11 as we were marched into war in the hopes of maintaining exceptionalism.

As a young child, Dexter Morgan watched helplessly as his mother was brutally murdered. Growing up, Dexter felt empty inside, often showing violent tendencies. Rather than get professional help for his adopted son, police officer Harry Morgan helped shape Dexter's behavior and identity, creating a normal façade for Dexter while simultaneously teaching him how to get away with murder. Even after Harry passes away, his "code" is literalized again and again through Dexter's uncanny conversations with Harry's ghost, whose presence still attempts to shape and modify Dexter's behavior. The show speaks to our own culture's traumatized masculinity as Dexter struggles to understand how to be a man following a disturbing, life-changing event. Therefore, I will discuss Dexter through the post-

traumatic construction of reality and masculinity will be discussed alongside psychoanalytic film theory and the concept of vigilante justice.

In chapter five, three primary texts will be discussed alongside the theories of gender and posthumanism. *Y: The Last Man* (2001-2008), another post-apocalyptic text by Brian K. Vaughan, follows the journey of Yorick Brown, the only man to survive after a plague kills every other male on earth. Unlike the real-life gendered response to 9/11 in which our culture wanted to restore “traditional” masculinity, Vaughan removes men entirely from the equation; he examines human, rather than gendered, responses to trauma, asserting that even in “the need to impose order on [a] chaotic and disturbing experience, finding a way out of darkness does not rely on socially constructed gender mythology” (Faludi 254). As more of a traditional apocalyptic tale, there is hope at the end of the series that humanity will be saved; however, this hope does not come from Yorick, who returns to his life of passive existence after being freed of his world-saving responsibilities. Exemplified by his empty straight jacket floating through the air, the madness of masculinity is no longer constricting his action.

Unlike Yorick Brown who is unwilling to take on any responsibility, Peter Parker faces adversity head on. In the film *The Amazing Spiderman* (Marc Webb, 2012) the myth of Spiderman is politicized and complicated by domestic terrorism via the release of a biological agent in New York City. Even though Peter is a high school student, not yet a “man,” he is willing to take on the responsibility conferred on him by his powers, which developed after he was bitten by a scientifically altered spider; like many superhero origin stories, an accident changed his life forever. The villain of the film, Dr. Connors/Lizard, in his desperation for wholeness, injects himself with an untested chemical that he hopes will

generate human bone and tissue, thus regenerating the arm he is missing. Both Peter and Dr. Connors are shaped by a sense of loss, but the posthuman (or unnatural) circumstances that change them do not necessarily heal their broken identities. Technology merely reconstructs and enhances the power of their bodies; Katherine Hayles' *How We Became Posthuman* will help me construct the argument that technologically enhancing the human body does away with the "natural self;" in destroying the natural individual, the posthuman body "undergo[es] continuous construction and reconstruction" leading to an unstable, uncontrollable identity (Hayles 3). This concept is further explored in *The Amazing Spiderman 2* (2014) speaks to the dangers of unchecked power and posthumanity. The film's villain, Electro, is shaped by the complete and utter rejection he faced while merely an electrical engineer for Oscorp. He was mistreated in all facets of his life, but at work in particular. The corporation he worked for stole his designs, did not credit him, and brushed his on-the-job death under the rug to avoid bad press. The havoc brought on by a newly powerful, post-masculine man shows the ways in which the pressures of masculinity and scientific innovation can lead to vengeance.

The study of culture allows us to challenge the imposition of regulative discourse. By pulling from an variety of fields, we can locate and resist hegemony, a concept that

refers to the cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life. At any given time, one form of masculinity rather than others is culturally exalted. Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees that dominant position of men and the subordination of women. (Connell 77)

The symbolic hierarchy of gender is not a natural construction; it is politically based in order to reinforce the dominant ideals of social reality, especially in the wake of major cultural events. Resisting predetermined gender narratives is how our culture can move forward towards unity and hope. Over the last decade, popular culture has revealed the erratic trajectory of changing gender expectations. While masculine anxiety can be seen in pre- and post-9/11 popular culture, it is particularly significant to look at the way national trauma contributed to personal and gendered trauma for men, and to examine what is at stake when our culture accepts the predetermined gender narratives evident in our media. Immediately following 9/11, Faludi argues that the masculine and feminine genders were disparate categories, separated by the trauma-induced fervor to return to “normality.” This illusion of normality relied on the rhetoric of rugged masculinity, providing a sense of safety in our culture. Graphic novels and cinema showed us the manliest of heroes, providing the nostalgia of victory and exceptionalism that our country needed to begin the healing process. As the decade continued, however, the trajectory moved from individualism and exceptionalism towards humanity and wholeness.

As our culture moves further away from the tragedy of 9/11 and the traumatic gender politics that followed, significant aspects of popular culture are moving in a positive direction, asking us to recognize and resist—both visually and narratively—the idea that trauma confines us to predetermined gender roles and expectations. While many proclaimed that the masculinity crisis ended following 9/11, I argue that a gender crisis persists. As I hope this work will show, there are a variety of ways that we can respond to personal, national, and even global trauma. But those responses require new ideas and images of gender rather than traditional patriarchal notions.

CHAPTER TWO

“AFTER NEW YORK, NOTHING MATTERS”: *WATCHMEN*’S UNCANNY

PREDICTION OF POST-9/11 GENDER CONSTRUCTIONS

In the wake of a massive catastrophe, it doesn’t seem to take long before neighborhoods, cities, and even countries unite in support of those affected. Our own post-9/11 culture is one of many examples of what seems like an easy and instantaneous transition from chaos into togetherness. In the days and weeks following the attacks, support came from all over the country and around the globe. Americans put their own lives on hold to travel to New York City to help in any way they could, even standing in line for hours to donate blood. But as in most post-apocalyptic tales, peace and harmony did not last. One of the biggest turning points in American opinion came with George W. Bush’s “Mission Accomplished” speech, wherein he proclaimed military exercises in Iraq to be over. This preemptive victory speech, complete with Bush’s Air Force jumpsuit, gave the image of American success overseas in the fight against terror, yet, the vast majority of American casualties occurred after this date. Growing dissent over not finding any Weapons of Mass Destruction, the key to our entrance into Iraq, caused Americans to realize that perhaps there was less to this heroic Bush image and ideology than meets the eye. Ultimately, it seems, the Bush effort to construct a masculine image of national triumph created more division than unity because it was so transparently a construction.

Alan Moore’s comic book series *Watchmen*, therefore, collected in graphic novel format in 1987, provides a critical starting point to my study of post-9/11 masculine imagery. The work is an uncanny template of the pre-9/11 American masculinity crisis and a devastating predictor of the dangers of a reconstructed post-apocalyptic gender hierarchy. In

it, Adrian Veidt, a former superhero named Ozymandias, orchestrates a terrorist attack that kills millions of people in New York City. He does this in order to unite the world against a common enemy and prevent nuclear war. Even several years later, the world within the graphic novel is still united against the terrorists who attacked the United States. The text suggests, however, that peace will not last. It reminds us that relying on hegemonic gender ideology can push pre-apocalyptic conditions to the brink and shape post-apocalyptic rebuilding. Rebuilding a supposedly damaged social infrastructure in the wake of a national disaster reaffirmed historical gender norms. But because these notions are outdated, imposing them on our present culture damages both genders by creating unrealistic expectations for masculinity and femininity. Tragically, this fictional depiction also became a reality as an outcome of the United States' response to 9/11. Zack Snyder's film adaptation of *Watchmen*, released in 2009, had a chance to address this disastrous reaction to the attacks. But unfortunately, it became mired with changes and rewrites to conform to the mass desires for traditional gender identities of post-9/11 audiences. In particular, the film omitted the grotesque aftermath featured in the graphic novel and re-asserted, rather than critiqued, the popular representation of masculine heroism. In doing so, it became representative of the public's desire for the false security of traditional gender identities and the movie's willingness to fulfill them in the post-9/11 era.

Watchmen takes place in an alternate history: it is 1985 and the United States is on the brink of nuclear war with the Soviet Union. Superheroes exist, but they are outlawed. Moore's graphic novel "show[s] how superheroes could deform [the] world just by being there, not that they'd have to take it over, just their presence there would make the difference" (Rosen 18). Unlike many other superhero comic books, *Watchmen* deals with the

political ramifications of vigilante superheroes. This reveals the hypocrisy with which governmental decisions are made. Even though the Keene Act outlaws all vigilantes, the government employs two members of the Watchmen because they give the United States a stronger image. The alternate history of the world presented in the novel is mired in political struggles and the pervasive threat of nuclear annihilation, as measured daily by a doomsday clock. While this alternate world is fictional, it shares many similarities to our own culture. In 2002, the Homeland Security Advisory System, often referred to as the terror threat level, was created to share information about possible risks of terrorist activity. The risks ranged from low (green) to severe (red). Raising the threat level (or moving the clock hands closer to midnight) wasn't necessarily an act of prevention but measuring the threat gave the illusion of being in control of it. The physical act of controlling the measurements is an active, not passive, response to the perceived threat of annihilation (as well as a way to keep fear alive in our culture). In the introduction chapter, I explained the gendered ways that our culture has responded to threats against masculinity. Just as Bush attempted to control the storyline about Iraq by creating a victorious, masculine photo-op, characters within *Watchmen* attempt to control the fate of the world by projecting masculine control, whether by terrorist attack or by the manipulation of time itself.

The representations of heteronormative gender constructions in this novel and its film adaptation accurately reflect issues embedded in post-traumatic culture. Superheroism tends to be gendered masculine. When one thinks of comic book superheroes, one thinks of Batman, Superman, Captain America—all strong, overtly masculine heroes. In *Watchmen*, it's clear that the male superheroes feel pressure to conform to heteronormative masculinity, but that they do not necessarily measure up to those expectations. Rorschach does not meet

the physical standard for heroic masculinity; he is short in stature and unattractive. Ozymandias, as the world's smartest man, isn't necessarily viewed as a traditional superhero either. As his sexuality is called into question and his masculine superhero status is forcefully removed, he attempts to reclaim his lost masculinity by controlling the fate of the world; however, his feelings of masculine victory are short-lived and his achievement will not last, perpetuating an emasculated sense of identity. On the other hand, Dr. Manhattan, whose status as posthuman allows a transcendent understanding of and detachment from humanity, suggests that post-human masculinity will provide future salvation. It is important to discuss these characters, in both graphic novel and film format, in terms of pre-apocalyptic (pre-terror) emasculation and post-apocalyptic gender construction. The characters in *Watchmen* only function in their critique of gender performativity by following the unwritten comic book code of identity. These characters are "recognizable only by representing previous culturally accepted identities" (Keating 1269). This identity puts them in a position to either support or critique traditional gender roles, and they were used far more critically in the novel.

Moore's *Watchmen* serves not only as a predictor for post-9/11 gender issues, but for the darkening psychology of our superheroes. Historically, comic book superheroes reflected cultural norms of strong, heteronormative, white masculinity. Superman defends truth, justice, and the American way, despite his position as an outsider. Batman protects the lives of innocents, reflecting the trauma of his lost youth. Captain America punches Hitler in the face to defend against tyranny, having grown from a weakling to a super soldier. All of these characters reflected the way men in American culture wanted to be, something to aspire to. This contrasts modern representations of masculinity and heroism that reflect issues in our

culture. Unlike the traditional heroes listed above who overcome tragedy, alienation, and weakness to attain strength, postmodern comic book characters aren't always capable of overcoming their inadequacies or fighting for justice. The world has grown too complicated for a black and white perspective on good and evil and our cultural products reflect this change.

Superheroes “are intent on retaining the status quo, subservient to the popular politics and will of the people they protect” (Wolf-Meyer). For the Watchmen vigilante group, it's clear that the will of the people they protect, most of whom distrust and dislike the costumed crusaders, is not important. Some vigilantes get involved for the fame, others do it to boost their egos, but only one seems legitimately concerned about making the world a better place: Rorschach.

Rorschach seeks to maintain an out of date status quo by any means necessary. So while he will hunt down murderers and rapists, he will do whatever it takes to locate criminals and make them pay. This means that he is willing to torture people for information—along the lines of waterboarding detainees for information (so long as it's in the name of preserving freedom)—and murdering those that he finds guilty, rather than handing them over to the police.

Rorschach's clothing and beliefs represent the return to historical notions of masculinity. It is important to mention Rorschach is the only one of the Watchmen to wear a costume that doesn't magnify his gender. His mask, trench coat, and small stature diminish his masculine presence (although his actions certainly read masculine) while the other men's costumes amplify their musculature and minimize their imperfections. Rorschach's outdated clothing and perspectives resist Veidt's postmodern vision of gender and moral ambiguity.

Clearly, Veidt does not subscribe to the black and white binary way of thinking. He exhibits the gray area blending masculine and feminine and good and evil that Rorschach is unable to acknowledge. Rorschach's pattern of thinking cannot recognize perspectives that do not fit neatly into categories like right or wrong, good or evil. Rorschach's character is a literalized representation of retributive justice, the black and white belief in binary oppositions of good and evil. Not only does his black and white mask symbolize his belief in binaries, but his actions foreshadow the hasty and violent desire for vengeance following 9/11. Despite Rorschach's belief in historical notions of morality, he is ultimately unable to push humanity back to what he perceives as a pre-Dr. Manhattan utopia and pays the price for being unwilling to participate in a postmodern society.

His obsession with justice makes him appealing to the conservative perspective. The editor of the novel's *New Frontiersman* calls Rorschach a "true American...Patriot" (7.12). The very name of the newspaper itself harkens back to historical norms and the idea of masculine identity as rugged, strong, and decisive. The editor promotes hyper-patriotism and the desire for all American food. In *Watchmen*, the editor doesn't want "hanky-head garbage," he wants "an *American* hamburger" (8.10). Not only does this match our culture's blatant racism towards anyone—no matter what race, gender, or religion—wearing a headscarf, hijab, or turban, it also preemptively describes the ways in which conservative Americans extoll their exceptionalism even in seemingly minor areas such as cuisine. For example, French fries became "Freedom Fries" in our post-9/11 culture given France's opposition to the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

Similarly, in the 2004 presidential election campaigns of George W. Bush and John Kerry, Bush utilized historical masculine swagger to sway voters away from Kerry's

indecisive (i.e., feminine) politics. Voters, particularly white men, supported the masculine ideology and steadfastness represented in the Republican Party and its ability to stay the course in Iraq, regardless of national and international disagreement about an ultimately illegal preemptive war.

Rather than imposing change on a culture already embedded with long-standing ideology, the role of the superhero is to protect and serve the culture in which they appear. Batman, for example, doesn't necessarily try to change social hierarchy in Gotham and unite the disparate class systems in the city. Instead, he protects everything the city stands for from being changed by a villain. Villains are typically the characters who demand some kind of social change. On the surface, Ozymandias appears to follow his role of protector; but, in reality, he goes beyond his superheroic duties, seeking to *change* the world, rather than protect it. In this way, Ozymandias is more villain than hero, and not just because of his act of terror, but also because of his exploitation of his post-modern masculine image. His reliance on hegemonic power structures allow for him to blend into society as a trusted masculine hero. According to Mila Bongco, it takes more than just a costume to create a superhero:

masculinity is a principle concept in defining and distinguishing an enduring hero ... being male and masculine manifests itself more in how effectively a superhero uses mind and/or muscle to resolve various power struggles, thereby displaying authority and self-sufficiency, and gaining public recognition. (115)

As a public figure, Adrian Veidt is the most trusted and most respected of all the Watchmen. Yet, Veidt's constructed façade conceals a sinister terrorist plot. After he has staged a false

assassination attempt on himself, the novel's recurring newspaper vendor character calls Veidt a saint. Ironically enough, Veidt's act of terror kills the vendor who believed so mightily in his fraudulent magnetism.

Veidt is neither a traditional hero nor a traditional villain, yet his unique combination of superhero and supervillain traits ultimately gives him the appearance of having the most power in the story. And although Veidt's supreme masculine strength certainly adds to his dominance, it is his status as the "world's smartest man" that elevates him to superhuman status. Veidt "overcame humanity, he transcended the bounds yoked on upon him by culture and achieved his genetic potential" (Wolf-Meyer 498). In *Watchmen*, achieving absolute enlightenment in American culture involves constructing the perfect male body, one capable of catching a bullet with his own hands, and doing so based on the pure strength of will. Veidt wasn't exposed to radiation or shaped by a traumatic experience; on his own volition, he built himself up physically, academically, and financially, thereby elevating himself above the rest of humanity as a savior and as a capitalist. Veidt's identity as a self-made, financially stable intellectual is key to the discussion of pre-apocalyptic, ornamental masculine identity.

As one of the smartest and richest men in the world, Veidt has access to anything and everything he wants. But his position within an ornamental culture only gives him wealth and status, a surface-level image of success. Because of this image, it may appear to others that Veidt does not have any real-world power. This helps to disguise his ulterior motives. Much in the same way that the masculinity crisis of the 1990s served as a precursor to rebellious hyper-masculinity, Veidt's desire for absolute perfection leads to his desire to control the fate of the world. But ultimately his act of terror is not just about protecting the world; it's about

preserving his own masculine ideology. In his capitalist endeavors, Veidt attempts to rebuild the world in his image.

Veidt markets masculinity to those in need of strength and confidence through “The Veidt Method for physical fitness and self-improvement” (10.32). This is an obvious reference to advertisements placed in comic books by Charles Atlas in the 1940s, when it was imperative for weaklings to become men. One of the most famous Atlas advertisements featured a skinny boy at the beach with a girl. A bigger and stronger boy then bullies the boy and the girlfriend mocks him. Frustrated by this embarrassing and emasculating situation, the boy orders the free Atlas book, becomes bigger and stronger, gets revenge on his bully, and wins his girl back. Like Atlas, Veidt has taken this idea and put a price tag on it, using himself as evidence that the method is effective. One of the quintessential issues in our postmodern culture is the idea that we want instant gratification and easy fixes. Consumer culture, from Charles Atlas through the present, has succeeded by promising these results, but largely left men unfulfilled. Similarly, Veidt offers a step by step program for personal growth and improvement, but packaging a simple solution for a small price will ultimately lead to frustration from those who don’t measure up to him (which no one is physically or mentally capable of doing). Veidt is referred to not only as the smartest man in the world, but also as a saint. Given the way that he is perceived, it is not possible for anyone to achieve his strength or intelligence. Similarly, the ways in which mass media represent masculinity make it seem like an attainable lifestyle; however, the idealized image of masculinity that is bottled and sold to consumers provides no real solutions and the failure to attain this image results in even more feelings of inadequacy (and subsequently more consumption).

Another of Veidt's bottled creations is his perfume line called Nostalgia. Faludi makes a great argument that parallels Veidt's particular choice of merchandise. To paraphrase, Faludi argues that ornamental culture revolves around masculinity being bottled and sold back to men, whether it's cologne, Viagra, or any other product that promotes manliness as its key selling point. Thus, Veidt uses the cologne and other items as references to himself as signifier of ideal masculinity which men will believe they can purchase. The product's name, Nostalgia, is a metaphor for the idea of returning to historical notions of conformity, yet another unobtainable concept that can be endlessly marketed. The Nostalgia trope is repeated throughout the novel as the logo appears on billboards and advertising. One of the braiding techniques in the novel, which "defines a series within a sequential framework," involves the omni-present Adrian Veidt brand, visually confirming his stronghold in this alternate society (Groensteen 146). He bottles his persona—his masculinity—and sells it to others in the form of perfume and exercise routines even though he knows that others will not be able to achieve what he has. Perhaps unnoticed upon first reading, the visual motif of the Veidt's prominence is "indispensable to the conduct and intelligibility of the story" (Groensteen 147). The repeated advertisements for Nostalgia on billboards, in newspapers, and on television show Veidt's presence and dominance are inescapable.

Action figures become another outlet for Veidt's marketing of masculinity. As inanimate objects, action figures have long represented unrealistic, yet idealized, representations of the human body. If Barbie's proportions were translated to real life, for example, she would be considered anorexic and would walk on all fours due to the heavy weight of her oversized breasts and head. Her glorified proportions set unfair expectations on

young girls who look at their beloved toy as a model for femininity. Although it certainly does not seem to be discussed as much, action figures for boys can similarly damage their perceptions of masculinity. G.I. Joe action figures, just like Barbie, convey ideological sign systems of gender normativity. In this case, they are mechanisms of hypermasculinity both in terms of appearance and play. These figures teach boys gendered play and subconsciously define what a man is, how he looks, and how he acts. The exaggerated musculature of the figure is accepted as normal or standard. The weapons that accessorize the figure are accepted, too, as standard models of problem solving and conventional masculine violence.

Veidt no doubt understands the influence that toys like these will have on promoting normative gender behaviors and utilizes the fear of apocalypse as a marketing tool. In a letter to his marketing and development representative, Veidt writes: “My study of recorded sales figures in a historical context suggests an increase in the sale of soldiers and action figures in times immediately prior to a period of anticipated war or bloodshed, and we should take advantage of this syndrome for as long as it lasts” (10.30). As soldiers and action figures are typically marketed towards young boys, Veidt is able to influence the behaviors of future generations of men who learn from his toys how to look and how to act. In particular, Veidt wants to create an army of terrorists for the Ozymandias action figure to fight against, rather than creating facsimiles of his real life counterparts or enemies like Moloch (former criminal), because he believes that superheroes aren’t marketable during wartime. Instead, Veidt understands that a perceived enemy will promote sales of action figures, just as he understands that a perceived enemy in the real world will unite people together to fight against the danger.

Seen from the present, Alan Moore's work can be sadly recognized as an eerie parallel of post-9/11 political developments when Iraqis were manufactured as a superficial enemy to face America's anger over the terrorist attacks. Initially, in our own post-9/11 culture, the relevance of superheroes was questioned. Andrew D. Arnold's article "Will Superheroes Meet Their Doom?" appeared in *Time Magazine* on October 2, 2001. In this article, he questioned the future of superheroes in a world that had changed so drastically after such an unforeseen attack revealed our vulnerabilities. After 9/11, did we need superheroes? Characters who are supposed to prevent citywide destruction and chaos? Similarly, how could Americans identify an unknowable enemy? Superheroes have clearly defined enemies to fight, but the American enemy was a vague terrorist network, not a traditional military force. Veidt understands that the best way to make money is to garner patriotic behavior through commercialism. His solution (and path to wealth and fame) is to have consumers fight—and defeat—terrorists through the illusion that they can purchase traditional American standards of masculinity. Veidt's marketing of masculine soldiers fighting terrorists thus matches the marketing of masculinity following 9/11, when "the notion of physical prowess in the service of patriotic duty [was] firmly back on the pedestal" (*The Terror Dream* 74). Rugged masculinity was sold as a valuable commodity in the fight against terror although in a different form. Historic notions of realistic masculinity became revered and celebrated while imaginary superheroes were pushed aside to celebrate realistic masculine heroes: firefighters and American soldiers.

Veidt's prediction about superhero marketing is uncanny. In chapter 1 of *Watchmen*, Rorschach visits Veidt in his office to warn of his mask-killer theory. Rorschach accuses him of cashing in on his reputation, "selling posters and diet books and toy soldiers based on

himself [...] a prostitute” (1.17). Veidt is able to brush off this emasculating insult in the last panel of this scene. The panel takes up most of the page, giving weight to the importance of this moment. In it, Veidt stands in front of the window of his high-rise office, looking down upon the city. His dominant positioning represents the hierarchy of power present in this society. Not only does he rise above humanity in terms of his intelligence and strength, his wealth and status afford him power over his fellow man. In the foreground of this panel, there are Ozymandias action figures all over his desk, reflecting the metaphor of creating the world in his image by mass marketing himself. At first, the figures appear to be scattered randomly on the desk but their positioning, too, is significant. One action figure stands heroically above a newspaper, hand outwardly stretched implying control. A second lays face down on the newspaper, the outwardly stretched hand appearing to punch the front page. Both indicate Veidt’s control throughout society (and the world). The headline of this newspaper reads “Nuclear Doomsday Clock Stands at Five to Twelve Warn Experts.” This headline would terrify most readers, but Veidt—very calmly and coolly—believes that he has the situation under control.

Veidt is not offended by Rorschach’s accusations, which are intended to be emasculating. After leaving Veidt’s office, Rorschach writes in his journal that Veidt is pampered and “possibly homosexual” (1.19). It is because of Veidt’s financially comfortable lifestyle and obsession with his own image that Rorschach believes Veidt is less of a man than he himself is. Unlike Rorschach’s belief in literally getting his hands dirty to fight crime and make the world a better place, Veidt is able to get his hands dirty without doing any more than lifting a finger. Veidt’s detachment from physical violence makes him appear ineffectual in the fight against crime, at least according to Rorschach’s perspective. But if

anything, Veidt's character is asexual. He never clearly identifies his sexual preference, his name is quite ambiguous, and he does not have close relationships with anyone but his genetically mutated cat. Despite the fact that his strength, musculature, and wealth read masculine, his gender-neutrality comes less from Rorschach's criticisms than from his own self-emasculatation. He is simultaneously a destroyer and a creator, masculine and feminine. His actions may, at times, conflict in terms of gender ideology, but ultimately he creates an image of himself that evokes traditional masculinity—strong, intelligent, wealthy. So although Veidt has an opportunity to promote gender neutrality, given his success as an androgynous person, he is confined by societal expectations of hegemonic masculinity and literally sells the concept of masculinity as the norm all consumers should strive to achieve. But because only Veidt is capable of achieving the feats he advertises, it's clear that the expectations of masculinity are unfair and constructed.

At various points in the novel, Veidt emasculates himself only to build himself up again. The concept of the self-made man is one of conservative political ideology, yet Veidt identifies himself as a liberal vegetarian, one who is in touch with the plight of human struggle. In order to understand human struggle, he places himself in positions where he needs to rebuild himself and his empire. After his parents passed away, teenage Veidt gave away his inheritance to travel the world, starting from scratch. Not only was he able to earn enough money to travel, he returned home and built his corporation, earning countless millions from his investments and production of goods. There's no doubt that his intelligence and his status as a white male helped Veidt to attain his power. Additionally, his status as a gender-neutral figure affords him the ability to appear simultaneously strong enough to build an empire based on his masculine image and compassionate enough to disguise his plans to

launch a terrorist attack. In a time when real men are supposed to resist consumption and feminization, Veidt seems to do the opposite. He fits the mold of the feminized marketer yet he's the terrorist.

As the doomsday clock hit midnight, Veidt teleported a constructed alien creature to New York City, causing mass casualties and destruction. As discussed throughout the novel on television and in the newspapers, the world is on the brink of World War III. In Veidt's perspective, a massive attack would unite all the countries together against a common enemy; in this case, the enemy is the alien that supposedly attacked earth. His terrorist attack seems to bring peace and solidarity, much like what was present in our culture after 9/11. The threat of nuclear attack disappears as the world unites not only to support a victimized New York City but also against the perceived new threat. But what we can take from Veidt's superhero alter ego is that his empire and his peace are temporary. Percy Bysshe Shelley reminds us in his poem "Ozymandias" (1818) that as civilizations fall away, so too do stories of tyrants. With no one to tell the stories, all that remains are broken visages with no concrete link to the past. The moment the attack is over, Moore depicts Veidt as insignificant to the world; his only remaining power is that of a white collar capitalist, a man who clings to and markets the image of the masculine strength he is no longer called upon to use. He is left in his own shadow by the end of the novel. In Figure 1, Veidt's shadow looms over him, making Veidt appear small and insignificant. The name Ozymandias was surely chosen by Moore for the poem's theme of the inevitability of decline for leaders whose delusions of grandeur will ultimately be forgotten. The very moment that Veidt triggers the squid, his decline begins. Ultimately his constructed identity and his constructed terrorist attack will be meaningless to a culture that will find a way to divide itself politically once again, just as our culture did

after the shock of 9/11, the awe of the War in Iraq, and the dissention of the 2004 presidential election. A woeful Veidt looks upon the universe, which takes up the majority of the page, and understands his efforts will be short-lived.

The issue of staying the course in losing battles is another of *Watchmen*'s predictions about post-9/11 culture. The novel, though, reverses the outcome of Vietnam, allowing for a devastating failure to become a proud victory, all thanks to a posthuman superhero named Dr. Manhattan.

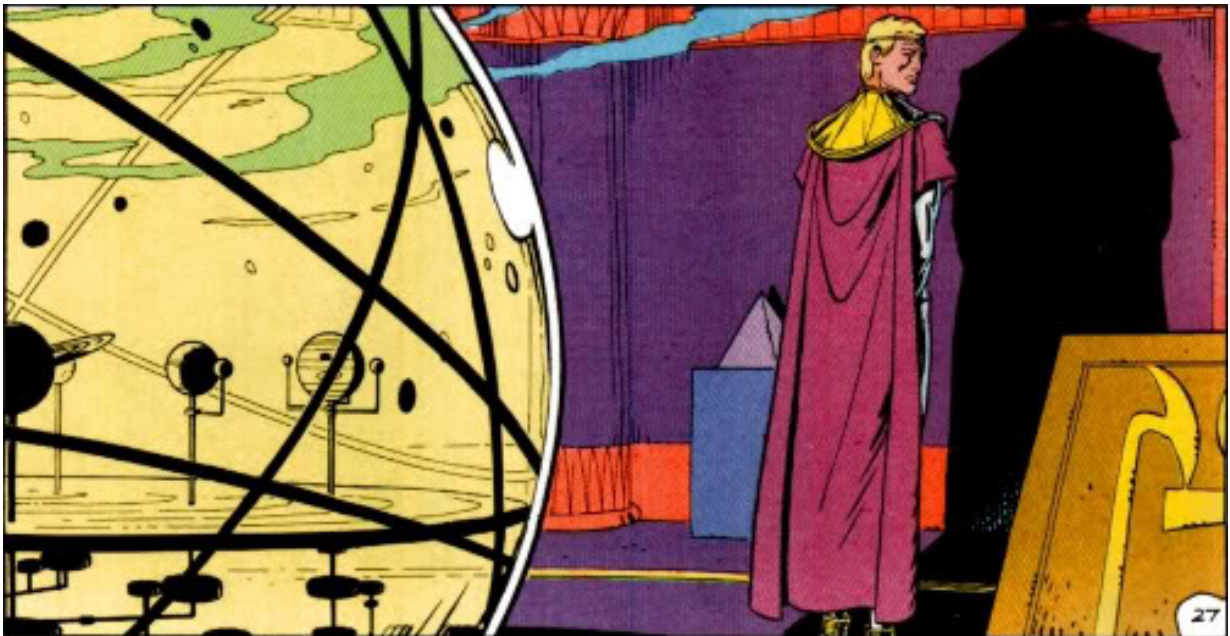


Fig. 1. Adrian Veidt stands beneath his towering shadow. From *Watchmen* © DC Comics.

When Dr. Jon Osterman is involved in a nuclear physics accident, his body is destroyed and everyone assumes that he was killed (Figure 2). Reminiscent of casualties on 9/11, an empty coffin is buried at Jon's funeral. But his body slowly puts itself back together and he later reappears fully reassembled, although blue, naked, and with powers.

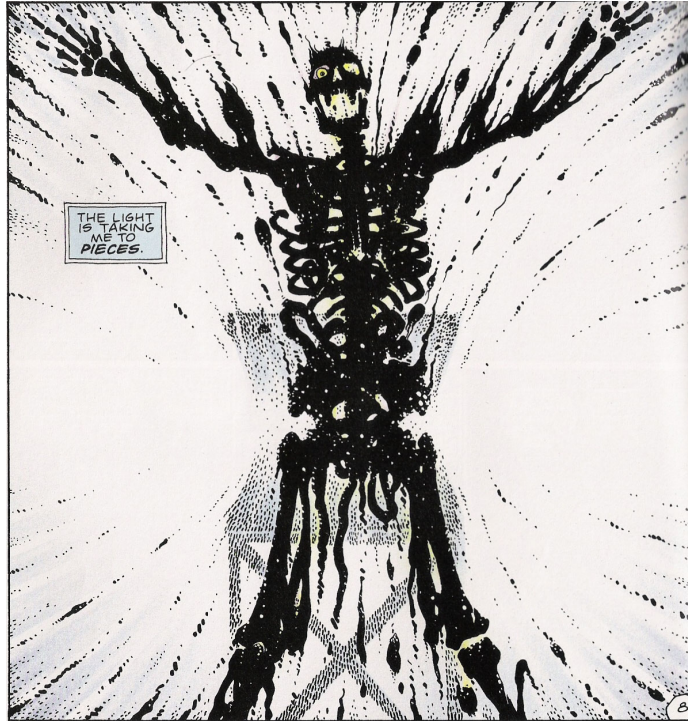


Fig. 2. Jon's body disintegrates. From Watchmen © DC Comics.

His nudity is significant because it displays and reasserts his maleness. His reappearance breaks with what is otherwise a fairly consistent spatio-topical system, each page layout symmetrically gridded in nine same-sized panels (Figure 3). The larger panel not only magnifies his physical presence, but in the panel itself he is physically placed above everyone else as a stoic, muscular god. Dr. Manhattan, a name meant to inspire fear of physical devastation, changes the course of history, ending the Vietnam War and keeping the nuclear arms race in check, reminding us that the political male body is in control of our fate. We are visually reminded of his stature as a political force in a flashback to Vietnam in which his body dominates not only the alternate historical reconstruction, but also the page. The rhetorical function of the enlarged panel privileges image over text to establish masculinity as a dominant force.



Fig. 3. The appearance of Dr. Manhattan. From Watchmen © DC Comics.



Fig. 4. Dr. Manhattan's looming presence in Vietnam. From Watchmen © DC Comics.

Dr. Manhattan's presence emasculates every man in the world. Gone are the days of boots on the ground. Soldiers are no longer needed to defend their countries because neither mortal man nor mortal weapon can defend against this posthuman God, as seen in Figure 4 when Dr. Manhattan goes to Vietnam. Because of him, the United States was able to win the war. Aside from his ability to destroy anything in his path with the flick of his wrist, his image of his masculine prowess would intimidate any man who looked upon him. Many Vietnamese soldiers surrendered to Dr. Manhattan personally.

Despite his hyper-masculine appearance, Dr. Manhattan represents a postmodern representation of gender. His post-gender identity does not make him uncomfortable. The people around him are the ones to suggest to him that he needs to cover his body in keeping with society's standards of decorum. Jon does not view his nakedness as gendered. Shortly after his reconstruction, he wore clothing around other people and for TV interviews. But the further detached he become from humanity, the more he disregarded cultural norms of covering the body. Regardless, the people who gaze upon him as he is viewed as an all-powerful God will associate his command with his naked male body and infer that power is a masculine trait.

Similarly, because he views living bodies and dead bodies as "structurally no different," one can assume that he views men and woman as similarly constructed. But because he was once confined by societal gender norms, he rebuilds his previously small, non-muscular body in an extremely hypermasculine, body-builder configuration, thereby giving him an image of power that helps confer his status to the world around him. Likewise, he understands the ways in which he should interact in a relationship with his girlfriend Laurie (formerly a Watchmen group member known as Silk Spectre II), but is also dismissive of her feelings because he knows that gender norms are ultimately meaningless. Because Manhattan is able to view humanity on a molecular level, he sees no difference in what are typical binary oppositions: male and female, alive and dead, rich and poor are all the same on a molecular level so, therefore, Manhattan understands the imaginary constructs of cultural norms. From his deity perspective, Manhattan is also able to understand that the beliefs and behaviors of the human race all lead to a future that he already knows, although he never articulates what the future holds. Both Manhattan and Veidt look down upon

humanity from an elevated posthuman status, but the difference is that Manhattan doesn't try to control the fate of the world like Veidt does. Manhattan is able to separate himself from humanity, while Veidt has a vested interest in saving his consumers. After all, they are the ones who have maintained Veidt's position on a pedestal. Much in the way that Manhattan finds humanity's social constructions to be meaningless, he also finds the construct of time itself to be pointless.

Manhattan experiences all time at once, which is significant in contrast to Jon Osterman who was only able to fix watches. Osterman was just a cog in the system, while Dr. Manhattan *is* the system. Jon's father pushes his son away from the watchmaking profession, calling it a "thing of the past. Instead, my son must have a future" (4.3). Jon's position as a man who could literally control time is significant, but not as significant as Dr. Manhattan's ability to construct his own future. Unlike the other characters in *Watchmen*, Dr. Manhattan's enhanced and unlimited vision of time allows him to transcend humanity, as well as humanity's adherence to gender norms.

His transcendence was not always looked upon favorably, however. Neither was the power embedded in the members of the Watchmen. Not only does Rorschach, a member of the vigilante group, accuse Veidt of being homosexual (as if homosexuality infers some kind of weakness) and say that Dan Drieberg (the second Nite Owl) is a "flabby failure," but also society itself views these superheroes as queer and/or subhuman for not abiding by gender normative behaviors. Rorschach's small stature and anonymous violence are antithetical to standard perceptions of justice and Dr. Manhattan's overtly masculine image combined with his posthuman power makes people distrust him. His god-like stature makes him asexual and, therefore, not normal.

As opposed to a man like Dr. Manhattan who is not under the influence of time (or Jon Osterman who could manipulate it), Dan Drieberg is the kind of passive guy who won't even look ahead in his calendar to see what next month's picture will be. Drieberg, then, is another of the graphic novel's asexual characters. Having been forced to retire by the Keene Act, a law passed in 1977 that banned superheroes, Drieberg spends his days alone and longing for the past. When he does socialize, it's with his mentor Hollis Mason, the original Nite Owl. Mason becomes a father figure of sorts to Drieberg, a man who never really grew up. Before the terrorist attack, Drieberg attempts to reclaim his lost masculinity with manly pursuits of violence and sleuthing. He's a very laid back, ineffectual man who is only capable of masculine performance when he wears his costume (when the manipulations of his costume make his body appear physically dominant). In another break from gridded symmetry, we can see that the out-of-shape, middle-aged Dan Dreiberger literally lives in the shadow of his masculine persona (Figure 5).



Fig. 5. Retired Dan Drieberg lives in the shadow of his former strength. From Watchmen © DC Comics.

It is clear that he relies on his masculine alter ego for confidence and masculine prowess, even to the point that he is impotent without it. After a failed sexual encounter with Laurie, Dan has a dream (Figure 6) in which his flabby, emasculated exterior is removed to reveal his Nite Owl alter ego, the masculine figure Dan wishes to be.

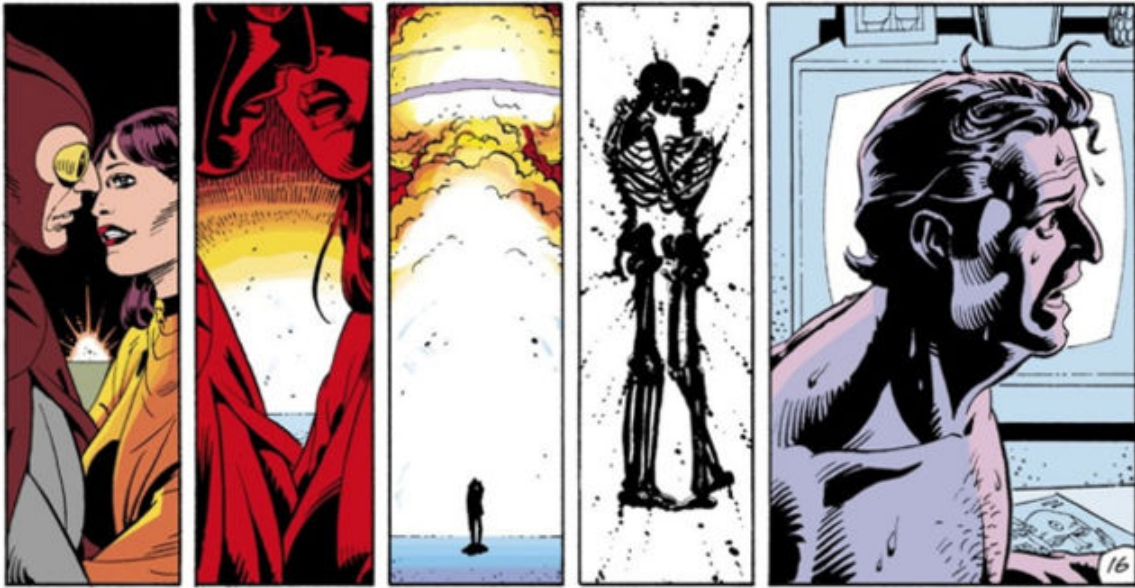


Fig. 6. Dan's nightmare. From Watchmen © DC Comics.

The pacing of these panels (seventeen of them instead of the usual nine) is a rhythmic, textless device that infers the heavy breathing of a sexual encounter that is only possible when Dan is wearing his costume (and is exactly what happens later on).

Dan's call to action happens after his nightmare about terrorism and explosions and destruction of bodies. He goes from flabby failure to hero, reborn and reconstructed after his body was destroyed, just like Jon. Only after this terrorist vision can he man up to responsibilities and try to save Laurie, whose helplessness in the dream and in real life help to solidify his masculine strength. Unfortunately for Drieberg, his newfound strength doesn't help him to prevent apocalypse, only to free vigilante terrorist Rorschach, who was arrested for murder after being set up by Veidt. After learning Veidt's secret attack plan, he returns

even more firmly to his flabby failure persona, running away with Laurie, reborn in an Adam and Eve scenario where their lies will save the world, not their strength or morality.

Ultimately, Dan retreats from his newfound masculine strength, willing to accept that he never had, and never will have, any power. Instead, Drieberg's agency as a man is only possible when Jon leaves earth for good at the end of the novel (and no longer threatens his feelings toward Laurie) and Veidt no longer has sole control over the fate of the world. It was Veidt's destructive plan that brought about world peace, but now that Dan, Laurie, Dr. Manhattan, and Veidt know the truth, everyone has to keep the secret; everyone shares the power. Each of them is also complicit in the murder of one of their own. Rorschach refused to partake in the power of this secret and was killed by Dr. Manhattan. Rorschach, the most morally ambiguous character in the novel in terms of gender, violence, and values, may just be the most righteous of all.

Veidt's alien squid invasion was meant to bring a blameless truce amongst countries who were seconds away from nuking each other. But, over time, the truth will be revealed, and those who hold any semblance of remaining power will lose it. Veidt's empire will crumble if and when Rorschach's journal is printed for the public to see. Fearing the worst, Rorschach implicated Veidt in the squid attack in his journal before dropping it off to the *New Frontiersman* and leaving with Dan to confront Veidt. Although Rorschach is no longer alive, it is only a matter of time before someone at the newspaper reads the journal and publishes it, even if intended to do nothing more than take up space on a slow news day. This is exactly how the novel ends. On a slow news day, Seymour, a low ranking employee at the newspaper, pulls the journal from the crank file. Those who believe Rorschach will be very similar to 9/11 truthers who believe that the events of September 11th were staged by the

government. If the truthers are correct about their assertions, then both the novel and 9/11 will stem from domestic conspiracies aimed at creating a false sense of peace and solidarity. Based on real world reactions to the events of 9/11, one can make the argument that if and when the truth is revealed, it will be an extremely divisive event. It will reveal the consequences of clinging to a masculine hierarchy, worshipping characters like Veidt and Manhattan whose performances were meant to affirm traits of masculinity. Masculinity is at the center of fictional and nonfictional disasters, which is why hegemonic masculinity is such a dangerous concept.

The film adaptation goes out of its way to remind us of 9/11, adding images of the Twin Towers that are not present in the graphic novel. The film also amplifies disparate representations of men and women to show that gender hierarchy is still the expected norm. The male characters are still complicated by their own psychological strengths, and weaknesses and thus adapted faithfully. One of the biggest changes from page to film is the attack itself. In the novel, Veidt commissions artists and scientists to build and transport a giant squid that explodes on impact, killing millions. According to “Comic Book Resources,” this ending was no longer possible following the events of 9/11:

Originally, the Squid was deleted by screenwriter David Hayter. He signed to write *Watchmen* on September 10, 2001. Following the events of the next day, Hayter did not believe he could use the visual language of the book’s ending. “That was a difficult time to end a movie with scenes of bloody torn-apart bodies just littering Times Square,” the writer recalled. Hayter chose to make the cut “not only for the studio’s sake, but in empathy with the rest of America and the world.” (Amaya)

Instead, Veidt manipulates Dr. Manhattan's energy signatures to detonate reactors. Instead of gruesome piles of bodies, a flash of light obliterates people and buildings, almost in the way that atomic blasts left shadows of people behind but no physical remains. By framing Dr. Manhattan for the attacks, Veidt stands alone as the most powerful man on earth.

While the altered ending was a very successful change for post-9/11 viewers, the female characters from the novel were afforded typical Hollywood-style treatment in their page-to-film representations. Skirts were removed, outfits became tighter, personalities changed, and women who previously held their own now whined their way through the film, dependent on their male counterparts to protect them, both physically and emotionally. The slight androgyny of the tough female characters in the novel did not diminish their femininity, but the filmmakers found it necessary to use femininity *against* these women by making them reliable on men for strength.

While Moore's Laurie is just as complex as her male counterparts, the *Watchmen* film pushed her away from her personal struggles and physical force. As discussed previously, Laurie's romantic encounter with two of the main characters affects the trajectories of their stories. While Laurie's presence in both the novel and the film affects these characters, the film makes Laurie more of a woman in refrigerator, a comic book trope in which a female character is murdered or harmed in order to advance the story of the male character. Once Dan is physically capable of having a sexual encounter, it changes his behavior to make him stronger. Dr. Manhattan's relationship with Laurie helped him to view humanity in a different light. But in what way was Laurie changed for the better by these relationships? The novel offers closure as Laurie and Dan, disguised, plan a life together, one that may include the occasional crime-fight. The end of the film, though, still posits Laurie's character as a

sexual plaything for Dan. As he comes up from the basement, she suggestively asks him “how is everything down there” and he replies that everything is working. Embedded in these lines is sexual innuendo between the two, heavily implied by the way Laurie speaks. The novel ends with the two of them as equals, while the film ends with Laurie as nothing more than a plaything.

Much in the same way that a post-9/11 film audience couldn't look at piles of dead, bloody bodies in Manhattan (as in chapter 10 of the graphic novel), a post-9/11 audience is also accustomed to seeing men being the heroes, even if said heroes are flawed. Laurie's placement as lower in the hierarchy of heroes correlates to the perception of heroism in post-9/11 culture. Manly men were revered for their strength, weak men were looked down on, and strong women were blamed for emasculating the men who weren't strong enough to care for themselves. Not only did Laurie need to become physically weaker, but in the film Laurie's character couldn't even smoke. The male characters still smoked as much as they did in the novel, but Laurie no longer suffered from her on again off again relationship with smoking. This may seem like an insignificant change, given the perception that no one smokes in movies any more, but for Laurie this was a very drastic change to her identity. As a psychological crutch, going on and off the wagon represented Laurie's complexity as a character, one who struggles with understanding who she is and where she came from. By taking away this addiction, Laurie is subverted as a character whose surface-level problems are solved by the men around her. As a sexual object, she is also subjected to the gaze not only of the characters around her but the film's audience as well.

Each of the promotional film posters for male characters closely matched the original intentions and representations of masculinity from the graphic novel. Malin Akerman's

poster, however, portrays her character Laurie/Silk Spectre II as nothing more than a woman who wants to be looked at, particularly given the choice to transform her skirted costume (which was far less revealing, although perhaps less practical) to a pantsless, bondage suit. Ackerman's assets take up the majority of the space on the poster. She is positioned in such a way that her lower half faces away from the viewer, allowing a clear view of her behind, which is carefully illuminated for maximum sexual effect. This lighting is actually quite impossible, considering the light source is above her head, so the lines accentuating her buttocks are clearly done not logically but for a desired sexualized effect. She is turned slightly at the waist, her midsection is positioned to show her breasts, similarly illuminated in an unrealistic way. The latex suit leaves little to the imagination, so to position her body in this way that accentuates her sexualized features infers that she is not a character, but rather an object to be gazed upon. Although her face is positioned to stare directly back at the viewer, her expression (combined with her body position) does not suggest that we should look away. In fact, we are almost privy to this voyeuristic moment of sexualized violence.

Her stance allows the gazer a perfect view of her anatomy. Her skin-tight costume leaves little to the imagination. Fist clenched, it is implied that she is responsible for the writhing, beat-down bodies in the background, but not one hair is out of place in this perfect pose. Her tagline, "I'm used to going out at 3:00 a.m. and doing something stupid," likens her to a party girl who does stupid things late at night, inferring her own lack of strength and character. In the novel, Laurie is shown to be a physically strong person, a woman who works out to maintain her crime-fighting capabilities. The film purposefully does away with her strength and androgyny in favor of a hyper-sexual representation. The removal of her

androgynous features confirms for viewers that women can only derive power from femininity and sexuality.

Not only does the film change her appearance in favor of selling her image as a sexual object, her behavior is modified as well. Her character is reduced from being a self-doubting adventurer into a dull, melodramatic individual who whines about her boy troubles more than worrying about the end of the world. Complicated character structure is stripped away in favor of outward appearances and representations of femininity, thus undermining the novel's original intentions of character development in favor of a more familiar presentation. Although audiences still tend to be wary of films directly about 9/11, almost subconsciously these same audiences crave familiarity in entertainment, especially when it comes to gender normativity. The mediated reactions to and the consequences of the events of 9/11 resulted in a cultural formation that greatly impacted gender and perceptions of normality. According to Jeffrey Melnick, "The art of 9/11 has been much more intent on reflecting how the political becomes personal. To put it plainly, one of the defining features of the post-9/11 cultural landscape has been to translate the violence of the day as a simple assault on the proper functioning of American masculinity and femininity" (123). The reflexive response to the attacks sought to restore our culture's historical gender myths by representing the narrative of 9/11 through images instead of words. Countless images of masculine rescuers and feminine victims told the story of manly heroes capable of defending our culture and protecting our most important myths. Faludi makes the point that "when we base our security on a mythical male strength that can only measure itself against a mythical female weakness ... we are exhibiting the symptoms of a lethal, albeit curable, cultural affliction" (295). This divisive affliction was represented not only in the media's narrative,

but also in our Hollywood productions. As previously discussed, the novel *Watchmen* serves as an uncanny predictor of post-apocalyptic gender divisions while the film adaptation, ironically, serves as the perfect example of the damage that can be done if we cling to the false security of traditional gender identities.

CHAPTER THREE

MASCULINIZATION OF THE GREAT MACHINE: RECONSTRUCTING THE POST-9/11 SUPERHERO IN BRIAN K. VAUGHAN'S *EX MACHINA*



Fig. 7. A splash page of Mitchell Hundred, who builds his image from the ashes of September 11th. From *Ex Machina Deluxe Edition Book Two*™ and © Brian K. Vaughan & Tony Harris. Courtesy of DC Comics.

Brian K. Vaughan's graphic novel series *Ex Machina* (2004-2010) is a realistic alternate history in which a vigilante superhero is able to save one of the Twin Towers on 9/11. Instead of approaching apocalypse as in Moore's fictional world of *Watchmen*, Vaughan's neo-apocalyptic characters are trying to deal with the trauma inflicted personally and nationally from 9/11. Vaughan's post-9/11 New York City deals directly with issues of terrorism, vigilantism, masculinity, and heroism as the main character, Mitchell Hundred, moves from the superhero spotlight to the world of politics. Vaughan turns the traditional superhero narrative upside down; typically the superhero is heroic and victorious. If a

superhero should die, he is often reborn in the next issue or in an alternate universe. In the case of *Ex Machina*, Hundred is indeed victorious at the end of the series, but at what cost? Hundred himself is a comic book enthusiast because “those stories never get to become tragedies” (Book 5, Chapter 4). Ultimately, his story is a tragedy and Hundred understands that the heroes he grew up trying to emulate don’t represent the reality around him and, perhaps, the idea that there is no such thing as a hero. *Ex Machina* interrogates what it means to be in a position of power in post-9/11 United States and to what extent we mythologize political figures in post-9/11 American culture.

As men “returned to being men” in the American post-9/11 society, the rugged cowboy identity became the masculine ideal, even in representations of political figures from the Bush White House. *Ex Machina* communicates the issues that stem from imposing gender normative requirements in our culture, particularly in the realm of politics. But the series also shows the reciprocal relationship in which we distrust the great machine of politics, but also the great machine’s distrust for us. Hundred says “Give this country a hero and they can’t wait to tear him down” (Book 5, Chapter 1). Here, Hundred establishes, firstly, that heroes are male, and secondly that heroics are dangerous. Becoming a part of the great machine of politics forces Hundred to manipulate his own identity for his own gain and, ultimately, we learn that Hundred has been the villain all along. The tragedy of the story is not Hundred’s, but the tragedy that befalls those around him as his moral corruption leads to his role as Vice President in the John McCain White House. The re-writing of 9/11, then, serves to show that despite our efforts, the fractured identity of society is susceptible to manipulation by those in power, even by those who appear to save us. Hundred’s ability to save one of the Twin Towers on 9/11 gave him immense political and social power; Hundred

wielded his authority in just and unjust ways, metaphorically taking the power from the skyscraper itself to build his own image.

Architectural theorists describe vertical buildings as symbols of male domination, power, and political authority. In fact, the inventor of the skyscraper himself (Louis Sullivan) described his ambition to create “masculine forms”—strong, solid, tall, commanding respect. Henri Lefebvre argues that the phallic brutality of the buildings represents the brutality of political power. Arguably, the perceived phallus, a dominant symbol of ideology and oppression, theoretically invades what is considered to be a neutral space, thereby establishing superiority. Although I myself struggle with the concept of architectural supremacy, it’s clear that buildings do carry with them a sense of identity. However, this identity stems not from their physical domination of the sky, but from the imaginary foundations of social norms, which connotes certain traits and behaviors as either masculine or feminine.

Mark Moss points out that technology carries with it an inherently masculine imprint, linking technological vision and innovation to the equivalent of biological reproduction. The architects and engineers of the world designate buildings in the public sphere as masculine because the buildings privilege function over ornamentation. “Both the architect and the building itself fuse together to become and to be defined as embodying the ‘very essence of manhood;’” the very pride emanating there from is linked to strength, pride, and power. As Moss writes, building a skyscraper “is supposed to be about a manly form of construction that is genuine and stripped of feminine ornament” (Moss 140). Firstly, skyscrapers are part of the public, not private domain, a place that is gendered female. Secondly, the construction of a skyscraper is about functionality, not ornamentation. However, it would be naïve to

suggest that building design stems purely from a functional standpoint. Some of the most important buildings in the world are also the most beautiful. From a regional standpoint, the Cathedral of Learning stands out not only as an educational landmark in Pittsburgh, but the elements of gothic architecture, the surrounding landscape, and ornately decorated nationality rooms are clearly meant to inspire aesthetic reverence and awe in the students who attend classes there. The ornate design of the classrooms does not inhibit their function, but perhaps the aesthetics nurtures the imagination, promoting academic excellence. Nonetheless, skyscrapers are considered to be masculine constructions: big, erect, and forceful, “the full balloon of the inflated masculine ego” (Weisman 1). The physical destruction of the Twin Towers was also the figurative destruction our nation’s sense of masculine strength and dominance. Attacking these patriarchal symbols dismantled America’s perception of safety and security. The failure to protect our citizens and our symbols was considered to be a masculine failure, one that was immediately answered with a hypermasculine response in the media.

Gender and politics are social constructions based on nothing more than ideas and, therefore, there is no real reason why buildings should be gendered in a certain way. The foundations of skyscrapers are steel and cement, not testosterone and cowboy hats. The objects themselves are marvels of technological and engineering innovation, incapable of constructing ideology on their own volition. Yet, much has been said about the destruction of buildings on 9/11 as an attack on gender. Similarly, the perception of the World Trade Center itself changed in an instant. Poet David Lehman wrote a poem after the first WTC bombing in 1993, explaining his initial disdain for such “ugly monoliths” that lacked character. As a symbol, however, Lehman grew to love the buildings. Many Americans grew to love the

buildings after 9/11, but it was more about their absence than their presence. Their absence represented an incomplete skyline, one whose previous dominance had been overcome by an act of terror. Although Hayles argues that dualities should become obsolete in a shift away from presence and absence, clearly that is not the trajectory taken in our culture; the absence of the towers enhanced dualities and binary gender categories, often leading to outrageously gendered interpretations.

On September 13th, 2001, Psychiatrist Alvin Poussaint appeared on a television special hosted by Peter Jennings and argued that our nation was suffering from a gendered trauma following the attacks. Although only two days after the attacks, his argument about gendered trauma was an uncanny predication of the ways in which our culture attempted to reclaim its masculine status. However, his argument was ultimately blurred between two vastly different concepts. First, he compared the attacks to a rape and that we, as a culture of victims, were violated by the terrorist attacks. Because 91% of rape victims are women, Poussaint's argument suggests that the victims were gendered female (RAINN). It's not clear whether he means that the acts of terror were about depowering the collective victim (the United States) or if the thousands of victims were a part of a larger cultural concern involving emasculation and weakness (to compare this idea to Faludi's concept of ornamental culture and the masculinity crisis of the 1990s). Second, he goes on to call the attacks an attempted symbolic castration. This part of his argument infers that the victims of the attack were masculine (or that the victims were to uphold masculine traits or behaviors). So whether he means that the symbolic victims were weak men or strong men, in either case his argument centers around the ways in which the attacks affected men, rather than women (or just humans in general). The fact that these attacks were unforeseen and shattered the nation's

perception of invincibility seems the likely reasons for such absurdly gendered claims. The general feeling that our nation is not as protected and untouchable as previously believed may also play a role. Because protection—whether personal, local, or national—is gendered as a masculine responsibility, the kneejerk reaction was that our nation needed to come together and get tougher. But because gender norms are based on ideology and intangible politics, this castration hypothesis does not work. In *Ex Machina* Vaughan comments on architectural gender symbolism by having Mitchell Hundred's alter ego The Great Machine save one of the towers. The one remaining tower in this alternate New York City represents the supposed importance of the image of heteronormative masculinity. Rather than two phallic symbols standing together, one remains as a symbol of straight masculinity, the very kind that Hundred is expected to convey in his own representation. Hundred's constant manipulations of his image, however, play a huge part in his ultimate demise, much like our culture's focus on rebuilding a masculine stereotype became damaging to both genders.

Part of the damage stemmed from the way the news media seemed to have a particularly gendered way of sharing the visual narrative of 9/11. The victims were generally represented as white-collar men, while male FDNY and NYPD members represented the heroes. Women were disproportionately underrepresented in favor of stories about brotherhood and heroics, despite the fact that there were women who worked in the Towers and women who arrived on scene as first responders. A short documentary called *The Women of Ground Zero* was dedicated to representing the heroics of female firefighters and rescue workers. Although the thirteen minutes film had a very limited release, it ignited outrage throughout the country. *The Weekly Standard* said that the documentary was disgraceful, while other reactions resented the “agenda” that the film supposedly advocated.

These intense reactions—from average Americans to syndicated news show hosts—made it clear that for women to be anything but invisible in the coverage of 9/11 was outrageous because quintessential to the successful heroic narrative was masculine ideology and imagery. Using this narrative, the media created a localized gender crisis, using the tragedy to reaffirm the gender binaries that supported a renewed social hierarchy that privileges masculinity.

The formerly strong, masculine skyscrapers no longer represented the essence of manhood; instead, their absence represented the ways in which our culture had become weakened in the first place. The men working in cubicles were no longer considered to be the epitome of masculine success, as constructed in American popular culture in the 1980s and 1990s; instead, the definition of masculinity reverted back to historical notions of physical prowess. The most coveted of bachelors in New York City were no longer the ones whose regal apartment lofts overlooked the city. No longer was financial success a way to secure a masculine identity. Instead, masculinity was measured by historical ideals and images.

To rebuild the American identity and the New York skyline after 9/11, first our culture needed to reconstruct masculinity. Peggy Noonan's opinion piece, appearing in the *Wall Street Journal* just about a month after 9/11, shows the immediacy with which we looked to revamp the masculine identity: "From the ashes of September 11, arise the manly virtues" (Noonan). The perception was that because of the women's movement, American men had "grown soft" leaving the US vulnerable to attack. In propping up their myth, the media settled on its archetypal manly man: the 9/11 New York firefighter "as *the* American hero." Ultimately, this trend of hyper-masculinity following the American "exposure" of feminized weakness damaged both genders, as well as our own perspectives of identity.

The post-9/11 representation of masculine ideals returned to the historical image of masculinity and confirmed once again the American ideology of justified military aggression and violence. The revitalized John Wayne hyper-masculinity reconstructed gender archetypes as a way to reinvent a strong American (i.e., masculine) culture. Ground Zero itself is key to this reinvention because “Ground Zero [is] an urgent All-American creation” that symbolizes the “reopening of the frontier” (Mead 57). It is impossible to ignore the political implications associated with “heroic masculinity.” The media supplied the “Old West” rhetoric, forging a narrative that Bush was our culture’s new John Wayne. He would stop at nothing to make ‘em pay for their attacks on our freedom.

As *Ex Machina* explores the issues embedded with reconstructing the masculine identity and the New York skyline following 9/11, Vaughan interrogates the concept of heroism, arguing that in the world of politics, perhaps the mask of hero is not so far from the mask of villainy. By mythologizing politicians whose self-interests might inhibit their judgment, Vaughan believes that we are setting ourselves up for failure. Our politicians are not movie stars and superheroes; giving them unrealistic accolades and expectations will not help our culture to heal, nor will it help us to progress.

Ex Machina opens with Mitchell Hundred admitting to us that his comic book story is a tragedy, as seen in Figure 8. In pages scattered throughout the series, Hundred speaks to us in a darkened room, almost a confessional. He is sick of seeing his own image, the idealized superhero image that opens the series. It’s a brightly colored photo of the Great Machine, his superhero alter ego, intercepting an airplane on a beautiful September morning and saving one of the Twin Towers. It’s one of the few bright, primary colored images in the entire series.

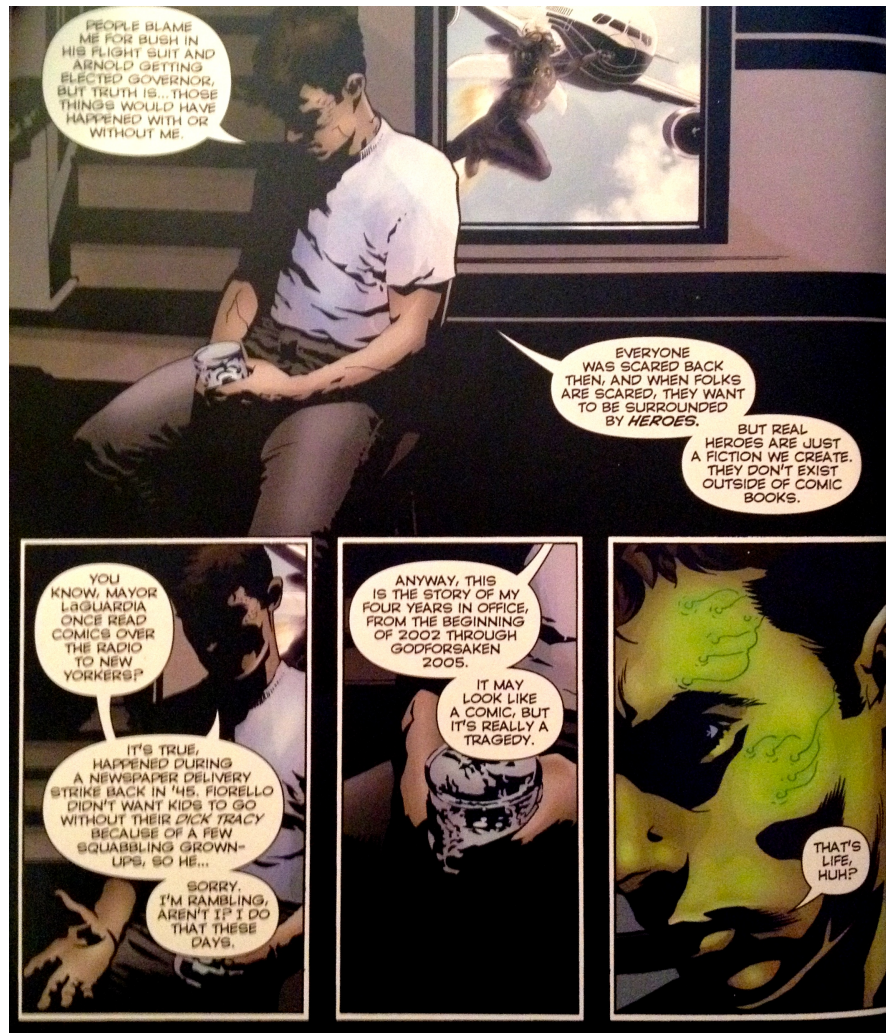


Fig. 8. The opening pages of *Ex Machina* feature a shadowed, brooding Mitchell Hundred as he explains that heroes are something that we invent to make life seem less tragic. From *Ex Machina Deluxe Edition Book One*™ and © Brian K. Vaughan & Tony Harris. Courtesy of DC Comics.

The rest of the coloring is dark, brooding, ugly—closely matching the reality underlying the character’s motivations as a superhero and as a politician. Not only is he sick of seeing the image, but he knows that we, the readers, are too. In this fictional confession, he is speaking to those in an alternate New York City, but we the readers, certainly understand the tiresome feeling associated with seeing the same glorified, rhetoric-laced images over and over again. For Hundred, the biggest act of The Great Machine’s career was his “deus ex machine” role

on 9/11, which propelled him into the political spotlight. But the great tragedy for Hundred occurred after his act of heroism, upon the realization that the hyper-real society in which we live is an artificial landscape, a simulacrum of ideology and identity stemming from a socially constructed reality and that he, despite his heroics, actually has no power to control his own identity, let alone make a difference in the political realm.

The postmodern identity is shaped by our surroundings and not necessarily by choice. Everything we do, think, or buy is part of the discourse associated with our position in society: “These elements—sounds, words, notes, gestures, expressions, clothes—are part of our natural and material world; but their importance for language is not what they *are* but what they *do*, their function. They construct meaning and transmit it. ... They don’t have any meaning *in themselves*” (Hall 5). In other words, meaning is signified through a visual representation of our identity as a system of signs. Consumers unknowingly buy into these signs as a way to construct an outward identity as well as a way to behave according to one’s place in a hierarchy. One such construct of identity is gender, which can be used to formulate personal and national identities: “In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, dominant representations of the US self-as-nation were constructed through particular discourses in ways that resonated with the prior masculinization of US identity” (Shepherd 21). For post-9/11 America, the resurgence of a masculine identity gave the illusion of solidarity and protection; however, in reality, the careful construction of masculine heroism masked the underlying political intentions of the Bush White House and irreparably divided the concepts of masculine and feminine in order to legitimize acts of war and to globalize gender politics.

In the case of *Ex Machina*, Hundred attempts to rise through the hierarchy with an appearance and behaviors that give him strength. By adopting a strong alter ego name,

wearing a costume with the appearance of armor, and attempting to reduce crime and save civilians in the city of New York, he constructs the same kind of masculine hero identity that appeared in the news media following 9/11. Like Bush, Hundred's appearance and expressions were specifically designed to create a certain kind of man, one whose historically strong behavior give the illusion of safety. Ultimately, the image of the brawny cowboy or brave superhero served as nothing more than a distraction from the real issues stemming immediately from the events of 9/11, right up through our misguided entry into Iraq.

The symbolic hierarchy of gender is not a natural construction; it is politically based in order to reinforce the dominant ideals of social reality.

At any given time, one form of masculinity rather than others is culturally exalted. Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees that dominant position of men and the subordination of women. (Connell 77)

After 9/11, the rugged, brawny, vengeance-seeker became the idealized form of masculinity. The supposed manly men could solve not only our problem of weakness at home, but their blood-thirsty, win-at-all-costs desire for revenge seemed to help our society to cope with the tragedy of 9/11. The image of renewed masculinity stemmed from gendered media representations. The media helped to reestablish a national identity based on fear and gender politics.

Donna Haraway argues that "social reality in lived social relations, our most important political construction, [is] a world-changing fiction" (Haraway 315). These oppressive social realities articulate the dangers of being comfortable in the face of absolute

power disguised as illusory freedom. Hundred's superpowers represent the dangers that come with absolute power. Like many superhero origin stories, a mysterious accident while on the job gives Hundred superhuman powers to communicate with machines, powers that I consider to be post-human and post-masculine. Hayles suggests that "the prospect of becoming posthuman both evokes terror and excites pleasure" (283). For Hundred, the moment he becomes transformed into the posthuman is a terrifying and painful one. But his feelings of terror do not last long once he realizes the pleasure he derives from controlling machines, ultimately relishing his newfound superhero status.

As one of New York City's civil engineers, Hundred was called to investigate something strange under the Brooklyn Bridge. A glowing green box explodes in Hundred's face. The explosion damages his body but the more painful outcome of the explosion is that in an instant, Hundred is able to hear every machine in New York City in his head—every cell phone, every computer, every man-made piece of technology. Screaming at the overwhelmingly torturous noises in his head to shut up shuts off the power to the entire city. Immediately we see the danger involved in one man's ability to control the world's technology. Interestingly enough, Hundred's job as a civil engineer similarly places him in a position of control over our environment. Through the physical manipulation of our world, Hundred understands the physical infrastructure that keeps our society safe, whether it be maintaining naturally occurring landscapes or by physically altering a landscape with manmade constructions. In the wrong hands, this knowledge could be used for destruction and we learn, over time, that Hundred isn't exactly the kind of person who should have infinite power. But if a former superhero turned politician can't be trusted with this kind of power, then who can?

With Hundred's identity and skills being linked so heavily with technology, we can return to Moss's argument that technology, architecture, and engineering are inherently masculine pursuits. During a time in which our culture was clinging so desperately to a specific type of masculinity, it is very fitting that Hundred embodies so much of what was celebrated in our culture in 2001. Not only is Hundred a strong, handsome engineer—one whose strength and intelligence designs and constructs buildings—but he's also a superhero that saved hundreds of lives on 9/11.

In this alternate world, "The Great Machine" was the world's only superhero, although comic book history as we know it is very much a part of this world. He is Batman-esque, a realistic caped crusader who builds his own contraptions and gadgets with the help of his father-figure mentor, Kremlin, and his brawny-protector and closest friend Bradbury. The series contains a number of flashbacks between past and present that show Hundred's naiveté as both a superhero and a politician. Often, his decisions cause more harm than good and he is perceived as a villain.

Hundred admits that his first adventure as a costumed hero feels "stupid on so many levels" as he attempts to stop two teenagers who are surfing on top of a subway car (Book 1, Chapter 1). The two teens are delighted by their god-like speed and enjoying their dangerous rebellion. When the Great Machine appears next to them in his jetpack, one of the startled teens falls off the train and must be rescued; Hundred ends up breaking the teen's arm and sitting him down on the tracks. With a looming train just seconds away from killing both of them, Hundred yells "Full stop!" In the next panel, Hundred stands above his crying rescuee with a very satisfied, arrogant expression peering through his mask. Authoritatively, he says "Listen to me. When people ask who saved you... tell them it was *The Great Machine*"

(Book 1, Chapter 1). In Figure 9, he flies away from his victim, breaking through the lines of the panel as he redefines the purpose of caped-crusading; for Hundred, feeling like he has done something good, even if there are costs, brings him a giant ego boost. The next panel is the front page of *The Daily Wire* with the headline “Crazed Wingman Shuts Down Subway for Eleven Hours!” As a superhero, Hundred was not particularly effective, often creating more issues than were originally present. However, all of his inadequate adventuring was forgotten when he actually used his abilities for something useful: saving one of the Twin Towers by landing one of the hijacked airplanes by using his voice to control the plane’s machinery.



Fig. 9. The Great Machine creates a narrative for his victimized rescuee. From *Ex Machina Deluxe Edition Book One*™ and © Brian K. Vaughan & Tony Harris. Courtesy of DC Comics.

Hundred actually saves the tower after he willingly retires his ‘ridiculous’ costume to become a member of the political machine. He sees his costume as childish and unmanly, saying that he was “playing dress up.” Upon meeting with his potential campaign manager, Dave Wylie, Mitchell creates the perfect image of a New York politician. He very purposefully chooses his wardrobe to project an image of masculine strength. He pairs a button up shirt and a dark jacket with a Yankees baseball cap. Readers of this comic will

instantly associate this character with Rudy Giuliani, who frequently wore outfits uncannily similar to this one. This image and connection is meant to give Hundred instant credibility, despite the fact that in the timeline of the comic, 9/11 has not yet occurred. Vaughan is able to very carefully manipulate moments of this series by referencing specific imagery from 9/11. It was, after all, the most visual event in history.

Believing that he can do more good in a day as a mayor than his superhero alter ego could do in a month, Hundred publically reveals his secret identity and announces that he is running for mayor of NYC. At his press conference, Hundred is disappointed that there aren't more reporters there to document a moment that he no doubt sees as an important one. He was particularly dismayed when an *Entertainment Weekly* reporter asked him what movie or TV show Hundred was promoting. This moment shows him that his time spent as the world's only superhero might have been more insignificant than he initially realized. Only two people oppose Hundred's coming out: Kremlin, his mentor, and superfan Monica, who became obsessed with the Great Machine after being rescued by him. She throws hot coffee at his face and calls him a sellout.

Although his campaign begins before 9/11, the reader can assume that Hundred's victory happened because he was able to save one of the Twin Towers on 9/11. Though he had retired his superhero identity, he used his celebrity alter ego to appeal to voters. The uncanny, unreal full-page image of an unrecognizable Ground Zero (as seen in Figure 10), where one untouched tower stands next to the memorial light of its lost twin signifies the potential power that a lawless superhero has to protect us in ways that we can't protect ourselves, yet immediately preceding this page, Hundred laments that he is not a real hero. Saving only one of the towers results in a visual representation of the partial emasculation of

the man-made skyline but also the emasculation of a superhero who could not save everyone in the wake of violent destruction. Like Spiderman, Hundred is blamed for not doing more. Not saving both towers, not saving the Pentagon, and not saving specific individuals weakens his presence as a masculine hero. Hundred sees his superhero identity as ineffective when compared to his role as an elected public servant. This reflects the ways in which our post-9/11 culture mythologized political leaders. In effect, voters seemed the most interested in electing leaders who were also heroes, whether they were fictional heroes (Arnold Schwarzenegger), real heroes (John McCain), or both (Jesse Ventura). The image of heroism, whether it be John Kerry defending his military record or George W. Bush wearing a flight suit, is privileged over leadership ability. Vaughan recognized the growing mythos of political leaders and critiques this trend in his superhero turned politician character Mitchell Hundred.

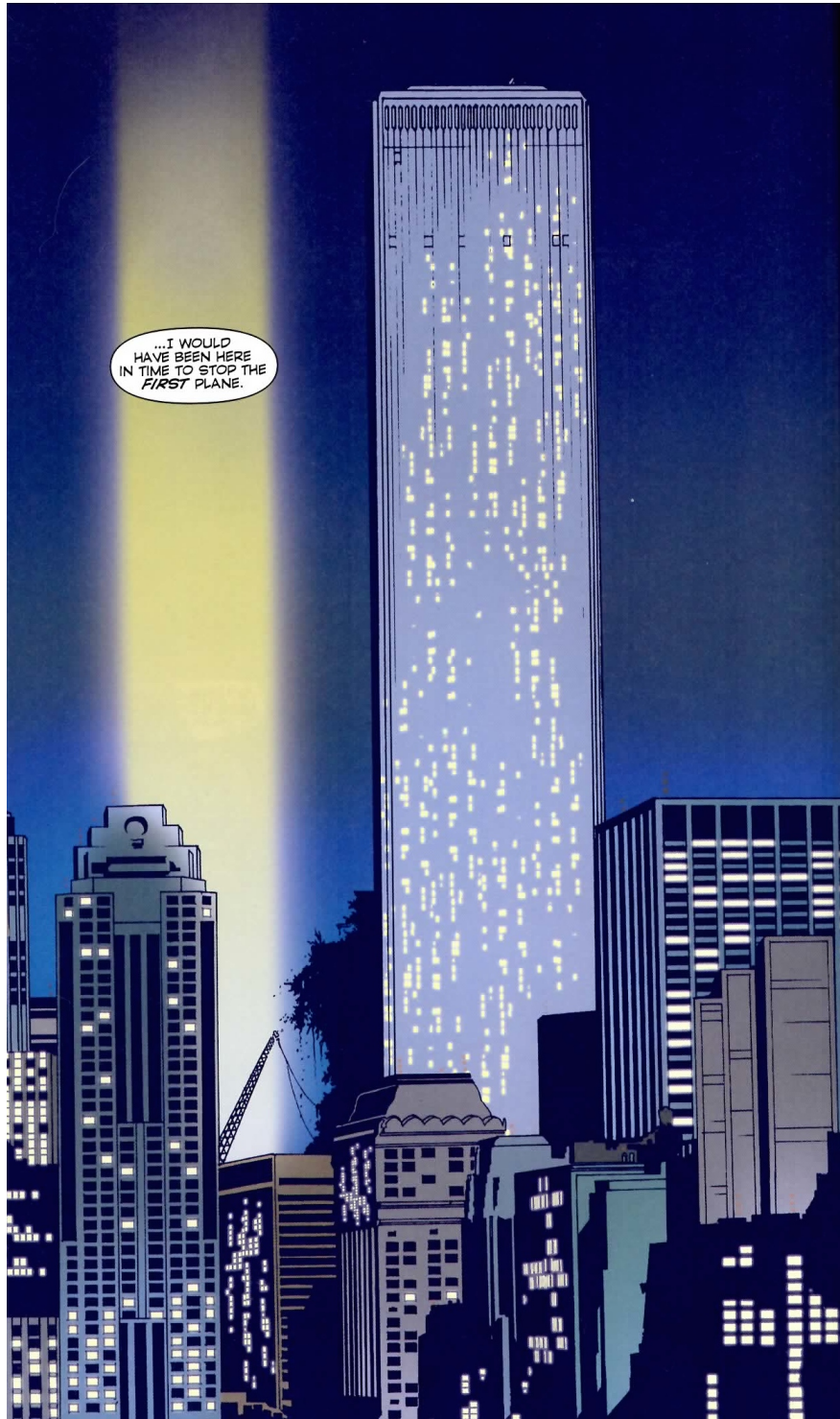


Fig. 10. The saved tower stands next the memorial light of its lost twin. From *Ex Machina Deluxe Edition Book One*™ and © Brian K. Vaughan & Tony Harris. Courtesy of DC Comics.

In *Ex Machina*, we see immediately how jaded Hundred becomes by his own experiences as a superhero *and* as a politician in the second panel of the series. He says

People blame me for Bush in his flight suit and Arnold getting elected governor, but the truth is... those things would have happened with or without me. Everyone was scared back then, and when folks are scared, they want to be surrounded by heroes. But real heroes are just a fiction we create. They don't exist outside of comic books. (Book 1, Chapter 1)

Not only do comic books make the actions of superheroes look easy and fun as they are celebrated by the society around them, but they don't represent the complicated nature of politics embedded in the foundations of our culture. Firstly, Hundred is surprised both before and after his retirement that people are unhappy about his superhero activities, almost as if he is expecting to be worshipped by the people he is trying to help. Secondly, he is surprised throughout his political career at the cost of making changes within a governmental system. Saying that all of these events would have happened whether or not he was involved shows how difficult it is to enact any kind of social change that deviates from the perceived norms of our culture. Alienated from his failed perception of optimism, Hundred falls victim to bureaucracy as he realizes that there really isn't anything else he can do to make any changes. The series ends with Hundred betraying his own morals and ethics to advance his political career, which continues to improve.

Though the series tackles a number of real-world issues, the construction of masculine identity in a fragmented post-9/11 world is most significant to this chapter. Hundred willfully denies himself full knowledge of his identity throughout the series. He is never very interested in learning the origins of his strange powers that allow him to

communicate with machines and, perhaps most importantly, his sexual identity is continually dismissed. As mayor, Hundred is called to officiate a number of weddings, a task that normally frustrates him. When he learns that his deputy mayor's brother, a firefighter, wants Hundred to officiate he is happy to oblige, having promised the rescue workers of New York City that he would do anything he could for them. As seen in Figures 11 and 12, when his deputy mayor tells him that this is a wedding he can't officiate because his brother is gay, four panels on one page zoom closer onto Hundred's face as he contemplates, before a full page image of a confident Hundred answers, "So?" His intern is the first to suggest that leading this charge will be controversial in a number of ways, including the potential to jeopardize a re-election campaign. She also suggests that his sexual orientation will be called into question, saying "It's just, you're a perpetually single guy, snappy dresser, used to wear a costume... it might not hurt for you to clarify you..." But Hundred immediately interrupts by saying "There are two things I don't discuss... my powers and my private life. Neither is relevant to this job" (Book 1, Chapter 3). While he understands that there will be backlash for seeming to take a stance on a divisive political issue, he uses 9/11 as the excuse to do what is right which, in this case, was promising to do everything he possibly could for the firefighters of New York. Officiating the wedding of a firefighter allows him to avoid taking an official stance on gay marriage. Hundred's evasiveness is his great strength. He never confirms nor denies specific positions on key issues and he was elected as an independent. While problematizing binaries is a departure from divisive political ideologies, we will see later that Hundred's self-interest is what his supposed neutrality hides.

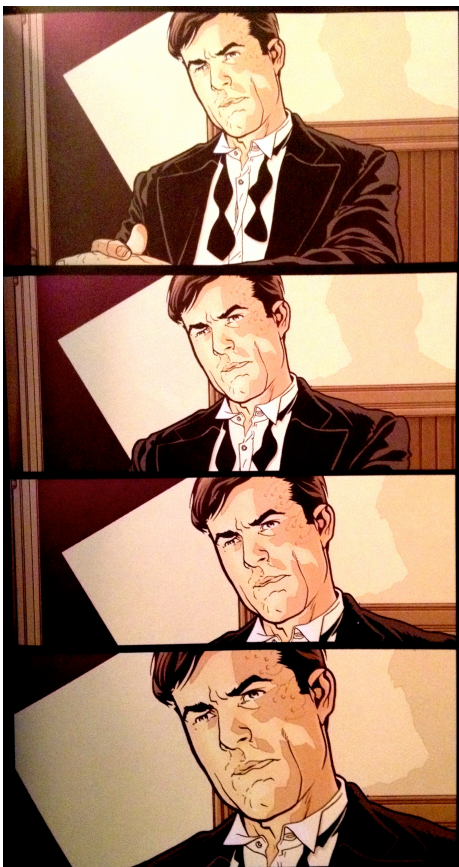


Fig. 11. Hundred contemplates his decision. From *Ex Machine Deluxe Edition Book One*™ and © Brian K. Vaughan & Tony Harris. Courtesy of DC Comics.



Fig. 12. Hundred appears to believe that his decision to officiate the wedding is a simple one. From *Ex Machina Deluxe Edition Book One*™ and © Brian K. Vaughan & Tony Harris. Courtesy of DC Comics.

After agreeing to marry Todd and Bill, Hundred asks a reporter named Suzanne out to dinner. When she realizes the convenient timing of his invite, she asks Hundred if he is gay. Hundred enters her apartment and shuts the door; the conversation that takes place is one that we never witness. There is not a definitive answer regarding Hundred's sexual orientation; Vaughan leaves the interpretation up to the reader. But part of what Vaughan is doing here is showing us how desperately we, as a culture built on a certain set of norms, need to know the answer regarding sexuality in order to feel like we can better understand a character's or politician's motivation and why he/she must constantly feel pressure to perform. Although his sexuality might not influence his duties as mayor, the general public demands to know every little detail about politicians so that in the event that something goes wrong, there is a way to pinpoint a character flaw.

There are numerous accusatory remarks made to Hundred and the Great Machine regarding sexual orientation. The words "faggot" and "queer" are constantly used against Hundred, often in situations where he is the one in control. In one particular scene, the Great Machine rescues a man from a burning building. On the sidewalk, an overweight male onlooker seems incredibly annoyed at this display of heroism. He mumbles contradictory complaints under his breath, first that jetpacks are "gay" and then that the Great Machine is "probably flying home to some skinny-ass model" (Book 1, Chapter 2). Because this witness is helpless to rescue the man himself, he felt emasculated by Hundred's presence as a superhero.

First, the witness accuses the jetpack—an extremely coveted, awe-inspiring piece of equipment—of being gay. Although it seems that the majority of people in American culture use this term as an inconsequential synonym for "stupid" or "lame," it's clear that using that

word as an insult stems from homophobic feelings and is used to demean people and objects as being weak and unnatural. Realistically, the man in this scene is clearly jealous of the superhero performing in front of him. Moss discusses the ways in which men utilize props to “define and prove” their manhood (5). Although Moss’s discussion is centered around masculine consumption and symbolic compensation, superheroes are an elite group whose masculinity is not available for purchase. In this case, Hundred has a physical object that gives him power that enhances his masculinity; because the object isn’t for sale and isn’t something an average man can build, the witness attempts to emasculate Hundred, who is only momentarily surprised to not receive a burst of appreciation from the man.

Second, the witness believes that the Great Machine embodies the ideal form of masculinity and is therefore capable of achieving the sexual conquest of what our society deems as the ideal form of woman: slender, attractive, and famous. In this case, it’s clear that this witness is jealous of the Great Machine, someone who visually represents everything a man should be: a strong heroic man who goes above and beyond to save people. In trying to create his own masculine superhero persona, Hundred diminishes the masculinity of those around him. From the onlooker who was powerless to help another person in need, to the teenager who was made to cower in fear, it is clear that Hundred’s idealized superhero representation often went over the line as Hundred boosted his own ego and his own masculinity. Despite his own personal gains, his narcissistic caped crusading did help people from time to time, although certainly his attempts at heroism (up until September 11th) caused more harm than good. But another way in which this comic series challenges superhero mythology is that most New Yorkers have no idea who the Great Machine is or

they dislike him. These citizens are too concerned with their own egos or too distrusting to appreciate that someone is trying to help them.

Hundred appreciates the ego boost when it comes to emasculating the men around him and uses it to build up his own power. Whether it's by threatening to shut off the pacemaker of someone who is blackmailing him, or by manipulating his closest friends, it is clear that Hundred thrives on subjugating men. In moments where he needs to be the so-called tough guy, he himself relies on homophobic rhetoric like the word "faggot" in order to maintain his idealized masculine image. Hundred is able to use authoritative force when necessary to save people as the Great Machine or to make policy changes in his role as mayor. However, there are a few villains in this story who do not fit neatly into gender categories. Automaton, for example, is a genderless robot while Hundred does everything he can to project a masculine normative image. Against these characters, however, it does not appear that Hundred is as capable of completely projecting a strong image. Perhaps his intimidation stems from his own insecurities.

Hundred's masculinity is called into question several times throughout the series, but perhaps one of the most significant comes from his own friend Bradbury shortly after Hundred begins his career as the Great Machine. Bradbury is a retired Marine who helps to protect Hundred as a superhero and becomes his bodyguard when Hundred is mayor. In a flashback to 2000, we can see that Hundred is more concerned with his superhero one-liners and daunting appearance, ultimately forcing Bradbury to save the day. After rescuing Hundred, Bradbury tells Hundred that "it's a good thing you got those superpowers, Mitch. 'Cause you punch like a faggot" (Book 3, Chapter 3). The panel with a close up of Hundred's face may be one of the most important in the series. His face is still covered by his mask, but

a look of sad anger and confusion is clearly seen in his expression. Unlike the rest of the male characters, Hundred's appearance could be considered feminine; in this specific panel, we can see Hundred's long eyelashes and kempt brows as he internalizes the word "faggot," perhaps using it as fuel to "cowboy up" his image or ideology.

Later in the story, Bradbury all but gives his life to protect Hundred's career and reputation. As the story climaxes, Hundred must take down his former friend (and possible beard) Suzanne Padilla, whose consciousness has been breached by a much more sinister version of the mysterious object that gave Hundred his abilities to communicate with technology. Interestingly, many of the main villains of the series are female characters, as if to comment on the prevailing media theory in post-9/11 culture that powerful women must be stopped by powerful men in order to preserve the natural (albeit fabricated) order of society.

Hundred gained his superpowers from the explosion of an extradimensional device. Towards the end of the series, we learn that there are multiple dimensions of the universe occurring at the same time and that Hundred has constructed a white box that can open portals to the other dimensions. When Padilla discovers the white box, she falls under complete control and becomes able to manipulate the people around to do whatever she asks. Her powers are also stronger than Hundred's in that she acquires super strength and the ability to fly. In her final showdown with Hundred, she blames his failures as a superhero on his inability to get laid. She goes on to link suicide bombers and engineers as men who don't know how to "score." As humans more concerned with construction (engineers) or deconstruction (suicide bombers), Suzanne essentially makes the claim that men's obsession with controlling physical objects is ultimately harmful to the culture at large, linking

engineers and terrorists as groups of people who are equally dangerous because they don't focus their lives on what society deems to be most important: following cultural norms. However, neither constructing nor deconstructing buildings is free of ideological influences. As I discussed earlier, the design of a skyscraper is gendered masculine; the attack on a skyscraper, too, is deemed masculine. Neither Hundred nor Suzanne understand the possibilities of going beyond the narrow gender definitions offered by posthumanism. Instead, they cling to traditional definitions, never able to achieve the success they desire because they are held back by the confines of gender expectations. While Suzanne might consider posthumanism as moving away from humanity, posthumanism actually allows us to reimagine what being human means, rather than what it doesn't. What I mean is that the concept of human exceptionalism leads to power structures and dualities that shape our beliefs in ways that are invented to maintain a certain social hierarchy that elevates men and suppresses women, ultimately hurting everyone.

Posthumanism seems to suggest that gender binaries no longer exist (or shouldn't exist), so theoretically as a technologically enhanced human Hundred is in an elevated position that frees him from the constrictions of social norms and expectations. Yet, despite the fact that Hundred is not bound by the expectations of gender hierarchies, he still attempts to conform to gender norms in terms of dress, behavior, and beliefs.

As Hundred has continued to brush aside his sexuality in favor of robotic asexuality, we are able to conclude that as a cyborg, he is meant to be neither masculine nor feminine. Cyborg theory can "suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves" (Haraway 149). However, Hundred is never able to achieve posthuman transcendence because he clings so desperately to the image of

masculinity that is expected of him so that he is supported by his political constituents and so he can further his career. Instead of reaching posthuman, non-gendered potential, he is victimized by identity politics that push him to fit into a gender normative category. This pressure stems from his own obsession with superheroes and from the gender ideology present in post-9/11 culture.

Hundred admires comic books because the stories told within the brightly colored pages never become tragedies. Before going on his own superhero adventures, he viewed the superheroes as reliable, unchangeable, and trustworthy—the very things we hope for our politicians. Superheroes represent the strong masculine ideals embedded in their surrounding culture. Additionally, the origin stories of superheroes often stem from scientific or technological mutations, resulting in posthuman bodies. It seems, then, that Hundred believed he could simply transfer his mythic superhero powers into his identity as a politician. But, in actuality, his mutation has shaped his identity so much that he cannot live up to his own expectations. As long as he clings to the ideology of masculine dominance, he can never be the hero.

When Hundred was a child, he was devastated to learn that it was possible for Superman to die. He was similarly upset to learn that multiple universes existed in the world of comic books and that storylines and characters could change so drastically from one issue to the next. His stubbornness to accept change reflects his conservative tendencies. For example, like all superheroes, he initially claims no political affiliation; by the end of the series, though, he becomes a Republican. He also attempts to create a strong, heteronormative image for himself. Ultimately, upholding his image becomes more

important to him than actually making a difference, which—in theory—is why he became a politician in the first place.

Hundred therefore exemplifies why we must move beyond the need to categorize gender identities, particularly in postapocalyptic culture. He is the perfect example of the damage caused when society mythologizes politicians whose masculine principles are nothing more than an illusion created to maintain the status quo.

Now, to return finally to Bradbury saving Hundred's career. In order to defeat Suzanne, Hundred was forced to become the Great Machine once more. He put on his costume, won the battle, and once the police arrived to arrest him for his vigilante activities, he flew away. When the police finally capture the Great Machine, the mask is removed only to reveal that at some point Hundred and Bradbury have switched places. Bradbury is willing to be arrested in order to preserve Hundred's career and his image. This act of selflessness is truly heroic, but in this case the hero is sent to jail for criminal vigilante activity and the villain is free to advance his political career.

A year passes since Bradbury's arrest. By the time Bradbury comes to visit Hundred, Hundred's career has taken a drastic new turn. Hundred is the United States ambassador to the United Nations and is about to embark on something even bigger and better. Meanwhile, Bradbury's life is clearly in shambles. Bradbury is drunk and disheveled as he explains how his life has fallen apart since he was released. Hundred is trying to brush Bradbury away so that his own reputation is not somehow tarnished by this encounter. But before Hundred can make him leave, Bradbury admits that he loves Hundred and always has. The conversation takes place in four page length panels that highlight the facial reactions of both characters. Bradbury moves closer to Hundred as he admits his feelings. It is clear that Hundred is

carefully taking this information in and is pained by his thoughts. It is possible that this pained expression stems from the fact that he knows that he cannot share those feelings, if he has them, because of his career. Or maybe it is because he does not want to hurt his friend's feelings. But in this moment, he must react quickly. He neither confirms nor denies the feelings and simply replies "you're drunk. Go" (Book 5, Chapter 4). In disbelief, Bradbury attempts to reclaim what he has lost by putting himself in a vulnerable position. He punches Hundred and then calls him a faggot. Bradbury actually revealed his true identity and real feelings, leaving his tough guy masculine persona behind, and Hundred could not be bothered to offer anything authentic, whether it was reciprocation or rejection, to uphold his image.

Several months later, Hundred is contacted by Kremlin, who has learned that Hundred used his power to communicate with machines to fix the election that he won. Having always been opposed to Hundred's political career, Kremlin plans to blackmail Hundred into becoming the Great Machine once more. To clearly establish his threat, he points a gun at Hundred. But once he realizes that Hundred will never be a superhero again, Kremlin turns the gun on himself and says "I cannot watch you become something you are not. If the Great Machine is really dead... then I may as well join him" (Book 5, Chapter 4). Hundred asks if Kremlin has shared his information with anyone else. When Kremlin claims that he hasn't, Hundred says, "BANG," which causes the gun to fire.

In the span of a few short months, Hundred has irreparably severed ties to those who loved him and became a murderer, all to preserve his image. While it seems that Hundred was upset by Kremlin's death, he makes sure to collect the incriminating file about the election before he left. As a posthuman, Hundred truly had the potential to deviate from

hegemony and oppression. According to Hayles, the ideal “version of the posthuman ... embraces the possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality” (5). Hundred’s superhero journey began innocently enough with an accident, but he soon became enamored with his own image of power and was willing to do anything to get more, even hiding parts of his identity and clinging to a traditional masculine persona.

Having never identified himself as Democrat or Republican, gay or straight, Hundred’s character fuses binary oppositions embedded in our society. By not articulating and defending a divisive viewpoint, the qualities of this character match the united and unbiased outlook of an American no longer separated by political divisions such as briefly existed after 9/11. But we know that it wasn’t long before dividing lines were reconstructed in the world of politics. For gender, it was almost the opposite effect. When it came time to talk about how to properly and respectfully allocate memorial space, even more divisiveness occurred.

Rebuilding the New York skyline has become nearly as complex and damaging as reconstructing masculinity. *In the Spirit of Terrorism*, Baudrillard states that “The spectacle of terrorism forces the terrorism of spectacle upon us” (30). In reconstructing a set of masculine ideals, both genders are damaged as one group is privileged over another. In attempting to repair a broken skyline, one traumatized by destruction, Baudrillard questions whether or not it is normal to build and construct, as architects do.

The towers, for their part, have disappeared. But they have left us the symbol of their disappearance, their disappearance as a symbol. They, which were a symbol of omnipotence, have become, by their absence, the symbol of the

possible disappearance of that omnipotence—which is perhaps an even more potent symbol. (47)

As a symbolic image, the towers will always exist. But commemorating 9/11 has been controversial. Even now, with the museum in place and with Ground Zero beautifully memorializing the victims, there is dissention about the best ways in which to encapsulate such a devastatingly complex and large-scale tragedy. In *Ex Machina*, Hundred wavered back and forth on the memorial plan before ultimately making a decision to rebuild the lost tower exactly as it was, preserving the skyline of New York and representing the resiliency of its people. But because his plan comes so late in the series—after he begins to learn that Hundred is the villain of the story—we are able to question his decision to rebuild. It becomes a metaphor for the dangers associated with a culture's inability to move forward. Building an exact replica places too much weight on the past. In the case of our post-9/11 culture, it means reverting back to historically oppressive notions of masculinity.

New York City artist in residence Banksy recently criticized One World Trade Center, calling it a “shy skyscraper” that proclaims that “the terrorists have won.” Banksy submitted the editorial to the *New York Times* who declined to publish it. Spokesperson for the *Times* Eileen Murphy said “We couldn't agree on either the piece or the art, so it was rejected.” A brief look at the comments section on CNN reveals a disparate group of voices, mostly in disbelief and anger that Banksy would dare say something negative about One World Trade, a supposed symbol of our American values. But again, a building is just a building. Claiming that a skyscraper encompasses all of our American values is simply untrue. As an artist who dares to push us outside our comfort zones, he makes the point that one should be able to criticize a building or political policy without fear. Acts of terror are meant to inspire

fear; acts of art are meant to inspire critical thinking. By condemning Banksy's position as offensive or insulting, we miss the point entirely. Defending the beliefs embedded by a physical structure sets ourselves up for dissention. By believing that a building can only be one thing, that a gender can only behave a certain way, we are preventing our culture from moving forward. Banksy is not diminishing the lives of those lost on 9/11; he simply asks us not to return to our old ways of thinking. That is how those lives are diminished.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE DARKNESS THAT KEEPS KNOCKING: REPRESENTATIONS OF POST-9/11

MASCULINITY IN *DEXTER* AND *BREAKING BAD*

Just as with film and graphic novels, the aftermath of 9/11 is infused in cable television. While it is true that most dramatic television series do not outright reference the events, the creation of characters and stories has no doubt been influenced by the cultural transformation of masculinity in post-9/11 culture. The influence of real world events on popular mediums is certainly not a new trend, yet there is a difference: “Hollywood has a long history of turning widespread fears into cinematic spectacles, but never before has the source of those fears been so singular, so easily isolated, or so thoroughly disseminated to national and international audiences” (Markovitz qtd. in Dixon 22). Furthermore, post 9/11 television viewers are rooting for the bad guys more than ever before, villains whose egregious and explicit violence has changed prime time television forever, pushing viewer tolerance and FCC regulators to the edge. Creators are banking on the collective American desire for vengeance. Americans live “in a kind of total fear that saturates day-to-day living, prodding and silently antagonizing but never speaking its name. . . . [T]his anxiety manifests itself symptomatically as a cultural fascination with monsters” (Cohen vii). The visual and emotional events of 9/11 permeate the subconscious of Americans who may not explicitly understand their universal desire for retribution, but considering the popularity of television shows about violent white men, it is fair to make the connection. Many of these characters, however, are carefully crafted to elicit sympathy. The serial killer character is one that has become “as quintessentially an American figure as the cowboy” in terms of celebrity status and glorified quests for violence (Schmid 24). While it is certainly true that the typical serial

killer story is one that similarly entices audiences to live vicariously through the thrills and terrors of horror imagery, the new killer is a man who blends into society as an average, normal-seeming man, one who confirms to the role of husband and provider. However, the pressure to conform combined with masculine trauma pushes these vulnerable characters down dark paths towards hyper-masculinity, violence, and vengeance—all of which are relatable to post-9/11 viewers.

In order to understand how masculinity changed after 9/11, first we need to take a brief look back at what defined masculinity in the 1990s. Ornamental culture, as defined by Susan Faludi, is the cultural notion that men have become emasculated by a sense of purposelessness in the work force, in the military, and at home by liberated women; as a result, masculinity came to be something that can be measured by financial rather than by physical accomplishments. As opposed to an earlier era in which men contributed to a social system in authoritative domains (as husbands, providers, soldiers), “ornamental culture [swept] away institutions in which men felt some sense of belonging and [replaced] them with visual spectacles” (*Stiffed* 35). Men had to prove their manhood with outer consumption rather than inner production: “the internal qualities once said to embody manhood—surefootedness, inner strength, confidence of purpose—[were] merchandized to men to enhance their manliness. What pass[ed] for the essence of masculinity [was] being extracted and bottled—and sold back to men” (*Stiffed* 35). Masculinity became an image—a visual display—instead of a demonstration.

Manhood became something to be measured by consumption, vanity, and even purposeless violence, all because men believed that these were the qualifications necessary for a successful masculine performance, to echo Judith Butler’s theory of gender

performativity. Thus, the new man of the 1990s focused on commodification of his gender, capitalistic competition, and the desire to fit in to the society around him by constantly upholding an image of masculine prowess, particularly in response to the threat of femininity:

manhood was replaced gradually by the term *masculinity*, which referred to a set of behavioral traits and attitudes that were contrasted now with a new opposite, *femininity*. Masculinity was something that had to be constantly demonstrated, the attainment of which was forever in question—lest the man be undone by a perception of being too feminine. (Kimmel 81)

Michael Kimmel sees a correlation between increased equality for women and the masculinity crisis. While the men of the 1990s certainly attempted to reclaim their right to masculinity in their own violent ways, there was also an issue with overt gender segregation as men tried to keep a tight hold on the last remaining manly occupations: “firefighters, police officers, and soldiers represented some of the last remaining resisters of gender equality” (Kimmel 277). Demonstrating a performed, new masculinity is not something that all men were prepared to do and this anxiety can be seen in films like David Fincher’s *Fight Club* (1999) and Mary Harron’s *American Psycho* (2000).

Works like *Fight Club* and *American Psycho* explore the ways in which ornamental masculinity was damaging to men and to culture as a whole. The perception for men was that they were fighting for an idea of masculinity, a representation of success, once defined by strength and ruggedness as opposed to wealth and status. Pressure to succeed pushed the nameless narrator of *Fight Club* and Patrick Bateman of *American Psycho* over the edge. The isolation and pressure associated with corporatized, ornamental masculinity was still an

anxious issue for men, right up until the events of September 11th, which “reversed the fortunes of both images of masculinity. The rehabilitation of heroic masculinity among the firefighters, police, and other rescue workers was immediate” (Kimmel 278). Shortly following the events of 9/11, this kind of masculinity (the feminized, ornamental masculinity) was blamed for a weakened American presence that allowed for such an attack to take place. Noses were turned up at feminized masculinity as the more rugged, historically masculine ideal was celebrated once more.

The events of September 11th, 2001 have been dissected time and time again as our wounded country has sought meaning in this tragedy. The desire to comprehend the actions of others as we feel pain is understandable, but in the immediate aftermath Americans did not just seek meaning abroad. Almost instantly, the blame was placed on an American lifestyle that had strayed from religion and traditional gender roles. Just one day after the attacks, Jerry Falwell blamed the “abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians [for] actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle [causing] God to lift the veil of protection which has allowed no one to attack America on our soil since 1812” (*The Terror Dream* 22). Falwell was not alone in his crazed attack on feminism and its supposed ill effect on our culture. To reaffirm traditional gender roles, images of a remasculinized culture pervaded news media, television, and film in the months and years following 9/11. When faced with trauma and tragedy, people desperately cling to perceptions of normality. Following a world-changing event like 9/11, any illusion of normality became a part of our nation’s healing process. Unfortunately, the problem with “getting back to normal” ostensibly means going back to historical notions of gender hierarchies:

At any given time, one form of masculinity rather than others is culturally exalted. Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women. (Connell 77)

The resurgence of hegemonic masculinity was ultimately damaging to both genders. Women disappeared from the public sphere to make room for representations of masculine heroism. Ornamental men who were secure in their masculinity prior to 9/11 were now looked down upon as the manly men reclaimed their stance on the pedestal.

Media coverage following the days after the attacks showed image after image of the larger than life firefighters, rescuing World Trade Center workers before the buildings collapsed. According to Faludi's research, the most widely circulated images were those of men rescuing women, although surely men and women equally needed help that day (and female first responders were on the scene as well). So why privilege the circulation of one photo over another? Once again, women were purged from culture in an attempt to privilege the masculine gender as the predominant cultural image. Just as women were erased from the narrative of September 11th, women were erased in the popular culture media that followed. The most interesting roles were reserved for heroic rescuers in films like *Pearl Harbor*, films that upheld the strong masculine image, or for emasculated men whose identities became complicated by gender norms and post-traumatic instability.

Showtime's *Dexter* (2006-2013) follows the life of a Miami blood-spatter analyst and serial killer Dexter Morgan (Michael C. Hall). Dexter is "abnormally normal" and "frighteningly average" on the outside, but on the inside he suffers from a deeply personal

trauma that shapes his violent tendencies (Smith 390). While Dexter does not remember his mother's death, this traumatic experience caused his dissociative behaviors and he is aware that he lacks feelings, emotions, and humanity. Despite his darkness, Dexter's constructed identity is likeable to viewers because they are able to sympathize with him, not only because of his traumatic past, but also because he only kills people who deserve it—killers, rapists, pedophiles.

Much like American Movie Classics' (AMC) *Breaking Bad*, Showtime's *Dexter* is a thrilling drama and the audience roots for Dexter, despite the fact that he stalks, murders, and dismembers people. But he only goes after people he identifies as criminals, going beyond legal methods to track them down, collect evidence, and make his move. He hides his darkness—something he eventually calls his “Dark Passenger”—and attempts to make the people around him believe that he is normal. He brings donuts to the office, tries to engage in a meaningful relationship with his sister, and eventually gets married and becomes a father.

Like other superheroes and avengers, Dexter's life was shaped by a personal trauma; the difference is that superheroes like Batman and Spiderman bring their criminals to justice legally and neither goes so far to fit in to their surrounding culture. However, the comparison between Dexter and superheroes is important because, theoretically, both are attempting to use vigilante justice to make society a better place: “contemporary serial killers and superheroes are signs of American culture's anxiety about what gets to count as justice and what gets to count as revenge” (Smith 391). For Batman and Dexter, it is fair to say that revenge is a major component of their inner desires. As a child, Bruce Wayne's parents were shot to death in front of him as the family left the theater. This moment of trauma shaped everything about Bruce, pushing him on a life pursuing justice as the vigilante Batman.

Bruce will never forget this moment of trauma and while he certainly works outside the law to bring people to justice, he does not kill people, unlike Dexter. As a child, Dexter's mother was murdered in front of him with a chainsaw, but this trauma was repressed for much of his life. He sat in a pool of her blood for three days before he was found. He grew up with dark tendencies, even dismembering animals. Trauma pushed Bruce and Dexter in opposite paths—one strives to make things right while the other does not understand what right means. His family's butler, Alfred, cared for Bruce and helped him achieve his role as Gotham's Caped Crusader. Dexter did not have such a caring force in his life.

The first police officer on the scene of his mother's murder, Harry Morgan (James Remar), adopted Dexter and taught him not only to fake his way through psychiatric evaluations, but ultimately to live by a "code" so he could get away with murder. Rather than seeking therapy for Dexter or caring for his dark tendencies, Harry allows Dexter to grow up feeling like a monster because he does not feel emotions like other people. As Dexter grew up and became a fully functioning man—a New Man if you consider his ability to keep his inner masculine violence under submission—Harry's selfish desires created more of a monster than did Dexter's trauma.

Harry wanted Dexter to deal with crime in ways that he was legally unable to. Once Dexter finally killed his first victim—a criminal that Harry was unable to arrest—Harry realized that he led Dexter astray and killed himself because of his fatherly failure and guilt. Yet, Dexter still satiates his lust for murder and justice in his own way. Conforming to the masculine ideals of fatherhood ultimately benefits Dexter, causing him to feel emotions in ways he never thought possible. Unfortunately, his obsession for his style of justice also costs the life of Rita (Julie Benz), his wife, when an adversary learns his true identity. He still

keeps to the code, but now understands his limitations as a father, as well as the fact that he is not *just* reliant on his dark passenger.

The show begins with Dexter's voiceover narration as he drives under the streetlights streets of Miami. A monotone Dexter says, "Tonight's the night and it's going to happen again and again. It has to happen" ("Dexter"). This opening parallels the opening of another production featuring a traumatized hero, *Taxi Driver* (1976). Both begin with a white man driving down wet city streets at night. They both speak in voiceovers about what must be done to save society. Given the implicit reference to *Taxi Driver's* Travis Bickle (Robert DeNiro), the viewer must surely realize that violent vengeance is coming. This sets the viewer up to think that Dexter is a sociopath just like Bickle, but there is more to Dexter than his violent tendencies.

At the end of Dexter's narration, he arrives at a public park where a choir of boys is just finishing a performance. This juxtaposition between innocence and sadistic indulgence sets us up to question our own moral standards. We learn that the man Dexter kidnaps from this scene is responsible for the deaths of three boys. Dexter seems to be taking vengeance for their deaths, but as the man says that he couldn't help himself, Dexter tells him, "I can't help myself either, but I have standards" ("Dexter"). Dexter will not kill children to satiate his thirst for blood-letting, but uses his special talent for what he was taught was the greater good.

Dexter is not entirely emotionless but he is not capable of feeling love, nor does he understand physical relationships, just like Travis Bickle. Also like Bickle, Dexter wants to rid the streets of crime but we also learn that Dexter is simply a violent man. As a child, he killed animals and thought about killing people. But there are several clues that Dexter is not

completely removed from humanity. Despite his thirst for killing, he seems to have some humane intentions. As a child he killed a dog because it kept barking while his sick mother was trying to sleep. In a sick way, he was trying to be thoughtful, to protect his mother from the disturbances of the dog. Later in the show, we see Dexter interacting quite pleasantly with his girlfriend's children. Though Dexter claims that he is simply acting like he is a part of humanity, there are instances that show us that Dexter does belong to the human race.

Rita, his girlfriend, had been abused and raped by her former husband. This is exactly the kind of violence that Dexter is obsessed with eliminating from society, but he is somewhat grateful for Rita's trauma. Her traumatic ordeal has made her disinterested in having a physical relationship with Dexter, and he is thankful for it. He does not understand sex. At one point, Dexter appears to become sexually interested in his girlfriend for the first time while discussing the gruesome details of a serial killer. He starts touching her leg and she becomes upset. He has no idea why he touched her like that, as if his baser instincts took over for a brief moment. This brief moment is humanizing. Rita's initial discomfort falls by the wayside and she wants to sleep with Dexter, who is now in an awkward position. He is clearly not interested in sleeping with her, and relieved when the phone rings and he doesn't have to.

Dexter uses Rita for stability in his life. While he is under the impression that he is incapable of love, he still puts on a show for Rita. What is unfortunate about this situation is that Dexter, façade or no, *is* a positive influence in Rita's life. Though his presence is a pretense, his stability really does help her to work through her own personal trauma and Rita is able to open up and fall in love with Dexter. Rita does not necessarily help Dexter deal with his own trauma, however, because his trauma is repressed.

Dexter's violent tendencies stem from repressed trauma in his childhood. Although he can't specifically remember the incident, the visual and emotional trauma is ingrained in his mind. These moments "foster the development of abnormal states of consciousness" (Collins & Jervis 131). While Heather Duda believes this moment "clearly caused Dexter to be a murderer," it is clear from the show's narrative that Dexter had potential to be saved from himself (Duda 153). Even Harry realized his mistake in helping Dexter fake his way through psychiatric exams and his day-to-day life. When Harry realized that he was responsible for creating a murderer, the guilt pushed him to suicide. Much like the incorrect perception that we are born with predestined identity roles, it is unfair to say that outside influences do not shape who we become.

As Dexter learns more about himself and about Harry, he begins to distance himself from the code that Harry taught him and make his own decisions about what he thinks is right. This is particularly significant to the story arc of season four. The season begins with Rita and Dexter, newlyweds and parents of a newborn, in their new home struggling to juggle three children, schedules, and noise. Dexter also becomes fascinated by the reappearance of the Trinity killer, who has gotten away with countless murders spanning several decades. Dexter feels as though this trophy kill will set things right in his life which has seemingly spun out of control with the constraints of family life. Viewers, too, will want Dexter to take out this killer because of just how terrible he is. One of the first scenes in season four opens with the brutal killing of a woman in a bathtub. The Trinity killer forces a woman to get undressed and get in the bathtub with him. He holds a mirror up to her face while he cuts her leg, forcing her to watch herself die. But the immediate justice for the viewer does not come. Once Dexter discovers the identity of the Trinity killer and follows

him home to complete the kill, he watches as this uncatchable, horrifically pathological murderer walks into the loving arms of his family. Arthur Mitchell (John Lithgow) becomes Dexter's new hero. Desperate to balance his dark tendencies, work, and family, he decides to befriend Arthur to learn how he is able to seemingly have it all.

This desperation shows that Dexter's struggle doesn't simply stem from the trauma of watching his mother die. Harry's code taught Dexter a number of troubling things, some of which stem from the expectations of masculinity. In having Harry teach Dexter how to be a man, not just a human, the pressure for Dexter to conform often creates anxiety on its own. This pressure echoes the anxiety felt by men prior to 9/11, the men who felt as though feminism was pushing them away from a sense of masculine identity. It also reflects the anxiety felt by men after 9/11 if they did not fit into the normative male gender category in terms of strength and image. The code, then, is essentially a code for post-9/11 masculinity: "Harry's code, therefore, responds to a perceived crisis of patriarchal authority in a changing climate that can no longer be indifferent to the claims of feminists and other anti-patriarchal groups that seek a redistribution of power and a re-articulation of masculinity" (Santaularia 66). The patriarchal crisis wherein the balance of power between men and women (and between men and men) shifted prior to 9/11 was a response to the threat of feminism. After 9/11, the return to rugged masculinity is infused within Harry's code because it teaches Dexter that surviving requires him to be aggressive, violent, and independent. Teaching Dexter to enhance his violent tendencies, rather than to seek help, was another instance in which Dexter was almost indoctrinated to conform to masculinity. On masculinity, Michael S. Kimmel explains that "violence is often the single most evident marker of manhood" (278). Violence and vengeance have long been celebrated traits of survival and vengeance.

Therefore, as men reclaimed their manhood in the post-9/11 era, feats of aggression, strength, and independence became valued traits once more. Part of Dexter's survival included maintaining patriarchal structures through his relationship with Rita, all while hiding his secret violence.

As stated earlier, Dexter's feelings towards intimacy and sex are mired in complications. Early in their relationship, Dexter thought that if he got close to Rita she would be able to see that there was something wrong with him. Ultimately, he used his position as a father-figure to further blend in: "I became a husband, a father. I had to evolve. It was the only way to survive" ("If I Had a Hammer"). Although marrying Rita was not only about survival, it certainly was Dexter's biggest motivator. It is clear throughout this season that Dexter would prefer to be stalking, maiming, and murdering and that his family life gets in the way of that. However, Dexter's feelings towards Rita and his children are very real; it is the pressure from Harry's code that makes him feel enamored with his dark desires. As he continues to try to break free from the code, he becomes closer with his new friend Arthur, the Trinity killer.

On the outside, Arthur appears to have the perfect life. He has a beautiful, loving family—a wife, a son, and a daughter—a lovely home, charitable hobbies, and a church presence. Dexter also knows that he is one of the most notorious and brutal serial killers to never be apprehended. Seeing what seems to be a perfect balance pushes Dexter even further from Harry's code as he is desperate to achieve a similar balance. However, Dexter soon realizes that Arthur's home life is anything but perfect. Arthur is abusive and viciously controlling of his family. He terrifies them into playing the roles of supportive, loving family members so that he can control his image of patriarchal success. Ignoring their roles leads to

violent consequences. On one occasion he breaks his son's hand and locks his daughter in her room. When Arthur realizes that law enforcement has discovered that he is the Trinity killer, he steals everything valuable from his home and his family members in order to escape. His family was nothing more than a prop to hide his transgressions. After learning all of this, Dexter decides to keep to the code and finally kill Arthur for himself. He realizes that there is no way to have it all and that monsters are monsters. He selfishly pursues Arthur, even after Arthur learns what Dexter plans to do and puts Dexter's family in danger. Dexter does kill Arthur, but returns home to a scene uncannily similar to the one he had repressed for so many years. He hears his son, Harrison, crying and goes into the bathroom, finding Rita dead in the bathtub and Harrison sitting in a pool of her blood. Dexter's obsession with his own image of masculine success, along with his selfish dark desires lead to the absolute destruction of the people around him. He retreats to the code, narrating at the end of the episode: "We are born in blood, the two of us. Harry was right. I thought I could change what I am, keep my family safe. But it doesn't matter what I do, what I choose. I am the problem. It's destiny" ("The Getaway"). Dexter is so ingrained with what Harry taught him that he has no idea how to be any other man, echoing "the contemporary [man's] struggle with the proper way to 'be' a man" (Smith 395). He attempted to balance his darkness with his family not just because he was selfish, but because he legitimately wanted both. Harry tried to teach Dexter that there was only one way for him to survive in the world: by following the code and being the type of man that Harry thought was right. Harry taught Dexter to be aggressive, independent, and emotionless, failing to see that Dexter had the potential to be more than just a hypermasculine killer. Domesticated suburban life weakened Dexter's masculine capabilities and Harry's code—the post-9/11 code—advocates for violent vengeance that Dexter can

never have because he already killed Arthur, not knowing that Arthur had already killed Rita. Dexter is never able to get revenge or to feel closure. Instead, he returns to feeling empty, as he did before. Requires

The pressure for regenerated violent masculinity is something that was clearly felt in the aftermath of 9/11, for which feminism was to blame for softening the men in our country, allowing such a tragic attack to take place in the first place. Viewers of this episode could sympathize with the desire for violent revenge against our enemy, but as with Dexter, their quest for vengeance will not be satiated. Although the wars abroad may have felt like a success in terms of satisfying a universal demand for retaliation, it was clear that our military efforts were misguided, much like Dexter's obsession for his trophy kill.

Dexter's secret identity is eventually discovered by those around him, including his stepsister Deb (Jennifer Carpenter). She is horrified and disgusted, yet conflicted about what the right thing to do is. In uniform, Deb is the quintessentially moral police officer. She knows right from wrong, ignoring the emotional gray area with logic, reason, and facts. With Dexter, however, morality is complicated by her love for her brother. She decides to try to help rehabilitate Dexter rather than send him to prison. In this way, she is a much stronger, better person than Harry ever was. Captain Maria Laguerta also discovers Dexter's crimes, and Deb shoots her to help keep Dexter's secret. Because of her moral upstanding nature, this sends her into a tailspin of drugs, alcohol, and depression. The women in Dexter's life all pay the ultimate price for his own selfish desires and desperation to be the man that Harry taught him to be. At the end of the series, Deb is shot by a criminal named Saxon that Dexter had initially planned to kill, but did not feel the dark desire to do it. Allowed to live, Saxon later shoots Deb who slips into an irreversible coma. Dexter sneaks into the hospital and takes Deb

off of life support. He takes her body out on his boat—just like all of his other victims—and drops her in the ocean. Pushing Rita out of her career and into the home was Dexter’s first step toward his patriarchal dominance. By the end of the series, almost every major female character is dead as a result of Dexter’s obsession with masculine survival and independence.

The last scene of the series takes place in a rugged logging setting. Big machines move lumber from pile to truck, the sounds of men working and machines growling with brute force. A man walks from a tractor-trailer to a cabin and sits down in a chair. The man is Dexter, now bearded and wearing very muted colored, masculine clothing. The last image we see of Dexter is a menacing, silent scowl, an ominous and ferocious stare in a dark and empty room, one that should make the viewer uncomfortable in its silence and intensity. This is just the opposite of the look Dexter gives us in the show’s opening credits. Outside his sunny Miami apartment, Dexter smirks at us while wearing his brightly colored clothes. This bookend of facial expressions shows us his initial attempt to fit into society but his ultimate fate of self-isolation. This uncomfortable stare and chilling silence indicates how we should view serial killers to begin with. We are not supposed to cheer for them or laugh at their jokes. Dexter’s constant voiceover was a crutch, a justification of his actions. In silence, he is now isolated from society. In his new surroundings, it is safe to assume that Dexter will retreat to his old, violent habits. There is no one left to hide his “Dark Passenger” from. Working in dangerous conditions and possibly travelling frequently in his tractor trailer, Dexter would not have a difficult time finding new victims. However, considering Dexter’s final expression, it is possible to make the argument that he may, in fact, feel so empty inside that even his “Dark Passenger” is gone and Dexter does not kill anymore. This is unlikely considering Dexter’s effort into faking his suicide, rather than actually going through with it.

And while Dexter's self-isolation may appear at first glance to be selfish, considering he is leaving behind grieving family members, it seems like he has finally learned his lesson that the people around him get hurt and will always have the potential to get hurt so long as he is a part of their lives. Instead of an actual suicide, he makes those around him believe he is dead so that they have closure while he chooses a life with his dark passenger after all. Taking Deb's life, although indirectly his fault, costs him the last loved one he is willing to lose. It is also clear that he planned to unplug her machines since he wore his kill outfit to the hospital. One might argue that if Dexter had followed his bloodlust, rather than suppressing it, and killed Saxon that Deb would still be alive. But he couldn't live with the guilt of leaving Deb in a vegetative state. In taking her life, perhaps the last remaining shred of humanity in Dexter expired. Releasing her into the ocean in a white sheet is symbolic of Deb's lightness slipping away, her positivity and morality no longer capable of protecting Dexter as he slips into the literal and figurative darkness of the impending hurricane storm clouds. While it seems throughout the series that Harry protected Dexter, it was really Deb who taught Dexter about emotions. Harry tried to suppress everything while Deb—the polar opposite—expresses everything to an almost sensational degree. Without her, Dexter sequesters himself away from the metro culture in which he attempts—bringing donuts, wearing pink polo shirts and khakis—and listens to his baser instinct to use his body like a machine. It is significant to explore the nature of his new career path, one that is so overtly masculine compared to the office job he used to have in Miami. All in all, Dexter did have access to humanity and had made great strides in attempting to control his dark passenger and explore more complex feelings, but without Deb, his only choice was to retreat into the wilderness as a solitary man. Even though fans saw him becoming more and more human

and wanted him to have a happy ending, serial killers aren't supposed to have happy endings. What we can take away from the final episode is that Dexter is indeed a complicated sociopath capable of feeling emotions; it's his love for his son Harrison that allows him to make the decision to separate himself from him for his own good so he can suffer in solitude for the loss of other innocent bystanders and loved ones along the way.

AMC's *Breaking Bad* is the story of an emasculated high school science teacher who is diagnosed with terminal cancer and turns to cooking and selling crystal meth in order to put money aside for his family. As he faces death and the realization that he has not fulfilled his role as a provider, he claims to feel alive for the first time as he is willing to do whatever it takes to prove to his family and to himself that he can be a man. Walter White (Bryan Cranston) feels at the start of the series that he has not lived an active existence, one in which he has made conscientious choices about who he is, what he does, or what he believes. This kind of rationality can truly apply to any of us, as we live in a constructed world that shapes our lives with norms and social hierarchies. But it's the word "this" in the quote that is particularly telling. By "this," he doesn't necessarily mean the cancer. Having lost control of every aspect of his life, he wants to control how his life ends—actively, not passively. Walt wants to "die like a man" ("Gray Matter"). This statement raises the question of what it means to be a man in post-9/11 culture and how Walt's transformation from a harmless nobody to the brutal kingpin of a meth empire echoes the ways in which masculinity in our culture transformed after 9/11. That viewers tend to root for Walt is very indicative of a post-traumatic culture of men who live vicariously through Walt's reclamation of power and masculine strength, despite the consequences of Walt's behavior.

The reason I find this parallel so fascinating for the transformation of Walter White is that he was a very ineffectual character until he became Heisenberg, a hyper-masculine, extremely powerful character. Before getting involved with meth, Walt was a passive husband and awkward high school teacher, a man not really taken seriously as any kind of strong authority figure. He had potential to do great things with his life, given his high level of intelligence, but fell short of his dreams and was emasculated both at home and at work. When he was diagnosed with cancer, he lost control over the last thing he really had any power over: his body. This loss is a significant one because “men’s bodies have long been symbols of masculinity in America. They reveal (or at least signify) manhood’s power, strength, and self-control” (Connell 248). With his last vestige of masculinity slipping away, Walt desperately seeks to regain control of his manhood. This transformation begins in the very first episode.

The show opens on a desert landscape; a pair of men’s trousers float through the bright blue sky, filling with air, embodied with emptiness as they crash into the ground and are immediately run over by the tire of an RV. We cut to the driver of the RV, a crazed, nearly-naked man wearing a gas mask who drives erratically through the dusty landscape. A panic-stricken Walt emerges from the RV wearing high-waisted white underwear. He puts on a green button down shirt and records a desperate message to his family, explaining that his actions were done out of love for them. Truly, at the beginning of the series, we can believe Walt’s intentions are purely financial. After placing the camera and his wallet on the ground, he regains composure and stands in the middle of the desert road as sirens approach the scene of his crashed RV. He aims a pistol in the direction of the sound, appearing to be unwilling to

go down without a fight. Cue the opening credits to the series and a flashback to how all this madness began.

Although we flashback to three weeks earlier, it's clear that the issues that Walt confronts start long before his fiftieth birthday. A day in the life of Walter White begins at the breakfast table with his wife, Skylar (Anna Gunn), who is pregnant with their second child, and their son Walter Jr. (R. J. Mitte), who is a teenager with cerebral palsy. For Walt's birthday, Skylar spells out "50" on his breakfast plate with veggie bacon, a new healthy choice that she's made for the family. This minor breakfast tweak appears to be nothing more than a helpful wife concerned about her husband's health, but from the demeanor present in the room, it's clear that Skylar makes the decisions for her household—from small to big. As Walt studies the bacon, it's clear that he isn't a fan of it but neither he nor his son has a say in the matter.

Next, we see Walt teaching chemistry to an extremely disinterested high school class. Walt begins his lecture passionately, citing chemistry as the "study of transformation." He hopes to impress his students with his passion and dedication to the field, but after it's clear that the students aren't interested, he resorts to using the textbook. One student in particular, Chad, is especially disruptive to the class after Walt asks him to sit at his assigned desk. Chad, the stereotypical high school jock, is too busy flirting with a girl in his class to pay attention to Walt. Instead of continuing to ignore him or indignantly returning to his desk, Chad chooses to humiliate Walt as he noisily drags his chair back to his desk, forcing the entire class to pay attention to him. This same student appears at Walt's second job a bit later in the episode. Because Walt's primary job doesn't secure enough income for his family, he works at a car wash on the side. His boss continuously takes advantage of Walt, making him

stay late to dry cars. As Walt dries off an extravagant sports car, one far better—if not manlier—than he can afford, he is humiliated to learn that the car’s owner is none other than Chad. Using the situation to further advantage, Chad takes demeaning pictures of Walt cleaning his car while his girlfriend tells her friends about it over the phone. This situation establishes an authoritarian masculine hierarchy in which Chad has power over Walt in all facets of Walt’s work life. Chad’s power is constructed by taking power away from Walt.

After a full day of being emasculated by his wife, his students, and his boss, he arrives home to a surprise birthday party, which begins with Skylar chastising him for being late. During the party, all the attention is on Hank (Dean Norris), Walt’s macho D.E.A. agent brother-in-law, whose most recent drug bust is the buzz of the party. The party quiets down to listen to his story. Walt’s own son is paying more attention to Hank than to his father. Hank tells a riveting recap of the day’s events and gives his handgun to Walter, Jr. to look at. Walt’s discomfort is obvious, so Hank encourages Walt to hold the weapon. It’s clear that when Walt takes a hold of the gun, that he has no idea how to hold it. He awkwardly shifts it around in his hand and says that it’s heavy. Hank emasculates him in front of the whole party by saying “that’s why they hire *men*” to carry them (“Pilot”). Hank’s actions infer the assumption that there is a gender hierarchy embedded in hegemonic masculinity that places strong men on the top—Hank—and weak men (and women)—Walt— at the bottom. That Walt is ignored at his own birthday party is one thing, but that Hank—the hypermasculine hero—is the one emasculating Walt is significant. Throughout the series, masculinity is measured by one person establishing power over another.

The power structure is established as soon as Walt awkwardly holds the gun, which is a symbol of masculine oppression and violence: “It is, overwhelmingly, the dominant gender

who hold and use [guns as a] means of violence.” (Connell 83). R. W. Connell goes on to explain that men are armed far more frequently than women, as the weaker gender is culturally disarmed and, therefore, unable to protect itself. The gun validates Hank’s masculinity and diminishes Walt’s. Hank shows that the dominant gender is the idealized hero with a gun who takes down criminals, thus protecting subordinated men and women from harm.

Walt can do nothing in the moment to reclaim the masculinity that was taken from him by Hank. Only Hank can give and take power in the hierarchy. Upon realizing that he is taking all the attention away from Walt, Hank offers a toast to Walt on his birthday, joking about Walt’s intelligence as a negative trait. Hank all but cuts himself off, however, to take the focus back to himself and the news story. Hank is on the TV discussing the raid and Walt becomes enamored by the boxes of cash seized by the police. Another manly olive branch is proffered, though, when Hank offers to take Walt on a ride along to add some excitement into his life. Throughout the series, however, we learn that Hank’s hypermasculine identity is a performance that he uses to hide his own fears and panic attacks. Ultimately Walt feels emasculated by a man whose identity is inauthentic, masked by artificial masculinity.

Walt’s emasculation continues after the party is over and Skylar attempts to give him a little birthday present in the bedroom. With one hand on her laptop and one hand underneath the blankets, she half-heartedly attempts to give Walt a hand job. Most of her focus is on an item she is selling in an eBay auction; yet, she wonders why Walt can’t seem to get an erection. When the auction ends, Skylar forgets entirely about Walt because she is excited about the money she earned. In this moment, Skylar shows her dominance once more. First, she controls the sexual encounter, deciding the terms and conditions. Second, as

she is earning money for the family, she reverses the role of provider. As Michael Kimmel points out, men are expected to fulfill the role of provider; Walt's failure to provide is metaphorically represented in his inability to get an erection. In feeling like he has failed as a provider and as a man, he is unable to perform sexually.

Later, when Walt goes on a ride along with Hank and his partner Steve Gomez, he is witness to their bravado exchange of insults towards each other—just guys being guys. But most importantly, he sees his future partner in crime Jesse Pinkman (Aaron Paul). Pinkman, a former student of Walt's, has everything that Walt doesn't: a steady (and impressive) cash flow, power, and sexual freedom. It is significant indeed that we meet both of these main characters when they are not wearing pants. Walt, of course, emerges from the RV as an old, disheveled wreck and Jesse sneaks out a bedroom window leaving behind a beautiful, blonde one night stand. Jesse isn't confined by a daily routine and goes completely against the grain to get what he wants. Walt played his entire life by the book and not only did he get cheated by his friends, not only does his wife control his every move, but he never smoked a cigarette and still ended up with lung cancer. It's no wonder that Walt, after losing that last thing he had control over—his body—looked at Hank's drug bust as an opportunity to reclaim his masculinity as a provider for his family and as a motivator to finally start living.

With Walt's diagnosis and the notion of having nothing left to lose, he blackmails Jesse into becoming partners in cooking and selling meth. Walt steals equipment from work while Jesse secures an RV they can use as a mobile laboratory. They drive into the desert to ensure that their activities will be undetected. Walt undresses to keep his good clothes free from the smell of chemicals. Although Walt is the one in charge of the operation, Jesse makes attempts to verbally establish his own masculinity. As he refers to Walt as a "homo"

for undressing, for being a “faggot” for using safety equipment, or a “bitch” in just about every scenario, Jesse’s gendered language establishes hegemony. As Connell writes, “[O]ppression positions homosexual masculinities at the bottom of a gender hierarchy among men” (78). Although Walt identifies as heterosexual, Jesse uses Walt’s precautionary behaviors as a tool of emasculation. Real men, as Jesse presupposes, aren’t so carefully refined; they’re not afraid to get their hands dirty. Comparing Walt to a woman or to a homosexual man is meant to diminish his power.

After the first batch is cooked, Jesse must find a way to distribute it. Jesse approaches known meth dealers Krazy-8 and Emilio who are angry that Jesse is attempting to deal meth on their turf. They force Jesse to take them to their cook spot and, of course, the situation escalates quickly. Guns blazing, threats are made, and Walt offers to show them how to cook meth in order to save himself and Jesse. While demonstrating, Walt improperly mixes two chemicals in order to poison his captors. At this point, we are caught up to where the series began. Walt begins erratically driving the RV away from the scene of the crime. He then crashes and emerges in his tighty whiteys. He stands in the middle of the dirt road, and the sirens approach the scene. He lowers his gun, and aims it at his throat. He pulls the trigger and the gun clicks, misfiring. He pulls the trigger again, aimed towards the ground and a bullet pierces the dust. In an anguished moment, we see Walt’s frustration at his inability to take his own life. However, upon realizing that the sirens are coming from fire trucks, he hides his weapon and eventually returns home. He sneaks into bed in the middle of the night. Skylar is still awake and asks where Walt has been. He avoids the question by kissing Skylar and aggressively flipping her over to face away from him as he makes love to her. The sex is

consensual, but Skylar's question, "Walt, is that you?" indicates that she is clearly not used to sexual dominance from her husband ("Pilot").

Prior to becoming involved in the meth business, Walt has been an outsider looking in to the notions of hegemonic masculinity. He has been the victim of emasculation and oppression by other men throughout his life and is only able to achieve his own masculinity at the expense of others. In the span of 58 minutes, the pilot episode of *Breaking Bad* establishes a number of key rhetorical functions of masculinity: providing, protecting, strength, power, and money. First, the role of the husband is to be the provider and protector. Earning power is a way to measure masculinity. As such, a man who is unable to financially provide for his family can be considered a failure. Walt works two jobs, neither of which pay well, and is barely able to provide for his family. Skylar is in charge of the family's finances so Walt doesn't have any power over the money he *does* earn. After charging a joint credit card for some printer paper, Skylar reprimands him for using the wrong card. Skylar supplements their income by selling items on eBay and working odd jobs. Second, men must be strong and powerful. As Walt's body betrays him, he becomes weaker and weaker with cancer. He has no control over the situation, so he refuses payment for treatment, ultimately attempting to control his own fate. He acts like the word "charity" is a dirty word because—as a man—he doesn't want to accept help, especially not financial help. There is a strong link between masculinity and money throughout the series; the powerful men have the most money and will fight to defend it.

Not only does the show speak to the issue of hegemonic masculinity, it also speaks to costs of transformative masculinity in post-9/11 culture. As the show continues, hyper-masculinity and domination takes over Walt as he becomes more like Heisenberg than Walt.

He leaves devastation at every turn, making no apologies for his actions, actions supposedly aimed at helping his family—just as U.S. military and government actions were supposedly aimed at keeping our country safe. But in trying to protect them financially, Walt’s actions put his family in grave danger. We ultimately learn that he wasn't doing it for family. He did it simply because he “liked it.” It made him feel like more of a man to be in control of such a powerful business, treating the people around him as expendable as he built his empire and reaffirmed the power that is associated with white masculinity. Additionally, Walt takes his newfound masculinity out on women and minorities—both perceived outsiders to the American ideal of strong masculinity. After Skylar learns the truth, he terrorizes her and kidnaps their baby daughter. He poisons his business associate, Lydia, as well as a child that Jesse cares for. He also watched as Jesse’s girlfriend choke to death on her own vomit, not intervening because having her out of the way makes things easier for him. By the end of the series, Walt kills—directly or indirectly—every non-white character as he builds his empire. This regeneration through violence affects everyone from business partners, enemies, law enforcement, and friends. Walt’s obsession with his own image, empire, and power closely parallel the resurgence of a certain rugged type of masculinity in the United States after 9/11, a time in which vengeance and violence were often synonymous with heroism and pride.

Referring to Noonan’s *Wall Street Journal* article once more, Walt does not match up to the strong masculinity celebrated in post-9/11 American culture because his physical body is not capable of matching up to the physical strength associated with and required of masculinity. Almost vengeful towards himself, Walt uses his failure to build a hegemonic masculine representation and reputation, using violence and coercion to build his strength, even as his body fails him. Despite the fact that Walt is fighting cancer, the violence

committed on his behalf helped him to establish his authority as a strong masculine figure, all while helping him to keep his hands clean. Although there were moments within the series when Walt did, in fact, have to go to the frontlines himself, the fact that he was able to fight many of his battles through strategic maneuvers and manipulation of others echoes the political manipulation of the American people preceding the War on Terror.

Although Walt's quest isn't a war, per se, he is engaged in a battle with enemies—those who threaten his power—and he perceives that he must defend himself by any means necessary. J. Ann Tickner argues that war is considered a masculine activity, stating that “gender is a powerful legitimator of war and national security; [which drives] our acceptance of a ‘remasculinized’ society.” In order for the War on Terror to be successful, our military and our culture supported historical notions of gender ideology, privileging masculinity over femininity. For Walt to be successful, then, he must engage in preemptive violence in order to secure the empire he is building. This comes at the expense of everyone around him and Walt doesn't care so long as his empire remains intact.

One of the most obvious proofs of Walt's willingness to do anything for his empire is his treatment of children throughout the series. He poisons one boy in order to control Jesse's behavior and is complicit in the murder of another child who is a witness to their train heist in the episode titled “Dead Freight” in season five (the train heist itself is another nod to the Western genre). The child is considered collateral damage; his loss is a means to an end. That end, of course, is self-preservation by preemptively eliminating a threat. Similarly, the Bush Doctrine allows for preemptive action against perceived threats. The Bush White House, in fact, followed much of the logic used by Walter White to defend his own exceptionalism: surveillance, casualties, collateral damage, torture, you name it, all in the name of

supposedly protecting our nation from outside threats. Ultimately, these actions (like Walt's) caused more harm than good.

It is impossible to ignore the political implications associated with the “rehabilitation of heroic masculinity” in popular culture (Kimmel 253). Michael S. Kimmel discusses the ways in which George W. Bush's reelection campaign reaffirmed the dominant roles of so-called traditional masculinity. Bush became the icon of the resurgence of rugged cowboy masculinity. For this reason, the very location of *Breaking Bad* is significant to the telling of the story. The show features stunningly beautiful Southwest imagery. Desert landscapes and mountains provide the setting for Walt's masculine performance. His trademark fedora becomes a modern cowboy hat. This matters for a post-9/11 discussion because of the cultural resurgence of Western ideals following the attacks. The cowboy was the quintessential manly man, the defender against evil. The cowboy persona was utilized again and again in the media, and even by George W. Bush, whose very image was westernized to showcase his supposed ability to protect us with his historical notion of justice. The danger here is that “the Western as a film genre and its self-conscious cult of inarticulate masculine heroism” influences the thoughts and behaviors of viewers (Connell 194). The image of John Wayne's masculinity shaped the way that men in American culture defined and measured their own masculinity in the 1950s. In a culture that no longer sought to conquer, men still needed a way to feel powerful. As the gender hierarchy continued to shift, the power of women was also considered a threat to manhood. It's clear that this issue continues to transcend time, as the threat of female strength continues to terrify men.

While Skylar becomes less and less active in her relationship with Walt and as a character, other women step into the picture. Jane is Jesse's apartment manager and a

recovering addict. Shortly after Jesse moves into the building, the two begin a romantic relationship. Jane starts using drugs again and eventually tries to blackmail Walt into giving the couple money so they can leave town and start a new life. Once Jane becomes the decision maker in her relationship with Jesse, she becomes the literalized threat to masculinity, as perceived in our culture after 9/11. Walt has no choice but to eliminate her as a threat. Walt sneaks into Jesse's apartment late at night and sees Jane struggling to breathe. In this moment, he easily could save her life but chooses to do nothing. This eradicates the threat and allows him to keep his hands clean. However, his action (or inaction) doesn't just get rid of an oppressive female presence; Jane's death brings about a horrific airline accident. Jane's father doesn't cope with well with her death and is ultimately responsible for the collision of two jetliners in midair. The imagery of the plane crash clearly harkens back to the imagery of 9/11, the most visual event in our history, and suggests the implications of our reactions. Attempting to preserve gender hierarchies will ultimately cause more harm than good, and the greater threat to culture is hyper-masculinity, not femininity. This parallels the trajectory of the U.S. following 9/11 as we were marched into war in the hopes of maintaining exceptionalism by any means necessary.

In the episode titled "Ozymandias," Walt finally faces the consequences for maintaining his powerful image. The title comes from Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem, which speaks to the impermanence of power and reputation. Heisenberg's reign in the meth business is short-lived and even though he might be remembered by some as an all-powerful man, he will be remembered by most as a monster. In this episode his obsession with his own image and power truly causes the demise of those around him. By this point, Jesse has teamed up with Hank in order to try to bring Walt down. In this particular episode, Walt is tracked to the

burial location of his money first by Jesse, Hank, and Hank's partner Steve Gomez and then by the neo-Nazi gang that he hired to kill Jesse. The Nazi gang's appearance is due to miscommunication, but the leader of the gang, Jack, shoots Hank in front of Walt, who genuinely appears to be devastated by the loss, weakened and sobbing on the desert sand. To reestablish his own power, he hands Jesse over to the gang so he will be killed. But before Jesse is taken away, Walt tells him, "I watched Jane die. I was there and I watched her die. I watched her overdose and choke to death. I could have saved her, but I didn't" ("Ozymandias"). Walt could have never told Jesse that he allowed Jane to die and he would have gotten away with it. Because Jane choked on her own vomit after drug-induced sleep, there was no indication of foul play. But losing Hank, losing millions of dollars to the gang, and losing his image of power requires him to counteract the loss by emasculating Jesse. Jesse's life is now in the hands of Walt, who wants him dead, and he finds a way to make this betrayal even worse by admitting what he did to compensate for his emotional outburst.

In the end, it hardly seems worth it for Walt. His Heisenberg persona is revealed and his family pays the price for his behavior. His wife and son want nothing to do with him or with his dirty money. His cancer returns and he is on the verge of death, about to turn himself in. But because he doesn't want all of this to have been for nothing, he finds a way to get the money to his son—through his estranged business partners at Gray Matter—and to free Jesse from his enslavement by the Nazis, who kept him around to cook meth for them instead of killing him. However, saving Jesse was more coincidence than plan. Walt approached Jack about his getting his money back, secretly planning a deadly revenge for ruining his empire. Walt constructs a weapon that when activated by his car key fob would fire a machine gun from a distance. When he discovers that Jesse is there, he tackles him to save his life, but

takes a lethal bullet to his stomach. After the firing stops, Jesse aims a gun at Walt, who asks him to kill him. When Walt admits that this is what he wants, Jesse tells him to do it himself. Walt, slowly bleeding to death, walks over to the meth lab, looking fondly at his empire once more before dying.

In this story, Walt gains power by taking it from others, showing the destructiveness of masculinity. This power frequently comes at the expense of women and minorities, those who are typically the most affected by white male masculinity. That each of Walt's enemies is Latino represents the fear of Others embedded in our news media, film, and television shows after 9/11. The desire for immediate vengeance unleashed resounding racism. That the "bad guys" in *Breaking Bad* are brown-skinned speaks significantly to the issue of racism. But, of the so-called bad guys, Walt is the worst of them all. He is complicit in the murder of a child, he poisons another child to manipulate his trusting partner, he watched an overdosing woman choke to death and, as a result, is partly to blame for the horrific airline accident, and he has murdered people to protect himself—all in the timespan of a few months! It's very problematic that viewers root for a white character taking out the non-white characters (dealers Krazy-8, Emilio, Tuco, and higher ups Gus and Hector) as if Walt is some kind of hero. Indeed, the presence of a neo-Nazi gang shows just how much hegemonic masculinity can damage our culture. Walt has built a capitalist empire by utilizing his own white privilege. The brown characters of the show are there to be manipulated and killed to tell the Walt's story. Walt's ultimate demise was on his own terms, yet, the minority characters who die are those who were outsmarted by Walt and died on his terms. As I think back to the first few years after 9/11 and the increase of real life hate crimes along with fictional depictions of brown people as terrorists, I can't help but see the connection with Walt's empire being built

on the bodies of subordinated people. The percentage of “good” and “bad” characters broken down by race is similarly problematic, yet representative of our culture’s worship of white heroism especially after the attacks. A similar cultural shift occurred in our culture after World War II. What follows can easily be applied to post-9/11 culture.

The hero archetype in popular culture helps to reaffirm dominant masculine ideals and behavior. Following a victory in World War II and facing threats of the Cold War, the western became a great escape for viewers who wanted to feel dominant and in control in terms of global dominance and, most importantly, masculine heroics. In the western, men were strong and victorious heroes: “In the evolution of the American myth system, the cowboy western provided an archetypal template for cleansing little villages beset by vicious evildoers” (Lawrence and Jewett 89). Facing and defeating enemies was an allegory for not just the international threat of the Cold War, but also the threat of American women attempting to destroy masculinity. Overcoming evildoers in film represented American power to dominate at home and abroad. Walter White is a new age cowboy, purging women and outsiders from American culture to preserve white masculine exceptionalism. Essentially, he seeks revenge against all those who emasculated him. Instead of the Cold War, post-9/11 culture faced the War on Terror. Instead of Russians, Americans feared men from the Middle East. It’s clear that as our culture faces threats, it retreats to hegemonic masculinity to protect itself.

Immediately after 9/11, our media bombarded us with images of heroic masculinity at the expense of those who did not conform to hegemonic masculinity. Walter White is the quintessential example of an emasculated man who uses trauma as a motivator for hypermasculine behaviors. While Walt paid the ultimate price for his actions, he died happily

surrounded by what he loved most—his power. Despite ruining the lives of countless people, Walt never learned his lesson or apologized for what he did. He reclaimed what he perceived to be taken from him—his masculinity—and never looked back. His mission was accomplished but at great personal expense. Much like Bush’s “Mission Accomplished,” the image of achievement was more important than actual victory. In each case, the image of masculinity was successfully projected but the actual performances were great failures. This parallel shows the costs of privileging ideology and exceptionalism embedded in hegemonic masculinity. While the show aims to condemn Walt’s behaviors and illuminate the consequences of hegemonic masculinity, many *Breaking Bad* viewers have rooted for Heisenberg. Male viewers don’t want to *be* Heisenberg, necessarily, but they can certainly empathize with a man assaulted by the pressures of masculinity conferred on him by society and the resentment that follows when failing to live up to unrealistic expectations. Because our culture is driven by and learns behavior from images in mass media, it is important for representations of masculinity and gender performance to suggest possibilities beyond the confines of normative structures. Thus, *Breaking Bad* plays a positive role because while it may appear to celebrate hypermasculinity and criminality, the show actually confirms just how damaging hegemonic masculinity is to both men and women.

Both Walt and Dexter end up isolated away from the ones they love and the power they commanded. In both cases, they retreat to a frontier, a masculine space far away from big city life, relying on instinct and masculine prowess to survive. That both men have beards and have retreated to the frontier signifies a shift in their own perception of masculine identity. For Dexter, having spent his whole life shaped by someone else, he now lacks any emotion or distinguishable identity. Working in a lumberyard may soothe his violent desires,

but this behavior alongside his appearance convey a much stronger masculine image than he did in his previous life, when he felt comfortable driving a minivan and wearing pink shirts (two things stereotypically linked more towards women). For Walt, not only has he lost his lifestyle, he is slowly losing his life. As his body becomes weaker and weaker, the beard conveys the masculine appearance that he would otherwise be lacking as his size and strength decreases. Being completely alone in the wilderness carries the sense of self-sufficiency, another masculine trait. While these two characters may seem incredibly dissimilar, they do in fact have a lot in common. In both cases, these men were trapped in middle class lifestyles that felt inauthentic to their desires. Both men also claimed that they only did bad things for the right reasons, when in reality both men did bad things simply because they liked it. And in both cases, these characters relied on hegemonic structures, behaviors, and appearances to convey “normal” identities to others, thus showing the ways in which the oppressive nature of gender roles is damaging to both men and women.

CHAPTER FIVE

DECONSTRUCTING POST-APOCALYPTIC THEMES IN *Y: THE LAST MAN* AND *THE AMAZING SPIDERMAN* FRANCHISE

The post-9/11 image of masculinity in visual media echoed historical, if not stereotypical, representations of masculinity—the rugged, strong, heteronormative hero, in particular, became the idealized form of man, an image from which men should gain inspiration. However, despite the fact that film, television, and graphic novels celebrated this restored masculine body, surely this image did not create a universally positive response. How many men were made to feel emasculated by their physical weakness if they could not match up to their culture's heroes, both real and fictional?

There are texts that navigate the trauma of the responsibilities bestowed on men in a post-9/11 world, a world in which gender constructions are decisive and imposed. While the expectation was that men were returning to being men, surely there were men who resisted this idea and women who were not given the opportunity to fulfill their own roles as heroes. Two important texts in particular shed light on the costs of masculine responsibility in the wake of trauma and apocalypse. Both *Y: The Last Man* and *The Amazing Spiderman* focus on accidental heroes, men whose placement in the exalted position of hero is coincidental and unwanted, yet expected. The stories of the two men diverge in that only one of them accepts his responsibility as a posthuman, post-masculine hero. In the first, *Y: The Last Man*, the main character's response to trauma is to run away and hide entirely from his responsibilities, but in the second, *The Amazing Spiderman*, Peter Parker's response is to face responsibility head on. Neither is correct. Yorick doesn't try at all, while Peter tries too hard, often at the expense of others. These two examples show us what not to do in a post-9/11 world. Instead,

we need to find a balance, one that allows our culture to heal and move forward without relying on socially constructed gender roles and expectations.

Historically, the concept of apocalypse held a more religious meaning. The book of Revelations defines the word as a prophecy or revelation about the end of the world. To have transparent knowledge about how and when the world would end helped create cooperative and peaceful populations, whose communal sense of optimism and hope fostered a sense of purpose. Any apocalyptic event was considered to be a disruption to God's plan, but remaining hopeful and optimistic about the future assured that the suffering and trauma was meaningful. In this way, the ends justified the means, and those who suffered found salvation and hope, even in the darkest, most traumatic moments. But we do not live in biblical times, apocalyptic events are not predictable through prophesy, and finding meaning from the trauma requires great effort.

The shift from biblical to contemporary meanings for catastrophic and devastating events became explicit following the events of 9/11. The *Daily Mail*'s front-page headline on September 12th, "APOCALYPSE," hovered over a photograph of the smoky remnants of the World Trade Center. The bold, capitalized word in the clouds of black smoke was meant to echo that historic definition of the word "apocalypse," given the doom and gloom, end-of-days photograph chosen to accompany the story. There was nothing hopeful about the image; no rescuers helping victims to escape, no firefighters banding together, no blue sky or sunshine to infer the possibility of faith in this hopeless situation. However, despite the apocalyptic conditions present in the images of 9/11, the meaning of the word "apocalypse" actually shifted away from the biblical implications and became a synonym for devastating

catastrophe. There are several reasons for this shift, involving the perpetrator(s), intentions, and responses.

One reason for the shift is that the events of 9/11 had a clear perpetrator, and could not be linked to a supernatural disruption by God, whose biblical intentions were to test our sense of communal faith and hope. A second reason is that the purpose of the attacks was not to end the physical world or help us to find meaning in our suffering. Instead, this crisis challenged our sense of security, showing us that we, as an exceptional nation, were not as invincible as we once believed. While certainly a revelation of sorts, it wasn't one that pushed us toward a purely hopeful, united response, which leads to the last reason for the shift in definition. While the immediate response—both nationally and globally—was generally supportive and united, temporal distance from September 11th drastically changed the perceptions of the cultural issues like gender ideologies. With this new definition for “apocalypse” came new critical and creative responses in the form of post-9/11 apocalyptic literature.

Generally, events within apocalyptic literature are emblematic social critiques. When presented with an approaching apocalyptic end or facing the rebuilding process, characters are forced to consider their personal and communal responsibilities, often leading to revelations about important social issues. Only after physical and social structures collapse can we look for solutions to rebuilding a better society. According to Elizabeth Rosen, “[A]pocalypse is a means by which to understand the world and one's place in it” (xi). Thus, apocalyptic based literature tends to suggest self-reflection in the wake of mass trauma, but more importantly the immersion in a sense of communal despair not only for those in political or military control, but also for those struggling with in terms of faith or religious-

based failure. As the end of the world approaches, one's sense of social awareness may become challenged by literal and metaphysical destruction. In the wake of this destruction, communities come together to rebuild a better society. Additionally, these works are also mired in complications and apprehension about the future as well as a particular tone of disillusionment and/or meaninglessness about the present. They show that rather than being the prelude to something better (as in a biblical apocalypse), the actual events of 9/11 made things worse. These issues are present in post-9/11 literature wherein characters are inundated by a sense of personal and global helplessness in the wake of newfound responsibilities.

Brian K. Vaughan's post-apocalyptic comic books series *Y: The Last Man* (2001-2008) follows the journey of Yorick Brown, the only man to survive after a plague kills every other male on earth. This series confronts the science-fiction themes of utopia, displaces the notion that there is a supposed natural order of things, and critiques the concept of reproductive futurism, an issue concerned with maintaining heteronormative visions of the future. In the media's gendered response to covering the events and aftermath of 9/11, heteronormative, conventional representations of masculinity were expected to restore the safety of our post-apocalyptic culture. To critique the immediate restoration of "traditional" masculinity, Vaughan removes men entirely from the equation; he explores human, rather than gendered, responses to trauma, proving that even in "the need to impose order on [a] chaotic and disturbing experience, finding a way out of darkness does not rely on socially constructed gender mythology" (*The Terror Dream* 254). Physically removing men from the planet does not automatically remove patriarchal structures; masculinity still influences the post-apocalyptic landscape as an absent signifier, thus showing the oppressive way that

masculinity has wholly permeated society and the difficulty involved in escaping it. As more of a traditional apocalyptic tale, there is hope at the end of the series that humanity will be saved; however, this hope does not come from Yorick, who returns to his life of passive existence after being freed of his world-saving responsibilities. The final image of the series, his empty straight jacket floating through the air shows that the madness of masculinity no longer constricts his action, nor the actions of the scientists and survivors who actually saved humanity.

The series opens by introducing the main character, Yorick, and his pet helper monkey Ampersand, another male. Yorick hangs upside down in a doorframe, his body encased in a straight jacket as he speaks with his girlfriend, Beth, over the phone. New panels occurring at the exact same time introduce important female characters in different situations in other parts of the world, including Yorick's mother Jennifer in Washington D.C., his sister Hero in Boston, Colonel Alter Tse'Elon in Palestine, and Dr. Allison Mann in Boston, who is on the brink of giving birth to her own clone. All but Dr. Mann's situation shows us that this comic book world is meant to be a realistic version of our own, especially believable in terms of how women are treated. Each of these women are important to the story that follows, but in each case their experiences on the edge of apocalypse show the various ways in which hegemonic masculine culture is damaging to women.

Both Jennifer Brown and Alter Tse'Elon are referred to and belittled by lower titles inappropriate to their actual positions, revealing complete disrespect by the men who speak to them. By referring to state representative Brown as "Congresswoman" and Colonel Tse'Elon as "Private," it's clear that not only are the women not viewed as equals, but that they would never be assumed to be higher authorities by men who do not view women as

leaders. Even though the men who disrespect these women are in lower positions, the men feel comfortable questioning female power. Even in equal or higher positions, the opening panels of the series make it clear that the world's infrastructure is built by men and that women, no matter what their title, are socially and politically below men. Showing political and military personnel is particularly important, as these are fields that are gendered masculine. Although more and more women are serving their country and running for office, they still must overcome misperceptions about their capabilities as women to be effective in a "man's world." Similarly, when her female colleagues realize that Hero was getting physical with her boyfriend, they take turns insulting her, calling her a "whorebag." This issue of "slut-shaming," in which women insult each other, passing judgment in a different way than would ever be placed on a man in the same position, is a major problem. In these brief moments, ways in which women are mistreated in a culture that values masculine power are portrayed realistically. Thus, Vaughan's pre-apocalyptic culture highlights real gender issues, but he suggests that only through apocalypse can the issues be solved. America's response to 9/11 relied on historic gender norms. Vaughan ultimately shows that constructing gender does not help save the world. Conversely, it's the blurring of the lines of masculinity and femininity that make it possible to save humanity through scientific innovation.

A countdown begins until we are placed in the exact moment when the plague strikes. In this moment, Yorick asks Beth to marry him, but doesn't get an answer. Long horizontal panels show the global chaos that ensues: bodies litter the ground at the stock exchange, soccer games, NASA, church, and several other gendered locations where men are typically in charge. In one of the most effective panels, seen in Figure 13, a female police officer raises a gun to her temple. This image appears twice in this first issue, once at the beginning of the

issue, and again at the end. This bookended moment is key to showing the relationship between enforced gender roles. The desperation and helplessness, even of a woman in a powerful position of authority, is meant to critique the ways in which women are made to feel in a hegemonic culture. This absurd reaction reflects the supposed helplessness that women are supposedly meant to feel in a world without patriarchy to guide them. This woman chooses to end her own life with a weapon generally associated with masculinity, rather than live in a world no longer ruled by patriarchy. In fact, to her knowledge it is completely devoid of men. This raises an interesting question: if she were the last woman on an Earth filled with men, would she feel more hopeful or have the same reaction?



Fig. 13. Police officer's suicide. From: *Y: The Last Man Deluxe Edition Book One*™ and © Brian K. Vaughan & Pia Guerra. Courtesy of DC Comics.

Her last words, “All of the men are dead,” in her final, hopeless moments creates a ridiculous and stunning opening to this post-apocalyptic world. A full page follows this image where Yorick and Ampersand, still alive, aren’t sure of what has happened, immediately diminishing this woman’s decision. This woman chose to end her own life—a very personal and private decision—based on the possibility that all the men are dead. Realistically, she has no way of knowing for sure if this is true, but the very possibility of living in a world without men gives her a feeling of purposelessness—what is life without men? She does not even want to consider such a bleak future.

As readers, we can assume that Yorick, as the only surviving human male, will fill the role of the post-apocalyptic savior of humanity. After months of hiding out, Yorick finally leaves his New York neighborhood on a quest to find his girlfriend, who is studying abroad in Australia. We later learn that before their phone call was interrupted, Beth was planning to end their relationship because she believed that they were headed in separate directions, Beth forward and Yorick immobile. While Beth takes active control of her own life Yorick is content to sit back and wait for life to happen around him. He has a bachelor's degree in English, but makes a living by doing street magic, specializing as an escape artist "who can't escape his apartment" because he can't find a real job (Vaughan 20). The obvious joke about English majors aside, Yorick's demeanor suggests that he hasn't really been trying all that hard to make progress in his life. His occupation as an escape artist matches his personality perfectly. He only seeks to escape responsibility and opportunity. Post-apocalypse, his main goal is to find his girlfriend. The apocalypse gives Yorick a *raison d'être*, but his quest is a selfish one. Deciding to go find her is likely the most active decision he's ever made, but it did, of course, take a widespread catastrophe to get him to take control over his own life. Yet, this control allows Yorick to ignore his responsibility as he defines his own life by the life of another.

Yorick doesn't seem to understand the near impossibility of this task, nor that his very existence on earth is more important than finding Beth. Rather than wanting to help discover the answer of how he survived the man-slaughter or gendercide, he runs away to find Beth, thus escaping any responsibility as the expected savior of the world. As he travels, he wears a gas mask to hide his identity and gender. He hides his identity *without knowing* that he faces many dangers as the only surviving man on earth; his decision to hide his

identity is only so that he can hide from his responsibility as a man. The disguise essentially unsexes him, removing entirely his masculine identity. It is eluded to early on in the series that not only was Yorick an English major, but his father was an English professor who insisted upon naming Yorick and his sister Hero after minor Shakespeare characters. It is safe to assume that he has a well-rounded background in literary tropes and themes. It's very likely that Yorick understands the last-man-on-earth trope, that he will be humanity's savior. However, his name accurately reflects the resistance he feels towards his important status. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Yorick was a dead jester whose skull was unearthed, inspiring Prince Hamlet's monologue about life, death, and existence. There is a difference between living and existing, between active and passive. Vaughan's Yorick simply exists. Nothing about Yorick makes him the best candidate for humanity's salvation; he just happens to be the only male who survives. Wearing a disguise allows him to continue existing without allowing the possibility of undertaking responsibilities.

Keeping his gender secret helps him travel, however, and two months after the genocide, Yorick's first interaction on the road is with a former supermodel whose new career is to dispose of all the bodies. Although this interaction is brief, it sets up this post-male world and establishes a number of key pieces of information. First, the supermodel complains that the worst part of the apocalypse is that she had breast augmentation surgery right before everything happened, a surgery she now feels was a waste of money. This suggests that the surgery was not something she did for herself, but rather for the men who would be looking at her body. In a world without men, preconceived notions of beauty no longer apply. Second, she tells Yorick that RFK stadium has been converted to a crematorium for all the men. Because the stadium was home to NFL football games, the

surviving women used it as the final resting place for men. The implication is that RFK (and other male-gendered spaces) is not a usable space for women. And lastly, she places blame on a familiar enemy, telling Yorick that “everybody knows the Arabs did it” (46). This echoes the racist perceptions found in our post-9/11 culture, wherein any small event or concern was blindly blamed on a universally feared and despised enemy, one that seeks to destroy the American way of life. Altogether, this short conversation illuminates gender issues and cultural biases present in post-apocalyptic American culture.

Yorick’s gender is revealed when Ampersand becomes hyper and removes his gas mask. In order to prove that Yorick is indeed a man, the model grabs his genitals and says “I don’t believe it! You’re a real man... but just barely” (Vaughan 50). This is one of many instances in the series where Yorick’s dignity is shaken. His masculinity is continually questioned when he reveals himself to others. Although he has already chosen a passive lifestyle, surely these insults don’t inspire him to feel like the most powerful man in the world. Yorick escapes the model—escaping being his specialty—and continues on his quest.

Once he arrives to Washington D.C. to see his mother, Representative Brown, there are several issues taking place at the White House. One issue is that because all of the men died, the secretary of agriculture is appointed president of the United States, although she does not believe she is qualified. She accepted her position as secretary as well as the line of command when she took the job, but even she would prefer to see a man in charge before herself. Women are programmed to believe that men should be leaders. In a world without men, many women are forced to step up to responsibilities in ways that they have never been asked to before. However, two groups of women do appear willing to do what it takes to establish control. One group, the Daughters of the Amazon, will be discussed later. The

second is a group of conservative widows whose husbands held seats in Congress before the apocalypse. These women arrive to the White House, guns blazing, to claim the seats of their dead husbands. Representative Brown says that the women are worse than the threat of terrorism and locks Yorick in a bunker to protect him from the impending shootout. Because he has a “responsibility to the world now,” his mother tried to keep him out of the range of gunfire (60). One woman is shot before Yorick finds his way out of the bunker, one of many important attempts to escape from his responsibility to the world. Knowing Yorick’s penchant towards unreliability and irresponsibility, his mother decides that Agent 355, an agent of the Culper Ring, should escort him to find Dr. Allison Mann, the scientist who, by studying Yorick, may find the key to humanity’s survival.

This journey is fraught with difficulty. On their way out of town, Yorick discovers that the Washington Monument has been transformed into a makeshift shrine to the dead men. He mocks the choice of using the phallic symbol for the shrine, but Agent 355 reminds him that women weren’t the ones who built it, insinuating that men are the ones obsessed with phallic structures and symbolic representations of power. When 355 doesn’t want to stop at the shrine, Yorick sneaks away to take a look. When the Amazons arrive and begin defacing the shrine, he unveils himself and stands up against the group. Because he is outnumbered, he takes quite a beating before daring one woman “just go ahead and kill me already” (Vaughan 102). Agent 355 eventually steps in, but waits long enough to try to teach him a lesson that he is not invincible like he was before the apocalypse, when being a white male would automatically put him in a safe position.

Once these Amazons return to their leader, Victoria, and tell her about Yorick, the Amazon mission becomes centered on killing Yorick because he represents the last remnant

of tyrannical patriarchy. Feminists to the extreme, this group believes that Mother Earth was simply rectifying a mistake by killing all the men on the planet. They have no interest in the survival of man, citing patriarchal domination as the cause of all of humanity's suffering. They believe that only by killing Yorick can women survive in a peaceful, non-oppressive world. The Amazons become the real-world representation of the type of perceived feminism that supposedly pushed men out of their natural hero modes to begin with and put our country at risk for an attack like 9/11 in the first place. But they also reflect an oppressive desire to eliminate historical gender ideologies.

Inherent in the idea of eliminating oppression, however, is an obvious contradiction. In their desire for peace and solidarity, these women practice their own violent domination and oppression. The Amazon women stop at nothing to find Yorick, killing innocent women along the way. The members of this gang are brainwashed by their leader, Victoria, into mutilating their own bodies and killing fellow compatriots in defending feminism against the ills of patriarchy. These women view *all* men as destroyers of women. According to the Amazon rhetoric, male biology determines that men can be nothing more than dictators, rapists, serial killers, and monsters. As controlled by their own hormones and DNA, men don't have a choice as to whether or not they are a part of the oppressive patriarchy and therefore must be destroyed.

Yorick's position in a post-apocalyptic world is contradictory as well. As the potentially most powerful person on the planet, he meekly hides his identity and wants nothing to do with the salvation of humanity. And despite his masculine gender, he is an ineffectual man who must constantly be protected by his female counterpart 355, a woman

who rescues him on numerous occasions, thus inverting the damsel in distress myth that is so often present in the wake of mass trauma, and was especially after 9/11.

Another of Yorick's contradictory issues is the fact that he is a smart, likeable guy who makes really, really dumb decisions. The reader becomes frustrated with Yorick time and time again for causing trouble, disobeying orders, and getting himself into dangerous situations that require 355's assistance. Her strength and constant protection emasculate Yorick, who has already chosen his path of selfish stubbornness in the face of tribulation. In several ways, Yorick's post-apocalyptic personality matches the contextual mindset in 2001 New York City, the time in which the series began. Living in New York City exposes Yorick not only to the lived trauma of the city, but also the post-9/11 responses of masculine heroes and subsequent expectations for all men. His natural tendency towards fleeing is enhanced when he sees the ways in which he can't match up to the heroes that came before him. Like Yorick, post-9/11 New Yorkers felt ineffectual in the wake of mass trauma. Yorick's feeling of impotence matches the emasculated, helpless feeling felt across the country following the attacks, but Vaughan's post-apocalyptic world differs from the response of our post-9/11 culture's resurgence of the protective male/dependent victim female mythology. Instead, Vaughn inverts this mythology by giving a female scientist the role of savior, by giving a woman the strongest physical presence in the novel, and by giving a man the weakest.

Vaughan uses the trauma and grief of suffering New Yorkers to shape Yorick's character and his evolution from boy to man. As mentioned earlier, Yorick's flippant attitude towards life doesn't inspire confidence in the reader that he can be humanity's savior. Rather than take problems seriously, Yorick frequently jokes around. *This*, Vaughn reminds us, is how some people deal with trauma. There are tiny flashes of Yorick's pain, but he chooses an

outward appearance of joviality in order to cope, just as others put on an outwardly hyper-masculine appearance, while others cling to gender mythology. Even Yorick names Clint Eastwood and Chuck Palahniuk as better candidates to be the last man on earth. Eastwood for being perfect representation of historical cowboy masculinity and Palahniuk for being a more contemporary representation of reclaiming masculine strength in his book *Fight Club*.

Eventually, those flashes of pain crack his façade and we find out that Yorick has a death wish. Agent 355 drops Yorick off at a safe haven with her friend Agent 711 while she



Fig. 14. Twin Towers. From: *Y: The Last Man Deluxe Edition Book Two*™ and © Brian K. Vaughan & Pia Guerra. Courtesy of DC Comics.

and Dr. Mann try to find a medical facility to care for Ampersand, who was injured during an attack on the group. Agent 711 drugs Yorick, ties him up, and then wakes him. While Yorick hangs helplessly, bound by rope, 711 dresses in bondage gear and verbally assaults him, accusing him of being gay because he hasn't tried to have sex with a woman since the apocalypse took place. To push Yorick further, she injects him with more serum and forces him to talk about his first sexual experience with a woman. Following a page of Polaroids of sexual imagery is a panel featuring the Twin Towers during sunrise. In Figure 14 Yorick says, "The next morning, I saw the most horrifying thing I've ever seen" (Vaughan 204).

Given the juxtaposition of those words to the image of the towers, the reader can assume that Yorick is talking about the horrifying events of 9/11. However, in the next few panels he describes finding the used tissues from the night's sexual escapade covered in flies: "There were dozens of them, feasting on my lust, my depravity, my *weakness*." Yorick's feelings of emasculation begin before the events of September 11th, given that he describes this moment as the worst one of his life. This image of his masculinity becoming nothing more than insect food leads to his feelings of masculine failure. Visualizing his sexual essence and procreative ability as garbage traumatizes him. That the flies want his leftover semen when Beth refused to let him finish inside her permanently alters Yorick's perception of his body and his masculinity. Throughout his post-apocalyptic misadventure, he has used Beth as his excuse for not trying to be with any other women when in actuality he is not that interested in sex in the first place. He knows that this does not match up to the normative standards of masculinity, and understands his failure. But, ironically, Agent 711's efforts to make Yorick feel emasculated and traumatized help him better understand his own actions and masculine identity. Using abusive sexual language, clothing, and behavior was the only way to take away Yorick's power to avoid thinking about his own life. Agent 711 allows Yorick to accept and fight against his death wish.

With no one else on earth who can understand his specific pain, Yorick must face his trauma alone. Yorick makes stupid decisions and puts himself in massive amounts of danger because he would rather die than be the last man. There are many, many examples of Yorick daring someone to kill him or putting himself into risky situations that he can't escape without 355's help. Likewise, there are many examples of Yorick's constant humiliation as his masculinity is unknowingly called into question by others who mock his "manly"

disguise. These physical and emotional attacks on his masculine identity take a toll on his already fragile ego. We learn that before Yorick leaves New York, he sees the body of the female police officer who could no longer live in a world free of patriarchy, and that Yorick envies the men whose struggles are over, and recognizes that “the perfect answer” to his existence would be dying, and “letting the women save themselves” (Vaughan 60-2). Yorick picks up the police officer’s gun, but obviously he never pulls the trigger (see Figure 15).

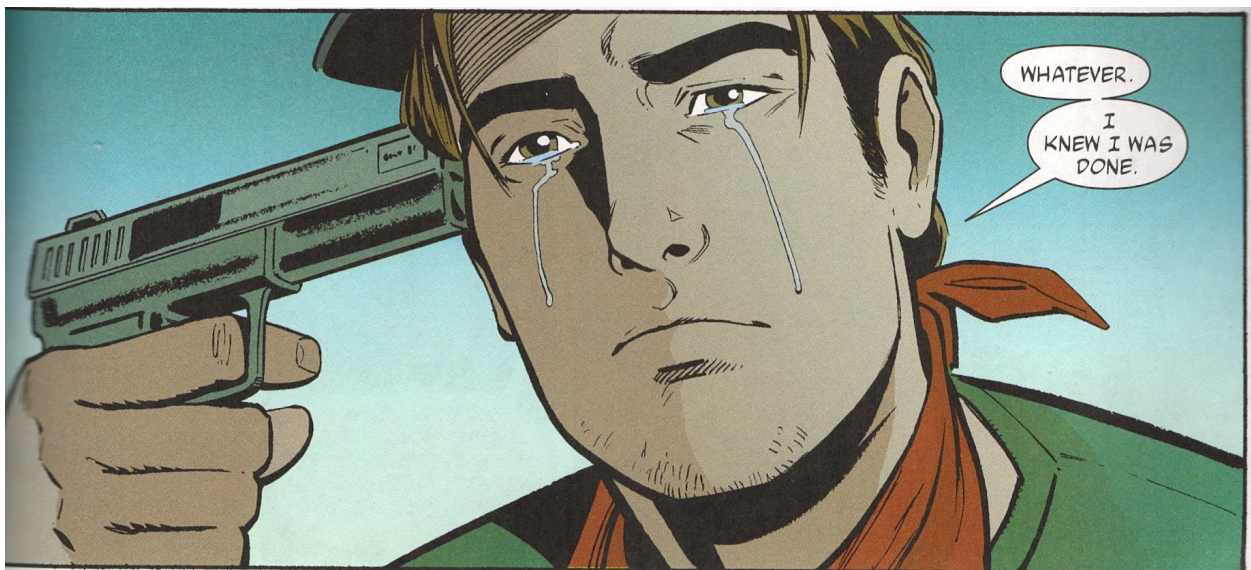


Fig. 15. Yorick's failed suicide. From: *Y: The Last Man Deluxe Edition Book Two*™ and © Brian K. Vaughan & Pia Guerra. Courtesy of DC Comics.

He claims that he simply changed his mind, but 711 forces Yorick to admit that he was too much of a coward to pull the trigger himself. She also forces him to understand that all of his stupid actions have been to take the personal responsibility off of his shoulders, forcing someone else to do the job for him. As Yorick hits rock bottom, he has a vision, and fights to survive 711’s fake drowning attempt. She admits to him that everything she did and said was a part of a suicide intervention. Grateful for his new perspective, Yorick forgoes his suicidal desires and is willing to become part of the solution to save humanity. It was

difficult for Yorick to admit his deepest fears and failures, but depraved sexual humiliation freed him from his past. He no longer needs to feel the weight of sole savior and manly hero. The pressures of masculinity and trauma no longer shape his identity, and he is able to move forward.

It is not fair to say that Yorick's decision to live is veiled support for Edelman's theory of reproductive futurism, a homophobic and politically-charged subject that views hetero-normativity as the only way to preserve the future. Yorick does not choose to live so that he can repopulate the world himself. He chooses to become a scientific specimen, a lab rat whose DNA might hold the answer to saving the world. In this way, Yorick is able to maintain his passive role, even in the realm of procreation. This "perversion of nature" might go against the natural order of things, but heterosexuality does not ensure a utopian society. The homosexual relationships in the post-apocalyptic world of *Y: The Last Man* do not somehow prevent procreation; procreation persists because of scientific innovation. The notion of the homosexual death drive is laid to rest; the final dagger in this argument is that Dr. Allison Mann, a lesbian, is the one who saves humanity. As women no longer need men to procreate, Vaughan's message is not to suggest that the world would be better off without men. Rather, the metaphor suggests that that world would be better off if not confined by any gender roles.

Despite being a post-apocalyptic narrative, the series isn't really about the apocalypse. Neither is this story about finding out exactly what caused the plague. Vaughan leaves this part of the story open, allowing us to consider the ways in which we, as a culture, are culpable in the perversion of our future. Vaughan's post-apocalyptic world can be considered a utopia because it doesn't matter how the world fell apart; all that matters is how

the survivors put it back together. It takes years of pain and suffering for things to start falling into place as survivors realize that letting go of the pre-apocalyptic social constructions and expectations will result in a world full of cooperation. As the series begins to wrap up, everyone is held accountable for their actions in perpetuating evil in the world. In reflecting on the post-apocalyptic world, an artist explains that women don't know anything about love or beauty. The men have been gone for years, yet the world is just as violent and terrible as ever. This point is not lost on the reader, who will immediately recognize violence, corruption, and deceit as familiar issues, issues that seemed to be temporarily placed on hold immediately following 9/11.

Although a posthuman world may be considered unnatural, the scientifically regenerated world is a peaceful place. Vaughan's intention was not to tell an apocalyptic tale, but to shed light on the artificiality of gender roles and constructions. Removing unnatural categories like "masculine" and "feminine" along with their restrictions allowed for the world to grow in a new direction, one freed from the confines of manufactured gender binaries. Yorick's unwillingness to be the hero just because he was the last man alive was the first step in a gender-free society, one in which decisions are made democratically and the world functions on shared responsibilities.

Unlike Yorick Brown who is unwilling to take on any responsibility, Peter Parker—better known as Spiderman—faces adversity head on; however, his actions often put others in harms way. The new Spiderman franchise, rebooted in 2012, shows the various ways in which post-apocalyptic masculinity wreaks physical and emotional havoc on individuals as well as society at large, especially within a post-9/11 context. While this reboot occurred only five years following the release of *Spiderman 3*—the final film of the previous

Spiderman franchise—the newest iteration of Spiderman provides far superior insight into the realm of masculine responsibility and the consequences that befall those whose masculinity fails. Both the hero and the villains of this franchise suffer from and react against issues of emasculation; in each case, the characters look to posthuman solutions to combat their physical and emotional failures and to fight back against those who emasculated them in the first place—often the unrealistic expectations of hegemonic masculinity is to blame.

In *The Amazing Spiderman* (Marc Webb, 2012) the myth of Spiderman is politicized and complicated by domestic terrorism via the release of a biological agent in New York City. Even though Peter is a high school student, not yet a “man,” he is willing to take on the responsibility conferred on him by his powers, which developed after he was bitten by a scientifically altered spider. Like most superhero origin stories, an accident changed Peter’s life forever; however, the trauma of losing his important male role models—his father, and then his uncle—is what drives him to become a hero. His heroism is only possible after his body has genetically mutated, as if to suggest that a weak boy can only achieve manly heroic potential through posthuman, unnatural means (not unlike Yorick Brown’s rise to importance). However, because of Peter’s small stature even as a costumed superhero, New Yorkers (NYPD in particular) are quite distrusting of Spiderman. This distrust stems partially from his vigilante status, but mainly from the fact that the concept of heroism is so heavily linked to the image of masculinity. Heroes are not skinny, spandex wearing vigilantes. In the alternate New York of the film—a New York not so different from our own—perceptions of strength, heroism, and valor are intertwined with specific images of masculinity: the handsome high school bully, the uniformed police officer, the hard hat wearing crane operator. In other words, men whose specific style of dress, occupation, and physical strength

determine their masculine success. In the superhero world, male superheroes are designed with similar images in mind: “Super hero identities are constructed along very gendered lines... [C]reators visually emphasized their musculature *and* gender differences” (Taylor 345). The ways in which Superman and Batman, for example, have only gotten more and more muscular over time—almost comically so—is meant to differentiate hero (man) from rescuee (woman). That both Superman and Batman have gotten unrealistically large indicates a fundamental shift in the understanding and expectations of masculinity and heroism. Big, strong men are the heroes who protect the weak, those who are physically incapable of doing so on their own because of the greatly exaggerated size and strength of the manly caped crusaders. Spiderman, however, has retained his boyish stature throughout the years because the original creator didn’t envision Peter as a handsome, overly muscled caricature. Thus, in the film, this lack of overt masculine strength is confusing to all New Yorkers, whether they are criminals or law enforcement.

Another reason why Spiderman is not immediately taken seriously as a strong male hero is because he, and all superheroes, appear to be androgynous: “super-heroes...seem to have absolutely nothing underneath their tight fitting tights; they all appear to be androgynous beings” (Reitberger and Fuchs 120). Every superhero wears a skintight costume in order to maximize flexibility. Many superheroes enhance their musculature by adding armor or padding to make their bodies bigger. Spiderman chooses not to manipulate his appearance in this way, likely because the streamlined red and blue costume is essential for the functionality of his web-slinging skills. But the gigantic, armor enhanced crime-fighters share the issue of “anatomical erasure” with Spiderman (Taylor 353). For the Superman and Batman type of heroes, this ironic issue is at odds with what the rest of their bodies convey;

the image of strong, heroic masculinity is simultaneously an image of castration and asexuality. For Spiderman, the unsexing of his image—the lack of any type of stereotypical masculine bulk—promotes that idea that heroism can be unlinked to masculinity, but again only in the posthuman circumstances wherein Peter finds himself.

Prior to his biological changes, Peter was an outcast in high school. He was a quiet photographer and skateboarder who, even when keeping to himself, was bullied by the school's resident tough guy, Eugene "Flash" Thompson. Flash represents everything that Peter would like to be, but is not: handsome, strong, and desired. Peter also understands that the differences between the two—strong/weak, popular/unpopular—lead them to be treated in unfair, unequal ways. Shortly after Peter is physically bullied by Flash, he is also chastised for skateboarding in the hallway. In a case where one offense—bullying—is surely worthy of punishment, Flash escapes reprimand because his behaviors fit the archetypal definition of the manly jock, one whose behaviors and appearance command respect in their masculine representation. Flash's behaviors fit with the norm, the expectation of masculinity. When Flash beats Peter up outside the school, the only person who steps in to stop it is Gwen Stacey, Flash's tutor and Peter's love interest. That Peter is unable to defend himself and must be rescued by a woman contributes to his negative sense of self worth, his perceived masculine failure. Peter has no way of reclaiming masculine power, but even then it's Spiderman who attains the masculine adoration that Peter wants.

After Peter is bitten by the genetically altered spider, he becomes immensely powerful. His strength is magnified to the point that he can't turn a doorknob without ripping a door from its hinges. His morning routine begins with Peter smashing the alarm clock, squirting all the toothpaste from the tube, and pulling faucet handles off in a hilarious

slapstick disaster. Of course this exaggeration should be comical to the viewer, but it should also serve as a cautionary tale about the powers of all-powerful masculinity, an image to which men in American culture are meant to adhere. Beyond the funny morning problems is the realistic issue of power falling into the wrong hands. Although we know that Peter is not going to become a villain, his path from teenage *boy* to *Spiderman* still leads to tragic circumstances to those closest to him. As he achieves more agency and strength through his superhero activities, he allows his newfound confidence to cloud his judgment. Superheroes are bound to have enemies, as he is warned later in the film. He chooses to ignore this advice and it leads to the deaths of three important characters. Peter's regeneration of masculinity comes at the expense of others. These tragic events are part of the long-term effects of masculinity, but the initial introduction of masculinity requires an adjustment for Peter, who has never been in a position to command power and respect. Because the spider was genetically altered, and because Peter's new strengths and abilities are beyond human capability, Peter essentially becomes posthuman and postmasculine. The spider was a literal attack on Peter's body, one that infected him with unrealistic hypermasculine capabilities. To become posthuman is the only way that Peter can transcend his weaknesses while simultaneously conforming to the foundational concept of masculinity: physical strength and ideological heroism. However, Peter does not initially use his new power responsibly. First, he wants revenge.

Peter's vengeance-driven display of masculine bravado occurs in a fitting place: the high school gym, a male-dominated space. Flash and his buddies are playing a game of basketball when the ball bounces across the gym and knocks over a paint can, ruining a poster that his female classmate was working on. When she accuses Flash of spilling the

paint on purpose, not only does Flash not apologize, he threatens her, telling her to watch her back. This astonishing physical threat by a male student to a female student pushes Peter to stand up for her, although her best interest was not his priority. When the ball bounces to that side of the gym again, Peter grabs it and holds onto the ball with his genetically altered sticky fingers so Flash can't take it from him. To Flash and to everyone else, Peter still appears to be the scrawny, weak outcast, but his appearance is misleading. Peter uses his small stature to further emasculate Flash. Peter drives to the net, leaps up to the hoop, and smashes the backboard with a slam-dunk. The glass rains down on the court, and Flash is embarrassed to be beaten by a lesser man. Peter's Michael Jordan impression will surely elevate his masculine status, while diminishing Flash's. The basketball court is a masculine space, one that Peter was unlikely to have entered successfully before this day. For Flash, this is likely the first time he has been dominated by another player, especially one whose physical appearance and demeanor appears so nonthreatening, non-masculine. Although Peter's aggression towards Flash stems from his own desire for revenge, this attack against hegemonic masculinity is important. Not only did Flash assault Peter, but he threatened a female classmate. Although authority figures within the school have certainly been willing to look the other way to allow for Flash's masculine identity to become the norm and the standard to which all students must measure themselves, Peter's attack is a metaphoric revolution against hegemonic masculinity. Given the temporal distance from the events of September 11th, Peter's reaction is representative of all those men whose masculinity did not measure up to the kind of masculinity that became celebrated in post-9/11 American culture. Similarly, while news pundits and other media talking heads were quick to blame feminism for issues in our pre-9/11 society, Peter represents the backlash against threatening women.

In seeing Flash's masculine behavior—bullying both men and women—rewarded by popularity and free-reign of the school, Peter's previous feelings of masculine inadequacy influence him to use his newfound powers irresponsibly to retaliate. Irresponsible vengeance also leads to his uncle's death, the first of several people close to Peter who will die.

After a fight with his uncle, Peter storms out of the house and goes into the city. When he doesn't have enough money for milk, the clerk—a larger, brooding fellow—emasculates Peter by making it sound like Peter is a child whose father didn't give him enough milk money. The next customer takes money from the register and Peter lets the thief leave, allowing his anger towards the clerk to cloud his judgment. Although Peter's desire for vengeance keeps him from acting, his uncle (who was out looking for Peter at the time) tries to do the right thing and stop the robber, who shoots him. Peter must live with the knowledge that if he had just taken action in the first place, his uncle would be alive. He uses this anger and newfound pursuit of justice to pursue criminals in the city, especially in the hopes that he will locate the man who killed his uncle.

Ultimately, Peter creates Spiderman as his new identity. Interestingly, compared to other superhero costumes that magnify masculine features, Peter decides to go with a form-fitting, if not revealing, costume that shows that he is not very muscular looking at all. Peter's strength may come as a surprise to witnesses, while proving the point that heroes do not need to act or look any specific way, thus complicating gender expectations. However, while this may inspire confidence to outcasts who may look up to Spiderman, Peter is biologically posthuman and postmasculine. His particular set of skills is no more possible than hypermasculinity. Additionally, Peter chooses to include “man” in his alter ego name, as if there is concern that his slight build and form fitting costume will not read masculine

enough. Despite the fact that Peter's vigilante alter ego was partially created and designed based on his feelings of emasculation and desire for revenge, more importantly his superhero behavior stems from his desire for wholeness.

Peter's wholeness can only be achieved by learning the truth about his parents, his father in particular. His quest to learn the truth permeates all of his actions and thoughts. The trauma of being left behind by his father and never understanding why is Peter's greatest trauma, and one that leads to the downfall of those around him. This issue is not unique to Peter, as "each time [superheroes] don their costume, they respond to a defining trauma from their past and, in fighting crime in the present, ritualistically relive and rewrite that original moment of trauma" (Yockey). Arguably, this can be true for villains as well.

The villain of the film, Dr. Connors, is another character in search of wholeness stemming from trauma. His scientific research aims to regenerate human limbs and tissue, a cause close to his own heart as he was born with only one fully operational arm. Dr. Connors is not a villain for the entire film, but is pushed towards desperate measures when Oscorp fires him for refusing to start human trials too early on in the research process. However, it's clear that Dr. Connors has spent his life feeling as though he is an outsider. After learning that Dr. Connors worked with his father, Peter looked Dr. Connors up online and discovered a number of publications. One, titled "A World Without Weakness," indicates Connors' perception of his own disability as weakness. Although he is a brilliant scientist whose disability does not hold him back, the fact that his body is incomplete makes him feel as though he is weak, incomplete, emasculated. The betrayal of his own body pushes Connors toward desperation.

In his desperation for wholeness he injects himself with an untested chemical that he hopes will generate human bone and tissue, thus regenerating the arm he is missing. Both Peter and Dr. Connors are shaped by a sense of loss, but the posthuman (or unnatural) circumstances that change them do not necessarily heal their broken identities. Technology merely reconstructs and enhances the power of their bodies; technologically enhancing the human body does away with the “natural self.” In destroying the natural individual, the posthuman body “undergo[es] continuous construction and reconstruction” leading to an unstable, uncontrollable identity (Hayles 3). Dr. Connors thus he goes from innocuous scientist to domestic terrorist whose body is literally constructed and reconstructed each time he injects the chemical that transforms him into the Lizard.

While Dr. Connors felt a responsibility toward the scientific community, Lizard goes beyond the goals of healing ills to “finding perfection.” He plans to release a biological agent in the air of New York City so every citizen will be transformed beyond the evolutionary scale to something greater and perfect. More important, yet left unsaid, is that everyone will be equal in the world shaped by the Lizard. While Dr. Connors felt weak and emasculated throughout his life due to his disability, Lizard plans for all humans to transform to the same lizard/human hybrids. The homogenized population will therefore never have outcasts because everyone will be the same. Lizard’s airborne toxin will eradicate gender roles, echoing Haraway’s “utopian dream of a monstrous world without gender” (181). No longer separated into binary categories of weak and strong, masculine or feminine, there will be no inequality. Unfortunately, the ironic issue is that in reacting against compulsory gender and body roles, the Lizard becomes the hegemonic discourse that once made him feel so oppressed. Peter creates the same ironic issue in making it seem as though any man is

capable of achieving superhero success, given his small stature, when in actuality his genetically-altered body makes it literally impossible for any human to match up to his capabilities. It appears that posthumanism is the key to weakening gender binaries, but it does not promise answers.

Another way of considering this issue is by framing it within the realm of the cyborg, an identity shaped by social realities and technologies. Scientific innovation creates both heroes and villains, in the case of this new Spiderman franchise, but there is also potential to create a new world in which gender constructions do not restrict identity. “The cyborg opens a place in politics for disempowering master narratives” such as gender oppression (Gray 192). The master narrative of masculinity in particular is what Dr. Connors seeks to destroy. It is the perception of his own masculine failure that makes him strive for a world “without weakness,” without body imperfection, without unfair masculine expectations.

This is a particularly important issue in post-9/11 culture, where certain types of masculinity became more valuable and celebrated than others. There are other echoes of rewritten masculine heroism as the film climaxes with an injured Spiderman soaring towards the Oscorp skyscraper—the tallest in Manhattan—toward two blue beams of light, uncannily similar to the ones that light up at Ground Zero. The rugged, blue-collar workers of the city—crane operators, construction workers—help an injured Spiderman by lining up in a row for easier web-slinging and swinging towards the building. As NYPD officers rush in and up the stairs as heroes, New Yorkers are running through the streets away from the apocalyptic smoke. All of this looks familiar to an American film audience. This uncanny representation may not be an explicit reminder, but subconsciously these are intensely familiar images. The purpose here is to show that anyone (although more specifically, any

man) can be a hero and that even the strongest person in the city still needs help. And Peter does need help defeating the domestic terrorist Lizard. Gwen's father, Captain Stacy, delivers the antidote and distracts Lizard long enough for Peter to deploy it and save the city.

Unfortunately, Captain Stacy dies from wounds sustained by the Lizard. The fallen NYPD captain's funeral is one more heartbreaking echo of the aftermath of 9/11, when the city was overloaded with funerals for weeks on end. The bagpipes' somber tone echoed throughout the city, lingering on feelings of immense emotional and physical devastation. This communal sense of loss created a united feeling, and a similar reaction occurs in the film after Spiderman and Captain Stacy are able to save the city from the Lizard's terrorist attack.

The breaking down of gender and hero boundaries following this apocalyptic attack makes the city unite together. Even Peter and Flash become friends at high school, as representative of the way that our culture united together following the events of 9/11. While the film is not directly representative of the events of 9/11, there are striking visuals that remind the viewer, perhaps subconsciously, about the actual events. The film itself represents the societal aftermath in terms of damaging gender expectations, as well as the dangers of unchecked desires for vengeance. For Peter, his obsession with justice led to just two deaths. For the Bush White House so obsessed with immediate retribution, the ill-advised entry to Iraq cost thousands of lives. The most famous quotes from comic books is one that should not stay true just to the colorful superhero pages. "With great power comes great responsibility" is something that goes beyond Peter Parker's selfish mistakes, beyond George W. Bush's alleged selfish motivations, and beyond the concept of restrictive and oppressive gender ideology; actions based on retribution, selfishness, or compulsion will have grave consequences, as each of the previous examples show.

In *The Amazing Spiderman 2* (Marc Webb, 2014), the focus changes from biological to technological engineering as posthuman and postmasculine constructs. While Peter deals with the guilt of Captain Stacy's death and pushes closer to finding out the truth about his parents, the new villains in this film suffer from issues embedded in postmodern culture. Our identities are so intertwined with technology that it is nearly impossible to detach the human element from the artifice of machines. The overreliance on technology is visible on a daily basis as people stare down at their smartphones in an effort to stay connected to the vehicle of humanity's exploration. Conversely, our technological feats—from space exploration to medical breakthroughs—are the pinnacle of human achievement. "Machines are essentially extensions of our embodied agency," which means that the human element is embedded in the technology that makes it possible to accomplish such feats (Graham 204). Without creative innovation and application, not all the technology in the world can solve the world's issues alone. The symbiotic relationship between human and machine makes it possible for both to thrive. An imbalance of power, however, can lead to more problems than benefits.

While technology obviously has innumerable benefits to society, all-powerful technology in the wrong hands could wreak devastating consequences on humanity. In the case of this film, it is established early on that Oscorp is taking control of the city's electrical grid. The new technology is corporate designed and owned, which gives Oscorp immense power to control the lives of all those who live below the skyscraper's commanding shadow. This enormous shadow is a metaphor for the reliance and blind trust put into technology and its creators. This is a cautionary tale about our inability to break free of the physical and ideological structures.

Most significant to the discussion of breaking free of structures is Max Dillon, an electrical engineer for Oscorp, who goes from being emasculated nobody to hypermasculine cyborg after an accident on the job gives him electrical powers. Max's transformation is very similar to *Ex Machina*'s Mitchell Hundred, whose accident gave him the power to control machines. Just as with Hundred, unchecked power is too much responsibility, especially when both characters are overcompensating for their previous issues of emasculation as well as the painful trauma of their accidents.

Before the accident, Max is all but invisible to the world around him because he does not fit the masculine norm. He is unassuming, unconfident, and a bit nerdy. Even though he works for an extremely powerful company and is extremely intelligent, no one sees him as intelligent or strong. A snarky coworker even doubts that Max designed the power grid for Oscorp, belittling him for being late to work. Max was late because of an attempted plutonium heist thwarted by Spiderman. As Max walked awkwardly down the street, passersby took no notice of him. He was constantly bumped into by other people on the sidewalk, each New Yorker in a hurry to their destination. Max's pleas for space go ignored until someone knocks blueprints out of his hands. Again, his pleas for help go unheard as he desperately tries to collect each rolled blue sheet of paper. He is almost hit by a car, but Spiderman saves Max and his blueprints. He also tells Max that he isn't a nobody, and that he's special and important. Max takes this interaction very seriously, ultimately forming an obsession with Spiderman. He imagines that Spiderman got him a birthday cake and has conversations with Spiderman while alone in his apartment. And while it was clear that Max's coworker was condescending to him, the only reason Max got upset during their conversation was because he insulted Spiderman. Immediately, Max attacks the coworker

and begins choking him and defending Spiderman. However, the film quickly cuts back to a benign Max, having only imagined his violent outburst. This scene is reminiscent of *American Psycho* and all of Patrick Bateman's imagined murderous proclivities resulting from a sense of emasculation in postmodern society. Max suffers from the same affliction. His strength is intelligence, the kind that was denounced after 9/11 as an incorrect form of masculinity. Max knows that violence is key to reclaiming some semblance of masculine strength and respect, but he does not possess the willpower to behave in this manner. Fighting against ideological repression is not an easy battle, of course, so Max chooses to repress his anger.

In the elevator, he strikes up a conversation with Gwen Stacy about Spiderman because a story about Spiderman is on the news. He tells her that he envies how many people look at Spiderman, revealing not only his obsession but also his own emasculation and feelings of invisibility. Intellectual power is not enough to make a man, at least not according to post-9/11 considerations of masculinity. At the end of this conversation, Max is thrilled when Gwen remembers his name, having just read it from his nametag. Unfortunately for him, this is the last good thing that will ever happen to him.

As he prepares to leave work, he is asked to stay and do some repairs. Despite the extremely dangerous nature of the work, no one stays to help even when he asks. So in the typical transformative manner in which heroes and villains are born, Max suffers from a horrific accident that electrocutes him to death. Oscorp refuses to take responsibility for the accident (not heeding the "with great power comes great responsibility" advice that is so pervasive throughout the films). Already knowing that Max was invisible, the company

decides that he needs to “stay invisible” so that the press doesn’t find out. Almost as if this is the last straw, Max reawakens with electric powers so he can finally right his wrongs.

Max’s feelings of invisibility stem from the real world masculinity crisis influenced by the hypermasculine response to 9/11 and the gender expectations that followed. In considering the ways in which manly men were seen as heroic and weak men—even if successful—were considered feminine, it’s easy to see how unfair gender expectations can lead to feelings of failure and invisibility. Adding to this complication is Max’s race. As a black man, his struggle with invisibility is even more distressing. Particularly given recent events in Ferguson, Missouri and New York City, riots and protests make it very clear that a specific faction of men in this country fear for their lives and refuse to accept their invisible status any longer. Their fear stems from systemic, ideological oppression. When their lives are taken by those in powerful positions, and when those men are not punished for their actions, black men everywhere are left to feel like their lives are invisible, unimportant, worthless. To combat this injustice against this pervasive threat, thousands have taken to the streets. All around the country, freeways and downtowns are clogged with protestors, forcing people to look at them and to listen. The film is almost an uncanny predictor of how much it takes for people to be heard. In the case of the 2014 protests, people must literally put their lives in danger by stopping traffic on the freeways. Max doesn’t have any power until after he is killed. It should not take such drastic, dangerous measures for people to be heard as they fight for equality.

Just as New York protestors brought traffic to a halt in Times Square, Max brings city life to a standstill. He is still building his electric powers, so the grid in Times Square is the perfect place to charge himself up. His transformation makes his newly blue skin glow so he

wears a hoodie so he does not stand out. When he opens a grate to grab hold of electrical wires, a police officer tells him to step away. A close up shot of Max's glowing blue face shadowed under a hooded sweatshirt compels the officer to pull his gun. While Max's glowing is certainly an extreme circumstance, it's not untrue that he was judged by his appearance to be worthy of drawing a weapon. In his delirious state, Max doesn't even seem to realize what he's doing, but the officer immediately imagines the worst about Max, given his appearance. New York is notorious for issues of police profiling and harassment, and while the alternate world of Spiderman has lizards and goblins as villains, the officer still seems to react too quickly to the situation. Max is confused and trying to explain that he didn't want to hurt anyone. Soon, Max realizes that his face is on all of the screens at Times Square and he becomes fascinated with his image, one that is familiar yet unfamiliar to him. At this point, the former electrical engineer admits that he just wants to be seen, inferring that he wants justice for his death.

When Spiderman arrives, Max has a brief amount of hope that the situation will be diffused and that the police officers that have arrived on scene will not hurt him. But when Peter does not remember Max's name, Max becomes very agitated. Because Spiderman made him feel so special, Max expected Spiderman—his best friend—would remember him. He also trusted Spiderman to keep him safe from trigger-happy police. When a shot is fired, Max's anger boils over. He destroys Times Square, smashing buildings to the ground. Spiderman, in an FDNY hat, blasts Max with a fire hose, ultimately ending the violent outburst.

The destruction of New York buildings is a pretty obvious visual parallel to the events of 9/11, but Spiderman's representation in this scene is also important to the

discussion of transformative hypermasculinity. Because Spiderman received so much attention after saving New York from Dr. Connors (in the first film), he becomes the new man, the quintessential representation of masculinity. Pairing this ideal with the image of an FDNY helmet drives the force of archetypal masculinity as being heroic. As FDNY by proxy, Spiderman defeats the other and defends New York. This image of heroic masculinity is familiar, and it is what truly separates Spiderman from his previous vigilante status. He is accepted not only by the people of New York, but also by NYPD and FDNY, as if acknowledging their shortcomings as protectors and as men. Yet, they also provide Spiderman with social acceptability.

As stated earlier, Spiderman's strength communicates an unrealistic standard of masculinity given Peter's posthuman status. While some of his gadgets are manmade and, therefore, attainable, his strength and healing abilities are not. Given his hyper-masculine capabilities as a genetically-altered posthuman, for any enemy to have a chance at besting him, they too must alter their bodies to posthuman status. Electro, as Max later refers to himself, as well as the Green Goblin and Rhino, the other villains in this film, transform their bodies to posthuman status. However, each posthuman transformation is still linked to human trauma and emasculation. This emasculation informs the ways in which these characters shape their posthuman identities and behaviors into excessive gender performances. As posthumans, each character has a blank slate: "Masculinity does not come naturally to the cyborg. The cyborg's masculinity is artifice all the way down, and all the phallic technofetishes conceal nothing but non-identity" (Fernbach 238). The masculine body is cultural symbol of political and ideological structures. The blank slate, or non-identity, gives the opportunity to go beyond hegemonic structures, but as superheroes and supervillains

demand power over everyone and everything, reliance on historical power structures and gender order is almost inescapable. Seeking power through masculine performance “whether the profit of power or the maximization of the glories of human potential, this process is fundamentally political” (Gray 11). The masculine form commands power, respect, and strength. These posthuman characters “make situationally specific choices from a cultural repertoire of masculine behavior” (Wetherell and Edley qtd. in Connell xix). While they have broken away from the physical notion of masculinity, they are incapable of escaping ideological masculinity, which informs their thoughts and behaviors. For Max, establishing his masculine control and power means eliminating Spiderman. While Peter initially sought power and control through his post-masculine status, his eventual cooperation with police and firefighters shows that he has recognized the downside of being posthuman and learned to share his power responsibly.

Max wants to live in a “world without power, without mercy, without Spiderman.” Of course, seeking a world without power doesn’t mean that Max wants equality; he just wants all the power to himself. He decides the fate of New York and Spiderman, who Max believes betrayed him. Seeking control of the city, however, is retribution for all the ways in which Max was oppressed by the system.

As Spiderman fights Electro at the power grid, Gwen arrives to help. She’s the one who pulls the switch, ultimately defeating Electro. There are several progressive moments in this film. Gwen defeating the enemy is one such moment; another happens when Peter discusses the identity of Spiderman, saying it could even be “Spiderwoman” because no one really knows for sure. But it’s not long before the film retreats to the stereotypical damsel in distress formula.

While Peter is busy dealing with Electro, Harry Osborn (heir to Oscorp) desperately searches for a cure for his terminal disease. After figuring out that the radioactive spiders were a part of an experiment at Oscorp and seeing the positive results on Spiderman, he asks Peter to help track down Spiderman and ask him for a sample of his blood. Harry hopes that whatever gave Spiderman regenerative powers can help Harry to overcome his disease. Because Peter knows that his own father's DNA is in the serum, he knows that the positive effects are only likely to happen to him. Not knowing the possible consequences this could have on Harry, Spiderman refuses to give his blood to Harry. In desperation, Harry injects himself with the serum he finds at Oscorp, which mangles and disfigures his body. Harry shows up to the electric grid, now the Green Goblin, and seeks revenge on Spiderman for not helping him. A long battle ensues, and Spiderman is unable to save Gwen. His spider web catches Gwen too late as she falls to her death in a devastatingly beautiful scene.

In slow motion, she falls down the clock tower, a still panic on her face, surrounded by tumbling cogs. The web catches her, and her head flings backward. She is too close to the ground, and the back of her head hits the floor. This scene is ripped straight from the comic books. In keeping with the Spiderman mythos, this scene is an important part of Peter's identity. To this point, the collateral damage he's caused to those he loves is far too much for him to handle. Truly, he is one of the more tortured superheroes. For Gwen, it's a devastating end to an extraordinarily promising life. Not only was she an intelligent scientist, interning at Oscorp in a male-dominated field while still in high school, but she was also a strong female character who helped to defeat villains in both of these films. Rather than relying on a male hero to save her, she used her own strength to be a hero on her own. Her death is one of many "women in refrigerator" moments in film and comics wherein a female character dies

to impact the life of a male character. Eventually, Gwen's death teaches Peter that he has to overcome his personal demons to do what is right. By returning to his responsibility as hero, he gives hope to the city of New York.

While Peter is still in the grieving process, he watches Gwen's graduation speech. In it, she stresses the importance of holding on to hope. She says, "We have to be greater than what we suffer," almost as if this speech was meant to speak directly to Peter. While the speech helps Peter to cope and to become Spiderman once more, her death still seems drastically unnecessary for Peter's character, given that he doesn't change very much afterwards. Yet, while her death may seem gratuitous, the audience can find value in her speech. We *must* hold on to hope. We *must* be greater than what we suffer.

We are living in tumultuous times. It is the hope of many that these times will lead to the overcoming of trauma and injustice. It's clear that there is much work to be done, yet hope remains. Shortly after 9/11, Rush Limbaugh blamed 9/11 on feminists. In December 2014 after two police officers were not indicted for killing unarmed black men, conservative activist Ben Carson blamed police shootings on feminists. Although the body may signify cultural values and norms, it's becoming clear that we are living in a time when people are refusing to accept the roles imposed on them by hegemonic power structures. The posthuman cyborg is valuable to study because it "demonstrate[s] both the fragility of our own assumptions and the promise of alternatives" (Graham 55). So while Gwen Stacy died, she did so having chosen to put herself in a position to save others. She was a hero and she gave us hope to overcome. To end this dissertation by discussing a strong female character in the wake of all that's happening in America shows the importance of gender and race neutrality. To link police shootings and terrorist attacks to feminism is dangerous and ignorant. This

type of thinking is what holds us back. Following any tragedy, we don't need blame. As Gwen Stacy puts it, we need to hold on to hope. We need to overcome what keeps us down—gender hegemony—and never look back to those historical constructs that have kept us divided for so long.

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