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Kevin Gleason

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TRAUMATIZED MASCULINITY:
MEN AND BOYS IN THE WORKS OF TOBIAS WOLFF

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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Title: Traumatized Masculinity: Men and Boys in the Works of Tobias Wolff

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This study is a critical analysis of Tobias Wolff's presentation of masculinity in his short stories, memoirs, novel, and novella. I argue that Wolff's works highlight performances of masculinity that are constructed, fragile, and often traumatizing and that his work operates as a critique of hegemonic masculinity.

This dissertation examines three iterations of masculinity in Wolff's texts: nascent masculinity, hypermasculinity, and man-womanliness. The young and adolescent boys who perform a nascent masculinity often rely on deeply flawed models to construct their masculinity as both survivors and perpetrators of trauma. Wolff's presentation of nascent masculinity critiques aspects of masculinity which are often hidden by the more practiced adult performances of masculinity. Men in Wolff's texts who perform a hypermasculinity domineer and traumatize less powerful individuals including children, women, minorities, and other men who are outside of hegemonic masculinity. Wolff's portrayal of hypermasculinity critiques the cycle of increasingly violent behavior that men enact to achieve and maintain dominance. Along with these two negative iterations of masculinity, Wolff also presents a positive one: man-womanliness. Men and boys who perform man-womanliness break the cycles of oppression and violence and perform a masculinity that resists the use of domination by incorporating traits often associated with femininity. Man-womanliness remains robust and resilient even when emerging from traumatic experience. My analysis draws from Wolff's short story collections *In*

the Garden of the North American Martyrs (1981), *Back in the World* (1985), *The Night in Question* (1996), *Our Story Begins* (2008), his two memoirs *This Boy's Life* (1989) and *In Pharaoh's Army* (1994), his novella *The Barrack's Thief* (1984), and his novel *Old School* (2003).

As a critical lens, I draw on theorists who highlight the constructed, fragile, and fluid nature of masculinity. As a secondary theoretical approach, I engage concepts from trauma theory that intersect with masculinity.

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Soli Deo gloria

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In this dissertation I argue that in his fiction and memoirs Tobias Wolff highlights performances of masculinity that are constructed, fragile, and often traumatizing and that his work operates as a critique of hegemonic masculinity. Though Wolff most often presents masculinity as negative, his texts also occasionally present some positive models of masculinity through individuals who reject hypermasculinity and embrace positive aspects of both masculinity and of femininity. In his novels, short stories, and memoirs, Tobias Wolff presents a wide range of masculinities. Wolff often depicts boys who perform a nascent masculinity that brings to light aspects of adult masculinity which are often hidden by the more practiced adult performances of masculinity. Often Wolff's adult men construct their masculinities by exerting power over women, children, minorities, and/or other men outside of hegemonic masculinity through performance of hypermasculinity that include verbal, psychological, and physical traumas. Occasionally, however, Wolff presents men who break the cycles of oppression and violence and perform a masculinity that resists the use of domination by incorporating traits often associated with femininity: a man-womanly performance. Traumatic events often play a role in how the nascent masculine, hypermasculine, and man-womanly individuals construct their masculinity. While most of these traumatic events involve abuse from domineering and patriarchal father figures and/or violent experiences connected to the military, some of Wolff's men experience trauma in a more latent and subtle context. From within these traumatic circumstances, Wolff portrays men who construct and present their masculinities across a wide range, both negatively and positively.

To develop my argument, I examine Wolff's body of work as a whole. His works are comprised of the short story collections *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs* (1981), *Back in the World* (1985), *The Night in Question* (1996), and *Our Story Begins* (2008), the novels *The Barracks Thief* (1984) and *Old School* (2003), and the memoirs *This Boy's Life* (1989) and *In Pharaoh's Army* (1994). The topics treated in his work include military combat in the Vietnam War, class struggles in America, and competing notions of masculinity and femininity. Wolff's work has been critically acclaimed; he won the PEN/Faulkner Award for *This Boy's Life* and was a finalist for the award with *Old School*, won the PEN/Malamud Award and Rea Award for short stories, won the 2008 Short Story Prize for *Our Story Begins*, and received the National Medal of the Arts from President Obama in 2015. As a teacher of creative writing at Syracuse and Stanford, Wolff has had a hand in shaping the writing careers of George Saunders, Jay McInerney, and Alice Sebold among others. Despite this reputation, Wolff's texts have received relatively little scholarly attention compared to other contemporary writers in his vein such as Cormac McCarthy, Philip Roth, Don DeLillo, and Thomas Pynchon. A rigorous theoretical treatment of Wolff is overdue and bound to be fruitful.

Wolff's acclaim comes in part from his craftsmanship as a writer of prose and his signature aesthetic moves. Malcolm Bradbury categorizes Wolff as a "dirty realist" along with the likes of Raymond Carver and Richard Ford given that Wolff's prose often includes passages of terse objectivity and working class dialogue rendered in a minimalist style (268). The short stories "Desert Breakdown, 1968," "The Other Miller," and "The Chain," among many others, exemplify this aesthetic hallmark of Wolff's work. Along with Wolff's "dirty realism," his work contains an interesting blurring of generic lines, another of his signature aesthetic moves. Most often, the blurring occurs on the line between fiction and autobiography. For example, *Old*

School's subtitle insists that the work is a novel, but the content mirrors Wolff's life such that it could easily be taken as autobiographical. Furthermore, the theme of the novel ironically centers on the potential for writing to act as a tool to strip away the props of persona and to reveal the authentic self, but given the generic blurring of the text, it seems to do the opposite. In *In Pharaoh's Army*, Wolff also blurs generic lines, but in this case he presents his autobiographical account of the Vietnam War in a series of interconnected vignettes that could easily be read as standalone short stories. Given Wolff's craftsmanship as a writer and his compelling aesthetic flourishes, his work provides a fruitful ground for scholarly analysis.

Along with Wolff's literary artistry, his reoccurring themes and subject matter make him an interesting study as well. In his memoir *This Boy's Life*, his novel *Old School*, and a number of his stories including "The Liar," "Fly Boys," and "Powder," Wolff portrays the struggles of boys and adolescent males coming of age in challenging circumstances. In these texts, Wolff's coming of age theme typically involves a character's strained relationship with a parent and/or with male peers. Another of his commonly used themes is his depiction the Vietnam War era both stateside and in Vietnam. In *In Pharaoh's Army*, Wolff depicts his own time in Vietnam, and in *The Barracks Thief*, he presents a poignant picture of soldiers in basic training preparing to deploy. In the short stories "The Poor are Always with Us," "Soldier's Joy," "Wingfield," "Casualty," and "The Other Miller," Wolff portrays American soldiers who wrestle with their personal demons both during and after the Vietnam War. In the pieces that contain Wolff's most often reoccurring themes, his characters can be seen constructing and maintaining their masculinities within traumatized situations.

In pursuing this research, my purpose is twofold: to bring scholarly attention to Wolff's under-examined body of work and to synthesize masculinity theory and trauma theory in order to

analyze culturally significant themes in his primary texts. Wolff's oeuvre represents an important contribution to American literature written after the Vietnam War, but the scholarship on Wolff is relatively small. Given the small amount of critical attention paid to Wolff, I am able to treat central aspects of his work that have not yet been examined. Since only a few of the studies done on Wolff apply any literary theory, my use of masculinity and trauma theories will also be unique for studies on Wolff. Along with entering the scholarly discourse on Wolff, it is also my purpose in this dissertation to present a unique theoretical approach by nuancing masculinity theory with the secondary theory of trauma studies. Both fields, masculinity and trauma, have seen extensions and revisions as theorists have complicated theoretical positions by integrating work from other fields such as deconstruction, Marxist theory, and postcolonial studies. Little work, however, has been done to demonstrate the intersections between masculinity and trauma theories. An understanding of how trauma theory can supplement masculinity theory helps to further illuminate Wolff's representations of masculinity. To establish a theoretical framework, I will rely heavily on the work of gender and masculinity theorists including R.W. Connell and Todd Reeser. Furthermore, by using trauma theorists including Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra, Michelle Balaev, and Joshua Pederson I will be able to nuance and enhance the theories of masculinity in order to more thoroughly examine Wolff's work.

I: Theoretical Approaches

To conduct this analysis, it will be necessary to establish some theoretical parameters and define some key terms. Defining terms like gender, femininity, and masculinity can be a problematic task. Cultures and historical periods hold conflicting definitions for these categories, and gender theory since the 1990s tends to present gender as something that defines

defining. Rather than being stable and essential, contemporary theorists identify gender positions as constructed and fluid. Wolff's texts often highlight the tenuousness of masculinity and present characters who rely heavily on a "stylized repetition of acts" to construct their masculinity (Butler 140). Masculinity theorist Todd W. Reeser—influenced by Judith Butler's concept of gender as constructed, fluid and performative—examines aspects of masculinity that are often taken for granted or assumed as natural. In examining the relationships between masculinity and femininity as well as relationships between powerful and less powerful iterations of masculinity in culture, Reeser notes the "fluidity or the instability of [these] relations, ...the cracks and fissures in these relations, on the successful and unsuccessful attempts by hegemony to hide itself as dominant" (14). Reeser also examines the constant need for policing and for reasserting one's masculinity that boys and men experience. He writes, "The man would have to continue repeatedly to become a man at many points of his daily life. He might slip in and out of masculinity, never able simply to remain a man without constant help and effort" (14). Wolff's presentation of male characters becomes more clearly understood when Reeser's concepts of masculinity's fluidity, cracks, and need for constant maintenance are taken into account.

Similar to Reeser's concepts of masculinity is R.W. Connell's treatment of the plural nature of masculinity. In *Masculinities* (1995), Connell argues that masculinity exists in many forms and that various iterations of masculinity define themselves by their relationships to other categories of masculinity. Connell presents the categories of hegemonic, subordinate, complicit, and marginalized masculinity as interdependent upon each other and not fixed. Connell argues that even "'hegemonic masculinity' is not a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same. It is, rather, the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable" (76). Like Reeser, Connell views masculinity as

always anxiously trying to exert its dominance, though the practices and props of masculinity itself do not remain constant. Unique to Connell is her emphasis on the importance of male to male relationships in which one individual or group uses the relationship to establish its dominance over another individual or group. As Wolff critiques hegemonic masculinity through his characters, he often presents men who prey on men in less dominant categories of masculinity (minorities, homosexuals, and boys) to establish their masculinity just as Connell theorizes.

The work of Reeser and Connell provide the broader theoretical concepts of masculinity useful for studying Wolff, but a number of other theorists who focus on more specific aspects of masculinity will also play a role in my analysis. The theorists Brenda Boyle, Susan Jeffords, Brian Baker, and Michael Kimmel contextualize masculinity within 20th century American cultural forces. In *Masculinity in Vietnam War Narratives* (2009), Boyle argues that historically war has produced cultural narratives and counter-narratives about masculinity but that the Vietnam War occurred in a unique cultural moment that intensified this phenomenon. She writes, “While previous wars had produced anxieties about masculinity, the Vietnam War was part of an entire *era* that rescripted gender and social identity for many, if not most, Americans” (3, italics original). Susan Jeffords takes an approach similar to Boyle’s but rather than focusing on the Vietnam War, she examines masculinity in the Reagan era in *Hard Bodies* (1994). Since Tobias Wolff served in the Vietnam War and began his writing career in the Reagan era, both of these theorists illuminate relevant contextual issues for examining Wolff’s presentation of masculinity.

Like Boyle and Jeffords, Brian Baker examines masculinity within the context of American history, and distinct to Baker is his focus on masculinity's intersection with the nation-state. In *Masculinity in Fiction and Film* (2006) Baker writes:

This book explicitly connects representations of masculinity to the ideological imperatives underpinning the nation-state, taking a cross-generic approach to a *political* understanding of the connection between masculinity, citizenship, law, community, and violence. (ix, italics original)

Though Baker's primary literary texts are located in the Cold War, in order to conduct his study, Baker examines the full sweep of American history going back to the Revolutionary War to demonstrate the reliance of the nation-state upon a mythic version of masculinity preserved through nostalgia to this day. Along with Baker, Michael Kimmel also places masculinity in the context of American cultural forces. In *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (2006), Kimmel notes how presidential elections, gender politics, and media portrayals of masculinity create an ever changing set of standards for masculinity. Both Baker and Kimmel help show where Wolff's presentations of masculinities fit into a larger set of cultural narratives and counter-narratives of masculinity.

Boyle, Jeffords, Baker, and Kimmel will provide more detailed analysis of cultural and historical issues pertaining to Wolff's presentation of masculinity, and the theorists Eve Sedgwick, Robert J. Corber, and Sophia Aboim will provide a theoretical lens for interpreting homosocial, homosexual, and hybridized masculinities. In *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), Sedgwick presents a range of male relationships that span from intense heterosexual friendships to homosexual relationships. Sedgwick writes, "Male homosocial desire' is the name this book will give to the entire continuum [of male to male

relationships]” (2). Sedgwick notes that homosocial relationships between men often involve homophobic behavior in an attempt by men to police their own potential latent homosexual desires. Corber focuses more specifically on homosexual relationships among men in *Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity* (1997). Corber theorizes male homosexuality in the Cold War era as less of an identity category and more of a rejection of hegemonic values which he refers to as “the Cold War consensus” (5). He writes, “Thus it was in the interests of straight women, African Americans, gays, and lesbians to join forces in opposition to the Cold War consensus” (5). Corber provides a lens for examining how Wolff’s male characters reject or promote the Cold War consensus about masculinity. In a similar vein to Sedgwick and Corber, Aboim examines a masculinity far removed from hegemonic masculinity in her *Plural Masculinities: The Remaking of Self in Private Life* (2010). Aboim argues that masculinity is often hybridized and that hegemonic masculinity discriminates against lower class men, men of color, and gay men. Furthermore, she claims that men rarely occupy a single guise of masculinity, but instead they embody plural masculinities at once. Aboim, along with Sedgwick and Corber, will help me analyze characters in Wolff’s texts who perform their masculinity in hybridized and non-hegemonic ways.

A final pairing of theorists—Maggie McKinley and Marilyn C. Wesley—shed light on a significant aspect of masculinity: the use of violence to construct masculinity. In *Masculinity and the Paradox of Violence in American Fiction: 1950-1975* (2015), McKinley argues that male violence perpetuates itself in a feedback loop that is unbreakable. This occurs when individuals and cultures construct a masculinity whose main tool against personal fragmentation or cultural oppression is violence. McKinley explains the “paradox of violence” as when “men make the choice to transcend oppression using liberatory violence that will purportedly allow them to

become men, but their aggression often results in the oppression of others and/or their ongoing emasculation” (3). In other words, men who see themselves emasculated and respond with violence experience the inefficacy of violence and feel themselves once again emasculated and without power. Wesley’s *Violent Adventure: Contemporary Fiction by American Men* (2003) runs counter to McKinley’s deterministic presentation of the unbreakable cycle of male violence. Her book “concentrates on expectations about violent construction of male power that not only harm young men but also damage the social relations that are supposed to sustain them” (7). Unlike McKinley, however, Wesley argues that cycles of male violence can be broken. McKinley examines texts (including *This Boy’s Life* by Wolff) that subvert genre based expectations about violence to demonstrate how male characters and texts by men can contribute to breaking the violent cycle. Both McKinley and Wesley help reveal the varied connections that Wolff’s male characters have to violence and traumatizing circumstances.

Along with the wide range of theorists and the broad concepts of masculinity outlined above, some key terms are worth defining as well. Though it is nearly impossible to articulate a firm definition or set of practices to encompass masculinity, providing concrete definitions for a few particular forms of masculinity with prove useful. The term “nascent masculinity” refers to masculine performances that have not yet been fully cemented and that operate in a fledgling state often revealing the cracks and instabilities in masculinity that adult men have become more adept at concealing. Todd Reeser and Marylyn C. Wesley theorize the manner in which boys forge a nascent masculinity based on the flawed or absent adult men who influence them. I use the phrase “stereotypical masculinity” to denote masculine performance that emphasizes dominance, physical aggressiveness, and emotional detachment (Reeser 15). Todd Reeser describes the masculine stereotypes that widely circulate in contemporary American society, and

how those stereotypes tend to veil the complexity and fluidity of masculinity (15). As I examine Wolff's presentation of masculinity I analyze how his characters perceive their relation to stereotypical masculinity and what effects it has upon them. Similar to stereotypical masculinity is R.W. Connell's term "hegemonic masculinity," but its subtle difference from stereotypical masculinity should be noted (76). Connell demonstrates that hegemonic masculinity is the iteration of masculinity that holds most dominance over other iterations of masculinity and over femininity (76). Hegemonic masculinity only relates to power positions not to specific performances of masculinity, and given the cultural moment, different performances of masculinity can take the power position of hegemonic masculinity. The term "hypermasculinity," as first theorized by Donald Mosher, is also useful to define for my critical framework (150). For my purposes, hypermasculinity will refer to performances of masculinity that exaggerate certain negative traits of stereotypical masculinity particularly physical strength, violence, and sexual aggression (Mosher 150). Wolff's works include a number of hypermasculine characters through whom Wolff presents a critique of the dangers and traumas associated with hypermasculinity. The term "nascent masculinity" refers to masculine performances that have not yet been fully cemented and that operate in a fledgling state often revealing the cracks and instabilities in masculinity that adult men have become more adept at concealing. Todd Reeser and Marylyn C. Wesley theorize the manner in which boys forge a nascent masculinity based on the flawed or absent adult men who influence them.

Running in contrast to hypermasculinity is Virginia Woolf's phrase "man-womanly" from chapter six of *A Room of One's Own*. Woolf remarks that "It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple: one must be a woman manly, or a man womanly" (104). Though Woolf's concept is primarily an aesthetic one by which she judges the gendered mental make-up of

canonical authors, I will use the term to describe characters who eschew hypermasculinity and who incorporate aspects of femininity into their masculinity by collaborating, empathizing, and nurturing along with other behaviors. In chapter four, I examine Wolff's characters who exemplify "man womanliness" and who provide positive models of masculinity in opposition to other characters' stereotypical, hegemonic, and hypermasculine performances.

The theoretical framework of masculinity serves as a useful approach for examining the works of Tobias Wolff, but given the traumatic circumstances in and through which his characters often shape their masculinities, a richer study can be borne out by nuancing masculinity theory with trauma studies serving as secondary and supplementary theory. Trauma—as theorized by Dominick LaCapra, Cathy Caruth, Joshua Pederson, and Michelle Balaev among others—readily lends itself to the work of Wolff given that Wolff often uses his experiences as a Vietnam veteran to inform his autobiographical and fictional writing. Furthermore, Wolff often includes civilian traumas in his work, particularly domestic violence committed by men against women and children. Both in military and in civilian experience, Wolff's characters often find themselves constructing tenuous masculinities in and around traumatic experiences. In fact, for many of Wolff's characters, masculinity and trauma are so inextricably related that it would be impossible to examine one without the other. Numerous characters respond to trauma either as victims or as perpetrators by regulating their performances of masculinity. Whether encountering extremely intensified trauma at the hands of a hypermasculine figure, or encountering trauma mediated through subtler and more latent contexts, most of Wolff's major characters can be placed somewhere on a continuum of traumatic experience which shapes their performance of masculinity. Not only do masculinity and trauma often intersect in Wolff's work, but more generally, these two approaches to literary

theory contain a number of thematic similarities including: the centrality of repetitive behaviors, cultural scripts as a means for understanding experience, and proximity to violence.

Furthermore, both trauma and masculinity operate along symbolic and representative horizons, and the representative nature of literature in general and Wolff's aesthetic technique specifically form a useful site for studying both trauma and masculinity.

Like masculinity, trauma is a complex concept to theorize, and within trauma studies, theorists often debate each other on essential aspects of how to define trauma. Trauma theorists vigorously debate whether or not trauma can be genuinely accessed in the psyche of a trauma survivor as well as the degree to which writers consciously and unconsciously represent trauma in literature. Rather than aligning myself with a specific theorist or position within the debates around trauma theory, I utilize a sampling of trauma theory that best suits my study of masculinity and that works most effectively with Tobias Wolff's writings. In sampling broadly from trauma theory, I employ theorists who have often found themselves in opposing camps, however. The two opposing camps in trauma theory make the point of access to traumatic memory their major issue of disagreement. On one side, theorists argue that traumatic experience, by definition, causes psychological damage prevents the survivor from successfully accessing memories of the traumatic moment itself. Therefore, literary texts tend to represent trauma most accurately through erasures, omissions, and unconscious manifestations. Cathy Caruth, Bessel van der Kolk, and Pearl James maintain this position. In the opposing camp, theorists argue that traumatic experiences can be accessed in the memory of survivors and that literary texts both by and about survivors contain explicit keys to understanding individual traumatic events and trauma in general. Joshua Pederson, Jeffery Alexander, Michelle Balaev, and Richard McNally maintain this position.

As the field defining scholar, Caruth emphasizes the unspeakable and un-representable nature of trauma both in lived experience and in literary expression (*Unclaimed Experience* 5). For Caruth, sufferers of trauma can never completely remember their trauma, and therefore can never truly process it and heal (7). In *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth argues that “What returns to haunt the victim... is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known” (6). In the telling of stories or the production of literary texts, victims of trauma, while not directly accessing initial trauma, can provide listeners and readers with a view of the trauma’s traces, erasures, and eruptions. Furthermore, in *Literature in the Ashes of History* (2013), Caruth posits that the speed at which trauma occurs and can(not) be processed contributes to its inaccessibility. She writes, “The breach in the mind—the psyche’s awareness of the threat to life—is not caused by a direct threat or injury, but by fright, the lack of preparedness to take in a stimulus that comes too quickly” (6). Caruth’s trauma theory—which she applies to literary, philosophical, and historical texts—is informed by Bessel van der Kolk’s clinical psychological studies of sufferers of PTSD. In Wolff’s works, male survivors of trauma often find their sense of masculinity shattered, and many of his characters can be seen struggling to reconstruct their masculinity as a method of coping with the haunting and inaccessible nature of their trauma. In some cases, characters remain unconscious of the impact of the trauma they have experienced and equally unconscious of the how they attempt to construct or reconstruct their masculinity in the context of their unclaimed trauma. Though Caruth makes no connections between trauma and masculinity, her theory complements the unconscious and unmarked construction and maintenance of masculinity that Wolff’s texts highlight.

Working from many of Caruth's arguments, in her book *The New Death* (2013), Pearl James affirms limited access to traumatic memories. Focusing her research in the era of World War I, James argues that the unprecedented casualty rate during the war forced a cultural shift in understanding and processing death, a shift that aligns with Caruth's theory of unclaimed traumatic experience. James engages novels by F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner, and in doing so she examines "how modernist novels *reveal, refigure, omit,* and aestheticize the violent death of young men in the aftermath of World War I" (9, italics mine). Continuing in the vein of Caruth, James posits that "One reason death haunts its survivors yet can seem unspeakable stems from shock. Death in war differs from death in peacetime" (17). *Shock, suddenness, and hastiness* are terms used by James and other trauma theorists who argue that the speed and surprise of a traumatic event make it difficult to access because it is missed in the first place. James's work also includes an interesting intersection between trauma and masculinity theories. James writes:

World War I was traumatic for male American modernist writers, he [Keith Gandall] argues, but not, as one might expect, because of trench warfare. In fact, the army rejected Hemingway and Faulkner and passed over Fitzgerald for promotion. Therefore, Gandall reasons, the U.S. military pronounced their masculinity inadequate; these writers did not suffer "war wounds" but "mobilization wounds." (12)

Here James aligns with theorists like Jeffrey Alexander who see trauma as caused by a socially constructed narrative. Unlike Hemingway and Faulkner, Wolff was deployed to the front lines in war-time, but he presents characters who suffer these kinds of inaccessible war wounds, which threaten their masculinity. Like Caruth, James acknowledges an important role for trauma theory

in interpreting literature and views the traces and erasures of trauma in literature as an avenue for accessing the inaccessible.

Running counter to Caruth's claims about the inaccessible nature of trauma is the work of Joshua Pederson who bases his theories on the clinical studies of Richard McNally. McNally's *Remembering Trauma* (2003), a survey of clinical studies on trauma, reveals the following: "traumatic amnesia is a myth, and while victims may *choose* not to speak of their traumas, there is little evidence that they *cannot*" (334, italics original). McNally's study specifically targets van der Kolk's work and seeks to point out its methodological flaws. Pederson takes McNally's findings and suggests a model based on three focal points for analyzing trauma in literature: (1) "the text itself" rather than its gaps, (2) "augmented narrative detail," and (3) "depictions of experiences that are temporally, physically, or ontologically distorted" (338). While Caruth's model of examining traces of traumatic experience in texts involves reading subjective or implied elements such as absences and suppressions, Pederson's model involves reading the objective or explicit elements of a text that are readily observable on the surface. Particularly when using a first person narrator, Wolff's presentation of traumatized characters contains passages that fit Pederson's model for analysis. I pay special attention to the passages of this variety that also present trauma's effect on characters' masculinity.

Aligned similarly to Pederson, Michelle Balaev also assumes that trauma is accessible to victims and representable through literary texts. In *The Nature of Trauma in American Novels* (2012), Balaev uses McNally's clinical work as a basis for her own work and uses his definition of trauma: "an objectively defined event, the person's subjective interpretation of its meaning, and the person's emotional response to it" (xii). Trauma includes all three of these components for Balaev, and each component provides a unique mode of accessing trauma. Balaev also

conceives of a “pluralistic model” of trauma that considers multiple sources and variables contributing to trauma as well as multiple responses to trauma, not all necessarily negative ones. The pluralistic model emphasizes remembering and accessing trauma opposed to Caruth’s model, which Balaev identifies as the “traditional model” which emphasizes “the discourse of the unrepresentable” (xiii). Also running contra to Caruth, Balaev argues that trauma can manifest “through a range of values that include negative, positive, neutral, or ambiguous connotations, thereby displacing the dominant claim that attaches only a negative value to trauma” (xii). These multiple manifestations of trauma are not, however, fixed and objective as Pederson implies. Balaev, much like Alexander notes that trauma is “a fluid and selective process of interpretation, rather than only as a literal, veridical recall” and that trauma is culturally mediated and reshaped over time (xiv). Like Pederson, Balaev argues that examining particular features of the text itself, rather than its omissions and erasures, provide ample entrée for the critic to access represented trauma. For Balaev, these features include “the disjunction of time through the use of repetition and negation; imagistic scenes of violence that lack emotional description; syntactical subversion and rearrangement; atemporality; and a double consciousness or point of view” (xvi). Balaev’s pluralistic model of trauma proves useful to studying Wolff’s characters who exhibit multiple and fluctuating manifestations of traumatic experience especially in regards to their construction of masculinity, which also tends to exhibit similar non-fixed manifestations.

Though not explicitly an attack on the Caruth school of trauma theory, Jeffrey Alexander’s *Trauma: A Social Theory* (2011) aligns with many of Pederson’s and Balaev’s positions. Alexander argues that trauma is accessible, but he examines trauma as a collective rather than as an individual experience. To this end, Alexander writes, “The lives lost and pains

experienced are individual facts; shared trauma depends on the collective process of cultural interpretation” (3). For Alexander, trauma is accessible through collective process, but he also argues that rather than being “natural” trauma is socially constructed through authorized cultural narratives (7). Relying on Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (1983), Alexander theorizes that, “Events are not inherently traumatic. Trauma is a socially mediated attribution” (13). Unlike Caruth who conceives of trauma as individual and inaccessible, Alexander posits that events become traumatic to a community when that community decides upon and narrates back to itself the status of trauma for an event. Literature is one of the vehicles through which a community narrates, and therefore creates, its trauma. Alexander writes, “Much of these memory residues surface through free association in psychoanalytic treatment, they appear in public life through the creation of literature” (11). In essence, trauma is constructed collectively, and it can also be collectively accessed through the mouthpiece of literature. Memory and access operate much more as theorized by Pederson than by Caruth for Alexander, but his position differs from Pederson in that traumatic events cannot be universally defined. Similar to James’s concept of Hemingway and Fitzgerald experiencing cultural trauma, Alexander’s theory helps illuminate how Wolff’s characters can experience trauma as members of a community, a community that also contains the cultural codes for masculinity.

A final trauma theorist, one who transcends the camps of Caruth or Pederson/McNally, must be taken into consideration—Dominick LaCapra. Like Alexander, LaCapra examines the nature of trauma as experienced by individuals within communities who suffer massive cultural traumas. In “Trauma, Absence, Loss” (1999), LaCapra uses the Holocaust and the South African apartheid to trace how trauma impacts a community in the moment and how that trauma moves through history and continues to manifest itself. LaCapra notes the reoccurring nature of trauma

and makes the case that members of traumatized communities who did not personally witness the event can also experience traumatic loss and absence. He writes, “I would argue that the response of even secondary witnesses (including historians) to traumatic events must involve empathetic unsettlement that should register in one’s very mode of address revealing both similarities and differences across genres (such as history and literature)” (699). LaCapra sees texts as valuable sites for examining cultural traumas, and Wolff’s works provide noteworthy instances that fit LaCapra’s concepts about trauma including characters who experience secondhand cultural absence and loss. For LaCapra, loss and absence can be closely related but not interchangeable. He defines his terms as such:

I would situate the type of absence in which I am especially interested on a transhistorical level while situating loss on a historical level. In this transhistorical sense absence is not an event and does not imply tenses (past, present, or future). By contrast, the historical past is the scene of losses that may be narrated as well as of specific possibilities that may conceivably be reactivated, reconfigured, and transformed in the present or future. (700)

LaCapra’s articulation of absence and loss in relationship to culturally experienced trauma is particularly relevant to any study of Wolff given Wolff’s father’s Jewish background and Wolff’s inclusion of a number of fictional characters who wrestle with their Jewish identities. In treating Wolff’s oeuvre, I will use LaCapra—along with Caruth, James, Pederson, Balaev, and Alexander—to demonstrate the centrality of trauma to Wolff’s characters’ formation and performance of their masculinities.

II: Literature Review

Having established a theoretical approach to Wolff’s work, it is now worth examining the treatment Wolff has received by other scholars. In presenting the material below, I aim to

demonstrate the state of scholarship on Tobias Wolff and to situate the originality of my own work. Though some scholarship exists on Wolff's novels, short stories, and memoirs, the amount of work is still somewhat limited. Rather than organizing the sources below chronologically or thematically, I have organized them by descending importance to my own work.

Working on issues more closely aligned to my research area than any other scholarship on Wolff, Marilyn C. Wesley (briefly mentioned previously as a trauma theorist) uses genre studies to nuance masculinity theory and examines works by Richard Harding Davis, Tobias Wolff, Cormac McCarthy, Tim O'Brien, Ernest Gaines, and Don DeLillo in her book *Violent Adventure: Contemporary Fiction by American Men* (2003). Each of these authors participate in a different subgenre of fiction, and Wesley argues that by subverting generic expectations, these authors provide a counter-narrative to the ideology of violent masculinity encoded within each given genre's tradition. In a brief section of her book, Wesley examines Wolff's *This Boy's Life*, *In the Garden of North American Martyrs*, *The Barracks Thief*, and *Back in the World* arguing that these texts subvert generic expectations for coming-of-age narratives in three areas: "the motif of developmental quest, the characterization of social mentors, and the theme of social integration" (47). Wesley argues that Wolff's texts serve as a critique of social norms about masculinity and violence, and rather than providing traditional and satisfying fulfillments of genre expectations (i.e. the boy successfully completes the developmental quest, the boy matures through the guidance of a social mentor, the boy achieves social integration within the larger community), these narratives demonstrate that contemporary adult masculinity is dysfunctional. She describes this as "the absence of a social system that can produce capable adult men" (55). Although Wesley does not see Wolff providing examples of characters who exhibit any positive forms of masculinity (as I do), she presents Wolff's texts as doing positive work in society since

they unsettle readers' notions about the plausibility of young boys coming-of-age in contemporary society since they refuse to re-inscribe the generic expectations of the coming-of-age narrative. Wesley is the only scholar who provides a sophisticated reading of violence and masculinity in the work of Wolff, and I extend and revise elements of her work in this dissertation.

James Hannah's *Tobias Wolff: A Study of the Short Fiction* (1996) is the only book length treatment on Wolff, and it examines *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs* and *Back in the World*. Hannah provides useful but very brief analysis of each story in the two collections, provides four interviews with Wolff, and concludes with reissues of book reviews from the *New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The New Republic*, and *The Los Angeles Times*. Hannah does not use a theoretical approach in his treatment of Wolff's short fiction. Instead he provides summaries, makes thematic connections between Wolff's stories, and comments on the literary technique of Wolff. Overall, Hannah's treatments of each story reads more like extended footnotes rather than a cohesive work of scholarship. Given that Hannah's work is the only monograph on Wolff, clearly more scholarly work on Wolff is merited especially work that operates within a theoretic framework. Unlike Hannah's work, I examine Wolff through the theoretic lens of masculinity and trauma rather than simply providing factually overviews of Wolff's short stories.

Farrell O'Gorman's "Tobias Wolff's *Back in the World*: American Dreamers, American Desert, Saving Word" (2006) is more comprehensive and more scholarly than most of the other article length work on Wolff and shows an improving quality and nuance in Wolff scholarship moving out of the 1990s into the 2000s. O'Gorman places Wolff within a larger tradition of American literature writing, "Wolff's experience as a fatherless child moving to the rude West,

forced into early self-reliance and ongoing self-invention, marks him as a contemporary American writer who has been profoundly well prepared to engage a number of the most longstanding concerns in the nation's literature" (71). O'Gorman examines morality and community in Wolff's works and briefly touches on stoic masculinity. He notes that as part of his maturation, Wolff himself found codes for his own behavior in literature. O'Gorman, however, writes that "some of the codes he [Wolff] initially found...—for example, the stoic masculinity of the Hemingway hero—were themselves badly flawed" (73). Wolff's awareness of the flawed stoic masculinity of Hemingway bears itself out in his fiction. I argue, along with O'Gorman, that Wolff presents stoic masculinity as brittle and deeply flawed. Some of the father figures in Wolff's fiction (especially "Powder" and *Old School*) display this kind of stoicism, which Wolff presents as a potentially harmful construction of masculinity.

Like O'Gorman's work, Santiago Rodríguez Guerrero-Strachan's "Realism and Narrators in Tobias Wolff's Short Stories" (2012) represents serious scholarly treatment of Wolff's work. This piece is a chapter in the edited volume titled *Short Story Theories: A Twenty-First-Century Perspective*, which includes 16 chapters by different scholars. Guerrero-Strachan examines realism, minimalism, and narratorial frame in the short fiction of Wolff and provides close readings of "Sanity," "The Other Miller," and "The Night in Question." In his treatment of "The Other Miller," Guerrero-Strachan focuses on Wolff's use of a narrator who shifts between second and third person. Guerrero-Strachan writes, "The use of these two different narrative voices corresponds to Wolff's intention to stage by means of narrative technique the psychological processes of a mind close to schizophrenia" (279). The protagonist in "The Other Miller" is a soldier who receives news about the death of his mother, but he is convinced that he has received news that should have actually been delivered to "the other Miller" in his battalion. The shock

when Miller comes to realize the truth as well as his status as a soldier preparing for war causes trauma that Guerrero-Strachan identifies through Wolff's use of narration. I use Guerrero-Strachan's analysis of "The Other Miller" combined with Pederson's concept of observable representations of trauma in literary texts as I demonstrate how Wolff depicts hypermasculinity operating in traumatic circumstances.

Though less ambitious and less sophisticated than O'Gorman's and Guerrero-Strachan's work, Byron Calhoun's "Tobias Wolff's Search for Heroism" (2010) does present a compelling aspect of Wolff's work that relates to both masculinity and trauma: the theme of military and literary heroism. Writing at the United States Air Force Academy, Calhoun examines Wolff's *In Pharaoh's Army* and analyzes his presentation of heroism and anti-heroism in the realms of warfare and in the literary world. Calhoun writes, "With notions of courage, skill, and achievement so problematized in Vietnam, it's not surprising that Tobias Wolff fails to become heroic on all counts" (23). Calhoun faults Wolff's military record, but his reading of *In Pharaoh's Army* is somewhat one dimensional. Though in *In Pharaoh's Army*, Wolff does present himself as scared for his life, he does in fact demonstrate an empathy and willingness to forego revenge that occasionally places him at odds with other soldiers—a type of heroism that goes unnoticed by Calhoun. In essence, Calhoun defines heroism in terms of hegemonic masculinity, and his analysis does not take into consideration Wolff's nuanced presentation of masculinity nor the critique of hypermasculinity present in this memoir. Calhoun does, however, credit Wolff for achieving literary heroism by telling a "true war story" (25). Since *In Pharaoh's Army* contains few scenes of battle but rather focuses on the "disillusionment and redemption" of its central character, Calhoun argues that Wolff's memoir "benefits our society" by presenting "brutal candor" and "nuanced depiction of ethical and psychological gray areas" (26). Though I

argue against Calhoun's claim that Wolff does not achieve anything other than fictional heroism, Calhoun does provide useful insights into commonly held notions of heroism within traditional military codes. Calhoun also provides some useful information on the tradition of military service for American writers placing Wolff within a larger literary context.

A number of critics have examined the religious themes of Wolff's work paying special attention to strains of the author's Catholicism¹ that appear in his texts. Here I briefly review three pieces in this vein: Anita Helmbold's "The Sacred in the Context of the Everyday: Finding Faith in the Fiction of Tobias Wolff" (2012), Paul J. Contino's "This Writer's Life: Irony & Faith in the Work of Tobias Wolff" (2005), and Peter S. Hawkins's "Lost And Found: The Bible and Its Literary Afterlife" (2004). Anita Helmbold surveys the entirety of Wolff's work in her study of his use of sacramental tropes and biblical allusions. She summarizes her argument by writing, "The current and accepted understanding of Wolff's fiction as work deeply concerned with questions of moral and ethical choice can only be augmented by a deeper understanding which recognizes and integrates Wolff's theological vision with his moral one" (21). Though she does not touch on how Wolff presents masculinity, Helmbold's argument about the moral, ethical, and theological aspects of Wolff's work aligns with my reading of how Wolff presents a critique of hypermasculinity. Additionally, Helmbold's article achieves a level of scholarly discourse absent from some of the other critiques of Wolff's work (Calhoun, Hanley, and Hawkins).

Paul J. Contino's "This Writer's Life: Irony and Faith in the Work of Tobias Wolff" (2005) includes interview snippets with Wolff and examines the role of Catholicism and Judaism in Wolff's fiction. Contino connects Wolff's affinity for irony and paradox in his work to the irony and paradoxes found in Catholicism. Contino also analyzes Wolff's complicated

¹ Wolff's absentee father was Jewish, his mother required him to go to Catholic catechism classes as a boy, and he now identifies as Catholic.

relationship with Judaism and his animosity towards religious traditions that elevate institutions above “its members as a body of the faithful” (19). Contino contends that Wolff sees the harmful aspects of religion, but he does not see religion as irredeemable. I argue that Wolff’s work presents a similar presentation of masculinity. Though not directly relating to the thematic aspect of Wolff’s work that I am working on, Contino’s commentary on “The Liar,” “In the Garden of the North American Martyrs,” and *Old School* helps establish the scholarly discourse into which I am entering.

In "Lost And Found: The Bible and Its Literary Afterlife," (2004) Peter S. Hawkins examines the biblical imagery found in Wolff’s title story from *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs* and argues that Wolff achieves a “moral weight” missing from most fiction of the era. Hawkins spends a good deal of the article dismissing much of contemporary fiction and bemoaning the lack of cultural literacy in today’s society. He suggests Wolff as an antidote to this illiteracy writing that “Wolff gains the moral weight that modern speech seems everywhere to have lost, while the prophet gets a chance once more to shock and assault, to disturb the peace” (13). I agree with Hawkins that Wolff presents a counter-narrative, though Hawkins does not examine the aspect of masculinity in Wolff’s work. Hawkins’s article, lacking a theoretical framework and relying heavily on plot summary of Wolff’s work rather than on providing critical analysis, also demonstrates the need for more scholarly work on Wolff.

Along with articles on Wolff’s work, it is helpful to be aware of some of the biographical issues pertaining to the author. Though no biography has been written to date, Wolff often gives interviews and a substantial number of these have been published. Here I will review two. J.H.E. Paine’s interview "Tobias Wolff B. 1945" (2003) appears in the *Journal Of The Short Story In English* and provides a useful dialogue with Wolff that includes some interesting remarks by

Wolff on masculinity and Hemingway's influence on his work. Wolff notes that Hemingway's characters tend to be men who are injured or broken either internally or externally, a trope that Wolff often uses himself. For my work on Wolff and masculinity, this interview provides some significant commentary by the author. Another useful interview is Jack Livings's "Tobias Wolff: The Art of Fiction No. 183"(2004) appearing in the *Paris Review*. This interview with Wolff comes on the heels of his publication of *Old School* and provides some insights into his creative process in producing that novel. Additionally, Wolff responds to questions about his own approach to political engagement as a contemporary writer. Rather than arguing that a writer should advocate for a certain political position, Wolff states that his fiction is political in that it causes his readers to become aware of and empathize with the other. Wolff's remarks about the writer's role in society and in the political sphere help me as I analyze his Vietnam War fiction.

Finally, two articles help demonstrate the lack of theoretical nuance used in Wolff scholarship and the need for further scholarly contributions. The first of these is Brian Hanley's "Modernity's 'Mr. Rambler': Tobias Wolff's Exploration of Vanity and Self-Deception in the Night in Question" (2003). Hanley examines self-delusion and morality in Wolff's short stories "Casualty," "Bullet in the Brain," and "Powder." Hanley's analysis of "Powder" proves useful as I include my own counterpoint to his interpretation. More significantly, however, Hanley eschews contemporary literary theories, which demonstrates the absence of significant critical study of Wolff.

One the other end of the theoretical spectrum is Colm J. Kelly's "Affirming The Indeterminable: Deconstruction, Sociology, And Tobias Wolff's 'Say Yes'" (1999). Kelly provides a reading of Wolff's short story "Say Yes" through the lens of deconstruction and argues for the superiority of this reading over three sociological readings of the same story. Though

Kelly is one of the few critics to approach Wolff's work from a theoretical position, his primary aim in the piece is to use Wolff's story to make an argument about the distinctions between Derridian and sociologically approaches to reading literature.

III: Brief Chapter Breakdown

Building from the existing scholarship on Wolff and using masculinity and trauma theory, the following chapters are organized thematically around particular iterations of masculinity found in Wolff's work. In chapter two, "Nascent Masculinities," I focus on how boys and young adolescent males in Wolff's works come to any early understanding of their masculinity and how they attempt to construct their masculinity based on the influences and models around them, and I argue that Wolff's presentation of nascent masculinity reveals and critiques the social norms of hegemonic masculinity. This chapter treats the memoir *This Boy's Life* (1989), the novel *Old School* (2003), and a trio of short stories from his collection *The Night in Question* (1996). Most often, these texts highlight the difficulties and failures of these boys who tend to select negative stereotypical aspects of masculinity around which to construct their gender identity. Wolff's young male characters provide clear examples of how masculinity is often fragilely constructed through props and stylized behavior as theorized by Reeser, Connell, and others. In using masculinity theory to analyze these characters, it becomes clear that Wolff presents these young boys as a critique of the abusive power of hegemonic masculinity. The artifice and fragility of masculinity is especially observable in these characters since they are boys trying on for the first time the codes of men. Many of the young male characters find themselves suffering traumas ranging from less dramatic actions such as neglect and verbal abuse to more dramatic actions such as violent beatings and attacks on loved ones. The trauma suffered by these characters plays a central role in how they produce their early constructions of

masculinity. Some of these characters are firsthand witnesses and survivors of trauma able to access and represent their trauma as Pederson theorizes, and some are second hand witnesses to cultural traumas and experience absence and loss as LaCapra theorizes.

In *This Boy's Life* Wolff dramatizes being abandoned by his father and by father figures as well as being physically and emotionally abused by his step-father, Dwight. Wolff, as first person narrator, shows how the influence of violence (and the props of violence) and his need for belonging factor into an early construction of masculinity. The memoir provides a vivid glimpse into a how masculinity and trauma overlap in a young boy's experience and how those early experiences create a foundation for future behavior. Wolff remarks, "There's a lot of violence in [*This Boy's Life*]*—a lot of male violence. The boyhood obsession with weapons has a terminus somewhere...it ends in war*" (Wesley 58). The memoir, though it ends with the narrator transitioning from adolescence to manhood, includes brief flash-forward that highlights how trauma's role in the development the narrator's masculinity features later in life as he becomes a soldier and a father.

Unlike the emphasis on the dramatic physical violence in *This Boy's Life*, *Old School* focuses on the cerebral and emotional nature of masculinity in school age boys along with subtler forms of traumatic experience. The unnamed narrator in the novel idolizes Ernest Hemingway's hypermasculine mystique and his indomitable prose style. As the novel unfolds, the narrator's highly crafted persona crumbles as the props of his masculinity and identity are stripped from him. Significant to this novel is the unnamed narrator's hidden Jewish identity and the role it plays in his coming-of-age. In the first chapter, the narrator accidentally offends the Jewish janitor of the all-boys boarding school he attends. While receiving punishment from the school's headmaster, he considers revealing that he himself is Jewish in hopes of resolving the

situation. Instead, the narrator keeps his Jewishness a secret believing that presenting himself as a minority would jeopardize his standing among his adolescent male peers. Since the novel is set in 1963, it is assumed that the narrator is a secondhand witness to the Holocaust and that the trauma of absence and loss, in LaCapra's terms, feature into his behavior. Similarly, another experience of loss—that of his mother—results in the narrator suppressing and hiding his grief in the face of loss and absence. Applying both LaCapra and Caruth to the narrator reveals how the subtleties of traumatic loss and absence contribute to the narrator's fragilely constructed young masculinity.

Along with *This Boy's Life* and *Old School*, I also examine the concept of nascent masculinity in Wolff's signature genre—the short story. In "Powder," Wolff places an absentee father and his exceedingly cautious son in an Austin Healey Roadster maneuvering down a snowy road. The father's mastery of the dangerous road conditions, his flaunting of the law, and his marital infidelity stand in contrast to his son's timidity. Rather than imitating the masculinity performed by his father, the son constructs something quite the opposite, which creates the tension that drives the conflict of the brief story. "Flyboys," another short story, shows the dynamics involved when one young boy betrays another for social advancement. In this story, the interdependence of males' relationships to other males as a means to achieving masculine dominance, as theorized by Connell, is on display. In "Smorgasbord," a third short story, Wolff presents a pair of boarding school roommates considering whether or not to solicit a prostitute. While both boys are playing at a kind of schoolboy fantasy and braggadocio, Wolff shows a nascent hypermasculinity through these boys' desire to participate in hegemonic masculinity through the use of money and sexual dominance, acts that Wolff presents coming to fulfillment through other adult male characters. Eve Sedgwick's work on homosocial behavior and Donald

Mosher's work on hypermasculinity help reveal the iterations of masculinity on display in "Smorgasbord." All three stories depict characters in early stages of constructing their masculinity and highlight the fragile and significant act of constructing a recognizable masculinity for these young characters who wrestle with the latent effects of traumatic experience.

In chapter three, "Hypermasculinities," I examine adult characters in the memoir *This Boy's Life* (1989), the novella *The Barracks Thief* (1984), the Vietnam War memoir *In Pharaoh's Army* (1994), and short fiction including "The Other Miller" (1996), "Soldier's Joy" (1985), "Hunters in the Snow" (1981), and "Wingfield" (1981). I argue that the hypermasculine men who construct their masculinity through physical strengthen, violence, and sexual aggression traumatize others and themselves resulting in a self-defeating cycle, and Wolff's depiction of this cycle serves as a critique of hegemonic masculinity. In this chapter I examine the male characters who exaggerate attention to the physical body and who exhibit violent behavior aimed at women, children, minorities, and males outside of hegemonic masculinity. The theoretical framework for this chapter relies on R.W. Connell's work on the interdependencies of male to male relationships to establish power, Maggie McKinley's work on the cyclical nature of male violence, and Marilyn Wesley's work on violence in the work of Tobias Wolff (McKinley 3 Wesley 50). Additionally, the work of Brenda Boyle and Susan Jeffords allows me to examine the context of the Vietnam War and how masculinity operated with in it (Boyle 3 Jeffords xiv). These theorists, along with the trauma theorists Cathy Caruth, Michelle Balaev, and Joshua Pederson reveal a range of hypermasculine performances and their intensified traumatic effects presented by Wolff as well as his implicit critique of these performances.

In *This Boy's Life* I analyze the abusive and luckless step-father figure, Dwight, whose hypermasculinity manifests in him lashing out and perpetuating a damaging cycle of violence. In response to his failures as a man, Dwight's violence only highlights and re-inscribes his inabilities to perform the masculinity he desires. In *The Barrack's Thief*, I focus on the character Lewis, a recruit in boot camp in the Vietnam War era who, after styling himself as a man of great sexual prowess, finds himself in an intimate moment with an effeminate male school teacher and then to overcompensate his masculine slippage, lashes out with violent hypermasculine behavior towards a prostitute. Like Dwight, his violent overcompensations for his perceived masculine inadequacies wreak havoc on those around him and also plunges him deeper into a self-defeating cycle. Both Lewis and Dwight reveal Wolff's critique of hypermasculinity situated in the contexts of the family and the military.

In Pharaoh's Army contains the character Pete Landon who exhibits a more nuanced hypermasculinity than Dwight's or Lewis's as Pete plays the role of both military and cultural conqueror during the Vietnam War. Pete performs his masculinity by insisting on placing himself in dangerous situations so he can display his military superiority, and he also uses his cultural knowledge of both the West and the East to orchestrate control over other American service men and Vietnamese locals. The memoir also includes Captain Kale, a blustering officer whose hypermasculinity creates the opportunity for the soldiers under him to lure him unwittingly into a brief dalliance with a Vietnamese boy in drag. Both Pete Landon and Captain Kale illustrate Wolff's damning depiction of hypermasculinity and its destructive effects within the traumatic context of the Vietnam War.

In the short stories mentioned for this chapter, I examine male to male relationships in the hypermasculine arena of military training and combat in "Soldier's Joy" and "Wingfield." In

both stories, characters wrestle with anxieties about masculine inadequacy as they respond to and cause traumatic events. “The Other Miller” involves a young Army recruit who responds to his father’s death and his mother’s remarriage by joining the military and trying to punish his mother. The surprising death of his mother and the trauma it causes play a key role in the protagonist’s construction of his masculinity. Finally, I examine the hypermasculine arena of a hunting trip in Wolff’s often anthologized “Hunters in the Snow.” A trio of men jockey for dominance in a showdown that ends with an implied murder. Each of these stories examine masculinity and how it intersects with trauma for these characters as Wolff critiques the flaws and dangers of hypermasculinity.

In the chapter four, “Man Womanly, Woman Manly,” I show that though Wolff more often presents and critiques negative aspects of masculinity, he does include positive male characters as well. I argue that when Wolff presents a male character in a positive light, it is one who displays the opposite traits of hypermasculinity. These positive male characters exhibit some masculine traits, but they also exhibit some traits often associated with femininity such as empathy, the instinct to nurture, vulnerability, and willingness to cooperate rather than to compete. Furthermore, these characters construct a masculinity and identity not easily dismantled and one not based on the subjugation of a less powerful sub-group. Todd Reeser, Virginia Woolf, Sophia Aboim, and Joshua Pederson inform the theoretical foundation for this chapter. Reeser helps demonstrate that when Wolff presents a character exhibiting both masculine and feminine qualities, masculinity becomes and no longer “unmarked,” a positive step towards understanding how hegemonic masculinity maintains its dominance (8). Additionally, Reeser argues that masculinity is most visible when performed by a woman. He writes, “female masculinity reveals masculinity’s arbitrary connection to the male body” and he

goes on to explain that women who embody traits of masculinity reveal masculinity as a construct (132). Virginia Woolf will also serve as a theoretical touchstone in this chapter as I use her concept of “man womanly” and “woman manly” to examine Tobias Wolff’s characters who display both masculinity and femininity (104). Virginia Woolf notes that it is “fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple,” and I will argue that Tobias Wolff presents characters who are admirable in part because they avoid the fatal flaw of performing only within the strictly regulated bounds of gender archetypes (104). Sophia Aboim’s concept of “hybridized masculinity” will complement Virginia Woolf in this section as well as to show how a character can simultaneously embody more than one iteration of masculinity (157). In this chapter I also continue examining trauma’s role in masculinity, and I use Joshua Pederson’s work to analyze several passages in which characters regulate their masculinity within a varying range of traumatic situations. Finally, I argue that the male characters who tend to be least shattered and paralyzed by trauma are the ones who exhibit a “man womanliness” rather than a hypermasculinity.

For the primary texts in this chapter, I analyze the endings of Wolff’s *In Pharaoh’s Army* and *This Boy’s Life*. In both of these works, a male character performs a masculinity that is tempered by feminine traits resulting in a note of optimism at the close of two fairly dark works. Wolff ends both pieces with male characters who have been constructing their masculinity throughout and who find comfort, confidence, and stability in distancing themselves from hypermasculinity and in moving towards a performance more akin to man womanliness. In *In Pharaoh’s Army*, the first person narrator, Lieutenant Wolff, sees the ravages of hypermasculinity in the Vietnam War, and in poignant scenes in the memoir he rejects this form of masculinity. In the touching final chapter, Wolff couches his remembrance of his fallen friend

Hugh Pierce in terms that are man womanly rather than hypermasculine. *This Boy's Life* also ends focusing on the relationship of two male characters, and in this case, the narrator helps a friend restrain his hypermasculinity, and the two of them close the novel singing together driving through the night. In both *In Pharaoh's Army* and *This Boy's Life*, these endings convey a sense of hopefulness for these male characters who are both survivors of and witnesses to trauma.

As a coda to chapter four, I provide analysis of two characters who exhibit “woman manliness” or in Reeser’s terms “female masculinity.” The mother character, Rosemary, from *This Boy's Life* and another mother—Krystal—from the short story “Desert Breakdown” perform acts typically considered masculine. Rosemary repairs a car, wins a shooting contest, and financially provides for her child. Similarly, Krystal works on a broken down car, physically assaults a man who poses a threat to her child, and fends for herself while stranded in the desert. These two characters both have husbands who have created for themselves a destructive and patriarchal masculinity, far removed from anything akin to “man womanliness.” Both Rosemary and Krystal perform masculine behaviors while at the same time exhibiting traits typically seen as more feminine such as comforting a scared child and empathizing with other women. As victims of traumas perpetuated by men, Rosemary and Krystal—like the male characters in the close of *This Boy's Life* and *In Pharaoh's Army*—find themselves un-shattered and adequately able to cope with their traumatic experiences. Wolff’s presentation of masculinity, whether it is performed by a male or a female character, indicates that those who allow masculinity to be tempered with femininity are more likely to emerge as admirable and less likely to be undone by trauma.

CHAPTER 2

NASCENT MASCULINITIES

The constructed and fragile nature of masculinity is clearly revealed in an individual who is not practiced or comfortable in performing the culturally accepted behaviors, poses, and attitudes of masculinity. Boys and adolescent males who clumsily try on for the first time the guises of masculinity demonstrate that although masculinity tends to be perceived as natural and stable, it is instead constructed and fragile. Tobias Wolff present the perils of boys attempting to don masculinity in his memoir *This Boy's Life* (1989), in his novel *Old School* (2003), and in a trio of short stories from his collection *The Night in Question* (1996). These texts reveal and critique what is often kept invisible about masculinity, namely masculinity's tenuousness and fragility when it is built to domineer and traumatize less powerful individuals. Todd Reeser notes that "it [masculinity] passes by us invisibly and we take it for granted in our everyday lives. It may be only when something goes wrong or when it goes into excessive overdrive that we really notice it" (1). Adult men tend to be more adept at smoothly performing masculinity, but for boys who are eager to learn the scripts of masculinity, it "goes wrong" often, making masculinity more visible and less likely to be perceived as natural. Wolff's boys' early approximations of masculinity juxtaposed with their naiveté and innocence contribute to the critique. A stark contrast emerges when a boy goes from parading with a gun and fantasizing about shooting someone in one moment to gently holding his mother's hand in the next. This contrast further pushes masculinity out of invisibility and into visibility. Wolff's presentation of nascent masculinity performed by boys and adolescent males serves as a critique of hegemonic masculinity and makes visible the process by which masculinity perpetuates its place of dominance.

Traumatic experiences shape the way many of Wolff's young male characters construct their masculinity though not all of his characters experience trauma on the same scale of intensity. Often these characters experience trauma through the violence or the absence of fathers and father figures. Despite being trauma victims, the boys often normalize the abusive behavior of older men and use them as models for constructing their own masculinity. The repetitive nature of both trauma and masculinity is the key to understanding this behavior. Repetitive behavior is addressed by both masculinity and trauma theorists, and in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2000), Dominick LaCapra demonstrates how the repetitive "acting out" of trauma can operate. He writes, "In acting out, tenses implode, and it is as if one were back there in the past relieving the traumatic scene" (21). In other words, trauma victims who are unable to successfully articulate their traumatic experiences tend to continue living them out by repeating them. In the case of many of Wolff's young boys, characters who have been traumatized through violence, loss, and/or absence continue to act out their traumas, and so they become perpetrators as well as victims of trauma. These scenes of re-enactment can be viewed as attempts by these characters to escape their traumas and to establish their masculinities at the same time. Reeser points out re-enactment's role in masculinity: "By virtue of the repetition of his masculinity, by virtue of doing more or less the same that appears predictable...masculinity comes to have meaning and to be perceived as coherent because it is repeated in many instances in ways that are perceived as coherent" (82). As Wolff's boys forge their nascent masculinities, their fragile and traumatized performances are anything but coherent or stable. The intensity of traumatic experience each character endures varies, but in each instance, performances of masculinity intersect with physical, verbal, psychological or symbolic trauma which reinforces Wolff's critique of hegemonic masculinity.

Wolff's characters in *This Boy's Life*, *Old School*, "Smorgasbord," "Flyboys," and "Powder" provide prime examples of boys attempting to construct masculinity. In *This Boy's Life*, the young narrator moves west with his mother running away from a string of bad boyfriends only to land in an even worse situation. The memoir focuses on the narrator, a young Tobias Wolff (who styles himself as both "Toby" and "Jack" at various points) growing from childhood to adolescence in the house of Dwight, his abusive stepfather, whose violence towards Toby and his mother creates a traumatizing environment in which Toby clumsily attempts to construct his masculinity. Throughout the memoir, Toby becomes fascinated with guns, uniforms, and the trappings of the military, all props for the model of masculinity that he has witnessed and been traumatized by. Though Toby never fully acts out the violent codes of masculinity he has been traumatized by, in his nascent formation of masculinity, he does fantasize about this behavior. Toby uses his relationships with other boys, particularly the unpopular and effeminate Arthur, in his attempts to establish dominance and to assert his masculinity. At times, Toby's attempts to don the guises of masculinity appear comic, at times tragic, and throughout the memoir, Wolff uses his young narrator to critique hegemonic masculinity by making visible the hidden scripts of masculinity.

Though it is a novel, *Old School* in many ways picks up where *This Boy's Life* leaves off thematically. An unnamed narrator finds himself navigating the complex social terrain of an elite all-boys boarding school. To gain social standing among his peers, an essential element of hegemonic masculinity according to R.W. Connell, the narrator constructs a false persona for himself by hiding aspects of his life and by suggesting through the stories he publishes in the school's literary magazine that he is someone other than who he truly is: a working-class, half-Jewish boy (76). His socio-economic position and ethnic identity threaten the narrator's social

position at the school and therefore also his fledgling masculinity. Though the dramatic kinds of trauma (physical violence) found in *This Boy's Life* are largely absent from *Old School*, another kind of trauma pervades the text: the trauma of absence and loss. As a Jew and second-hand witness, the narrator experiences the trauma of absence created by the holocaust, and as a son, he experiences the trauma of loss caused by his mother's death. The narrator attempts to suppress both of these traumas, but his actions and thoughts reveal a repeated acting out and revisiting of these "unclaimed experiences," to use Cathy Caruth's term. In constructing a nascent masculinity, the narrator finds himself cornered by peer status negotiations and unprocessed traumas, an environment through which Wolff demonstrates the tenuousness of masculinity.

Like *Old School*, the story "Smorgasbord" is set in an elite all-boys boarding school environment. In the short story, two poorer students (recipients of scholarship money and therefore social outsiders) surprisingly find themselves asked to dinner by Garcia, a wealthy South American student whose embodiment of hegemonic masculinity stands in stark contrast to the fumbling and inadequate unnamed narrator and his roommate, a boy named Crosley. During their dinner at a cheap all-you-can eat buffet, the narrator and Crosley unsuccessfully attempt to impress Garcia's stepmother and assert their masculinity only to find themselves little more than the butt of a joke. Rather than using the dinner to elevate their masculine status, the two boys have their inadequacies brought clearly into view. After the unsuccessful dinner, the narrator and Crosley return to the school and attempt to mend their masculinities by fantasizing about soliciting a prostitute. The story reveals the seeds of a hypermasculine behavior in a nascent form. Though the boys in this story are not trauma survivors themselves, they fantasize about constructing their masculinity by means of becoming trauma perpetrators.

Similar to “Smorgasbord,” Wolff’s “Flyboys” involves a young boy attempting to create and maintain social prestige among other boys as a means to constructing a nascent masculinity. The story’s unnamed narrator—an elementary aged boy—views his new friend, the confident and affluent Clark, as the vehicle to upward mobility and to a stable and coherent masculinity. Clark’s possessions—a samurai sword, compasses, calipers, a Webley pistol—mark him as adequately masculine in the eyes of the narrator. In aligning himself with Clark, the narrator also aims to distance himself from an old friend, Freddy. Freddy foils Clark. His asthma makes him physically inadequate and his poverty makes him socially inadequate. Association with Freddy threatens the narrator’s social status and therefore, his masculinity. In the story, Wolff makes clear a behavior often concealed in adult masculinity: the calculated social maneuvers males perform with each other to assert and maintain their masculinity. In this story, the narrator’s relationship to trauma less explicit, though the text does give clues about troubling circumstances within the narrator’s family. Setting these behaviors in the context of young boys, rather than adult men, further illuminates and critiques the constructed and fragile nature of masculine performances.

“Powder,” one of Wolff’s most artistically rendered short stories, also addresses a masculine performance in which a young boy, the first person narrator, alters his behavior and attitudes according to an accepted model. In the story, a young son—despite his own cautiousness and preference for domesticity—finds himself impressed and swept away by his father’s ability to ski a dangerous slope, deceive a police officer, and navigate a dangerous road closed due to a snow storm as the duo races the clock to make it home in time for dinner at the table of his disapproving mother. The story ends with an image of the boy riding with his father down the snow-covered road having abandoned caution and anxiety and replaced them with trust in

his father. Charmed by the mastery of his father's performance of masculinity, the son is blind to his father's flaws. Though the boy in this story is less obviously traumatized than others, he experiences the traumatic impact of loss and abandonment by his father. In this chapter, I argue that *This Boy's Life*, *Old School*, "Smorgasbord," "Flyboys," and "Powder" reveal and critique the constructed and fragile nature of masculinity as it is performed in nascent stages by young boys and adolescents.

I: Nascent Masculinity in *This Boy's Life*, a Memoir

Though *This Boy's Life* won the PEN/Faulkner award and was made into a feature film starring Robert De Niro, Ellen Barkin, and Leonardo DiCaprio, the memoir has received little critical attention beyond brief mention in a few articles. At the time of publication, the *Harvard Book Review*, praised *This Boy's Life* calling it a "stylish memoir" that was "profound and memorable" (9-10). The review goes on to highlight Wolff's focus on "the roles one tries on" as a young boy as well as Wolff's childhood search "for a man, the man who will show him what a man is" (9). The reviewer, Michael Martone, notices that clothes function as a key prop for constructing young Wolff's masculine pose in the memoir. Martone writes, "Clothes, here, are being used to make the man" (10). Given Martone's review, it is surprising that *This Boy's Life* received little scholarly attention in the decade after publication. Reviewed as part of a 2013 retrospective on Wolff's body of work, Clifford Thompson in *The Threepenny Review* notes *This Boy's Life's* "perceptiveness" and its "utter absence of sentimentality" (9). Thompson notes the resilience and optimism of Wolff's mother—Rosemary—and the bullying nature of his stepfather—Dwight—as depicted in the memoir. In his final assessment, Thompson views *This Boy's Life* as part of Wolff's "progression from the lost young man of his memoirs to the one who has found a new place in life, as one of our country's finest writers" (8).

Outside of book reviews such as Martone's and Thompson's, *This Boy's Life* has only been treated in two articles and two book chapters. Martin Scofield's "Winging It: Realism and Invention in the Stories of Tobias Wolff" (2001) and Anita Helmbold's "The Sacred in the Context of the Everyday: Finding Faith in the Fiction of Tobias Wolff" (2012) both mention *This Boy's Life* but spend no more than a few paragraphs on the memoir. Marilyn C. Wesley's *Violent Adventure: Contemporary Fiction by American Men* (2003) spends a third of a chapter addressing the memoir, and Daniel D. Challener's *Stories of Resilience in Childhood* (1997) devotes a chapter to *This Boy's Life*. Scofield's article focuses on the sub-genres of the short story and explores the way in which Wolff's fiction adapts and modifies the generic conventions of realist fiction. Scofield uses *This Boy's Life* in contrast with Wolff's fiction writing ultimately arguing for the generic superiority of Wolff's fiction. Scofield writes, "there is something constricting in my awareness that we are tied to fact, with the young Tobias Wolff as hero" (101). Along with addressing generic aspects of the memoir, Scofield also briefly touches on the bookends of *This Boy's Life*, noticing that the opening and closing scenes are set in cars, an "icon of American freedom" (100). Though he does not expand upon it, the motif of cars—especially as a means to freedom and masculine self-construction—play a major role in the memoir.

Helmbold's focus, like Scofield's, is on Wolff's fiction, but she does briefly address *This Boy's Life*. As with Wolff's other works, Helmbold argues that *This Boy's Life* contains "a vision of life in sacramental terms...shaped by Christian sensibilities" (10). From the memoir, she points out young Wolff's conversion to Catholicism at his mother's urging and the presence of a feared and respected nun, Sister James. Helmbold argues that Christianity plays a positive role in young Wolff's identity formation, and she notes the ambiguous final line of the memoir in which a slightly drunk Toby driving in a car with his friend Chuck sing hymns "as if we'd been

saved” (288). Though not the focus of her analysis, Helmbold provides some insights into the role of two female characters—Rosemary and Sister James—in the maturation of young Toby.

A more sophisticated and extensive treatment of *This Boy's Life* comes in a chapter titled “Boys' Lives” in Marilyn C. Wesley's *Violent Adventure*. In the chapter she examines *This Boy's Life*, *The Barracks Thief*, and “Soldiers Joy” by Wolff along-side thematically comparable works by Pinckney Benedict. Wesley examines Wolff's texts as examples of the coming-of-age genre and argues that Wolff's works mark a sharp departure in the genre's history. She writes, “In place of the easy passage [from boyhood to manhood] of the Victorian period or even the corrective connection between young males and their communities popular from the 1950s through the 70s, the autobiographies and fiction of Tobias Wolff...published in the 1980s and 90s, present an alternative picture of American coming-of-age” (46-7). The alternative picture, Wesley explains, is one in which a young protagonist fails to achieve male maturation not because of the failure of the individual but because of “the failure of a society in which mature manhood is imaginable” (44). The violence performed by boys in this kind of social context functions not as a rite of passage into manhood but as a frustrated reaction to failed attempts to gain access to something that does not exist—stable, mature masculinity. Basing her argument upon Wolff's adaptation and alteration of generic expectations for coming-of-age narratives, Wesley makes the compelling claim that *This Boy's Life* critiques contemporary masculinity's abuses by showing “violence as symptomatic of the absence of a social system that can produce capable adult men” (55).

In her analysis of *This Boy's Life*, Wesley points out the absence of suitable models of masculinity for Toby's maturation and the trauma it causes. Wesley writes, “He [Toby] proceeds by trying to learn from and accommodate to the various brutal father figures Rosemary's

unfortunate relationships provide” (50). Wesley goes on to briefly examine Duke, Toby’s biological father who is an absentee father and a con man; Roy, one of Rosemary’s boyfriends who gives Toby a gun; and Dwight, Toby’s stepfather, a “Dickensian villain...who takes on Rosemary’s son as a special project” (51). Each of these figures shapes Toby’s configuration of masculinity, and according to Wesley, each figure highlights the improbability of attaining mature male adulthood in contemporary America. In her analysis of Dwight, Wesley convincingly demonstrates how his negative masculine performances shape Toby’s nascent masculinity to varying degrees, but she down-plays the physical violence and trauma suffered by Toby at Dwight’s hands. She writes, “The form it [child abuse] took was not so much actual violence but steady derision and exploitation” (51). Wesley’s view fails to take into consideration the multiple beatings Toby receives by Dwight that become so regular and violent that Toby’s biological father advises him during a phone call to “kill him [Dwight]” the next time things turn physical (211). By examining the physical and emotional trauma suffered by Toby throughout *This Boy’s Life*, it becomes clear that Wolff’s presentation of early performances of masculinity critiques and reveals the cracks in socially normed masculinity.

Rather than moving chronologically through *This Boy’s Life*, which covers Toby’s life from age ten in 1955 to his enlistment in the Army in 1964, my analysis is organized around the various relationships Toby has and how they contribute to the construction of his nascent masculinity. Reeser’s concept of masculinity as non-linear supports an a-chronological examination of Toby’s nascent masculinity. Reeser writes, “the notion of a man would already be implicit in the boy; he would, in part, be a man even before he goes through this rite [of passage]. The boy would also still be implicit in the man; he cannot actually *become* and then *be* a man since subjectivity is too unstable simply to *be* a man” (13-14). Rather than moving

teleologically from boyhood to manhood, Reeser theorizes masculinity's instability and non-linear changes. Connell's theories on male to male relationships also lends itself to analyzing Toby's nascent masculinity in terms of his relationships rather than in a chronological order. Connell writes, "To recognize more than one kind of masculinity is only a first step. We have to examine the relations between them. Further, we have to unpack the milieu of class and race and scrutinize the gender relations operating within them....A focus on the gender relations *among men* is necessary to keep the analysis dynamic" (76 italics mine). In examining Toby's relationships with his boyhood peers as well as his relationships with father figures, a picture emerges of the faltering steps he takes in constructing a masculinity.

In many ways, *This Boy's Life* is about Toby running from one father figure to another with increasingly traumatizing results. This journey begins before Toby's birth, with his mother, Rosemary, running from her father. Wolff writes, "My mother took off a few months after her mother died, when she was still a girl. But Daddy left some marks on her. One of them was a strange docility, almost paralysis, with men of the tyrant breed" (60). Rosemary's father "spanked her almost every night on the theory that she must have done something wrong that day whether he knew about it or not" (59). Rosemary marries Duke and gives birth to Geoffrey and then to Toby, but as the memoir opens, she is divorced and driving west across the country to escape a violent and possessive boyfriend—Roy. While living in a boarding house in Seattle, Rosemary briefly entertains flirtations from Gil, whose affluence and promises to Toby quickly turn empty. Ultimately, Rosemary's and Toby's journey ends in the dismal company town of Chinook, Washington, in the house of the abusive Dwight. Each of these men figure into Toby's quest to establish his masculinity, and in each character, Wolff depicts the tenuous construction of masculinity.

Toby's biological father, Duke, though absent from much of the memoir, casts a long shadow on Toby's forays into constructing masculinity. Toby often sees his father in an unrealistic light, believing, unlike Rosemary, that he wishes to reunite and become a family again. Toby calls his father after receiving a brutal beating from Dwight, and Duke lays out an idealistic plan for Toby to join him in California where he can prepare for prep school and spend time with his older brother, Geoffrey. Duke vaguely apologizes for his absence and says, "I've made some mistakes.... We all have. But that's behind us. Right, Tober?" (211). The affectionate nick-name and the promise of a better life impresses Toby, but Rosemary responds by saying, "Sounds real nice. Don't bank on it" (211). The plan never materializes, and Duke continues to pose as a loving father, rather than actually being one.

Another significant depiction of Wolff's relationship with his biological father occurs earlier in the memoir in the form of a flash-forward. After describing how Dwight would refer to Duke as "Daddy Warbucks and Lord High-and-Mighty," Wolff, in a philosophical and reflective passage breaks from the present tense to describe interacting with his father as an adult. He writes:

I made excuses for him [Duke] long after I should have known better. Then, when I did know better, I resolved to put the fact of his desertion from my mind. I visited him on my way to Vietnam, and then again when I got back, and we became friends. He was no monster—he'd had troubles of his own. Anyway, only crybabies grouched about their parents. This way of thinking worked pretty well until my first child was born. (121)

Upon the birth of his first child, Wolff's stoical pose of masculinity (i.e. "only crybabies grouched about their parents") crumbles, and he begins to more accurately assess his relation with his father. Wolff's first child is born two weeks prematurely, and when he first sees the baby boy in

the hospital nurse, he witnesses a nurse trying to take the baby's blood but repeatedly missing the vein with the needle. He writes, "She kept jabbing him, and every time the needle went in I felt it myself" (121). After finally getting to hold his newborn son, he reflects, "as I held him something hard broke in me, and I knew that I was more alive than I had been before" (121). In becoming a father, Wolff sees his own father's absence for what it was and the hardness inside him that had resulted. His response is rage. He writes, "for days I shook with it [rage] when I wasn't shaking with joy for my son, and for the new life I had been given" (122). As a son, Toby cut himself off emotionally from the pain of Duke's traumatizing absence, forgiving him and even lionizing him. His former pose of stoical masculinity becomes dismantled and emotions flood Wolff when he becomes a father himself and recognizes that the masculinity his father performed was predicated on artifice and deception.

Along with its content, the position of this episode within the memoir is noteworthy. Occurring almost exactly in the middle of the memoir, this reflective and philosophical episode makes use of a flash-forward technique, used only sparingly elsewhere. The jump into the future creates a sense of rupture, and the reader is quickly bolted back to the present tense upon conclusion of the brief episode. Wolff ends the flash-forward episode abruptly with "But that was still to come" (122). In two other episodes in the memoir, Wolff performs a similar break with chronology and flashes forward making a connection from an event in the present to one in the future. References to Wolff's experiences in the Vietnam war provide a unifying feature in each of these flash-forward episodes. These episodes demonstrate one of Joshua Pederson's three focal points for analyzing trauma in literature. Pederson emphasizes the importance of studying passages that contain, "depictions of experiences that are temporally, physically, or ontologically distorted" (338). Rather than focusing on erasures or subconscious slippages in the

text, Pederson privileges obvious passages of distortions when pin-pointing traumatic expression in texts. Given the thematic similarity of these flash-forward passages in *This Boy's Life*, the sparing use of the technique, and the temporal distortion connected with them, it appears that Wolff's reflections on his father at the time of his own son's birth connect not only to the performance of his masculinity but also to his previous traumatic experiences. At the hands of Duke, Wolff experiences abandonment and the trauma of absence and loss, but at the hands of other stand-in father figures, he suffers much worse.

While Duke's traumatizing influence on Toby's masculinity operates largely through his absence, Roy—a later boyfriend of Rosemary's—influences Toby's masculinity by parading the props and possessions associated with masculinity. On the surface Roy appears to have the nonchalant confidence of an experienced man of the world, but in reality he is a nervous and violent stalker. After Rosemary and Toby leave Florida to get away from him, Roy tracks down Rosemary and Toby in Salt Lake City where he tails her to and from work to keep her under his thumb. Roy also uses “threats and occasional brutality” to keep her in place (14). As a child, though, Toby is unaware of Roy's menacing behavior. Wolff writes, “I thought Roy was what a man should be” (14). Roy, who does not have a job, presents his masculinity through the props of his Jeep and his guns, symbols of his presumed self-reliance. Judith Butler argues that “The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gesture, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (140). Roy's stylization and masculinity rely on his possessions and poses. In reality, however, he lives off a disability check from the VA and possesses very little self-reliance.

Toby recognizes the importance of acquiring the appropriate props in his quest to construct his masculinity, and he puts Roy “under siege” begging him for his Winchester .22 rifle (23). Wolff writes:

A weapon was the first condition of self-sufficiency, and of being a real Westerner, and of all acceptable employment—trapping, riding herd, soldiering, law enforcement, and outlawry. I needed that rifle, for itself and for the way it completed me when I held it. (23)

The rifle becomes Toby’s prize possession, and it represents his desire for masculine self-reliance and competence. Wolff’s presentation of his boyhood infatuation with the weapon, however, reveals the item to be nothing more than the prop and guise of constructed masculinity. Wolff’s tone is self-deprecating as he lists the romantic list of acceptable occupations (trapping, riding her, soldiering, law enforcement, and outlawry), and he makes it obvious through overstatement (“it completed me”) that he is critiquing a juvenile desire.

After receiving the rifle with strict instructions about never loading it with ammunition, Toby quickly progresses from cleaning it, to imagining himself as a soldier, to firing it. The progression depicts Toby’s urge to replicate the pattern of masculinity with which he has been presented through Roy’s poses and props. Wolff writes:

I went to marching around the apartment with it, and then to striking brave poses in front of the mirror. Roy had saved one of his army uniforms and I sometimes dressed up in this, together with martial-looking articles of hunting gear: fur trooper’s hat, camouflage coat, boots that reached nearly to my knees. The camouflage coat made me feel like a sniper, and before long I began to act like one. (24)

The image is a comical one, but one with a feeling of foreboding. The rag-tag outfit serves as a uniform for portraying masculinity, and Toby's initial goal is to prove his masculinity to himself by examining his appearance in the mirror. Though Toby convinces himself that he has successfully approximated adult masculinity, Wolff's presentation of his boyhood self clearly depicts how far from the mark he falls. Throughout the memoir, Toby keeps seeking the right costumes and props to portray masculinity. He moves from his rag-tag sniper's outfit to boy-scout uniforms, progressing through each level of woodsmanship gaining its attendant merit badges. Upon becoming more conscious of his class status, Toby recognizes the clothes and styles of his wealthier classmates and tries to emulate them. Ultimately, he joins the Army after dropping out of high school and puts on the uniform he had once played at as a boy. This progression highlights Wolff's critique of culturally scripted masculinity and its dependence upon domineering, violent, and traumatizing modes of expression.

Reeser examines how the patterns of masculinity and external influences upon a young boy can create a desire to repeat a behavior—in this case donning the uniform of masculinity—to establish a nascent masculinity. Reeser writes, "The boy may be influenced by images or discourses around guns, and then change what he does on a daily basis (buy a toy gun, play with it, go hunting with his dad, vote for a pro-NRA political candidate). As these aspects of ideology influence practices, these practices in turn also serve to construct masculinity" (24). Echoing Butler, Reeser goes on to argue that the more a boy repeats a behavior he perceives to be masculine, the more he believes that the behavior and masculinity are related and capable of conveying his masculinity to others. In *This Boy's Life*, Toby tries to emulate the models of masculinity available to him by repeatedly uniforming himself in order to convince himself and others that he has been accepted into hegemonic masculinity.

In dressing up and parading around with the rifle, Toby convinces himself that he looks the part, and then he begins to try his hand at acting the part. Toby takes the gun to the apartment window and stealthily aims at unsuspecting passers-by on the street below. He writes:

Hammer cocked, a round in the chamber, finger resting lightly on the trigger, I drew a bead on whoever walked by—women pushing strollers, children, garbage collectors laughing and calling to each, anyone—and as they passed under my window I sometimes had to bite my lip to keep from laughing in the ecstasy of my power over them. (25)

The sensation of holding power over another is central to Toby's concept of masculinity given the models of masculinity he sees. In dressing in Roy's clothes and fantasizing about dominating women, children, and men through the hidden power of the rifle, Toby illustrates the desire of a young boy to achieve peer status with an adult male (Roy). The clothes, the weapon, and the power dynamics played out by the boy appear tragic or perhaps comic, but when enacted by an adult man, they appear as an accepted part of society. Wolff's depiction of this nascent masculinity shows the constructed, fragile, and traumatizing nature of hegemonic masculinity that often remains veiled and normalized in adult male behavior.

Near the dramatic climax of the scene in which Toby aims the rifle out the window, Wolff breaks the narration and presents a flash-forward using the same technique he used jumping from describing his boyhood perception of his father, Duke, to his perspective on Duke once he himself became a father. In this scene, Wolff connects his "ecstasy of power" as a boy to his experiences as a soldier in Vietnam. As a boy he becomes dismayed that his power over the passers-by is understood only by himself and not by his potential victims. The power dynamic that he establishes works just like his reflection in the mirror when he is uniformed in the guises of masculinity but still completely alone—it is all self-perception. At this point, the

narration flashes forward to Wolff's experience in Vietnam. He writes, "I saw it [dismay] years later in men I served with, and felt it myself, when unarmed Vietnamese civilians talked back to us while we were herding them around. Power can be enjoyed only when it is recognized and feared" (25). As the author writing the memoir, Wolff understands the emptiness of power, but as the young protagonist of the memoir, Toby does not. Centered around violence and warfare and making use of the flash-forward technique, this scene aligns with Pederson's model for analyzing trauma in literature particularly in its "temporal distortion" (338). The scene highlights how a boy who has been traumatized by absent and violent father figures views masculinity through terms of violence and power and can progress from a trauma victim to a trauma perpetrator.

Even as a boy, however, Toby recognizes the cracks in a masculine performance built on power and violence as he continues to model his masculinity on Roy. Two instances serve as examples: the moment Toby finally pulls the trigger of the rifle and kills a squirrel and the moment Toby is confronted by the nun, Sister James, while dressed in Roy's military fatigues. After fantasizing about shooting an innocent passer-by, the temptation to pull the rifle's trigger becomes too much for Toby to bear, and he shoots a squirrel from his sniper's position in the apartment. Rather than the expected experience of elation upon exerting dominance through violence, Toby feels remorse, and he hides in shame. Wanting to process his guilt but not willing to admit his action to his mother, Toby informs his mother of the dead squirrel and his wish to bury it. Wolff writes, "She [his mother] stuck her hand in the wrapper and picked up the squirrel, then pulled the bag inside out away from her hand. We buried it behind our building under a cross made of popsicle sticks, and I blubbered the whole time" (26). Here Toby behavior opposite to Roy's martial masculinity as he cries openly and needs his mother to do the

dirty work of handling the dead animal's body. Wolff's image of the popsicle-stick cross highlights Toby's oscillation between innocent boyhood and his trying on of the uniforms, props, and behaviors of violent adult masculinity making his critique more poignant.

Toby's remorse over his violent action and his recognition of violence's inability to usher him into adult masculinity is, however, short lived. Despite his failure to construct his image of masculinity based on Roy's model, he soon returns to the allure of the rifle. Wolff writes, "Though I avoided the apartment, I could not shake the idea that sooner or later I would get the rifle out again. All my images of myself as I wished to be were images of myself armed. Because I did not know who I was, any image of myself, no matter how grotesque, had power over me" (27). The grotesqueness of this self-image comes from its failed approximation of Roy's hypermasculinity, which is itself based on a fragile approximation of masculine dominance and self-reliance.

Toby experiences his second realization after again relapsing into parading around the apartment striking poses with the rifle dressed in his military and hunting outfit. As he peers out the window sighting down the barrel of the rifle, he sees a car of nuns approaching the apartment. Sister James, a parish nun who provides after-school enrichment activities for Toby and other boys, has come to pay an unannounced visit to Rosemary. Known for her mental, spiritual, and physical toughness, Sister James possess what Roy and Toby feign to possess. As Sister James approaches the apartment door Toby thinks:

What would she make of the rifle, the fur hat, the uniform, the darkened room? What would she make of me? I feared her disapproval, but even more than that I feared her incomprehension, even her amusement, at what she could not possibly understand. I

didn't understand it myself. Being so close to so much robust identity made me feel the poverty of my own, the ludicrous aspect of my costume and props. (28)

Wolff presents this as a moment of realization for Toby. Toby becomes aware that his approximation of masculinity falls short of the mark when he tries to imagine himself as seen through eyes other than his own. Judith Butler's concept of the illusion of a stable performance of gender through stylization illuminates Toby's behavior. Wolff dramatizes how Toby's "illusion of an abiding gendered self" becomes shattered when his performance is revealed as fraudulent when confronted with Sister James's "robust identity" (Butler 140). Ironically, Toby's moment of realization comes not when he encounters a man, but when he encounters a woman. Sister James, for whom I provide further analysis in chapter four, embodies common female traits—nurturing, empathizing, and collaborating—along with traits commonly associated with masculinity including physical strength. Furthermore, her robust identity is not dependent upon domineering and traumatizing others as is Roy's.

Despite Toby's realization in the scene with Sister James, he does not ultimately change his attempts to create his masculinity through props, poses, and stylized behaviors. Rather, he insists on taking the rifle—to him, the essence of his identity and masculinity—with him after Rosemary leaves Roy. The rifle remains his prized possession once Rosemary and Toby land in a more permanent residence in the rugged company town of Chinook, Washington living with Dwight, a violent drunk who ensnares Rosemary. While Toby sees Roy as a model of masculinity to emulate, he sees Dwight as an impediment to attaining masculinity. The relationship and power dynamics between Toby and Dwight illustrate Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity's relationship to subordinate masculinity with Dwight in the position of hegemony and Toby in the position of subordination. Connell argues that the primary category

of subordinated men is homosexuals, and goes on to posit that heterosexual men and boys can also be subordinated by hegemonic masculinity when members of the hegemonic group mark them with symbolic femininity (78). Connell writes:

The process [of subordinating heterosexual boys and men] is marked by a rich vocabulary of abuse: wimp, milksop, nerd, turkey, sissy, lily liver, jellyfish, yellowbelly, candy ass, ladyfinger, pushover, cookie pusher, cream puff, motherfucker, pantywaist....

Here too the symbolic blurring with femininity is obvious. (79)

Dwight habitually uses similar language when he addresses Toby and describes him to others. For example, Dwight considers him “effeminate” calls him a “sissy” to his mother, and questions his relationship with another boy, Arthur, who he suspects to be gay (96, 132). In her treatment of *This Boy’s Life*, Marilyn C. Wesley accurately notes Dwight’s “steady derision and exploitation” of Toby (51). Throughout the memoir, Dwight uses language to subordinate Toby by connecting him to femininity, a form of verbal traumatizing that leaves its marks on Toby’s nascent masculinity.

Along with Dwight’s verbal abuse comes his physical abuse, which Wesley underplays. Dwight traumatizes Toby’s body throughout the memoir, and physical abuse is often associated with masculinity. Dwight uses violence to maintain his position within hegemonic masculinity, and Toby—positioned in subordinate masculinity—in turn often uses the same methods as Dwight in his attempt to gain access into hegemonic masculinity. In *Masculinity and the Paradox of Violence in American Fiction: 1950-1975* (2015), Maggie McKinley presents a theory that aptly fits the dynamic between Dwight and Toby. McKinley argues that male violence perpetuates itself in a feedback loop. This occurs when individuals and cultures construct a masculinity whose main tool against personal fragmentation or cultural oppression is

violence. McKinley explains the “paradox of violence” as when “men make the choice to transcend oppression using liberatory violence that will purportedly allow them to become men, but their aggression often results in the oppression of others and/or their ongoing emasculation” (3). In the context of McKinley’s argument, emasculation occurs not only for the victim, but it also doubles back on the perpetrator when he realizes the inefficacy of his own violence. When Toby models Dwight’s violence in an attempt to “transcend oppression” or to construct his masculinity, he fails and the paradox of violence doubles back to traumatize him.

The first instance of traumatic violence perpetrated by Dwight upon Toby’s body occurs indirectly, but Dwight’s intent to physically harm and psychologically degrade Toby is unmistakable. In one of his “meanest whims,” Dwight assigns Toby to husk chestnuts in a utility room after dinner (96). When Toby attempts to use gloves to handle the spiny nuts, Dwight refuses to allow it, insisting that the “gloves were effeminate” (96). Wolff writes, “My fingers were crazed with cuts and scratches. Even worse, the broken husks bled a juice that made my hands stink and turned them orange. No amount of borax could get it off” (96). At school, Toby’s peers ridicule the condition of his hands. For weeks, Dwight continues to force Toby to continue husking the chestnuts as Toby’s hands become more and more disfigured. Through repetition and brute force, Dwight controls Toby’s body, maintaining the distinctions between his position in hegemonic and Toby’s position in subordinate masculinity while physically and psychologically traumatizing him.

In the instance of the chestnut husking, Toby does not respond to Dwight’s violence with some form of his own violence, but he does fantasize about it. As Toby becomes more desperate to escape Dwight, he thinks, “I was ready to do anything to get clear of Dwight. I even thought of killing him, shooting him down some night while he was picking on my mother” (133). After

fantasizing about killing Dwight, Toby takes a step towards enacting violence, much like the progression he enacted before when posing with the rifle in the apartment and then eventually shooting the squirrel. Wolff writes, “Sometimes I took the Winchester down when I heard Dwight start in on my mother” (133). Toby does not enact his fantasy, but he does become aware that his identity and attempt to construct his masculinity are centered around his struggle with Dwight. Wolff writes, “I defined myself by opposition to him” (134). Toby’s nascent masculinity, therefore, finds a foundation in being traumatized and in seeking to traumatize.

Although Toby does oppose Dwight as he constructs his masculinity, he also mirrors Dwight’s violence and attempts to achieve dominance when he attacks another male belonging to a subordinate group. Just as Dwight verbally assaults Toby by connecting him with femininity and then physically traumatizes him as well, so too does Toby attempt to dominate a weaker male. The action occurs when Toby verbally harasses and then fights Arthur Gayle, the “uncoolest boy in the sixth grade” (107). Part of Arthur’s uncoolness comes from how his peers perceive his masculinity. Wolff writes, “Arthur was a sissy. His mother was said to have turned him into a sissy by dressing him in girl’s clothes when he was little. He walked like a girl, ran like a girl, and threw like a girl.... The name Gayle implicated him further in sissyhood” (107). Connell includes “sissy” in her long list of names used by members of dominant or hegemonic masculinity to push other males into positions of subordination (78). Toby recognizes Arthur’s position of subordination and the potential for him to gain access to hegemonic masculinity by ridiculing Arthur in much the same way that Dwight has done to him, but he secretly likes Arthur for his wit and story-telling abilities, traits the two boys share. Wolff writes, “But I had withheld my friendship, because I was afraid of what it would cost me” (108). Toby instinctively knows

how power dynamics work between boys, and he wants to cement his status in the dominant group.

Arthur threatens Toby's fragilely constructed masculinity when he taunts him after school one day about his scratched and discolored hands (from the work Dwight assigned him to do husking the chestnuts). When Arthur walks past a group of boys including Toby who had been talking about him, Arthur says to Toby, "Didn't your momma teach you to wash your hands after you go pee?" (108). The two boys exchange escalating insults until, after he calculates that he could easily beat the overweight and un-athletic Arthur in a fight, Toby calls Arthur a sissy. Mirroring Dwight's use of verbal abuse that leads into violence, Toby tries to dominate Arthur to establish his own masculinity. Wolff shows, however, that just as Dwight's use of domineering behavior only leads him to be perceived as petty and brutal rather than as masculine, so too do Toby's efforts ultimately work counter to his purposes. When the fight begins with Arthur, it becomes clear to Toby that he has misjudged Arthur's abilities. Wolff writes, "His first swing caught me dead on the ear. There was an explosion inside my head, then a continuous rustling sound as of someone crumpling paper. It lasted for days" (109). After a barrage of punches from Arthur, Toby strikes Arthur damaging his eye and nose. Wolff writes:

The eye [Arthur's] was already closing up, his face gone scarlet, his nostrils streaming gouts of snot. When I saw his eye I got worried. I was ready to stop, but he wasn't. He flew at me again. I closed with him and got him in a hug to keep his arms still. We staggered over the road like drunken dancers. (109)

Toby's attempt to construct his dominance through physical violence fails as Arthur emerges as the winner of the fight, and Toby loses ground rather than gaining it in his quest to construct his nascent masculinity.

Toby's failure illustrates McKinley's concept of the paradox of violent masculinity. McKinley argues that male "aggression often results in the oppression of others and/or their ongoing emasculation" (3). Toby is emasculated not only by losing a fight to a "sissy," but also by having to "take back" calling Arthur a sissy in order for Arthur to agree to end the beating. Toby's emasculation in this scene is observable in the quasi-sexual language Wolff uses to describe the final stages of the fight. Wolff writes, "He [Arthur] struggled, then abruptly collapsed on top of me. He was panting for breath. His weight pressed me into the mud. I gathered myself and bucked him off. It took everything I had. We lay next to each other, gasping strenuously" (110). Though Arthur physically dominates the fight, in Wolff's depiction of the boys laying on and beside each other, bucking, and gasping strenuously, the image of the boys becomes less pugilistic and borders on sexual. Rather than appearing like the macho brawler as he had hoped, Toby is seen by his peers watching the fight as not only the loser in the fight but also as situated in a compromising position with Arthur, the "sissy." The scene ends with Toby's complete capitulation, both physically and verbally, to Arthur. Wolff writes, "I looked up at him [Arthur] and the other two boys. There was pleasure and scorn on their faces. He wore, instead, an expression of such earnestness that it seemed impossible to refuse him what he asked. I said, 'You're not a sissy'" (111). Toby follows Dwight's model of verbal and physical violence to assert masculinity, but fails to raise himself to the status of the dominant masculine group. In this scene, Wolff critiques the desire to construct masculinity through dominance by revealing the fragile nature of masculinity predicated on violence. As Wesley observes, a modern boy's quest to achieve full adult masculinity does not fail because he is unable to perform rites of passage, it fails because of "the absence of a social system that can produce capable adult men" (55). Had Toby won the fight, he still would have failed to establish

a stable and coherent masculinity because he, like Dwight, is trying to access something that does not exist. In this way, Wolff's presentation not only critiques the individual attempts to establish masculinity through violence, but it also takes aim at the larger cultural norms that sanction and motivate a self-perpetuating cycle of trauma.

Toby's relationship to Dwight and its significance to his attempts to construct his nascent masculinity manifests itself again later in the memoir in another scene involving violence and Arthur. Ironically, after Toby's first fight with Arthur, the two boys bond and become friends, though they still often butt heads. When a teacher, Mr. Mitchell, catches the two boys bickering he forces them into settling their differences in a "grudge fight" boxing match as a part of the annual pugilistic spectacle he promotes at the school (216). At this point in the memoir, Dwight's violence towards Toby has become more brutal. In one scene, Dwight attacks Toby after Toby had snuck out of the house the night before. Wolff writes:

Then he [Dwight] was on me. He caught me with one hand under the covers and the other holding the sandwich, and at first, instead of protecting myself, I jerked the sandwich away as if that was what he wanted. His open hands lashed back and forth across my face.... He was kneeling on the bed, his legs on either side of me, locking me in with the blankets. I shouted his name, but he kept hitting me in a fast convulsive rhythm and I knew he was beyond all hearing. Somehow, with no conscious intention, I pulled my other arm free and hit him in the throat. He reared back, gasping. I pushed him off the bed and kicked the covers away, but before I could get up he grabbed my hair and forced my face down hard against the mattress. Then he hit me in the back of the neck. I went rigid with the shock. He tightened his grip on my hair. (177)

In another vicious scene, Dwight attacks Toby for not scrapping the last of the mustard out of a jar before discarding it. Wolff writes:

‘Look again,’ he [Dwight] said, and pushed the open neck of the jar against my eye. When I jerked away he grabbed me by the hair and shoved my face back down toward the jar.... He asked me again if the jar looked empty. It was hurting my eye, so I said no, no, it didn’t look empty. (202)

After Toby scrapes the jar again, Dwight reaches over the table and slaps him in the face. As Dwight further traumatized Toby, Toby’s desire to traumatize others increases as a part of his quest to establish his nascent masculinity.

As the time for the grudge fight with Arthur approaches, Dwight puts his violence towards Toby on hold and begins to teach Toby how to fight. Perversely, the stepfather and step-son bond over a violent fantasy. Dwight inflicts violence upon Toby while teaching him to do the same to others. Wolff writes:

Dwight said that all I had to do was sidestep when Arthur came at me, then uppercut him to the jaw. It was that simple: sidestep, uppercut. Using the peculiar patience, almost tenderness, that he reserved for instruction in combat, Dwight rehearsed this move with me several times before the smoker [fight]. (219)

This is not the first time Dwight had given Toby combat instruction. After the first fight with Arthur, Dwight shows Toby how to defend himself better next time by “kicking him in the balls” and “punching him in the windpipe” (113). Wolff writes, “At first I was afraid he would use these maneuvers as an excuse to cream me—all in the spirit of serious training, of course. But he didn’t. He caught my fist or foot almost gently, let go, spoke a few words of correction, and told me to try again” (115). Dwight’s gentle touch in teaching Toby how to perform acts of violence

creates a sinister effect through juxtaposition. Ironically, Toby debuts his combat techniques on Dwight himself in the scene in which Dwight attacks him while in bed: “I pulled my other arm free and hit him in the throat” (177). Had Toby successfully defended himself in that scene, he would have repositioned himself as no longer Dwight’s masculine subordinate. Since he fails to physically defeat Dwight at that point, his drive to construct his masculinity through his status relationship with Dwight continues. If he could dominate Arthur in the grudge fight, using Dwight’s combat techniques, he would ascend to Dwight’s category of hegemonic masculinity.

As Wolff narrates the moments surrounding the grudge fight, he uses a noteworthy aesthetic technique: he provides a dramatic build up to the fight, entirely omits the actual details of the fight leaving three blank lines on the page, and then presents his mother’s and Dwight’s reactions to the fight after the fact. Similar to Wolff’s use of flash-forward, use of omission and then flashback to narrate this section align with Pederson’s concepts of trauma being represented through temporally distorted narrative (338). Toby’s mother, Rosemary, is appalled by the fight, and “She refused to understand that I’d really had to fight, that there was no choice. The entire spectacle had disgusted her” (220). Rosemary, who knows her son most intimately and deeply loves him, knows that this violent expression of his identity is counter-productive to establishing his identity. Dwight, on the other hand, praises Toby’s efforts even though he badly loses a fight, yet again, to Arthur. In his description of the moment when Toby uses the techniques taught to him by Dwight, Wolff captures the grotesque bond that the two have forged:

I caught him [Arthur] with that uppercut twice more during the first round, but neither of them rocked him like that first one. That first one was a beaut. I launched it from my toes and put everything I had into it, and it shivered his timbers. I could feel it travel through him in one pure line. I could feel it hurt him. And when it landed, and my old

friend's head snapped back so terribly, I felt a surge of pride and connection; connection not to him but to Dwight. I was distinctly aware of Dwight in that bellowing mass all around me. I could feel his exultation at the blow I'd struck, feel his own pride in it, see him smiling down at me with recognition, and pleasure, and something like love. (221)

Toby, as the victim of Dwight's violence, perversely feels loved by his abuser when he replicates his violence. Both Toby and Dwight, however, do not enjoy any lasting sense of masculine identity through their violence, and their fleeting sense of power through violent domination is quickly replaced by feelings of inadequacy which perpetuates the cycle of trauma.

The cycle follows this sequence: 1. The man (or boy) feels inadequate and does not measure up to the arbitrary standard of hegemonic masculinity 2. The man over-compensates for his inadequacy through violence 3. The act of violence serves to highlight his inadequacy and intensifies his ever failing attempts to achieve a stable position in hegemonic masculinity. Since Toby and Dwight's brief bond after the fight with Arthur is built on this violent and emasculating cycle, it does not take long for them to again find themselves at odds. In the final significant action between the two in the memoir, Toby again finds himself the victim of Dwight's violence. Preceding this scene, Toby's fragile nascent masculinity has been completely stripped from him. In a woodshop class, he cuts off the tip of his finger, becomes addicted to morphine during a hospital stay, and during his slow recovery at home, he begins stealing Dwight's alcohol to numb his narcotic withdrawals. When Dwight confronts Toby, Toby responds "I'm not the drinker in this house," initiating verbal jockeying for dominance. Dwight shoves Toby who falls and lands on his wounded finger. Narrating again with a sense of temporal distortion, Wolff writes, "...as I went down I threw my hands out behind me to break the fall. All this seemed to happen very slowly, until the moment I landed on my finger" (231). Not satisfied with pushing him to the

ground, Dwight escalates the violence against the prone Toby. Wolff's description presents the action as a near out-of-body experience. He writes, "I forgot who I was. I heard a steady howling all around me as I thrashed on the floor. Other sounds. Then I was sitting on the couch, drenched in sweat, and my mother was trying to calm me" (231). Toby clearly remains in the subordinate category of masculinity in this exchange after attempting to overcome his perceived inadequacy by challenging Dwight. Though he appears to reassert his position of dominance through violence after his masculinity is challenged by Toby's attack on his drinking, Dwight actually (and predictably) reveals the fragility of his masculinity because he is perceived by other family members as having attacked an invalid. Furthermore, Dwight's action prompts the departure of Toby and Rosemary from his house; both of whom he had been using as essential props to construct his masculinity.

Even after leaving Dwight's house to go live with a friend, Chuck Bolger, Toby's attempts to construct his masculinity rely on his relationship with his abusive stepfather. His position in masculinity remains contested by Dwight's spectral influence in his life. Dwight's dominance over Toby moves from verbal and physical violence to symbolic dominance in the final portion of the memoir. Dwight feels an ongoing inadequacy in his lack of financial power, and after Toby leaves Dwight's house to live with Chuck, Toby finds out that Dwight has stolen the money that he had been saving from his paper route. Dwight's attack on Toby in this case is a symbolic one, but like his physical violence it proceeds from his inadequacy and his need to dominate Toby. By not allowing Toby to access his own money, Dwight establishes control over him, and in stealing and spending it, he attacks what little autonomy Toby had created for himself. The theft also operates as an attack on Toby's future self-reliance, an aspect of his nascent masculinity, because he had earmarked the funds as a way to cover part of his tuition to a

prestigious preparatory school to which he has just been admitted on scholarship. The promise of attending Hill School represents a new life and an escape from Dwight, so the theft acts as a continuation of Dwight's domineering attempts to control Toby.

Toby's response to the theft strikes at the core symbols of Dwight's masculinity, his guns and other weapons. With his friend Chuck, Toby sneaks into Dwight's house and perpetuates a theft of his own. He first takes Boy Scout troop regalia that belongs to the proud though inept troop leader Dwight. Wolff writes, "If Dwight wouldn't promote me to Eagle, I'd just have to promote myself" (268). Just like the earlier scene in which Toby uses Roy's military uniform and hunting apparel to don masculinity, Toby's theft of the regalia and his pseudo-promotion to Eagle Scout, allow him to put on a costume of masculinity that Dwight had been barring him from. Next, Toby targets the props of Dwight's masculinity in his theft. Wolff writes:

I went back in the house and got the two shotguns. Then I got the Marlin and the Garand. On my last trip I rounded up the Zeiss binoculars and the Puma hunting knife and a tooled leather scabbard Dwight had bought for the Marlin. He'd planned to use it when he went elk hunting by horseback, something he had never gotten around to doing. (268)

These treasured items of Dwight's are weapons and tools for hunting, but Wolff highlights their visual rather than their practical qualities. These items symbolize masculine self-reliance, ruggedness, and dominance over the natural world, but in Dwight's hands, they are merely props to his fragilely constructed masculinity. Wolff's narration depicts the lack of use these items have seen, Dwight's preferences for visually appealing items (tooled leather), and Dwight's unachieved fantasies of masculine adventure (elk hunting by horseback). Although these props merely highlight the fragility and lack of substance behind Dwight's masculine poses, Toby is drawn to them. Even though he no longer lives with his stepfather, Toby cannot help but

continue to look to Dwight as both the model for constructing masculinity as well as the gate-keeper to masculinity whom he must defeat in order to access hegemonic masculinity.

Mirroring Dwight's theft of Toby's paper route money, Toby takes the stolen guns to a pawnshop in an attempt to not only symbolically attack Dwight's masculinity but also to restore his monetary means for future self-determination. Toby's plan, however, only leads to further challenges to his masculinity as he again suffers defeat. After being rejected at three pawnshops, Toby enters a third shop, this one operated by a woman. Wolff writes, "She was as tall as I was, and had the stiff blond hair, spiky eyelashes and smooth, waxy face of a doll.... Her hands were red and big and covered with turquoise jewelry" (277). The pawnbroker's jewelry, hair, and face embody typical femininity, but her size presents an element of masculinity that comes into contest with Toby's masculinity. When she reluctantly agrees to examine the stolen guns, Wolff genders her movements. Toby reflects:

I did not like to see them [the guns] handled as this woman handled them, slapping them around, levering and pumping the actions as if she were trying to break them. But I said nothing. I was unnerved by her big competent hands and her doll's face that never changed expression. (279)

Not only is the pawnbroker competent handling the ultimate symbols of masculinity—guns—she also asserts her dominance over them through her rough handling of them. Wolff writes, "She tore down every gun and rifle without hesitation, checked its barrel, checked its firing mechanism, and put it together again as fast as I could have" (279). She dominates the symbols of masculinity and, at the same time, Toby's fragilely constructed nascent masculinity. In the end, the pawnbroker refuses to buy the guns, but allows Toby to pawn them for five dollars a piece, a fraction of their worth.

Toby's attempt to establish his masculinity in his struggle with Dwight fails on every front. Dwight's masculinity is built on dominating and traumatizing the weak, and when Toby attempts to do the same, he is dissatisfied and finds his masculinity even less stable. When he seeks to join Dwight's position of masculine power as a peer by fighting Dwight himself, he also fails. In the scene of the theft, Toby attempts to use Dwight's methods against him only to see those methods double back on him causing further feelings of inadequacy. Rather than defeating Dwight or becoming his peer within hegemonic and dominant masculinity, his theft only further highlights the difficulty he has in constructing his masculinity. The theft of the Eagle Scout regalia fails to prove satisfying to Toby because, though he has the symbols of young masculine achievement, rather than pointing to anything of genuine merit, they point to his lack of integrity, a key Eagle Scout virtue. A dubious symbol of masculinity to begin with, Toby's theft of the Eagle Scout regalia further strips the items of their symbolic power. Furthermore, Wolff never mentions the Boy Scouts again in the memoir, and it is implied that Toby never has the opportunity to present himself to other troop members as having achieved the high rank of Eagle Scout. Wolff's presentation of the power of these empty signifiers of masculinity reveals the artificiality of masculinity's props.

The theft of Dwight's guns also fails to prove satisfying and like the Eagle Scout regalia, Wolff portrays the guns as doubly devoid of power to signify anything other than the artifice of masculinity. Though Dwight esteems the guns as essential to his masculinity, it is clear that his ability to use them is doubtful. At one point in the memoir, he performs poorly in an NRA shooting contest, and ironically, Rosemary ends up winning the contest. Not only do the guns signify the artifice of masculinity in Dwight's hands, but Toby also experiences the guns' inability to produce an adequate masculine performance when he tries to sell them. In the

pawnshop, he finds himself physically and economically dominated by a woman, putting the finishing touches on his failed attempt to achieve status in hegemonic masculinity. Wesley points out that “Their guns afford them self-destruction instead of self-transcendence” (56). In the symbolic struggle with Dwight mediated through the Boy Scout regalia and the guns, Toby’s attempts to construct his masculinity is contingent upon his relationship to another man. As Connell argues, power dynamics between men and groups of men form a foundation for masculine identity, and Toby’s relationship with Dwight dominates his fledgling attempts to construct his masculinity (76).

The physical, psychological, and symbolic traumas enacted by Dwight upon Toby form the core experiences through which Toby’s nascent masculinity emerges. The effects of these experiences live on in Wolff’s experience as he presents brief flashes-forward in the memoir. Wolff connects his boyhood experiences with his biological father, Duke, to the poignant moment in which he first sees his own new born son, and Wolff includes a parallel scene encapsulating the trauma he suffered at Dwight’s hands and its influence on his adult life. As Toby leaves Dwight’s house to go live with Chuck after the final violent beating, he reflects:

We hated each other. We hated each other so much that other feelings didn’t get enough light. It disfigured me. When I think of Chinook I have to search for the faces of my friends, their voices, the rooms where I was made welcome. But I can always see Dwight’s face and hear his voice. I hear his voice in my own when I speak to my children in anger. They hear it and look at me in surprise. My youngest once said, “Don’t you love me anymore?” (233)

Dwight’s traumatizing dominance is complete. His presence looms so large that it is always present, inescapable, and resurfaces unbidden. His trauma distorts Toby’s other memories.

These categories align with Cathy Caruth's model of traumatic memory. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), Caruth emphasizes the haunting nature of trauma and its tendency to return unexpectedly to the survivor. She writes, "What returns to haunt the victim, these stories tell us, is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known" (6). For Caruth, trauma is not limited to a single moment in time. The traumatic event continues to return in the mind of the survivor because the initial event included an element of suddenness or shock making it hard to be "fully known."

The trauma Toby suffers at the hands of Dwight is habitual and follows a pattern in many ways, so on the surface it does not appear to happen with the suddenness or shock that are hallmarks of trauma for Caruth. The pattern becomes predictable when mediated through the narrative structure of the memoir, but the individual moments as experienced by Wolff, are in fact quite sudden and shocking. The trauma of the chestnut peeling comes at Dwight's "whim" (96). When Dwight attacks Toby after he had snuck out of the house, the violence is so sudden he finds himself defenseless, caught with a hand under a blanket and the other holding a sandwich. When Dwight attacks Toby when his finger is wounded, it is with such suddenness that he falls to the ground unable to avoid landing on the finger. Even when Dwight symbolically attacks Toby's masculinity through the theft of his paper route money, Toby receives the news with shock and disbelief having missed the actual event. Though these events fit a pattern, to the victim they continue to occur with a suddenness and shock that aligns with Caruth's presentation of trauma.

The effect of these sudden moments of trauma is the unbidden return of traumatic memory later in life for Wolff. His memory of Chinook remains distorted and haunted by

Dwight, and Wolff has to “search for the faces of my friends” from that time in his life (233). More chillingly, though, is the effect of this trauma on Wolff’s own voice. The traumatic scars return unbidden in Wolff’s voice when he, as an adult, speaks to his children in anger. He hears Dwight’s voice rather than his own, and so do his children. His children respond the same way as he did to Dwight—with “surprise” (233). Though Wolff does not traumatize his children, his role as a father is colored by his role as a step-son to Dwight. The traumatic relationship with Dwight and its on-going power struggle contribute to young Wolff’s nascent masculinity and continue to linger in the masculinity he embodies into adulthood.

Toby’s relationships with Duke (his biological father), Roy (a father-figure), and Dwight (his stepfather) demonstrate his fledgling efforts to enter what Connell calls the hegemonic group of masculinity that gains and maintains its status through its relationship to other subordinate men (76). A man’s relationship to other men is the key factor in constructing masculinity, according to Connell, and along with his relationship with father-figures, Toby’s relationships with male peers features prominently in his nascent masculinity. Along with Connell, Michael Kimmel emphasizes the key role peers play in shaping masculinity for boys, and in his sociological study *Guyland* (2008) he argues that boys acting in groups often validate each other’s masculinity rather than receiving that validation through adult men. Kimmel examines rituals and initiations performed by groups of boys outside the purview of adults that aim at establishing masculinity for the participants. Kimmel writes, “how could they [boys] possibly have their masculinity validated by their peers, when those peers are only ‘men’ by virtue of having declared it themselves?” (19). Though boys desire to have their masculinity validated by peers, Kimmel shows that source of validation to be hollow. Furthermore, he contends that boys who seek peer validation through rituals and initiations suspect and are frustrated by the

hollowness of these acts. Kimmel writes, “Such rituals, absent any adult participation, are desperate frauds, and, I suspect, the participants sense this fraud, which only fuels their eagerness to participate in increasingly desperate and dangerous rites in order to prove it” (19). Much like the emasculation produced by cycles of ineffectual violence theorized in McKinley’s paradox of violence, the rituals and initiations contrived by boys to establish their masculinity tend to highlight the fragile, constructed, and inaccessibility of masculinity. In *This Boy’s Life*, Toby’s interactions with his peers illustrate Kimmel’s and Connell’s theories and highlight how Wolff’s presentation of nascent masculinity serves as a larger critique of hegemonic masculinity.

The first significant relationship Toby has with male peers in *This Boy’s Life* occurs when he is 11 and living in Seattle with his mother after they fled west from an abusive boyfriend of Rosemary’s. Toby soon makes friends with two boys his age, Terry Taylor and Terry Silver. Many of the threesome’s interactions feature a trying-on of their nascent masculinities, and the group often preys upon the weaknesses of others to establish dominance and therefore masculinity. The power dynamics play out as the three compete with each other as well as when the three boys present themselves as a unified group, sharing a masculine identity. As they jockey for masculine status within the group, Toby and Terry Silver attack Terry Taylor painting him as a “momma’s boy.” Wolff writes, “Taylor was a dreamy thin-skinned boy who cried easily, a weakness from which he tried to distract us by committing acts of ferocious vandalism. He’d once been to juvenile court for breaking windows” (39). Terry Taylor, in a stereotypical response to perceived masculine inadequacy, overcompensates to reassert his masculinity and uses destructive behavior to prove his masculine merits to Toby and Terry Silver.

When not jockeying for dominance among themselves, the three boys, all of whom have been “claimed by uncoolness,” band together in their attempt to establish a masculine identity.

(43). Similar to Toby's donning of Roy's military and hunting duds and his theft of the Eagle Scout regalia, the three boys attempt to approximate adolescent masculinity by trying out a "greaser" look. The boys attire themselves with stolen, unlit cigarettes, low pants, belts buckled to the side, and Butch Wax greased hair, but they are too timid to take their new look outside. Wolff writes, "Then, bumping each other with our hips to make room, the three of us would press together in front of Mrs. Silver's full-length mirror to comb our hair and practice looking cool" (43). Wolff's presentation of the scene highlights the fragile and constructed nature of this nascent masculinity. Not only does Wolff use the irony of a full-length woman's mirror as the source of reflecting masculinity back to these boys, but he also comments explicitly:

We should have looked cool, but we didn't. Silver was emaciated. His eyes bulged, his Adam's apple protruded, his arms poked out of his sleeves like pencils with gloves stuck on the ends. Taylor had the liquid eyes and long lashes and broad blank face of a cow. I didn't look that great myself. (43)

For Toby, the gnawing knowledge that this masculine performance is a failure, is dampened, however, since the boys' act is communal. When these boys construct their masculine identity as a group, they perceive it to be more legitimate, just as the process operates within adult hegemonic masculinity.

Along with donning masculinity through clothes and poses, the three boys seek to establish masculinity through exaggerated sexual desire. Again, Wolff uses irony to critique this route to establishing masculinity. Rather than fixating on an overly sexualized woman, the boys ironically target their sexual braggadocio at Annette, the innocent and girlish host of the TV show *The Mickey Mouse Club*. When the three boys gather to watch the show, they out-do each other with their sexual boasts. Wolff writes, "As soon as she appeared on the show—Hi, I'm

Annette!—Taylor would start moaning and Silver would lick the screen with his tongue. ‘Come here, baby,’ he’d say, ‘I’ve got six inches of piping hot flesh just for you’” (44). The boys’ performance is for each other, proving to one another their masculinity. Wolff highlights the absurdity of this performance as he describes how the show lulls the boys out of their sexual fantasies and into the innocence of 11 year olds watching a kids’ TV show. Wolff writes, “We softened. We surrendered. We joined the club. Taylor forgot himself and sucked his thumb, and Silver and I let him get away with it. We watched the Mousketeers get all excited about wholesome projects and have wimpy adventures and talk about their feelings and we didn’t laugh” (44). When the show ends, the boys blink awkwardly and then “rouse ourselves and talk dirty about Annette” (44). Wolff juxtaposes the overly sexualized performance with an innocent and boyish presentation of the group to highlight the artificiality and thinly constructed nascent masculinity of the boys. He also shows the constant work required to maintain a masculinity that slips in and out of acceptable hegemonic performance. Reeser notes that “masculinity requires constant work to be maintained and because it can never fully remain at rest, it cannot be maintained in the way that men may want it to appear” (3). For the three boys, the inability to maintain their comically exaggerated masculinity becomes obvious.

While dressing up as greasers and making lewd sexual comments to a TV screen could be viewed as fairly benign, the boys also engage in much more destructive behavior in their attempts to construct their masculinity; they vandalize a man’s vehicle and hurl racial slurs at him. This behavior can be traced in part to the boys’ watching shows about World War II on TV, and the lessons they drew from the shows. Rather than seeing the shows a celebration of “victory of goodness over evil,” they see “through this fraud” and consider the shows a celebration of “snappy uniforms, racy Mercedes staff cars, and great marching, thousands of

boots slamming down together on cobbled streets while banners streamed overhead and strong voices sang songs that stirred our blood though we couldn't understand a word" (41-2). The boys also fixate on the Luger, a Nazi pistol that becomes a fetish of masculinity for the three. Ultimately, the boys interpret the WWII shows as affirming their desire for masculine power. Wolff writes, "These shows instructed us further in the faith we were already beginning to hold: that victims are contemptible no matter how much people pretend otherwise; that it is more fun to be inside than outside, to be arrogant than to be kind, to be with a crowd than to be alone" (42). As witnesses to the traumatizing results of WWII, the boys seek to become traumatizers to establish their nascent masculinity. In their forays into constructing masculinity, the group of three boys have created for themselves an insider group dynamic that validates itself, and in the absence of any form of positive adult masculinity, the boys draw from and twist cultural messages mediated through American patriarchy in the popular culture.

It is out of their need for masculine validation coupled with their Nazi infatuation that the boys target a stranger with vandalism and racial insults. From the rooftop of an apartment building the boys spot a man driving below who embodies the masculinity they wish to emulate. The man is young, handsome, well-dressed, and driving a new convertible Thunderbird muscle car. Wolff writes, "We held no conference. One look was enough to see that he was everything we were not, his life a progress of satisfactions we had no hope of attaining in any future we could seriously propose for ourselves" (45-6). To restore and validate their own fragile masculinities, the boys begin to bombard the Thunderbird with eggs from the rooftop. The eggs splatter across the hood, in the passenger seat, on the dashboard, and on the driver. The driver screams, honks, and vents his anger, but he is unable to determine where the eggs are coming from. After the driver circles the block several times and the boys run out of eggs, the car stops,

and the man becomes silent. Taylor Silver becomes outraged by the man's silence, understanding that their assault has ultimately proved ineffectual. Of Taylor Silver, Wolff writes, "His face was purple and twitching with anger as if he had been the one set upon and outraged" (47). In his outrage, Taylor Silver screams out a Jewish racial slur at the man in a last ditch effort to place the man into the category of outsider and himself and his friends into the category of insider. Ironically, Toby is Jewish on his father's side, though he does not use this moment to reveal it. By collectively participating in this act of vandalism and racial abuse—verbal and symbolic trauma—the boys seek to validate their own masculinity but continue to find masculinity always just beyond their grasp.

As a teenager living with his stepfather, Toby's interactions with his male peers mirror those he had with Taylor Silver and Taylor Terry, though he continues to sense the hollowness of this route to establishing masculinity. At a Boy Scout jamboree, Toby meets a scout troop, the Ballard boys, whose drill routine, perfect uniforms, and tough looks place them in a position of dominance over the other boys. Wolff describes them as "crisp, erect, poker-faced, responsive" highlighting their perceived competent masculinity (161). Toby curries favor with this group to receive peer validation of his masculinity, but the results yield the opposite of what he has hoped. Upon meeting the Ballard boys, Toby works to gain their acceptance by telling untrue stories that he hopes will place him in the best possible light. He accepts a cigarette from one of the boys and tries to strike a nonchalant pose as he smokes. Eventually he begins bragging about his (fictional) sexual exploits, and Toby and the Ballard boys objectify and compare their alleged sexual conquests. The newfound comradery of the Ballard boys and the affirmation of Toby's masculinity by a prestigious peer group lasts only briefly. Upon entering an amusement park with the Ballard boys, Toby begins playing a rigged game of chance operated by two park

employees. In an attempt to impress the Ballard boys with his financial status, Toby keeps spending money on the game. The Ballard boys cheer on Toby, though it is quite apparent the game is unwinnable, and they abandon him once he runs out of money. Toby's sense of stable masculinity evaporates, and he is left comically and tragically standing alone holding an oversized stuffed pink pig, the useless prize for his wasted money. He had planned to use the money he wasted at the amusement park to escape from Dwight while at the Boy Scout jamboree. As Toby chases a nascent masculinity, his reliance upon peers to validate it continues to prove as unsuccessful as his reliance upon father figures who traumatize him.

Another scene involving Toby and his high school peers shows teens attempting to validate their own masculinity. Toby begins spending time with a group of male classmates who have had the types of sexual exploits Toby had bragged about to the Ballard boys. The other boys, seeing Toby's apparent lack of sexual experience, put him into situations where he could easily join their number by having sex with a readily willing girl. While the others in the group routinely congratulate themselves for their sexual conquests (often of the same woman), Toby begins to sense the hollowness of that route to masculinity. Wolff writes:

Chuck and the others knew a lot of women like Veronica, and girls on their way to being like Veronica. When they found a new one they shared her. They tried to fix me up with some of them, but I always back out. I didn't know what these girls expected; I did know I was sure to disappoint them. Their availability unmanned me. And I didn't want it to be like that, squalid and public with a stranger. (187)

This sexual initiation relies on a peer validation. Kimmel notes that in scenarios like this one, "the pursuit of [sexual] conquests is more about guys proving something to other guys than it is about the women involved" (192). For the situation Toby finds himself in, the woman is one

who other members of the peer group have also had sex with, and the act must be done publicly so the group can confirm it. But Wolff's use of the word *unmanned* signifies the impossibility of the situation. For Toby to become a man in the eyes of the group, he must do something that represents the opposite of manliness in Toby's eyes. This scene marks a shift in Toby's concept of masculinity, and as the memoir begins to move to a close, his sense of himself and his masculinity starts to become less based on his status among peers and adult men. His relationships with women and with his one-time nemesis Arthur provide seeds for a different performance of masculinity, one not based on dominance, violence, and trauma which I explore in chapter four.

II: Nascent Masculinity in *Old School, a Novel*

While *This Boy's Life* ends with Toby preparing to enter an elite all-boys boarding school in New England having finally managed his escape from Dwight, Wolff's novel *Old School* tells the story of an unnamed narrator from an underprivileged background trying to make his way at a school much like the one described at the end of *This Boy's Life*. Though a novel, *Old School* reads like a memoir, bending generic conventions just like *This Boy's Life*, a memoir that reads like a series of interconnected, self-contained fictional stories. Along with their generic similarities, *This Boy's Life* and *Old School* also both share a similar concern with the nascent masculinity of a central character. In the case of *This Boy's Life*, Toby constructs a nascent masculinity primarily through physically and verbally traumatic circumstances. Though also concerned with the development of masculinity, the narrator in *Old School* does not encounter such obvious traumatic experiences as Toby. Though the narrator does not experience physical trauma, he does experience a different kind of trauma. Examining the traumas of absence and

loss as theorized by LaCapra reveals the role trauma plays in the narrator's search for identity and masculinity in the mannered but ruthless world of an elite prep school.

Despite enjoying positive reviews, featuring as a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award, and becoming a national bestseller, *Old School* has received relatively little critical attention. The novel receives a paragraph or two in articles by Paul J. Contino, Farrell O'Gorman, Anita Helmbold, and Clifford Thompson, James Astor, David Gooblar have written the only article length treatments of the work. Wolff himself has commented on the novel in interviews with John H. E. Paine and Jack Livings. Though the scholarship is not extensive, each of the aforementioned pieces touch on aspects of the novel relevant to *Old School's* representation of traumatized nascent masculinity.

Concerned primarily with Wolff's use of religion, Contino summarizes *Old School* and briefly mentions the significance of the narrator's Jewishness. Contino writes, "Yet by plagiarizing Friedman, he (the narrator) has acknowledged the Jewish identity he'd been struggling to understand, and comes to a deeper, more honest self-understanding" (21). Though Contino does not expand on this concept, the narrator's suppression of his Jewishness links him to a cultural trauma of loss. Like Contino, O'Gorman focuses on Wolff's use of religious themes and presents a brief treatment of *Old School*. O'Gorman's analysis briefly highlights the role of gender in the novel given that the narrator's act of plagiarism is of "a female student who, he is astounded to discover, actually speaks for him" (86). Contino and O'Gorman mention but do not elaborate upon masculinity and trauma.

Anita Helmbold's "The Sacred in the Context of the Everyday: Finding Faith in the Fiction of Tobias Wolff" (2012) extends O'Gorman's insights on *Old School's* presentation of gender. Helmbold takes stock of how Ernest Hemingway influences both the narrator and the

author of *Old School*. She writes, “he [the narrator] comes to re-evaluate the strengths of his most revered role model, Ernest Hemingway, a writer whose influence on Wolff cannot be underestimated” (9). Helmbold goes on to argue that the novel’s narrator progresses from seeing Hemingway’s stories as ones of “reassuring images of macho manhood” to understanding them as depictions of men who “got things wrong and suffered from nervousness and fear” (Helmbold 9, Wolff 97). For Helmbold, the narrator projects his own damaging view of masculinity onto Hemingway’s protagonists, but as he begins to see the truth about his own identity, he is able to interpret the stories as revealing masculinity’s vulnerability. She concludes her analysis of the novel by writing, “The novel climaxes when the narrator finally surrenders his pretense and allows himself to be seen, in his writing, as the person he actually is” (10).

Wolff himself has commented on his relationship to Hemingway and the role it has played in his writing and in his depictions of masculinity. In his interview with John H. E. Paine for the *Journal of the Short Story in English*, Wolff relates how he, like his narrator in *Old School*, went through an evolution in his understanding of Hemingway. Wolff says, “I was first attracted to him [Hemingway] as a boy because he seemed to me to exemplify a masculine self-sufficiency, and I imposed that on what I was reading without actually getting at the truth of what I was reading” (368). He goes on to state that Hemingway’s later work, full of “inadvertent self-parody and posing” which makes it easy for readers of Hemingway to cast him one-dimensionally regarding his presentation of masculinity. Wolff, however, sees the majority of Hemingway’s male characters embodying a masculinity and marked less by self-sufficiency and more by vulnerability. Wolff says:

I learned all over again how beautiful a story writer he was, and how tender, and how, if I may say so, almost feminine in their understandings and their tenderness so many of

those stories are. And they're not as the common image would have them, not hairy-chested, rather the opposite. Almost all of them are about vulnerability and being wounded and incomplete, hurt. (386)

As an example, Wolff argues that Hemingway's "Big Two Hearted River" is not about the macho activity of camping and fishing, but rather about a shattered young man's attempt to regain himself. Wolff says that "The fragility of the mind that haunts that story is unmistakable, and I think that's the extraordinary effect of Hemingway's best work—the fragility of our being, how easily we break" (386). The same kind of fragile masculinity permeates Wolff's work particularly in *Old School*. In "This Man's Books," a review of Wolff's oeuvre, Clifford Thompson registers a similar observation writing, "*Old School* suggests, touchingly, that what unites us is the secret fallibility each of us carries" (7).

James Astor in "The Self Invented Personality? Reflections on Authenticity and Writing Analytic Papers" (2005) also engages the fragility of *Old School*'s narrator, but he does so through the lens of psychoanalysis rather than masculinity. Writing for an audience of clinicians rather than literary critics, Astor uses *Old School* as a metaphor for writing analytic papers in the field of psychology. Astor argues that when the narrator in *Old School* begins to see his persona crack, "Wolff is exploring the conditions which enable us to develop" (422). He goes on to argue that for both the narrator and clinical patients, "New developments come, not from the actions of the ego but from our unconscious internal objects which cannot flourish in an atmosphere of repression and fear" (422). The narrator's suppression of his Jewishness and the grief from the loss of his mother form the crux of his traumatic experience out of which he develops the key aspects of his identity including his masculinity. Astor goes on to make connections between *This Boy's Life* and *Old School* arguing that out of the mess of Wolff's

childhood as described in his memoir comes his ability to artistically craft a compelling narrative. He writes, “Deep wounds scar. Wounds which have been understood and integrated can become a resource, if the artist has mastery of his medium and rich internal resources” (425). Astor’s approach includes analysis of Wolff’s biography, which is hard to avoid when treating a writer whose work is so often implicitly and explicitly autobiographical, but while Astor focuses on the real life wounds of Wolff as they feature in *Old School*, I analyze Wolff’s literary characters. Furthermore, Astor writes in general about wounds and scarring in Wolff’s biography, but he does not pinpoint sources of trauma for the characters in the novel, which exemplify Wolff’s literary presentation of how trauma and masculinity intersect.

Along with the masculinity and gender theorists previously used in this chapter, the trauma theorists Dominick LaCapra, Jeffrey C. Alexander, and Cathy Caruth help illuminate *Old School*. LaCapra and Alexander require a further introduction at this point. Unlike Pederson’s theory of trauma, LaCapra focuses on second-hand witnesses to trauma and argues that individuals can suffer trauma by hearing stories as well as through culturally mediated sources. In “Trauma, Absence, and Loss” (1999), LaCapra maintains that “secondary witnesses” belonging to a traumatized community experience “empathetic unsettlement” (699). Though seemingly less dramatic, the effects of trauma that LaCapra theorizes can deeply affect an individual’s identity. Membership in a community that has suffered a large scale traumatic experience, like the Holocaust, can cause trauma even for individuals removed from the actual events by time and geography, according to LaCapra.

Absence and loss operate in unique ways within LaCapra’s framework of cultural trauma. Absence is transhistorical, located in no particular event, and outside of the tenses of time. Loss is historical, located in a specific event, and can be narrated, reactivated, and transformed (700).

The narrator of *Old School* experiences loss on a cultural level (as a Jewish secondary witness to the Holocaust) and on a personal level (due to the death of his mother.) This unsettlement caused by loss can manifest itself internally through psychological struggle or externally through “acting out.” In *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2000), LaCapra writes “In acting out, tenses implode, and it is as if one were back there in the past relieving the traumatic scene” (21). In this case, the internal struggle becomes external.

Along with Dominick LaCapra, Jeffrey Alexander theorizes the impact trauma can have upon individuals who do not witness events first-hand. Alexander locates trauma as a collective rather than as an individual experience. To this end, he writes, “The lives lost and pains experienced are individual facts; shared trauma depends on the collective process of cultural interpretation” (3). For Alexander, trauma is accessible through collective process, and he also argues that rather than being “natural” trauma is socially constructed through authorized cultural narratives (7). Relying on Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, Alexander theorizes that, “Events are not inherently traumatic. Trauma is a socially mediated attribution” (13). For Alexander, events become traumatic to a community when that community decides upon and narrates back to itself the status of trauma for an event. Literature is one of the vehicles through which a community narrates, and therefore creates, its trauma. Alexander writes, “Much of these memory residues surface through free association in psychoanalytic treatment, they appear in public life through the creation of literature” (11). Though constructed collectively, trauma can also be accessed collectively through the mouthpiece of literature. Wolff’s protagonist in *Old School* encounters literary texts that shape his identity and begin to produce a racial consciousness about his Jewishness that he had previously suppressed. Additionally, it is

through his own literary piece—a short story—that he begins to work through his own status as a member of a traumatized group.

Trauma and masculinity are hard to separate in *Old School*, and the first chapter of the novel highlights the narrator's perilous position as a new student at the all-boys boarding school. The narrator finds himself in an environment in which he feels pressure to conceal both his class (lower-middle) and his ethnicity (half Jewish) in order to establish his social status among the other boys and therefore forge his masculinity. The narrator describes the environment:

The atmosphere of our school crackled with sexual static. We had the occasional dance with Miss Cobb's Academy and a few other girls' schools, but these brief affairs only cranked up the charge.... The absence of an actual girl to compete for meant that every other prize become feminized. For honors in sport, scholarship, music, and writing we cracked our heads together like mountain rams, and to make your mark as a writer was equal as proof of puissance to a brilliant season on the gridiron. (15)

In keeping with Connell's theory about the importance of men's relationships with other men, the boys at the school contend with each other to establish their masculinity. Achieving a suitable form of masculinity in the absence of a female presence also drives the boys to create an abstract ideal of femininity that hangs over all their activities. The narrator's quest to prove himself among his peers centers around an annual literary contest, and he uses each piece he writes for the school magazine to craft a persona of rugged masculinity that veils his socio-economic class and his ethnicity.

Maintaining this persona becomes paramount, and the narrator faces his first threat when he finds himself reprimanded by Dean Makepeace. The stoic Makepeace—rumored to be a friend of Hemingway's—represents not only the image but the institutional power of masculinity

that the narrator desires. In the Dean's office, Makepeace rebukes the narrator for whistling a tune he had learned while working as a dishwasher the previous summer. Though unbeknownst to the narrator, the tune was a "Nazi marching song, and very ugly piece of work it is, too," as the Dean informs him (21). The narrator had previously whistled it while waking behind Gershon—the school's janitor and a Holocaust survivor—and the Dean believes the narrator had been intentionally harassing Gershon. After pleading his innocence to Dean Makepeace while at the same time keeping his own Jewishness hidden, the narrator is required to make amends with Gershon. In Gershon's basement apartment, the narrator fumbles through an apology to Gershon and again refuses to offer up his own "Jewish defense" (24). The narrator's refusal to reveal his Jewishness is tied to his quest to establish his standing with his peers and therefore, his masculinity. He thinks, "I'd let Gershon think the worst of me before I would claim any connection to him, or implicate myself in the fate that had beached him in this room. Why would I want to talk my way into his unlucky tribe?" (23). Despite the presence of other popular boys at the school who are Jewish, the narrator notices a "subtly charged field around them, an air of apartness" (24). To establish his masculinity, the narrator attempts to side-step an ethnic stigma that has been created through the cultural trauma of the Holocaust. As a member of a predominately white all-male school, the narrator has internalized both racial and gender hierarchies which regulate his performance of masculinity as well as his secrecy about his Jewishness.

The scene with Gershon also reveals another key element in the narrator's construction of his masculinity—his relationship with his Jewish father. As he considers whether or not to reveal his Jewishness to Gershon, the narrator imagines a "certain kind of story" that could unfold. The imagined story highlights the importance of self-invention to the narrator especially

regarding his status. He imagines revealing his ethnic kinsmanship to Gershon, becoming friends, and eventually adopting him as a father figure. Wolff writes, “In time the man [Gershon] who has lost his sons becomes a true father to the boy, enfolding him in the tradition his own false father has denied him” (23). The narrator’s father never told him he was Jewish, and it was his mother who had revealed it. Given the opportunity to establish ties with Gershon, however, the narrator chooses to imitate his father and suppress his Jewishness. Ironically, the narrator loses the opportunity to have a mentor who could guide him through adolescence and into manhood by instead choosing to emulate his father who he disdains. The narrator holds this realization for only a fleeting moment as a “tremor of apprehension,” and quickly suppresses the thought (24). The desire to achieve masculinity through peer validation rather than through adult validation drives this choice, much like Toby’s actions with his peers in *This Boy’s Life*, and by granting his peers the power to determine his masculinity, the narrator finds himself perpetually on unsteady ground.

To navigate this unsteady ground, the narrator attempts to forge his masculinity through the pieces he writes for the school literary magazine, *Troubadour*. The magazine is widely read by the other boys and offers a level of social prestige that the narrator craves. Though at times he writes pieces that truly reveal himself, he quickly abandons them, suppresses the thought, and he goes back to writing pieces that will better serve the masculine image he tries to portray. The pieces the narrator submits are carefully manicured to give the impression of being semi-autobiographical. Through these pieces, the narrator presents an image of himself as ruggedly self-reliant, wealthy, and gentile. Several stories feature a character named Sam, who spends time in the Pacific Northwest hunting, fishing, and romancing women as he escapes the “civilizing demands of his socialite mother and logger-baron father” (32). The narrator admits

that he “wanted to be taken for Sam by my schoolmates, who knew nothing of my life back in Seattle” (32). The stories draw heavily from Hemingway’s style and from what the narrator perceives to be Hemingway’s stoic machismo. The narrator’s infatuation with Hemingway’s mystique goes so far that he day dreams about fishing with the great writer on his boat and receiving his praise (117). For a time, the stories work, and the narrator integrates himself into the school’s social fabric and finds himself able to project a masculinity accepted by the other boys.

The narrator’s battle to suppress his true identity suffers a sea-change mid-way through the novel, however. Along with his adoration for Hemingway, the narrator becomes infatuated with Ayn Rand upon the announcement that she will be coming to the school to judge a literary contest. After reading *The Fountainhead*, the narrator feels empowered by Rand’s presentation of will to power. He reflects:

I was discovering the force of my will. To read *The Fountainhead* was to feel this caged power, straining like a dammed-up river to break loose and crush every impediment to its free running. I understood that nothing stood between me and my greatest desires—nothing between me and greatness itself. (68)

The narrator’s inflated sense of self-importance runs quickly aground when Rand’s bombastic campus lecture shows her work to be artificial, inartistic, and repugnant. The narrator’s affinity for Rand is further shattered when his roommate, Bill White, mentions “all that *Übermensch* stuff” in Rand’s work (72). Though the narrator had not noticed it in his reading of Rand, Bill’s use of a word associated with Nazi ideology puts the narrator on edge. The narrator reflects:

He [Bill] knew that I’d caught on to his Jewishness, but he wasn’t aware of mine, such as it was. I didn’t want to say something that would touch so tender a nerve, a tenderness I

assumed in him because I suffered from it myself, covertly bristling when I read or heard anything that might be construed as anti-Semitic. (72)

He goes on to consider how maintaining his relationship with Bill factors into his social status. He thinks, “Our balance was fragile enough anyway, with so many complications of ambition and envy and pretense” (72). Again, the narrator finds himself suppressing his Jewishness and his position as a member of a traumatized community to establish peer status in his pursuit of forging his masculinity.

The narrator’s final disenchantment with Rand’s concept of self-reliance founded on the powerful dominating the weak comes when in her campus visit she attacks Hemingway after the narrator asks her estimation of contemporary writers. Rand rails, “Indeed, I’m told that one of them [Hemingway’s novels] has a hero with no—how shall we say this—no *manhood*. How fitting! And what shall we learn from this wretched eunuch to whom the great bearded Ernest Hemingway has devoted an entire novel? The superior virtue of impotence?” (85). Rand’s diatribe shocks the narrator as he sees Rand attack the element of Hemingway he had been most attracted to—his masculinity.

As a result of this encounter with Rand, an alteration ensues in the narrator’s concept of Hemingway, masculinity, and his own relationship to writing as a means to constructing masculinity. The narrator begins to reread Hemingway, reading more critically and even copying out with a typewriter some of the stories. On further reflection he finds that the legend of Hemingway’s life biased his reading of the texts. He notes, “I’d gone in looking for images of toughness, self-sufficiency, freedom from the hobbles of family and class and conventional work, so that’s what I’d found. Now I was reading a different writer” (96). In rereading “Big Two-Hearted River” rather than seeing Nick Adams’s physical abilities as superficial symbols of

adept masculinity, he sees Nick's actions as rituals that "keep him from falling apart" (96). He begins to understand Nick's constructed masculinity and the props and behaviors that keep it from crumbling, and he notices the "shimmer of Nick's fragility" (96). The narrator's epiphany goes a step further as he begins to understand Hemingway the man as opposed to Hemingway the legend. He realizes that "the man [Hemingway] who lived in these stories was not the steely warrior-genius whose image had so fogged my first impressions. He was in most respects an unremarkable, even banal man who got things wrong and suffered from nervousness and fear" (97). Gradually, the narrator begins to view truthfulness and vulnerability as elements of masculinity, but remains fearful of changing the persona he has worked tirelessly to construct.

The evolution of the narrator's concept of masculinity reaches a crisis when he finds himself unable to produce a piece for the next school literary contest, which will be judged this time by his hero, Ernest Hemingway. As the deadline approaches, the narrator continues copying out Hemingway's stories hoping for inspiration, and one evening he goes into the office of the *Troubadour* to write. There he begins reading through archives of other school literary magazines, bored with their familiarity until he discovers a story, "Summer Dance," written five years previously by a girl from Miss Cobb's Academy. In the story, he finds a reflection of himself—his social ambitions, his suppressed Jewishness, and his desire for peer validation. Upon concluding the story, he feels "as if my inmost vault had been smashed open and looted and every hidden thing spread across these pages. From the very first sentence I was looking myself in the face" (125). Resonating with the themes of the story, the narrator begins to type it out, as he had done with Hemingway's stories, and as he types he begins to feel as if he is finally coming clean, revealing his true self through writing. He changes the story's narrator's first name, but retains the Jewish last name—Levine, and after completing the copy, he conceives of

the piece as his. He decides to submit it for the literary contest and thinks, “Anyone who read this story would know who I was” (127). Wolff’s use of irony (it takes an act of plagiarism for the narrator to reveal the truth about himself) highlights his critique of the tenuous operation of masculinity. While the narrator’s willingness to forsake some of the earlier props of his masculinity (his stoic, hypermasculine stories) is commendable, his violation of academic honesty is inexcusable. In this scene, Wolff demonstrates the difficulty and reluctance of the narrator to begin facing the artifice of his masculinity. In some respects, the narrator’s act of plagiarism replaces a pernicious artifice with another type of artifice.

The fallout from the publication of the narrator’s soul-baring story demonstrates the kind of double-bind the narrator faces when constructing his persona and his masculinity. In publishing the story, he portrays a masculinity that incorporates vulnerability and fragility much like what he has recently come to see in stories like “Big Two-Hearted River.” Rejecting his former pose of macho self-reliance and assumed wealth, he presents a protagonist (who is certain to be taken as a stand-in for himself) struggling to overcome to the obstacles of class and race in a quest to be accepted by peers. Wolff, however, portrays the narrator’s act of plagiarism with moral ambivalence; the narrator’s behavior allows him to recognize truths about himself, but his academic dishonesty amounts to continued self-deception for which he is justly expelled from the school on the grounds of an honor code violation. During his meeting with the headmaster, a boy named Goss—the president of the Student Honor Council—makes it clear to the narrator that he sees the act of plagiarism as less offensive than the narrator’s willingness to acknowledge the excellence of a female writer. Goss exclaims, “Plagiarism’s bad enough, but from a girl? I can’t believe you’d plagiarize from a girl” (144). The misogyny is explicit from Goss as he tries to shame the narrator. Writing is a man’s domain in the eyes of Goss, who is the voice of the

narrator's peers. The expulsion and belittling experienced by the narrator confirm his earlier notion that any performance of masculinity other than the one accepted by the hegemony poses a threat to the individual. Wolff's staging of these events in the novel is loaded with irony as he critiques the forces that prop up hegemonic masculinity through a character who uses a lie to tell the truth about himself. The narrator, his peers, and the institution of the school itself all receive reprimands through Wolff's depiction of a boy seeking to construct his masculinity.

Though primarily concerned with the events leading up to the narrator's expulsion, *Old School's* final three chapters jump forward to the narrator's life as an adult, including a scene in which he writes to Susan Friedman, the writer of "Summer Dance" and arranges to meet her. Waiting for Susan to arrive at an Italian restaurant, the narrator—still in the process of constructing his masculinity—imagines the two will have much in common. He even thinks, "Suppose—a ridiculous supposition, I knew, but just suppose—we fell in love and ended up together" (158). Quite the opposite occurs when Susan arrives, and the narrator finds himself the social and intellectual inferior. The narrator also expects Susan to be a woman convinced of literature's power to reveal truth, but instead, Susan is dismissive of literature and of her own writing and sees the narrator's appropriation of "Summer Dance" as a joke on "this ivy-covered stud farm and on Papa," an evisceration of the school and Ernest Hemingway (161). She continues her attack on Hemingway saying, "Change a few names and pronouns and Papa himself, the peerless measurer of penises...couldn't tell if he was reading the story of a boy or a girl. So much for the supreme arbiter of manhood" (161). The narrator having re-fashioned his masculinity once already in the novel, finds it crumbling again in Susan's presence. When he defends himself, Hemingway, and writing, Susan casually laughs off the narrator's rebuttals. A final moment of emasculation occurs for the narrator when the waiter gives the bill for the meal

to Susan without even looking at the narrator. Wolff writes, “She counted some bills onto the table...She must have suspected my humiliation, because she reached over and gave my hand a squeeze. You get the next one, she said, though I knew there wouldn’t be a next one” (162). The narrator’s financial inadequacy perceived by the waiter and Susan, reverses the typical economic roles for a man and a woman on a date. The narrator’s performance of masculinity in this scene carries with it the fragility and inadequacies he had sought to overcome as an adolescent.

Taken as a whole, *Old School* portrays a nascent masculinity that adapts and reinvents itself striving to attain acceptance and stability. Instead, in both adolescence and early adulthood, the narrator finds his performances of masculinity always inadequate. Wolff depicts a narrator whose attempts to achieve masculinity falters both when he performs a stoic macho persona as well as when he dons a more honest and vulnerable persona to achieve masculinity. The impossibility of the task reveals the destabilizing assumptions about masculinity. In rendering a character traumatized by loss and absence trying to construct a nascent masculinity, Wolff’s text makes visible and critiques the constructed and tenuous nature of masculinity that often goes unnoticed or perceived as natural.

III: Nascent Masculinity in Three Short Stories

This Boy’s Life and *Old School* provide extended treatments of nascent masculinity, and Wolff’s short stories also provide numerous examples along similar themes, though in a compressed format. “Smorgasbord,” “Flyboys,” and “Powder,” short stories from the collection *The Night in Question*, present three unique portrayals of boys navigating their fledgling masculinities. The stories dramatize Reeser’s concept of masculinity hiding in plain sight until it crumbles as well as Connell’s concept of masculinity’s dependency on male power relationships

with other males. Though not as directly concerned with trauma as *This Boy's Life* and *Old School*, characters in these stories experience the trauma of loss through absent, unavailable, or manipulative father figures. "Smorgasbord" presents the starkest picture of nascent hypermasculinity, "Flyboys" presents exclusionary alliance making among boys, and "Powder" presents a young son rejecting his father's hypermasculinity while at the same time being charmed by it.

Like *Old School* "Smorgasbord" is set in an elite all-boys boarding school where a young protagonist struggles to embody an accepted performance of masculinity. Like *Old School*, the protagonist comes from a working-class background and finds his socio-economic status tied to his attempts at conveying his masculinity to his peers. In the short story, two poorer students (recipients of scholarship money and therefore social outsiders) surprisingly find themselves asked to dinner by Garcia, a wealthy South American student whose bravado, poise, and social standing identify him as a man amongst boys. The two poor students—an unnamed narrator and a boy named Crosley—are taken by limousine to dinner with Garcia and his stunningly beautiful stepmother. The narrator and Crosley attempt to impress Garcia's stepmother with their idea of mature and worldly masculinity only to find themselves humored and playfully mocked by Garcia's seductive stepmother. The stepmother completes her show of dominance over the two boys when she offers each of them a one-hundred-dollar bill as a parting gift, which they reluctantly accept. Rather than achieving status into Connell's category of hegemonic masculinity, the boys find themselves relegated to subordinate masculinity; they are rejected by a woman and also beholden to her financially. The scenario plays parallel to *Old School's* narrator's "date" with Susan.

Upon returning to the school's campus, the narrator and Crosley recognize the failures of their masculinity both at the hands of Garcia's stepmother and within the all-boys peer group of the school. They respond to this failure by discussing how they might use their newly acquired cash to solicit a prostitute, "buy a woman," as the story comes to an end (165). Though the boys do not act on their hypermasculine fantasies, they explicitly reveal their need to mend their masculinity. This reveals elements of masculinity that Reeser notes are often hidden from view, though in plain sight. Since the characters are young and less adept at bluffing their way through performances of masculinity, their engagement with masculinity is more visible. These two characters demonstrate a common behavior pattern that Wolff's texts reveal and critique: when a male's fragiley constructed masculinity becomes exposed, he will often respond with acts of hypermasculinity further revealing the fragility of his performance of masculinity. The fantasies of hypermasculinity imagined by these characters still at the nascent stage become the realities of many of the adult male characters in Wolff's works.

In "Winging it: Realism and Invention in the Stories of Tobias Wolff," Martin Scofield argues that "Smorgasbord" presents a moment of epiphany for the narrator. Scofield examines a brief scene of flash-forward in the story in which the narrator breaks up with his girlfriend ostensibly due to his jilting experience with Garcia's stepmother. Scofield writes, "The structure of the fiction has incorporated certain conventional moral realizations but has subordinated them to a final effect of growth and development, something slightly anarchic but vital" (104). This reading, however, does not take in to account the final sentence of the story: "And so we sat up and took counsel, leaning toward each other from the beds, holding our swollen bellies, whispering back and forth about how this thing might be done, and where, and when" (165). "This thing" refers to the narrator's and Crosley's scheme to use the money they received from

Garcia's stepmother to solicit prostitutes. The final image of the story exemplifies a key element of constructing and repairing masculinity—it must be done in the presence of other males. The narrator and Crosley reassure themselves and bond with each other over their hypermasculine fantasy. Rather than a moral epiphany, the story operates as an unveiling of hypermasculinity in nascent form. Wolff's presentation of the boys in this story operates as a critique of their default to peer validation in the absence of legitimate male figures which leads to their joint fantasy about dominating and traumatizing a prostitute.

Like "Smorgasbord," Wolff's "Flyboys" portrays a young boy attempting to create and maintain social prestige among other boys as a means to constructing a nascent masculinity, but the boys in "Flyboys" rely on alliances rather than upon the hypermasculine fantasies depicted in "Smorgasbord." The unnamed first person narrator, this time an elementary aged boy, connects himself to the wealthy and confident Clark, a boy his age. The two boys dream of and plan to build a functioning fighter jet, a symbol of masculine control and power. By attaching himself to Clark, the narrator places himself in proximity to a compelling masculine performance and distances himself from an old friend, Freddy, whose poverty and physical disability pose a threat to the narrator's quest to presenting himself as a confident and capable male. Reflecting on Clark's family, the narrator observes, "You could see in the pictures that they took it all in stride, the big spreads behind them, the boats and cars, and their relaxed, handsome families who, it was clear, did not get laid off, or come down with migraines, or lock each other out of the house. I pondered each picture as if it were a door I might enter" (57). The narrator envies the possessions and the stability in Clark's family contrasted with the instability and implied domestic trauma of his own family, and he connects masculine competency to the family's

success. In anchoring himself to Clark, the narrator hopes to elevate his own social status and therefore his nascent masculinity.

When the narrator and Clark take a trip to Freddy's house in search of a cockpit for their jet design, the narrator makes it his goal to keep Freddy from joining their jet-building schemes and to keep his social ties strong to Clark, the representative of young hegemonic masculinity. Ivan, Freddy's stepfather, enters the action and becomes a part of the boys' jockeying for social position. When Ivan gets his truck stuck in the mud, a moment of defeat for his masculinity, it is the young Clark who devises a plan for rescuing the vehicle. While Freddy's asthma causes him to labor for breath as the boys work on getting the truck out of the mud, Clark displays poise and physical strength while dodging danger with nonchalance. Clark's success with the truck elevates his social status and affirms his masculinity as he gains Ivan's respect. Wolff writes, "Ivan stood and brushed off his hands and walked over to the truck, still watching Clark. Before he climbed into the cab, he said, 'Young fellow, if you ever need a job, call me'" (70). Here Ivan confers upon Clark a sign of adult masculinity, something envied by the narrator.

Unable to achieve a masculinity like Clark's through physical ability and poise, the narrator uses calculated social maneuvering to keep himself close to Clark and push Freddy—a former friend now seen as a liability—to the social outskirts. From early in the story, the narrator establishes his ability to maneuver socially as he dictates to Clark their far-fetched plans for building a working jet. The narrator explains, "Sure and commanding in everything but this, Clark took most of my ideas to heart, which made a tyrant of me. The more attentive he was, the more I bullied him" (58). As the story concludes, the narrator makes use of his social cunning to push Freddy out telling Clark, "all things considered, I'd just as soon keep it to the two of us" (73). The narrator's cowardly maneuvering to remain close to Clark and cut out Freddy reveals

the craftiness he uses to prop up his own fragile nascent masculinity. Though the story does not explicitly incorporate elements of trauma, the narrator makes a brief allusion to instability in his family indicating that his rejection of Freddy and attachment to Clark is motivated by suppressing or covering over some emotional duress caused at home. The narrator admits, “The shakiness of my own family was becoming more and more apparent. At the time I didn’t admit to this knowledge, not for a moment, but it was always there, waiting in the gut: a sourness of foreboding, a cramp of alarm at any sign of misfortune or weakness in others, as if such things were catching” (65). In this reflection, the narrator of “Flyboys” parallels *Old School*’s narrator as he tries to suppress and dismiss negative thoughts about his family because the thought threatens his ability to perform an idealized masculinity. Like many of his texts, Wolff’s “Flyboys” reveals and critiques performances of masculinity by focusing on boys’ faltering attempts to access a non-existent stable masculinity under the specter of traumatic family circumstances.

“Powder,” one of Wolff’s most artistically rendered short stories, also addresses masculine performance when a young boy, the first person narrator, attempts to regulate his behavior and attitudes according to an accepted model. The story juxtaposes a young and cautious son with a reckless and confident father. The father, often absent from home, casts a larger than life shadow over the boy much like Duke’s in *This Boy’s Life*. In the story, the father and son attempt to drive a road closed due to snow in order to make it home in time for Christmas dinner. The narrator describes himself as “a boy who kept his clothes on numbered hangers to insure proper rotation. I bothered my teachers for homework assignments far ahead of their due dates so I could draw up schedules. I thought ahead” (37). On the other hand, the father drives a car he cannot afford (an Austin-Healey), acts as an absentee husband and father,

and flouts police authority. Unlike most of Wolff's narrators, this one does not consciously try to construct his masculinity based on the model of a father figure. He does, however, fall prey to his father's charisma and unintentionally begins to find himself joining his father's stylized performance of masculinity.

After the father cajoles the son into staying on the ski slopes too long, they find themselves caught in a snow storm, which the father insists on driving through despite a warning from a police officer. As the father expertly navigates the Austin-Healey over the treacherous road, he remarks, "Don't ever try this yourself.... Someday you'll get your license and then you'll think you can do anything. Only you won't be able to do this. You need, I don't know—a certain instinct" (35-6). Cars and driving feature prominently in Wolff's work, and they represent independence and self-reliance, traits often associated with masculinity. Even though the father in "Powder" impugns his son's fledgling masculinity and future ability to handle a car like himself, he still manages to charm him back into his good graces with humor and back-handed compliments. Eventually, the boy even abandons his usual cautiousness and enjoys the adventure. He observes, "This was one for the books. Like being in a speedboat, only better. You can't go downhill in a boat. And it was all ours. And it kept coming, the laden trees, the unbroken surface of the snow, the sudden white vistas" (37). He goes on to compliment his father: "He was a great driver. All persuasion, no coercion. Such subtlety at the wheel, such tactful pedalwork. I actually trusted him" (36). Brian Hanley in "Modernity's 'Mr. Rambler'" (2003) recognizes how the son begins to take on the attitudes of the father. Hanley writes, "Here the son deludes himself in a manner directly after his father" (159). A reader could easily be charmed, like the young boy, by this display of the father's masculine competence behind the wheel. What lies in the subtext of this story, however, is the father's manipulation of his son and

his wife, his lies and irresponsibility, and the inevitability of his imminent abandonment of the family. Though not the physically and verbally traumatic overtures of Dwight in *This Boy's Life*, these actions produce long lasting emotional trauma for the narrator. Though one of his more understated stories, "Powder" reveals the subtle and pervasive ability of hegemonic masculinity to exert power upon and to disfigure young boys.

Wolff's young male characters contain seeds of masculine performances that become full grown in his depictions of adult men. While some of Wolff's boys are less conscious of hegemonic masculinity's pull upon them, like the narrator in "Powder," most of them are keenly aware of it and do everything in their power to win access into hegemonic masculinity. The forays into constructing masculinity initiated by these boys take on an even greater significance when Wolff's adult male characters journey down similar paths. Families, schools, and peers provide the primary social sites for Wolff's boys in their quests for masculinity, and Wolff's adult male characters often find themselves abusing their positions of authority within families and within the American military structure to construct their masculinity. Whereas many of Wolff's young boys construct their masculinity as trauma survivors, many of his adult males construct their masculinity as trauma perpetrators, and the seeds of hypermasculinity that were a fantasy in nascent masculinity grow into a reality in adulthood.

CHAPTER 3

HYPERMASCULINITIES

After having examined Wolff's presentation and critique of negative iterations of masculinity as performed by young boys in chapter two, "Nascent Masculinities," I now move in chapter three to analyze Wolff's presentation of adult male characters who exhibit hypermasculinity in Wolff's short stories "Hunters in the Snow," "Soldier's Joy," and "Wingfield," in his novella *The Barracks Thief* (1984), and in his two memoirs *This Boy's Life* (1989) and *In Pharaoh's Army* (1994). Many of the adult hypermasculine characters exhibit similar though hardened performances of masculinity in comparison to Wolff's young and adolescent characters. The nascent masculinity constructed by the characters in *This Boy's Life* and *Old School* along with those in "Smorgasbord," "Flyboys," and "Powder" tends to be fragile, and the characters' approximation of adult masculinity often appears cartoonish as illustrated in chapter two. These boys often slip out their masculine performances and back into child-like naiveté highlighting the tenuousness of their performances. Unlike these boys, most men in Wolff's works have become much more practiced in their masculinities. Many of these hypermasculine men have taken such care to accentuate their masculinity that their exaggerated performances often becoming caricatures. Furthermore, these characters' proximity to trauma heightens their hypermasculinity. Wolff's traumatized and traumatizing hypermasculine characters construct and perform their masculinities within three primary contexts—domineering patriarchal family units, all-male peer groups, and the military—and a close analysis of Wolff's texts reveals his critique of hypermasculinity and of the cultural structures that produce it.

Wolff's hypermasculine men reveal the constructed nature of masculinity much like Wolff's boys do. When Wolff's boys experience cracks in their masculinity, the experience is

less dramatic, however, because of their fledgling status within masculinity. For hypermasculine men the stakes are higher and the results are more dramatically and violently intensified. When they experience threats to their masculinity or see their performances not measuring up, they raise the level of their performances to an even greater extreme. Wolff's hypermasculine men often establish their masculinity by exerting power over women, children, minorities, and/or other men outside of hegemonic masculinity. Ultimately, Wolff's texts show the traumatizing nature of hypermasculinity as well as its thin artifice. Rather than operating successfully as a way to present their masculinity as unquestionable, coherent, and stable, characters in Wolff's works who perform hypermasculinity reveal the inconsistencies and inadequacies in their masculinity while traumatizing those around them and often even themselves.

Though critiques of hypermasculinity can be found as early as 1955 in Tom Burnam's "Primitivism and Masculinity" in *Modern Fiction Studies*, the term "hypermasculinity" was first coined in 1984 by Donald L. Mosher in his article "Measuring a Macho Personality Constellation." Mosher surveyed male college students about drug use, aggressive behavior, dangerous driving, and delinquent behavior during high school. In identifying individuals as hypermasculine, Mosher recognized a "constellation of three components: (a) calloused sex attitudes toward women, (b) violence as manly, and (c) danger as exiting" (150). Mosher's study provides specificity and terminology in describing damaging effects of hypermasculinity.

Along with the attitudes and behaviors identified by Mosher, the physical body itself forms a key element to hypermasculinity. Judith Butler treats the significance of the body and lays the ground work for theorists more specifically focused on masculinity in her ground breaking work *Gender Trouble* (1990). Butler argues that "The construction of stable bodily contours relies upon fixed sites of corporeal permeability and impermeability." (180). For

Wolff's hypermasculine men, permeability of the body, whether through a war wound or through a transgressive sex act, produces anxiety and overcompensation. Impermeability of the body is key to presenting the accepted hypermasculine hard body, the literal hardness of a body that resists physical penetration, as Susan Jeffords describes in *Hard Bodies* (1994). In her earlier work, *The Remasculinization of America* (1989), Jeffords critiques the hypermasculine tendencies in America following the failure of the Vietnam War, and in *Hard Bodies*, she examines popular culture images of masculinity in the 1970s and 80s and their emphasis on the muscular action hero types embodied by characters in movies such as *First Blood*, *Die Hard*, and *Terminator*. Jeffords argues that "although definitions of the masculine body were key to the formation of national and popular cultures [in America]...those bodies and definitions were neither stable nor consistent" (13). Jeffords critiques the destructive potential for hypermasculinity in individuals as well as in cultural institutions. The era Jeffords treats is particularly germane since it covers the time in which Wolff's military career ended and his writing career began in earnest.

In a similar vein as Butler and Jeffords, R.W. Connell's *Masculinities* (1995) demonstrates the significance of the male body to true masculinity and hypermasculinity: "True masculinity is almost always thought to proceed from men's bodies—to be inherent in a male body or to express something about a male body" (45). The hypermasculine male body, however, lacks the stability central to its construction. Using a champion swimmer as an example, Connell argues that "much of what was defined in his peer culture as masculine [womanizing, fighting, drinking] was forbidden him. Indeed, this body-reflexive practice that constructed Steve's [the swimmer's] hegemonic masculinity also undermined hegemonic

masculinity” (63). Wolff’s characters and indeed Wolff himself find themselves struggling through the cultural shifts, internal contradictions, and damaging effects of hypermasculinity.

Extending the work of Susan Jeffords, in *Masculinity in Vietnam War Narratives* (2009), Susan Boyle situates her treatment of the male body’s role in hypermasculinity within the context of the military industrial complex, which is the setting for a number of Wolff’s hypermasculine characters. Boyle argues that although the “flat-bellied and steely-eyed” male body remains standard issue for the hypermasculine soldier, the Vietnam War era destabilized the national concept of the masculine body in times of war. She writes:

The Vietnam War era provided alternatives to the One True Way of being masculine, to the notion that a male body should behave in prescribed masculine ways. Rather than replacing one correct way with a new correct one, however, the era complicated the relationship between how the body physically is constituted and the behaviors it may manifest. (4)

Though the era may have blurred “boundaries that previously separated masculinity and femininity” according to Boyle, many of Wolff’s hypermasculine characters become more anxious about their masculinity when the stable binary categories are challenged. Furthermore, Boyle argues that America’s crushing military loss in the Vietnam War and the cultural softening of masculinity in the Carter era eventually lead to the pendulum swinging back towards the hard body hypermasculinity in the era of Reagan and Rambo (7). In tracing some of the major contributions to studies on hypermasculinity, it is worth noting that the field moves from describing hypermasculinity, to critiquing its damaging effects, and then finally to demonstrating its incoherence and self-contradiction.

Hypermasculinity in Wolff's texts often intersects with trauma, and the characters who exhibit hypermasculinity do so within the context of peer groups, the family, the military or a combination of these. In *This Boy's Life* Wolff portrays the luckless step-father figure, Dwight, whose hypermasculinity manifests in him lashing out and perpetuating a damaging cycle of violence. In response to his failures as a man, Dwight's violence only highlights and re-inscribes his inability to perform the masculinity he desires. Dwight's hypermasculinity traumatizes both those around him and himself. In another story of civilian hypermasculinity—"Hunter's in the Snow" from the collection *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs* (1981)—a trio of men jockey for dominance in the hypermasculine arena of a hunting trip. Anxious to establish and reaffirm their masculinity in front of each other, these men turn on each other and eventually murder one of their own. The story highlights not only the impetuous violence brought on by hypermasculine behavior but also its banality.

This Boy's Life and "Hunters in the Snow," depict hypermasculinity in civilian life, but Wolff's signature depictions of hypermasculinity come in his texts set in military life. As a veteran of the Vietnam War, Wolff draws from his personal experiences in both state-side military training as well as in combat zones in Vietnam. Wolff's military texts dramatize the intersections between masculinity, the male body, trauma, and the nation-state. *The Barrack's Thief*, features the character Lewis, a recruit in boot camp in the Vietnam War era who, after styling himself as a man of great sexual prowess, finds himself in an intimate moment with an effeminate male school teacher and then to overcompensate for his masculine slippage, he lashes out with violent hypermasculine behavior towards a prostitute. Like Dwight, his violent overcompensations for his perceived masculine inadequacies wreaks havoc on those around him and also plunges him deeper into a self-defeating cycle. In the short stories "Soldier's Joy" from

Back in the World (1985) and “Wingfield” from *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs*, Wolff emphasizes the hypermasculine programming of his characters in boot camp. As characters become emotionally desensitized, they also become physically hardened turning into the physical manifestations of the hypermasculine nation-state. These characters, however, break down emotionally and physically as the stories depict the instability and destructive nature of hypermasculinity. “Soldier’s Joy” and “Wingfield” also highlight the centrality of male to male relationships in establishing and maintaining hypermasculinity. Also set in the context of boot camp, “The Other Miller” published in Wolff’s short story collection *The Night in Question* (1996) involves a young Army recruit who responds to his father’s death and his mother’s remarriage by joining the military and trying to punish his mother. The surprising death of his mother and the trauma it causes play a key role in the protagonist’s construction of his masculinity. Each of these stories provide opportunities to examine Wolff’s critique of hypermasculinity and how it intersects with trauma for these characters.

Wolff’s Vietnam War memoir, *In Pharaoh’s Army*, contains the character Pete Landon who exhibits a more nuanced hypermasculinity than most of Wolff’s other characters as Pete plays the role of both military and cultural conqueror during the Vietnam War. Pete performs his masculinity by insisting on placing himself in dangerous situations so he can display his military superiority, and he also uses his cultural knowledge of both the West and the East to orchestrate control over other American service men and Vietnamese locals. The memoir also includes Captain Kale, a blustering officer whose hypermasculinity creates the opportunity for the soldiers under him to lure him unwittingly into a brief dalliance with a Vietnamese boy in drag. Both Pete Landon and Captain Kale illustrate Wolff’s damning depiction of hypermasculinity and its destructiveness in the context of military life.

I: Hypermasculinity in Domestic Life: *The Boy's Life, a Memoir*

In the previous chapter, I examined Wolff's depiction of nascent masculinity in his memoir *This Boy's Life* focusing on the character of Toby and the models of masculinity he encounters as a boy. One of these models, the step-father Dwight, merits a fuller treatment here given his deployment of hypermasculinity. Wolff presents Dwight as a bully constantly overcompensating for his failures and inadequacies. Dwight's abuse of alcohol, violent and aggressive behavior, and infatuation with firearms place him well within Mosher's categories of hypermasculinity. Wolff's presentation of Dwight operates as a critique and shows the destructive nature of hypermasculinity in the family structure as well hypermasculinity's inability to act as a stable, coherent, and consistent performance.

Dwight's attraction to and performance of hypermasculinity is easily observable, but his connections with trauma are not as easily grasped. Unlike Toby and Rosemary, Dwight does not appear to be the victim of trauma, rather his habitual violence appear to mark him as a perpetrator and therefore not "traumatized." The impact of Dwight's violence on others however, does create a traumatizing effect upon him though his violence remains indefensible, and it would be inaccurate to label him a victim. Dominick LaCapra uses the terms "survivor-victim" and "perpetrator-victim" to categorize levels of agency in traumatic situations (*Writing History, Writing Trauma* 182). Although using the word *victim* in the term *perpetrator-victim* implies less agency than warranted for a malevolent operator like Dwight, LaCapra's terminology highlights the notion that trauma deeply affects all parties involved. Cathy Caruth defines trauma as distinct from physical wounds because it is "a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind," and she goes on to note that "the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world—is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but

rather an event that...is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (*Unclaimed Experience* 4). Caruth, like LaCapra, places both parties—the perpetrator and the victim—in the category of “survivor.” Given this understanding of trauma, Dwight’s actions as a trauma perpetrator can be seen as self-inflicted wounds to his own mind that continue to manifest themselves in cycles of repetition. Though Dwight affords no sympathy and remains solely responsible for his violent behavior, the negative impact on his mind as a trauma-perpetrator reveals aspects of his character. In the overlap between Dwight’s masculinity and his relation to trauma, Wolff presents his compelling critique of how hypermasculine men damage those around them as well as themselves in the context of the family structure.

Guns, violence, alcohol, and combinations of the three best illustrate Dwight’s intersections with hypermasculinity and trauma. Dwight’s image of himself as “some kind of big hunter” and his large collection of firearms is central to his performance of hypermasculinity, but he finds this image under threat when he actually has to prove his abilities at an NRA shooting contest (74). At the contest, Rosemary, enters as the only woman, and her ability immediately eclipse’s Dwight’s. Dwight is unable to assemble the firearm brought by Toby, labels it a “blunderbuss” and remarks, “That thing is a menace. You ought to get rid of it. It shoots wild. The bore is probably rusted out” (72). When Dwight takes his turn to shoot he “fired his ten rounds in rapid succession, hardly pausing for breath” and scores poorly (72). Despite protests from other men in the contest, Rosemary takes her turn using the same rifle as Dwight and wins the contest. She strikes a pose with the rifle and enjoys the begrudging adoration she has earned from the men in the contest while Dwight sulks. Dwight’s

hypermasculine image is revealed as nothing more than a pose, a pose that he is unable to successfully enact but that can be performed convincingly by a woman. Through the contest, Rosemary also receives status among men, a key element within masculinity as theorized by R.W. Connell, further dismantling Dwight (76). When Dwight, Rosemary, and Toby return home, Dwight's biological children reflect "Oh boy, now we're really in for it. He thinks he's some kind of big hunter" (75). Based on past experiences, the children anticipate that Dwight will take out the defeat of his hypermasculinity upon them. Though this scene does not end in violence it establishes Dwight's typical response when he experiences a defeat to his hypermasculinity.

Dwight's need to perform his hypermasculinity and his subsequent failures come to the fore again after Rosemary joins Dwight's shooting club. Wolff writes, "When I came in from my paper route I often found myself looking down the barrel of Dwight's latest piece [firearm], which he, in outrageous violation of the code governing even unloaded weapons, held on me until I moved out of the way" (132). Here, Dwight's pose with the rifle illustrates that although he is inadequate in his marksmanship, he can use guns to threaten those around him to establish hypermasculine dominance. Later, after losing badly at another shooting contest while seeing Rosemary perform successfully, Dwight verbally abuses Rosemary, Toby, and his daughter Pearl before pulling into a roadside tavern to get drunk. Leaving the family in the car, Dwight enters the tavern to salve his bruised pride with whiskey. After arguing with Dwight, Rosemary who "didn't look like a winner now" enters the car, and Dwight drunkenly drives the family home (135). Enduring Dwight's taunts and perilous driving, the family holds on for dear life in the car. Wolff writes, "And then he took us through the turns above the river, tires wailing, headlights swinging between cliff and space, and the more we begged him the faster he went, only slowing

down for a breath after the really close calls, and then laughing to show he wasn't afraid" (136). To reestablish his hypermasculinity and dominance, Dwight uses reckless behavior that places himself in a position of dominance over his wife and children but that also endangers himself.

In order to establish and maintain his masculinity, Dwight relies on domineering those around him who are physically weaker and those who have less power within the abusive hierarchical structure of his family. Connell posits that "The main axis of power in the contemporary European/American gender order is the overall subordination of women and dominance of men—the structure Women's Liberation named 'patriarchy'" (74). Through hypermasculine practices he keeps himself at the top of the tiny kingdom he establishes in his home. His physical abuse of Toby forms the emotional center of the memoir, and in chapter two I provide a detailed analysis of their relationship and its impact on Toby's nascent masculinity. Dwight verbally belittles Toby, acts as if taking him in is a great service, and physically abuses him on multiple occasions. But Dwight's relationship with Rosemary paints an even clearer picture of his use of hypermasculinity to reinscribe patriarchal norms within his family. Although he initially courts Rosemary with kindness, it soon becomes evident that his intentions for her center around his desire to exert control and dominance.

Rosemary's past relationships with abusive and domineering men plays a role in her willingness to endure Dwight's abuse, but as she asserts some power within their relationship, Dwight's hypermasculine violence escalates again. In the second half of the memoir, Rosemary volunteers to work on the campaign of John F. Kennedy and spends time traveling and meeting people she admires. Dwight feels threatened by her personal and political independence during the campaign, and when she returns, Dwight reminds her of his dominance. After he hears a

rumor that Rosemary wants to leave his home in Chinook, Dwight viciously threatens her.

Wolff writes:

While they were driving up from Marblemount one night, he turned off on a logging road and took her to a lonely place. She asked him to go back but he refused to say anything. He just sat there, drinking from a bottle of whiskey. When it was empty he pulled his hunting knife out from under the seat and held it to her throat. He kept her there for hours like that, making her beg for her life, making her promise that she would never leave him. If she left him, he said, he would find her and kill her. It didn't matter where she went or how long it took him, he would kill her. She believed him. (205-6)

Dwight's reaction to Rosemary in this scene follows the same pattern as his reaction to losing the shooting contests, but this time with a more dramatic result. In the shooting scenes, Dwight feels his masculinity threatened because of his inadequacy, and he responds with drunken driving and verbal abuse of his family. This time, Dwight feels his masculinity threatened by Rosemary's personal and political independence, and his response again involves alcohol and an automobile, this time with the added menace of a hunting knife. The car, the alcohol, and the knife all carry with them hypermasculine connotations, and Dwight's deployment of them upon Rosemary serves to reestablish his threatened masculinity. Rosemary does not serve as a companion or object of affection for Dwight. Rather, Rosemary operates as a prop for Dwight's masculinity. By domineering Rosemary, Dwight keeps in place a central element to his performance of masculinity, and when she threatens to leave he responds violently not because of any love for her but because of what she provides for his masculinity. Dwight's guns, knives, and other props of hypermasculinity are all ironically dependent upon his ability to keep his one central prop—a woman.

The final chapter of *This Boy's Life* depicts Dwight as his most hypermasculine, his most violent, and his most defeated. The chapter, titled "Amen," serves as a postscript to the memoir and deals with Toby's life after leaving Dwight's home, his relationship with his biological father and his brother Geoffrey, and his poor performance at a private school along with a final flashback to a moment back in Chinook. Wolff also relates the harrowing experience of Dwight attempting to strangle Rosemary. After Toby enters Hill School, Rosemary leaves Dwight's house and takes a job in Washington, D.C. During the Christmas holidays, Toby visits his mother's D.C. apartment in a rough neighborhood. Having tracked her down to D.C., Dwight attacks Rosemary in the lobby of her apartment building, and although Toby hears a commotion coming from the lobby, he chooses to ignore it "pretending to believe that the strange noises I heard came from cats" (284-5). While Toby exhibits a passive abdication in this scene—knowing someone was in trouble and doing nothing—Rosemary exhibits a powerful physical action that sounds the final note in Dwight's damaging performances of hypermasculinity. After Wolff describes Dwight's attempt to strangle Rosemary; he records her reaction: "Just before she blacked out she kned him in the balls. He hollered and let her go; then he grabbed her purse and ran" (284). Dwight's final attempt to reassert his dominance involves actual rather than just threatened violence, but the result of his hypermasculine aggression only leads to the further deterioration of his masculinity as he finds the symbolic locus of his manhood ("the balls") the site of Rosemary's resistance.

This scene of reversal is almost too perfect. Not only does Rosemary stop Dwight's literal physical attack, she symbolically castrates him in perpetuity as well, since this interaction is their final one. Connell notes that attacking the male genitals, whether literally or symbolically, is an attack on "the point of intersection between patriarchal dominance of culture

and the bodily experience of masculinity; in more orthodox Freudian terms it means reviving the terror of castration” (232). For Rosemary, who has been dominated for her entire life starting with her father and running through a long series of abusive relationships with other men, her strike on Dwight resonates as a symbolic strike against the patriarchal dominance that has oppressed her for years. For Dwight, the strike lands at the center of his bodily experience of masculinity but it also serves to place him outside of the patriarchal structure he has used to exploit Rosemary. After the strike he “grabbed her purse and ran.” Running away is the action of a coward, and stealing a woman’s purse implies not only juvenile petty theft but also economic dependency upon a woman. In sum, Dwight’s hypermasculine aggression paradoxically results in the undoing of his hypermasculine image. The final image of Dwight that Toby and Rosemary see is one of complete defeat. Having been arrested by two police officers outside of the apartment building, Dwight stands in shame. Wolff writes, “Dwight raised his head. He seemed confused, as if he didn’t recognize me. He lowered his head again. His curly hair glistened with melting snowflakes. This was my last sight of him” (285). Unable to threaten, domineer, or abuse, Dwight’s final moment in the memoir is one in which he has been reduced to his true character—a weak and cowardly man whose hypermasculinity has traumatized not only those around him but also himself.

Though Dwight should be viewed as completely culpable for his acts of violence, his proximity to violence as a perpetrator has an on-going damaging impact on him. As mentioned previously, LaCapra notes that trauma involves a damaging experience for both perpetrator and victim, and Caruth maintains that trauma is a wound of the mind not of the body. Given these concepts, Dwight’s hypermasculine escalation of violence in the memoir can be viewed as an acting out the traumatic woundedness of his mind. In his relationship with Toby, he goes from

verbal abuse to ever increasing physical abuse. In his relationship with Rosemary, Dwight verbally threatens her, then terrorizes her by holding a hunting knife to her neck, and finally makes an attempt at her life when he tries to strangle her. Dwight's hypermasculinity requires a continual upping of the ante, which only serves to double back on itself with higher degrees of failure. Dwight repeats the same kinds of behaviors over and over. His mind becomes more and more wounded, and his masculinity becomes more and more tenuous. In Dwight's final scene, he embodies the disoriented haze of one whose violent actions have produced a traumatizing and searing effect on the mind. After being arrested by the police, Dwight's confusion and inability to recognize Toby point to the woundedness of his mind produced in part by his on-going role as trauma perpetrator. Though rightly portrayed as the memoir's central antagonist, Dwight embodies hypermasculinity's ability to traumatize even itself.

II: Hypermasculinity in an All-Male Peer Group: "Hunters in the Snow," a Short Story

Like *This Boy's Life*, Wolff's short story "Hunters in the Snow" includes a portrayal of the damaging effects of hypermasculinity, and again Wolff makes use of automobiles, firearms, and violence in his depiction of the fragile veneer of hypermasculinity. Rather than in the context of the family as in *This Boy's Life*, "Hunters in the Snow" sets its depictions of masculinity in the context of an all-male peer group of three friends whose hunting trip ends with a death. James Hannah writes that the story is "about the vagaries and cruelties of superficial friendships, about masculine camaraderie that appears sympathetic and fulfilling but that is in the end destructive and as barren as the frozen landscape in which the story takes place" (7). Three friends—Tub, Kenny, and Frank—embark on a deer hunting expedition that begins with Tub as the object of Kenny's and Frank's ridicule and ends with Tub and Frank aligned against Kenny who is slowly dying in the back of a pick-up truck after having been shot by Tub. Kenny's

aggressive and violent hypermasculinity at the beginning of the story doubles back on him by the end as Tub asserts his own hypermasculinity, though somewhat more reluctantly, as he finds himself in the position of power within the friend triad.

The trope of hunting evokes a long tradition of masculinity imagery in America. Connell notes that American Western frontiersmen were “promoted as exemplars of masculinity” and that “the novels of James Fennimore Cooper and the Wild West show of Buffalo Bill Cody were early steps in a course that eventually led to the Western as a film genre and its self-conscious cult of inarticulate masculine heroism” (194). Furthermore, Connell argues that the “cult of the hunter” involving “wilderness, hunting and bushcraft were welded into a distinct ideology of manhood” (194). Indeed, the image of man as hunter so deeply pervades cultural consciousness that often the defining trait of pre-historical maleness is his status as a hunter. Being a successful hunter seemingly elevates a man in the evolutionary chain, and the adolescent who makes his first successful hunt moves through a common rite of passage. Its exaggerated significance in masculinity and its inherent violence mark hunting as hypermasculine. Tub, Kenny, and Frank each measure their own and each other’s masculinity by their hunting ability. Kenny, who controls the group’s power dynamics at the story’s beginning, brags about his hunting prowess even in the face of an unsuccessful hunt. After losing a deer’s tracks, Kenny swears, throws his hat to the ground and says, “This is the worst day of hunting I ever had, bar none... This will be the first season since I was fifteen I haven’t got my deer” (15). Here, Kenny demonstrates not only his past success, but also that he successfully passed the hunting rite of passage as an adolescent. Earlier, Kenny uses his hunting abilities and Tub’s apparent lack of ability, to bully Tub and to maintain his own position of power and masculinity. Kenny mocks Tub for missing

signs of a deer. Kenny says, “What do you think that is, Tub? Walnuts on vanilla icing?” and berates him for being lost and inattentive.

Along with Kenny’s use of hunting to jockey for position and to maintain dominance over the group, Wolff presents another dramatic power-play within the group through his use of another hypermasculine trope: a pick-up truck. The truck in the story is a battered and rugged vehicle representing the rough and ready hypermasculinity of Kenny. The story opens with Tub having waited for an hour in the snow for Kenny to pick him up in the truck. As Kenny approaches in the truck, he drives recklessly on a sidewalk directly towards Tub who is forced to clumsily evade the oncoming threat dropping his rifle in the process. After the truck stops “several feet beyond where Tub had been standing,” Kenny laughs at Tub, mocks him for being overweight, and tells him to stop complaining about almost getting killed (10). After the group arrives at the hunting location and spends hours in the cold, Tub is the last one to return to their rendezvous at the truck, and when Kenny sees him, he begins to drive away in the vehicle. Wolff writes, “Tub had to run for it and just managed to grab hold of the tailgate and hoist himself into the bed. He lay there, panting. Kenny looked out the rear window and grinned” (14). Tub remains in the truck bed for a time enduring the freezing wind. At the steering wheel, Kenny controls the direction and decision making for the group, and he wields the truck as a weapon with his aggressive behavior.

By the end of the story, however, the power positions of Kenny and Tub have reversed and so have their positions in the truck. After shooting Kenny in an act of panic and self-defense, Tub and Frank load Kenny—whose stomach is bleeding badly from the gunshot—into the bed of the truck. The story ends with the eerie image of Kenny barely remaining conscious in the truck bed. Wolff writes, “Kenny lay with his arms folded over his stomach, moving his

lips at the stars...As the truck twisted through the gentle hills the star went back and forth between Kenny's boots, staying always in his sight. 'I'm going to the hospital,' Kenny said. But he was wrong. They had taken a different turn a long way back" (26). For Kenny the truck ironically shifts from being a weapon and the object of his power and hypermasculine aggression into a surrogate hearse ushering his broken body towards death. Connell's emphasis on men's relationship towards other men in establishing masculinity illuminates aspects of Kenny's and Tub's reversal. Connell notes the importance of power dynamics between men outlining four categories within masculinity: hegemony, subordination, complicity, and marginalization (76). Furthermore, Connell writes, "A relational approach makes it easier to recognize the hard compulsions under which gender configurations are formed" (76). In "Hunters in the Snow," Tub experiences a configuration of masculinity that moves from subordination to hegemony through his slow building performance of hypermasculinity.

The shift in power dynamics becomes clearer upon examining Tub's reluctant entrance into a hypermasculine performance. Tub begins the story in the subordinate category as he remains the object of Kenny's ridicule for some time. Kenny's barbs about Tub's weight problem put the masculine status of Tub's body into question. Kenny tells Tub, "You haven't seen your own balls in ten years" (12). Implying that Tub's stomach is large enough to hang over and cover his genitals, the statement allows Kenny to establish verbal and physical dominance over Tub. If Tub has not seen his "balls in ten years," he has been symbolically castrated by Kenny's language. Much like the pattern established in *This Boy's Life*, verbal dominance leads to physical dominance and violence, and Kenny makes it his job throughout the day's hunting to cause Tub physical pain: he walks at a pace too fast for Tub to maintain, he allows Tub to struggle through a barbed wire fence rather than assist him, and he drives off in the truck forcing

Tub to chase and leap into the bed. Kenny's domineering hypermasculinity reaches its zenith after he walks out of a farmer's house after having asked permission to hunt on a piece of land. For no clear reason, Kenny begins expressing hatred and firing his rifle at seemingly random targets. Wolff writes:

When they [Tub and Frank] were coming up to the barn Kenny stopped and pointed. "I hate that post," he said. He raised his rifle and fired. It sounded like a dry branch cracking. The post splintered along its right side, up towards the top. "There," Kenny said. "It's dead..." Kenny looked at Tub. He smiled. "I hate that tree," he said, and fired again. Tub hurried to catch up with Frank. He started to speak but just then the dog ran out of the barn and barked at them. "I hate that dog." Kenny was behind them...Kenny fired. The bullet went in between the dog's eyes. (15-16)

Kenny's staccato language highlights his increasingly violent and erratic behavior. Tub and Frank urge Kenny to put his rifle down throughout the shooting spree, but Kenny continues to escalate his volley. Kenny turns to Tub and speaks to him as he had spoken to the post and the dog: "I hate you" (16). The progression from inanimate object to animal to human in Kenny's threats shows a heightening of aggression and hypermasculinity. Hearing Kenny's menacing chorus repeated toward him, Tub fires his own rifle wounding Kenny in the stomach. In pain but still conscious, Kenny insists that he never intended to shoot Tub.

After having found himself repeatedly pushed into a subordinate position, Tub's violent action toward Kenny may be hard to condemn given the grounds of self-defense. In isolation, the act would be seen as hypermasculine aggression, but in the context of the situation, Tub appears to be acting out of fear and through reflex not in an attempt to dominate. Tub's rise to occupy the position of hegemonic masculine domination in the group comes later when he and

Frank try to load the wounded Kenny into the bed of the truck. Frank and Tub drop the boards holding Kenny, and Frank says to Tub: “You fat moron. You aren’t good for diddly” (19). Frank’s jibe attacks Tub’s masculine adequacy in both the physical (“fat”) and mental (“moron”) categories. Tub responds with a sustained aggression that goes beyond his knee-jerk reaction in shooting Kenny. Wolff writes, “Tub grabbed Frank by the collar and backed him hard up against the fence. Frank tried to pull his hands away but Tub shook him and snapped his head back and forth and finally Frank gave up” (19). Tub shows his physical ability to dominate Frank in this moment asserting the masculinity of his body that had been in question. Tub forces Frank to apologize, and after Tub gets in the truck and takes the place of dominance (the driver’s seat), the two interact on amicable terms and begin to bond. Tub’s physical aggression and symbolic position of dominance in the truck—two hypermasculine gestures previously performed by Kenny—completes the reversal of the power dynamics in this all-male peer group.

The story ends on a strange note, however, and rather than maintain his position of dominance, Tub continues to bond with Frank revealing secrets about binge eating. He then stops the truck at a dinner where he gorges himself on pancakes with Frank’s approval. Meanwhile, Kenny remains barely conscious outside in the back of the truck freezing. Martin Scofield comments on Wolff’s unexpected ending in his article “Winging it: Realism and Invention in the Stories of Tobias Wolff” in which he writes:

The story is more disturbing and provocative, as a presentation of human sentimentality and insentience, if it is read as realist. The reader has to stop and think: is this a ‘tall tale’ or is it realistically plausible? And the ambiguous status between the two, with a definite tilt towards the latter, gives the story its charge. (95)

Rather than seeing the bizarre actions (or more accurately *inactions*) of Frank and Tub towards Kenny at the story's end as surrealist or tall tale, Scofield argues that Wolff's understated and objective style lends itself to a realist reading.

Reading the story as realist becomes more plausible when taking into consideration the traumatic context of this situation. Tub's and Frank's calm and meandering conversation in the dinner that never addresses the shooting of Kenny or his critical situation can be viewed as a symptom of traumatic shock. Caruth posits that traumatic experience involves a suddenness that creates shock. In *Literature in the Ashes of History* Caruth writes, "The breach in the mind—the psyche's awareness of the threat to life—is not caused by a direct threat or injury, but by fright, the lack of preparedness to take in a stimulus that comes too quickly" (6). For Tub and Frank, the shooting of Kenny—Tub's knee-jerk reaction—constitutes this "lack of preparedness." Though a trauma perpetrator, Tub's action has an impact on him as well. The denial and distorted sense of reality occupied by Tub and Frank in the dinner are symptoms of traumatic shock. The three men exhibit superficial and self-serving relationships with each other, but this alone does not account for Tub's and Frank's fatal neglect of Kenny. Tub and Frank take their time in the dinner reassuring each other of their masculinity by forming an exclusionary bond at Kenny's expense. Having fought Kenny's hypermasculinity with their own violent hypermasculinity only to be traumatized by it themselves, Tub and Frank find themselves using hypermasculine bonding to salve their wounds while the initial embodiment of hypermasculinity—Kenny—approaches death as the victim of hypermasculine violence. Wolff's use of irony and reversal in this story make clear his critique of hypermasculinity as displayed in this all-male peer group.

III: Hypermasculinity in Military Life, *The Barrack's Thief*, a Novella

Like “Hunters in the Snow,” Wolff’s novella and the winner of the 1984 PEN/Faulkner Award, *The Barrack's Thief*, is set in the context of an all-male environment, in which proving one’s masculinity through aggression, violence, and bravado is paramount. Rather than a small peer group of men, however, *The Barrack's Thief* places its characters in the larger setting of an Army boot camp in the Vietnam War era. The protagonist, Phillip, joins the Army as a reckless and angry young man, and briefly bonds with two other soldiers during a volatile encounter at an ammo dump. Hubbard, a reflective and sensitive young man, along with Lewis, a boastful and fragile example of hypermasculinity, join Phillip to form another of Wolff’s signature triad male coteries. Though the novella includes a flash-forward to reveal the fate of the three men after the war, the most significant scenes take place during basic training where the soldiers confront their anxieties about constructing and maintaining their masculinity in the hypermasculine environment of transitioning from civilian to soldier.

Masculinity in America at the time of the Vietnam War highlights some of the often veiled aspects of masculinity according to theorists Brenda Boyle, Brian Baker, and Susan Jeffords. In her book *Masculinity in Vietnam War Narrative: A Critical Study of Fiction, Films, and Nonfiction Writings* (2009), Boyle argues that the Vietnam War, unlike previous American wars, failed to operate as a site for masculine rites of passage that had previously helped to preserve a monolithic masculine identity. Boyle writes, “While previous wars had produced anxieties about masculinity, the Vietnam War was part of an entire era that rescripted gender and other social identity roles for many, if not most, Americans” (3). The process of rescripting that Boyle mentions is a part of a counter-narrative that *The Barracks Thief* participates in by pushing back against the authorized narrative of a single acceptable notion of masculine identity for all

soldiers. The novella shows the dangers of the authorized hypermasculine performance of a soldier through the character of Lewis whose attempts to live up to the model fail disastrously. Boyle notes that acceptable masculine performance in the military was created in part by the federal government which was “altering regulations against homosexuals and women serving in the armed forces during and after the War” (Boyle 18). The nation-state’s anxiety about its stability demands a stable and authorized masculinity from its soldiers according, to Boyle.

Brian Baker’s *Masculinity in Fiction and Film* (2006) demonstrates how masculinity intersects with the nation-state and how the two become dependent upon each other. Baker writes, “This book explicitly connects representations of masculinity to the ideological imperatives underpinning the nation-state, taking a cross-generic approach to a *political* understanding of the connection between masculinity, citizenship, law, community, and violence” (ix, italics original). To historicize masculinity and the nation-state, Baker reaches back to the Revolutionary War demonstrating the reliance of the nation-state upon a mythic version of masculinity preserved through nostalgia. Citing Peter Karstan, Baker argues that the “Minute Man, the mythical hero of the Revolution, was largely just that—a myth existing principally in the pages of true-blue textbooks and the speeches of incumbent Congressmen” (18). Rather than a historical reality, Baker sees the “virtuous, honorable, and loyal” minute man as a narrative of masculinity deployed by the nation-state for its own establishment and preservation. In his treatment of the Korean War, Baker notes Eugene Kinkead’s claim that “‘a new softness’ had entered American masculinity in the postwar years causing the American soldier to perform in Korea less than honourably” (17). Baker argues that to combat any perceived “softness,” the nation-state must prop up the hegemonic masculinity of the mythic minute man in order for both masculinity and the nation-state to survive. Within this crucible of

forces, Phillip, Lewis, and Hubbard navigate their roles as American soldiers in Wolff's *The Barrack's Thief*.

In Baker's treatment of masculinity and the nation-state, he goes on to examine a major source of national and male anxiety: the issue of homosexuality in times of war. In his historical overview, Baker offers commentary on the Kinsey Report of 1948 and on the homosocial "buddy bond" in the Vietnam War. The Kinsey Report shows that during World War II soldiers "among other moral and legal transgressions, they masturbated, had homosexual encounters, were promiscuous before marriage, and adulterous afterward" (4). Baker argues that masculinity had to be redefined and reasserted in the postwar period to maintain stability within the nation-state. Drawing on Eve Sedgwick, Baker notes that in the Vietnam War, soldiers formed an intense bond that "seemed to go beyond the normative makers of male friendship, and it is unsurprising that anxieties about the experiences of enlisted men were often sexual" (3). Though an intense fraternal bond based on machismo and homophobia is useful for the nation-state, according to Baker, the bond can easily become sexually transgressive, which is a threat to the nation-state. In *The Barrack's Thief*, Wolff's presentation of Lewis's homophobia and hypermasculinity (often the two go hand in hand) operates as a critique.

Along with Boyle and Baker, Susan Jeffords provides a valuable framework for understanding the larger scope of American masculinity during the Vietnam War era. In *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*, Jeffords argues that the prevailing narrative about the Vietnam War established through popular films, works of fiction, and non-fiction works reasserts a patriarchal power that had been in relative decline. Jeffords writes, "a study of the representations of the Vietnam War can be used as an emblem for what I call the 'remasculinization' of American culture, the large-scale renegotiation and regeneration of the

interests, values, and projects of patriarchy now taking place in U.S. social relations” (xi). In making her case, Jeffords notes the gendered nature of texts treating the Vietnam War: “enemies are depicted as feminine, wives and mothers and girl friends are justifications for fighting, and vocabularies are sexually motivated” (xi). Jeffords posits that in prevailing narratives about the Vietnam War, the defeat suffered by the hypermasculine soldiers comes at the hands of agents gendered as feminine. In particular, Jeffords notes that in films such as the *Rambo* series, *Missing in Action*, and *Uncommon Valor*, the enemy faced by a hypermasculine American soldier is “not the Vietnamese but their own government” making these men sympathetic victims (xiv). In arguing that the U.S. government is gendered feminine in this context, Jeffords points to advances made by women through “legislative or federal action.” In short, American soldiers lost in the Vietnam War because the governmental institutions of the nation-state had lost degrees of masculinity according to Jeffords. Jeffords critiques Vietnam War narratives that seek to further the process of remasculinization by presenting hypermasculine men as victims of a feminized government and nation.

Analysis of *The Barracks Thief* shows Wolff’s text presenting a counter-narrative to the texts Jeffords analyzes. Rather than portraying men as victims of a feminized government, Wolff highlights characters whose hypermasculinity not only damages those around them but also doubles back as a destructive force upon themselves. Rather than femininity driving defeat for men as in the texts that Jeffords examines, *The Barracks Thief* shows how aggressive hypermasculine behavior drives defeat and reveals the constructed and tenuous nature of masculinity.

Lewis provides the clearest example of hypermasculinity’s destructiveness as he desperately tries to construct his masculinity, sees it crumble, attempts to reconstruct it with even

more machismo, and finds himself falling into an increasingly more difficult to maintain performance of masculinity. As a new recruit along with Phillip and Hubbard, Lewis finds himself ignored by the experienced soldiers. His status as an outsider along with his lack of military ability and knowledge threaten his masculinity. On the night of the fourth of July, a sergeant assigns Phillip, Lewis, and Hubbard to guard an ammunition dump, and his orders include a barrage of stock military insults. Wolff writes, “He [the sergeant] told us that we were *little girls*, piglets, warts. We were toads. We didn’t belong in his army” (28 italics added). The words remind Lewis of his lack of status and call into question his masculinity. After taking the first patrol at the ammunition dump, Lewis engages Phillip in conversation aimed at establishing his masculinity in the eyes Phillip of who is also a new recruit.

Lewis’s conversation with Phillip exemplifies the hypermasculine ritual of exaggerating one’s sexual exploits and ability to handle danger. With no prompting from Phillip, Lewis claims to have scars on his back from a woman who was so overcome by his sexual ability that she “almost tore my back off” (33). He then boasts that he started drinking and lost his virginity at the age of thirteen, and to illustrate his current virility he claims, “Now it’s got to where I can’t go to sleep anymore unless I ate pussy” (33). The absurdity of Lewis’s final boast is highlighted by the fact that he now spends 24 hours a day with men only, and Wolff’s depiction of Lewis clearly plays on the absurdity of his hypermasculine posing. Turning the conversation to his status among the other soldiers, Lewis accidentally reveals damaging information about his masculine adequacy while attempting to reestablish it. Again with no prompting, Lewis pronounces, “It wasn’t the way you probably heard it...I just didn’t have the rope fixed right. I wasn’t afraid. You ought to see me go off the high dive back home. I wanted to straighten out the rope was all” (34). Though previously unaware of the incident Lewis has described, Phillip

connects Lewis's fragmented narrative to a recent rappelling training drill. Lewis goes on to say that after the rappelling incident the sergeant had called him "Tinkerbell." Lewis insists, "You go ask around home. Just talk to those girls back there. They'll tell you if I'm a Tinkerbell" (34). In his attempt to establish his masculinity in the eyes of Phillip, Lewis only succeeds in drawing his adequacy further into question. As the conversation concludes, Lewis reveals his desire to achieve recognition and status within the military hierarchy. He reflects, "What burns me... is how you meet one of them in the PX or downtown somewhere and they look past you like they never saw you... I'm just as good as them" (35). Lewis's rapid fire commentary and social ineptitude in the conversation as well as his desperate and failing attempts to establish his masculinity cast him as a counterpoint to the hypermasculine Vietnam War action heroes often depicted in film and literature as described by Jeffords. Through Lewis, Wolff creates a counter-narrative painting tragicomic forays into hypermasculinity.

The scene at the ammunition dump shifts to action after Lewis's revealing conversation with Phillip. A civilian approaches the ammo dump's fence to warn the three soldiers about a nearby fire that could threaten to spark an explosion within the facility, and he suggests that the soldiers return to Fort Bragg for safety. Though an emissary of good will, Lewis seizes on the situation to display dominance over another man. After hearing the civilian's suggestion, Lewis warns him, "That's a good way to get dead" (37). Lewis then cocks and aims his rifle at the man with maximum dramatic flair exclaiming, "Let loose of that fence or you're dog meat" (37). The man retreats, and a sheriff comes to give the soldiers the same warning using his status as a Korean War veteran to assure them that no one would blame them for leaving their post in the situation. Remarking on the pointlessness of their pseudo-bravery, the sheriff says, "I was in Korea. Men dropped like flies all around me but at least they died in a good cause" (40). As a

group, the three soldiers decide to stay at their post despite the approaching fire and smoke descending upon the ammo dump. Wolff writes, “‘A little smoke won’t hurt you,’ Lewis said. Then Lewis began to cough. A few minutes later so did I. We couldn’t stop. Whenever I took another breath it got worse. I ached from it, and began to feel dizzy” (41). Lewis’s desire to achieve initiation into the fraternity of soldiers with field experience drives his determination to needlessly remain in a dangerous situation as the fire approaches. The three narrowly avoid disaster and forge a bond over their shared near death experience.

The threat of danger operates as a proving ground for Lewis, Phillip, and Hubbard, and Wolff describes their comradery in terms that mock their hypermasculine mindset. Wolff describes the three soldiers’ drive back to base after surviving their post: “As we bounced through the potholes I steadied myself with my rifle, feeling like a commando returning from a suicide mission” (42). Though the mission the men endured was a routine state-side affair and the danger faced was self-imposed, Lewis, Hubbard, and Phillip imagine their performance in hypermasculine terms. Wolff depicts the incongruence and self-adulating pose of the soldiers upon their return to base. Wolff writes:

We turned in our rifles and lingered outside the orderly room. We didn’t want to go away from each other. Without saying so, we believed that we had done something today, that we were proven men. We weren’t, of course, but we thought we were and that was a sweet thing to believe for an hour or two. We had stood our ground together.

We knew what we were made of now, and the stuff was good. (42)

The first person narrator in the passage and throughout chapter three is Phillip, though Wolff shifts narratorial positions in several places in the novella. Through Phillip’s reflections above,

Wolff makes it clear that maintaining this kind of hypermasculine performance requires a level of self-delusion and constant reassertions.

Lewis basks in the temporary masculine affirmation conferred upon him by Hubbard and Phillip after the ammo dump incident, but he finds his masculinity in peril a few days later. His fledgling insider status is revoked when he is unable to find any soldiers willing to go to town with him to the movies during a break from training. Wolff, shifting to the present tense for much of chapter five, writes, “He [Lewis] thinks they owed it to him to come” (55). Abandoned by those who conferred status upon him, Lewis finds his masculinity challenged on the social level, and after experiencing prolonged swelling in his hands after having been stung by nettles on patrol at the ammo dump, Lewis also finds the adequacy of his body—a key aspect of masculinity noted by Jeffords, Butler, and Connell—under attack. As Lewis hitchhikes towards town, a school teacher gives him a ride and asks him what he has done to treat his swollen hands. Lewis responds, “Nothing, I’m in the Army” (57). By refusing treatment, Lewis’s stoicism affords him respect among the other men on base, which ironically prolongs his inability to use his hands crippling key aspects of the required military training that Lewis sees as his route to securing his masculinity. Lewis’s thought process programmed in part by the military industrial complex demonstrates hypermasculinity doubling back on itself in self-defeat.

Eventually Lewis accepts the teacher’s invitation to stop by his house to receive a calamine lotion treatment for his hands. Wolff writes, “He [the teacher] pours some lotion into his palm, then takes Lewis’s hand by the wrist and starts to work it in, over the swollen, dimpled knuckles, between the thick fingers” (59). Surprisingly, Lewis responds with gratitude leaning back and closing his eyes. Unconsciously, Lewis joins hands with the teacher, the two interlacing their fingers. The scene’s tone is one of tenderness and physical affection. Lewis

appears not to notice how thoroughly he has transgressed his own code of hypermasculinity until sometime later while watching a movie preview in which Tinkerbell makes an appearance. Wolff writes, “‘Tinkerbell,’ Lewis says. When he hears the word his stomach clenches” (62). Hearing the same word used by the sergeant in his previous insults triggers Lewis’s feeling that he has been feminized by his experience with the school teacher. Carrying with him the bottle of calamine lotion he had been given by the teacher, Lewis runs out of the movie theater and smashes the bottle in the street. Wolff writes, “‘I’m no Tinkerbell,’ he says. He watches the cars go by for a while, balling and unballing his fists, then turn and walks back into Fayetteville to find a girl” (62). Having realized that his interactions with the teacher border on homosexual, Lewis attempts to reestablish his heterosexuality through the hypermasculine act of soliciting a prostitute.

Just as each of his previous attempts to mend his masculinity only serve to further damage and highlight its fragility, so too does Lewis’s encounter with a prostitute continue to cause traumatic damage to himself and to those around him. Lewis’s lack of sexual experience, despite his bragging to Phillip at the ammo dump, is revealed in this scene. Wolff writes, “He has never paid for it [sex] and he’s not about to start now. He’s never had it free either, but he came really close once at Nag’s Head and has almost managed to forget that he failed” (62). Though a virgin, Lewis styles himself as a man of great sexual experience. After failing to impress two girls he encounters outside a library, Lewis makes his way toward the red-light district and follows a prostitute out of a bar. Lewis’s poorly executed attempts to engage the prostitute are met with insults and rebuffs from her: “drop dead” and “damn you” (67). Walking toward a motel, Lewis and the prostitute walk pass the place where Lewis had shattered the bottle of calamine lotion, a reminder to Lewis of his urgent need to reestablish his masculinity.

Short on money from his expenditures at the movie theater, he hands the prostitute six dollars promising to give her more soon. She slams the door of the motel room on him, and Lewis responds by slamming his body into the door to gain entry, symbolically using his body to violate the space he enters. Lewis's hypermasculine victory over the door is short lived, however, because he finds himself confronted by the prostitute armed with a knife. Wolff writes, "She doesn't move. She holds the knife *as a man would*, not raised by her ear but in front of her chest. Her breathing is hoarse but steady, unhurried." (68 italics added). The prostitute vanquishes Lewis, keeping the six dollars he had given her establishing dominance over him with a weapon, with money, and with her poise.

Defeated again, Lewis returns to the barracks at Fort Bragg and steals Hubbard's wallet to fund a second attempt at soliciting the prostitute. In Lewis's second attempt, Wolff portrays Lewis as a character whose hypermasculine responses to hypermasculine failures spirals to a final point of deterioration. Preparing to return to the prostitute's motel room, Lewis gives himself another self-deluded pep-talk asserting his dominance. Wolff narrates Lewis's thoughts: "It will teach her something. She probably thought she had him and it's best she known right off the kind of man she is dealing with" (71). After arriving at the motel and pleading with the prostitute to accept his money, Lewis finds himself in a sexual encounter which he had hoped would assert his masculinity once and for all, but instead leaves him physically and emotionally striped of his masculinity. In the encounter, the prostitute grabs his genitals, examines them, and remarks, "You won't do any harm with that little shooter" (73). By referring to Lewis's penis as a "little shooter" (a small gun), the prostitute not only emasculates Lewis but also casts a shadow over his fitness for military service and his competence with weapons. She goes onto to question his sexual orientation as Lewis unintentionally reveals his inexperience. She remarks, "Christ.

Just my luck. A homo” (74). After berating him, the prostitute physically dominates Lewis by refusing to let him control the movements of their bodies. Wolff writes, “she...digs her fingers into his flanks... He tries to move his own way, but she governs him....Then she rolls over and wraps her legs around his back and slides her finger up inside him. He shouts and bucks to be free. She laughs and tightens around him” (75). After intercourse is over, the prostitute launches another verbal attack saying, “You’re garbage. I won’t be mocked by you, not by you” and she again brandishes the knife hastening Lewis’s exit. Expecting to leave with a sense of his masculinity restored having lost his virginity through the aggressive and hypermasculine act of intercourse with a prostitute, Lewis instead leaves with his body violated.

Key to understanding this scene is the significance of the male body’s impenetrability for successful hypermasculine performance. Both Butler and Reeser argue that masculinity involves regulating the body’s surfaces. Butler observes that “the construction of stable bodily contours relies upon fixed sites of corporeal permeability and impermeability” (132), and Reeser echoes the sentiment noting that a male performance must “be on the lookout for gender’s permeable membrane, for specific ways in which masculinity is seemingly differentiated from other subjectivities” (40). Lewis progresses towards less and less stable bodily contours and each attempt to create impermeability leads to greater permeability as his body becomes more and more traumatized. From his hands being injured by the nettles, to the contours of his hands being transgressed by the teacher, to his anus being penetrated by the prostitute’s finger, Lewis progressively loses control of his body while desperately trying to mend it with increasingly volatile acts of hypermasculinity.

Lewis’s theft of Hubbard’s wallet reveals part of what motivates Lewis’s tragic hypermasculine performance, and it also triggers the final attack upon his bodily contours.

Lewis's bragging and aggression are partly due to a constant loneliness and rejection epitomized by the contents he keeps from Hubbard's wallet. Not only does he take the cash to pay the prostitute, but he also takes a touching, handwritten letter from Hubbard's mother. Lewis, a man without relatives, without friends, a small cog in the enormity of the military machinery, desires companionship, especially the kind of companionship that will affirm his masculinity. Rejected by peers and rejected by women, Lewis symbolically turns in his retention of the letter to a source of maternal comfort, an action standing in contrast to his usual hypermasculine responses.

Here Wolff highlights a battle between Lewis's public performance of masculinity and his private longings as well as the impossibility of maintaining a constant, unassailable hypermasculine performance. The theft of the wallet also signals Lewis's breaking from the group of men that he had previously relied on to confer masculinity upon through peer status. The eventual response to Lewis by the soldiers as a unified body provides a view into the collective operation of hypermasculinity. Once the identity of the barracks thief becomes known, the soldiers in the company plan a collective retribution against one of their own who has violated the soldiers' code of fraternity. As a group, the men cannot abide an individual whose reputation jeopardizes the group's, so the response is a gratuitous one. In order to reestablish their monolithic group identity by rejecting Lewis a member of the group, the soldiers of the company attack Lewis at night in the barracks. Phillip narrates, "His [Lewis's] face was in turmoil. It was a face I'd never really seen before, full of humiliation and fear, and I have never stopped seeing it since. It is the same face I saw on the Vietnamese we interrogated, whose homes we searched and sometimes burned" (96-7). From the beating, Lewis sustains a broken rib and cuts on his face, and upon being released from the hospital, he receives a dishonorable discharge from the Army.

The physical wounds suffered by Lewis at the hands of his fellow soldiers signify the final dissolution of his ability to control his masculinity through his body. During the beating, the soldiers throw a blanket over Lewis rendering him blind, unable to fight back, and also unaware of the specific individuals striking him. Having been injured by the nettles and then violated by the prostitute, Lewis's progression toward permeability reaches a maximum in the scene of his beating. Not only does he find his body completely unable to maintain its hypermasculinity, Lewis also finds his relationship to the military and to the nation-state working against his masculinity. Having joined the Army to validate his masculinity and to find an outlet for his hypermasculine aggression, Lewis finds himself the recipient of a dishonorable discharge. Phillip echoes the Army's sentiment about dishonorable discharges: "When I thought of a dishonorable discharge I thought of a man in clothes too big for him standing outside bus terminals and sleeping in cafeterias, face down on the table" (100). In this image of Lewis, he has become the opposite of a self-reliant man, as far from the mythos of the American minute man as possible. Ironically, Lewis's experience in the Army doubles back on him negatively. In Wolff's presentation, Lewis's hypermasculine actions and attitudes undercut themselves creating an ever more destructive cycle demonstrating the instability and damaging nature of hypermasculinity.

Though in a less exaggerated manner than Lewis, Phillip serves Wolff's critique of hypermasculinity, and given Wolff's choice to occasionally use Phillip as a first-person narrator, we see a level of consciousness not present in Lewis. Like in *This Boy's Life* and *Old School*, Wolff includes noteworthy flash-forwards and flash-backs interrupting the temporality of his narrative to include glimpses of his character experiencing the trauma of military combat. Most notably in *The Barracks Thief*, the scene of Lewis's beating includes a flash-forward from the

point of view to Phillip to combat in Vietnam. Phillip sees in Lewis's face the "same face I saw on the Vietnamese we interrogated, whose homes we searched and sometimes burned" (97). As Wolff depicts the interiority of Phillip, he shows him making a connection to the violation of human dignity suffered by both Lewis and the Vietnamese individuals mentioned. Phillip's admiration for the fraternity and brutishness of soldiers contributes to his initial desire to join the Army, but surprisingly he does not join in with the others in the beating of Lewis. With Phillip narrating, Wolff writes, "I did not join in, but I did not try to stop it either. I didn't even leave, as one man did. I stayed where I was and watched them beat him" (97). Phillip, though with ambivalent feeling about the situation, is attracted to the proximity of hypermasculinity without completely committing to it. Phillip exhibits the same attraction to danger without fully committing to it in the scene at the ammo dump. At the point of deciding whether to abandon their post or not Phillip thinks, "I liked this situation. It was interesting. It had a last-stand quality about it. But I didn't really believe that anything would happen, not to me. Getting hurt was just a choice some people made, like bad luck, or growing old" (39). Phillip's attraction to danger along with his youthful delusion about his own security operate as a less dramatic type of hypermasculinity from Lewis's, but one that still produces traumatizing effects.

Phillip's hypermasculine response to danger and to death are conditioned by his service in the Army. He witnesses death up close for the first time after a training exercise in which a paratrooper's chute fails to open. Phillip narrates, "I heard him yell going down but it only lasted a moment and I paid no attention," a response of self-delusion similar to the one made by Toby in *This Boy's Life* when he ignores the sounds coming from the lobby of Rosemary's apartment building later to find out that Dwight had attempted to strangle her (25). Phillip witnesses the dead body remarking, "They wanted us to take a good look, and remember him,

because he had screwed up. He had forgotten to pull his reserve parachute” (25). Seeing other soldiers cynically laughing at the situation, Phillip feels the urge to laugh but checks himself wondering, “The man lying by the road had been alive an hour ago, and now he was dead. Why did that make me want to smile?” (25-6). Rather than continuing to process the trauma he has witnessed, Phillip sedates himself with the marijuana he and the other soldiers smoke immediately after seeing the dead body. Caruth demonstrates that the suddenness of witnessing trauma contributes to lasting symptoms in a survivor, and the sense in which the initial event is missed upon the first encounter contributes to a survivor’s inability to process the event which may continue to haunt the survivor (*Literature in the Ashes of History* 6). In the case of Phillip witnessing the death of the paratrooper, he has the opportunity to directly stare at the dead body as well as the chance to anesthetize his response through drug use. The suddenness of the paratrooper’s death, the spectacle which his body becomes, and the callous response made collectively by the soldiers form a blueprint for future experiences with trauma in combat for these soldiers who are regulating the hypermasculinity drilled into them as a part of their military training.

Wolff never reveals Phillip’s combat traumas (it is assumed that he both witnesses and perpetrates violence in the Vietnam War), and it is the experiences in boot camp that return to Phillip at the close of the novella. Phillip finds himself in a comfortable life living as a polite neighbor in the years following the war. He reflects, “But I’m also a careful man, addicted to comfort, with an eye for the safe course” (101). Phillip has survived the mental and physical ordeals of military training and the dehumanizing experience of warfare, and rather than seeking danger as he did as a young man, he now gravitates towards the safest course of action. The

final paragraph of the novella, however, indicates the traumatic aftershocks Phillip still experiences. He thinks:

But I have moments when I remember that day, and how it felt to be a reckless man with reckless friends.... Three men with rifles. I think of a spark drifting up from that fire, glowing as the breeze pushes it toward the warehouse and the tall dry weeds, and the three crazy paratroopers inside the fence. They'd have heard the blast clear to Fort Bragg. They'd have seen the sky turn yellow and red and felt the earth shake. It would have been something. (101)

As a young man, Phillip uses an arrogance about his own security in the face of danger to help affirm his masculinity. As an older man who has experienced both training and combat and who is now drawn to safety, Phillip is left fantasizing not about escape but about death. In a comfortable and safe life as a civilian, Phillip's masculinity no longer needs to be on constant display for the men around him. The unbidden return of a traumatic situation—one that created a bond and masculine affirmation between him, Lewis, and Hubbard—indicates that even when no longer under scrutiny, Phillip finds it necessary for his own perception of himself to thrust his psyche back into a context that affirms his masculinity through a mental proximity to danger and even death. Through both Phillip and Lewis, Wolff portrays the traumatizing impact of hypermasculinity which damages both victim and perpetrator.

IV: Hypermasculinity in Military Life: “Soldier’s Joy,” a Short Story

Like *The Barracks Thief*, Wolff's short story “Soldier’s Joy” treats Vietnam era soldiers on a stateside military base, and like *The Barracks Thief*, Wolff presents elements of masculinity as they intersect with trauma. Ironically titled, the story traces the events of a single night for Private First Class Hooper who has served in the Army for 20 years with a complete lack of

ambition for promotion. The story opens with Hooper having been demoted from corporal to the third lowest rank in the Army, private first class. As the night unfolds, Hooper oversees the patrol of two soldiers at a communications center on the base, and he also makes a failed visit to his lover's house off the base. The story's drama centers around a conflict between the two soldiers on patrol—Trac and Porchoff—ending with Hooper's attempt to calm the suicidal Porchoff who is ultimately shot by Trac. Through Hooper's dialogue with Porchoff, Wolff reveals the traumatic scarring of combat in Vietnam for Hooper as well as Hooper's desire to return to a combat zone that provides him with the necessary elements to fulfill the hypermasculine requirements placed upon him by the Army, which he no longer has access to in his stateside assignment.

Like Lewis and Phillip, Hooper uses the hypermasculine elements of danger and comradery to establish and maintain his masculinity after having experienced the traumas of combat. In his analysis of the story, James Hannah notes that outside of combat, Hooper finds himself isolated, unhappy, and looking for something to break his rut. Hannah writes, "To Hooper, 'contact' does not mean the touch of flesh or spirit; it means the destruction of the enemy, the mindless and stultifying task of sanctioned killing, which bonds fellow soldiers" (66). Hooper's failed marriage, apathetic fathering, and even his half-hearted sexual encounters with a lover demonstrate Hooper's inability to achieve any level of contentedness or fulfilling identity outside of the hypermasculine violence and male-bonding he experienced in combat. Reeser notes the potential for war to damage men, even when they act primarily as trauma perpetrators in combat. Reeser writes, "If masculinity is a factor contributing to war, then it easily doubles back on to the men fighting that war, causing them pain in the process" (8). Though Hooper fails

to earn sympathy from readers, his experience stateside after combat is marked by deep pain and dislocated experience as a trauma perpetrator.

Hooper's military career, his family life, and his sexuality all demonstrate his inability to function outside of the hypermasculine context of combat. Having been demoted in rank, Hooper's commanding officer tells him, "It's like you have to keep fucking up to prove to yourself that you don't really care" (94). Indeed, Hooper's backward movement in military rank indicates a willful disregard for himself. When unable to destroy an enemy, Hooper sublimates his aggression turning towards self-damaging behavior. Unlike Dwight in *This Boy's Life* who dominates his family with hypermasculine aggression, Hooper apathetically engages his wife and son. As the representatives of civilian domesticity, Hooper keeps them at a distance: his son living with an aunt and his wife barely mentioned in the story. In his life "back in the world" (stateside away from Vietnam), Hooper's sexual potency also flags. Though Hooper is married, Wolff does not indicate that he has a sexual relationship with his wife, but Mickey, his lover, becomes the central figure for Hooper's sexual desire. Mickey is married and openly flaunts her other lovers to Hooper. Her bedroom, decorated by her husband, includes sheets made of parachute silk and lamps made from howitzer casings, intermingling sexuality with the symbols of military aggression. Wolff indicates that "in Mickey's bedroom Hooper had turned in his saddest [sexual] performances" (95). Despite his sexual inadequacy and Mickey's other lovers, Hooper continues seeing her. Wolff writes, "He wasn't exactly sure why he kept going back. It was just something he did, again and again" (95). This kind of repetition echoes Butler's notion of gender as the "stylized repetition of acts" and Balaev's notion of trauma sufferers experiencing "the disjunction of time through the use of repetition" (Butler 140 Balaev xvi).

Hooper clearly articulates his thwarted existence stateside, when confronted with the combat-like situation of Porchoff holding himself hostage at gunpoint with threats of suicide. Porchoff, a new recruit who does not fit and finds himself the butt of other soldiers' jokes, suffers a mental breakdown while on patrol with Trac, and the two soldiers exchange insults. When Hooper arrives after Trac calls for help, Porchoff is in tears. Hooper, unarmed, approaches the armed Porchoff and asks, "Are you gay?" (110). Programmed and traumatized by the military, the only explanation Hooper can imagine for Porchoff's breakdown is homosexuality. Eve Sedgwick notes the importance of homophobia to maintain cultural power. She writes, "Our society could not cease to be homophobic and have its economic and political structures remain unchanged" (4). Hooper's reaction to Porchoff demonstrates the military deploying homosexuality as a rubric for assessing adequacy. Hooper, even in the face of potential harm to himself, reiterates the norms that have allowed him the hypermasculine experience of military combat.

Despite Hooper's homophobic opening to his conversation with Porchoff, he coaxes Porchoff into talking through his frustrations with the military. When Porchoff asks Hooper about his best time in the Army, Hooper reveals his dearly held memory of combat. Wolff writes:

For Hooper it was closer than the memory of home. In truth it was a kind of home. It was where he went to be back with his friends again, his old self. It was where Hooper drifted when he was too low to care how much lower he'd be when he drifted back, and lost it all again. "Vietnam," he said. (113)

Later Hooper admits to Porchoff that after returning stateside "it's been nothing but confusion" (113). The trauma he experienced in combat makes all experience outside of it impossible to

process. Hooper explains to Porchoff the appeal of the combat zone: “Everything was clear. You learned what you had to know and forgot the rest. All this chickenshit. You don’t spend every living minute of the day thinking about your own sorry-ass little self. Am I getting laid enough. What’s wrong with my kid. Should I insulate the fucking house” (113). The clarity of sanctioned killing in combat along with its fraternal bonding stands in stark contrast to the mundane domesticity of life stateside for Hooper. This logic, however, fails to convince Porchoff, who begins to see Hooper as the insane one rather than himself. Hooper concludes his evaluation of Porchoff by trying to convince him that once he has the opportunity to experience combat, all his problems will dissolve. Hooper says, “There’s nothing wrong with you that a little search and destroy wouldn’t cure” (113). For Hooper, a return to the environment that sustains hypermasculine behavior is the ultimate cure for internal conflict. Ultimately, Hooper also longs to restore his masculinity through a deep connection with other men. Wolff writes, “He [Hooper] tried to bring it back for Porchoff, tried to put it into words so that Porchoff could see it too, the beauty of that life, the faith so deep that in time you were not separate men anymore, but part of each other” (113). The homophobia represented by Hooper’s first response to Porchoff (“Are you gay?”) operates in part to combat the anxiety he and many soldiers like him feel about the intimate bond they feel with each other during times of combat. This homosocial bond assures the soldiers of their masculinity but if felt too deeply, it threatens to tip toward homosexuality, a paramount threat to their hypermasculine performances.

Though Hooper’s “cure” does not resonate with Porchoff, Hooper is permitted a temporary return to a combat-like zone in his negotiation with Porchoff, and he finds himself more and more at home. When the conflict comes to its ultimate crisis, Trac shoots Porchoff in the head afraid that he and Hooper are about to be shot by Porchoff, a standoff similar to the one

in “*Hunters in the Snow*.” Trac’s murder of Porchoff provides the necessary elements for Hooper to experience a sensation of returning to both the traumas of combat as well as to the comradery and danger through which he constructs his masculinity. After almost being hit by Trac’s shot, Hooper falls to the ground and is later helped up by Trac in a gesture that signifies them becoming “a part of each other” as Hooper had previously described his combat partners (113). Wolff writes, “Trac came over to Hooper. He slung his rifle and bent down and the two men gripped each other’s wrists.... He tensed as Hooper pulled himself to his feet and for a moment afterwards they stood facing each other, swaying slightly, hands still locked on one another’s wrists...Each of them slowly loosened his grip” (115). Hannah calls the moment one of “bloody bonding” (70).

After the physical bonding between Trac and Hooper following the murder of Porchoff, the two also bond over a newly realized common enemy: the officers who will investigate the death of Porchoff. Hooper insists that they “get our story together” in the final line of the story, and leading up to that final moment he makes it clear that he sides with Trac and will help him create a cover story. As they share a sense of shock after the shooting, Hooper reenters another ritual from his time in combat. After smoking a cigarette, he follows his training in making sure to leave no trace. Wolff writes, “When the cigarette went out Hooper dropped it, then picked it up again and field-stripped it, crumbling the tobacco around his feet so that no trace of it remained” (116). The story ends with the implication that Hooper and Trac will successfully cover up the murder and that the military will easily cover up the violent event as a training accident. Hooper’s proximity to danger, his witnessing of a death, and his willingness to take the risk of lying about the murder of a soldier place him back into a mental space that allows him to perform his hypermasculinity. Along with the sense of reconstructing his hypermasculinity

comes the return of traumatic memory. The story's title—"Soldier's Joy"—reads both as irony and as commentary on Hooper's psyche. After the trauma of combat wipes out a soldier's ability to feel joy in everyday life, paradoxically and perversely joy can only be felt by a return to the original site of trauma—the combat zone, the place where aggression, violence, and comradery sanctioned by the state provide the necessary elements for hypermasculine performances. The story serves as a critique not only of the hypermasculinity of the individual soldier whose traumatic experience causes him to seek out and perpetuate violence, but it also critiques the military industrial complex that instills, sanctions, and protects such attitudes and behaviors.

Along with "Soldier's Joy," Wolff's short story "The Other Miller" provides another look at traumatized masculinity within the context of stateside Army training. Unlike Hooper who needs the feeling of combat to reinstate his masculinity, the story's protagonist, Wesley Miller, uses his position in the Army to settle a score within his family that affords him the opportunity to reassert his masculinity. With his signature irony, Wolff creates a short story in which Miller, while participating in a miserable training exercise, receives news that his mother has died. Convinced that the military's bureaucracy has again switched him for another soldier in his battalion with the same last name and first initials, Miller receives word of his mother's death and feigns mourning to get a short break from base. During his trip home, the reader learns that when Miller was six his father died in the Army not in combat but stateside in an easily preventable accident. When Miller's mother marries his biology teacher, Phil Dove, while he is in high school, Miller leaves the house and joins the Army to spite his mother going so far as to send back her unopened letters for the next two years. On his trip home, Miller decides to forgive his mother given the opportunity provided him through the case of mistaken identities, but when he arrives at the house, he is greeted by his step-father and discovers to his shock and

horror that his mother has in fact died. The suddenness of the news and the fracturing of his psyche create the traumatic circumstances that punctuate Wolff's story.

The story's crafted irony suggests the artificiality of an O. Henry tale, but Santiago Rodriguez Guerrero-Strachan's "Realism and Narrators in Tobias Wolff's Short Stories" argues that "The Other Miller" aspires to a level of verisimilitude. Guerrero-Strachan argues that the story contains two narrative voices: one in the third person and the other as Miller's own voice. Citing a brief paragraph near the story's end, Guerrero-Strachan notes that Wolff slips from the third person into a momentary use of Miller's own voice taking the reader into Miller's psyche temporarily. The paragraph Guerrero-Strachan cites includes what he interprets as Miller directly addressing the reader with second person pronouns. Furthermore, he views the double narration as the key to interpreting the story and the character. Guerrero-Strachan writes, "To the reader's great surprise (and this is also the climax of the story), it turns out that the narrator's voice and Miller's voice are one and the same. The use of these two different narrative voices corresponds to Wolff's intention to stage by means of narrative technique the psychological processes of a mind close to schizophrenia" (279). Guerrero-Strachan concludes that Wolff's use of narratorial technique in "The Other Miller" paints a picture of a young soldier whose experiences with his mother, father, and step-father have driven him to a place of near madness, which his service in the military has exacerbated. Guerrero-Strachan concludes:

The variations in the narrative voice imply, firstly, an alienation from the persona and, secondly, a lack of emotional involvement. Both narrative voices, third- and second-person, indicate that the narrator does not participate in the story, yet the great irony of the story is that the narrator turns out to be Miller himself, and the former detachment translates into the latter's mental estrangement and inner dissociation. (279)

Miller turns out to be the “other Miller,” containing within himself more than one self.

Guerrero-Strachan’s analysis points to a reading of “The Other Miller” that aligns with Joshua Pederson’s presentation of trauma represented in literature. For Pederson, trauma is most accurately represented in literature (either in fiction or non-fiction and written by either survivors or witnesses) by three observable textual phenomena including “depictions of experiences that are temporally, physically, or ontologically distorted” (338). Wolff presents Miller’s experiences from the beginning of the story to the end as temporally distorted. Jumping from the present moment to the past and then telescoping to a prediction about the future, Wolff translates Miller’s disorientation through the text. The disorienting ending, one that turns the entire story on its head, also manifests itself along Pederson’s model of representing trauma in literature.

Through Guerrero-Strachan’s examination of narrative technique, the story’s realism becomes clear, and an examination of Miller’s relationship with his mother further reveals key elements of his psyche, hypermasculinity, and traumatic experience. The traumatizing loss of his father, his close bond with his mother, and his hatred of his step-father all play roles in how Miller relates to his masculinity. Miller’s father died when his son was six years old, and Miller’s bond with his mother centers on its exclusivity: “how good it was with just the two of them” (93). Miller’s father’s death occurs while he was serving in the Army, but his death was not in combat. Wolff writes, “...his father had been killed while serving in the Army. Not in Vietnam but in Georgia, in an accident. He and another man were dipping mess kits in a garbage can full of boiling water and somehow the can fell over on him” (94). Miller’s father’s death is gruesome and shocking, traumatic for the family, and lacks any meaning for the war effort. After the death of his father, young Miller bonds intensely with his mother and the two relate more as peers than as mother and son. Wolff describes them:

...eating whatever they wanted to eat, sometimes nothing, sometimes the same dish three or four nights in a row, watching the programs they wanted to watch and going to bed when they wanted to and not because some other person wanted to. Just being together in their own place. (93)

Miller's experience with his mother while he is a child and an adolescent afford him a place proximal to adult masculinity enjoying freedoms and peer-status with his mother. Miller's status as "man of the house" becomes threatened, however, when his mother dates and then marries Phil Dove, Miller's biology teacher. When Phil moves in, Miller briefly moves into a hotel until his money runs out, and then he joins the Army to spite his mother for replacing him. The close bond Miller felt with his mother and the status he enjoyed by being seen as a true man in his mother's eyes becomes erased by Phil's presence, and Miller's response in reasserting his masculinity ultimately leads to his own traumatization in the military.

The mother's marriage to Phil threatens Miller on several levels: Miller feels his father being replaced, he feels himself being replaced, and the grounds upon which he has established his masculinity—his relationship with his mother—have been snatched out from under him. In response, Miller lashes out in a hypermasculine performance that includes both a pseudo-stoicism and an attempt to dominate those closest to him. Miller's response to his mother's remarriage is an extreme one: he drops out of high school a month before graduating, he joins the branch of the service that his mother detests, and he refuses to open the letters she sends him. Wolff writes, "Miller hated every minute of it [being in the Army], but there was pleasure in his hatred because he believed that his mother must know how unhappy he was" (94). Wolff waits to reveal Miller's motives until half way through the story during Miller's journey home. At this

point, Wolff also reveals how Miller attempts to inflict pain on his mother by refusing to communicate with her. He writes:

Miller sent all her letters back unopened and after a year of this she finally gave up. She tried calling a few times but Miller wouldn't go to the telephone. Miller wants her to understand that her son is not a man to turn the other cheek. He is a serious man. Once you've crossed him you've lost him. (93)

Miller's extreme response to a fairly normal choice by his mother indicates the fragility of his masculinity and his need to reestablish it. Wolff's use of the word *man* twice in quick succession in the passage above as well as the fact that Miller is still only a teenager paints a picture of an individual desperate to establish his masculinity. In a story driven by ironies, Miller ironically returns to the site of original trauma for the family—the Army—to mend his masculinity, much as Hooper does in “Soldier's Joy,” only to find himself at the story's end further alienated from himself and from those he loves. The story ends abruptly with Miller entering his childhood home to learn of his mother's death from the man who replaced his role as man of the house: his step-father. The suddenness of the story's conclusion creates for readers the same psychic shock experienced by the protagonist and highlights the fallibility of Miller's hypermasculine attitudes.

V: Hypermasculinity in Military Life: *In Pharaoh's Army, a Memoir*

Not only does Wolff's fiction contain critical depictions of hypermasculinity and the trauma surrounding it, but his memoir *In Pharaoh's Army* also contains sketches of men in the Army whose real-life hypermasculine performances are scrutinized. Written a decade after *The Barrack's Thief*, *In Pharaoh's Army* traces Wolff's experiences in the Vietnam War as a “cultural adviser” with the officer's rank of lieutenant. After graduating from officer training school as a paratrooper, Wolff learns Vietnamese and finds himself assigned to My Tho to

coordinate action between the North Vietnam Army and the American Army in the battle against the Viet Cong. The memoir presents Lieutenant (Lt.) Wolff's fluctuating performance of masculinity, which tends to mirror the performances of masculinity by the men around him. A desire for acceptance permeates most of Lt. Wolff's performances of masculinity, and although he achieves a much higher degree of acceptance than Lewis in *The Barrack's Thief*, Lt. Wolff's performances are still highly constructed, fluid, and often anxious. Lt. Wolff's performances of masculinity tend to be positioned, for better or for worse, along a spectrum of courage vs. cowardice and insider vs. outsider behavior. Lt. Wolff serves as the main focus of the memoir (and a full treatment of him appears in chapter four), but two secondary characters serve as key iterations of hypermasculinity in the text: Pete Landon and Captain Kale.

Pete Landon's hypermasculinity operates in a subtler way than the abuse of Dwight or the desperation of Lewis. On the surface, Pete appears intellectual and insightful while serving as an American soldier in Vietnam. The source of his hypermasculinity, however, stems from his appropriation of Vietnamese culture and from his desire to place himself and other soldiers in needlessly dangerous situations. When Pete is first introduced, Wolff writes that "other men, myself among them, courted his notice as if he were a beautiful girl; he had that charge of glamour" (141). Pete's dominance of the all-male social group places him squarely within Connell's category of hegemonic masculinity. Wolff draws attention to Pete's dominance in the group of men by ironically comparing Pete to a beautiful and glamorous female highlighting the constructed nature of masculinity. Lt. Wolff initially admires Pete's bravery as a soldier, his urbane intelligence, and most of all Pete's status as a charismatic leader of other men. These characteristics place Pete's performance of masculinity within the authorized monolithic

performance of soldierly hypermasculinity, yet within this performance Lt. Wolff eventually discovers the flaws and inevitable inconsistencies of such a performance.

In the early days of knowing Pete, Lt. Wolff joins him and his tightly-knit band of comrades who have taken up residence in an old villa in My Tho, a remnant from French colonial occupation of the city. Pete provides a dinner for his comrades: “journalists, visitors from the States, cryptic young officers from up-country wearing Montagnard bracelets” and Lt. Wolff (142). The Montagnard bracelets signify not only the exclusive fraternal status of the soldiers wearing them, status conferred upon them by Pete, but they also represent Pete’s cultural appropriation. The bracelets come from tribes in the central Vietnam highlands, and they contain deep cultural significance for those indigenous to the region. Pete, however, takes the bracelets and reinscribes upon them colonial hypermasculine significance. It is also not by chance that Pete has set up his headquarters in a French colonial villa in My Tho, another symbol of cultural domination and appropriation.

As Lt. Wolff becomes enamored with Pete’s group, he is invited to dinner at the villa. As dinner progresses, Pete regulates the group’s conversation and behavior “conducting us like a choirmaster” (143). Notably, the men in the group are attracted to Pete’s intellect, and the dinner conversation becomes a rehearsal of Western discourse performed with the attendant props and gestures of hypermasculinity. Wolff writes, “He [Pete] produced cognac and Cuban cigars and leaned back in his chair, thinking deep, inviting us to consider whether the Novel really was dead, and if Napoleon’s Russian campaign had in fact been such a great failure as conventional minds made it out to be” (143). The cigars, the cognac, and the discussion of Napoleonic military tactics stand in stark contrast to the war zone that awaits the group just outside the doors of the villa. Ben Knights in *Writing Masculinities* (1999) notes the role of literature in creating

the mythos of masculine heroism. This is particularly germane in light of Pete's exultation of Western discourse at his dinner conversation. Knights writes that classical epic texts are "addressed to men: a constant and intimidating reminder of what you need to do to join the club of those who hold sway over destiny" (113). Lt. Wolff's admiration for Pete's discourse draws him towards Pete, and he desires to prove himself worthy of joining the "club of those who hold sway over destiny." Lt. Wolff allows Pete to talk him into taking a dangerous drive into a Viet Cong territory on a mission that serves no tactical purpose but allows Pete to continue enhancing his own hypermasculine performance.

Pete orchestrates a trip into dangerous territory to meet with a Vietnamese man named Ong Loan who possesses insightful perspectives on the current military campaign, but Pete's motives for the trip are fueled by his desire to remain at the center of the group of men in his entourage and by his continued cultural appropriation. Pete contradicts military intelligence about the road's condition and safety cavalierly smiling in the face of danger. To prepare for the trip, Lt. Wolff "piled sandbags on the floor of the Land-Rover and fixed us up with weapons. Two M-16s, plenty of ammo, a bunch of frags" (149). Pete's selection of weapon embodies his hypermasculinity and his need to remain a step above the men around him. Wolff writes, "Pete had brought his Swedish K, a good-looking and much-sought-after rifle" (149). Just as Toby poses throughout *This Boy's Life* with weapons in establishing his nascent masculinity, Pete fully realizes Toby's aspirations as he strikes the hypermasculine pose with his Swedish K heading into the unknown danger of Viet Cong controlled territory. In an interview after having completed both of his memoirs, Wolff reflects, "There's a lot of violence in [*This Boy's Life*]—a lot of male violence...The boyhood obsession with weapons has a terminus somewhere...it ends

in war” (Lyons and Oliver 3-4). The nascent masculinity in *This Boy’s Life* becomes hypermasculinity in *In Pharaoh’s Army*.

After safely arriving at the destination, Pete engages Ong Loan. Wolff writes, “Yet I could see that his [Pete’s] greatest pleasure came not from mastery of this situation but from our observation of his mastery” (152). During the interaction, Ong Loan presents Pete with an ancient bowl made of fine porcelain. In accepting the largesse of Ong Loan’s gift of the porcelain bowl, Pete continues his show of hypermasculinity through cultural appropriation and dominance. Having once admired Pete, Lt. Wolff now sees through his highly constructed performance. Wolff writes, “that’s what this whole number was about: the perfect Vietnamese, the compulsion to excite native awe, the insouciant gamble of life, the porcelain collection, the Swedish fucking K rifle. It was about cutting a figure” (152). Pete’s hypermasculinity is more pliable than Lewis’s or Dwight’s easily shattered performances, but Pete’s highly crafted hypermasculine performance involves the same attitude of superiority and lust for danger. Wolff’s presentation of this scene reveals and critiques this more camouflaged brand of hypermasculinity.

After seeing through Pete’s performance, his “cutting a figure,” Lt. Wolff finds himself in a direct conflict with Pete. Using his military connections, Pete engineers a more dangerous combat assignment for Lt. Wolff a week before Lt. Wolff is due to return to America. Pete tells Lt. Wolff, “[You are] missing out on all the fun. Pack your bags, big guy—you’re going to the party” (154). Pete sees a dangerous combat zone as a party, a place where any real man (or “big guy”) would want to be. Pete tells to Lt. Wolff, “You’re a razor-edge weapon, remember? Don’t you want to show your stuff?” to which Lt. Wolff responds “I want to go home” (144). Pete attempts to transmit his hypermasculinity to Lt. Wolff while at the same time maintaining

dominance over him. In describing a soldier as “a razor-edge weapon,” Pete replaces the male body, which can be vulnerable and permeable, with an invulnerable and impermeable object of violence and aggression, an object designed to traumatize. Pete’s hypermasculinity runs aground when met by Lt. Wolff’s simple statement: “I want to go home.” Having survived his tour of duty, Lt. Wolff does not feel compelled to engage the kind of dangerous situations Pete finds necessary for creating and maintaining his hypermasculinity. Furthermore, Lt. Wolff’s statement is a critique of the entire war effort in Vietnam. While Pete views the war as an ideal venue for his hypermasculinity, Lt. Wolff has seen through Pete’s charade as well as through the charade of the American presence in Vietnam. Lt. Wolff’s response to Pete, however, is only an individual one. The memoir implies that Pete continues his hypermasculine performance among other groups of soldiers throughout the remainder of the war demonstrating the ongoing damage caused by American imperialism in Vietnam and the prevailing attitudes of many influential officers, an attitude critiqued by Wolff throughout the memoir.

As the memoir moves to its close with Lt. Wolff’s time in Vietnam coming to an end, Captain Kale appears as a character who highlights the highly constructed and fragile nature of hypermasculinity. Kale becomes the commanding officer of Lt. Wolff’s battalion, and he is eager to put his mark on the soldiers. Wolff writes, “He [Kale] was strongly of the opinion that I had failed in my duty. I had babied the Vietnamese, he thought, instead of raising them to American standards of aggression. They lacked the killer spirit, and Captain Kale was bullish on the killer spirit” (172). Kale’s hypermasculinity is defined by aggression, condescension, and patriarchal colonialism. Kale pays attention to both masculine physique and masculine aggression. Wolff writes, “Captain Kale knocked out push-ups by the hundred...While he worked out he told me how he was going to turn his future battalion into a killer fighting unit,

unlike this one, and how it was a good thing I was leaving the army, because if every officer were like me the VC would walk off with the whole country inside of a week” (172). Critiquing Kale’s bravado, Bryan Calhoun in “Tobias Wolff’s Search for Heroism” notes that Kale is “built like a superhero” but “fails...miserably” and “poisons hearts and minds everywhere” as can be seen when Kale encounters his first challenge (24).

Kale elevates his hypermasculine bluster when he orchestrates a Chinook helicopter’s maneuvers over an allied Vietnamese village. Having been informed that the Chinook will not have enough room to touch down and pick up a howitzer canon in a sling, Kale brashly goes ahead with the plan directing operations from the ground. As the Chinook nears the ground, the lightly constructed village houses (referred to as hooches) begin to fly to bits under the pressure of the helicopter’s rotors. Wolff writes, “Women and kids gathered in front of the hooches to watch. They knew they were in for some kind of show. Captain Kale should’ve had them moved out” (177). Describing the destruction, Wolff writes, “It grew wild, furious, a chaos of winds. A man ran out of a hooch with a small child under one arm...people were boiling out of doorways, shouting, stumbling, some half dressed, carrying babies and boxes and bags” (179). After Kale’s hypermasculine direction of the Chinook operation, he sees the damage he has done to allied Vietnamese civilians and attempts to make amends. In the wreckage of homes, he finds a photograph of a young woman, and he begins “walking from woman to woman, begging them to examine the picture, holding it out as if it proved something important” (181). Wolff depicts the ineffectuality of Kale’s engagement with these Vietnamese women who refuse to look at him. He writes, “They wouldn’t look, they wouldn’t listen, and they couldn’t have understood him anyway. He was speaking English.” These are the last lines of the chapter, and Wolff’s

dramatic understatement in the final four words register a poignant critique of Kale's traumatizing and imperialist hypermasculinity both in action and in mentality.

Captain Kale continues to be an object of critique, and in a chapter titled "The Rough Humor of Soldiers," Kale becomes the butt of a practical joke that highlights the fragility of his hypermasculinity. At a dinner honoring the end of Lt. Wolff's tour of duty, a group of American and Vietnamese officers arrange for an individual introduced as Miss Be to serve the officers. Wolff writes, "She [Miss Be] was made up heavily, even ceremonially, her face whitened, her cheeks rouged, her lips painted red" (183). "Miss Be," however, is actually a young Vietnamese man dressed in drag, approximating the gender norms Kale begins to project upon him/her. As the evening progresses, Miss Be flirts with Kale who imagines himself to be the most desirable to her of all the men present. Eventually Miss Be convinces Kale to dance, and then they disappear together into a back room in the house. Wolff narrates Kale's moment of discovery:

Then another yell—a roar, really—and the sound of Captain Kale coming our way. He stomped into the room and stood there, staring at me, his face bleached white. His mouth was smeared with lipstick. He held his hands clenched in front of him like a runner frozen in midstride. (187)

The essence of the prank is predicated upon homophobic attitudes, which fits squarely within the authorized monolithic masculine wartime performance. The officers who initiate the prank know that once Captain Kale realizes the identity of Miss Be, he will react violently. The predictability of Captain Kale's reaction illustrates the officers' strictly defined parameters for masculine performance; for Captain Kale and the other officers to construct their masculinity they all must perform (or over-perform) their rejection of the possibility of homosexual attraction.

Along with Kale's rage at having been tricked into accidental homosexual attraction, he also responds by seeking to dominate Lt. Wolff, who he perceives to be at the center of the ruse. Having lost peer standing among the officers after the prank, Kale seeks to regain a dominant position, so he threatens Lt. Wolff. Kale asks Lt. Wolff, "Did you know she was a guy?" and after Wolff denies it, he adds, "I'd kill you if you did" (188). Lt. Wolff perceives Kale's threat as not an empty one, since he could order Wolff into a potentially fatal combat zone, giving Kale the power to both physically and psychologically traumatize Lt. Wolff. Kale's hypermasculinity requires him to over-retaliate, threatening death in response to having his masculinity challenged.

Judith Butler's work on drag helps to illuminate Captain Kale's interaction with Miss Be. In *Gender Trouble* Butler writes, "In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency" (137). In other words, drag highlights the performative nature of gender and shows how gender operates as performance rather than as essence. In the case of Miss Be, his/her performance is so convincing that Captain Kale, who "had a wife to whom he intended to be true," finds himself so affected that he makes sexual advances (184). Captain Kale's attraction is to a performance of femininity, and when he discovers the artifice of this performance, he must respond in turn with a heightened performance of his masculinity to make it clear that homosexual attraction is transgressive. Kale feels particularly threatened in this circumstance not just because he has kissed another man, but also because like Miss Be, his hypermasculine performance is one full of props and poses that could also be easily approximated by an imposter. In other words, Miss Be performs a hyper-femininity in the same way Kale performs his hypermasculinity revealing the constructed nature of both. Wolff's ironic and critical reading of this scene continues to show how his memoir

operates as a critique of hypermasculinity and its potential to traumatize less powerful individuals.

Wolff's description of the events also highlights the fragility of the other officers' constructed masculinity and their need to regularly reestablish boundaries as a part of the larger entity of the United States military. Todd Reeser notes that one is "never able simply to remain a man without constant help and effort," and Lt. Wolff's complicity in the Miss Be prank allows him and his fellow officers to remain men with the help of a young Vietnamese man who is subjugated by American and Vietnamese men of power (14). By controlling a less powerful male—the young Vietnamese man—in order to humiliate a more powerful male—Captain Kale—the officers move themselves higher up within the hierarchy of male power through a ruse predicated on homophobia. As Reeser points out, remaining a man takes work, and the scene played out with Kale and Miss Be operates as a part of that work. According to Brian Baker, soldiers often formed an intense bond that "seemed to go beyond the normative makers of male friendship, and it is unsurprising that anxieties about the experiences of enlisted men were often sexual" (3). One way to combat that anxiety is to parody and mock the possibility of homosexual attraction as the officers do in the case of Miss Be and Kale. Though homophobia, violence, and domination, hypermasculinity operates as part and parcel for men in the military given their constant proximity to danger and the required violence of combat. Discussing *In Pharaoh's Army* with Jack Livings for *The Paris Review*, Wolff describes the connection between the violence he writes about in *This Boy's Life* and the violence of the military. Wolff says:

I've had some experience of violence, I've lived in fear of it, and I guess it would be strange if it didn't find its way into my work. I grew up in a world where violence was

all too common—not deadly violence, so much, but beating, bullying, and threats—
certainly relations between boys, and between men, and often between men and women.
I spent four years in the army, one of those in Vietnam. You know an army is basically
an enormous threat of violence or it is violence in motion. (45)

The specter of traumatic violence looms large in Wolff's work, and the hypermasculinity of adult men which Wolff critiques in *In Pharaoh's Army* runs through much of his work included in the forms of nascent masculinity he presents in *This Boy's Life*. By dramatizing the incoherence, instability, and traumatizing effects of hypermasculinity in his lived experience in the Vietnam War, Wolff comes full circle with the critiques of hypermasculinity that he initiates in his first memoir.

VI: Hypermasculinity in Military Life, "Wingfield," a Short Story

Wolff's texts that treat the Vietnam War present the intersection between trauma and masculinity, and perhaps the best example of this is his brief short story "Wingfield." Published in *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs*, the story details the experiences of boot camp, a traumatizing battle in the Vietnam War, and the return to civilian life for the first-person narrator. The unnamed narrator presents the brutal and desensitizing experience of boot camp in which the army fuels the hypermasculine aggression of recruits while at the same time cauterizing their capacity for emotional response. During boot camp, the narrator becomes acquainted with two men: Parker and the eponymous Wingfield. Upon being deployed to a combat zone in Vietnam, the narrator finds his unit attacked by the Viet Cong, and he witnesses the death of 26 of his fellow soldiers. Parker misses the attack having been previously hospitalized for malaria. The story's final third presents a reunion in civilian life between the narrator and Parker and their attempts to navigate their traumatic memories. Through the story,

Wolff dramatizes his critique of hypermasculinity deployed by the nation-state in the form of warfare, and he illustrates how traumatic experience serves to both construct and deconstruct masculinity within this context.

“Wingfield” opens on a scene in which new army recruits arrive at boot camp and are thrown into a physically and emotionally traumatizing program designed to mobilize their hypermasculinity. Upon the moment of arrival, the recruits are made to do push-ups until the tar from the asphalt sticks to their noses, their clothes are mocked and confiscated, their heads are shaved, and their arms are “punctured...with needles” (117). As the daily physical training begins to create the hypermasculine “hard body” (to use Jeffords’s term), the recruits also receive mental programing. The narrator says, “In the afternoons they showed us films: from these we learned how to maintain our jeeps, how to protect our teeth from decay, how to treat foreigners, and how to sheathe ourselves against boils, nervous disorders, madness, and finally the long night of the blind” (118). The themes of the films align with Pete Landon’s conflation of the masculine body with an impenetrable weapon in *In Pharaoh’s Army* when he says to Lt. Wolff “You’re a razor-edge weapon, remember?” (144). In the films, recruits are taught to maintain their military equipment and their bodies the same way implying both function the same way and will be used for the same purpose. Wolff’s presentation of the conflation of body and machine shows the absurdity and danger of this proposition.

Upon completing their training, the recruits engage in a final test; they are split into two groups, dropped off in the woods, and given blank ammunition to simulate a battle. Wolff’s sarcastic presentation of the situation underscores his criticism of the training in general. He writes, “When soldiers with red scarves walked by we hid and shot them from behind and sent them to the parking lot, which was no longer a parking lot but the land of the dead” (119). Wolff

uses his signature deadpan humor with this comic juxtaposition of a parking lot and purgatory. As the simulated battle continues, the narrator and Parker—members of the same team—stalk into the camp of the other team which includes Wingfield. In his analysis of the story, James Hannah argues that “The narrator...comes to despise the sleepy-headed Wingfield. Wingfield pays no attention to the training that will be vital to his survival in battle. He drifts through it all, a chuckle-headed farmboy tired from chores and oblivious to his need for this masculine wisdom” (31). The narrator, who has adopted all the physical and emotional poses presented to him in training, represents a classic hypermasculine soldier, a killing machine, while Wingfield represents the opposite. He pays little attention to the training, and rather than constantly working to construct and maintain a hypermasculinity as the other soldiers do, he dozily drifts along more boy than man. Given the two characters’ foiling of each other, it is not surprising that when the narrator stalks into Wingfield’s camp in the simulated battle, he finds Wingfield asleep.

The narrator’s response to finding Wingfield in a vulnerable state is the culmination of his receptiveness to the physical and emotional hypermasculine training he has received. The narrator says:

I found one right away, mumbling and exclaiming in his sleep his rifle propped against a tree. It was Wingfield. With hatred and contempt and joy I took him from behind, and as I drew it across his throat I was wishing that my finger was a knife. Twisting in my arms, he looked into my black face and said, “Oh my God,” as though I was no imposter but death himself. (119)

At the thought of taking a life, the narrator is elated and desires actual rather than simulated violence. In drawing his finger across Wingfield’s throat, the narrator symbolically enacts the

conflation of a hypermasculine body with an impenetrable weapon. Just like Toby's poses with the Winchester rifle and Pete Landon's pose with the Swedish K rifle, the narrator's simulation of death follows an on-going trope within Wolff's presentation of men with weapons playing at a fantasy. Of this scene in "Wingfield," Hannah notes, "This manly world of recruits involving deadly lessons in ambush and patrol is itself only a boy's game of playing soldier" (32). The narrator's time of playing soldier ends upon deployment and Wolff dramatizes how dissimilar his training is to his experience in a combat zone as both hypermasculinity and its traumatizing effects become heightened.

Though the narrator's traumatic experience in Vietnam creates the emotion center for the story, Wolff elects to spend little time describing the scene itself and using a signature aesthetic move, he renders the combat scene through elision and temporal distortion. Committing less than three brief paragraphs to the scene of the narrator's ambush in Vietnam, Wolff flashes-forward to the scene in the moment immediately following the narrator drawing his finger across the throat of Wingfield during the simulated battle. The narrative technique he uses here parallels his staging of traumatic events in *This Boy's* and *Old School*, a brief flash-forward triggered by events containing thematic similarities. Describing his attack upon Wingfield's company in the simulated battle, the narrator says, "Then we stormed the camp, firing into the figures lumped in sleeping bags. It was exactly the same thing that happened to us a year and three months later as we slept beside a canal in the Mekong Delta, a few kilometers from Ben Tre" (119-20). Jumping directly from the training scene to the combat scene and finding himself no longer in the position of dominance dramatizes the scene for the narrator and demonstrates how Wolff's text represent Caruth's concepts of the suddenness and shock of traumatic experience and memory.

The narrator's inability to directly address his traumatic experiences also aligns with Caruth's notion that trauma is often represented by survivors through traces, erasures, and eruptions (*Unclaimed Experience* 6). When Parker, who was not present at the battle, writes to the narrator after the ambush, the narrator refuses to respond choosing instead to engage his traumatic experience through silence or erasure. Wolff writes, "He [Parker] wrote letters to me but I never answered them. They were messages for people who weren't alive any more, I thought it would be a good thing if he never knew this. Then he would lose only one friend instead of twenty-six" (120). By not responding to Parker, the narrator symbolically erases the trauma for himself and prevents it from even occurring for Parker. Years after the war, however, Parker tracks down the narrator and the two reunite on friendly terms at the narrator's house. Their reunion triggers an eruption of traumatic memory for the narrator that he had previously erased through his silence. Wolff writes, "Parker asked the question he'd come to ask and then sat back and waited while I spoke name after name into the night" (120). The narrator does not give any details other than listing the names of the dead, still unable to directly confront the fullness of the trauma. Then, much to the narrator's surprise, Parker reveals he can confirm that Wingfield survived the ambush in Vietnam. Parker had seen Wingfield in a train station peacefully dozing on a bench. Not only does Wolff dramatize a mental return to the traumatic experience for the narrator, but the text also demonstrates the tenuousness of hypermasculinity in war given the fact that Wingfield, the opposite of a hypermasculine razor edged soldier finds himself equally if not more able to survive combat than the soldiers who internalized their training.

The final two paragraphs of "Wingfield" depict the narrator's actions and reflections after Parker leaves his house. The scene portrays the narrator as a man who has suffered deeply from

his experiences both in boot camp and in combat and who wishes to escape his traumatic memories. After Parker leaves the house, the narrator goes through several domestic acts in a way that dawns on him as being “fussy” (121). When he was a soldier, the narrator conducted himself with hypermasculine behavior at all times, but as a civilian and as a survivor of trauma, he now finds himself more like Wingfield. In fact, the final paragraph of the story portrays the narrator attempting to entering into the behavior most associated with Wingfield: sleep. Opening a bottle of wine and drinking it rapidly, the narrator begins the act of forgetting the traumatic memories of which Parker has reminded him. The narrator says, “Like a soldier on leave, like a boy who knows nothing at all, like a careless and go-to-hell fellow I drank to them” (122). James Hannah interprets this scene differently. He writes, “Now at peace with himself, no longer the prematurely old man, having relieved himself of the names of the dead and having received the incredible news of Wingfield’s continued presence in the world, he falls back on the grass to sleep and dream” (33). Hannah’s reading, however, is flawed. The narrator does not seem to be falling into a peace of sleep, but rather into a sleep of oblivion. The symbol of sleep connects directly to Wingfield, and Wingfield represents blind luck and willful ignorance in the story. Wingfield also foils the narrator throughout the story, so in his final connection to Wingfield at the story’s close, the narrator acknowledges the ineffectuality of his hypermasculinity to handle the trauma that he now wishes only to forget.

As Wolff presents masculinity intersecting with trauma throughout his body of work, he consistently demonstrates the constructed, fragile, and damaging nature of hypermasculinity. The characters who deploy hypermasculinity subject those around them to its destructive force and also find themselves damaged as their aggressive, violent, and domineering behavior doubles back on them. In *This Boy’s Life*, Dwight increases his aggression and violence towards Toby

and Rosemary when he finds his masculinity under threat, and as his hypermasculinity becomes more extreme it also becomes more damaging and less sustainable leaving him ultimately defeated and alone. In “Hunters in the Snow,” Kenny escalates his threats towards Tub only to find his own form of hypermasculinity deployed back upon him resulting in a reversal of power dynamics and ultimately his untimely death. In *The Barrack’s Thief*, Lewis’s attempt to construct a hypermasculine identity that lives up to his self-projection is met at every turn by further emasculation by two major sources of masculine affirmation for him: a woman and the Army. In “Soldier’s Joy,” Hooper yearns for the combat zone that provides him with the circumstances he needs to perform his hypermasculinity prompting him to deal with his traumatic memories by continuing to seek further traumatic experience. In “The Other Miller,” a young recruit asserts his hypermasculinity to settle a family score only to find himself more damaged by his performance than his intended target. In *In Pharaoh’s Army*, Pete Landon and Captain Kale portray the hollowness of hypermasculinity in their easily imitated wartime poses highlighting the constant effort and artifice of such performances and the traumatizing impact of these performance upon less powerful individuals. In “Wingfield,” a hypermasculine recruit turned docile domestic civilian longs for escape from the traumatic memories his hypermasculinity helped create. In each of these texts, Wolff’s irony and narrative techniques accentuate his critique into this range of traumatizing and traumatized hypermasculine performances.

CHATER 4

MAN-WOMANLY

In his literary representations of nascent masculinity and hypermasculinity, Tobias Wolff reveals and critiques destructive and oppressive tendencies imbedded within the most common performances of masculinity. Through characters like Dwight in *This Boy's Life*, Captain Kale in *In Pharaoh's Army*, and Kenny in "Hunters in the Snow," Wolff examines the tenuously constructed veneer of hypermasculinity that requires constant maintenance and an ever increasing exaggeration of predatory and traumatizing behavior when confronted with its inadequacies. When presenting a character who exhibits the hypermasculine traits of sexual callousness, violent or oppressive behavior towards women, children, and minorities, and/or a penchant for danger, Wolff insures that the character will suffer by the end of the narrative. Most often, the hypermasculine character will find himself traumatized by his own destructive behavior becoming increasingly more miserable as he attempts to reconstruct his masculinity through the same aggressive behaviors which continue to double back upon him. Wolff dramatizes the fragility of hypermasculinity as well as its inability to exhibit resilience in the face of traumatic experiences.

Wolff, however, does not limit himself to hypermasculine characters or to young boys well on their way to becoming hypermasculine men. Wolff's texts also include male characters who perform a masculinity that runs opposite to hypermasculinity. Characters in *This Boy's Life* (1989), *In Pharaoh's Army* (1994), and "Desert Breakdown, 1968" (1985) exhibit traits often associated with masculinity, but they also simultaneously embody behaviors and attitudes often associated with femininity such as empathy, the instinct to nurture, and willingness to cooperate rather than to compete. In his texts, Wolff presents these characters not as less than man,

although other characters sometimes see them as such. Rather, in the narrative arcs these characters inhabit, Wolff highlights their virtue and portrays their resilience in the face of traumatic experience. The fragility of hypermasculinity is contrasted by the durability of those male characters whose masculinity does not depend upon violence and oppression.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf observes that it is “fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly” (104). In the case of Tobias Wolff’s characters, this edict holds true. The “pure and simple” man operating through hypermasculinity in Wolff’s texts encounters fatal experiences, while the man-womanly characters find themselves more resilient. It is important to note that Virginia Woolf’s statement is couched within the context of her discussion of writers, not their characters per se. She critiques the work of Rudyard Kipling and others for “writing only with the male side of their brains” (101). Work in this vein is “crude and immature,” “lacks suggestive power,” and appears to be “some purely masculine orgy” according to Virginia Woolf (102). The result of such work not only impoverishes the arts, but Virginia Woolf also contends that “unmitigated masculinity” leads to negative social conditions (103). In contrast to the work of man pure and simple, Virginia Woolf presents Coleridge as a poet capable of writing as man-womanly. She writes, “but when one takes a sentence of Coleridge into the mind, it explodes and gives birth to all kinds of other ideas, and that is the only sort of writing of which one can say that it has the secret of perpetual life” (101). Whereas Kipling’s “purely masculine orgy” leads only to sterility, Coleridge’s man-womanliness leads to off-spring and perpetual life in Virginia Woolf’s estimation. For a text to operate as man-womanly, it must possess a suggestive power. Virginia Woolf writes, “And when a book lacks suggestive power, however hard it hits the surface of the mind it cannot penetrate within” (102). Tobias Wolff’s texts contain this suggestive power in

their presentation of characters who embody a man-womanliness that stands in stark contrast to the hypermasculinity also presented in the texts.

A man-womanly character does not necessarily inhabit this position permanently, nor is he androgynous. Todd Reeser notes “the fluidity or the instability” of masculinity, so it is logical that a man’s performance of masculinity cannot be perpetually and perfectly masculine (8). In Wolff’s texts, when a hypermasculine character experiences the cracks and fissures of masculine performance, he perceives them as a fundamental threat to his identity and power. In contrast, when a man-womanly character shifts between behaviors often associated primarily with masculinity (physical strength, competitiveness, self-reliance) and attitudes and behaviors often associated with femininity (vulnerability, collaboration, empathy), he feels no threat. The man-womanly character is not androgynous or lacking in masculinity or femininity; rather, he comfortably performs traits associated with both. In *Plural Masculinities: The Remaking of Self in Private Life* (2010), Sophia Aboim approaches this concept and uses the term “hybridized masculinities” to show how a character can simultaneously embody more than one iteration of masculinity (157). For Aboim, a character can possess multiple and fluctuating gender performances, but the categorization and terminology of masculinity and femininity remains useful. She writes:

Plurality has endowed us with a wider field of possibilities in so far as the old essentialist dualism male/female has been deconstructed, while, at the same time, it has created new forms of categorization. In these processes, at least in most cases, femininity and masculinity are still the principles providing the basic standpoint from which we are able to imagine other possibilities, whatever they might be. Multiplicity and categorization are, in fact, deeply interwoven. (158)

Hegemonic masculinity reacts negatively to the man-womanly or the hybridized male subjecting him to positions of lesser power. In the works of Wolff, however, these characters—even when rejected or attacked—are portrayed as the most positive male figures by the author.

Characters portrayed in a positive light by Wolff rarely are ones who have been able to avoid traumatic situations in their lives. These characters—often man-womanly ones—display a resistance to trauma that could appear to indicate that no traumatic experience had even occurred. If trauma is viewed in the Caruthian model as a threatening event that occurs too suddenly to be processed and results in the unbidden return of traumatic memory that remains difficult to express or access, then immunity to trauma or a response that is articulate would suggest that a trauma had not occurred in the first place. In *Literature in the Ashes of History*, Caruth defines trauma as a “breach in the mind—the psyche’s awareness of the threat to life” caused by “fright, the lack of preparedness” (6). For Caruth, the breach in the mind renders traumatic experience unspeakable except through erasures, omissions, and fissures that operate as literary utterances. While this definition leads to effective analysis of texts that in some way represent the unrepresentableness of trauma, it does not easily account for moments in texts like Wolff’s that portray access to and resilience against trauma.

Like Caruth, Jeffrey Alexander provides useful rubrics for trauma but does not make space for responses to trauma illustrated by Wolff’s man-womanly characters. In *Trauma: A Social Theory*, Alexander argues that for events to be traumatic, they must be collectively narrated and identified as traumatic by a group. He writes, “collective traumas are reflections of neither individual suffering nor actual events, but symbolic renderings that reconstruct and imagine them” (4). As for individual traumas, Alexander writes, “*Individual* victims react to traumatic injury with repression and denial, gaining relief when these psychological defenses are

overcome, brining pain into consciousness so they are able to mourn” (3, italics in original). For individuals, traumatic experience can eventually be accessed and processed, but its existence and nature have more to do with symbolic representation and narration rather than with actual events. In essence, trauma is trauma when an individual or community decides it is trauma, according to Alexander. Alexander’s work proves useful for studying individual and cultural scripts that inscribe or create trauma, but his approach does not account for the individual who experiences trauma without a consciousness of it being trauma. Wolff portrays characters, often man-womanly ones, who do not narrate their trauma as trauma, but who have suffered physical, psychological, or symbolic trauma and meet it with strength and endurance.

Since Caruth and Alexander prove less useful for analyzing Wolff’s man-womanly and woman-manly characters, the models for trauma developed by Michelle Balaev in *The Nature of Trauma in American Novels* (2012) will provide a more effective theoretical foundation. Balaev bases her theory on the clinical trials of Richard McNally whose studies critique Caruth’s model. McNally’s *Remembering Trauma* (2003) targets the clinical trials performed by Bessel van der Kolk, which Caruth uses extensively to establish her model of trauma. McNally attacks the methodology and repeatability of van der Kolk’s clinical observations, and he goes on to define trauma as “an objectively defined event, the person’s subjective interpretation of its meaning, and the person’s emotional response to it” (Balaev xii). Each of the three categories as determined by McNally contribute to Balaev’s “pluralistic model” of trauma, and unlike Caruth’s and Alexander’s views, objectively defined events can be labeled as traumatic. Balaev views Caruth’s model as the “traditional” one because it has come to represent the dominant thinking in the field. The pluralistic model, on the other hand, is one in which trauma is not only accessible, but also manifests itself across a broad spectrum. Balaev argues that survivors

experience trauma “through a range of values that include negative, positive, neutral, or ambiguous connotations, thereby displacing the dominant claim that attaches only a negative value to trauma” (xii). The positive value that Balaev attaches to trauma could be seen as controversial. She does not, however, argue that traumatic experiences are positive ones or that victims of trauma are in some way receiving a justified punishment. Rather, Balaev’s analysis of American novels takes into consideration characters who have endured traumatic experiences and responded with resilience, healing, or another positive outcome. Balaev recognizes that these characters, though usually in the minority, are worth considering alongside those who suffer trauma and experience a shattering or dislocation of self as Caruth posits. In further defining her position Balaev writes that:

the pluralistic model allows a view of trauma indicating that in addition to the trope of fragmentation, trauma may disrupt previous formulations of the self and world and involve a reordering of perception, a process that does not necessarily produce an epistemological void. (26)

Wolff’s man-womanly and woman-manly characters who endure trauma are less likely to experience an epistemological void than Wolff’s hypermasculine characters.

Characters such as these are peppered throughout Wolff’s works and include Arthur Gayle in *This Boy’s Life* and Hugh Pierce in *In Pharaoh’s Army*. Arthur, branded as a sissy by his classmates, possess both physical strength as well as emotional tenderness and empathy. Despite his tumultuous friendship with Toby in the memoir, Arthur remains a faithful friend to Toby, willing to make himself an object of scorn in order to protect the fragile nascent hypermasculinity of his friend. Hugh, another faithful friend, inspires Wolff’s writing of his Vietnam War memoir *In Pharaoh’s Army* and serves as a counter-point to the hypermasculinity

of Captain Kale and Pete Landon who also appear in the book. Hugh's courage as a paratrooper paired with gentleness towards his comrades in arms makes him a unique and resilient character whose life and death informs Wolff's conceptualizing of masculinity in the memoir.

Both Arthur and Hugh have a unique impact not only on Wolff as a writer but on Wolff as a character in these two memoirs.² In *This Boy's Life*, young Toby performs a nascent masculinity built on many of the behaviors and attitudes that could harden into an adult hypermasculinity, but, in part through his interactions with Arthur, Toby breaks with his nascent hypermasculinity in several scenes embodying a more man-womanly performance. Toby's friendship and competition with Arthur serves as a mediating factor that regulates his masculinity in positive ways. The memoir's ending depicting a moment of hopefulness and redemption in an otherwise bleak memoir is made possible by Toby adopting a man-womanliness that he has seen modeled by Arthur. In a similar way, Hugh plays a positive role in Lt. Wolff's mediated performance of masculinity as a character in *In Pharaoh's Army*. Throughout his deployment in Vietnam, Lt. Wolff finds himself in close proximity to hypermasculinity, and at times he participates in the violent and oppressive behavior that saturates the combat zone. On several occasions, however, Lt. Wolff, like his younger literary iteration Toby, breaks with the pervading hypermasculinity that surrounds him and tempers his masculinity with a man-womanliness. Hugh plays a critical role in Lt. Wolff's ability to break with hypermasculinity. Though a minor character, Hugh is a character who motivates Wolff to write and represents elements of goodness and gentleness coupled with a soldierly strength. Hugh's death in Vietnam and Wolff's mourning of his loss also establish a key intersection between masculinity and trauma and how it can be represented through language. Like the final

² In this chapter, I use "Wolff" to refer to Tobias Wolff the writer, "Toby" to refer to Wolff as a character in *This Boy's Life*, and "Lt. Wolff" to refer to Wolff as a character in *In Pharaoh's Army*.

scene in *This Boy's Life, In Pharaoh's Army* concludes with a moment of optimism, a recollection of Hugh's interactions with Wolff and other soldiers in a moment of vulnerable and affectionate comradery.

Along with Wolff's characters who exhibit man-womanliness, Wolff also presents female characters who exhibit woman-manliness. Since the performance of masculinity is not limited to male bodies, these female bodies performing masculinity provide valuable insights into Wolff's larger presentation of masculinity. These are the female characters whose performance of gender includes traits often associated with masculinity such as physical strength, self-reliance, economic autonomy, and expertise with machinery or weapons. In theorizing masculinity in the abstract and as not attached to a male body, Eve Sedgwick remarks that "sometimes masculinity has got nothing to do with...men" (qt. in Reeser 131). If gender is performative, then a woman can potentially execute masculinity with as much or more success as a man. Todd Reeser argues that a woman performing masculinity can provide a clear view of the cultural attitudes towards masculinity because as performed by a female body, masculinity becomes more visible (133). Reeser uses Judith Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* (1998) to support his position. Halberstam writes, "far from being an imitation of maleness, female masculinity actually affords us a glimpse of how masculinity is constructed as masculinity" (1). For Sedgwick, Reeser, and Halberstam, masculinity is often incorrectly viewed as natural or neutral, so when it is performed by a non-male body, its constructedness becomes more obvious. These theorists view female masculinity as a positive subversive force as it comes in contact with hegemonic masculinity. In his texts, Wolff presents characters who exhibit female masculinity (or woman-manly characters) as ones capable of enduring traumatic experiences with much more resolve than hypermasculine characters. These characters also cast a critical light on the hypermasculine characters from the

same texts because of their abilities to out-perform men in tasks typically associated with masculinity while at the same time not jettisoning their femininity.

Wolff's texts often present female characters who could be classified as woman-manly including Rosemary and Sister James from *This Boy's Life* and Krystal from the short story "Desert Breakdown, 1968." All three characters navigate challenges and/or traumas more successfully than their male counterparts, and they often deploy behaviors and attitudes associated with masculinity. Despite being abused physically and emotionally by male family members and other men, Rosemary's resilience stands in stark contrast to Dwight's fragility as she often bests the men around her in operations such as car repair, fire arm proficiency, and wage earning. Sister James, presents a contrast to young Toby whose nascent masculinity crumbles in the presences of her self-assurance. Sister James, like Rosemary, has a capacity with weapons and physical exertions, but she also engages in nurturing the spiritual and emotional well-being of the young boys she mentors. Sister James comfortably moves between behaviors more often considered feminine and those more often considered masculine. In a similar way, Krystal moves fluidly between nurturing her child and violently attacking a man who represents the predatory surroundings she finds herself in after her car breaks down, and her husband abandons her.

I: Man-Womanliness in *This Boy's Life*, a Memoir

The young male characters presented in chapter two, "Nascent Masculinities," primarily served as examples revealing boys' attempts to integrate themselves into hegemonic masculinity through the donning of hypermasculine behaviors and poses that inadvertently drew attention to their inadequacies. Wolff, however, also presents at least one character in *This Boy's Life* that falls into the man-womanly category rather than the nascent hypermasculine category. The

memoir, set in the late 1950s in Washington state, includes Arthur Gayle, deemed to be the uncloolest boy in the sixth grade and perceived by his peers as less than masculine. Arthur's adequacy in ventures typically associated with masculinity are often challenged by others. Although Arthur is ostracized by most of his peers because of his willingness to embrace feminine qualities along with masculine ones, Wolff depicts Arthur as one of the more sympathetic characters in a memoir that includes a gallery of unsympathetic male characters. Arthur displays compassion and empathy towards others and loyalty to Toby, despite being treated poorly by Toby on numerous occasions. Arthur willingly performs both masculine and feminine gender norms, and as a result, he tends to be a character more at ease with himself than Toby or the other representatives of nascent hypermasculinity in the memoir.

When Wolff first introduces Arthur, gender norms take center stage. Wolff writes, "Arthur was a sissy. His mother was said to have turned him into a sissy by dressing him in girl's clothes when he was little. He walked like a girl, ran like a girl, and threw like a girl.... The name Gayle implicated him further in sissiness" (107). Arthur's feminine physical gestures conceal the masculinity of his physical abilities, however. Walking like a girl and even flouncing as he does later in the memoir are natural to Arthur, and he does not feel inclined to alter these arbitrary gestures as his peers do. By labelling him a sissy, Arthur's peers connect him with femininity in a demeaning way. Clothing operates as a central signifier for gender, and Arthur's rumored childhood attire places him in a category diametrically opposed to the hypermasculine costuming Toby performs when he dons the hunting and military garments of his mother's boyfriend. Arthur does not have or desire the props of masculinity so important to his peers, and as a result, his status as genuinely male is questioned by others.

Arthur's peers also perceive him to be less than male because of his close relationship with his mother. Cal, Arthur's father, works a blue-collar job, and lacks the sophistication and intellect that draw his son and his wife close together. Unlike his father, Arthur's mother is portrayed as intellectual, stylish, and emotionally complex. Describing Arthur's relationship with his mother, Wolff writes, "Arthur and Mrs. Gayle were complicated. They were complicated by themselves and exotically complicated when together, playing off each other in long cryptic riffs like a pair of scat singers, then falling heavily, portentously silent (157). Arthur's relationship with his mother operates more like a woman to woman relationship rather than a mother to son relationship. Arthur enjoys the kind of discourse preferred by his sophisticated mother and her friends. At times, Arthur even accompanies his mother and her friends on their shopping trips. While Toby is busy aping the behaviors and attitudes of the hypermasculine models around him, Arthur feels comfortable participating in the world of women.

Arthur does not, however, tolerate being attacked or mocked for his lack of machismo. Despite his perceived sissiness, Arthur possesses a masculine adequacy that many of his peers aspire to. Though appearing to be capable only of physical gestures belonging to femininity, Arthur's physical adequacy when tested is not found to be lacking. On two occasions, Arthur finds himself drawn into a fist fight with the narrator, Toby. On the first occasion, Toby attempts to validate his nascent masculinity in front of his peers by picking a fight he believes he can easily win against Arthur. Though Arthur endures repeated insults and provocations from Toby, a mark of resilience and self-control, he becomes physically aggressive after Toby questions his masculinity by calling him a "sissy." Using his natural and untrained physical abilities, Arthur routs Toby in the fight, and refuses to relent until Toby rescinds the insult. On a second

occasion, Arthur again physically bests Toby in a boxing matching sanctioned by their high school history teacher. In this scene, Arthur again dominates Toby and knocks him to the floor twice. The relationship between Arthur and Toby, however, goes far beyond these scenes of violence. In their interactions, Arthur's positive influence, due to his man-womanly performance, allows Toby to access a more stable and less traumatizing configuration for his own masculinity.

The first physical fight between Toby and Arthur initiates an unlikely friendship and reveals attitudes they both hold about masculinity. Before the fight, Toby has been aware of Arthur and even admires his "acid wit and the wild stories he told and his apparent indifference to what other people thought of him" (108). Eventually the boys bond over their status as outsiders and their appreciation of language. Toby, however, is far more concerned about the opinions of others than is Arthur, so he has withheld friendship from Arthur in order to advance his peer standing within his male peer group. Weeks prior to the fight the two exchange a knowing glance recognizing that they "were meant to be friends" (108). Their view of masculinity, however, keeps them apart. Toby's insecurity about being perceived as anything other than hypermasculine and acceptable to the group of authorized male peers causes him to see Arthur's comfort with his feminine stylings as a threat to his own masculinity.

Along with Arthur's physical gestures, Toby views Arthur's body as feminine to a degree. Toby perceives Arthur's body as soft, the opposite of the impenetrable hypermasculine hard body. Before the fight, he anticipates Arthur's larger size as a disadvantage to him and "factored out this weight as blubber" (108). Toby follows the same gender script as Kenny when he uses Tub's weight in "Hunters in the Snow" to feminize him and to question his masculinity. Wolff critiques the hard body requirement for masculinity as he portrays Arthur physically

dominating the fight. In the second fight, the boxing match, Toby has come to recognize Arthur's physical prowess. Describing Arthur's dominance, Wolff writes, "Arthur was all over me, his craziness proving more radical than my own. Twice his windmilling gloves came straight down on my head and knocked me to my knees" (220). Prior to the fight, Toby learns boxing technique from Dwight, but in the midst of the contest, "radical craziness" wins out. Though Arthur's flailing style of windmill punching is perceived as ineffective, unorthodox, and feminine by Dwight, it inflicts more damage than the masculine approach of calculation, sidesteps, and uppercuts Toby employs after his training. In both gesture and body, Arthur's man-womanliness is ironically more effective than the aspiring hypermasculinity of Toby when it comes to physical combat.

After the first fight, Arthur and Toby forge an unlikely friendship in which Toby becomes less devoted to the hypermasculine behavior and attitudes he embodies around other male peers. The two bond over their status as outsiders and over their enjoyment of stories, language, and wit. As Toby's situation living under Dwight's traumatizing attacks worsens, he makes plans to run away to Alaska while at a Boy Scout jamboree. Toby counts Arthur as one of his few true friends at this stage in the memoir, and he reluctantly invites Arthur to join his run-away scheme. Toby again performs a nascent hypermasculinity in the way he imagines the adventure. With a gently mocking tone, Wolff writes:

I planned to travel alone under an assumed name. Later on when I had my feet on the ground, I would send for my mother. It was not hard to imagine our reunion in my cabin: her grateful tears and cries of admiration at the pelt-covered walls, the racks of guns, the tame wolves dozing before the fire. (155)

As he does throughout the novel, Wolff presents the props and attitudes of hypermasculinity as superficial and easily shattered. In this case, Toby's daydream is interrupted by his fear of being alone. Wolff writes, "I gave Arthur this news [that he was invited to join Toby's scheme to run away] with a show of reluctance, as if I were doing him a favor, but really, I was just afraid to be alone" (156). As the time approaches for the two boys to act on their plans, Toby loses his nerve while Arthur remains committed. The man-womanly Arthur remains committed to the friendship and his courageousness stand in contrast to Toby's easily shattered hypermasculine fantasies.

The contrasting perspectives on masculinity that the two boys have plays out in their interactions with other Boy Scouts at troop jamboree, and it continues to highlight the suppleness and strength of Arthur's man-womanliness in contrast to Toby's nascent hypermasculinity. Upon meeting the Ballard boys, a troop of hypermasculine scouts described as "crisp, erect, poker-faced," Toby immediately attempts to ingratiate himself to the group by telling false stories that exaggerate his sexual experience and general masculine ability. Meanwhile, Arthur remains at a distance from the Ballard boys, and as a loyal friend to Toby tries to keep him focused on their plan to extract Toby from Dwight's clutches by running away to Alaska. In response to Toby's infatuation with the Ballard boys' drill team performance, Arthur quips, "What a bunch of dildos" (161). Arthur's commentary on these "crisp, erect, poker-faced" boys is not just crass and comedic; it is also meant to reveal their superficial and easily imitated form their masculinity. As "dildos," the Ballard boys are nothing more than artificial substitutes for some other type of masculinity that cannot be replaced by a prop.

Toby continues to interact with the Ballard boys, and when they question him about Arthur, Toby denies their friendship and joins the group in laughing about Arthur's name.

Arthur's status as an outsider in relationship to this group allows the group to affirm its own fragile masculinity. By identifying Toby as acceptable and Arthur as unacceptable, the group reestablishes its boundaries of masculinity. R.W. Connell describes this process writing, "At any given time, one form of masculinity rather than others is culturally exalted" (*Masculinities* 77). The exalted form must police itself against the subordinate forms. When Toby loses all his money playing rigged games of chance at an amusement park, however, the Ballard boys desert him positioning him back outside the hegemonic group and renegotiating their boundaries to exclude an individual who lacks economic power. In contrast to the Ballard boys, Arthur's response to Toby's loss, involves empathy and loyalty, which perhaps Toby does not deserve. As Toby squanders his money, Arthur urges him to stop and remember their plan to escape to Alaska. Feeling his fledgling status as a member of a desirable male group threatened by Arthur's unwillingness to engage in petty risk taking and bragging about sexual exploits, Toby pushes Arthur away and downplays his previous plans to run away. When Arthur inquires for a second time, "I thought we were going to Alaska," Toby responds, "Look we're *going*, okay? Jeez. Just hold your horses" (164). It becomes clear that Toby's commitment to the plan was never as serious as Arthur's. Wolff deploys his trademark irony in this scene to critique the masculinity of the Ballard boys and Toby while positively representing Arthur's man-womanliness. Behind the props, speech, and gestures of hypermasculinity, Toby and the Ballard boys lack courage, strength, and resolve to do anything other than idle around an amusement park. Arthur, on the other hand, fails to conform to the authorized scripts of masculinity in speech and gesture, but he is the one willing to embark on an adventure to Alaska that requires courage, survival skills, and self-reliance. The hypermasculinity of the Ballard boys appears fragile and impotent in contrast to Arthur's robust yet unassuming man-womanliness.

Wolff's positive presentation of Arthur's man-womanliness becomes even more pronounced when Dwight comes to pick up Toby after his day spent squandering money with the Ballard boys. At this point, "the Ballard boys climbed on a ride together and I lost them. I never even got their addresses" (167). Toby is left alone with Arthur, and he holds a giant stuffed pig, the comical and pathetic prize for the money he spent on a game of chance. Arthur again demonstrates his loyalty to Toby when he reluctantly takes the stuffed pig to protect Toby from having to explain the situation to Dwight. The object in question is opposite to the kind of masculine props Toby gravitates towards. It is a pink stuffed animal marking it as feminine, and he has received the object through humbling circumstances. The stuffed pig threatens Toby's ability to perform his masculinity in an acceptable way to Dwight, whose hypermasculinity threatens Toby. Arthur, however, has nothing to lose by possessing the pig. As man-womanly, Arthur's performance of masculinity is not dependent upon the props Toby uses, and Arthur is able to use Dwight's assumptions about his masculinity, or lack of masculinity, to shield Toby from a potentially threatening and traumatizing situation. Dwight arrives drunk to pick up Toby, and he sees Arthur holding the pig. Wolff writes:

And that was what Dwight stared at as we walked toward him through the blaze of the headlights, this glowing pink pig carried by the sissy Arthur Gayle. And as if he knew how Dwight would describe the sight later on, Arthur, who despised him, smirked at Dwight, and wriggled and pranced every step of the way. (168)

Arthur defies Dwight's concept of masculinity by associating himself with the pig and by performing physical gestures in his gait that signify a lack of masculinity. With his narrow concepts of how masculinity could appear, Dwight fails to see that Arthur is playing him. Through loyalty and self-sacrifice, Arthur's parody of gender subverts Dwight masculine power

and diverts the threat of Dwight's hypermasculinity away from Toby and onto himself. With his embodiment of positive qualities of both masculinity and femininity, Wolff presents Arthur's man-womanliness as far more resilient, pliant, and courageous than the anxious and fragile hypermasculinity exhibited by Toby, the Ballard boys, and Dwight in this scene.

Though Arthur's man-womanliness is made obvious through his gestures and attitudes and Toby's desire to attain a hypermasculinity is made just as obvious through his curated speech and props, Toby shares much more in common emotionally and intellectually with Arthur than he readily admits in public. The emotional and intellectual connection the two boys have goes beyond their public personae, and Toby's interactions with Arthur afford him the opportunity to incorporate elements of his identity that he often suppresses from himself and hides from others. Perhaps the most significant of these elements is Toby's love of language and storytelling. Wolff writes, "Arthur was a great storyteller. He talked himself into reveries where every word rang with truth.... In Arthur's voice the mist rose above the loch and the pipes skirled; bold deeds were done, high words of troth plighted, and I believed them all" (158). Arthur bases his stories on the gothic novels he reads, and he weaves a pseudo family history for himself complete with ancient aristocratic blood lines. Toby's renderings are equally fantastic, and the two boys find themselves growing closer to each other through this ritual of storytelling. Wolf writes, "I was his perfect witness and he was mine. We listened without objection to stories of usurped nobility that grew in preposterous intricacy with every telling. But we did not feel as if anything we said was a lie. We both believed that the real lie was told by our present unworthy circumstances" (158). The boys also share an interest in nostalgia, old cars, and singing—interests that Toby would not share publically and that would place him outside the authorized performances of masculinity dictated by his peers and the hypermasculine father

figures around him. Around Arthur, Toby can act like himself and forego the stylized performances of masculinity he employs in public. As Toby begins to become influenced by Arthur's man-womanliness, he also experiences moments of greater resilience in his traumatic circumstances.

Arthur's man-womanliness and its positive effect on Toby takes an enigmatic detour half way through the novel. Wolff writes, "Arthur played the piano pretty well, and when we were alone in his house we sang old songs together, our voices quavering." (159). Wolff describes the emotional closeness shared by the two then writes, "One night he kissed me, or I kissed him, or we kissed each other. It surprised us both. After that, whenever we felt particularly close we turned on each other" (159). The memoir does not allude to the kiss again. It appears quite suddenly in the text, and it occupies only three sentences in the memoir. The ambiguity of who initiates the kiss adds a level of complexity to its terse treatment. What becomes clear, however, is that both Arthur and Toby fall into a culturally scripted response to this prepubescent homosexual encounter. Arthur and Toby recoil from the encounter, and find that they have drifted too far beyond the scripts for masculinity. The exterior cultural influences that condition this response are immense and are described by Eve Sedgwick in *Between Men* (1985). Sedgwick writes, "Our society could not cease to be homophobic and have its economic and political structure remain unchanged" (4). Although Toby becomes comfortable expressing himself in a more man-womanly way when around Arthur who is comfortable in that mode in public as well, the boys enact a homophobic reaction to each other and to themselves when they stray from homosocial into homosexual behavior. The anxiety produced by this moment causes them to be guarded and to make sure it does not happen again by treating each other poorly when

they feel as they are becoming too close. In this way, the boys find themselves at times shifting away from an honest and resilient man-womanliness to a dishonest and fragile hypermasculinity.

Despite brief ruptures of socially conditioned homophobia, Arthur's presence in Toby's life contributes to a less rigidly performed nascent hypermasculinity, which helps him respond to trauma with more resilience. Although Toby's performance of masculinity often incorporates negative behaviors and attitudes such as violence and posturing, he is at times able to employ a more man-womanly response, which tends to produce a more successful result for him. Arthur's influence, along with Rosemary's and Sister James's, contribute to this positive alteration. Wolff's use of the motif of singing, which is introduced as Toby and Arthur sing together, illustrates how Toby's adoption of a more man-womanly performance produces a greater degree of resilience to trauma.

Singing provides a point of connection between Arthur and Toby, and the act of singing together falls distinctly outside of the bounds of the nascent hypermasculinity performed by the boys' working class peers in the rough-neck culture of Chinook, Washington. The manner of singing that Toby and Arthur engage in marks it as man-womanly. Rather than the popular rock and roll of the late 50s and early 60s that would have appealed to their peers, Toby and Arthur sing tender melodies of a by-gone era. Furthermore, they sing as a duet, two male voices intertwined rather than the domineering lone male voice projecting aggression most often found in rock and roll. For their peers, yelling, cursing, and teasing are acceptable uses for the masculine voice, but the type of singing performed by Toby and Arthur connotes sensitivity, emotion, and artistry, which are shunned by hegemonic masculinity. In the case of Arthur and Toby, singing is also the activity that functions as the prelude to their kiss. Toby, despite his anxiety about performing his masculinity outside of the authorized scripts, deploys singing in a

couple of key moments of duress throughout the memoir. Toby's man-womanly use of singing demonstrates the positive impact Arthur has upon Toby and how Toby is able to access resilience in traumatic circumstances by distancing himself from the hypermasculinity that he sees performed around him and that beckons to him.

The first instance in which Toby sings in the midst of trying circumstances occurs after he sneaks out of the house late at night, takes Dwight's car for a joy ride, and drives into a ditch. Theft (though temporary) and reckless driving signal a hypermasculine urge in Toby, but the difficulty that he finds himself in serves as a swift critique of this urge. After finding himself unable to maneuver the car out of the ditch, Toby responds to the crisis by doubling down on his hypermasculinity with a "string of swear words" (174). Immediately after, however, he perceives the words as "coming at me, not from me" (174). Toby's shift in perception indicates that he sees the futility of this hypermasculine script, and he also recognizes that the kind of language he is using has been fired at him by men seeking to deride and dominate him in the past. Abandoning the car, Toby begins to walk toward home, a four-hour journey, when he again experiences his voice operating as if it were detached from him. Wolff writes, "And then a voice bawled, 'Oh Maybelline!' I knew that voice. It was mine, and it was loud, and I got behind it" (174). Unlike his swearing, Toby recognizes this voice as authentically his. Being utterly alone in the night and away from any anxiety about his public performance of masculinity, Toby finds a more direct access to a man-womanliness that is more capable of handling this crisis. Toby continues to walk and sing, and Wolff writes:

I became aware that I didn't sound that bad out here where I could really cut loose—that I sounded pretty good. I took different parts. I did talking songs, like 'Deck of Cards' and 'Three Stars.' I sang falsetto. I began to enjoy myself. (175)

Though he is not singing a tender duet with Arthur as before, the falsetto voice that Toby uses further highlights this act of singing as outside the bounds of authorized masculinity as he incorporates the sound of a female's voice into his own voice. This man-womanly act provides Toby an emotional sanctuary and allows him to keep putting one foot in front of the other as he walks away from the crisis of a wrecked automobile and towards the trauma of Dwight's reaction.

Predictably, Dwight's reaction to Toby involves traumatizing physical abuse. Dwight slaps Toby across the face, beats him with his fists convulsively, grabs his hair, and hits him in the back of the neck. In self-defense, Toby lashes at Dwight using a technique he learned from Dwight: punching the throat. The blow has little impact. After the beating, Dwight says to Toby, "I hope you learned your lesson" (177). The lesson Toby learns, however, is not the one Dwight attempts to teach. Rather than falling in line under Dwight's traumatizing patriarchal family structure, Toby recognizes the absurdity and self-harming nature of Dwight's hypermasculinity. Wolff reflects, "I learned a couple of lessons. I learned that a punch in the throat does not always stop the other fellow. And I learned that it's a bad idea to curse when you're in trouble, but a good idea to sing, if you can" (177). By rejecting an act of violence and by embracing the man-womanly act of signing, Toby recognizes the fragility of the former and the resilience of the latter.

The second instance in which the singing motif plays a central role occurs on the final page of the memoir. As a whole, the memoir conveys a bleakness tinged with irony and dark humor, but Wolff chooses to end on a note of optimism and inspiration. Using his signature flashback technique to highlight temporal distortion as well as the pervading traumatic recollection of his boyhood years, Wolff's final scene involves a performance of masculinity that

is both manly (signaled through alcohol and driving) and womanly (signaled through signing). The final scene is an emblematic snapshot that punctuates the rapidly paced final chapter. The final chapter includes an attempted sexual assault upon Toby by a male friend of Dwight's, Dwight's attempted strangulation of Rosemary and his subsequent arrest, Toby's failure and expulsion from Hill preparatory school, and Toby's brutal experiences in Army boot camp on the eve of the Vietnam War. The rapid delivery of these traumatic events telescopes Toby's experience into the future, but then abruptly breaks off and jumps back to a memory of Toby driving back home from Seattle.

Wolff presents this car ride as a momentary stay against the traumas of the past and the anxieties of the future in his personal experience. He writes, "We live on the innocent and monstrous assurance that we alone, of all the people ever born, have a special arrangement whereby we will be allowed to stay green forever. That assurance burns bright at certain moments" (286). The moment in which he and Chuck drive home from Seattle comes after both of the boys have experienced but endured traumas, threats, and uncertainties, and their surprising response given the circumstances is to sing. After losing the radio station and turning it off, the two adolescents sing pop songs that "already made us nostalgic" (287). As they sing the boys also drink alcohol, not in excess but in celebration. Unlike Dwight's hypermasculine abuse of alcohol, the motive for the boys' drinking is not to repair or conceal damaged masculinity but to toast their survival. Eventually, the boys change from pop songs to hymns, which they sing loudly and with respect, and the final lines of the memoir elevate the scene to a spiritual level. Wolff writes, "Between hymns we drank from the bottle. Our voices were strong. It was a good night to sing and we sang for all we were worth, as if we'd been saved" (288). In his article "This Writer's Life: Irony and Faith in the Work of Tobias Wolff," (2005) Paul J. Contino

observes that this scene “suggests an imagination that sees signs of grace in life’s flawed joys” (21). With both masculine strength and feminine sensitivity, the boys find momentary salvation, and fittingly, the memoir ends where it began: in a car moving forward with hopeful anticipation.

II: Man-Womanliness in *In Pharaoh’s Army, a Memoir*

Like his memoir on boyhood, Wolff’s memoir on the Vietnam War, *In Pharaoh’s Army*, ends with a scene of male comradery, singing, a vehicle, resilience in the face of trauma, and spirituality. The scene also illustrates a man-womanliness that aids Lt. Wolff through the traumas of his combat tour in the Vietnam War. Also much like in *This Boy’s Life*, Wolff uses the flashback technique to include a last scene punctuating a final chapter that projects into the future beyond the main scope of the rest of the memoir, which spans the late 1960s and early 70s. *In Pharaoh’s Army* ends with a moving tribute to Wolff’s friend Hugh Pierce who died fighting in Vietnam. Like Arthur, Hugh stands apart from the majority of the hypermasculine characters in the memoir due to his compassion and sensitivities, and Hugh’s influence upon Lt. Wolff helps equip him to endure traumatic circumstances and eschew hypermasculinity.

In the memoir’s final scene, Wolff eulogizes his fallen friend and provides insights into his performances of masculinity that could be categorized as man-womanly. Wolff hypothesizes a world in which Hugh survives the war and imagines him not only interacting as a close war buddy but also as a warm influence on his children. Much of Wolff’s musings about what Hugh would have done had he survived the war focus on interactions with children. He writes, “He would have been...another godfather for my children, another bighearted man for them to admire and stay up late listening to” (220). Wolff goes on to write, “He [Hugh] will not know what it is to make a life with someone else. To have a child slip in beside him as he lies reading on a Sunday morning” (220). Twice Wolff highlights Hugh’s role as a nurturer within a domestic

environment, the opposite of the role fulfilled by Dwight, a hypermasculine war veteran who abuses children as a means to maintaining his masculinity. Wolff also imagines Hugh caring for aging parents: “Watch the decline of his parents, and attend their dissolution” (144). In Wolff’s imagined life span for Hugh had he not died, Wolff portrays his friend as one who cares for the physical and emotional needs of others distancing him from hypermasculinity and highlighting his man-womanliness. These traits give Hugh a resilience that Wolff admires. Reflecting on Hugh, Wolff writes, “Lose faith. Pray anyway. Persist. We are made to persist, to complete the whole tour. That’s how we find out who we are” (220). Hugh embodies strength and endurance, but at the same time, he is characterized as sensitive and nurturing, a picture of man-womanliness.

Wolff’s serious reflections on Hugh, however, turn towards a comedic, though revealing, final image. In remembering Hugh, Wolff recalls Hugh’s performances jumping from planes as a paratrooper and the levity it produced. Wolff writes, “He [Hugh] loved to jump. He was the one who started the ‘My Girl’ business, singing and doing the Stroll to the door of the plane. I always take the position behind him, hand on his back, according to the drill we’ve been taught” (221). Hugh’s fearlessness in the face of a dangerous exercise is not the result of an elaborately constructed and maintained hypermasculinity. His performance mocks such false bravado. The proximity and physical touch of Hugh and Wolff indicate a genuine male bond that lacks the homophobic anxiety often produced in similar circumstances. The selection of the song “My Girl” also comically subverts the hypermasculine expectations for the testosterone producing act of soldiers jumping from a plane. Wolff tempers the comedic element of the scene by shifting verb tenses from past to present in the middle of the paragraph. The flashback no longer relays

past experience. Wolff's temporal continuum ruptures, and he is placed back into the immediacy of the experience, a hallmark of trauma writing.

Continuing to use present tense verbs through the final sentences of the memoir Wolff writes:

I do not love to jump, to tell the truth, but I feel better about it when I'm connected to Hugh. Men are disappearing out the door ahead of us, the sound of the engine is getting louder. Hugh is singing in falsetto, doing a goofy routine with his hands. Just before he reaches the door he looks back and says something to me. I can't hear him for the wind. What? I say. He yells, *Are we having fun?* He laughs at the look on my face, then turns and takes his place in the door, and jumps, and is gone. (221)

Hugh, just like Toby in *This Boy's Life* after wrecking Dwight's car, deploys singing (and again falsetto is used) under duress, but Hugh's performance operates primarily as an aide to those around him in need of strength. Elements of trauma also underpin this scene. Wolff's combination of humor, understatement, and sincerity creates a moving final image that conveys the suddenness of traumatic loss that persists in a continual present tense for survivors. Just as the paratroopers disappear out of the plane and out of the viewer's immediate world inside the airplane, so too the soldiers who die in combat are ripped with suddenness from life. The shattering effect upon survivors comes as a result of the event's suddenness or untimeliness and also from its violence. Working within Balaev's pluralistic model for trauma, this passage also presents a positive response to traumatic and potentially traumatic situations: a resilient man-womanliness that produces strength as well as a sensitivity to others' emotional needs. Wolff's recognition of Hugh comes because of how Hugh cared for him and protected him both physically and emotionally.

Though the final scene of the memoir most poignantly depicts Hugh's man-womanliness and its positive impact on Lt. Wolff, Hugh is introduced much earlier in the memoir when the two young soldiers meet stateside at airborne training. Just before meeting Hugh, Wolff finds himself promoted to the rank of sergeant having been recognized by his superiors as possessing "command presence" (50). Since the memoir as a whole critiques military catastrophes caused by hypermasculinity, it is no surprise that Wolff mocks the concept of "command presence" in hindsight, but as a soldier he falls under its allure. Wolff writes, "I let go of that notion [that every man was my brother], and the harshness that took its place gave me a certain power. I was recognized as having 'command presence'—arrogance, an erect posture, a loud barksy voice. They gave me an armband with sergeant's stripes and put me in charge of the other recruits in my platoon. It was like being a trustee" (49-50). As a soldier, Lt. Wolff receives a higher rank in the military by trampling others, but as a memoirist, Wolff recognizes the damaging nature and the comedic absurdity of promotion through the unsubstantial gestures of erect posture and a barksy voice. On the heels of this promotion, Lt. Wolff meets a soldier whose demeanor conveys the opposite of command presence: Hugh Pierce.

Lt. Wolff's first interaction with Hugh involves a similar exchange to his boyhood encounter with Arthur, a younger representative of man-womanliness. It is a scene of recognition in which Lt. Wolff instantly senses that the two are bound to be friends based solely on a glance. When Toby has a similar scene of recognition with Arthur, Toby spurns his friendship knowing it could threaten his status, but with Hugh, Lt. Wolff responds positively. Meeting Hugh for the first time after a grueling training session, Wolff writes, "...[I] saw in one mud-caked face a sudden flash of teeth. The guy was *grinning*. At *me*. In complicity, as if he knew me" (50, italics in original). Lt. Wolff recognizes Hugh's awareness of the comic

absurdity of the training they have just completed, and when he returns the knowing glance, the two “were friends before we ever knew each other’s names” (50).

Hugh’s humor, however, is not his defining trait. His embodiment of a paradoxical strength mixed with tenderness runs in contrast to the other hypermasculine soldiers Lt. Wolff encounters. Hugh’s approach to the rigors and debasements of their training regime involves immense physical strength, a deep emotional reserve, and selfless generosity. Wolff writes, “Whenever the drill sergeants caught him smiling they swarmed all over him, shouted dire threats directly into his ears, made him do push-ups while they sat on his back. Nothing got to him. His pleasure in the ridiculous amounted almost to a pathology” (51). Hugh also exhibits a tenderness opposed to the “command presence” and heartlessness that gained Lt. Wolff his promotion in rank; Hugh displays generosity to others. Wolff writes, “Unlike me, Hugh made a habit of helping men who dropped back on our runs, mostly out of generosity” (51). In his article “Tobias Wolff’s Search for Heroism” (2010), Byron Calhoun reiterates Hugh’s selfless strength. Calhoun writes, “Hugh had been a much better officer than Wolff, with an abundance of strength, ability, energy, and confidence” (22). Hugh achieves this without the constructed performances of command presence.

Along with these traits of man-womanliness, Lt. Wolff’s interactions with Hugh contain two other distinct similarities to his interactions with Arthur: the two men tell lavish stories and they sing together. After one session of telling tales and casting their dreams about adventures they would have after the war, the two erupt into a cathartic fit of laughter. Wolff writes, “It’s been almost thirty years now and the words are mostly gone, but I remember the ecstatic rush of them, and the laughter” (55). When the laughter subsides, the two sing. Wolff writes, “And we sang; how we sang... I laid down the melody while Hugh did crazy riffs around it, shoulders

jumping, eyes a gleam, head weaving like a cobra's" (55-6). Lt. Wolff's singing, like his singing with Arthur, represents a comradeship and a tenderness. So unlike the barked commands that typify the authorized use of the male voice in the military, these two men use their voices for pleasure and with tenderness in their singing. Wolff's description of his singing with Hugh portrays both a feminine tenderness while at the same time a masculine physicality and even danger ("like a cobra's"). As a result of his friendship with Hugh, Lt. Wolff experiences an emotional peace rarely afforded him when immersed in the hypermasculine world of paratrooper training. He writes, "I never unloaded my worries on Hugh. I didn't hide them, but when we were out on a tear they ceased to trouble me" (55). The emotional sanctuary provided for Lt. Wolff by Hugh's man-womanliness builds a resilience to trauma that he would not have otherwise possessed. After Hugh's death midway through the memoir, his legacy endures in Lt. Wolff's character.

Lt. Wolff's motivation for joining the army shows hypermasculine tendencies he embodies, which come to be tempered in part by his encounter with Hugh's man-womanliness. Wolff joins the Army to validate his masculinity and to have military experiences which he views as a prerequisite for becoming a legitimate writer. Wolff writes, "I'd always known I would wear the uniform. It was essential to my idea of legitimacy. The men I'd respected when I was growing up had all served, and most of the writers I looked up to—Norman Mailer, Irwin Shaw, James Jones, Erich Maria Remarque, and of course Hemingway, to whom I turned for guidance in all things" (44). (Wolff's perception of Hemingway's presentation of masculinity alters significantly from early adulthood to maturity, as noted in chapter two.) Not only does the military provide legitimacy to his masculinity, but it also provides an opportunity for Lt. Wolff to fashion himself as a literary archetype. Wolff writes, "No longer a powerless confusion of

desires, I was now protagonist, the hero of a novel... Experience was the clapper in the bell, the money in the bank, and of all experiences the most bankable was military service” (44). Unlike Hugh’s generosity and warmth towards others he serves alongside, Lt. Wolff’s motives center on himself—constructing his masculinity and advancing his career and economic prospects.

The military also offers a way for Wolff to engage in an Oedipal contest with his biological father. A con-man and a looming presence in Lt. Wolff’s life despite his absence, his father, Duke, pretends to embody traits that Lt. Wolff genuinely wants to possess. Wolff writes, “My father had never served, though he sometimes claimed he had, and this incompleteness in his history somehow made his fate intelligible and offered a means to escape it myself. This was the way, the indisputable certificate of citizenship and probity” (46). Where Lt. Wolff sees his father as illegitimate because of his lack of military experience, he sees himself as capable of achieving legitimacy. Lt. Wolff’s encounters with Hugh, however, contribute to his realization that his conception of the military is fatally flawed.

The memoir reveals a much different reality of military experience than the one Lt. Wolff hopes to enter by enlisting. Rather than validating his masculinity, he finds it interrogated, and rather than finding himself as the protagonist of a heroic war tale, he serves as a reluctant participant and as a wry critic of the tragicomic absurdity of the Vietnam War. The memoir functions as a working out of Wolff’s traumatic experiences as a soldier, and the writing that he produces is far from resembling what he set out to write as a young man. As such, Wolff writes the memoir as a reproach to his younger self, to hypermasculinity, and to the military industrial complex. Given the triangulation of these forces, Wolff’s epigram selection from Ford Madox Ford’s *The Good Soldier* is apt:

You may well ask why I write. And yet my reasons are quite many. For it is not unusual in human beings who have witnessed the sack of a city or the falling to pieces of a people to desire to set down what they have witnessed for the benefit of unknown heirs or of generations infinitely remote; or if you please, just to get the sight out of their heads. (ii)

Wolff seeks absolution through confession in the narrative; his act of writing is an act of combating his traumatic memory.

Though the memoir focuses primarily on the traumatizing effect of serving in a violent yet bureaucratically inefficient military, Wolff does include a few avenues of hopefulness especially through the effect Hugh had upon him. Wolff renders most of his traumatic experiences in graphic but brief depictions throughout the memoir, but surprisingly, he also uses humor and warmth in places, a tribute to Hugh's influence. The multivalenced response to trauma does not align with Caruth's mode for analyzing trauma represented in literary utterances, but Michelle Balaev does provide a paradigm for assessing traumatic memory and experience that contains a plurality of responses. In her treatment of trauma, Balaev discusses, "trauma through a range of values that include, negative, positive, neutral, or ambiguous connotations, thereby displacing the dominant claim that attaches only a negative value to trauma" (xii). Lt. Wolff's resilience to trauma, influenced by Hugh's man-womanliness, allows him to respond to traumatic experience with resilience and hope rather than only negative value.

After surviving the traumas of combat and nearing the end of his tour of duty in Vietnam, Lt. Wolff finds himself confronted by the hypermasculinity of Pete Landon and his response to Pete's domineering presence highlights Hugh's man-womanly positive impact upon Lt. Wolff. Despite the traumatizing circumstances, Lt. Wolff does not meet Pete's hypermasculinity with a show of even more dramatic hypermasculinity as he would have been inclined to do before the

tempering of his masculinity by Hugh's man-womanliness. The scene with Pete occurs sometime after Lt. Wolff learns of Hugh's death and indicates the lasting influence of his friend not only in his conduct within the relayed events of the memoir but also within Wolff's memory and processing of trauma nearly a quarter century after the experiences as he writes the memoir.

Near the end of his tour of duty, Lt. Wolff meets Pete whose hypermasculinity affords him dominance over most men as explicated in chapter three. Pete attempts to transfer Lt. Wolff into a more dangerous location in order to give Lt. Wolff "a chance of a lifetime" and an opportunity to "show [his] stuff" (157). Unable to imagine an iteration of masculinity other than his own, Pete sees Lt. Wolff as "wasted" far away from the most dangerous battle zones, and even after Lt. Wolff begs out of the new assignment, Pete insists the transfer would be "for your own good" (158). Pete's behavior towards Lt. Wolff forms a pattern of paternal condescension in which Pete's hypermasculinity allows him to maintain dominance. Pete's hypermasculinity not only subordinates Lt. Wolff, but it also threatens to place Lt. Wolff in a life-threatening circumstance for little strategic gain at a point when Lt. Wolff is approaching the safety of leaving deployment all together.

Lt. Wolff manages to avoid Pete's reassignment, but the threat of danger lingers in his psyche, which has already been exhausted and traumatized by the ravages of combat. When Lt. Wolff finds a route to exacting symbolic revenge on Pete, he surprisingly spurns the opportunity and resists the desire to deploy hypermasculinity to combat hypermasculinity as Tub does towards Kenny and Frank in "Hunters in the Snow." By breaking the cycle of retribution, Lt. Wolff steps outside of hypermasculinity and embraces the man-womanliness modelled by Hugh. Lt. Wolff overcomes his hypermasculine tendencies when he comes into possession of an ancient Vietnamese artifact that Pete owns. As described in chapter three, Pete functions not only as a

military oppressor in Vietnam but also as an appropriator of culture. Pete has procured this ancient ceremonial bowl at great risk to his life and to Lt. Wolff's as well, and though he feigns great respect for the bowl, it serves only as another prop in the constructed hypermasculine soldierly pose he is striking. Lt. Wolff receives the bowl with instructions to deliver it to a mail plane, and after being tempted to destroy the prized possession "for his [Pete's] own good," he delivers the bowl safely to its destination (159).

Wolff's description of what he does with the bowl creates a level of ambiguity that illustrates the tenuous reliability of narratives forged out of traumatic experience: he first describes destroying the bowl, and then he recants. With no indication that what follows is inaccurate, Wolff writes:

I put the package on the floor and pressed at it with my stockinged foot, for better control and so as not to leave any bootprints.... I gave it more of my weight until I was almost standing on it. Though I didn't hear it break, I felt it travel up my leg—a sudden sad release. (159)

Wolff describes unfolding the packaging to look at the shattered bowl and then following Pete's "orders to the letter" to deliver the package to the plane. Wolff then employs two lines of blank page before rescinding the first version of the scene. He writes, "Really, now. Is the part about the bowl true? Did I do that? No. Never. I would never deliberately take something precious from a man—the pride of his collection, say, or his own pride—and put it under my foot like that, and twist my foot on it, and break it. No. Not even for his own good" (159). In reflecting on his composition process in writing the memoir, Wolff indicated to *The Paris Review* that his memory rather than his collection of letters from the time served him better. Wolff tells Jack Livings:

The letters were mostly a parade of poses—stiff upper lip, reticent warrior, deep tragic thoughts, et cetera. They had very little in the way of astute detail about the life around me and the life I led. They were useless to me in writing the book, so I trusted memory, which was actually pretty good about what went on there, the details of my day, the meanness and banality and boredom and occasional pure terror of my experience there.

(16)

Along with his commentary, Wolff's presentation of two versions of the same scene indicates an ambivalence about the experience and suggests that constructing the details surrounding experiences of war is fraught with contradictions, erasures, remembering, mis-remembering, and willful forgetting—all modes of utterance examined by most trauma theorists even those who disagree on other features of trauma such as Caruth and McNally.

Wolff's portrayal of his willingness to break the revenge cycle by not destroying the pride of Pete's collection also shows a response to trauma not addressed by most theorists: positive value. Within the traumatizing context of brutal recent battles and the present threat of being transferred to a more dangerous location by Pete, Lt. Wolff's response to Pete mediated through the symbolism of the bowl indicates a positive value and a reorientation of attitudes and behaviors. Lt. Wolff's eschewing of hypermasculinity in favor of man-womanliness in this scene (choosing forgiveness rather than retribution) affords him a more resilient response to trauma. Though most trauma theorists focus on the damaging and negative effects of trauma, Balaev's pluralistic model incorporates the potential for positive value within a traumatized subject. Balaev writes, "Certain novels indicate that a traumatic experience disrupts the previous framework of reality and the protagonist must reorganize the self in relation to this new view of reality" (40). Wolff's "previous framework" is based on his hypermasculine project of joining

the military in order to collect the prerequisite masculine experiences needed to write a novel featuring a fictional stand-in of himself as the heroic protagonist. The “disruption” of Hugh’s man-womanly influence and the disorienting trauma of combat force Lt. Wolff to reorganize his view of reality which, in the case of his conflict with Pete, results in a positive outcome.

Balaev applies her pluralistic trauma theory to Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* and writes, “The protagonist’s recovery in the novel depends upon accepting his identity as one that is connected to a specific natural landscape and tribal community, both of which contain stories of his role in human society and mythic reality” (40). Though not deeply connected to a specific geography like the protagonist (Tayo) in *Ceremony*, Lt. Wolff does experience the trauma of war like Tayo, and he also must reorganize his understanding of his role within his community. For Lt. Wolff, this reorganization involves the cultural scripts of masculinity. For both Tayo and Lt. Wolff, the pain of trauma also includes the surprising positive value of a “transformative journey,” as Balaev describes it (40).

Along with Balaev’s treatment of the potential positive value for trauma, Ben Knights’s *Writing Masculinities* (1999) also provides insights into Wolff’s reluctant choice to narrate his breaking of the cycle of revenge in the case of Pete. Knights argues that throughout history epic narratives, especially those with the motifs of wars and journeys, reinforce culturally dominant masculine scripts. Knights writes:

Through a sequence of acts of supremacy the epic hero advances step by step from dependence to autonomy: in a satisfying climax the paradigmatic male hero masters adversity—or at least goes down fighting. He is an agent, a doer; his existential homologue is a responsible adult. (113)

The kind of narrative outlined by Knights is the one Lt. Wolff sets out to write upon first enlisting in the Army. Knights goes on to demonstrate how these narratives are not only damaging to the collateral victims of the epic hero, but also how they create an anxiety within an aspiring hero, one at the stage of nascent masculinity. Knights writes:

Narratives of male heroism are not addressed solely (as a schematic gender politics might assume) to men's imperial subjects. Crucially, they are also addressed to men: a constant and intimidating reminder of what you need to do to join the club of those who hold sway over destiny. (113)

By enlisting, Lt. Wolff aims to “join the club” of the writers he admires: “Norman Mailer, Irwin Shaw, James Jones, Erich Maria Remarque, and of course Hemingway” (44). Instead of achieving initiation into the club, Lt. Wolff reorganizes his relationship to the culturally produced scripts of the hypermasculine soldier turned writer, and the scene with Pete's bowl provides one of the clearest examples. In the first version of the scene, Wolff portrays himself as a man who controls both his destiny and the fate of another man, just as in Knights's theory. In the second version of the scene, the truthful one, Lt. Wolff relinquishes “sway over destiny” and chooses the man-womanly positive value response to trauma rather than the vengeful-hero-in-command negative value of hypermasculinity. In this moment, the tension between a masculine writing and a feminine writing converge as man-womanliness.

As *In Pharaoh's Army* unfolds, the act of writing, mediated through traumatic memory, becomes Wolff's primary tool for reorganizing understanding his past experience and his function in society after the Vietnam war. Writing in the memoir from a position of man-womanliness rather than writing in the novel from the position of hypermasculinity underscores a resilience and moves towards positive value while remaining elegiac. In the memoir's

penultimate chapter, Wolff reflects back not just on his traumatic experience but upon his experience attempting to write and speak about it. He writes, “How do you tell such a story? Maybe such a story shouldn’t be told at all. Yet finally it will be told” (207). Here Wolff fits squarely within a trauma theory that asserts that trauma paradoxically cannot be fully accessed nor can it ever be escaped. Wolff continues to reflect on the difficulty of telling “such a story” by describing its moral dilemma and attendant guilt. He writes, “But isn’t there, in the very act of confession, an obscene self-congratulation for the virtue required to see your mistake and own up to it? And isn’t it just like an American boy, to want to admire his sorrow at tearing other people’s houses apart? And in the end who gives a damn, who’s listening? What do you owe the listener, and which listener do you owe?” (208). Wolff writes with the burden of guilt that haunts him as a trauma perpetrator (“tearing other people’s houses apart”) as well as the psychological scars he carries as a trauma victim. His desire to write about these experiences, however, no longer comes from a need to establish and maintain his masculinity (both actual and literary), but it comes from a need to reorganize his understanding of himself and reality in the aftermath of traumatic experience.

Lt. Wolff reveals that he destroyed the half-finished novel he had intended to write from the outset of his military career. Not long after his first experiences with actual combat, which do not line up with his romanticized expectations, Lt. Wolff perceives the impossibility of continuing to write his planned manuscript. Wolff writes:

Probably it [the novel] was romantic. Most first novels are... I had it, then I didn’t. The ground shifted under my feet; the old view vanished and of the one still taking shape I could make neither poetry nor sense. I put the novel out of sight. Eventually, ceremonially, I burned it. (85-6)

The writing that emerges from Wolff's experience takes on a form that is not romantic and that honestly engages traumatic experience out of a man-womanly empathy rather than out of a hypermasculine authority. In reflecting on his process of becoming an effective and empathic writer, Wolff offers, "In writing you work toward a result you won't see for years, and can't be sure you'll ever see. It takes stamina and self-mastery and faith" (*In Pharaoh's Army* 213). This kind of humility and faithfulness in Lt. Wolff's perspective on writing opposes his original creed of "no longer a powerless confusion of desires, I was now protagonist, the hero of a novel" (44). Wolff's perspective has become tempered by the man-womanliness of Hugh's humility, generosity, and faithfulness. Ultimately, Lt. Wolff recognizes this shift in perspective and in his approach to writing as rescuing him from the trap of traumatic imprisonment. He concludes his reflections on embracing a new approach to writing: "It toughens you and clears your head. I could feel it happening. I was saving my life with every word I wrote, and I knew it" (213). For Lt. Wolff, writing becomes a way to survive trauma. Producing another text that reinscribes the hypermasculine epic war narrative validating himself as protagonist would have contributed to perpetuating the violence that caused him trauma. Todd Reeser writes, "If masculinity is a factor contributing to war, then it easily doubles back on to the men fighting that war, causing them pain in the process" (8). The concept could be extended to narrative: a hypermasculine text that romanticizes war helps perpetuate war which easily doubles back on those writing about war causing them pain in the process. In *In Pharaoh's Army*, Wolff's man-womanly elegy of Hugh and depiction of Hugh's positive influence on Lt. Wolff, breaks a cycle of hypermasculine response to trauma that perpetuates and intensifies violence by replacing it with a narrative of sober reflection that interrogates masculinity, war, and trauma.

III: Woman-Manliness

Although the focus of this dissertation is on the masculine performance of men and boys, it is worth noting that given its performative nature, masculinity can operate independent of the male body. To view Wolff's presentation of masculinity in its entirety, it is worth examining how he presents female bodies who perform elements of masculinity, especially since these characters tend to be ones who subvert hegemonic masculinity. Along with his positive depictions of man-womanliness in *This Boy's Life* and in *In Pharaoh's Army*, Tobias Wolff includes a number of female characters who further interrogate masculinity by performing typically masculine behaviors and attitudes from within female bodies. The performances do not jeopardize the femininity of these characters, but rather they highlight an ability to simultaneously occupy elements of both masculinity and femininity. These characters are woman-manly. In his article "Winging It: Realism and Invention in the Stories of Tobias Wolff" (2001), Martin Scofield observes the fitting irony of Wolff's emphasis on female characters. He writes:

One of the notable facts about Wolff's stories is how many of them, indeed, focus on or take their point of view from women characters. This may at first seem surprising in light of Wolff's popular image as a man's writer, a chronicler of war, male friendship, a boy's coming of age, and the rest, though it is not so surprising when one thinks of the figure of Wolff's mother in his memoir *This Boy's Life*. (99)

Scofield demonstrates that both Wolff's characters and the way in which he writes them is imbued with elements of femininity. In Rosemary and Sister James from *This Boy's Life* and Krystal from "Desert Breakdown, 1968," Wolff portrays women able to incorporate elements of

masculinity within their gender performances and whose woman-manliness contributes to their resilience in the face of trauma.

Todd Reeser explores the idea of woman-manliness using concepts borrowed from Judith Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* and Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women*. Drawing from Halberstam, Reeser argues that masculinity performed by a woman (through behavior, speech, dress, or attitude) more clearly reveals the constructed nature of masculinity than masculinity performed by a man (135). Female masculinity unveils what is often veiled about how masculinity maintains its power as well. For Reeser, female masculinity affords women a degree of access to power while at the same time operating as a critique of masculinity. Reeser also examines Mary Wollstonecraft's phrase "masculine women." He notes that Wollstonecraft argues that when men perceive women as masculine, they are in fact seeing women as their equals or as having the "talents and virtues, the exercise of which ennobles the human character" (135). Like Halberstam, Wollstonecraft deems "masculine women" as a positive position. Some of Wolff's most positively portrayed characters could be considered woman-manly (having "female masculinity" in Halberstam's words or being "masculine women" in Wollstonecraft's), and in Reeser's estimation, "female masculinity... is a call to open up new gender presentations for women and to help make them culturally legible" (135). Implied in Reeser's position is the notion that women who take on aspects of masculinity are, much like the man-womanly character of Arthur in *This Boy's Life*, subject to remain on the margins of society. Despite the common cultural alienation of man-womanliness and woman-manliness, these positions have the potential to operate as positive ones, and Wolff presents them as such.

IV: Woman-Manliness in *This Boy's Life, a Memoir*

In *This Boy's Life*, Rosemary functions as a woman-manly character. Rosemary's feminine qualities include her nurturing relationship with her son, her physical attractiveness to men, and her empathy and emotional sensitivity to others. In addition to these, Rosemary also exhibits a number of traits often associated with masculinity: she is a traveler and an expert with automobiles, she is engaged in the political sphere, and she has a high degree of competence in doing physical and mechanical tasks. In the memoir, Rosemary endures more traumatic experience than any other character. As a child, Rosemary was spanked daily after dinner and then made to say "Thank you, Daddy, for earning the delicious meal" (59). In the opening scene of the memoir, Rosemary is driving with Toby "to get away from a man my mother was afraid of," who stalks them across the country (4). Through the majority of the memoir, Rosemary is with Dwight, who beats her regularly, threatens her with weapons going so far as to hold a knife to her throat for an hour, and after she leaves him, tracks her down to Washington D.C. and attempts to strangle her. Throughout Rosemary's traumatizing experiences she remains resilient. Unlike Wolff's presentation of hypermasculine characters who find themselves shattered or out of control as a result of trauma, Rosemary remains steadfast to those around her and does not repay violence with violence. Wolff's positive presentation of Rosemary's woman-manliness intersects with her ability to navigate trauma. Furthermore, as Scofield notes, Wolff's ability to write female characters and to write first person narrators in some of his fiction, comes from Rosemary's positive influence as a mother (99).

One of Rosemary's primary avenues of performing woman-manliness comes through her relationship to automobiles and to travel. In 1955, the year in which the memoir begins, the ability to expertly drive or repair a car would be reserved primarily for men, and Rosemary

herself associates specific cars with past men in her life: her father's Franklin touring car and an adolescent boyfriend's Chrysler convertible (5). Rosemary symbolically joins these men and integrates a masculine performance associated with cars alongside her femininity as she drives a Nash Rambler from Florida towards Utah with her son in the first chapter. As a driver, rather than a passenger, Rosemary demonstrates autonomy, agency, and power similar to the vehicular positions of power that shift throughout Wolff's story "Hunters in the Snow." The destination and impetus for the trip also highlight Rosemary's woman-manliness. She is driving away from Roy's abusiveness and towards the promise of a get-rich-quick scheme prospecting for uranium in the west. In this journey, Wolff casts Rosemary as the archetypal frontiersman participating in the quintessentially American act of moving westward towards a better life and more freedom, typically a man's journey.

While the journey operates along symbolic lines of woman-manliness, Rosemary's abilities with the Nash Rambler are also practical and hands-on. The car repeatedly over-heats, and despite their efforts no male mechanic can fix it. Despite the car's limitations, Rosemary knows how to handle the problem, make road-side adjustments, and keep the journey moving forward. Not only does Rosemary demonstrate technical ability with the car, but she also shows patience, a trait antithetical to the hypermasculine response to a broken-down vehicle. As the journey progresses, Rosemary's automotive competence harmonizes with her nurturing interactions with her young son demonstrating a woman-manliness that helps her overcome repeated dilemmas. Later in the memoir, Rosemary experiences some of her most traumatizing experiences in cars as Dwight holds her hostage with a knife on one occasion and insists on recklessly driving drunk with her as a passenger on repeated occasions. Cars and journeys remain ambivalent for Rosemary: they signify liberation but also captivity; they are a space in

which she is traumatized but they are also a space in which she experiences healing. In each instance, Wolff portrays Rosemary's woman-manliness as an asset to her resilience while she serves as a foil to the hypermasculinity that surrounds her.

In addition to the way in which Rosemary engages automobiles and journeys, her engagement in the political sphere also illustrates her positive woman-manliness. While both Dwight and Rosemary's ex-husband are politically disengaged, Rosemary participates actively in progressive causes and campaigns for progressive candidates. On one occasion, Rosemary returns home from a political conference to find Dwight and Toby in a conflict involving a hunting dog and a rifle. The conflict between the man and boy is a petty one, which provides a pointed contrast to the nationally significant work Rosemary had just completed. Furthermore, Rosemary's political activity is noticed by the Democratic party, and party leaders have promoted her to a position of greater influence. The Democratic party begins recruiting Rosemary to work for Adlai Stevenson, an influential and progressive politician whose policies run counter to Dwight's views of women. Rosemary's political work stands in juxtaposition to her time spent resolving the petty squabbles between the men in her life. Later, she also campaigns for John F. Kennedy, another politician despised by Dwight. Dwight refers to Kennedy as "the Pope's candidate" and dislikes how Kennedy's hopefulness stirs Rosemary (193). Rosemary's independent political consciousness and engagement contribute to a woman-manliness that poses a threat to Dwight and his concept of his own masculinity. Eventually, Rosemary's engagement with politics serves as a catalyst for her move to Washington D.C. and away from Dwight. In her final interaction with Dwight, Rosemary fights off a physical attack from Dwight who has tracked her to Washington. When Rosemary frees herself from Dwight's literal stranglehold on her body while present in the nation's capital, she performs a woman-

manliness intersecting her physical and political selves that demonstrates her on-going resilience in the face of assault and trauma.

Along with her political engagement, Wolff also highlights Rosemary's bodily performance of woman-manliness throughout the memoir as he casts her as possessing both a feminine attractiveness along with a masculine capability. These two elements do not conflict with each other or diminish each other, but instead they harmonize to create one of the few admirable characters in the memoir. Whereas Dwight's hypermasculinity leads him to repeated physical failures, Rosemary's competence in physical tasks usually deemed as masculine does not erode her femininity. Not only is Rosemary physically competent driving and working on cars, but she also displays a physical ability with another supremely masculine tool—a rifle. At an NRA sponsored turkey shooting contest, Dwight “couldn't figure out how the rifle fit together,” misses his shots badly, and claims “that thing [the rifle] is a menace” (72-3). In contrast, Rosemary adroitly handles the rifle, wins the contest, and “struck a pose with the rifle” (73). In another scene, Wolff describes Rosemary's body in explicitly masculine terms as she berates a school principal for his misconduct. Wolff writes, “She face him [the principal] across the desk. She was *erect*, pale, and unfriendly” (79, italics added). In both the shooting scene and the scene at the school, Rosemary physically embodies a masculinity that defeats the fragilely constructed masculinities of the men who obstruct her.

Wolff, however, also highlights the femininity of Rosemary's body as he presents her as physically alluring to numerous suitors throughout the memoir. Toby's father, Roy, Dwight, and a series of short-term boyfriends all acknowledge and also sadly objectify Rosemary's physical attractiveness. Rosemary's body is also nurturing and tender as she performs her role as a

mother. In a poignant moment of reflection, Wolff remembers the tenderness of his mother's hands and shows how her maternal affection influences him. He writes:

I was my mother's son. I could not be anyone else's. When I was younger and having trouble learning to write, she sat me down at the kitchen table and covered my hand with hers and moved it through the alphabet for several nights running, and then through words and sentences until the motions assumed their own life, partly hers and partly mine. I could not, cannot, put pen to paper without having her with me. (142)

Rosemary's physical tenderness in this maternal moment illustrates the feminine capacity of a body also capable of handling automobiles and firearms. The image also depicts the manner in which Toby's identity is shaped by Rosemary. Despite his ill-guided admiration for the posturing of hypermasculine figures in his life, it is his mother's guiding hand, both literally and metaphorically, that shape who he eventually becomes—a writer. Because of Rosemary's internal and external woman-manliness and the resilience in the face of trauma that it produces, Tobias Wolff is able to become a man-womanly writer able to avoid the fatal flaw of writing as “man or woman pure and simple” (Woolf 104).

Though less influential, another character in *This Boy's Life* serves as another example of a positive force in Toby's life who exhibits woman-manliness: the nun Sister James. Whereas Rosemary provides Toby with security, stability, and comfort, Sister James's presence serves to destabilize the nascent hypermasculinity he often performs. Furthermore, Sister James operates as yet another positively portrayed character in Wolff's oeuvre whose gender performance does not fall neatly into a binary category. The character's name is the first sign of how Wolff presents her: the first half, “Sister,” carrying feminine connotation and the second half, “James,” carrying masculine connotation. Toby encounters Sister James when his mother insists that he

attend catechism classes and join the Catholic church. Sister James teaches the classes and also takes Toby under her wing by requiring him to join her afternoon archery class in an attempt to keep him away from troublesome influences. Wolff writes, “She was a woman of passion. Her square jaw trembled when something moved her, and as she talked her eyes grew brilliant behind her winking rimless glasses” (9-10). A certain bluntness accompanies her passionate teaching style, and Wolff writes that “She had no timidity or coyness. Even about sex she spoke graphically and with gusto” (10). Unlike the hypermasculine figures in Toby’s life, Sister James has the courage to speak about sex directly and without reducing intercourse to crassness.

Along with her classroom teaching, Sister James’s instruction in archery shows her operating simultaneously in both masculine and feminine spheres. Much like Rosemary’s proficiency with the rifle, Sister James’s engagement with a different type of weaponry, a bow, involves skill mediated by self-control and humility, which is not found in the world of hypermasculinity around Toby. Sister James provides archery instruction to Toby and a group of boys who quickly run amuck when they are unsupervised. The boys begin to “hunt” each other with the bows, and when Sister James catches Toby red-handed, the resilience of her woman-manliness stands in stark contrast to the fragile nascent hypermasculinity of Toby. Wolff writes, “I heard a rustling behind me. I spun around. Sister James had been about to say something. Her mouth was open. She looked at the arrow I was aiming at her, then looked at me. In her presence my thoughtlessness forsook me. I knew exactly what I had been doing” (11). Unarmed but unthreatened by Toby, Sister James takes complete control of the situation. The scene is similar to other standoffs in Wolff’s work including those in “Hunter in the Snow,” “Soldier’s Joy,” and *The Barracks Thief*. In this instance, Sister James maintains control with her gaze (“she looked at me”), a physical gesture (“waved her hands as if to shoo away gnats”), and a

short declarative sentence (“practice is over”) (11). Similar actions performed by Lt. Wolff in *In Pharaoh’s Army* earn him the label of possessing “command presence.” Sister James’s command presence, however, serves as a guiding force for the boys she mentors, rather than as a self-serving instrument as it does in the early stage of Lt. Wolff’s military career before he meets Hugh.

After their showdown, Sister James’s intervention in Toby’s life takes on larger psychological influence, an influence from which Toby recoils. Wolff writes, “The business with the arrow probably meant nothing to her. To her I was just another boy doing some dumb boyish thing. But I began to feel that she knew all about me” (12). Sister James has the ability to see through Toby’s charade of bravado and understand his vulnerability. The self-possessed confidence of Sister James again puts Toby on alert when she makes a house-call, and Toby again finds himself holding a weapon but feeling far less adequate than the woman-manly nun. Alone in the apartment, Toby has costumed himself in his mother’s boyfriend’s hunting attire and military surplus gear, and he has been handling, aiming, and posing with a Winchester rifle. In the midst of his hypermasculine fantasies and pantomime, Toby sees Sister James approaching the apartment building in a car with other nuns. Toby double checks the locks on the apartment doors and covers at Sister James’s “imperative knock” on the door (28). Sister James waits, whistles, and firmly knocks again before sliding a letter for Toby’s mother under the door. Sister James’s woman-manliness juxtaposed with Toby’s absurd approximating of masculinity elicit an ambivalent response from Toby. Wolff writes, “Being so close to so much robust identity made me feel the poverty of my own, the ludicrous aspect of my costume and props. I didn’t want to let her in. At the same time, strangely, I did” (28). Toby both recoils from but is drawn to Sister James. The unsettled nature of his masculinity causes him a shame that he wants to hide, but

something also pulls him towards a desire to be known by someone else and to be known more accurately by himself. Though at this moment Toby chooses to remain hidden and destroys the letter from Sister James to his mother, the influence of Sister James's woman-manliness contributes along with other positive forces (his mother, Arthur, Hugh) to shaping him into a person able to remain resilient in the face of future traumas and to write from a man-womanliness rather than from the "pure and simple" manliness described as tragic by Virginia Woolf.

V: Woman-Manliness in "Desert Breakdown, 1968," a Short Story

The man-womanly and woman-manly characters presented above all come from Wolff's memoirs, but his fiction also includes a number of characters who could be classified as such. Since Wolff often blurs the line between fiction and autobiography (*This Boy's Life: A Memoir* could be read as a collection of thematically related short stories, and *Old School: A Novel* could be read as a coming of age memoir), the characters he constructs in his fiction tend to resemble those he constructs in his non-fiction especially in terms of gender performances. Wolff's fiction includes the following characters who could be viewed as man-womanly: Father Leo from "The Missing Person," Grandjohn from *Old School*, Wingfield from "Wingfield" the son from "Powder," Freddy from "Flyboys," and Hubbard from *The Barracks*. Also from Wolff's fiction, the following could be considered woman-manly: Jean from "Coming Attractions," Ann from "Say Yes," Marty from "Sister," Hellen from "Leviathan," Virginia from "Face to Face," Mary from "In the Garden of the North American Martyrs," Frances in "The Night in Question," and Krystal from "Desert Breakdown, 1968." These characters encounter a range of traumatic experience including domestic abuse, parental abandonment, sexual harassment, an automobile wreck, a whale attack, rape, dehumanizing training in boot camp, and combat in the Vietnam

War. Unlike the destructive hypermasculine characters who often operate alongside them, these fictional man-womanly and woman-manly characters respond to traumas with resilience and dignity.

The character Krystal from “Desert Breakdown, 1968” serves as a useful representative of the woman-manly characters Wolff portrays in his fiction. The story appears in Wolff’s collection *Back in the World* (1985), and Farrell O’Gorman notes the hostile world confronting many of the characters in the collection. O’Gorman writes, “That depiction is enhanced by the otherwise seemingly discordant predatory imagery that is present in nearly every story” (78). In “Desert Breakdown, 1968,” Krystal, a pregnant German woman with a toddler, finds herself confronted by the “predatory imagery” of hardened men styling themselves as cowboys who taunt her and her son after her husband, Mark, leaves them at an isolated gas-station to seek help for their broken down car. O’Gorman places the story in the larger context of the collection: “Throughout the collection, the possibility of violence and the latent fear generated by an environment that permits survival, socioeconomic or otherwise, of only the fittest is constantly suggested by means of such images” (78). The harshness of the desert landscape, Krystal’s limited facility in English, the departure of Mark (who considers not returning to his family), and the looming presence of the cowboys, identify Krystal as prey in a predatory environment, a potential victim of trauma. Though at the story’s end, she appears to be safe, the circumstances create a traumatizing situation for Krystal. Caruth considers “the psyche’s awareness of the threat to life” as trauma, and Krystal is aware of the threat to not only her life but also to the lives of her toddler, Hans, and to her unborn baby (6).

Krystal’s response to this traumatizing situation includes two significant actions that herald her as woman-manly. The first action is the recitation of a poem, and the second action is

clubbing the foot of one of the cowboys with a two-by-four. While waiting for Mark to return, Krystal decides to recite a poem hoping he will be back when she is finished. The attempt to conjure Mark through language fails, naturally, but instead Krystal arrives at a realization about her husband's ineptitude and self-serving behavior. Wolff writes, "I will say a poem, Krystal thought, and when I am finished he will be here. At first silently, because she had promised to speak only English now, then in a whisper, and at last plainly, Krystal recited a poem the nuns had made her learn at school long ago, the only poem she remembered" (145). The gradual increase of Krystal's voice shows her asserting herself with more force, and the language works not as an incantation to bring forth Mark, but as a conduit for her to arrive at a critical realization. Wolff writes, "As if she had really believed he would be there, Krystal kicked the wall with her bare feet. The pain gave an edge of absolute clarity to what she'd been pretending not to know: that he had never really been there and was never going to be there in any way that mattered" (145). Poetic language triggers a visceral physical response that in turns triggers Krystal's clarity of thought. O'Gorman writes, "At some level of consciousness, Krystal believes that ordered language, language necessarily drawn from a cultural tradition and an earlier communal experience can somehow restore order to her world" (79). The recitation of the poem connects to a communal experience with other women, the nuns, and establishes the feminine half of the woman-manly response to trauma that Krystal enacts.

Moving across a range of gendered responses to her traumatic situation, Krystal performs masculine action at the story's end when she strikes the feet of a man with a flat board after he teaches little Hans the word *bitch*. By this point in the story, Krystal has been taken in by the gas station owner's wife, Hope, who gives her a place to rest in the seedy apartment connected to the station. While Krystal rests in the apartment, Hans wanders outside. When Krystal opens the

door of the apartment, she sees a cowboy lying in her car with his bare feet hanging out the window. She also sees Hans with three men on a bench. Wolff writes, “She could not see the men on the bench but one of them was saying something, the same word again and again. Krystal couldn’t make it out. Then she heard Hans repeat the word, and the men laughed” (150). After Krystal brings Hans inside, he repeats the word *bitch* twice to her horror. Though no physical trauma occurs here, the psychological trauma is palpable. The men weaponize the language of Krystal’s toddler son and by proxy attack her femininity.

Like her response to Mark’s absence and abandonment, Krystal’s response to these men begins in language and ends with physicality. Wolff writes, “Krystal took a flat board from the pile of scrap and turned toward the three men on the bench. They were watching her from under their big hats” (151). After the men refuse to admit guilt, Krystal berates them. Wolff writes, “When they didn’t answer she started toward the bench reviling them in German, using words she had never used before. They stood and backed away from her” (151). These hypermasculine cowboys with their stylized big hats who are too cowardly to insult Krystal to her face, now crack in the presence of such a force or personality, much like Toby in the presence of Sister James. Krystal turns from the men on the bench and approaches her car which has become occupied by another one of the cowboys. Just as the driver’s seat operates as a location for conferring power in “Hunters in the Snow,” in “Desert Breakdown, 1968,” Krystal gains power by evicting the interloper whose position in her car parallels the other threats she faces. Wolff writes, “She kicked the boots aside. Holding the board with both hands, she swung it as hard as she could across the bare feet sticking out of the window. The man inside screamed. Krystal hit his feet again and he pulled them back” (152). By kicking his boots, Krystal’s first gesture is to attack the costuming of hypermasculinity employed by the man. By striking his

feet, Krystal forces the man from the power position of the car, and his flight is so immediate that he leaves behind the other essential prop of his masculinity: his cowboy hat, which he is too afraid to return for. In this moment, Krystal embodies the masculine half of her woman-manly response to trauma.

The story concludes with only one more paragraph after Krystal vanquishes the cowboys at the gas station, and rather than the return of Mark, the final image is the return of Hope. Before the previous incident, Hope leaves the gas station with a shotgun planning to shoot a rabbit so the two women and Hans can have something to eat for dinner. Like Rosemary and Sister James, Hope is another woman able to handle a weapon with control and for the benefit of others. The final sentences of “Desert Breakdown, 1968” paint an image that inverts the trope of the wild-west ending in which a typical male hero rides off into the sunset. Instead, Wolff presents a woman staring off into the sun-set and seeing another woman walking towards her. Wolff writes:

She [Krystal] shaded her eyes and looked around her. The distant mountains cast long shadows into the desert. The desert was empty and still. Nothing moved but Hope, walking toward them with a gun over her shoulder. As she drew near, Krystal waved, and Hope raised her arms. A rabbit hung from each hand, swinging by its ears. (152)

This final image in the story runs in contrast to the predatory imagery of the rest of the story. Though the threatening landscape and the presence of a gun remain in this image, the scene now conveys triumph, kinship, and survival. Both Hope and Krystal possess a woman-manliness that stands in stark contrast to the men in the story who serve as agents of threat, abandonment, and/or ineptitude. Like Rosemary and Sister James, and the man-womanly characters Arthur and Hugh, Krystal’s response to trauma does not emanate from the dichotomy of male and female

scripts, but rather in her fluid movement between masculine and feminine performance, she finds herself more equipped to absorb traumatic experiences and threats.

...

Wolff's ability to write compelling female and male characters who operate outside of discrete binary categories comes in part from his interactions with man-womanly and woman-manly influences in his life, many of whom become the subject of his writing. Although he often represents his own masculinity in his work as fragile and capable of causing damage, ultimately Wolff cultivates a literary imagination that allows him to dramatize the positivity and resilience of characters who operate outside of the culturally sanctioned scripts for masculinity and femininity.

While critiquing writers whose literary imaginations she finds purely male or purely female, Virginia Woolf turns to Coleridge as a positive example of a male writer. Virginia Woolf writes, "but when one takes a sentence of Coleridge into the mind, it explodes and gives birth to all kinds of other ideas, and that is the only sort of writing which one can say that it has the secret of perpetual life" (101). Tobias Wolff's memoirs and fiction give birth to all kinds of other ideas because his vision of masculinity and femininity resides not only in a strident critique of hegemonic masculinity but also in a presentation of man-womanliness and woman-manliness that does what masculinity pure and simple cannot do: respond to trauma with resilience and even positivity.

To conclude, a brief scene from *This Boy's Life* serves as a representation in miniature of Wolff's general presentation of nascent masculinity, hypermasculinity, and man-womanliness. When Toby is still a child and before he and Rosemary have met Dwight, Toby momentarily embodies a nascent man-womanliness that can be seen emanating through his work. In the

scene, Rosemary returns home late at night after a date that had gone badly. Though the text omits details, it is clear that a man has in some way traumatized Rosemary. When Toby hears his mother crying, he goes to comfort her. Wolff writes, “She looked at me, tried to say something, shook her head. I sat beside her and put my arms around her. She was gasping as if someone had held her underwater” (55). Having been soothed by his mother after being attacked physically and verbal by hypermasculine men, Toby now soothes Rosemary in the same way. Wolff writes, “I rocked her and murmured to her. I was practiced at this and happy doing it, not because she was unhappy but because she needed me, and to be needed made me feel capable. Soothing her soothed me” (55). Capability, the trait so often longed for by Wolff’s male characters, comes here in the form of the feminine gestures of soothing and rocking.

The empathy and nurturing Rosemary has taught Toby doubles back to comfort both herself and Toby. Just as Wolff demonstrates how hypermasculinity doubles back on itself creating an ever more traumatizing downward cycle, here Wolff shows how woman-manliness and man-womanliness converge in mutual support of each other and double back to create a positive upward cycle. The scene ends on a note of resilience and interdependency in the face of trauma. Wolff writes, “She exhausted herself, and I helped her into bed. She became giddy then, laughing and making fun of herself, but she didn’t let go of my hand until she fell asleep” (55). Toby does not constantly maintain this type of performance (not long after this scene, he joins with Taylor and Silver in their juvenile delinquencies), but Tobias Wolff’s pervading presentation of masculinity critiques the traumas enacted by hypermasculinity and elevates man-womanly performances that possess strength and a soothing touch in the face of those traumas.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Though Tobias Wolff's work treats numerous subjects including class struggle, racial identity, war, and geopolitics, his presentation of masculinity emerges as his most recurrent and complexly rendered subject. Wolff portrays the fragility of nascent masculinity in boys and the perniciousness of hypermasculinity in men juxtaposed with the more tempered man-womanliness of his more endearing and admirable characters. In his presentation of masculinity, trauma plays a significant role. Wolff presents characters who are trauma survivors, characters who are trauma perpetrators, and some who occupy both positions. In many cases, characters perform a masculinity that becomes mediated through traumatic experiences whether those experiences be the dramatic violence of physical abuse and military combat or the subtler and latent traumatic experiences of absence and loss. From within these traumatic circumstances, Wolff portrays characters who construct and present their masculinities across a wide range, both negatively and positively. Using masculinity theorists such as Todd Reeser and R.W. Connell along with trauma theorists including Cathy Caruth and Joshua Pederson, it becomes clear that taken as a whole, Wolff's work highlights and critiques hegemonic masculinity and the cultural structures that maintain it.

The memoir *This Boy's Life* (1989), the novel *Old School* (2003), and a trio of short stories from the collection *The Night in Question* (1996) illustrate how boys and young adolescent males come to any early understanding of their masculinity and how they attempt to construct their masculinity based on the influences and models around them. Wolff's presentation of this nascent masculinity reveals and critiques the social norms of hegemonic masculinity. Most often, these texts highlight the difficulties and failures of these boys who tend

to select negative stereotypical aspects of masculinity around which to construct their gender identities. Wolff's young male characters provide clear examples of how masculinity is often fragilely constructed through props and stylized behavior. The artifice and fragility of masculinity is especially observable in these characters since they are boys trying on for the first time the codes of men. Many of these young male characters find themselves suffering traumas ranging from less dramatic actions such as neglect and verbal abuse to more dramatic actions such as violent beatings and attacks upon loved ones. The trauma suffered by these characters plays a central role in how they produce their early constructions of masculinity as they chose to either replicate or to break the traumatic cycles they find themselves in.

Along with nascent masculinity, Wolff also presents characters whose performance can be categorized as hypermasculine. The hypermasculine men who construct their masculinity through physical strength, violence, and sexual aggression traumatize others and themselves resulting in a self-defeating cycle. The memoir *This Boy's Life* (1989), the novella *The Barracks Thief* (1984), the Vietnam War memoir *In Pharaoh's Army* (1994), and short fiction including "The Other Miller" (1996), "Soldier's Joy" (1985), "Hunters in the Snow" (1981), and "Wingfield" (1981) all provide vivid depictions of hypermasculine characters who Wolff portrays as deeply flawed and largely irredeemable. These characters emphasize attention to their physical bodies and exhibit violent behavior aimed at women, children, minorities, and males outside of hegemonic masculinity. Though they aim to construct an unassailable masculinity, Wolff demonstrates that as their hypermasculinities become more hyperbolic, their identities become more fragile as they and those around them suffer ever increasingly more violent traumas. Wolff's portrayal of hypermasculinity illustrates the tenuous and damaging

nature of the type of masculinity that predicates itself upon domineering weaker and less powerful individuals.

Though Wolff more often presents and critiques negative aspects of masculinity, he does also include some positive iterations of masculinity as well. When Wolff presents a character in a positive light, it is one who displays the opposite traits of hypermasculinity. Wolff's memoirs *In Pharaoh's Army* and *This Boy's Life* and his short story "Desert Breakdown, 1968" include such characters. Positive male characters in Wolff's texts often exhibit some masculine traits, but they also exhibit some traits often associated with femininity such as empathy, the instinct to nurture, vulnerability, and a willingness to cooperate rather than to compete. Furthermore, these characters construct a masculinity and identity not easily dismantled and one not based on the subjugation of a less powerful sub-group. Virginia Woolf's concept of "man-womanly" and "woman-manly" illuminates Tobias Wolff's characters who display both masculinity and femininity (104). Virginia Woolf notes that it is "fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple," and Tobias Wolff presents characters who are admirable in part because they avoid the fatal flaw of performing only within the strictly regulated bounds of gender archetypes (104). The male characters who tend to be least shattered and paralyzed by trauma are the ones who exhibit a "man-womanliness" rather than a hypermasculinity. Given the performative nature of masculinity, a male body is not a prerequisite for masculinity, so several of Wolff's female characters who don masculine performances also help reveal Wolff's broader portrayal of masculinity. The woman-manly characters portrayed by Wolff perform masculine behaviors while at the same time exhibiting traits typically seen as more feminine such as comforting a scared child and empathizing with other women. These woman-manly characters find themselves far more adequately able to cope with their traumatic experiences than the

hypermasculine and nascent masculine characters. Wolff's presentation of masculinity, whether it is performed by a male or a female character, indicates that those who allow masculinity to be tempered with femininity are more likely to emerge as admirable and less likely to be undone by trauma.

Wolff's complex presentation of masculinity demonstrates masculinity's tendency to traumatize and to be traumatized when it is built upon dominating subordinate groups as well as masculinity's tendency to be resilient and pliable when it resists hegemonic norms. Wolff's vivid characters highlight the constructedness, the fragility, and the contradicting forces at work in those who perform nascent and hypermasculinities, and while these characters become objects of critique in Wolff's fiction, the cultural forces that encourage these masculinities remain Wolff's larger target for criticism. The society that continues to foster these negative iterations of masculinity will continue to see itself traumatized by them. Wolff's man-womanly characters, however, point another direction: a way to embody masculinity without the artificial props, poses, and attitudes of masculinity and through the incorporation of empathy, cooperation, and nurturing. The society that learns to foster these positive iterations of masculinity will be one step closer to reducing many of its self-inflicted traumas.

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