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Bare-Knuckled Brawling and Bare-Fisted Breaking:

The Search for Authentic Masculinity

Throughout the course of gender studies, there remains one inarguable fact. The majority of gender studies have been devoted to exploring feminism and all of its subtopics, from gender equality to the female's role in society to the construction of feminism itself. This is true because of the fact that throughout history, women have consistently been marginalized or considered the inferior sex, while men have held positions of power and of dominance. Masculine studies are a relatively recent phenomenon and have garnered much less attention. While this is true, masculine studies is not necessarily deserving of secondary attention. As often as the feminine has felt at odds with culture and society, so too has the masculine. It is because of the male gender's historic dominance, however, that little attention has been paid to male studies. Throughout the following essay, I observe the struggles between the male and the hegemonic masculinity to which he is subject, ultimately defining the "authentic masculinity" man seeks. By exploring two novels, supplemented by existing articles and essays, I intend to demonstrate the societal issues of men that limit or deny their masculine identities. I will begin by briefly tracing the history of hegemonic masculinity, or, the way in which society deems men, men. Then, I will examine the hegemonic masculinity present in the culture of two novels, *Player Piano* (Kurt Vonnegut) and *Fight Club* (Chuck Palahniuk). Through this process, I will arrive at a new definition of authentic masculinity; defined not as a construct of culture or society, as hegemonic masculinity would lead us to believe, nor as an external ideal independent of culture and construct. Rather, it is defined by the pursuit of masculinity contrary to that of the mainstream.

We must begin with hegemonic masculinity. At first a daunting term, it can be broken down into its two simple components. Hegemonic masculinity is made up of two distinct terms: "hegemony" and "masculinity". Most simply defined, hegemony is the "social, cultural, ideological, or economic influence exerted by a group" (Merriam-Webster). Any sort of influence or authority exerted by a group, state, or idea over another is hegemony. Masculinity, then, is defined as anything "suggestive or characteristic of a man" (New American Heritage). Something masculine is often uniquely linked to characteristics or traits believed to be embodied by men. Thus, "hegemonic masculinity" becomes the social and cultural influence exerted on that which is suggestive or characteristic of men. More simply, hegemonic masculinity is the masculinity deemed appropriate and acceptable and imposed by society.

This theory of hegemonic masculinity originated nearly three decades ago – relatively current in terms of gender studies – and has undergone extensive critiques and reviews since its conception. In their essay *Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept*, R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt trace its history, pointing out significant stages in the theory's development. In its earliest understandings, hegemonic masculinity was "understood as the pattern of practices (i.e., things done, not just a set role of expectations of an identity) that allowed men's dominance over women" (Connell 832). Indeed, it was very much defined in relation to the female, and focused heavily on the male/female binary. However, Connell points out that one of the eventual changes in the concept of hegemonic masculinity is a move away from that comparison of gender: 'The concept of masculinity is criticized for being framed within

a heteronormative conception of gender that essentializes male-female difference" (Connell 836). Not only is hegemonic masculinity not exclusively defined by male-female differences, it is difficult to say that masculinity is essentialist in any sense, as there are a "multiplicity of social constructions that historians have documented" (Connell 826), clearly demonstrating that masculinities are not a fixed entity, but rather are "configurations of practice that are accomplished in a social action" (Connell 836). Certainly, while those social actions may include the male/female binary, they include more that have an influence on masculinity. What happens then, if that "social action" is to change? Does the hegemonic masculinity change as well? Absolutely. Masculinities are configurations accomplished by "practice...in social action, and therefore can differ according to...a particular social setting" (Connell 836).

Hegemonic masculinity's ability to differ and change is central to this paper. Since hegemonic masculinity can change and can be changed, it allows for reactions against it. It is not, as previously asserted, essentialized or fixed on any one thing. In different times and places, when hegemonic masculinity is unsettling or unfulfilling in the sense that the men in that time and place do not find it satisfactory, men can react against it. They can configure a new hegemonic masculinity, one that is appealing and authentic to what those men believe man should be. These men who react against hegemony do so primarily because they feel the need to "compensate for a sense of disempowerment created by a contemporary culture in which the...male no longer occupies a central, unchallenged, normative position" (Friday 7). It is easy to jump directly to feminism and the growing role of the woman in society as the cause of this

displacement, and while in many cases this is certainly a fair assumption, it is far from the only cause. Technology and consumerism are two others that this paper will focus on in regard to these two novels, *Player Piano* and *Fight Club.*

Before moving forward, it is important to note that the idea of hegemonic masculinity certainly applies to the female as well, and a hegemonic femininity undoubtedly co-exists with hegemonic masculinity. Much of what will follow could apply equally to women as well as to men, and the argument is certainly valid in both cases. However, in the case of this specific argument and in using these two specific novels, the focus will remain solely on the masculine. My argument is not dependant on the male/female binary, and thus the female reactions to the situations presented will not be discussed. Now, on to the texts.

American author Kurt Vonnegut creates a very specific type of a culture in his novel *Player Piano.* Published in 1952, Kurt wrote to a post-war audience, one of which was afraid of man and the power man had over himself and others. Kurt saw this fear of man manifested in an increased dependency on technology and machinery; "this was in 1949 and the guys who were working [with machinery] were foreseeing all sorts of machines being run by little boxes [other machines] and punched cards" (Wampeters 261). Thus, in his novel, Kurt presents technology that has "been refined to the point that manpower has been replaced with mechpower" and where "men, or masculinities, have been made redundant by technological advance" (Birgersson 1).   In this society, they are completing a futuristic Second Industrial Revolution. The first, in the words of protagonist Paul Proteus, was when "machines devalued muscles work" (Kurt 52).

What the Second Industrial Revolution has devalued, however, is not as clear to Paul. The answer is masculinity (Birgersson 11). This futuristic dystopia set forth by Kurt presents a unique hegemonic masculinity, one which "deprives them [men] any chance of asserting their masculinity, firstly by replacing them with machines and secondly by defining 'men's work' as academic studies" (Birgersson 11). Not only have machines devalued muscle work, they've made physical labor nearly obsolete. Paul, an academic, is "the most important, brilliant person in Ilium" (Kurt 1) because of the position – manager of the Ilium Works – he holds. Judged by his stature, according to a different hegemonic masculinity in which brawn has not been replaced by brain, we would not consider him masculine, as he is "tall, thin, [and] nervous" (Kurt 1) with "long, slender fingers" (Kurt 9). However, in Kurt's mechanized society, Paul remains the most prestigious man in Ilium given his position.

It is important also to note, that although academic studies in *Player Piano* are considered men's work, it is the same academic study "from which the average man is barred" (Birgersson 12). This is a common catch-22 of hegemonic masculinity. It is reflected also in Connell's article: "the case of the Australian 'iron man' surf-sports champion...is a popular exemplar of hegemonic masculinity. But the young man's regional hegemonic status actually prevents him from doing the things his local peer group defines as masculine—going wild, showing off, driving drunk, getting into fights, and defending his own prestige" (Connell 838). Although this case is not identical to the situation presented in *Player Piano*, the similarity in thought is there. Paul, who is a man in the eyes of society, is not necessarily deemed masculine by regional hegemonic

masculinities, where the men who are not in Paul's circle see his "long, slender fingers"

and wonder how it is this man deserves more over them. This contrast is demonstrated

most clearly by Bigley, a barber and member of a class far lower than Paul's, who

expresses his own views on masculinity in a long monologue to a foreign visitor; "the

machines separated the men from the boys" (Kurt 205) he begins. Bigley continues to

explain:

> "Used to be there was a lot of...things [a man] could do to be great, but the
> machines fixed that. You know, used to be you could go to sea on a big
> clipper ship or a fishing ship and be a big hero in a storm. Or maybe you
> could be a pioneer and go out west and lead the people and make trails
> and chase away Indians and all that. Or you could be a cowboy..." (Kurt
> 207)

But the machines have taken away "all the dangerous jobs" and have made man

unnecessary. Certainly, Bigley holds on to a more traditional sense of masculinity,

where the "dangerous jobs" or violent ones, such as the army, are where men can be

men. This catch-22 traps men, and forces them to choose a culture by which they define

their masculinity. Regardless, the hegemonic masculinity is established. No longer

does bravery or physical actions define a man, but rather, position and intelligence are

what Kurt's fictional hegemonic masculinity decrees, and the average man is denied the

ability to align himself with the masculine.

Similarly, in the novel *Fight Club*, Chuck Palahniuk presents a culture with a very

strong hegemonic masculinity. Published in 1996, Chuck wrote for an audience not

obsessed with technological advancement, but an audience obsessed with

consumerism. This consumer culture is what Chuck focuses on, specifically examining

the masculinity it imposes or denies. Instead of being defined by who they are or what

they do, the members of this society are defined by *what they own*. This culture is in the

midst of a crisis wherein "consumer ethos [...] reduces identities to brand names"

(Robinson 1) and "an acceptance that commodities can define the self is posed against

an ideal of authenticity" (Robinson 3). This acceptance is seen early as the narrator

describes his dependence on commercial goods: "I wasn't the only slave to my nesting

instinct. The people I know who used to sit in the bathroom with pornography, now

they sit in the bathroom with their IKEA furniture catalogue" (Chuck 43). He belabors

the point after having arrived home to find his apartment has been bombed, and

everything he owns is in splinters on the ground. He observes:

> "You buy furniture. You tell yourself, this is the last sofa I will ever need in my
> life. Buy the sofa, then for a couple years you're satisfied...Then the right set of
> dishes. The perfect bed. The drapes. The rug. Then you're trapped in your
> lovely nest, and the things you used to own, now they own you" (Chuck 44).

They own you, and eventually you *become* the things you own. "I loved that condo. I

loved every stick of furniture. That was my whole life. Everything, the lamps, the

chairs, the rugs were me. The dishes in the cabinet were me. The plants were me. The

television was me. It was me that blew up" (Chuck 110-11). Chuck makes it clear the

way that commodities and consumer culture have come to define his narrator's

character and when all of that is lost in the bombing of his apartment, he too is suddenly

lost. "If you don't know what you want" Chuck muses, "you end up with a lot you don't"

(Chuck 45), recognizing that type of male identity construction leads to a false sense of

self, or to what the narrator will comes to see as an inauthentic sense of self. "The social

force against which *Fight Club*'s males rebel is figured as a consumer or corporate

culture that promotes phoniness over authenticity" (Robinson 2).

The consumer culture is supplemented with what Robinson notes as "corporate culture," which again, also "promotes phoniness over authenticity". The narrator is a slave not only to the "nesting instinct" but also to the monotony of the "white collar bureaucracy" (Robinson 9). This is evidenced in the novel through the narrator's constant work-related travel: "You wake up at O'Hare. You wake up at Logan. You wake up at SeaTac...You wake up at O'Hare, again...You wake up at LAX...If I could wake up in a different place at a different time, could I wake up as a different person?" (Chuck 25, 31, 33). There is no authentic sense of his masculine self in this society and culture, and the narrator starts to realize this. Being masculine no longer has anything to do with being male, but rather it has to do with constructing an identity void of masculinity based off the things around you. Much like Bigley in *Player Piano*, Tyler Durden, the narrator's friend and mentor in *Fight Club*, expresses his own views on what masculinity ought to be. His ideas are defined by historical context, which as mentioned previously, is one of the contributing factors to hegemonic masculinity. In the case of *Fight Club*, however, there is no great historical context against which these men can define themselves. They "don't have a great war in [their] generation, or a great depression" (Chuck 149). So instead, "advertising has [them] chasing cars and clothes they don't need" as "generations have been working in jobs they hate, just so they can buy what they don't really need" (Chuck 149). These men's self-definitions lack any historical context and are void of any masculinity as it is the commodities they own that define them; their masculine identities are false and inauthentic.

The hegemonic masculinity now established within the two novels and their

respective cultures, it is important to next look at the two combined, taking note of

similarities between the situations of the lead male characters. In both cases, these men

are experiencing what Robinson calls "a widespread cultural crisis" (1). This crisis, she

asserts, "most poignantly affects men...and replaces meaningful work with status

oriented consumption" (1). This is most certainly true, and this cultural crisis has

removed any authentic connection to their masculinity, thus stripping them of a

masculine or male identity. Whether by machines or by commodities, these men find

themselves a part of a "generation of American men who lack the power to find

meaning in the wastes of [their] culture" (Robinson 1). Bigley, again seems to sum it up

perfectly when he claims that "the machines took all the good jobs, where a man could

be true to hisself and false to nobody else" (Kurt 207). The same sentiment applies to

the men of *Fight Club*. No longer are they true to themselves, but rather are false,

pretending to be the things they own. For both characters, Paul Proteus and the

narrator, "modern masculinity...consist[s] of the leftovers, the sad reminders, of a viable

masculinity that had once existed in a more stable cultural environment" (Robinson

12).

It is this belief that there at one time existed a viable masculinity, however, that

prompts the two characters into action. Since they disagree with the hegemonic

masculinity of their respective societies and the masculine identity each imposes, Paul

Proteus and the narrator decide to create their own. In an attempt to return meaning to

who they are as men, they each seek a return to what they believe is a truer sense of

masculinity. This becomes for them an authentic masculinity that is independent of

their culture, removed from the influences of society.

Paul starts this process on an individual level. He feels the need to find this

independent masculine ideal on his own before it can expand to include other men. The

change is gradual, as originally he is content in his role in his society. After all, he is

considered to be the "manliest" man in his society because he holds one of the highest

positions as one of the "finest ivory tower doctors" (Birgersson 2). But he soon desires

something more. Paul "had never been a reading man, but now he was developing an

appetite for novels wherein the hero lived vigorously and out-of-doors, dealing directly

with nature, dependent upon basic cunning and physical strength for survival" (Kurt

137). These novels provide Paul with a "primitive ideal to which he could aspire" and

he discovers within himself that "he wanted to deal, not with society, but only with

Earth as God had given it to man" (Kurt 137). As this change develops and grows

stronger within Paul, he soon starts to look at "fellow members of the system" and think

"to hell with you" (Kurt 137). Ultimately, he is only "waiting until a time when

he...would be in mental shape to quit and start a better life" (Kurt 137).   Soon enough,

that time seems to arrive, as Paul finds an old farmhouse for sale outside of the city, and

immediately decides to purchase it. This farmhouse is his opportunity to reconnect

with an authentic masculine identity outside of society. For a farmhouse means

"farming—now *there* was a magic word" (Kurt 147). It is completely unacceptable by

society's standards, as one man manages the "farming of the whole country with one

hundred men and several million dollars' worth of machinery" (Kurt 147), but the more

he thinks about it, the more perfect it seems. "Farming. Paul's pulse quickened, and he daydreamed of living a century before" (Kurt 147). So to the farmhouse he goes, and while the realtor Dr. Pond does his best to talk Paul out of the idea, his attempts are futile. For Paul, "here was a place where he could work with his hands, getting life from nature without being disturbed" (Kurt 153). It is a return to what Paul believes is natural and authentic. And so begins Paul's journey into that authentic masculine identity he so desires. Paul's efforts lead him to the Ghost Shirt Society. The Ghost Shirt Society is essentially, "a revolutionary group" (Ponniah 230) and has been growing, unbeknownst to Paul, while he underwent his own individual process. When he joins, he is thrown to the forefront as a figurehead of a group that seeks to "defend old values" (Ponniah 230) and "create a new society, in which people are more important than machines and a society that upholds the worth of human beings" (Ponniah 230).

Fight Club's Narrator takes a similar approach, starting on a personal level. After the destruction of his condo, the narrator is forced to seek a new identity, and, freed from the items that once owned him, he is able to do anything. He reflects that "it used to be enough that when I came home angry...I could clean my condominium or detail my car" (Chuck 49). Without those things, he looks elsewhere. Rather than buying items to create his identity or calm his anger, he wonders, "maybe self-improvement isn't the answer" (Chuck 49). Maybe, instead, "self-destruction is the answer" (Chuck 49). And so when Tyler drunkenly tells the narrator to hit him, he does. He is taking advantage of having lost everything and being able to start fresh, free from the identity his commodities and society once imposed. And thus, he finds fight club in the same way

Paul finds his farm. "The first fight club was just Tyler and I pounding on each other"

(Chuck 49) he says, as their way to release frustration, but it soon grew into more.

Eventually, fight club grows, and more and more members start to join. It is a way for

them to, outside of society, connect with what they feel is an authentic masculinity. It

provides them an opportunity to express themselves in a way that, like Paul's farming,

society would deem unacceptable. Fight club provides a feeling of the natural,

physically manifested in the fifth rule of fight club: "fight without shirts or shoes"

(Chuck 49). The characters are literally stripped of their shirts, stripped of society and

the consumer culture that mandates who they are. They are free to be the men they

believe they should be. And it works. "Who guys are in fight club is not who they are in

the real world. Even if you told the kid in the copy center that he had a good fight, you

wouldn't be talking to the same man" (Chuck 49). Fight club is the narrator's way of

escaping the hegemonic masculinity imposed by his culture, even if only during "the

hours between when fight club starts and when fight club ends" (Chuck 48). The

narrator has found his farm, and begins his own journey into his authentic masculinity.

The narrator's experience leads to the creation of a larger group, Project Mayhem.

Project Mayhem is, like the Ghost Shirt Society, a revolutionary group, seeking "the

complete and right-away destruction of civilization" (Chuck 125). Through this, Tyler

and the narrator feel that they will be able to take "control" (Chuck 122) of their lives

and their identity and their world.

  Both the Ghost Shirt Society and Project Mayhem function as sub-cultures within

their respective worlds. They provide an outlet, outside of social restrictions, for these

men to freely pursue their ideas of authentic masculinity. In addition to providing an

outlet, however, the existence of these groups helps to further the development of a

natural masculine identity in and of themselves. They promote solidarity, as these men

are united around a common purpose, and male solidarity is one of the dominant

discourses of masculinity (Kiesling 701). This promotion of "male solidarity – the 'old

boys club' – plays a role in the maintenance of men's power" (Kielsing 695). It is

important to note that "power" in this sense does not mean dominance or superiority

over others, but rather it refers to a power of self. As Tyler mentions in the formation of

Project Mayhem, it is the power to take control of their own lives, outside of what

society tells them (Chuck 126). These men have been stripped of their authentic

identity, and need a new source of power to reconnect with that identity. Again, this

solidarity is the result of being gathered and motivated by a common purpose. Both

groups stress a return to the natural and authentic, as this is where they can find their

true masculine identities. For Paul and his companions, this can be seen in the

inspiration for their revolutionary organization. They have named themselves after the

Indians who resisted the increasing presence and oppression of the white man.

> "The Indians found out that all the things they used to take pride in doing, all the
> things that made them feel important, all the things that used to gain them
> prestige, all the ways in which they used to justify their existence—they found
> that all those things were going or gone" (Kurt 288).

Paul and the fellow Ghost Shirt Society members find themselves in a similar position,

although instead of the white man, they have been displaced by machines. Like the

Indians of history, The Ghost Shirt Society wants to "make one last fight for the old

values" (288). If they don't make a stand now and "revolt against the worthless values

of the modern times" (Ponniah 230) then "people [will] have no choice but to become second-rate machines themselves, or wards of the machines" (Kurt 290). The return to the authentic isn't as singularly focused in *Fight Club* through Project Mayhem, although there are a number of factors that center around the idea of freeing oneself from the modern values of society in the same way the Ghost Shirt Society hopes to. The narrator, Tyler, and the rest of the men in the novel are presented as dissatisfied with modern values and hegemonic masculinity; Project Mayhem is the solution that "will break up civilization so that we can make something better" (Chuck 125).

  As these two groups are founded around a common set of values, goals, or purposes, the two organizations can be likened to fraternities, which is important in observing an interesting aspect of the "old boys club". "There is thus a kind of paradox to membership to the fraternity [Ghost Shirt Society/Project Mayhem], in which each member must first be entirely dominated and powerless before he can be accepted" (Kiesling 708). In relation to the Ghost Shirt Society, this acceptance of powerlessness is seen in the members' knowledge and acceptance of the fact that machines have replaced them: "The machines took all the good jobs" (Kurt 207) and that "people have no choice but to become second-rate machines...of wards of the machines" (Kurt 290). This acceptance of their powerlessness is what allows them to become members of the Ghost Shirt Society. Similarly, an acceptance of total domination must be accepted before members can move from fight club into Project Mayhem. "Hitting bottom" (Chuck 78) comes up often, as Tyler tells the narrator that this is the most important

thing in discovering his authentic masculinity: "It's only after you've lost everything that you're free to do anything" (Chuck 70).

In addition to sharing these similarities, the two groups share one more, most important belief. They seek to find and secure an authentic masculinity. For them, that "authenticity is not socially constructed—that is, authenticity is a pure ideal, outside of culture" (Robinson 9). Likewise, Paul expresses a near identical thought when he ponders, " Somewhere, outside of society, there was a place for a man...to live heartily and blamelessly, *naturally*..." (Kurt 146). Both Paul and the narrator are in search of a "pure" and "ideal" masculinity that exists "somewhere, outside of society". This is what unifies them and this is the ultimate goal of both characters and their organizations.

Ultimately, both these revolutionary counter-culture groups fail. But why? If hegemonic masculinity is indeed something that, as previously stated, can be changed or altered over the course of history with changing social action, why do these groups, who hope to change the accepted social action by implementing their own, fail? There are many factors, and each one plays a role in the failure of The Ghost Shirt Society and Project Mayhem.

In the case of *Player Piano*, despite the organization of the Ghost Shirt Society and the widespread movement – Pittsburgh, Seattle, Minneapolis, St. Louis, Chicago, Birmingham, Boston, New York, Salt Lake City, Oakland, and Ilium (Kurt 327-28) all have factions operating within them – they are not powerful enough to complete a mass overthrow of society in one fell swoop. The rest of society is still too strong, and crushes the attempts at change. "*People of Ilium, lay down your arms!*" booms the

loudspeaker of a robot helicopter, *"Oakland and Salt Lake City have been restored to order. Your cause is lost"* (Kurt 331). The rest of society comes crashing down around their efforts. Additionally, despite the mass movement across the country and as unified as their purpose and efforts may seem to have been, there is mass disorganization and an actual lack of common purpose. For Paul, the movement required a specific approach if they were to be successful and topple the hegemonic masculinity. But as the movement grew, its members grew out of control. "'Lord,' said Paul, "'I didn't think it'd be like this...I suppose genocide is closer. The good die with the bad—the flush toilets with the automatic lathe controls'" (Kurt 330). Their changed social action is not unified, and as such, not substantial enough to change the accepted social action. Ultimately, Paul ends up arrested. He and the other leaders of the Ghost Shirt Society, accepting their defeat, turn themselves over to the authorities, thus ending any chance of successfully changing the hegemonic masculinity and returning to what Paul envisioned. Furthermore, Kurt makes sure that his readers know the movement has failed in the last pages of his novel. As Paul and the others approach the police to end their run, a young "bright looking teenager" approaches them, asking for an electric motor (Kurt 338). "'If I had a decent little motor...' said the youngster excitedly, 'I'll betch anything I could make a gadget that'd play drums like nothing you ever head before" (339). Everything that Paul has been fighting for and moving toward is instantly ended, and society around him is already again comfortable with the hegemonic masculinity, only hours after having sought to destroy it.

With *Fight Club*'s Project Mayhem, there are a number of reasons for failure as well, although different from the Ghost Shirt Society's. The first of these issues is that the narrator suffers from dissociative personality disorder and Tyler Durden, the man he has been following on his path to finding masculine authenticity, is his split personality. "'We're not two separate men. Long story short, when you're awake, you have the control, and you can call yourself anything you want, but the second you fall asleep, I take over, and you become Tyler Durden'" (Chuck 167). Once this realization sets in, the narrator sees what his actions have done and the threat that Project Mayhem poses. This is emphasized by the death of a member of Project Mayhem, Robert Paulsen: "One minute, Robert Paulsen was the warm center that the life of the world crowded around, and the next moment, Robert Paulsen was an object" (Chuck 177-78). His sudden realization leads him to attempt to end the fight clubs and Project Mayhem. "Go home, tonight, and forget about fight club. I think fight club has served its purpose, don't you? Project Mayhem is canceled" (Chuck 178). But like the Ghost Shirt Society, Project Mayhem has spread beyond the narrator's control, and he cannot harness it toward the original purpose and goal he sought. In an act of desperation, the narrator attempts to take his life in order to dispose of Tyler Durden – he's unsuccessful. Like Paul, the narrator finds himself in the hands of an external authority, a man he calls "God" who sits "across his long walnut desk with his diplomas hanging on the wall behind him" (Chuck 207).

In both cases, their efforts fail. What started as individual attempts to connect with an authentic masculine identity blossomed into society wide movements to topple

the constructed hegemonic masculinity in favor of an authentic masculinity. More

importantly than their failures, though, is the authentic masculine they seek. They are

in search of something that they believe exists independently of culture and society.

Really what they are chasing after isn't an original, free of cultural influence, masculine

identity – it is simply a different hegemonic masculinity. Paul Proteus's farming and his

desire to live "a century before" and the narrator and his bare-knuckled physicality and

hs dream of "stalking elk past department store windows" and wearing "leather clothes

that will last...the rest of your life" (Chuck 125) are just manifestations of *different*

hegemonic masculinities. Their desires reflect not an independent and pure ideal of

authentic masculinity but hegemonic masculinities of past cultures. They only perceive

these masculinities to be authentic and pure and true because they *aren't theirs.* Thus,

there is no authentic masculinity at which these characters can arrive, as any other

masculinity is only another cultural construction—their assumption that authentic

masculinity "is a pure ideal...outside of culture..." is wrong.

     If there is no authentic masculinity at which men can arrive, what then are Kurt

and Chuck saying about masculinity? Were the efforts of Paul Proteus and the narrator

to find an independent, authentic, masculine identity in vain? Are Kurt and Chuck

telling us that all men are destined to live lives of phoniness, defined by a hegemonic

masculinity over which they have no control? Or, rather, are they claiming that

authentic masculinity is not something one can ever obtain, but is instead only

something to which men can aspire on a personal level? It is the second option that I

believe is the appropriate response, and the stance that both Kurt and Chuck take in

their novels. In a society where hegemonic masculinity disagrees with what men feel is

right or appropriate, they can achieve an authentic masculine identity by undermining

the hegemonic masculinity. Each author seems to say that it is in the defiance that the

characters are free and able to connect with their male identity. The process, and not

necessarily the result, is what is important.

The process for Paul is indeed what matters and where he finds his own

personal connection with the authentic masculine. Even though he fails in his ultimate

goal of toppling the hegemonic masculinity, he has succeeded personally. On the farm,

as Paul begins to first explore what he thinks is an authentic masculinity, noted that

"here was a place he could work with his hands, getting life from nature" (Kurt 152).

While he works he fantasizes about the hero living vigorously and out-of-doors, dealing

directly with nature, as he is doing now. The efforts inspire in him a "feel of primitive

strength" and his muscles are "tight from the unaccustomed rigors of the afternoon"

(Kurt 158) on the farm. In this situation, long before Paul has any knowledge of the

Ghost Shirt Society, and long before he desires to overthrow his society and culture, is

where Paul has found a way to reach for his personal "authentic masculinity." Whether

or not there truly exists an independent authentic masculine identity outside of culture

is irrelevant, for in this moment Paul feels he has found it. It is in the effort that he

connects with his authentic masculinity. Paul and his companions note this just before

they submit themselves to the authorities.

> And that left Paul. "To a better world," he started to say, but he cut the toast
> short, thinking of the people of Ilium, already eager to recreate the same old
> nightmare. "To the record," he said, and smashed the empty bottle on a rock.
> ..."This isn't the end, you know," he said. "Nothing ever is..." (340-41)

Paul has come to the realization, at the end of everything, that the process is what has made them. The "record", taking note of the fact that they tried, is what is important, because in that attempt is where he has gained his sense of authentic masculine identity. By noting that "This isn't the end", Kurt suggests that this process is one that will continue, and generations of men will undergo the same process, however manifested, as they attempt to find their own authentic masculinity.

Similarly, the narrator strives for a masculine authenticity and comes closest not as a result of Project Mayhem, but through the fight clubs. They provide an outlet for him to reach a new level of masculinity. "The authenticity of what the men experience in fight club is explicitly contrasted with the falseness of their everyday life" (Robinson 12). In fight club, the narrator and other men are free to express themselves, and this is evidenced in the narrator's observations: "Who guys are in fight club is not who they are in the real world" (Chuck 49) because at fight club "you're not how much money you've got in the bank. You're not your job. You're not your family, and you're not who you tell yourself" (143). It is in this freedom that man is allowed to search for, and hopefully find, his authentic masculine ideal. "You aren't alive anywhere like you're alive at fight club. Fight club isn't about winning or losing fights...when you wake up Sunday afternoon you feel saved" (Chuck 51). It is here in fight club, long before Project Mayhem even exists, that the narrator is able to pursue and find his own personal authentic masculine identity. Like Paul on his farm, fight club inspires the narrator to feel an inner strength that society and the hegemonic masculinity do not allow. Through this process of exploring the possibilities of alternate masculinities, the

narrator comes closest to his ultimate ideal of an authentic masculinity. This idea that

the product is in the process is also reflected in the closing lines of Chuck's novel:

> Someday, she says, they'll bring me back...
> But I don't want to go back. Not yet.
> Just because.
> Because every once and in a while, somebody brings me my lunch tray and my
> meds and he has a black eye or his forehead is swollen with stitches, and he says:
> "We miss you Mr. Durden." (207-08)

The narrator, or, Tyler, is consciously choosing to delay his return to society. His plans

to destroy and "break up civilization" will never be successful, but "instead, this

impossibility itself is deferred and thereby transformed into possibility" (Friday 38). By

delaying the inevitable failure of Project Mayhem, Tyler is extending the opportunity

and the process in which he and all the other men involved feel like they have found

their authentic masculine identities.

It is in this process that both characters find their "authentic masculinity." It is

in this process that they have achieved that which they initially thought could only be

achieved by toppling society. It is also in this process they have also learned that this

authentic masculinity they seek is not independent of culture. It is, again, simply a

different construction of hegemonic masculinity. And although each character in a

sense has failed – their cultural movements have been shut down or stalled without

their leadership – they have also succeeded. They have found a way to pursue and

connect with their authentic masculinity on a personal and individual level. Through

this, they have reasserted their masculine identities as well. By the end of each novel,

both Paul and the narrator have found an identity, based of the masculine authenticity

they have discovered in the process. "'Smile', Doctor Proteus—'" a character says after

the fall of the Ghost Shirt Society, "'you're *somebody* now'" (Kurt 340). For the narrator, he takes solace in knowing that people write to him in his psychiatric institute: "People write to me in heaven and tell me I'm remembered. That I'm their hero" (Chuck 207). He has found his identity and a sense of self, founded on the authentic masculinity he has discovered.

Ultimately, the experiences of each character suggests that the authentic masculine identity each character seeks, while not independent of culture or society, does exist, and that it exists as an individual intangible which man can only briefly grasp or realize. The fact that each character has found themselves as a result of searching for authentic masculinity confirms the existence of the masculine authenticity, but the failure of their organizations purports that the authentic masculine identity is not something that can be reached and maintained, especially by a large group in rebellion against hegemonic masculinity. Authentic masculinity is an individual and personal ideal that can only be reached as a part of a process, and never maintained as a goal or an end result.