Unattainable Manhood
Masculinity and Folk Culture in Late 20th Century American Fiction

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This thesis is dedicated to my husband, Andy, for his uncompromising love and support. Never once did he ask, “When will it be done?” Instead, he simply offered to help, in whatever way possible. And to my boys, Miles and Henry, who prolonged the writing of this dissertation by enriching my life.
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SUMMARY

My dissertation, *Unattainable Manhood*, argues that late-20th century American authors as varied as Cormac McCarthy, Maxine Hong Kingston, Toni Morrison, and Philip Roth portray the recuperation of masculinity within the domain typically assigned to women’s empowerment. Whereas critics like Hazel Carby describe the fictional representation of folk culture as the evocation of fundamentally feminine, domestic lifeways, the novels in my dissertation imagine that folk culture’s distinctive practices confer masculinity. Participation in kin networks, the cultivation of community, labor practices which stress the handmade and homespun, and folktales, themselves, are all deployed to enhance what is understood as a faltering masculinity.

In *Unattainable Manhood*, I argue that this impulse to imagine folk culture as invigorating manhood stems from what scholars ranging from Michael Kimmel to David Popenoe understand as a masculinity crisis. My dissertation focuses on novelists who grapple with two crucial factors in this crisis: men’s changing roles in the family and the transformation of the labor market. I begin by examining novels which depict dramatic shifts in gender roles within the family, imagined to result from the interworking of capitalism, Second Wave feminism, and the Civil Rights Movement. The next two chapters dissect the representation of the shift from a manufacturing to a service economy and its impact on male workers. More than a thematic preoccupation, these novels utilize formal elements, uniquely available to fictional texts, to highlight the importance of folk culture.

Taken together, these novels represent various means of coping with the shift to a post-Fordist economy and the reverberations of late 20th century social upheaval, such as the Civil Rights Movement and Second Wave feminism. Although the imaginative return to folk culture invokes lifeways and labor practices seemingly far removed from those of the late 20th century,
this fictional retreat squarely addresses the social and economic changes which prompted the masculinity crisis.
I. INTRODUCTION

Looking to counter Asian American stereotypes in U.S. popular culture, Aiieeeeee!: An Anthology of Asian-American Writers (1974) showcases novelists who are not, as Frank Chin writes, “snow jobs pushing Asian-Americans as the miracle synthetic white people that America’s proprietors of white liberal pop… make us out to be” (xv). Chin critiques this stereotype primarily in terms of its emasculating consequences for Asian American men: “Good or bad, the stereotypical Asian is nothing as a man. At worst, the Asian-American is contemptible because he is womanly, effeminate, devoid of all the traditionally masculine qualities of originality, daring, physical courage, and creativity. The mere fact that four out of five American-born Asian-American writers are women reinforces this aspect of the stereotype” (xxx). The “stereotypical Asian” is perceived to be imitative (a “miracle synthetic white” person) and consequently “effeminate.” In this passage, Chin implicitly argues that writers, through their profession’s association with “originality” and “creativity,” realize other conventionally “masculine qualities,” like “daring” and “physical courage.” This is why Chin finds it problematic that “four out of five” “Asian-American writers are women”; Asian-American men, displaced from an apparently masculine profession by female peers, confirm the “womanly, effeminate” stereotype. Chin’s insistence on the manliness of creative writing, however, doesn’t resonate with conventional notions of American masculinity. Although Chinese culture traditionally imbues intellectual labor with masculine connotations, mainstream American culture does not similarly gender this type of labor. Thus the emergence of Asian-American male writers, in and of themselves, would not reverse stereotype.
Instead, the fiction included in *Aiiieeeee!* confers masculinity on Asian American men by incorporating and idealizing folk tales, imbued with patriarchal values. This becomes particularly apparent in the second edition of *Aiiieeeee!* (1991), when Chin argues that the reclamation of an authentic Asian American identity and masculinity entails the deployment of folk tales, correctly remembered and properly told. Chin indicts authors such as Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan for transforming traditional Asian American folklore into something palatable for white audiences— and therein rendering Asian American men according to stereotype:

Kingston, with a stroke of white racist genius, attacks Chinese civilization, Confucianism itself, and where its life begins: the fairy tale. She, the victim of Chinese misogyny, says that “The Ballad of Mulan,” the children’s game chant, a fairy tale playing on the sounds of weaving, is the source of the misogynistic emphasis of Chinese ethics. Then she takes Fa Mulan, turns her into a champion of Chinese feminism and an inspiration to Chinese American girls to dump the Chinese race and make for white universality. (27)

At issue here is the meaning of “Chinese civilization,” for which Chin argues the “fairy tale” is a foundational element. According to Chin, authors like Kingston alter folk tales in service to feminism. Chin takes umbrage at this apparent bastardization because in changing the folktales, Kingston eliminates a means by which Asian American men can formulate and achieve masculinity. Chin argues that traditional folk tales, accurately captured, express Confucian values and the associated masculine ethos upon which Chinese civilization is founded (34-35).

For Chin, authorship enables Asian American men to attack demeaning stereotypes and thereby achieve masculinity. This martial model allows Chin to transform writing (labor which is not conventionally masculine) into a manly endeavor: “writing is fighting” (35). Redefining
authorship as war, associated with physical strength and martial skills, Chin squares intellectual labor with hegemonic American masculinity.

My dissertation, *Unattainable Manhood*, explores late 20th century American fiction which imagines, like the short stories Chin includes in *Aiieeeee!*, that folk culture has the capacity to restore masculinity to disempowered men. I argue that novelists as varied as Cormac McCarthy, Maxine Hong Kingston, Toni Morrison, and Philip Roth portray folk culture as invigorating manhood in response to what scholars ranging from Michael Kimmel to David Popenoe understand as a masculinity crisis. My dissertation focuses on novelists who grapple with two crucial factors in this crisis: men’s changing roles in the domestic sphere and the transformation of the labor market. I begin by examining novels which depict dramatic shifts in gender roles within the family, imagined to result from the interworking of capitalism, Second Wave feminism, and the Civil Rights Movement. The next two chapters dissect fiction which represents the shift from a manufacturing to a service economy and its impact on male workers. These novels reveal common concerns regarding late 20th century economic and social developments. Toni Morrison and Annie Proulx depict the gains of feminism as leading to the destruction of the family and community, and ultimately undermining masculinity. At the same time, each novelist approaches this shared concern from a historically-situated, culturally-specific context. For Morrison, women’s independence threatens to dismantle a unified African American culture, undermining the community’s ability to cohere in moments of crisis and in the continuing battle against oppression. Proulx, meanwhile, positions late 20th century women as symbolic of a widely reviled “culture of narcissism,” imagined to be responsible for the decline of U.S. society. More than a thematic preoccupation, folk culture’s centrality to these novels is established through the use of formal elements, uniquely available to fictional texts. For
instance, in David Bradley’s *The Chaneysville Incident*, John Washington reclaims masculinity when he assumes the role of novelist, imagining an otherwise unknowable family history using skills derived from folk culture.

The widespread perception of a masculinity crisis arose in the late 20th century when economic and social changes caused many men to take up labor conventionally associated with women. For instance, the service economy, a hallmark of post-Fordism, marks a movement away from manual labor and relies upon feminine “soft” skills. At the same time, Second Wave feminism and the Civil Rights movement led increasing numbers of women and minorities into professions that were once the exclusive preserve of white middle class men. As Michael Kimmel, in *Manhood in America* (1994), explains: “[t]he structural foundations of traditional manhood—economic independence, geographic mobility, domestic dominance—have all eroded. The transformation of the workplace—the decline of the skilled worker, global corporate relocations, the malaise of the middle-class manager, the entry of women into the assembly line and the corporate office—pressed men to confront their continued reliance on the marketplace as a way to demonstrate and prove their manhood” (197). Beyond encroaching on the public sphere and prestige gained from participation therein, women’s increasing participation in the labor force caused (mainly white) middle class families to restructure domestic labor, requiring men to take on traditionally feminine roles like cooking and nurturing. At the same time, the Civil Rights Movement and activism by feminists of color enabled more minorities to achieve middle class status and assimilate into mainstream American society. While greater class mobility might not appear to be an obvious danger to masculinity, it demanded that members of these minority communities redefine gender roles and thereby led to uncertainty regarding the traits associated with manhood.
Typically associated with middle class white men, the late 20th century masculinity crisis is imagined to result from transformations in the labor market, social equality movements, and the ensuing cultural upheaval. Kimmel explains that

[although these economic, political, and social changes have affected all different groups of men in radically different ways, perhaps the hardest hit psychologically were middle-class, straight, white men from their late 20s through their 40s. For these were not only the men who inherited a prescription for manhood that included economic autonomy, public patriarchy, and the frontier safety valve but also the men who believed themselves entitled to the power that attended on the successful demonstration of masculinity… As a result, many middle-class, white, middle-aged heterosexual men—among the most privileged groups in the history of the world—do not experience themselves as powerful.

(262) Deploying the rhetoric of crisis enables these apparently powerless white men to claim victimhood, which they contend must be redressed through the restoration of the modern era’s gender relations and thereby the resurrection of retrograde masculinities. Hamilton Carroll contends that “arguments [positioning white men as emasculated] participate in the broader and more pernicious culture of white male injury or victimhood that cites women and people of color as the beneficiaries of those transformations at the expense of white male enfranchisement. This belief persists despite much evidence to the contrary” (4). Utilizing “white male injury,” “[w]hite masculinity has responded to calls for both redistribution and recognition by citing itself as the most needy and the most worthy recipient of what it denies it already has” (10). While I am foundationally interested in the rhetoric of crisis and the myriad of ways that rhetoric is put to
use, this dissertation does not investigate whether or not a crisis did, indeed, occur. Rather, I am interested in how a perceived crisis led novelists to envision an alternative masculine model.

The term “crisis” is not usually applied to minority men because, historically, racism and the resultant poverty have precluded many of these men from achieving hegemonic American manhood; as a result, their ability to achieve normative masculinity has always been tenuous. For instance, African American men have been stereotyped as overly-physical and hyper-sexual, thereby discouraged from educational achievement and denied access to class mobility. As bell hooks argues: “Seen as animals, brutes, natural born rapists, and murderers, black men… are victimized by stereotypes that were first articulated in the nineteenth century but hold sway over the minds and imaginations of the citizens of this nation in the present day… Negative stereotypes about the nature of black masculinity continue to overdetermine the identities black males are allowed to fashion for themselves” (xii). Clyde W. Franklin II argues that, after the publication of the Moynihan Report which “indirectly blamed Black women for Black people’s underclass status in America,” “Black men convinced themselves that they could be ‘men’ only if they adopted the White male’s sex role… White masculine role enactment can occur only when there is full participation in American society, [a] requirement for White male sex-role assumption continues to be met by only a few Black men” (364). The study of masculinity provides a crucial lens on social inequality, revealing the ways in which gender is deployed as a gate-keeper, defining cultural Others and relegating many to the lower classes. This becomes apparent in studies like Lisa Lowe’s Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics (1996), wherein she argues that “Chinese male immigrants could be said to occupy, before 1940, a ‘feminized’ position in relation to white male citizens and, after 1940, a ‘masculinity’ whose racialization is the material trace of the history of this ‘gendering’” (12). Thus, the ways in
which minorities are gendered by racial and ethnic stereotypes, as well as their particular histories of exclusion from the U.S. majority, produce concrete limitations and circumscriptions that novelists of color attempt to redress through the imaginative construction of alternative masculine models. At the same time, as I demonstrate in Chapter 3, novelists like David Bradley and Philip Roth imagine that advances in equality and assimilation threaten their protagonists’ achievement of masculinity.

In light of late 20th century social and economic changes, as well as the enduring effects of gendered stereotypes on minority men, it is not surprising that many U.S. men felt a sense of emasculation. It is, however, remarkable that so many novelists imagine a return to folk culture as a means of countering this perceived feminization. Although folk culture does not have fixed content, it is loosely organized around several key concepts. For many of the novels I analyze, folk culture involves the retreat to an isolated area, wherein knowledge, skills, and labor practices are handed down from father to son via physical demonstration and oral culture.7

Philip Roth’s *American Pastoral* marks a departure from the depiction of folk culture as necessarily originating in a rural preserve. Instead, Roth imagines folk culture as a product of a tightly knit urban Jewish community in which a commitment to craftsmanship underwrites success. In so doing, *American Pastoral* illustrates another aspect of folk culture common to the novels I consider in *Unattainable Manhood*: the invocation of labor which predates the factories of Fordism and the service work of post-Fordism, and requires the skills associated with craftsmanship. *The Shipping News* marks an exception to this general rule. Annie Proulx’s protagonist does not recuperate a form of labor associated with folk culture but instead uses his talents as a newspaper reporter to facilitate the continued practice of the island’s traditional livelihood: fishing. *The Shipping News* participates in another feature common to the depiction
of folk culture; Proulx and the other novelists in this study associate folk culture with poverty and the ensuing creation of community as a means of thwarting dire conditions. In these novels, cultural unity is established and fostered by shared traditions, manifest most often in folktale and oral culture.

This late 20th century portrayal of folk culture echoes a similar celebration of the folk that emerged in the 1920s and 1930s. It is not surprising that both eras looked to the past as a model of community and ideal way of life because these were periods of instability, marked by fundamental shifts in the economy and social upheaval. Under Fordism labor became defined by the assembly line rather than farming or craftsmanship, while post-Fordism precipitated the shift from the assembly line to the cyber era. These labor market transformations instigated pivotal moments in urbanization: the early 20th century marked by optimism for the possibilities of the city and the late 20th century witnessing the implosion of those hopes. At the same time, both eras made strides towards greater equality, for (some) minorities and (some) women. Thus, the category of the folk functions as a form of nostalgia for a simpler way of life, something that is on the verge of being lost in the technological, economic, and social advances. More than a simple romanticization, however, folk culture provides a peripheral sphere which can provide perspective on and a critique of these transformations. According to Martin Favor in *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance* (1999), “Populist elitism facilitates a critique of the black bourgeoisie” (8). Of course, the irony of this critique is that it is launched by members of the bourgeoisie. Favor goes on to argue that the invocation of folk culture during the Harlem Renaissance marked an attempt to create “unity” in the face of an “elite” and thereby offers “resistance to crushing assimilationism and/or naturalization of African American cultural inferiority” (7, 6).
The Harlem Renaissance was not the only movement to recuperate folk culture in the early part of the 20th century. In the mid-1930s, the Index of American Design, part of the Works Progress Administration, was formed. Its goal was to establish a national repository for American material culture. Holger Cahill, in “American Resources in the Arts” (1936), argues:

The Index of American Design represents an endeavor to recover a usable past in the decorative, folk, and popular arts of our country… to awaken a realistic and vivid appreciation of the American past… rediscovering a rich native design heritage which we had all but forgotten in our frantic and fashionable search for aesthetic fragments of European and Asiatic nations. The Index is a record of objects which reveal a native and spontaneous culture. It gives us a broad view of this American cultural heritage… the continuity of aesthetic experience with the daily vocations of the American people. (42) Like the invocation of folk culture by Harlem Renaissance artists, the Index of American Design looked to establish an authentic culture as a means of countering claims that Americans were imitative (manifest in the “search for aesthetic fragments of European and Asiatic nations”). In this context, Chin’s search for “originality” through authentic Asian American folklore participates in a long-standing tradition whereby folk culture serves as the foundation of a distinctive community. Similarly, the desire to recuperate folk culture retains nationalist overtures in the 1975 creation of the National Folklife Center in the U.S. Library of Congress. This Center was justified by the logic that “the encouragement and support of research and scholarship in American folk life is a legitimate concern of the Federal Government” because “American folk traditions have persisted and lent strength to the people and the nation” (1-2).9

The foundation of the American Folk Life Center marks a definitive transformation in folk studies. While the Index of American Design sought to collect artifacts, the American Folk Life
Center looks to chronicle the context in which those artifacts were used. As Barre Toelken explains, “Up to the 1970s, it was common for most folklorists, and most folklore textbooks, to pay more attention to the items of folklore than to the live processes by and through which folklore is produced” (xi). In other words, folk life scholars focus on “style, performance, context, event, and process” while earlier folklorists analyzed “genre, structure, or text” (Toelken, xi). The changing field of folk studies marks the fundamental shift from modernist to postmodernist inquiry. At the same time, there are historical reasons whereby scholars might move from collecting artifacts to examining context. In the 1930s, it was still possible to record a way of life untouched by modern conveniences. In a post-Fordist era, folk culture doesn’t have a referent in the actual world; it is purely fictional. This is why it makes sense that novelists look to folk culture. Because folk culture is an imaginative construction, an author has the ability to craft a peripheral sphere which perfectly addresses her particular critique of contemporary society. At the same time, folk culture invokes nostalgia because it is always on the verge of extinction or already defunct. This nostalgia, in late 20th century novels, generates sympathy for male protagonists who are losing or have lost their patriarchal privilege – inciting a desire to restore this privilege to the character.

The disappearance of anyone who might qualify as “folk” also provides the motivation for transformations in the field of folk studies. In “Who Are the Folk?” (1977), Alan Dundes participates in a late 20th century movement to redefine the study of folklore: “ ‘The term “folk” can refer to any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is—it could be common occupation, language, or religion—but what is important is that a group formed for whatever reason will have some traditions which it calls its own. With this flexible definition of folk, a group could be as large as a nation or as
small as a family” (22). With this definition, Dundes creates an elastic and ever-expanding definition of the folk. This allows folklore scholars to include contemporary Americans in their study of folk life, as Toelken attests:

[U]p until very recently the rural scene has been the basis for most American folklore studies… for American culture itself has been defined—in its own terms—by a vanishing frontier, a disappearing pioneer tradition, a fading of the ‘good old days’… Modern folklorists do not limit their attention to the rural, quaint, or ‘backward’ elements of their culture. Rather, they will study and discuss any expressive phenomena—urban or rural—that seem to act like other previously recognized folk traditions. (2)

This movement to expand the definition of folklore, away from an approach which values the “vanishing,” “disappearing,” or “fading” “rural scene,” represents a desire to save the profession from necessary extinction, as Dundes makes clear: “If modern folklorists accepted the nineteenth century definition of folk as illiterate, rural, backward peasant, then it might well be that the study of the lore of such folk might be a strictly salvage operation and that the discipline of folkloristics would in time follow the folk itself into oblivion” (22). Unlike Dundes or Toelken, the authors in this study imagine folk culture as a peripheral sphere on the verge of extinction.¹⁰

Thus, folk culture provides novelists with the means by which characters can contemplate and critique contemporary America. As Favor argues, however, “By relying too heavily on a critique launched from the margins, we risk never being able to dismantle those margins without wholly erasing ourselves; in an effort at self-preservation, marginal we must remain” (9).

The novels I examine in this dissertation portray the recuperation of masculinity within a folk domain typically assigned to women’s empowerment. Participation in kin networks, the cultivation of community, labor practices which stress the handmade and homespun, and
folktales, themselves, are all deployed to enhance what is understood as a faltering masculinity. For much of the late 20\textsuperscript{th} century, however, folk culture forms the foundation of a feminist politics looking to recuperate from derision roles and duties conventionally associated with women. Imagining folk culture as the basis of a feminist praxis, writers like Cherie Moraga, Sandra Cisneros, Alice Walker, Marjorie Pryse, Gloria Anzaldúa, Amy Tan, and Maxine Hong Kingston celebrate virtues and labor that dominant culture has dismissed. These authors envision women’s traditional roles as foundational to the creation of a tightly knit community. For instance, Wendy Ho’s 	extit{In Her Mother’s House: The Politics of Asian American Mother-Daughter Writing} (1999) argues that novels by Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan dramatize the ways in which Asian American folk culture is handed down from mother to daughter through the culture which emerges from shared domestic labor. Ho claims that the “talk-stories,” imparted while preparing dinner or sewing dresses (“sometimes hand-embroidered or beaded with intricate flowers”), demarcate the “gendered spaces of women’s talk and culture” (14, 12). While performing distinctively feminine domestic labor, women pass along traditional Chinese and Hawaiian folk tales, as well as family history (13). For Ho, Asian American women sustain the community by preserving the past (12).

While the association of ethnic women’s fiction with folk culture is commonly recognized, the same is true, though less commonly recognized, of white women. Annie Cheatham and Mary Clare Powell, in 	extit{This Way Daybreak Comes: Women’s Values and the Future} (1986), claim: “[w]omen are intimately involved with life—birth, death, peacemaking, governing, gardening, artmaking. We are harvesters, teachers, scientists, witches, and mediators. We invent, nurse, counsel, cook, design, and administer. Life-loving values, socialized as ‘female,’ are not exclusive to women. Many men exhibit them, and some women don’t. But the traits
relegated to women as unnecessary or unworthy of men—e.g., flexibility, receptivity, nurturing, reverence for life, cooperativeness—are turning out to be the qualities necessary for sustenance of life on this planet” (xix). The feminine “traits” described by Cheatham and Powell are intimately tied to the domestic sphere and associated with folk labor (gardening, harvesting, and witchcraft). Cheatham and Powell argue that these traits should be considered a source of women’s strength and empowerment, but also “sustenance” for “life on this planet.” In this formulation, women’s “life-loving values” are no longer derided as “unnecessary” or “unworthy.”

The desire to recuperate folk masculinity, in the novels analyzed in this dissertation, is associated with men’s movement into conventionally feminine roles and realms. While this transition into feminized labor seemingly indicates a more expansive definition of masculinity, the desire to redress this emasculation through a retreat to a folk culture involves colonizing a conventionally feminine sphere and transforming it into a masculine space. Often, this involves imbuing folk culture with traditionally masculine values (i.e. when Chin describes “writing as fighting”). Colson Whitehead embraces the domestic sphere as an ideal space for a man to labor; at the same time, Whitehead positions the domestic as a unique space which enables his protagonist to enact conventionally masculine traits, like individualism. In the case of Cormac McCarthy and Chuck Palahniuk, folk culture marks a realm in which characters can retreat from the late 20th century labor market’s feminine connotations and recuperate patriarchal privilege. Many of the authors examined in Unattainable Manhood recognize as problematic the patriarchal underpinnings of folk culture and therefore refuse to imagine a permanent retreat to a folk environment; other authors, however, unambiguously celebrate the recuperation of patriarchy within the confines of a folk culture. Even those novels which celebrate folk culture
as the ideal sphere of masculine retrenchment realize that it is not a viable solution to late 20th century masculinity crises, in that folk culture exists in the past or in remote areas and cannot evade modernization.

In contrast to the novelists who depict folk culture as a balm for wounded manhood, public figures as diverse as Dan Quayle and Bill Clinton idealized the modern era as the model for masculinity and a stable social order. Stephanie Coontz describes late 20th century Americans’ overwhelming nostalgia for mid-century family formations, labor market, and gender roles, saying:

If the 1950s family existed today, both [liberals and conservatives] seem to assume, we would not have the contemporary social dilemmas that cause such debate. At first glance, the figures seem to justify this assumption… The profamily features of this decade were bolstered by impressive economic improvements for vast numbers of Americans… By 1960, thirty-one million of the nation’s forty-four million families owned their own home, 87 percent had a television, and 75 percent owned a car. The number of people with discretionary income doubled during the 1950s. For most Americans, the most salient symbol and immediate beneficiary of their newfound prosperity was the nuclear family. (24, 25)

Coontz goes on to explore the reality of the 1950s, noting that governmental policies fostered economic expansion, rising real wages, and home ownership (68-92). She also notes that “minorities were almost entirely excluded from the gains and privileges accorded white middle-class families” (30). Thus, the romanticization of the modern era’s gender relations as the source of its prosperity cannot be sustained in light of historical evidence pointing to the enormous
governmental infrastructure sustaining the economic growth and the considerable inequalities upon which that economic boom relied.

In Chapter One, “Folk Family Values,” I argue that Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby* (1981) and Annie Proulx’s *The Shipping News* (1993) intervene in the contemporary preoccupation with societal decline, presumed to result from women’s wider participation in the workforce and the ensuing increase in their self-interest. *Tar Baby* and *The Shipping News* foreground women’s individualism as the source of social decline and emasculation. Female protagonists in these novels focus on self-making, a conventionally masculine activity, and thereby feminize their male partners, men who stake their identities on tending to the community or children. But Morrison and Proulx rescue these male characters from emasculation by portraying them as representative of a folk culture, marked by practices such as strong kinship networks, women’s participation in the labor force, and men who nurture children, all of which contribute to a sense of community and encourage gender equality.

Chapter Two, “Father Knows Best: David Bradley and Philip Roth,” examines the widespread concern over "father absence," men’s inability to act as primary breadwinners in “intact” biological families, an anxiety which intensified in the mid-1960s for the African American community with the publication of the Moynihan report and reached its zenith for dominant society in the mid-1990s, manifest in Dan Quayle’s infamous outrage over Murphy Brown’s choice to become a single mother. The novels I examine in this chapter -- *The Chaneysville Incident* (1981) and *American Pastoral* (1997) – represent the erosion of paternal roles and thereby masculinity as a result of the movement away from segregated folk communities and assimilation into mainstream American society. Centrally, each novel revolves around a male protagonist’s quest to understand the life and motivations of an admired but elusive
man. In each novel, folk culture enables these characters to narrate the hitherto unknown history of an important male figure and thereby comprehend and seek to reclaim the traits associated with masculinity.

In Chapter Three, “Belabored Manhood: Cormac McCarthy and Chuck Palahniuk,” I argue that All the Pretty Horses (1992) and Fight Club (1996) respond to the entrance of women and minorities into many professions which previously were the exclusive preserve of white men. The bestselling business book of the century, In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America’s Best Run Companies (1982), reacts to the resultant sense of feminization by arguing that success stems from the revival of male camaraderie in the workplace. Likewise, McCarthy and Palahniuk assuage fears of an emasculated work environment by idealizing folk forms of labor, either that of a cowboy or a hunter, which they portray as dependent upon a supportive network of men. Thus, male characters appear interchangeable or indistinguishable, by which these novels indicate that folk masculinity represents shared values and beliefs and thereby fosters community.

“Workin’ on the Railroad: Colson Whitehead and Maxine Hong Kingston,” Chapter Four, places John Henry Days (2001) in the context of the post-Fordist feminization of labor. In response to perceived emasculation, J. Sutter looks to appropriate the manhood of folk hero John Henry but ultimately realizes that this metaphoric recovery must fail because it doesn’t account for the fundamental differences between service work and steel driving. Whitehead’s assessment of the folktale’s utility in reimagining masculinity finds an interesting counterpoint in China Men (1980), wherein Kingston portrays the negation of a railroad folktale, celebrating the manhood of late 19th century Chinese immigrants, by dominant white society’s erasure of these laborers from historical documents and countervailing notions of masculinity within traditional Chinese
culture. Both novels intersperse autobiography, myth, historical records, and fictional accounts to demonstrate the ways in which the folktale is manipulated to suit the purposes of individual men in a variety of situations. For Whitehead and Kingston, the folktale must adapt to the particular historical and social constraints of its audience; consequently, both depict the need to revise the railroad folktale in order to locate masculinity in the domestic sphere.

Taken together, these novels represent various means of coping with the shift to a post-Fordist economy and the reverberations of late 20th century social upheaval, such as the Civil Rights Movement and Second Wave feminism. Although the imaginative return to folk culture invokes lifeways and labor practices seemingly far removed from those of the late 20th century, this fictional retreat squarely addresses the social and economic changes which prompted the masculinity crisis. For instance, Toni Morrison and Annie Proulx speak to women’s expanded employment opportunities by depicting folk cultures marked by poverty and necessitating women’s participation in the labor force, thereby requiring manhood which defines itself as inclusive of caregiving.

At the same time, this imagined retreat to folk culture misdirects anxiety over social and economic change, as Hazel Carby makes clear in “The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology, and the Folk: Zora Neale Hurston.” Carby explores the late-20th-century critical celebration of novels which promulgate folk culture, particularly as an expression of African American authenticity and community. Specifically, Carby examines the canonization of Hurston, arguing that the “veritable industry” of Hurston scholarship enables critics to avoid a discussion of “urban crisis and conflict”:

Why is there a shared assumption that we should read the novel as a positive, holistic, celebration of black life? Why is it considered necessary that the novel produce cultural
meanings of authenticity, and how does cultural authenticity come to be situated so exclusively in the rural folk? I would like to suggest that, as cultural critics, we could begin to acknowledge the complexity of our own discursive displacement of contemporary conflict and cultural transformation in the search for black cultural authenticity. The privileging of Hurston at a moment of intense urban crisis and conflict is, perhaps, a sign of that displacement; large parts of black urban America under siege; the number of black males in jail in the 1980s doubled; the news media have recently confirmed what has been obvious to many of us for some time – that one in four young black males are in prison, on probation, on parole or awaiting trial; and young black children face the prospect of little, inadequate or no health care. Has Their Eyes Were Watching God become the most frequently taught black novel because it acts as a mode of assurance that, really, the black folk are happy and healthy? (182)

According to Carby, the critical celebration of “rural folk” displaces an anxiety about “urban America under siege,” which she frames as a crisis of masculinity. Carby goes on to say that “it is time that we should question the extent of our dependence upon the romantic imagination of Zora Neale Hurston to produce cultural meanings of ourselves as native daughters” (182, my emphasis). While Carby’s argument points to critical practices that, undeniably, elide a complex reality, it is not entirely clear how an anxiety about “young black males” is displaced by the celebration of a culture which arises from or is sustained by the practices of black women (“native daughters”). That is, how does a culture which fosters black women’s empowerment act as a compensatory mechanism for the “one in four young black males” that “are in prison, on probation, on parole or awaiting trial”? It seems instead that the late 20th century celebration of Zora Neale Hurston displaces anxiety over black women’s role in the fragmentation of the post-
Civil Rights African American community. Carby alludes to this in her analysis of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, wherein she argues that the novel marks the attempt to imagine a role for the black female intellectual that would also enable her to be a part of the folk community. In other words, Hurston’s novel imagines a sphere wherein women are powerful but do not abandon their culture. Thus, the critical recuperation of Hurston enables contemporary scholars to maintain that Black women are not responsible for the “culture of poverty” decried in the popular media. Carby’s argument regarding the motivation behind the recuperation of Hurston, however, frames a contemporary social and economic crisis as a masculine one – and she thereby participates in the late 20th century discourse, proclaiming manhood under siege. Unlike the novelists I discuss in this dissertation, however, Carby does not suggest a return to folk culture as a compensatory mechanism for this crisis. In other words, Carby invokes a masculinity crisis but does not look to folk culture as a means of redressing inequality.

A comparison of texts by Alice Walker and Toni Morrison demonstrates the distinct ways in which folk culture’s invocation acts as a compensatory mechanism for black women and men. In her seminal essay “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens” (1974), Walker cements the association between conventionally folk endeavors, such as gardening, and women’s empowerment. Walker argues that the explosion of texts written by African American women in the late 20th century owes its inception to generations of women who sustained a “creative spark” through folk culture. The “creative spark” is manifest in folk labor practices, such as gardening: “I notice that it is only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant …. She had handed down respect for the possibilities - and the will to grasp them. For her, so hindered and intruded upon in so many ways, being an artist has still been a daily part of her life. This ability to hold on, even in very simple ways, is work Black women have done for a very long time.”
The homespun labor of tending to flowers, deploying the folk knowledge of how to best encourage them to grow, becomes the means by which mothers inspired their daughters to find a means of expressing themselves. Thus, for Walker, bourgeois female Black intellectuals maintain their ties to the African American folk community; these women, in their refusal to abandon their culture, therefore do not contribute to what was popularly described as “urban decay” and its associated “underclass.”

It comes as a surprise, therefore, when Toni Morrison (who certainly must have been aware of Walker’s essay) indicates that gardening implies masculinity in *Tar Baby* (1981). Son, employing folk knowledge, violently “flicks” plants because “[t]hey just need jacking up” in order to “bloom” and advocates the same technique (“jacking up”) to compel “women” to “act nice, like they’re supposed to.” In Morrison’s text, gardening does not enable women to better express themselves but instead provides men with a metaphor by which they imagine enforcing patriarchy. Son, emasculated by his inability to act as a provider and fulfill the mainstream American measure of masculinity, idealizes a patriarchal folk culture as a residual sphere in which he can recuperate manhood; thus, folk culture acts as a compensatory mechanism whereby Son may negate the effects of racism and poverty. *Tar Baby* makes apparent that Son’s desire to recuperate folk culture is not the best thing for the African American community in general or Black women in particular. This criticism, however, is directed at Son’s desire to reinstate folk culture’s patriarchal gender roles rather than his desire to elide contemporary inequalities. At the same time, Morrison’s novel expresses and generates sympathy for the social and economic limitations faced by many African American men. In so doing, Morrison is not unique. Each novel discussed in this dissertation looks to evoke the reader’s sympathy for men who face some form of (perceived or actual) inequality or degrading condition. Sometimes, this sympathy is
harnessed for retrograde purposes, causing the reader to similarly long for a restoration of unquestioned patriarchal privilege; other times, novelists acknowledge the inadequacies of folk culture but, through sympathetic identification, allow the reader to understand the particular constraints engendered by structural inequality. Only Maxine Hong Kingston’s *China Men*, discussed in Chapter 4, realizes the liberatory potential of folk culture. In her novel, the narrator harnesses the power of folk culture to addresses social realities and at the same time provides a more expansive definition of masculinity. *China Men* accomplishes this only through the recognition that folk culture must change in order to grapple with contemporary social reality.

2 See Linda McDowell, Andrea Wigfield, and Donna Haraway.
3 See “An America That Works.”
4 Kimmel is certainly not the only scholar to describe the late 20th century masculinity crisis as uniquely impacting white middle class men. See Faludi, Robinson, Savran.
5 See Gardiner for a discussion of what is problematic about the use of “crisis” rhetoric and how that rhetoric evolved.
6 For a more detailed discussion of the transformation of white masculinity into an identity, see my third chapter which analyzes Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* and Cormac McCarthy’s *All the Pretty Horses*.
7 In positioning folk culture as the product of an isolated peasantry, the novels in my dissertation endorse a conventional view of folk culture. As Barre Toelken argues, “Folk observances and fragments of early rituals were taken as simple elements from an earlier stratum of civilization, studied because they would reveal to us the building blocks of our contemporary, complex society. The focus for these studies was primarily on lower classes, peasants, simple folk, ‘backward’ cultures, and ‘primitives,’ for it was believed that these kinds of people had avoided or resisted longest the sophisticating influences of so-called advanced culture. Conversely, urban dwellers, immersed in literacy and sophistication, were thought to be immune to folklore. From their ranks came those who studied ‘the folk’” (4).
8 Favor remarks upon this irony: “though most critics are, by definition, middle-class, they work themselves into a strategic alliance with folk privilege by consciously emphasizing aspects of heritage and experience that link them to the folk while downplaying their own similarities to ‘buppies’” (13).
9 In the Senate bill which established the Center, folklife is defined as: “the culture transmitted either orally or by imitation from one generation to another, often without the benefit of formal instruction or of written resources. The terms are understood to include the accumulation of technical knowledge, beliefs, lore, language, wisdom, music and art of given group such as family, ethnic, religious, occupational, racial, or any group of people sharing a common set of unifying folk-cultural traditions” (3-4).
10 Although Philip Roth locates the folk within an urban environment, he does not imagine its existence in contemporary America.
II. FOLK FAMILY VALUES

Conventionally imagined to celebrate individualism, Americans in the late 20th century reconsidered this paradigmatic national trait, declaring it fundamentally egocentric and, ultimately, the source of society’s problems. Epitomizing this perspective, Tom Wolfe’s infamous essay, “The Me Decade” (1976), argues that the pursuit of personal aspirations and desire for self-improvement suggest an inherent selfishness and mark a departure from traditional American values (namely, hard work and self-sacrifice):

The old alchemical dream was changing base metals into gold. The new alchemical dream is: changing one’s personality—remaking, remodeling, elevating, and polishing one’s very self... and observing, studying, and doting on it. (Me!) This had always been an aristocratic luxury, confined throughout most of history to the life of the courts, since only the very wealthiest classes had the free time and the surplus income to dwell upon this sweetest and vainest of pastimes.

As I will demonstrate shortly, Wolfe was not alone in attributing social decline to an apparent surge in individualism. A number of social scientists, members of the popular press, and governmental agencies investigated the reasons behind the seemingly escalating desire to “dwell upon this sweetest and vainest of pastimes” and concluded

(4, 6)
that Second Wave feminists were responsible for the ruinous “new alchemical dream.” ¹
In essence, their logic develops as follows: due to inroads in equality made by feminists, many late 20th century women had the financial and personal freedom to focus on individual desires, choosing to forgo a commitment to family and community, and thereby precipitating societal decline. According to this theory, cultural deterioration begins in the home and is occasioned by women’s rejection of the role of housewife. To restore social order, the “new bipartisan consensus,” chronicled by historian Stephanie Coontz, advocated a return to the modern nuclear family, marked by a male breadwinner and a female housewife. ² This recommendation betrays an anxiety over gender roles and manifests a suspicion that women’s participation in the labor force leads to emasculation.

The preoccupation with women’s burgeoning independence finds expression in a variety of media outlets, most conspicuously in the mid-1990s with Dan Quayle’s indictment of Murphy Brown, the fictional single working mother on a television series. During this time period, literary texts also explored the social disorder and emasculation which stem from the apparent surge in women’s self-interest. For instance, John Updike’s *Witches of Eastwick* (1984) portrays women who embrace individual freedom at the cost of monogamy or nurturing a family, and ultimately wreak havoc on the community. The novels that I discuss in this chapter, Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby* (1981) and Annie Proulx’s *The Shipping News* (1993), likewise foreground women’s individualism as the source of social decline and emasculation. Female protagonists in these novels focus on self-making, a conventionally masculine activity, and thereby feminize their male partners, men who stake their identities on tending to the community or children. These male characters represent a folk culture whose values run counter to
those found in egocentric contemporary American society. Marked by practices such as strong kinship networks, women’s participation in the labor force, and men who nurture children, the folk cultures depicted in *Tar Baby* and *The Shipping News* foster a sense of community and encourage gender equality. For these reasons, Morrison and Proulx value folk enclaves but also lament the particular racism or geographic isolation and the ensuing poverty which engendered these communities. In order to obviate the crushing historical conditions which produced folk enclaves, Morrison and Proulx attempt to transform these cultures into attributes of particular people which, because of an ancestry rooted in the community, inherit the shared values, beliefs, and practices.

Unlike the proponents of the “new bipartisan consensus,” Morrison and Proulx make it obvious that women’s participation in the labor market does not cultivate selfishness, weaken men, or destroy community. Indeed, *Tar Baby* and *The Shipping News* depict women’s labor as necessary for the community’s survival and, importantly, portray a form of masculinity which finds strength in meeting the demands of a dual-earner household. In so doing, folk culture’s domestic partnerships speak to the ways in which contemporary men and women could adapt to the demands of the post-Fordist labor market. Morrison and Proulx attribute contemporary women’s selfish individualism to another gain realized by the Civil Rights Movement and Second Wave Feminism: that is, the ability to assimilate into a culture that rewards self-interest. In *Tar Baby* and *The Shipping News*, late 20th century women embrace individualism, conventionally associated with hegemonic masculinity, and sideline traditionally feminine characteristics, such as self-sacrifice and community-orientation. In this context, Carolyn Chute’s contemporaneous novel, *The Beans of Egypt, Maine* (1984),
provides an interesting counterpoint. Chute’s narrative similarly portrays the loss of folk culture and widespread emasculation, but attributes these phenomena to the post-Fordist economy rather than women’s increasing self-interest.

To signal the disarray of late 20th century society and the coherence of folk culture, *Tar Baby* and *The Shipping News* utilize a similar formal element: in both novels, omniscient narrators provide access to a variety of characters’ points of view. These viewpoints clash and fail to achieve mutual understanding in the contemporary world, but when characters embrace folk culture, the points of view converge. Employing this device, Proulx and Morrison indicate that the narratives which take place in contemporary America focus on individual concerns, while the portions of the text which take place in the folk community represent shared beliefs and values. This point becomes particularly apparent in the depiction of heterosexual partnerships. Within contemporary society, the focus on individual concerns leads to a failure in communication between partners, causing relationships to falter and fall apart, whereas folk culture enables couples to connect over shared values, allowing heterosexual relationships to flourish. In utilizing this formal device, Morrison and Proulx demonstrate why fiction is uniquely suited to address late 20th century individualism and apparent social decline by portraying folk culture as a corrective. Omniscience enables the reader to understand the thoughts, feelings, and motivations of a character in a manner similar to that which exists within the fictional folk communities. This formal device enables readers to approximate a folk culture, something that otherwise exists only in a fictional space.
The contemporary discussion regarding Americans’ burgeoning selfishness imagines that women’s liberation contributes to a “culture” of weakened families and social turmoil. In 1996, the Council on Families in America, a decidedly conservative think tank, addressed the hazards of individualism manifest in rising divorce rates:

The divorce revolution—by which we mean the steady displacement of a marriage culture by a culture of divorce and unwed parenthood—has created terrible hardships for children. It has generated poverty within families. It has burdened us with unsupportable social costs. It has failed to deliver on its promise of greater adult happiness and better relationships between men and women…. The divorce revolution set out to achieve some worthy social goals: to foster greater equality between men and women; to improve the family lives of women; and to expand individual happiness and choice. (293)

Here, the “worthy social goals” which prompted the “divorce revolution” derive from the political aims of Second Wave feminism: “to foster equality between men and women; to improve the family lives of women.” By extension, although framed in gender-neutral terms, the desire to “expand individual happiness and choice” becomes associated with the women’s liberation movement due to its propinquity to the first two goals. For the Council on Families in America, feminism prompted women to focus on “individual happiness and choice” and incurred “unsupportable social costs.”

In a similar manner, another conservative social critic, Norval Glenn (1996) indirectly implicates Second Wave feminism for encouraging women to cultivate individualism and thereby contribute to societal decline:
If, as some social critics maintain, there has been a general increase in American society of a sense of entitlement... there has been a decrease in a sense of duty... all institutions, including marriage, must have suffered. A related change may have been an increased tendency for people to feel they can, and deserve, to have it all... and a decreased recognition that a relentless pursuit of career goals and financial success is likely to interfere with attainment of marital and parental goals. (31)

Here, “a general increase” – seemingly irregardless of gender – in American’s “sense of entitlement” causes “all institutions” to suffer. The cause of this “general increase” in the “sense of entitlement,” however, seems to echo the popular understanding of the goals of Second Wave feminism: that women can “have it all.” More to the point, men’s “relentless pursuit of career goals and financial success” prior to the gains of Second Wave feminism did not cause “all institutions” to “suffer.” It is only when women embrace those same ambitions that “marital and parental goals” deteriorate.

While conservatives unabashedly point to the women’s liberation movement as the cause of social decline, this bogeywoman appears in seemingly liberal academic analyses as well. Catherine S. Chilman, in Contemporary Families and Alternative Lifestyles (1983), claims that “[t]he early 1970s saw the end of the social protest movement of the 1960s and the launching of the psychological ‘me first’ protest movement of the following years... As I see it, the reformers, depressed and disillusioned by the defeat of their efforts, turned away from the concept of utopian attainment through community to a new dream: realization of paradise through the self as a freed individual” (16, 17). Here, once again, individualism is framed in gender-neutral terms.
Conspicuously, however, Chilman immediately follows this description of the “‘me first’ protest movement” with the following claim regarding its adherents: “People (especially women, because men already knew) were learning how to be ‘number one,’ to ‘take charge of their own lives’” (18). For Chilman, women’s pursuit of individual goals leads toward a more selfish society. If “men already knew” how to “be ‘number one,’” then women’s newfound embrace of this skill proves to be foundational element of a “‘me first’” society.

Although the deterioration of society ostensibly prompts investigations into the widespread embrace of individualism, these studies also indicate a preoccupation with the ways in which independent women emasculate their male partners. That is, women who work foreclose men’s ability to define themselves as sole breadwinner, a central tenet of hegemonic American masculinity. Stephen Nock, in *Marriage in Men’s Lives* (1998), argues that “traditional” marriage (i.e. the modern nuclear family) provides the means by which men achieve masculinity and, thereby, failure to act as sole breadwinner causes emasculation: “Historically, masculinity has implied three things about a man: he should be the father of his wife’s children, he should be the provider for his wife and children, and he should protect his family. Accordingly, the male who refused to provide for or protect his family was not only a bad husband, he was somehow less than a man” (6). Anthony Astrachan, in *How Men Feel: Their Response to Women’s Demands for Equality and Power* (1986), explicitly connects women’s labor with emasculation: “most of us identify our masculinity so completely with our work and our traditional modes of dominance that we start to feel unmanned—which is to say, we start to lose our identities,
our selves, our very humanity when women show that they can do the same work or exercise the same power” (15).

Stephanie Coontz, in *The Way We Really Are: Coming To Terms with America’s Changing Families* (1997), recounts how many Americans in the 1990s longed to reinstate the modern nuclear family as the American norm because they imagined that doing so would ameliorate societal chaos and, by implication, counter widespread emasculation. She situates this desire within a discourse about how women’s growing numbers in the workforce led to the deterioration of the family and social decline, which reached a pinnacle “[w]ithin months of the 1992 presidential election,” when both liberal and conservative commentators were proclaiming a new “bipartisan consensus” that “Dan Quayle was right.” New think tanks were formed and old ones reorganized to proclaim “The Controversial Truth: Two-Parents are Better.” President Clinton declared that “there were a lot of very good things” in Quayle’s Murphy Brown speech after all. By 1994, the *LA Times* reported, candidates of both parties were “lining up” to join the family values bandwagon. In 1996, Dan Quayle felt able to report that “America has truly reached a new consensus” to “support the unified model of father, mother, and child.” The “new consensus” blamed all of America’s social and economic ills on people who failed to maintain this “unified model.” (5-6)

The “unified model,” however, does not simply entail a “father, mother, and child,” but adherence to the modern nuclear formation, with the father acting as sole breadwinner and a woman who stays at home. Coontz makes this clear when she cites a 1996 poll by the Knight-Ridder news agency in which “more Americans chose the 1950s than any
other single decade as the best time for children to grow up… they associate the 1950s
with a yearning they feel for a time… when there was more predictability in how people
formed and maintained families, and when there was a coherent ‘moral order’ in their
community to serve as a reference point for family norms” (33). While reinstating the
modern nuclear family as the norm was framed as a means of addressing social decline, it
also (as Nock and Atraschán testify) was a means of reasserting masculinity. This
recommendation obscures the way in which the transition to a post-Fordist labor market,
steep decline in real wages, and dismantling of many social welfare programs in the
1970s and 1980s necessitated that many American household become or continue to be
comprised of dual-earners.4

The chapter which follows, “Father Knows Best,” details a related concern,
namely that late 20th century women’s financial and personal independence precipitates
an era of “fatherlessness” and thereby deprives men of the ability to define masculinity in
terms of paternal obligations. As Anna Gavanas chronicles in Fatherhood Politics in the
United States: Masculinity, Sexuality, Race, and Marriage (2004), the modern nuclear
family was widely perceived as a means of restoring manhood to “lost fathers.” David
Bradley’s The Chaneysville Incident and Philip Roth’s American Pastoral intervene in
these debates, idealizing instead the paternal roles developed within segregated folk
cultures. Like Morrison and Proulx, Bradley and Roth manifest an uneasy relationship
with assimilation; Bradley and Roth, however, do not indict women for adopting traits
conventionally associated with hegemonic American masculinity, but interrogate African
and Jewish-American men’s assumption of mainstream paternal roles. The protagonists
in The Chaneysville Incident and American Pastoral demonstrate the value of folk culture
as a device by which history can be imaginatively reconstructed and used to invigorate late 20\textsuperscript{th} century masculinity. For while \textit{Tar Baby} and \textit{The Shipping News} look to create, through readers, a folk community, these novels fail to imagine how this imagined culture might be used to reinstate masculinity in the contemporary world.

For the most part, discussion of \textit{Tar Baby} focuses on Morrison’s portrayal of competing approaches to and definitions of the African American community. Early criticism of \textit{Tar Baby} contends that the novel celebrates Son Green’s commitment to folk culture and condemns Jadine Child’s selfish individualism.\textsuperscript{5} More recently, scholars complicate the perceived dichotomy between Son and Jadine by demonstrating Morrison’s ambivalence toward the Black folk community, arguing that she positions it as an oppressive place for women.\textsuperscript{6} While the re-evaluations of Son and Jadine provide cogent readings of \textit{Tar Baby}, I look to situate these interpretations within the context of contemporaneous discussions of African American women’s upward mobility and assimilation into dominant society, and how these phenomena were imagined to affect African American men and the traditional black folk community. As I will show, Morrison’s \textit{Tar Baby} reflects upon the necessity of a particular type of woman to foster African American masculinity and enable African American folk culture to thrive; when that woman no longer exists, having been eradicated by late 20\textsuperscript{th} century economic and social changes, black manhood and the black community simultaneously falter.

Relations between African American men and women in 1981 were marked, in part, by the prolonged attempt to grapple with the 1965 Moynihan Report. The Moynihan Report infamously correlates female-headed households with social decline,
indicting black women for perpetuating the conditions which lead to fatherless homes and exacerbating poverty. Moynihan concludes that “the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well” (Chapter IV). For Moynihan, men’s ability to fulfill conventional gender roles fundamentally impacts a society and masculinity; the Negro community’s “matriarchal structure” simultaneously “retards the progress of the group as a whole” and “imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male.” In 1978 an angry Michele Wallace, in Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman, sums up the implications of this report:

“Moynihan was suggesting that the existence of anything so subversive as a ‘strong black woman’ precluded the existence of a strong black man or, indeed, any black ‘man’ at all” (31).

Being held to white, middle class standards of manhood leads to a sense of emasculation among many African American men for whom racism precludes the achievement of hegemonic American masculinity. 7 For instance, Clyde W. Franklin II says,

[…] the seeds of division between Black man and Black women were sown during the Black movement. Black men bought the Moynihan report (1965) that indirectly blamed Black women for Black people’s underclass status in America. In doing so, Black men convinced themselves that they could be ‘men’ only if they adopted the White male’s sex role… White masculine role enactment can occur only when there is full participation in American society, [a] requirement
for White male sex-role assumption continues to be met by only a few Black men.

In looking to appropriate patriarchal “white power” (Wallace 3), black men were not without motive. To become masculine in the eyes of dominant society and thereby counteract the claims of the Moynihan report, black men needed to conform to mainstream patriarchal gender roles.

Morrison attributes a different type of masculinity to African American folk culture. In a 1981 interview with Charles Ruas, Morrison describes traditional black manhood as a product of equality between men and women:

I remember my parents and my grandparents—I always knew somehow they were comrades. They had something to do together. That does not exist now, because the work distribution is different. The man can’t find work befitting what he believes to be his level, so it changes the relationship between the two. What is valuable about the past is not the fact that women had to work themselves into the grave so early, but this little idea of what it meant to have a comrade. It’s not the mode of work, but the relationship of the work. A woman had a role as important as the man’s, and not in any way subservient to his, and he didn’t feel threatened by it, he needed her. (Morrison 114)

While Morrison values the folk community’s egalitarianism, she finds troubling the fact that “women had to work themselves into the grave so early.” That is, Morrison manifests nostalgia for the culture that emerges from segregation, not for the racism which enforced segregation and relegated many in the African American community to poverty.
In *Tar Baby*, Son embodies the masculinity which Morrison describes as a product of folk culture’s comradeship. In Elo, Son’s hometown and a folk enclave, “a woman had a role as important as a man’s” and the men don’t “feel threatened by” this equality:

[Jadine] kept barking at him about equality, sexual equality, as though he thought women were inferior. He couldn’t understand that. Before Francine was attacked by dogs, she gave him ten points on the court and still beat him... Cheyenne was driving a beat-up truck at age nine, four years before he could even shift gears, and she could drop a pheasant like an Indian. His mother’s memory was kept alive by those who remembered how she roped horses when she was a girl. His grandmother built a whole cowshed with only Rosa to help... Anybody who thought women were inferior didn’t come out of north Florida. (268)

Elo offers “equality” in terms of women’s ability to excel at activities (basketball, driving a car, carpentry) and in roles (cowboy) traditionally associated with masculinity. Yet, after her trip to Elo, Son’s girlfriend, Jadine, “kept barking at him about equality, sexual equality.” The “equality” Jadine desires does not correspond to the “equality” Elo offers. This is just one of many instances in which Son and Jadine manifest irreconcilable points of view.

As the previous passage makes clear, the conflict Morrison depicts in *Tar Baby* does not involve a quarrel between a black woman who values folk culture, organized around gender equality, and a black man, who embraces mainstream society’s gender roles. To the contrary, Morrison portrays a falling out between Jadine, a woman who esteems independence over responsibility to family and culture, and Son, a man who
emerges from a rural folk community, to which he hopes to return. As I will show, this marks Morrison’s attempt to grapple with the unforeseen consequences of feminist and Civil Rights movements. The fight for equality enabled African American women’s increased social mobility and financial independence, but in the process seemingly transformed black women’s goals from furthering the community to furthering the self. Jadine unintentionally emphasizes this when she reflects on her incompatibility with Son: “‘While you were hiding from a small-town sheriff or some insurance company, hiding from a rap that a two-bit lawyer could have gotten you out of, I was being educated, I was working, I was making something out of my life. I was learning how to make it in this world. The one we live in, not the one in your head. Not that dump Eloie; this world’” (264). Jadine’s education enables her to assimilate into dominant society by teaching her “how to make it in this world,” ultimately leading her to embrace individualism and self-interest. For Morrison, African Americans’ wider access to the capitalist marketplace destroys the black folk community.9

bell hooks makes a similar argument in We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity (2004):

A significant number of black power militants, male and female, were among the first generation of black youth to be educated in predominantly white university settings. In those settings many of us learned for the first time that the values of honesty, integrity, and justice taught us by our parental caregivers in all black worlds were not the values that led to success in the world we had entered, the world of mainstream white culture… the values she holds dear (being a person of integrity, being honest, sharing resources, placing humanist goals over materialist
ones) are not the values that lead to economic success in a capitalist society.

Facing these contradictions and the psychological disillusionment they created served as a catalyst for many black folks, newly educated in the white school, to first turn away from capitalism in disgust and then to turn toward it, eager to participate in a corrupt economy, willing to stand among those who would exploit rather than with the exploited. (18)

For hooks, the values instilled in segregated “all black worlds” do not correspond to those embraced by “mainstream white culture.” Immersed in “white university settings,” “black youth” betray their upbringing in order to “participate in a corrupt economy.”

Here, hooks implies that a particular economic system produces a culture marked by qualities that undermine community; “capitalism” engenders a desire to “exploit” others and causes otherwise morally-centered individuals to become selfish (they no longer share resources nor do they place “humanist goals over materialist”). Comradeship, however, is rooted in poverty and can only be maintained in a racist society which denies African Americans any possibility of upward mobility. This becomes obvious in Jadine’s analysis of Eloes: “A burnt-out place. There was no life there. Maybe a past but definitely no future” (259).

For Jadine, the breasts of her nighttime tormentors, the “night women” who foster folk culture and black men’s masculinity, become the way in which she visualizes the drawbacks of a woman’s role in African American folk culture. In her first encounter with the “night women,” “they each pulled out a breast and showed it to her… revealing one breast and then two and Jadine was shocked” (258). Despite working as a model, a career which requires Jadine to reveal her body, she is “shocked” by the way in which
each of the “night women” “pulled out a breast.” What “shocks” Jadine is the appearance of these women’s bodies: “The women looked awful to [Jadine]: onion heels, potbellies, hair surrendered to rags and braids. And the breasts they thrust at her like weapons were soft, loose bags closed at the tip with a brunette eye” (261). The “night women” do not embody Western notions of beauty, the ideals to which Jadine must conform in order to earn a living and establish independence. In contrast, the night women give their bodies to work and children in order to further the community. While both Jadine and the night women use their bodies, Jadine’s allows her to flourish, as an individual, in the contemporary world, while those of the night women help build a pre-modern enclave within a racist society. Jadine wants access to the upward mobility of contemporary capitalist society; racism prevents the night women from participating in that economy and forces them to sacrifice their bodies in order to develop an isolated community.

Jadine, like many contemporary black women according to Morrison, opts for the individualism, freedom, and consumption available in contemporary society. In an interview with Charles Ruas (1981), Morrison explains why this is the case: “The characteristics they [contemporary women] encourage in themselves are more male characteristics, not because she has a fundamental identity crisis, but because she wants to be truly free. Part of that is perceived as having the desirable characteristics of maleness, which includes self-sufficiency and adventurousness” (105). The “characteristics” that Morrison equates with masculinity, freedom, “self-sufficiency,” and “adventurousness,” do not accord comradeship but are associated with hegemonic American masculinity. In her depiction of Jadine, Morrison illustrates how African American women’s desire to act as individuals, and thereby “be truly free,” emasculates
their partners: “[Jadine] thought she was rescuing [Son] from the night women who wanted him for themselves, wanted him feeling superior in a cradle, deferring to him; wanted her to settle for wifely competence when she could be almighty, to settle for fertility rather than originality, nurturing instead of building” (269). Here, Jadine prizes traditionally Western, masculine values: being “almighty,” manifesting “originality,” and “building.” Conversely, she eschews feminine traits, such as “nurturing” and “fertility,” which are associated with Son’s patriarchal privilege: “deferring” to him and “wanting him feeling superior.” In refusing to pursue communal goals, Jadine simultaneously emasculates her male partner.

Jadine further undermines Son’s manhood by asking him to live in New York City, the definitive grounds of late 20th century capitalism. When Son ventures into the city, he, like so many other black men, feels emasculated in his inability to act as a breadwinner, dominant society’s measure of manhood. Trained in rural survival, Son cannot earn a living in the late capitalist, technology-driven marketplace: “There wasn’t a permanent adult job in the whole of the city for him, so he did teenager’s work on occasion and pieces of a grown man’s work” (227). Susan Mayberry, in her careful analysis of masculinity in Tar Baby, argues that Son maintains his manhood while in New York City: “Although there ‘wasn’t a permanent adult job in the whole of the city’ for Son, they find his virility to be an account transferable into Big Apple sophistication” (146). While it is certainly true that Son embodies “virility,” this trait is stereotypically associated with black men and confers a masculinity that lacks institutional or economic power. In the heart of the capitalist marketplace, manhood measured in terms of earning power confers dominance. This becomes obvious over the course of Son and Jadine’s
relationship. Son’s virility establishes his manhood during his honeymoon period with Jadine. When Jadine wants to settle down, however, virility does not certify his masculinity. Instead, she pushes him to enroll in school in order to pursue a remunerative career in business or as a lawyer. Yogita Goyal (2006), in her analysis of *Tar Baby*’s gender dynamics, perceptively points to Son’s masculinity crisis upon arrival, describing him as constrained by the contemporary world, unable to enact a primitive, African manhood defined by “heroism and adventure” (404). In response to his inability to find “a permanent adult job” (Morrison 227) and the enormous pressure to act as a breadwinner, Son momentarily fantasizes about “heroism and adventure.” Throughout the rest of the novel, Son consistently idealizes Eloe. The tension for Son and Jadine, therefore, does not derive from his momentary desire to return to mythic masculinity but his unwillingness to embrace a mainstream, late 20th century notion of masculinity in favor of one developed in African American folk culture.

The novel makes it clear that Son and Jadine represent fundamentally opposing positions which can never be reconciled. At one point, the narrator juxtaposes these conflicting perspectives, saying: “She thought she was rescuing him from the night women… He thought he was rescuing her from Valerian, meaning them, the people who in a mere three hundred years had killed a world millions of years old… Each was pulling the other away from the maw of hell—its very ridge top. Each knew the world as it was meant or ought to be. One had a past, the other a future and each one bore the culture to save the race in his hands” (269). In contrast to Son and Jadine, members of African Diasporic folk culture share similar values and inherently understand one another. For instance, most characters in the novel describe the Isle de Chevalier’s blind horseman in
conflicting ways but those who belong to the African Diasporic folk culture (Son and the native islanders) feel certain that these spirits were once slaves and still ride the hills. At the same time, members of the African Diasporic folk culture fail to understand anyone from a different background. Thérèse, a native islander, illustrates this point when she reflects on the white inhabitants of Isle de Chevaliers: “She realized that all her life she thought [white individuals] felt nothing at all. Oh, well, yes, she knew they talked and laughed and died and had babies. But she had never attached any feeling to any of it… What went on inside them?” (112). Here, Thérèse implies that within a culture, each person’s feelings or “insides” are apparent to all those with that background. Thérèse, however, misapprehends the African diaspora, assuming all members belong to the folk community, sharing similar beliefs and values, and thereby transparent to one another. This becomes apparent when Thérèse imagines Son and Jadine’s break-up: “’the fast-ass [Jadine] is brought low at last. Too late, bitch – too late you discover how wonderful he really was. How gentle, how kind. And you are full of remorse, but too late, cow, too too late; you will never have him now’” (112). From the barest evidence, Thérèse correctly ascertains Son’s personality (he is “gentle” and “kind”) but fundamentally misapprehends Jadine. In truth, Jadine brings Son “low at last” when she leaves him and feels relief in recuperating her “lean and male” self (275). Thérèse misrecognizes Jadine’s personality because the native islander does not recognize a dissolution of the apparent consensus within the African diaspora during the post-Civil Rights era.

Like Thérèse’s innate understanding of other members of African diasporic folk culture, readers have the capacity to access the “insides” of all characters through first-person omniscience. As a result, the novel acts as a means of allowing readers to
approximate a folk culture. This community is comprised of anyone who reads the novel, regardless of racial, ethnic, or socio-economic background. At the same time, however, Morrison makes it clear in the final pages of the novel that folk culture inheres within a select few. At the close of *Tar Baby*, Thérèse skippers a boat to the Isle de Chevaliers and drops Son on an uninhabited portion of the island, urging him to join the Blind Horsemen, instead of pursuing Jadine and assimilating into dominant culture (306). After disembarking, Son does just that: “The mist lifted and the trees stepped back a bit as if to make the way easier for a certain kind of man. Then he ran” (306). Son, a “certain kind of man,” has the ability to join the blind horsemen.11 Here, folk culture lodges within individuals, necessarily of African descent and holding a particular set of values and beliefs, rather than emerging as the product of particular historical conditions or as a function of reading novels. Morrison’s formal device seemingly contradicts her thematic concern with African American folk culture. She attempts to reconcile this paradox with the admonition that the reader “respond on the same plane as an illiterate or preliterate reader would” (quoted in Dubey, 182). Here, Morrison looks to control the reception of her novel, asking her readers to approach the text as a member of African Diasporic folk culture would. This, of course, is an impossible mandate for her (obviously literate) readers.

Imagining the novel as a means of approximating folk culture, Morrison envisions a new manner by which African American women can unite a community. In her portrayal of Jadine, Morrison provides an ambivalent assessment of late 20th century feminism’s legacy, implicitly attributing the break-up of the apparent consensus within the African American community to black women’s education and upward mobility.
With *Tar Baby*, Morrison imagines that the educated African American woman can continue to serve the community by fostering folk culture through fiction. In re-imagining authorship as a means fostering community, Morrison suggests a concern common to many contemporary African American writers: how to unite African Americans in the post-Civil Rights period. Although Morrison clearly prizes folk culture, she is keenly aware of its chief drawback, that of a patriarchal foundation. This explains why Morrison fundamentally alters the role of the African American woman within the folk community; the late 20th century African American female novelist, unlike the “night women,” does not cultivate black masculinity. In the novel’s conclusion, Son becomes part of a myth and therefore no longer available to contemporary society. As such, *Tar Baby* marks Morrison’s attempt to reimagine folk culture without patriarchy.

In *The Shipping News*, Proulx similarly depicts a male protagonist’s emasculation at the hands of an independent, “liberated” woman. Critical consensus positions this novel as the depiction of a man’s dawning sense of “self” or “identity.”12 Ranging from the discovery of his voice to his increased appreciation of nature, scholars dissect and disagree about the process by which Quoye comes into his own. While this chapter also chronicles Quoyle’s growing self-esteem and -awareness, I frame his achievement within a discussion of contemporary gender politics and the U.S. social climate in the 1970s and 1980s. That is, I foreground the ways in which manhood functions as the definitive trait by which selfhood is recuperated in *The Shipping News*. Positioning Quoyle as a bumbling everyman, Proulx portrays late 20th century men’s emasculation as a necessary by-product of women’s newfound independence. Renouncing her role as wife and
mother in order to enjoy innumerous extramarital affairs, Quoyle’s wife precludes him from achieving conventional manhood. For Proulx, men can recuperate masculinity, and thereby a sense of self, only by retreating to a folk culture which defines masculinity in terms of nurturing family and community.

Like Wolfe, Proulx envisions overriding self-interest as the paradigmatic American trait in the 1980s, but she overtly attributes this solipsism to women whose commitment to themselves devastates men’s self-worth. Quoyle’s wife, Petal Bear, embodies destructive individualism in her relentless pursuit of sexual satisfaction. The narrator describes Petal in this manner:

In another time, another sex, she would have been Genghis Khan. When she needed burning cities, the stumbling babble of captives, horses exhausted from tracing the reeling borders of her territories, she had only petty triumphs of sexual encounter… By day she sold burglar alarms at Northern Security, at night, became a woman who could not be held back from strangers’ rooms, who would have sexual conjunction whether in stinking rest rooms or mop cupboards. (13)

In comparing Petal to Genghis Khan, Proulx imagines late 20th century women channeling barbaric impulses into sexual encounters. The sexual freedom described in this passage emerges as the dark underbelly of second wave feminism’s advances in workplace equality; that is, the uninspiring labor (wherein Petal must substitute service work for her true calling of war) causes her to embrace sexuality as a means of asserting herself. Here, Proulx collapses the distinction between Second Wave feminism and the sexual revolution, and thereby manifests a fairly common misunderstanding of the women’s liberation movement. 14
Very early in the novel, Proulx pointedly portrays the emasculation that results from Petal’s sexual freedom. Cuckolding Quoyle, Petal places him in a feminized position: “One night he worked a crossword puzzle in bed, heard Petal come in, heard the gutter of voices… and, after a while, squeaking, squeaking, squeaking of the hide-a-bed in the living room and a stranger’s shout… [Quoyle] lay on his back… tears running into his ears. How could something done in another room by other people pain him so savagely? Man Dies of a Broken Heart. His hand went to the can of peanuts on the floor beside the bed” (16). In this passage, Quoyle enact's a stereotypical feminine role. He waits at home for his dissolute partner to return, cries as he passively listens to her engage in an affair, places a high value on his emotions (imagnining that they have the power to kill him), and indulges in fatty food in order to ameliorate a broken heart. Petal’s refusal to be monogamous proves to be an irresolvable conflict in their marriage: “She was sorry he loved her so desperately, but there it was. ‘Look, it’s no good,’ she said. ‘Find yourself a girlfriend—there’s plenty of women around.’ ‘I only want you,’ said Quoyle. Miserably. Pleading. Licking his cuff. ‘Only thing that’s going to work here is a divorce,’ said Petal. He was pulling her under. She was pushing him over. ‘No,’ groaned Quoyle. ‘No divorce.’ ‘It’s your funeral,’ said Petal” (16). Petal and Quoyle espouse irreconcilable definitions of marriage, undermining their capacity for a mutually satisfying, companionable relationship.

Not only do Petal’s dalliances unman Quoyle, but she refuses to care for their children, leaving him to nurture the kids and thereby assume the feminine role in their family: “it was he who drove the babies around, sometimes brought them to meetings, Sunshine in a pouch that strapped to his back, Bunny sucking her thumb and hanging on
his trouser leg. The car littered with newspapers, tiny mittens, torn envelopes, teething rings” (14-5). Quoyle rather than Petal must work the “second shift,” taking responsibility for their children and the housework (15). In so doing, he struggles to balance work and family, the dilemma so many “liberated” women faced in the 1980s and 1990s.

His relationship with Petal, however, is not the only circumstance in which Quoyle manifests conventionally feminine qualities. Hegemonic manhood in the late 20th century also emphasized individualism and Quoyle unquestionably fails to embody this trait.Christopher Lasch, in *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979), elaborates on masculinity in 1970s and 1980s:

For all his inner suffering, the narcissist has many traits that make for success in bureaucratic institutions, which put a premium on the manipulation of interpersonal relations, discourage the formation of deep personal attachments, and at the same time provide the narcissist with the approval he needs in order to validate his self-esteem... The management of personal impressions comes naturally to him, and his mastery of its intricacies serves him well in political and business organizations where performance now counts for less than ‘visibility,’ ‘momentum,’ and a winning record. As the ‘organization man’ gives way to the bureaucratic ‘gamesman’—the ‘loyalty era’ of American business to the age of the ‘executive success game’—the narcissist comes into his own. (91-92)

Quoyle cannot achieve the masculinity described by Lasch because Proulx’s protagonist values personal connection over success in bureaucratic institutions. Quoyle most notably manifests this failure when he misses “a chance at a job that might have put his
mouth to bureaucracy’s taut breast” (3) in order to make a friend. This pattern continues throughout his career. Quoyle chooses to work at a newspaper, in spite of bleak prospects for advancement, because “it seemed he was part of something” (8). Valuing friendship and community over individual fulfillment, Quoyle manifests a conventionally feminine perspective.

When Quoyle moves to Newfoundland, however, he discovers a folk culture that similarly values kinship and connection and thereby renders his masculinity. Through writing for a local newspaper, communicating information necessary to the smooth functioning of the community, Quoyle becomes a contributing member of society and therein discovers masculinity. After publishing his first widely-read and well-liked story, “He felt light and hot… Thirty-six years old and this was the first time anybody ever said he’d done it right” (144). Upon receiving recognition for his newspaper articles, Quoyle begins to take pride in himself and his work, fighting for the integrity of his writing (202-204). Ultimately, Quoyle realizes that place is intimately tied to masculinity: “Quoyle was not going back to New York… Thought of his stupid self in Mockingburg, taking whatever came at him. No wonder love had shot him through the heart and lungs, caused internal bleeding” (241). Quoyle cannot return to New York because he would return to his former, emasculated self. Choosing to remain in Newfoundland, Quoyle accesses a definition of masculinity that prioritizes the very things he values: family and community.

In Newfoundland, Quoyle finds a partner who embodies the local folk culture’s commitment to community and kinship. He becomes involved with Wavey, a stay-at-
home mother who fights on behalf of her son to institute special education programs on the island:

Fervent. A ringing voice. Here was Wavey on fire. Had requested books on [Down’s Syndrome] through the regional library. Started the parents’ group. Specialists from St. John’s up to speak... Got up a petition, called meetings, ah, she said, they wrote letters asking for the special education class. And got it... Rescuing lost children, showing them ways to grasp at life. She squeezed her hands together, showing him that anyone could clench possibilities. What else, he thought, could kindle this heat. (146)

Wavey’s concern for her child, in Quoyle’s mind, translates into sexual desire (the something “else” that “could kindle this heat”). Eventually, it becomes clear that Quoyle and Wavey achieve mutual understanding, something that eluded him in his relationship with Petal: “I know something now I didn’t know a year ago,” said Quoyle. ‘Petal wasn’t any good. And I think maybe that is why I loved her.’ ‘Yes,’ said Wavey. ‘Same with Herold. It’s like you feel to yourself that’s all you deserve. And the worse it gets the more it seems true, that you got it coming to you or it wouldn’t be that way. You know what I mean?’ Quoyle nodded” (308). Here, Quoyle and Wavey reach the same conclusion at the same time. Although Quoyle and Wavey realize something particular to each as an individual, that apprehension applies to the other, making them almost interchangeable.

This absolute harmony of understanding, sympathy, and identification, is simultaneously conferred on the reader through the novel’s deployment of first person omniscience. The reader, thereby, becomes imaginatively incorporated into
Newfoundland folk culture. At various points in the novel, however, Proulx indicates that only those with Newfoundland ancestors belong to the island’s community. Although Quoyle is newly arrived, his forebears lived in Newfoundland and consequently, Quoyle is viewed as an insider. This becomes obvious when Jack Buggit explains Newfoundland history to Quoyle: “‘It was a hard life, but it had the satisfaction… There was some wild, lawless places, a man did what he wanted. Guess you know about that, being who you are!’” (64, emphasis Proulx). Or when Billy Pretty says, “‘By God, Quoyle, you’re a wracker! You’re a real Quoyle with your gaff, there’” (174). Wavey, too, physically manifests Newfoundland culture: “In a way [Quoyle] could not explain she seized his attention; because she seemed sprung from wet stones, the stench of fish and tide” (115). Here, the physical elements of Newfoundland (“wet stones, the stench of fish and tide”) generate Wavey. In these moments, Proulx removes folk culture from its social and economic context by turning it into a natural phenomenon.

At the same time, Quoyle is portrayed as an outsider who must become familiar with the customs, traditions, and specialized knowledge of the island’s inhabitants. For instance, Quoyle buys a boat and “felt transformed, ready to take on the sea, to seize his heritage” (88) but because he isn’t versed in the complexities of sea life, he purchases what a native Newfoundlander describes as a “shitboat” (86). When writing a column for the newspaper, Quoyle’s ignorance becomes advantage; as Buggit explains, Quoyle “‘don’t know nothin’ about boats, but that’s entertaining’” (143). Quoyle’s movement from ignorance to knowledge mimes the process by which the reader, who is also an outsider, slowly attains familiarity with Newfoundland culture. Here, Proulx manifests
the contradiction implicit in *Tar Baby*, as well. The reader, through the novel’s use of first person omniscience, approximates the island’s folk culture; at the same time, Proulx indicates that this community is a birthright which cannot be acquired by an outsider. Unlike Morrison’s impossible mandate that the reader approach the text from the perspective of a preliterate reader (a contradiction in terms), Proulx resolves this conflict by making the reader a de facto member of Newfoundland culture. In a 1993 interview with *Chicago Tribune*’s John Blades, Proulx discusses her first trip to Newfoundland: “‘I thought I’d just stepped into my own past.’ That was not an altogether pleasant sensation, she added, ‘because I could see what’s roaring down on them.’ Which is? ‘The future,’ Proulx replied. ‘Roads and cars and shopping malls and fast foods. It’s already arrived, but it’s scattered. There’s still this quiet, simple village life, but that’s all coming apart at the seams now’” (2). Newfoundland’s transition from a “quiet, simple village” to “roads and cars and shopping malls and fast foods” echoes Proulx’s “own past” – and by extension, that of everyone who lives in contemporary society. Thus, readers need not be of Newfoundland ancestry in order to inherit its folk culture.

At the same time, Proulx indicates that contemporary readers would be, in reality, inadequate community members. This becomes apparent when Dennis and Beety contemplate moving to Toronto in order to find work. Upon hearing their plans, Quoyle “[k]new they would be lost forever if they went, for even the few who came back were altered in temper as a knife reclaimed from the ashes of a house fire” (326). Quoyle’s aunt Agnis, a woman who grew up on the island and then moved to the United States to access a wider employment opportunities, demonstrates how a “temper” is “altered” after moving to the mainland. When Quoyle tells Agnis that he knows she was raped by her
brother, his father, “[t]he aunt hauled in her breath. The secret of her whole life” (322). Rather than establishing an intimacy between the two, Quoyle’s revelation causes Agnis to think: “Couldn’t live with the nephew now. Who knew what he knew” (323). This desire for privacy marks Agnis as “altered in temper.” By contrast, reports of sexual assault “with names and dates… and grisly details” “sell” Newfoundland’s newspaper (218). Unlike other members of the Newfoundland folk culture, Agnis prefers to keep secret her childhood violations and current sexual identification. This desire for privacy refuses the sympathetic identification which underlies Newfoundland folk culture. By extension, the late 20th century reader might appreciate the ability to peer into another person’s life and thoughts but would not want to have her privacy violated in a similar manner. As such, the reader is not suited to actually move to Newfoundland; the experience of reading the novel does not translate into a lived reality. Thus, *The Shipping News* acts as a temporary respite from late 20th century women’s ruinous individualism, the resultant social decline and widespread emasculation, but does not offer a corrective or chart a feasible alternative.

While Quoyle’s achievement of masculinity appears laudatory, the folk culture which encourages his newfound self-confidence is rooted in patriarchal privilege. Most of the wives stay at home, tending to the smooth functioning of the family. Indeed, Quoyle’s relationship with Wavey is formulated in such a manner by local gossips: “’He’s that desperate for somebody to take care of those brats and do the cooking’” (222). Even if the reader dismisses this assessment of Quoyle’s marriage to Wavey as rumormongering, this incident plays into conventional gender role expectations: the words are spoken by envious, unmarried “old maids.” The suspicions of the old maids,
however, play out over the course of the novel. Quoyle’s ideal household becomes evident when he collects his daughters from their after-school caregiver: “A fine part of Quoyle’s day came when he picked up his daughters at Dennis and Beety’s house. His part in life seemed richer, he became more of a father, at the same time he could expose his true feelings which were often of yearning” (136). In this passage, Quoyle’s outlook does not align with conventional masculinity; he appreciates the opportunity to become “more of a father” and “expose feelings.” His pleasure in emotional intimacy causes Quoyle to behave contrary to established notions of manhood: he cries (137). But this vulnerability is enabled, in no small part, by his assumption of patriarchal privilege. In the scene immediately following the above passage, the men in the house, Quoyle included, assert their superiority over Beety: “Dennis barely looked away from the screen but shouted at the kitchen. ‘Make us some tea, mother.’ The water faucet gushed into the kettle. A smaller kettle steamed on the white stove. Beety swept at the kitchen table with the side of her hand, set out a loaf of bread”” (137). If Dennis had only asked for a beer, he might conform to the stereotypical male role: indolently parked in front of the television, demanding that a woman wait on his gastronomical needs.

Quoyle’s assumption of patriarchal privilege becomes particularly evident in his evolving relationship with his aunt. After Petal dies in a car accident, Agnis suggests that he move to his ancestral homeland, Newfoundland, and there, she guides their lives: moving them to the family’s long-empty home, finding someone to repair the house, discovering a means by which Quoyle can commute to work, and locating childcare for his daughters.21 Once Quoyle establishes himself in the Newfoundland community, however, he feels confident in directing their lives. He argues for major alterations in the
routine Agnis established: “‘You have been thinking of all the angles,’ said the aunt. Dryly. She was used to being the one who figured things out... the aunt was astonished. She had gone for a walk and looked at a pond. Now everything had rushed on like an unlighted train in the dark” (227). Quoyle displaces Agnis as the head of the household and therein recuperates his masculinity. Agnis is noticeably unsettled by this (“everything had rushed on like an unlighted train in the dark”) and decides to move into her own residence, where she has the freedom to command her own life.

In “Inarticulacy, Identity, and Silence: Annie Proulx’s The Shipping News,” Rachel Seiffert argues that although Quoyle achieves a sense of identity at the expense of Agnis, this does not render patriarchal privilege complete. In making this argument, Seiffert claims that Proulx’s novel attempts to subvert what late 20th century feminists describe as a text’s necessary co-option of readers into agreement with mainstream, patriarchal values (512). Seiffert contends that “The Shipping News exposes and questions the processes of reader-character identification to political effect... [the novel is] designed to elicit resistance in the reader” (513, 514). According to Seiffert, the novel purportedly focuses on Quoyle’s narrative, in which he achieves a sense of self at the expense of women. At the same time, however, Seiffert argues that Agnis holds the privileged position in the reader’s sympathies, which complicates the reader’s celebration of Quoyle’s coming to voice (520). In this interpretation of The Shipping News, Seiffert relies on the reader to empower (or recognize the understated power of) Agnis and the other women in the novel. While the reader may sympathize with Agnis over Quoyle, this does not redress the patriarchal privilege which Proulx’s novel depicts as underlying
the Newfoundland folk community. Within the confines of the novel, women have very little authority or control.

In addition to acknowledging its patriarchal foundation, Proulx expresses ambivalence about folk culture’s endemic poverty. Proulx, however, projects these difficulties into the past, as when Agnis reflects on her childhood: “What desperate work to stay alive, to scrob and claw through hard times… She remembered the stories in old mouths: the father who shot his oldest children and himself that the rest might live on flour scrapings; sealers crouched on a floe awash from their weight until one leaped into the sea; storm journeys to fetch medicines—always the wrong thing and too late for the convulsing hangashore” (33). Yet, for Proulx, poverty does not diminish the benefits of a folk culture. Indeed, because Newfoundlanders have so little money, they form a strong community in order to help one another through tough times. As Billy Pretty, a lifelong resident of Newfoundland says, “if it was hard times, they shared, they helped their neighbor. No, they didn’t have any money, the sea was dangerous and men were lost, but it was a satisfying life in a way people today do not understand. There was a joinery of lives all worked together” (169). Quoyle values Newfoundland for the way in which its residents value and maintain the “joinery of lives.” Proulx demonstrates how the “joinery of lives” continues in Newfoundland, in spite the lack of “hard times,” by insisting on a shared culture which emerges from “native” bodies (51).

Although Proulx acknowledges poverty in Newfoundland, depicting the close-knit community and unique lifeways as recompense, Carolyn Chute’s The Beans of Egypt, Maine (1985) allows no escape from the violence and privation that occur in a New England working-class community. For Chute, the late 20th century economy rather
than women’s increased individualism eradicates the traditional folk community. For instance, *Beans* portrays characters who help one another in order to ameliorate the effects of poverty but these gestures are not unambiguously beneficial. When her husband, Beal, cannot earn enough to afford a house, Earlene moves in with Madeline, an in-law. Madeline provides a home and friendship to Earlene, but also openly flirts with Beal (193-195). This portrayal of kinship captures the ambivalent remnants of a once vibrant folk culture. As Chute attests in the “Postscript,” the events in *Beans* demonstrate poverty’s depletion of a once interconnected, caring community: “I have known the riches of an interdependent family. The riches of home. And I foresee these riches lost, lost to big global business, more and more generations lost to the absurdities of modern education, and ghastly laws and cruel punishments, this hi-tech, cold, cold, cold, impersonal, unaccountable new age” (278). In Chute’s novel, the “lost” “riches of home” become evident when Earlene reflects that Pip Bean, the family patriarch, “likes to say how in *his time* there were… no officials, no experts, no shit… you just had your people, and you all had a part. Your people. *His* people. Pip… he’s never alone. But Beal and me, we ain’t got no part. It’s all slippin’ And it gets more lonely… so lonely” (221).

The characters in *Beans* are no longer members of a folk culture, an interconnected community united by a patriarch, but have become the working poor, individuals with no support network. Chute, however, formulates her critique of the post-Fordist economy and culture in terms that Morrison, Proulx, and their contemporaries would understand: individualism represents the most corrosive, lamentable aspect late 20th century America.

Beyond destroying the folk community, Chute portrays the post-Fordist economy as the cause of widespread emasculation: “Earlene and Beal are both raped by America’s
big corporate consumerist culture, modern education’s absurd aspirations, fast-lane America. And here, the lives of Beal and Earlene in ruins, all that’s left for comfort, all that’s left for dignity is sex. Especially for Beal, who has failed so enormously as a provider” (“Postscript” 276). In this formulation of “fast-lane America,” Chute imagines women as capable of ameliorating men’s “dignity,” recuperating their feeling of manhood through sex. This becomes obvious in Beal’s relationship with Earlene. At a particularly low point, when Beal is out of work, his newborn son “ain’t had milk” for four days (220), and he has an infected eye after a mistress’s husband gives him “a thrashin’” (215), he exclaims: “I ain’t worth a piss… What good am I? I musta come outta my mother’s asshole” (223). After this declaration, Beal demands sex (225) – something that, despite these circumstances, allows him to feel like a man. Through Beal, Chute portrays poverty, rather than independent women, as the cause of the folk community’s destruction and widespread emasculation.

In her essay, “From the Suwanee to Egypt, There’s No Place Like Home,” Cynthia Ward inadvertently marks the distinction between fiction portraying folk culture and novels which depict the working poor. This becomes evident in her comparison of the critical failure of Chute’s Beans with the academic “rediscovery” of Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God. Ward accounts for Beans’ “critical invisibility” by arguing that it portrays a folk culture articulated through “active resistance to… a middle-class reading practice… [Chute’s novel] offer[s] an alternative to the literary construction of identity, meaning, and reality by pointing to a vernacular notion of home that cannot be commodified for middle-class consumption” (76). Ward, however, furnishes evidence which unintentionally disproves this claim. She points to the novel’s popular success; its
“continuing sales” indicate that *The Beans of Egypt, Maine* has indeed been
“commodified for middle-class consumption” (75). Just a few pages later, Ward claims that the means by which the Beans resist identification with a middle class audience (77), their creation of a “vernacular notion of home” which cannot be commodified and therefore fails to conform to middle-class values, is indeed a universal sentiment about “home”: “What is home? Doubtless for Reuben [a character in *Beans*], as for anyone, it evokes memories a text can only represent at the cost of commodifying them” (87). Here, Ward indicates that the average reader (“anyone”) can sympathize with Reuben’s inability to translate “memories” into a “text” because doing so will commodify them. In reading *Beans* as a representation of folk culture, Ward looks to establish the novel as worthy of academic attention. Ward indicates this by asking: “Given the academic commonplace of the importance of race, class, and gender, why are these novels overlooked by the critical establishment? Given the academic attention to issues of identity, why has no critical perspective emerged to examine these novels’ representations of working-class identity?” (75-76). Here, Ward argues that *Beans* represents a “working-class identity,” or culture, because this is the only way critics will lavish “attention” on a text. Yet, culture is the very thing Chute resists. It appears that scholars do not know what to make of a novel that does not employ a conventional depiction of the poor: that is, novels which do not transform poverty into folk culture.

Yet Chute’s novel confronts the very thing that fictional representations of folk culture attempt to elide: the post-Fordist economy. At the same time, Chute laments working class men’s inability to achieve hegemonic masculinity, in the form of breadwinner, while Morrison and Proulx offer an alternative definition of manhood.
Within Morrison and Proulx’s folk cultures, men assert superiority over women but masculinity does not hinge upon the provider role. Instead, manhood is achieved through caring for and raising children, building community, and helping neighbors. Despite depicting a masculinity inclusive of conventionally feminine roles, Morrison and Proulx ultimately portray male protagonists who achieve a form of manhood valued by mainstream society. Paradoxically, the retreat to a folk culture enables Son and Quoyle to achieve late 20th century hegemonic masculinity, as described by James Cantano: the “call to anti-institutionalism, to a rejection of the status quo and the flabby, bureaucratic, nonmasculinity embodied in the aging fathers and the corporate powers-that-be” (188).

Son rejects Jadine’s pressure to enroll in college because he equates assimilation into dominant society with “obedience” (263). Quoyle, writing for a newspaper that informs the public about the missteps of the government, rejects “flabby, bureaucratic, nonmasculinity.” Folk culture, moreover, enables these characters to achieve what their contemporaries in the real world cannot: an actual, as opposed to metaphoric, escape from late 20th century American culture and economy in order to achieve masculinity. As Cantano notes about the use of self-making rhetoric: “there is a real irony in the motif’s usage by and about individuals who are deeply a part of, and indeed deeply dependent on, the very institutional frames that they decry” (188). Although Morrison and Proulx uphold “anti-institutionalism” as the masculine ideal, they acknowledge what their peers do not: that this type of manhood is unattainable. Morrison transforms Son into a myth, incapable of existing in late 20th century society. Proulx, despite deploying a formal device which enables readers to imaginatively enter into a folk community, makes it clear that readers cannot actually retreat to a folk culture and its associated gender roles.

This theory ignores the dramatic changes in the late 20th century U.S. labor market and ensuing steep decline in real wages that precluded many lower and middle class families from embodying the modern nuclear ideal. See Coontz’s cogent and insightful analysis of the contemporary nostalgia for the 1950s, in particular pp. 33-50.

Another obvious reference to the social decline precipitated by Second Wave Feminism occurs in a 1996 report by the Council on Families in America, a decidedly conservative think tank, which addressed the hazards of individualism manifest in rising divorce rates. The “worthy social goals” which prompted the “divorce revolution” derive from the political aims of Second Wave feminism: “to foster equality between men and women; to improve the family lives of women” (293). For the Council on Families in America, feminism prompted women to focus on “individual happiness and choice” and incurred “unsupportable social costs” (293).

See Coontz’s cogent and insightful analysis of the contemporary nostalgia for the 1950s, in particular pp. 33-50.

See Peter B. Erickson, “Images of Nurturance in Tar Baby” and Marilyn Sanders Mobley, “Narrative Dilemma: Jadine as Cultural Orphan in Tar Baby.”

See Yogita Goyal, “The Gender of Diaspora in Toni Morrison’s Tar Baby” and Malin Walther Pereira, “Periodizing Toni Morrison’s Work from The Bluest Eye to Jazz: The Importance of Tar Baby.”

Or refer to Michael C. Hanchard: “When viewed in isolation, black fatherhood becomes a fetish of maschismo and conventional masculinity rather than a practical component of family life within immediate and extended families and communities. When viewed in isolation, the black family becomes but another receptacle for dominant values and ideals that do not work for the dominant social group in the first place but are utilized to tell African-Americans, once again, that they do not measure up” (470).

Goyal’s careful and insightful reading of Tar Baby imagines the dichotomy between Son and Jadine in a different manner. That is, Goyal describes Jadine as a symbol of diaspora, choosing independence and mobility in order to reject the gender inequalities inherent in the black folk community, while Son embodies black nationalism, clinging to folk traditions (396-97). The problem with this reading is that Goyal accepts the way in which black nationalism defines itself (as preserving tradition) but does not acknowledge the feminist critique of black nationalism (that it imports Western gender constructions).

Dorothea Drummond Mbalia, in Toni Morrison’s Developing Class Consciousness (1991), argues that Morrison’s oeuvre reflects a growing preoccupation with capitalism as the source of racial and gendered oppression, ultimately claiming Morrison realizes that “capitalism—in all its forms—must be the African’s primary target of attack” (23). Here, Mbalia seems to indicate that Morrison advocates an embrace of socialism in order to overcome racism. Mbalia ultimately argues, however, that Morrison portrays capitalism’s worst attribute as the eradication of the “bond” between “Africans” and consequently destruction of “African” community (72). See her discussion of Son for a more detailed understanding of how Mbalia defines “class consciousness” as cultural awareness, rather than an awareness of shared position in an economic underclass. Mbalia bemoans Jadine’s (as well as Sydney and Ondine’s) loss of identity, rather than their participation in the exploitation of the masses. In so doing, Mbalia insightfully diagnoses the struggle Morrison portrays in Tar Baby, as that of a desire for culture versus a drive for independence, but inaccurately frames this battle as a dawning class consciousness.
This is a moment wherein the clash between points of view occurs most strikingly. Immediately following the passage quoted above, Morrison writes, “He thought he was rescuing her from Valerian, meaning them, the aliens, the people who in a mere three hundred years had killed a world millions of years old... Each was pulling the other away from the maw of hell—its very ridge top. One had a past, the other a future and each one bore the culture to save the race in his hands” (269).

Mayberry also discusses this (148-149).


Notably, Wolfe argues that unlicensed sexual freedom functions as a fundamental element of the “Me Decade” (8).

Beth Bailey, in her analysis of the incorporation of second wave feminism into popular culture, argues that “throughout the 1970s, in American public life, women’s liberation was frequently conflated with the sexual revolution. ‘Are you liberated?’ did not mean ‘Do you believe an individual should have the freedom to choose his or her own path?’ It did not mean ‘Do you work outside the home?’ It meant ‘Do you have sex?’” (116).

As Petal makes clear to Quoyle: “See, it was a joke. I didn’t want to be married to anybody. And I don’t feel like being a mama to anybody either. It was all a mistake and I mean it” (21).

Proulx agrees with Wolfe’s claim that, in the late 20th century, many Americans broke with “serial immortality” in order to pursue individual desires. For Proulx, “serial immortality” is a mid-20th century value by which men of that era defined masculinity. In her portrayal of Guy, Quoyle’s father, Proulx cements the association between “serial immortality,” the modern era, and manhood: “I had to make my own way in a tough world ever since I came to this country. Nobody ever gave me nothing. Other men would have given up and turned into bums, but I didn’t. I sweated and worked, wheeled barrows of sand for the stonemason, went without so you and your brother could have advantages” (19). In this passage, the conventional masculine role of the self-made man (“nobody ever gave me nothing”) exists alongside and provides the foundation for “serial immortality” (“went without so you and your brother could have advantages”). Quoyle, however, does not follow his father’s model of manliness. As becomes evident in Guy’s list of his son’s inadequacies, Quoyle fails spectacularly in terms of self-making: “From this youngest son’s failure to dog-paddle the father saw other failures multiply like an explosion of virulent cells—failure to speak clearly; failure to sit up straight; failure to get up in the morning; failure in attitude; failure in ambition and ability; indeed, in everything” (2). Guy diagnoses Quoyle’s incompetence in terms of self-making. Quoyle does not manifest physical prowess (“failure to dog-paddle”) and does he show an inclination to aggressively seek out success (“failure in attitude; failure in ambition and ability”). Proulx indicates, however, that the modern values by which Quoyle fails to achieve masculinity are no longer relevant in the 1970s and 1980s. At the end of his life, Guy pronounces self-making and “serial immortality” lacking: “Hasn’t been much of a life” (19). Quoyle’s parents, both diagnosed with cancer, commit suicide because, as Quoyle suspects, “they’d spent everything. The grocery chain went bankrupt and his pension stopped. If they’d kept on living they’d have had to go out and get jobs” (20). The modern man, embodied in Quoyle’s father, loses his moorings in the late 20th century because the systems he’d worked toward becoming a part of and come to rely upon, such as a “pension” and long term healthcare, are no longer sacrosanct in the contemporary world.

Over the past decades, Newfoundland attempted to enter the contemporary world: “But now they said that hard life was done... All was progress and possession, all shove and push, now. They said” (33). Here, “progress” is associated with the cornerstone of capitalism, consumerism or “possession,” which implies an interest in the self rather than the community. But, over the course of the novel, it becomes obvious that “possession” has not fully arrived in Newfoundland. Although some governmental services and utilities have migrated to Newfoundland, the economy has not transformed into a late 20th century marketplace (64-5). Or, more accurately, Newfoundland’s previously sustainable economy (at subsistence level) has nearly been demolished and has not been replaced by a new form of labor. In order to achieve “possession,” inhabitants must leave for Canada or America, where jobs are more readily available. Without “possession,” Newfoundland retains its unique culture and a communal spirit.
8 Writing, the paradigmatic modern form of employment, becomes associated with the folk in this novel. Everyone employed at the Gammy Bird lacks a formal education in journalism, they simply write about their interests. More than that, the newspaper was conceived and carried out in opposition to government and “progress.” Jack Buggit, the founder and editor-in-chief of the Gammy Bird, describes how he entered into the newspaper business: “Now, how do you know things? You read ‘em in the paper! There wasn’t no local paper. Just that government mouthpiece down to St. John’s, The Sea Lion. So I says, not knowing anything about it, hardly able to write a sentence… but I made up my mind that if they could start a glove factory with no leather or nobody that knew how to make ‘em, I could start a newspaper… They sent me off to Toronto to learn about the newspaper business… I hung around Toronto what, four or five weeks, listening to them rave at me about editorial balance, integrity, the new journalism, reporter ethics, service to the community. Give me the fits… Learned what I had to know finally by doing it right here in my old shop… I know what people want to read about. And no arguments about it” (67). No formal training. An instinctive knowledge of what the community needs to know. Not an authoritative, unbiased source. Riddled with spelling errors. Translates the news from the wire, inserting different words until no longer resembles the actual story. Gossip column – “near-libelous” (62). Filled with ads concocted by the editors.

19 Christian Hummelsund Voie, in “Drinking the Elixir of Ownership: Pilgrims and Improvers in the Landscapes of Annie Proulx’s That Old Ace in the Hole and The Shipping News” (2009), argues that conventional accounts of Quoyle’s dawning sense of self fail to take into account the impact of Newfoundland’s unique geography in this process: “Hope is to be found in nature, unimpeachable, superior and always attainable. Hope grows from the cultivation of at-home-ness… Home is inextricably bound to nature, landscape, and a character’s growing sense of place, home, and belonging. In The Shipping News Quoyle finds hope and a sense of at-home-ness in his ancestral Newfoundland… It is neither society nor civilization that impels Quoyle toward Newfoundland’s frozen north… Quoyle needs to discover something stable and enduring, terra firma that will not crumble from underneath him” (42-43). While Voie is right to point to the impact of nature on Quoyle, I argue that it is Newfoundland’s harsh natural setting that causes its residents to develop a sense of community. While I do not focus on the direct impact of nature, itself, I agree with Voie that location and landscape fundamentally shape the inhabitants of the island.

20 Intuitive knowledge also marks Newfoundland culture. For instance, Quoyle doesn’t suspect Petal’s death, but Buggit knows when his son goes missing (138), then instinctively understands where to find his shipwrecked child in the vast sea (97). Buggit also knows when Quoyle is lost at sea (212) – thereby marking Quoyle’s thorough integration in Newfoundland folk culture.

21 Agnis becomes associated with masculinity by virtue of her ability to guide Quoyle, but also, notably, as a result of her status as a onetime U.S. resident, exposed to America’s widespread “culture of narcissism.” As her business (and, possibly, romantic) partner, Mavis Bangs says, “Agnis have a manly heart, Agnis do… A boldish air, she grasp on things like a man do. That’s from living in the States. All the women down there is boldish” (179).

22 Also, Nolan becomes Quoyle’s responsibility – patriarch of the family.

23 I question the ubiquitous nature of this sympathy. The film version of The Shipping News certainly prioritizes Quoyle’s perspective and celebrates his attainment of masculinity.

24 The only moment in Proulx’s novel which might remotely qualify as an ambivalent assessment of community occurs when a boat is wrecked as a “good joke to keep poor Nutbeem here” (261). While the sinking of Nutbeem’s boat is cruel, the entire community works to fix the situation (261).
III. FATHER KNOWS BEST

Boldly claiming triumph for the masses of unacknowledged, underappreciated American fathers, Bryan E. Robinson and Robert L. Barret, in The Developing Father (1986), proclaim: “During the 1970s the father was rediscovered” (5). Robinson and Barret announce, with apparent delight, that late 20th century American fathers are no longer “dehumanized” (4) by society’s strict gender roles and thereby eagerly grasp opportunities, newly available as a result of Second Wave Feminism’s disruption of traditional gender roles, to nurture and care for their children. Although Robinson and Barret celebrate the “rediscovery” of the father’s ability to excel in the aspects of parenting conventionally associated with mothers, David Popenoe, in Life Without Father (1996), argues that fathers who fulfill traditionally feminine parenting duties are “absent” because these men do not provide their children with a necessary example of manliness, ideally embodied in the breadwinner. Despite their very different perspectives on the role of paternal figures, Robinson, Barret, and Popenoe participate in a widespread late 20th century discourse on the fundamental importance of fathers to the wellbeing of their children and the nation. Ultimately, social scientists, popular culture, and governmental studies agreed with Popenoe: most promoted the idea that the family is the foundation of the nation but that this foundation is only strong when embodied in the modern nuclear formation. This pervasive conversation about the societal benefits which accrue from the modern nuclear family represented a means of coping with a disruption in conventional gender roles and a perceived assault on masculinity caused by the social and economic transformation of the 1970s and 1980s. In imagining the restoration of the modern nuclear family as a balm for social ills, pundits positioned personal lifestyle, rather than
governmental policies and economic conditions, as the cause of a myriad of these social problems.

In this chapter, I examine David Bradley's *The Chaneysville Incident* (1981) and Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* (1997), which offer an alternative assessment of changing family formations and the impact of these alterations on masculinity: the idealization of folk culture as the site in which fatherhood and, concomitantly, manhood, may be recuperated. In these novels, folk culture exists prior to the mid-20th century, inheres within the segregated ethnic communities which developed in response to racism and, importantly, generates strategies for its members to successfully navigate a bigoted society. The folk enclave, as imagined in *The Chaneysville Incident* and *American Pastoral*, enables men who were often denied access to the conventional signifiers of masculinity (breadwinner status and upward mobility) to successfully develop alternative definitions of fatherhood and manhood. As depicted in these novels, a segregated folk culture inextricably links fatherhood with manhood in a variety of ways: the oral transference of family history from one generation to the next, assuring boys and men of their place and importance within history; the survival skills, passed between male kin members and boys, enabling them to outwit a racist society and thereby achieve a sense of pride; and the feeling of accomplishment men derived from raising happy, successful children in spite of oppression.

Not only do *The Chaneysville Incident* and *American Pastoral* offer an unconventional site in which to salvage masculinity, but they also attribute the deterioration of fatherhood to very different conditions than those described by
governmental publications, sociologists, and the popular press. In these novels, fatherhood is not undermined by an individual’s departure from the role of breadwinner or housewife. Nor do they anticipate recent scholarly re-evaluations which position the transformation of paternal roles as a response to economic and social upheaval. Rather, both depict fatherhood and masculinity as undercut by the movement away from segregated folk communities and assimilation into dominant American society. In imagining the masculinity crisis to be precipitated by the loss of racial and/or ethnic identity, The Chaneysville Incident and American Pastoral directly contradict the conclusions of the commentators and analysts detailed in subsequent paragraphs. Assimilation and the attainment of middle class status, with its associated gender roles (breadwinner and housewife), do not confer manhood; indeed, these authors imagine segregated folk communities, the sites in need of reform according to their contemporaries in social science and then Assistant Secretary of Labor, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, as fostering the ideal masculinity.

The prevailing discourse on fatherhood, from which Bradley and Roth’s novels so starkly diverge, emerges in the mid-1960s with the publication of “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action.” The 1965 Moynihan Report emphasizes the "pathology" that emerges from a "matriarchal structure," claiming that underemployed, absent fathers fail to provide young boys with an example of what to strive for. Moynihan concludes that the absent "pattern of men working" causes African American boys to score poorly on intelligence tests, drop out of school, and engage in crime and delinquency (Chapter IV). In his analysis of the "pathology" of the "matriarchal structure," Moynihan does not imagine fathers as needing to provide more than an example of industrious provider.
While Moynihan advocates breadwinning as the balm for what he perceives to be the African American community's troubles, he does so because he sees value in conforming to the normative masculine function, not because he thinks acting as provider is inherently better than any other role available to men. In other words, Moynihan believes that African Americans' allegedly matriarchal community fails to produce upstanding citizens due to its deviation from dominant society's family structure: "There is, presumably, no special reason why a society in which males are dominant in family relationships is to be preferred to a matriarchal arrangement. However, it is clearly a disadvantage for a minority group to be operating on one principle, while the great majority of the population, and the one with the most advantages to begin with, is operating on another." For Moynihan, the problem with a "matriarchal arrangement" stems from its departure from the norm; conforming to the dominant family formation in America will ensure African Americans’ success, defined as becoming indistinguishable (in terms of income, educational attainment, and job status) from the rest of the population. For Moynihan, normative masculinity – embodied in the role of sole provider -- enables assimilation and thereby improves the lives of African Americans. Presumably, however, Moynihan would argue that if the entire population adopted the "matriarchal arrangement," "Negro Americans" would be at no disadvantage.

Yet, from the late 1970s through the 1990s, a large segment of dominant white society began to resemble the "matriarchal arrangement" of the "Negro American" "subculture" and there was no improvement in African American boys' criminal and delinquency rate. Indeed, as so many social scientists, governmental studies, and the popular press argued, the negative effects of a "matriarchal arrangement" were visited
upon the "great majority of the population." In consequence, many pundits argued that the failures of a "matriarchal arrangement" result from its very structure. Conservative social critic David Popenoe (1996) claims: "Father absence is a major force lying behind many of the attention-grabbing issues that dominate the news: crime and delinquency; premature sexuality and out-of-wedlock teen births, deteriorating educational achievement; depression, substance abuse, and alienation among teenagers; and the growing number of women and children in poverty" (3). Popenoe goes on to argue that "role complementariness," a return to modern nuclear gender roles, will resolve the "attention-grabbing issues that dominate the news." For Popenoe, “role complementariness” is, in and of itself, beneficial to society. Men and women, as Popenoe argues, need to adhere to their gendered responsibilities (breadwinner and housewife, respectively) because these roles underlie society’s wellbeing.

The U.S. government agreed with Popenoe regarding "role complementariness." According to state laws at the time, husbands and wives, even when faced with divorce, should enact modern nuclear gender roles. It was not until 1979 that the first joint custody act was enacted in California and it took 12 years for 39 states to follow suit; throughout the 1970s and 1980s, women retained sole custody of children in 85% of cases.³ Custody laws position the mother as nurturer and the father as breadwinner, responsible for child support and little else. During this time period, however, men's ability to establish masculinity as a function of breadwinning deteriorated. As a result of social and economic transformations (or longstanding conditions), many men were precluded from identifying paternity with breadwinning. At the exact moment that men’s ability to act as sole provider diminished, there emerged a proliferation of texts attesting to the unique
nature of fatherhood and its necessary role in children's development. Robinson and Barret chronicle the rising interest in fatherhood:

> Until the 1970s fathers and the experience of fatherhood were largely taken for granted both in the popular culture and in the psychological literature. Fathers were accepted as necessary ingredients in the family life, but few people really expected them to be deeply involved in day-to-day parenting activities... The growing awareness of fathers' significant participation in their children's development has led researchers to devote more attention to this overlooked parent... The paucity of research on fathers is almost alarming... The idea that such narrow participation in child rearing [i.e. acting as provider] is dehumanizing was rare in the literature before the 1970s. The prevailing assumption was that women have an instinctive nurturing ability and men do not. During the 1970s the father was rediscovered.(4-5)⁴

The "rediscovery" of fathers' "significant participation in their children's development" occurs at the exact moment that men's ability to act as sole provider diminishes. This simultaneity isn’t likely to be coincidental; it stands to reason that scholars (along with governmental studies and popular culture) salvaged fatherhood in a moment when the paternal role looked to be on the brink of extinction.⁵ Nonetheless, most scholars did not explicitly make the connection between lower real wages and the desire for a new paternal role. For the most part, discussions of “new fatherhood” participated in the rhetoric of personal fulfillment, eschewing an analysis of contemporary economic and social conditions.
The newly expanded definition of fatherhood was seen as vital to the formation of masculinity in the adult man and his son. The discussion of father absence foregrounds a concern about the ability of boys, in an era of escalating divorce rates and the state’s decision to award primary custody to mothers, to develop a positive masculine identity without a paternal figure. John Lewis McAdoo summarizes the dominant discourse surrounding fatherless young boys: "Many studies... have found a relationship between father absence and problems in developing a secure masculine identity, with juvenile delinquency sometimes viewed as a resulting overcompensation... both Black and White boys from fatherless homes tended to be markedly more immature, submissive, dependent, and 'effeminate' than other boys" (82). But there is also a concern about the impact of diminished fatherhood on adult men. In *Fatherhood Today* (1988), Michael W. Yogman, James Cooley, and Daniel Kindlon argue that "apart from any response to the women's movement, men are also seeking increased emotional closeness with their infants as part of a men's movement toward fuller personhood, and as a reaction against the alienation and burnout of the purely instrumental role of family provider" (53). Yogman, Cooley, and Kindlon position men's reevaluation of the "purely instrumental role of family provider" as the result of "men's movement toward fuller personhood" rather than a reaction to the limitations of less remunerative economy.

Similarly, in the 1980s and 1990s, Hollywood released a slew of movies to counter the idea that men's best contribution to parenting derives from their income, but these films also highlight that this "movement toward fuller personhood" often results from a job loss or poorly paid work. A few of these movies include: "Mr. Mom" (1983), "Three Men and a Baby" (1987), "Look Who's Talking" (1989), "Three Men and a Little
Lady" (1990), "Father of the Bride" (1991), and "Mrs. Doubtfire" (1993). In depicting the gains men encounter when accessing and acting upon their ability to nurture, Hollywood focused on white, upper class families, ignoring the problems encountered by unmarried, teenage mothers and single parents at or below the poverty line (an increasingly common condition for divorced American women with kids). More to the point, many of these films end with the biological father and mother re-engaged in happy relationships, and the father, after demonstrating his skills as a nurturer, restored to his "proper" role of provider. The films that deviate from this format ("Mr. Mom" and "Look Who's Talking") betray an anxiety over the definition of fatherhood by refusing to neatly settle the tensions between competing paternal roles. Unwilling to resolve the masculinity crisis by resurrecting the role of provider, these movies express a desire to balance the provider role with a more nurturing persona, but are unable to imagine what that would look like. Ultimately, however, all the films position the nurturing father as a lifestyle choice, derived from self-interest, rather than a political statement about women's equality.

Despite the widespread declaration of a father's necessary role in nurturing children, men's behavior did not change in any significant way during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. As Diane Ehrensaft notes: "As these shifts [more women in the workplace and increasing numbers of divorces] have occurred, a striking phenomenon appears: to wit, the paradox of both more and less participation by men in childrearing. As late as the mid 1970s to 1980s, estimates of American fathers' involvement in basic childcare ranged from 1-1/2 to 3 hours per week. This is not very much time. Yet it is a lot more time than characterizes the women-headed households in which there is no father involvement at all" (4). *The Developing Father* (1986) clarifies this data with an investigation into the
reasons behind the very slow changes in men's behavior: "Most men are encouraged to perform as highly traditional fathers, and much of the psychological and sociological literature prior to the 1970s has generally validated such a restricted role. Many men feel they must restrict or sacrifice their father role in order to be successful breadwinners" (13). Robinson and Barret justify men's decision to act as "highly traditional fathers" by describing the societal pressure to conform to this role. Despite the implicit critique of the coercion that causes men to "restrict or sacrifice their father role," *The Developing Father* ultimately advocates traditional gender roles:

Traditional fathers in this study were firm and demanding, authoritarian, and possessed the bulk of the power in their families. The children of these men, who were self-confident and comfortable in their paternal roles, fared better in the outside world, were more assertive, were better adjusted, and achieved at a higher level than children of androgynous parents... The future of paternal roles is not clear, but there is good reason to reject the desirability of an era of androgynous unisexuality. (44, 45)⁹

Society's ills, imagined to result from "androgynous" parenting, can be solved by the reinstatement of "traditional fathers." Like many others, Robinson and Barret believe that America’s future success depends on men - from all races and backgrounds - conforming to the role of provider.

According to Robinson and Barret, and many others like them, reinstating a traditional father figure, rather than addressing poverty, racism, and the demands of late-capitalist society, will prevent the "attention-grabbing issues that dominate the news"
(Popenoe 3). For instance, the 1986 report to the President, "The Family: Preserving America's Future," proclaims: "The American people have reached a new consensus about the family. After two decades of unprecedented attacks on it, the family's worth—indeed, it's essential role—in our free society has become the starting point in a national effort to reclaim a precious part of our heritage" (1). Here, the ideal "family" existed prior to the "two decades of unprecedented attacks"; as such, the 1986 report defines the family, an "essential" actor in the propagation of "our free society" and which Americans have begun to "reclaim," as the modern nuclear ideal. In a similar assessment of the modern nuclear family's value, Dan Quayle (1992) infamously indicted the title character of the television sitcom "Murphy Brown" for "mocking the importance of fathers" when she decided to keep an unplanned pregnancy and raise a baby on her own. While Quayle understood popular culture as propagating new, threatening family formations and the 1986 report to the President imagined a resurgence of conventional gender roles, both value the modern nuclear family as the ideal to which all Americans should aspire. In other words, if all families resemble the modern nuclear ideal, then all citizens will embrace the same morals and values, and thereby access the benefits of upward mobility. The call to return to the modern era, with its associated gender roles, was popularly embraced by the American public as well (Quayle's assessment of Americans' lax values notwithstanding). Stephanie Coontz, in *The Way We Really Are* (1997), says, "In a 1996 poll by the Knight-Ridder news agency, more Americans chose the 1950s than any other single decade as the best time for children to grow up" (33). While the official and popular discourse sought to reinstate biological fathers as breadwinners, feminists often responded with excitement about the newly proliferating variations in family structure.
Exuberant in the face of postmodern chaos, wherein master narratives collapse, feminists tended to view the failure of the family as a crushing blow to patriarchy.¹¹

Not only do *The Chaneysville Incident* and *American Pastoral* counter the diagnosis of their contemporaries in regards to the source of the fatherhood crisis, but these novels depict as problematic the material and educational advancements which were lacking for the majority of men in the 1970s and 1980s -- the very circumstances that contributed to the re-evaluation of fatherhood in mainstream America. That is, assimilation often entails educational achievement and material prosperity; yet, these novels portray assimilation to be the cause of the masculinity and fatherhood crises. In so doing, Bradley and Roth point to a contemporary reality: a select (but unprecedented) number of African American and Jewish men and women were able, in the second half of the 20th century, to access upward mobility.¹² Assimilating into a society that had traditionally excluded them, middle class minorities were required and able, often for the first time, to conform to dominant society’s gender role expectations. This often involved relinquishing the gender roles developed to sustain their segregated cultural communities and signaled, in *The Chaneysville Incident* and *American Pastoral*, an abandonment of folk culture.

Both novels incorporate a similar formal device to highlight the importance of folk culture in the search for manhood. Centrally, each novel revolves around a male character’s quest to understand the life and motivations of an admired but elusive man. Via imaginative reconstruction, these characters narrate the hitherto unknown details of another man’s life. This narration is made possible by a shared cultural heritage. Collective identity, rooted in folk culture, allows a character to envision the history of an important male figure in his cultural group and thereby comprehend the traits associated
Bradley's novel chronicles a man's search for the truth about his father as a means of establishing a masculine identity. For the most part, scholars have focused on this novel as an example of the powerful role that the excavation of suppressed history plays in the formation of African American identity. Of the many discussions of *Chaneysville*, I have found only two that question or analyze gender in the novel. Mary Helen Washington, in her 1981 review, notes Bradley's "problematic treatment of women." She concludes her analysis of the text with "I do not know what this novel is finally trying to say about women, but it is a crucial question to be dealt with." Cathy Brigham, in "Identity, Masculinity, and Desire in David Bradley's Fiction" (1995), seems to be the only scholar who responds to Washington's prompt, asserting that "the women whom [male characters] very much wish to bed, ignore, and be alienated from... persist in creeping in from the margins and directing the quest for male identity" (289). While Brigham offers a fascinating reading of Bradley's novel, I contend that the "problematic treatment of women" pinpointed by Washington cannot be fully resolved by ascribing power to secondary female characters. Rather, the quest for masculinity in *Chaneysville* reflects a contemporary concern about fatherlessness and thereby necessarily relegates women to the periphery of the text.

Bradley's interest in fatherhood becomes obvious when *Chaneysville* is placed in the context of the Moynihan Report and its aftermath. After the Moynihan report described poor, urban African Americans as enmeshed in a debilitating "pathology," many scholars, beginning with Andrew Billingsley and Carol Stack,
responded by arguing that the black community's matriarchal structure and high rates of single motherhood were not instances of societal decline but a necessary adaptive response to the historical and current social conditions in the United States. That is, rather than divide into independent nuclear family units, only capable of sustaining autonomy through a cushion of wealth, Billingsley and Stack demonstrate how the African American community embraces supportive kinship networks, to counteract the effects of racism and resultant poverty. According to scholars, these networks arose out of African traditions and African American folk culture, and give children the opportunity to interact with a variety of caring, involved adults. Fatherhood, then, involves caring for the children of kin and does not limit paternal guidance and love to biological children. As Michael Connor and Joseph White describe, in *Black Fathers: An Invisible Presence in America* (2006), "The overlapping community, social, and family networks that make up the extended family in the African American community have always been a primary source of social fatherhood... most African American men learned the meaning of fatherhood through a circle of kin networks and community affiliations that provided a variety of men to be observed and emulated and from whom a frame of reference for viewing the world could be acquired" (7). Proponents of the kinship model position men as necessary in the raising of children; the men in question, however, need not be the children's biological fathers, but concerned relatives or friends. In his extremely popular series of books, *Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys* (1982), Jawanza Kunjufu advocates the use of a masculine support network, termed a "rites-of-passage" program, to raise black boys (146). Kunjufu's rites-of-passage program and
others like it are grounded in both African survivals and African-American folk culture’s methods of coping with racism.

In this context, it is not surprising that *Chaneyville* portrays John Washington's reliance upon male kin, primarily his deceased father's friend, Old Jack, to guide him toward manhood. Through John's relationship with Old Jack, Bradley illustrates the way in which a community of men, rather than a single father figure, teaches a boy to become a man. The assumption in this novel, as in so many other texts of this period, is that boys require a paternal figure in order to achieve manhood. In anticipation of his death, Moses worries that John, raised by a single mother and without masculine influence, will become a "sissy," as Old Jack relates:

"Your daddy.... was worried about you.... Said you was too much your mama's child. Said he was worried you was gonna end up bein' a preacher or a sissy or somethin', on account a the way that woman carried on around you, fussin' with your clothes an' fixin' you food an' things that a man oughta be able to do for hisself... He said there was a lot of woman in you... Anyways, that was what your daddy was afraid was gonna happen: you'd spend so much time with women that the woman would come out in you and you'd end up rubbin' your hands an' cryin' 'stead of doin' what needed to be done." (34)

According to Moses, a mother brings out the "woman in" John. But the fact of living in a racist society, and the concomitant need of "doin' what needed to be done," disallows John the luxury of feminization. While producing a "sissy" may be fine for white families, Moses argues that black families must raise sons who know how to do "things
that a man oughta be able to do himself." In order to "[do] what needed to be done," Moses indicates that John needs the influence and guidance of male kin.

Primarily, Old Jack worries that John's mother encourages him to accept the rules of a racist society. For instance, when discussing the educational system, John's mother advises obedience to white authority: "'don't you forget, don't ever forget, that white people are the ones that say what happens to you... And so long as you're going to their school, so long; as they're teaching you what you need to learn, you have to be quiet, and careful, and respectful'" (119). Rather than outwit or evade "white people" and their rules, John's mother counsels acceptance and assimilation: "be quiet, and careful, and respectful." The foundation of manhood, imparted by Old Jack and advocated by Moses, involves independence from manipulation, feminine, white, or otherwise. According to Old Jack, women short circuit a man's ability to survive racism because they advise acceding to white society and thereby foreclose his "say": "'If [a man] don't have no say over the things he needs to live, he ain't got no say over whether he lives at all, an' if he ain't got no say over that, he ain't no man. A man has to have say'" (41). By instructing John to "be quiet," John's mother refuses to give him a "say"; instead, "white people" are the only ones with "say." In order to ensure "say," Moses insists that a black man, in particular John, needs to acquire folk skills: "Jack, if anything happens to me, you take that boy an' teach him to hunt, an' teach him to fish, an' drink whiskey an' cuss. Teach him to track" (36). The folk skills of hunting, fishing, drinking, cussing, and tracking enable a man to establish independence from dominant white society and thereby ensure a "say."

Old Jack's lessons in masculinity prove necessary because Moses, while living,
did not teach John how to act like a man. Rather than behave like a male member of the folk community and transmit survival skills to his sons and other boys in the area, Moses behaves like a traditional breadwinner: a detached and remote provider who leaves the caring and nurturing for his wife. In conforming to the modern nuclear ideal, Moses is standoffish and uninvolved in his sons' lives. As such, Bradley counters the Moynihan Report, which advocates adherence to modern nuclear gender roles as a solution to the perceived fatherlessness in the African American community; instead, Bradley shows how father absence results from enacting the role of breadwinner. Beyond the way in which the role of breadwinner fosters fatherlessness, Bradley establishes that the role of sole provider does not benefit African American boys in terms of modeling ideal masculine behavior. In a racist society, as Moses and Old Jack argue, the modern nuclear family does not encourage African American boys to hone the folk skills necessary to evade oppressors and survive. Indeed, it is only through Moses' ability to master folk practices (in this novel, defined as hunting, tracking, and dexterous wit) that he is able to intimidate the white community and thereby gain the freedom to enact the modern nuclear ideal.

Old Jack, meanwhile, disapprovingly views Moses’ adoption of the breadwinner role for another reason altogether: it marks the abandonment of folk culture and thereby indicates emasculation. According to Old Jack, Moses’ embrace of middle class respectability (he "put down his whiskey" and "lived butt-to-belly with them Methodists") causes “weak”[ness] and emasculation (69). Unbeknownst to Old Jack, however, Moses does not abandon folk culture after assuming the role of breadwinner. Rather, Moses employs his folk skills in a new way: to "hunt" his paternal history. He
“had been researching something, that what had happened was not, as everybody thought, that Moses had given up hunting, but rather that he had transferred his efforts to an entirely different forest, to the pursuit of other game” (142). Despite adopting white society's traditional masculine gender role, Moses retains his manhood by maintaining the folk skill of hunting and applying it to an “other game.”

Not only does Moses utilize folk skills and thereby retain manhood despite his modern nuclear trappings, but he hunts his paternal history, the penultimate use of folk culture because a man’s knowledge of his father confers a masculinity that cannot be mitigated or diminished. John Edgar Wideman in his memoir, *Fatheralong* (1994), reflects upon his relationship, or lack thereof, with his father and asserts the importance of a father in establishing masculinity:

The stories must be told. Ideas of manhood, true and transforming, grow out of private, personal exchanges between fathers and sons. Yet for generations of black men in America this privacy, this privilege has been systematically breached in a most shameful and public way. Not only breached, but brutally usurped, mediated by murder, mayhem, misinformation. Generation after generation of black men, deprived of the voices of their fathers, are for all intents and purposes born semi-orphans. Mama's baby, Daddy's maybe. Fathers in exile, in hiding, on the run, anonymous, undetermined, dead. The lost fathers cannot claim their sons, speak to them about growing up, until the fathers claim their own manhood. Speak first to themselves, then unambiguously to their sons. Arrayed against the possibility of conversation
between fathers and sons is the country they inhabit, everywhere proclaiming the inadequacy of black fathers, their lack of manhood in almost every sense the term's understood here in America. (64-5)

For Wideman, as for Bradley, establishing a relationship between a fathers and his son instills "manhood" in both men. Before fathers can "speak" to their sons about "growing up" and establishing a masculine identity, the fathers must first "claim their own manhood." Bradley reflects this progression in his depiction of Moses and John. Only after Moses discovers his paternal history can he guide John toward manhood.

Unlike Moses, however, when John enrolls in an urban university and eventually becomes a historian, he abandons his folk culture entirely. As might be expected, Old Jack views John’s pursuit of education as a betrayal of race and a loss of masculinity: "'You goin' off to be a white man, you best learn how white folks act... I 'spect you already know. I 'spect that woman's been teachin' you how to flip your coattails 'fore you set down like a Goddamned sissy'" (135). Once again, Old Jack equates education with becoming a "white man" and emasculation ("a Goddamned sissy"). Despite his education and seeming repudiation of the folk, John continues to anchor his manhood in the discovery of paternal history. John, however, mistakenly pursues Moses’ “whys and wherefores” with the rational methods he learned at the university and therefore repeatedly fails to make sense of the historical documents. In a similar manner, John recounts his realization that scientific algorithms do not enable an understanding the natural world:
that if you knew the shape of the land and the velocity and temperature and
direction of the wind, you could sit there with your slide rule and come up with a
pretty good idea of what the pitch would be... I had gone to the far side to sit with
Old Jack and drink toddies and listen to the sound the wind made and to glory in
the power of knowing what it was...But then it started... And what I had heard had
filled me with cold fear... I had heard singing. I had sat there, trying to perceive
that sound as I had known I should, trying not to hear voices in it, trying not to
hear words. But I heard them anyway. (382-83)

Empirical knowledge, calculating the "velocity and temperature and direction of the
wind," does not enable John to figure out why he perceives the wind as "singing" or
"panting." This is because the "voices" John hears in the wind manifest the imprint of an
historical event on the natural world—something decidedly beyond rational calculation.
For the same reason, John does not have success in approaching paternal history from an
empirical perspective. Eventually, John realizes that "there aren't any facts. All that
about runaway slaves and Moses Washington, that's extrapolation. It's not facts... There
aren't any more facts" (391). Only when John abandons empiricism can he "extrapolate"
the "whys and wherefores" of Moses and his paternal grandfather.

Old Jack's lessons in folk skills, particularly hunting, allow John to "extrapolate"
his heritage. John employs hunting expertise to track his father because "if [Moses] was
anything, he was a hunter. And he did what any good hunter does when he's going off to
trail dangerous game: he left trail markers, so that if somebody wanted to they could
follow him, and he more or less made sure somebody would want to" (387). In order to
"trail" Moses, John uses Old Jack's advice on tracking: "You figure too much, Johnny... You ain't lost him. You jest lost your feel for him. He's still there. Quit trying to figure where he's at an' jest follow him!" (393). In remembering this piece of advice, John abandons logic (to "figure") and "jest follow[s]" Moses to "feel" history.

The folk skills of hunting and tracking allow John to find his father and thereby attain masculinity. It is important to note that John does not intend to permanently retreat into a folk community. Instead, the knowledge John acquires through hunting and tracking enables him to return to the contemporary world with an intact masculine identity. As such, Bradley advocates re-acquaintance with folk culture in order to establish a sense of self prior to assimilating into mainstream American society. For Bradley, folk culture should function as a foundational element of African American men’s masculinity, not as a permanent milieu. This becomes evident in the novel’s depiction of the role of a biological father in establishing his son’s masculinity. In portraying the relationship between John and Old Jack, Bradley explores the kinship model but ultimately elides its importance by focusing John's efforts on his paternal ancestry. John is not complete until he uncovers his father's motivations and his grandfather's history. As such, Bradley betrays an investment in biological fatherhood, implying that kinship works to facilitate the relationship between biological father and son, but does not replace that relationship's importance in fashioning manhood.

Countering my interpretation of Bradley’s novel as a tale of masculinity discovered through paternal history, Brigham argues that "[Chaneysville] very
carefully constructs a narrative about very carefully constructing a gendered identity and a patrifocal family history—until its final segments, when a feminine, oral, imaginative vision of history asserts itself as the only process through which its protagonist might resolve his dilemma" (290). Brigham views the “oral, imaginative vision of history” as a necessarily “feminine” sphere because, since the African American women’s renaissance in the 1970s and 1980s, folk culture has been overwhelming gendered as female. As I have shown, however, Bradley positions the "oral, imaginative vision of history" as only accessible through an embrace of folk skills which he associates with masculinity. Stories about Moses form the basis of the relationship between Old Jack and John. And it is only through the deployment of masculine folk skills, such as "hunting" and "tracking," that John arrives at an understanding of history. Thus, when Brigham argues that no one investigates Bradley's depiction of masculinity because John does not conform to the urban, delinquent black manhood depicted on the news (291), I believe the absent discussion of masculinity in *Chaneysville* derives from the fact that manhood is rooted in folk culture, a sphere conventionally associated with the feminine.

In *American Pastoral*, Roth captures a similar nostalgia for the masculinity that inheres in folk culture’s patriarchal roles through a narrator who imagines the dire consequences of assimilation. *American Pastoral* presents the life of Seymour "the Swede" Levov as the culmination of a century of Jewish Americans’ struggle to assimilate and emblematic of the achievements or, more accurately, the misfortunes of the Jewish community. For the most part, scholars focus on the loss of Jewish identity as the central preoccupation and complication of the text. While the
movement away from Jewish culture functions centrally in the Swede’s failure, the role of Jewish culture in establishing and mooring masculinity constitutes Roth’s central preoccupation in this novel.  

While paternal roles in the Jewish family have evolved over the past century, home life has always been the site of cultural transmission. According to Lawrence Fuchs, in *Beyond Patriarchy: Jewish Fathers and Families* (2000), prior to emigration to the United States, Jews measured masculinity in terms of knowledge of the Torah and strict religious observance (70). Upon immigration to the United States, a place in which they encountered fewer limitations and the possibility of assimilation, Fuch argues that Jewish men embraced a new definition of masculinity: upward mobility. As men became immersed in the capitalist marketplace, women became responsible for transmitting Jewish culture and raising the children (Fuchs 135). For Roth in *American Pastoral*, Jews born in America during the early 20th century straddled the divide between 19th century immigrants and mid-20th century assimilates. This transitional generation retained religious observance and inhabited segregated Jewish neighborhoods but also embraced capitalism and upward mobility. In *American Pastoral*, Roth imagines Jewish folk culture as modern in certain respects, but maintaining its uniqueness as a consequence of oppression and its counterpart, segregation. Stephanie Coontz, in *The Way We Really Are*, confirms Roth's portrayal of Newark in the 1940s:

Right up through the 1940s, ties of work, friendship, neighborhood, ethnicity, extended kin, and voluntary organizations were as important a source of identity
for most Americans, and sometimes a *more* important source of obligation, than marriage and the nuclear family. All this changed in the postwar era. The spread of suburbs and automobiles, combined with the destruction of older ethnic neighborhoods in many cities, led to the decline of the neighborhood social club. A critical factor in this trend was the emergence of a group of family sociologists and marriage counselors... claiming that the nuclear family, built on a sharp division of labor between husband and wife, was the cornerstone of modern society. (37)

The family formation and community organization described by Coontz correspond to folk culture's kinship networks. Although Coontz extends the "traditional extrafamilial networks" to "most Americans," she, like Roth, emphasizes the important role "ethnicity" played in shaping these communities. Often, the "neighborhood" was a center of "extended kin" because it was a segregated enclave for ethnic minorities.¹⁷

Newark of the 1940s, as portrayed in *American Pastoral*, embodies a folk culture united by patriarchs: "Mr. Levov was one of those slum-reared Jewish fathers whose rough-hewn, undereducated perspective goaded a whole generation of striving, college-educated Jewish sons: a father for whom everything is an unshakeable duty, for whom there is a right way and a wrong way and nothing in between, a father whose compound of ambitions, biases, and beliefs is so unruffled[...] men for whom the most serious thing in life is to keep going despite everything" (11). As a father, Lou Levov imposes "unshakeable duties." These "duties," however, do not entail acquiring the folk skills of hunting and tracking, as outlined in *Chaneysville*. Instead, Lou demands achievement ("to
keep going despite everything”) as a means of circumventing racism. For Jewish children in the mid 20\textsuperscript{th} century, according to American Pastoral, accomplishment became synonymous with education and assimilation. Mid-20\textsuperscript{th} century Jewish Americans adopted this measure of success because, as Roth depicts, they hoped to escape oppression (Roth 41). As such, the Swede, "a boy as close to a goy as we were going to get" (10), marks a triumph for the Newark Jews. Unlike Lou, who becomes American as a result of "sheer striving" ("to keep going despite everything"), the Swede simply is "isomorphic" with "the WASP world" and thereby a "regular American guy" (89).

This “isomorphism” serves as the foundation of Debra Shostak’s argument that manhood and identity in American Pastoral function as bodily byproducts, rather than stemming from behavioral and social patterns. One of the few critics to discuss gender roles in American Pastoral, Debra Shostak provides a careful, insightful reading of Jewish masculinity in Roth’s novel. She interprets the Swede’s physical isomorphism and resulting assimilation as the cause of his mistaken view that identity inheres within his body, which conforms to “the dominant fiction of masculinity” (101). As such, Shostak claims that the Swede “erases his difference by resisting with his body the embodied identity of the Jew” and this functions as the Swede’s “fatal error” (105). While I agree that the Swede utilizes his effortless physical conformity to “the WASP world” in order to assimilate and thereby seek a version of masculinity inaccessible to many Jewish American men, I contend that he also pursues social signifiers of mainstream American manhood. That is, the Swede’s assimilation does not occur merely on the grounds of physical correspondence with the “dominant fiction of masculinity”; he also consciously modifies his behavior to conform to American pastoral expectations.
In particular, the Swede rejects his Jewish heritage "out of the desire to go the limit in America with your rights, forming yourself as an ideal person who gets rid of the traditional Jewish habits and attitudes, who frees himself of the pre-America insecurities and the old, constraining obsessions" (85). To become American, which Swede imagines as the "ideal person," he must "rid" himself of a Jewish identity. For Swede, "the traditional Jewish habits and attitudes" constrain his ability to become an "ideal person," an "ideal" American man. As Swede tells his wife, Dawn, Jewish identity plays no role in his definition of masculinity: "I used to go on High Holidays with my father, and I just never understood what they were getting at... I never understood what any of that stuff had to do with his being a man. What the glove factory had to do with his being a man anybody could understand—just about everything" (314). Swede embodies the pinnacle of assimilation in that his values and definition of manhood correspond with dominant society's estimation of worth and masculinity. He "never understood" what religious observance "had to do with" "being a man," but feels completely at home with defining masculinity in terms of the capitalist marketplace: the "glove factory."

Beyond centering his manhood on his job, the Swede imagines himself exemplifying two other fundamentally American means of establishing masculinity: enacting the role of breadwinner and ordering his life so as to embody the pastoral mode. The role of breadwinner, as detailed earlier in this essay, was championed in the 1980s and 1990s by governmental agencies, conservative critics, and popular culture as the balm for wounded manhood and the damaged nation. According to these advocates, men's embrace of the provider role corresponds to a desire to cultivate family and community. The American pastoral, on the other hand, champions a solitary retreat from society as a
means of achieving masculinity. In his canonical text, *The Machine in the Garden*, Leo Marx describes the pastoral as a mode that "has been used to define the meaning of America ever since the age of discovery" (3). Centrally, the pastoral involves the "urge to withdraw from civilization's growing power and complexity" into nature (9). Nina Baym's critique of Marx's argument (and similar descriptions of American literature) exposes the pastoral as a genre fundamentally interested in the development of masculinity, depicting manhood as the result of an individual's escape from "encroaching, constricting, destroying society" into the wilderness (133). The Swede attempts to follow this trajectory, but in so doing, fails to conform to the basic model; he eschews a solitary retreat, instead withdrawing in order to start a family. Marx describes the impulse to meld these two iconic American models of the idyllic life (the pastoral and the family) as "sentimental" pastoralism, which is manifest in the "flight from the city" and retreat into the "suburbs" (5).

Swede realizes the sentimental pastoral when he marries an Irish Catholic beauty queen and moves to the countryside: "Next to marrying Dawn Dwyer, buying that house and the hundred acres and moving out to Old Rimrock was the most daring thing he had ever done. What was Mars to his father was *America* to him—he was settling Revolutionary New Jersey as if for the first time. Out in Old Rimrock, all of America lay at their door... Jewish resentment, Irish resentment—the hell with it" (310). For the Swede, the pastoral retreat enables an escape from the stigma of a Jewish identity and thereby allows him to become American. The societal chaos that Swede wants to escape is not defined as technology (which Marx famously chronicles) but the "resentment" which results from enduring prejudice. For Swede, the pastoral retreat enables an escape
from the stigma of a Jewish identity and thereby allows him to become American. Swede enforces pastoral "orderliness" by carrying out his masculine "duties," such as earning a living and acting as a caring husband and father, "strenuously and unflaggingly" (413). In so doing, Swede reveals his deepest hope: to create a sentimental pastoral life, what he imagines to be the defining American existence, unmarked by the "agitations," "unpredictable fluctuations," "combat," and "dissatisfying surprises" endemic to an oppression (413).

In his desire for "orderliness," Swede refuses to model his paternal role upon the folk patriarch. Unlike his father, Swede does not feel free to act like an unreasonable tyrant in his home. That sort of behavior only incurs chaos, similar to the unruliness of a cultural identity. Instead, Swede chooses to become an assimilated, understanding father, as his brother describes: "Just a liberal sweetheart of a father. The philosopher-king of ordinary life. Brought [his daughter] up with all the modern ideas of being rational with your children. Everything permissible, everything forgivable, and she hated it" (69). Like Chaneyville's John Washington, who initially approaches history as an empirical enterprise, Swede imagines fatherhood as a "rational" enterprise. When Swede's wife, Dawn, cannot abide by Merry's behavior, Swede advises: "The important thing is to keep talking to her... All we can do, Dawn, is continue to be reasonable and continue to be firm and not lose hope or patience, and the day will come when she will outgrow all this objecting to everything" (103). Swede tries to control his daughter's chaos, her "objecting to everything," by being "reasonable" and "sensible." As with John, the turn to rationality proves incapable of providing a solid foundation for the Swede's goals.
The sentimental pastoral, however, cannot be sustained. According to Marx, the pastoral is nearly always interrupted by an irrational "counterforce," "some token of a larger, more complicated order of experience" which "brings a world which is more 'real' into juxtaposition with an idyllic vision" (25). Marx argues that the "literary" pastoral does not depict the simple pleasure of retreat, but complicates the desire for the "urge to withdraw" by refusing "the simple, affirmative attitude we adopt toward pleasing rural scenery"; "these works manage to qualify, or call into question, or bring irony to bear against the illusion of peace and harmony in a green pasture" (25). Swede's daughter, Merry, becomes the unreasonable "counterforce" to his orderly "idyllic vision": "Meredith Levov. Seymour's daughter. The "Rimrock Bomber" was Seymour's daughter. The high school kid who blew up the post office and killed the doctor" (68). Merry's bombing explodes Swede's pastoral retreat: "the daughter and the decade blasting to smitherens his particular form of Utopian thinking, the plague America infiltrating the Swede's castle and therefore infecting everyone. The daughter who transports him out of the longed-for American pastoral and into everything that is its antithesis and its enemy, into the fury, the violence, and the desperation of the counterpastoral—into the indigenous American beserk" (86). The pastoral sought after by Swede does not comprise a lived reality, in that it is only "longed-for" and "utopian." The "counterpastoral," "indigenous" to America, marks the Swede’s thorough assimilation. As Jerry, Swede's brother, says, "You longed to belong like everybody else in the United States of America? Well, you do now, big boy, thanks to your daughter... With the help of your daughter you're as deep in the shit as a man can get, the real American crazy shit. America amok! America amuck!" (277). Becoming prone to the "real American crazy
shit" results from assimilating and belonging "like everyone else in the United States of America." If Swede had maintained a Jewish identity, he would not have embraced the sentimental pastoral (a rational enterprise) and, as a result, his success would not have been undermined by "America amok" (the unpredictable, the illogical). 18

In becoming the "counterforce," Merry incites a masculinity crisis, in that the Swede is plagued by "a gruesome inner life of tyrannical obsessions, stifled inclinations, superstitious expectations, horrible imaginings, fantasy conversations, unanswerable questions. Sleeplessness and self-castigation night after night. Enormous loneliness. Unflagging remorse" (173). Merry renders chaotic Swede's "inner life." He no longer has faith in himself ("unanswerable questions" and "unflagging remorse"), control over his thoughts ("tyrannical obsessions" and "superstitious expectations"), or the power to regulate his body ("sleeplessness"). In a very literal demonstration of Swede's emasculation, he dies of prostate cancer, a disease that attacks the physical site of manhood.

In choosing to portray Merry as the embodiment of the counterforce, Roth deviates from the father/son narrative at the heart of the governmental studies, social scientists’ reports, popular press documents, and depicted by Bradley in Chaneysville. Timothy Parrish, in "The End of Identity: Philip Roth's American Pastoral" (2000), notes this: "As the daughter whose presence threatens to disrupt Zuckerman's familiar father-son narrative, Merry is perhaps the only character who succeeds in destroying the father" (92). But Parrish does not investigate this aberration any further. Zuckerman, the novel’s narrator, offers an inadequate explanation of why Swede’s crisis of fatherhood occurs at
the hands of a daughter, rather than a son: "And so many were girls, girls whose political identity was total, who were no less aggressive and militant, no less drawn to 'armed action' than the boys... They renounce their roots to take as their models the revolutionaries... Their rage is combustible" (254). Here, Zuckerman highlights the new “aggressive and militant” role available to “girls,” but it is unclear why Roth’s tale of thwarted fatherhood centers on a daughter. I contend that Roth portrays Swede’s emasculation at the hands of a girl in order to emphasize the disastrous effects of the loss of a shared culture. Merry is inexplicable to Swede because she is both a woman and refuses a Jewish identity. In a similar manner, Dawn, Swede’s wife (a woman and a Catholic), is incomprehensible to him: “And if that [Dawn’s hatred of their home] was true? To find this out so late in the game! It was like discovering an infidelity—all these years she had been unfaithful to the house. How could he have gone around dopily believing he was making her happy when there was no justification for his feelings, when they were absurd” (193). Merry, too, is so foreign that Swede cannot decipher her feelings or motivations. He spends his life attempting to understand Merry’s motivations, but never understands why she bombed the post office.19

In contrast, Swede’s narrative is imagined by Nathan Zuckerman, a writer and childhood friend of Swede’s younger brother, Jerry. Like John Washington, Zuckerman knows only the bare facts about the history he seeks to resurrect. Unlike John, however, Zuckerman expresses doubts about the accuracy of his portrayal:

despite these efforts and more to uncover what I could about the Swede and his world, I would have been willing to admit that my Swede was not the primary
Swede. Of course I was working with traces... of course the Swede was concentrated differently in my pages from how he'd been in the flesh. But whether that meant I'd imagined an outright fantastical creature, lacking entirely the unique substantiality of the real thing... well, who knows? Who *can* know? (76-77)

Despite Zuckerman's doubts over the accuracy of his "chronicle," he, like John Washington, experiences a seemingly magical transportation into another life, that of Swede: "I began gazing into his life—not his life as a god or demigod in whose triumphs one could exult as a boy but his life as another assailable man—and inexplicably, which is to say lo and behold, I found him in Deal, New Jersey, at the seaside cottage, the summer his daughter was eleven" (89). Like John Washington “feel[ing]” his paternal history, Nathan “finds” the Swede (89). Nathan simply needs to “gaze” at the person with whom he is, due to cultural background, intimately familiar in order to recreate history (89). As with John Washington, there is no rational process whereby Nathan recreates the history of a person with whom he is, due to cultural background, intimately familiar.

Several critics, in particular Derek Parker Royal in “Pastoral Dreams and National Identity in *American Pastoral* and *I Married a Communist*” (2005), argue that Nathan never fully accesses the Swede’s point of view and, as such, the narrative simply represents Nathan’s perspective (199). Although Royal contends that Nathan cannot “grasp fully the Swede’s consciousness” (195), he also claims that Roth’s novel reveals a different consciousness, to “show how individual identity embodies *national* identity”
In Royal’s insightful account, “national identity” is transparent whereas individual consciousness is opaque. The distinction between these two identities apparently stems from the shared nature of American-ness, as opposed to the unknowability of another’s impenetrable mind. While Roth’s novel certainly addresses American identity in the 1960s and 1970s, specifically the failure of the American Dream, it also focuses on another collective identity: that of Jewish Americans in the mid- to late-20th century. Nathan doesn’t need to access the truth of an individual in order to understand what happened to the Swede; rather, Nathan understands the Swede to signify “the mid century” Jewish “assimilationist ideal” (Shostak 242). And, importantly, Nathan accesses and understands the Swede’s story through his familiarity with “mid century” Jewish culture.

Although Nathan utilizes his knowledge of Jewish folk culture to create an account of the Swede’s life, the Swede does not find his Newark heritage useful in the least. That is, even after Merry bombs the Post Office and his wife leaves him, the Swede does not imagine a return to the Newark folk culture in order to recuperate masculinity. Instead, he remarries in a second attempt at sentimental pastoralism. For the Swede, there can be no retreat from assimilation; the segregated Jewish enclave of Newark no longer exists and therefore its culture cannot be recuperated. Yet, his second marriage and family of three boys does not counteract the emasculation occasioned by Merry’s bombing: “a second marriage, a second chance at a unified life… a second shot at being the traditional devoted husband and father… And yet not even the Swede… could go all the way and shed completely the frantic possessiveness, the paternal assertiveness, the obsessive love for the lost daughter, shed every trace of that girl and
that past and shake off the hysteria of ‘my child.’ If only he could have just let her fade away. But not even the Swede was that great” (81). Nathan’s account of the "American beserk" and the havoc it wreaks on the sentimental pastoral idyll, inciting a masculinity crisis, reveals his doubts regarding the benefits of assimilation into dominant society, particularly when contrasted with the Newark folk community.

Although he acknowledges the impossibility of a return to folk culture, Nathan betrays nostalgia for the historical moment during which Jewish culture unified a community and enabled men to raise happy, successful children. Lou verbalizes this realization when commenting on a world wherein oppression (for Jews, at least) has lessened considerably since the early 20th century:

“I remember when Jewish kids were home doing their homework. What happened? [...] If, God forbid, their parents are no longer oppressed for a while, they run where they think they can find oppression. Can't live without it. Once Jews ran away from oppression; now they run away from no-oppression. Once they ran away from being poor; now they run away from being rich. It's crazy. They have parents they can't hate anymore because their parents are so good to them, so they hate America instead.” (255)

According to Lou, “Jewish kids” require “oppression” and the cultural identity that is destroyed by the freedom to assimilate. Because they lack “oppression,” “Jewish kids” lack a purposeful direction (they are not “home doing their homework”) and therefore engage in violent, seemingly senseless acts. While Nathan’s imagined narrative acknowledges the inability to undo assimilation and recuperate folk culture, with its
associated patriarch, it also contains a longing for the segregated Jewish community.

For readers familiar with Roth’s previous Zuckerman novels, this bleak portrayal of assimilation and affirmative perspective on midcentury Jewish masculinity, as embodied in that era’s fathers, might appear surprising. For lack of space, I cannot discuss the reasons for the difference between the earlier depiction of Nathan and that which is apparent in *American Pastoral*. In brief, however, we can see Roth’s intervening memoir, *Patrimony*, as a transitional text between the early Zuckerman novels and *American Pastoral*. In *Patrimony*, published seven years prior to *American Pastoral*, Roth reflects on his father, Herman, and their relationship during Herman’s physical decline and death. While Roth expresses dislike toward particular aspects of his father’s personality, he also qualifies these emotions by acknowledging the importance of those traits in coping with the era’s anti-Semitism and in raising a generation of college-educated, successful children. Ultimately, Roth manifests what he terms “forgiveness” for his father. While *Patrimony* does not tackle the potential pitfalls of assimilation, it lays the groundwork for a new perspective on midcentury Jewish masculinity.

A number of critics call into question the nostalgia expressed by Lou, as posited by Nathan, for the midcentury Newark enclave. For instance, Shostak contends that Roth expresses ambivalence toward Lou’s Jewish idyll as it “is indistinguishable from Seymour’s nostalgia” for the sentimental pastoral (247). Shostak’s argument for the equivalence between the two, while persuasive in light of Roth’s entire oeuvre, is not entirely convincing when *American Pastoral* is examined on its own. Nathan does not advocate a recuperation of midcentury Jewish urban enclaves and therefore his nostalgia
does not seem destructive in the same manner as the Swede’s attempt to build a life according to the dictates of an unrealizable utopian vision. The distinction between these two forms of idealism becomes clear when Shostak claims that “the countercontext of *American Pastoral* is a fiercely nostalgic book suggesting in the end that nostalgia has doomed its players by pretending to offer escape from time” (244). While the Swede certainly attempts to “escape from time” with his pastoral vision, Nathan’s nostalgia does not have a similar impetus; indeed, in the refusal to call for a return to mid century Jewish segregated communities, Nathan acknowledges the ineradicable passage of time. Although Roth, in different contexts, manifests suspicion of nostalgia for previous eras, he doesn’t quite formulate a “countercontext” for this tendency in *American Pastoral*.²³

Declining the appeal for a return to Newark’s mid-century Jewish enclave and its associated masculinity, *American Pastoral* diverges from *Chaneysville* in its approach to assimilation and manhood. Although both novels portray the necessity of acknowledging assimilation’s irreversibility (the Swede remarries in order to create a new family and finally achieve the sentimental pastoral; John Washington ultimately leaves Old Jack’s cabin in order to return to life as an academic at an urban university), John believes that folk culture continues to have value in the contemporary world while the Swede does not. That is, John recuperates folk skills in order to establish a masculine identity which will serve outside Chaneysville. The Swede, meanwhile, refuses to model his behavior after his father’s, implicitly arguing against the continued applicability of manhood defined and embodied by Newark patriarchs. This fundamental difference between *Chaneysville* and *American Pastoral* provides a telling glimpse into the distinct problems which inhere in each novel’s evocation of nostalgia for folk culture.
In *Chaneysville*, John’s discovery of folk culture’s enduring value eschews an exploration of post-Civil Rights Black politics, which must necessarily acknowledge the difficulties of uniting disparate African Americans around a single cause; instead, he invokes an anachronistically virulent racism in order to resurrect an anachronistically cohesive Black community, united in common cause against debilitating oppression. This becomes apparent when Old Jack reminds John of the African American community’s common interests:

“I spent the best part of my life tryin' to teach you up from down an' left from sideways, an' now you come tryin' to tell me that things have changed to the point where they give a Goddman about what happens to a colored man... 'cause if your daddy hear that, he's gonna be settin' up to chase my tail... An' when he catches me, he's gonna say,'... You let him grow up thinkin' the whole world changes on account of somebody draws a mark on a map, or passes a law. You let him grow up thinkin' like a white man, an' a dumb white man at that.'" (64, 67)

Upward mobility marks a movement away from racial culture, as Old Jack indicates; this failure to retain African American folk community and its associated skills, according to Old Jack, is dangerous because racism, latent or overt, will eventually cause a black man’s downfall. Only folk practices help a black man maintain his vigilance and manhood. Old Jack’s understanding of racism, however, doesn’t address the variety of problems faced by African Americans in a post-Civil Rights era. As Angela Davis cogently argues:

I think it is important to acknowledge the extent to which the Black movement [during the 1960s] allowed for the emergence of a much more powerful Black middle class and the breakup of an apparent political consensus… So the question
today is not so much how to reverse these developments to re-find ourselves, based on a kind of nostalgic longing for what used to be, but rather, to think about the extent to which movements for racial and gender equality can no longer be simply based on questions of desegregation. A different kind of ‘political,’ a different kind of politics, really has to inform this movement. (303-304)

Imagining a return to folk culture manifests the longing for political consensus, but does not address African Americans’ fragmented interests and investments in the post-Civil Rights era.

In American Pastoral, the desire to assimilate causes the Swede’s emasculation, not because, as with John Washington, a lack of preparedness for “hate” or “bigotry” calls his manhood into question, but because he is undone by his daughter’s adoption of radical politics in the absence of “hate” and “bigotry.” In this novel, Nathan describes assimilation and the ensuing lack of Jewish identity as the cause of the mayhem and disruption of the 1960s. Rather than depicting Merry as committed to misguided violence in her zealous embrace of radical politics, Nathan (via an imagined Lou) believes that she bombs the Post Office because she suffers from too much freedom.24 If teenagers experienced oppression, according to Nathan, they would dedicate themselves to educational achievement and class ascension. In his portrayal of Merry, Nathan obfuscates 1960s radicalism by ascribing its motivation to a lack of ethnic identity, rather than to a commitment to equality.25

Intervening in the late 20th century fatherhood debates, Bradley and Roth portray the destabilization of paternal roles and masculinities in a manner uniquely relevant to the
Jewish and African American communities. Prior to the mid- to late-20th century, Jewish and African Americans faced implacable oppression that severely curtailed their rights, threatened them with violence, and relegated them to poverty. As a counter to dominant society’s racism, segregated folk communities provided necessary and foundational support for members of the oppressed minority. So, in the 1970s and 1980s, these minority groups did not grapple with a newfound inability to enact the breadwinner role so much as struggle with the post-Civil Rights era’s unprecedented access to the social and economic mainstream. Bradley and Roth portray recent assimilates struggling to define fatherhood and masculinity in the absence of the segregated folk community’s traditional moorings. Although *The Chaneysville Incident* and *American Pastoral* provide an important alternative perspective to dominant discourses on the American family and its relationship to masculinity, these novels foreclose a cogent criticism of contemporary historical conditions by transforming paternity into identity. That is, by mooring fatherhood to an idealized culture, Bradley and Roth censure any modification in paternal roles as emasculation, but more importantly, as a betrayal of an ethnic identity, rather than a response to shifting historical realities.
In keeping with this tradition, there has also been very little research on Black fathers... Several studies focused on the negative impact of the absent Black father, but the researchers did not evaluate the role, if any, that such fathers might continue to play in the rearing of their children. Thus the role of the Black father has generally been portrayed in terms of deficiencies" (79).

As Caldwell and White note, "Social fathering is no longer something that happens primarily in the Black community. Because of increasing rates of divorce, out-of-wedlock births, separation, and family breakups, more men from all communities are assuming father-like roles for children who are not their biological offspring" (57).

See McAdoo:p. 133.

Gavanas provides an excellent analysis of the “fatherhood politics” as a means of coping with the social and economic transformations of the late 20th century.

McAdoo, however, discounts these interpretations, pointing to the fact that "empirical evidence does not support the popular notion of a father having to be present in the home in order for his son to develop a positive masculine identity" (82-3).

See Wandersee, p. 133.

Ehrensaft notices this when interviewing men on new parenting styles: "For men to admit to a social purpose underlying their parenting style would be to make a commitment to feminism, to a social movement whose leadership and constituency are women, many of whom, in fact, have complaints about male behavior. These fathers were often, I thought, disquieted at the thought of making such a commitment... Instead, they developed their own notions about how they just happened to be those men who enjoy raising a child. They preferred to keep it personal—just between themselves, the woman they love, and their child" (21).

Bagby similarly argues that modern nuclear gender roles are "complementary and supporting," not "exploitative" as feminists argue (138).

Coontz, however, debunks the idea that the modern nuclear family produced such a prosperous era: "What most people really feel nostalgic about has little to do with the internal structure of 1950s families. It is the belief that the 1950s provided a more family-friendly economic and social environment, an easier climate in which to keep kids on the straight and narrow, and above all, a greater feeling of hope for a family's long-term future, especially for its young" (33, 34).

This is a well documented occurrence. While Jewish Americans established a middle class in the mid-20th century, fear over assimilation manifested in the 1970s in the proliferation of studies on the Jewish family and its failure to properly inculcate a Jewish identity in children (see Bubis, Rose, and Waxman). African Americans began to develop a larger (though, of course, not widespread) middle class in the 1970s and 1980s. This is chronicled in articles such as Time Magazine's "Races: America's Rising Black Middle Class" (July 17, 1974).

In using the term, “sissy,” Old Jack does not simply refer to weakness, but also indicates a fear of homosexuality. The word, “sissy,” emphasizes Old Jack’s insistence upon heteronormativity.

Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon contains a similar storyline. Milkman, immersed in a folk environment, goes on a hunting trip with a group of men. He makes a fool of himself, but in so doing garners acceptance from his compatriots. Ultimately, these hunters make it possible for Milkman to discover his parternal history.

For instance, see Parrish.

Parrish, however, seemingly refers to fatherhood as the novel’s preoccupation when he asserts that Swede’s narrative reflects “the search for what might be called the father’s wisdom” (88). For Parrish’s purposes, “father wisdom” does not refer to Swede’s inability to develop a masculine identity rooted in Jewish parenting but to “Lou Levov’s judgment of Swede” as straying from his culture (88).

Describing mid-century Newark as a “folk culture” might run counter to the conventional understanding of Jewish...
folk culture but there are several reasons which warrant this accounting. The first, which I detail in the preceding paragraph, consists of Newark’s social organization. It is an ethnic enclave which utilizes kinship networks, a hallmark of folk culture. Additionally, the laborers employed by Levovs in the 1940s and 1950s embody folk culture; while the Levovs operate a factory, the workers come from the “Old World” and utilize traditional glove cutting methods. As the Swede remarks: “This cutting room is one of the last in this hemisphere… We still have people here who know what they are doing. Nobody cuts gloves this way anymore, not in this country, where hardly anybody’s left to cut them, and not anywhere else either, except maybe in a little family-run shop in Naples or Grenoble. These were people, the people who worked here, who were in it for life. They were born into the glove industry and they died in the glove industry. Today we’re constantly retraining people. Today our economy is such that people take a job here and if something comes along for another fifty cents an hour, they’re gone” (127). In this passage, the Swede captures the movement from craftsman, associated with folk culture, to factory employee, part and parcel of Fordism. Later in the novel, the labor and the factory are outsourced to a developing country, embodying the economics of post-Fordism. Finally, I believe that classifying mid-century Newark as folk enclave would not run counter to Roth’s perception, as he wrote this novel at the close of the 20th century, when studies of “urban folk” had become commonplace.

10 Timothy L. Parrish, in “The End of Identity: Philip Roth's American Pastoral” (2000), argues that this novel 'explore[s] the deleterious consequences of forsaking one's Jewish origins' (87). While Parrish's interpretation seems entirely accurate, he does not explore the way in which identity functions as the foundation of masculinity. That is, the problem is not the loss of identity per se, but the loss of manhood premised upon that identity.

11 In order to discover why his daughter bombed the post office, the Swede spends his life looking for her. He willingly pays, in money and memorabilia, to learn about Merry’s whereabouts (138-39). At one point, the Swede thinks: “Five years pass, five years searching for an explanation, going back over everything” (152). When the Swede finally finds Merry, he begs her: “Explain it to me, please” (251).

12 The ability of those who share a culture to tap into a collective consciousness becomes obvious at Nathan’s high school reunion, when an old friend describes the incomprehensibility of mid-century Newark Jewish culture to a classmate’s “shiksa” wife: “She said, ‘Why are they all Mutty and Utty and Totty? If his name is Charles, why is he called Totty?’ ‘I shouldn’t have brought you,’ [her husband] says to her. ‘I knew I shouldn’t. I can’t explain it,’ [her husband] says to her, ‘nobody can. It’s beyond explanation. It just is’” (57). Likewise, because he understands what is “beyond explanation,” Nathan can simply “gaze” into Swede’s life because they share a cultural background.

13 The Swede’s contemporaries fare no better as fathers. Jerry, the Swede’s younger brother, marries four times and has “kids galore” (69), but does not act as a traditional father. Nathan Zuckerman, impotent as a result of prostate cancer, is not married and does not have children.

14 Marshall Bruce Gentry offers an alternative critique of the facile acceptance of Lou and Nathan’s nostalgia as symptomatic of Roth’s endorsement of this idealism. That is, Gentry argues that this novel “pretends to be a eulogy for the culture of assimilated Jews before the 1960s” (77). Instead of “a eulogy” for Jewish folk culture, Gentry claims that Roth’s novel is a feminist critique of patriarchy. While Gentry makes a compelling case for the way in which “the women in book seem to win a battle over the dominant male voices” (76), he does not address the reason why Swede cannot effectively “fight the women in the book”: namely, that Swede’s masculinity, based upon the sentimental pastoral, is inevitably destroyed by a “counterforce.” More importantly, however, Gentry fails to make a crucial distinction between the “dominant male voices” of Swede and Lou when demonstrating the novel’s scathing appraisal of patriarchy. Gentry equates Swede with Lou, saying that “Swede’s [parenting] methods may not resemble his fathers, but his motives do” (81). For Gentry, both men embody patriarchy’s drive for control, which the women in the novel effectively critique and undo. Yet, I contend that the “methods” mark a crucial difference between Swede and Lou; Lou’s methods are successful, while Swede’s are not. Thus, while there is “space for the reader to laugh… [at] Lou Levov at the novel’s end” (Gentry 82), this is not because Lou’s “methods” were wrong when he employed them as a father in the 1940s and 1950s. It is simply the case that Lou’s “methods” are no longer applicable in the contemporary world.

15 Indeed, Nathan’s nostalgia for Newark manifests what David Brauner describes as Roth’s model community: the “anti-pastoral.” Brauner argues that Roth endorses the anti-pastoral, a “philosophy” “antithetically opposed” to the pastoral, because the “anti-pastoral” acknowledges and embraces “the confusion, irrationality, incoherence and mess (in all the senses of the word) of ‘lived reality’” (67, 74). The “confusion, irrationality, incoherence and mess” of the anti-pastoral also represent the “lived reality” of an oppressed minority, such as that of the early-to-mid-century Jews in Newark, as I argue earlier in this essay. This acceptance of “lived reality” becomes evident in Lou’s assessment of the Newark folk culture’s value: “You don’t have to revere your family, you don’t have to revere your
country, you don’t have to revere where you live, but you have to know you have them, you have to know that you are part of them” (365). Here, in Lou’s rejection of reverence for “family,” “country,” and “where you live,” he refuses to participate in the pastoral’s idealism. Lou, instead, implies that the value of “family,” “country,” and “where you live” stems from the community, however flawed, generated therein.

Roth’s conceptualization of the flaws inherent in the Civil Rights era and the need to restore segregated folk communities echoes, in many ways, McCann’s delineation of Norman Mailer’s political commitments.

Although Shostak refers to Swede’s downfall in terms of his attempt to escape “history,” when she employs the term “history” she refers to “change,” in general, rather than to particular social and economic events (241).
IV. BELABORED MANHOOD

In *The Last American Man* (2002), Elizabeth Gilbert describes a “crisis” wherein Americans, citizens of an “impotent nation,” struggle with the social and cultural repercussions of the post-Fordist economy (225). Counter-intuitively, Gilbert argues that the late 20th century credit system and the relative ease of labor lead to a diminished quality of life, causing widespread depression and anxiety: “The basic needs of humanity—food, clothing, shelter, entertainment, transportation, and even sexual pleasure—no longer need to be personally labored for or ritualized or even understood. All these things are available to us now for mere cash. Or credit. Which means that nobody needs to know how to do anything anymore, except the one narrow skill that will earn enough money to pay for the conveniences and services of modern living. But in replacing every challenge with a shortcut we seem to have lost something” (14). Gilbert’s allusion to “credit” and the “conveniences and services of modern living” (my emphasis) indicate that she is preoccupied with the social and cultural implications of the post-Fordist economy. In particular, Gilbert imagines that the ability to purchase “the basic needs of humanity” precipitates a national crisis. As such, Gilbert attributes the nation’s impotence to an increase in consumption (a conventionally feminine activity) and a declining commitment to “do[ing] anything” (traditionally associated with masculinity).1

Gilbert’s text chronicles one man’s response to this “crisis” and therein details a means of reversing the nation’s impotence. Eustace Conway, who lives in a pre-Fordist enclave of his own making, emerges as Gilbert’s hero:

[...] he believes that is his particular calling—nothing less than to save our nation’s collective soul by reintroducing Americans to the concept of revelatory communion with
the frontier... He is convinced that the only way modern America can begin to reverse its inherent corruption and greed and malaise is by feeling the rapture that comes from face-to-face encounters with what he calls “the high art and godliness of nature.” It is his belief that we Americans, through our constant striving for convenience, are eradicating the raucous and edifying beauty of our true environment and replacing that beauty with a safe but completely faux “environment.” What Eustace sees is a society steadily undoing itself, it might be argued, by its own over-resourcefulness. (13-14)

Here, Conway enacts an iconic American fantasy: in order to recover his “soul,” he returns to nature (or the frontier), negating society’s “corruption and greed and malaise” which result from economic and technological advances. Certainly, this is a conventionally masculine endeavor; historically, women have not had the freedom to enact a solitary retreat into an uncultivated land. On Turtle Island, Conway engages in “folk labor,” practices which predate the Fordist assembly lines and require both physical strength and craftsmanship. For instance, he acts as a homesteader, wears homespun clothing, engages in traditional agriculture (clearing the land himself, sowing crops without use of machines, growing only enough to sustain his household), and invokes Native American culture and lifeways (building and living in a teepee, adopting a Native American name). In so doing, Conway indicates that folk culture resuscitates masculinity because it requires that men engage in physical labor, rather than merely acting as consumers.

While the return to manual labor seemingly reverses the nation’s impotence, the re-assertion of manhood also relies on the concomitant creation of a homosocial work environment. As such, Conway’s means of saving the “nation’s collective soul” also overturns demographic changes in the late 20th century labor market. In 1987, the Hudson Institute, commissioned by the U.S. Department of Labor, produced “Workforce 2000,” a report detailing the “dramatic and
challenging” demographic changes in the U.S. labor market (2): “by the year 2000... 80 percent of the new entrants into the workforce will be women, minorities, and immigrants—groups that have historically been disadvantaged” (1).² While women are welcome to partake of his utopia, they tend to fall in love with Conway rather than focusing on the labor required to build a pre-Fordist enclave. Thus, Conway creates a predominantly white male workforce, reversing the advances of Second Wave feminism and the Civil Rights Movement. Gilbert acknowledges this as a motivation for many of the young men who join Conway:

Aside from the environmental and consumer crisis that so offends his sensibilities, [Jason, one of Conway’s acolytes] is facing a world undergoing a total cultural and gender upheaval. Men are still largely in charge, mind you, but they are slipping fast. Modern America is a society where college-educated men have seen their incomes drop 20 percent over the last twenty-five years. A society where women complete high school and college at significantly higher rates than men, and have new doors of opportunity open to them every day. A society where a third of all wives make more money than their husbands. A society where women are increasingly in control of their biological and economic destinies, often choosing to raise their children alone or not to have children at all or to leave an identifiable man out of the reproductive picture entirely, through the miracles of the sperm bank. A society, in other words, where a man is not necessary in the way he was customarily needed—to protect, to provide, to procreate… So, given the current culture, it’s no wonder that a guy like Jason would want to move to Alaska and reclaim some noble and antique ideal of manhood. (204)

The “total social and cultural upheaval,” described by Gilbert, results from declining real wages and women’s advances in equality. Conway’s pre-Fordist utopia enables men to escape waged
labor (and thereby nullifies their ability to act as consumers) and reverse women’s increased participation in the workforce, which enabled Second Wave Feminists to achieve social and financial independence and therein the power to reject male authority. The “customary” masculinity that has been eroded by women’s departure from the role of housewife was, historically, available only to middle- and upper-class men; more specifically, this normative masculinity has been the privilege of primarily white men. As such, folk labor restores white middle- and upper-class men to power and therein recuperates the masculinity which relies upon exploiting an imbalance between the sexes, as well as retaining a class prerogative in which minorities are relegated to the lower class.³

White middle-class men’s displacement from power and their response to the resultant sense of impotence, articulated in texts like The Last American Man, is also depicted and dissected in contemporary American literature. Chuck Palahniuk’s Fight Club (1996) and Cormac McCarthy’s All the Pretty Horses (1992) grapple with the apparent impotence of white men in the late-20th century, feminized by the social and cultural upheaval associated with the post-Fordist economy. Palahniuk and McCarthy depict protagonists for whom the ease, convenience, and rampant consumption of post-Fordist society, as well as the gains of Second Wave Feminism, lead to emasculation. As with Conway, Palahniuk and McCarthy portray the recuperation of folk labor, embodied in hunters, gatherers, and cowboys, as necessary for the re-assertion of masculinity. Not only do the male characters in Fight Club and All the Pretty Horses perform manual labor, but they are resourceful and in tune with nature, so much so that McCarthy’s protagonist survives in the wilderness with few provisions, buoyed by his innate ability to communicate with horses. For Palahniuk and McCarthy, this labor confers masculinity because it is physical and, importantly, it fosters a culture wherein violent patriarchy is
acceptable. For instance, John Grady Cole, in *All the Pretty Horses*, earns a living as a ranch hand and is respected for his embodiment of an ethical code for which the cowboy is symbolic: he never compromises his morals, acts as a caretaker for weaker men and women, and never maliciously inflicts harm but does not shy away from a fight.

Notably, both novels portray white male protagonists who perceive themselves under attack, beset by the feminizing influences of post-Fordist labor and culture, and stake their masculine identities on the refusal to capitulate to these forces. This contradictory position, in which “privileged” members of dominant society imagine themselves besieged by mainstream culture, encapsulates the “white minority discourse” described by Mark McGurl in “The Program Era: Pluralisms of Postwar American Fiction” (2005). McGurl argues that the late 20th century “high pluralist enterprise” allowed novelists such as Wallace Stegner and William Kennedy to imagine a white “cultural entity understood to be significantly different from American culture as such” and portray it as under assault by the assimilating, normalizing forces of dominant society. In consequence, white men can imagine themselves belonging to something like a minority culture, which must protect its integrity against mainstream culture’s appropriation and thereby retain status as an outsider, nobly adhering to a beleaguered identity (119). Palahniuk and McCarthy posit a white male culture, akin to that captured in Southern writing or regionalism, which functions as “a white minority discourse that resists assimilation into the American mainstream” (McGurl 120). This is especially apparent in *All the Pretty Horses*, wherein McCarthy positions John Grady Cole as the embodiment of a cowboy culture, which is inherited and must, of necessity, be fulfilled:

The boy who… sat a horse not only as if he’d been born to it which he was but as if were he begot by malice or mischance into some queer land where horses never were he would...
have found them anyway. Would have known that there was something missing for the world to be right or he right in it and would have set forth to wander wherever it was needed for as long as it took until he came upon one and he would have known that that was what he sought and it would have been. (23)

In this passage, the narrator describes John Grady as a natural cowboy who inherits this trade (he is “born to it”). Not only that, but John Grady cannot escape or abandon this lifestyle – even when social or economic changes no longer warrant its existence. As such, John Grady must defend against alterations in the economy or society which would eliminate his livelihood and thereby his culture.

For the protagonists of Fight Club and All the Pretty Horses, membership in a white minority culture justifies a definition of manhood premised on violence. Palahniuk imagines violence as the best means of redressing the powerlessness men feel as a result of their position in the post-Fordist economy and culture. McCarthy, on the other hand, imagines that the cowboy must violently resist the forces which would obliterate him and his way of life. The invocation of violence as a means of asserting masculinity occurs, as Richard Slotkin argues, each time the frontier becomes the myth through which Americans imagine their current condition. While All the Pretty Horses obviously embodies the Western, Fight Club doesn’t as palpably manifest the qualities associated with that genre. Palahniuk’s novel, however, calls upon established Western conventions, most notably through the depiction of a male protagonist who desires an escape from civilization through a retreat to an unsettled frontier. The frontier in Fight Club must be created via the destruction of contemporary society; in this interpretation, Palahniuk implicitly argues that untrammeled spaces no longer exist in late 20th century America so must be created (through guerilla warfare). Slotkin describes the typical violence portrayed in the Western: “At
the core of that scenario is the symbol of ‘savage war,’ which was both a mythic trope and an operative category of military doctrine. The premise of ‘savage war’ is that ineluctable political and social differences—rooted in some combination of ‘blood’ and culture—make co-existence between primitive natives and civilized Europeans impossible on any basis other than that of subjugation” (12). For McCarthy, the “savage war” is displaced to Mexico as there are no longer Native Americans who actively defend their territory in the U.S.; his hero battles Mexicans whose values run counter to the cowboy code. Palahniuk, meanwhile, imagines that the “savage war” takes place between members of the same ethnicity; white men battle other white men and native Bolivians battle native Bolivians. The protagonists in these novels thereby implode a definitive feature of the Western, described by Slotkin as “a spiritual or psychological struggle which they win by learning to discipline or suppress the savage or ‘dark’ side of their own human nature” (14). Both Palahniuk and McCarthy portray the “the savage or ‘dark’ side” as a necessary part of “human nature” which should not be disciplined or suppressed; it is the drive to do so which emasculates late 20th century men.

Rather than looking to “discipline or suppress” Native Americans, McCarthy and Palahniuk idealize these populations. Native Americans, in Fight Club and All the Pretty Horses, are represented as members of a fundamentally violent culture—but this is no longer imagined in negative terms. Rather, these novels imagine indigenous Bolivians or Comanches as symbolic of the masculinity their protagonists look to recuperate. In so doing, Palahniuk and McCarthy imagine privileged white men as enduring subjugation, poverty, powerlessness, and racially-motivated violence similar to that which Native American populations endured (and continue to endure). This enables Fight Club and All the Pretty Horses to justify violent behavior as necessary to assert and maintain masculinity. Philip Deloria, in Playing Indian
(1999), describes how late-20th century members of dominant white society appropriate Native American imagery and symbolism, positioning themselves in opposition to the mainstream: “countercultural rebels became Indian to move their identities away from Americanness altogether, to keep outside national boundaries, gesture at repudiating the nation, and offer what seemed a clear-eyed political critique… To play Indian was to become vicariously a victim of United States imperialism” (161). In “bec[oming] Indian,” the privileged white male protagonists in Fight Club and All the Pretty Horses perceive themselves to be a minority culture in opposition to the mainstream.7 Anticipating McGurl’s argument, Deloria contends that this imaginative identification with Native Americans emerges from “the context of a postmodernism that emphasized relativism and openness”; in this moment “it was easy to read cosmopolitan multiculturalism as a license for anyone to choose an ethnic identity—Indian, for example—regardless of family, history, or tribal recognition. When non-Indian New Age followers appropriated and altered a cosmopolitan understanding of Indianness, they laid bare a slow rebalancing away from the collective concerns with social justice that had emerged in the 1960s and toward the renewed focus on individual freedom that has characterized America since the 1980s” (173). Here, Deloria marks the contemporary deployment of “Indian” identity as facilitating “individual freedom.” While it is certainly true that the protagonists in Fight Club and All the Pretty Horses are foundationally interested in pursuing individual concerns (i.e. redressing the feeling of being unmanned), this is imagined in collective terms. In other words, Palahniuk’s narrator and John Grady act as archetypes of emasculated men, imagined to be pervasive in the contemporary world; these characters share, with a cohort of white men from similar backgrounds, a failure to achieve conventional manliness. Palahniuk and McCarthy portray a plight seemingly common to all American men and posit a return to folk culture, a
community which values a violent, patriarchal definition of manhood, as the solution to the masculinity crisis. In imagining these characters as symbolic of a common problem, these novels indicate that the solution involves banding together to recuperate an outmoded form of labor and its associated culture. Of course, Palahniuk and McCarthy do not acknowledge that this problem is uniquely that of white men and that the solution posited does not benefit anyone other than white men.

In order to imply the existence of a shared culture and common cause, the protagonists in these novels often appear indistinguishable from other characters. *Fight Club* famously depicts a schizophrenic protagonist, unaware of his alter personality who goes by the name Tyler Durden. Although these two personalities are fundamentally dissimilar, those who know them intimately cannot differentiate between the two. This interchangeability is not limited to the narrator and Tyler; throughout *Fight Club* all men are imagined to be essentially the same. In *All the Pretty Horses*, on the other hand, John Grady Cole embodies the traits associated with the traditional American folk hero, the cowboy. For McCarthy, all cowboys are similar in that they share the same values and therefore perpetuate the same narrative development. For both Palahniuk and McCarthy, the inability to differentiate between characters emerging from or embodying folk culture demonstrates a shared set of values, whereas the indistinguishability which occurs in the Fordist or post-Fordist eras indicates a shared corruption of the soul.

Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* is frequently viewed as a critique of post-Fordist consumption. In this novel, service work, in and of itself, does not precipitate the protagonist’s emasculation; rather, his acquisitiveness feminizes him: “And 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” (43). Here, the narrator refers to his “nesting instinct,” something conventionally associated with women, particularly mothers, in a pejorative manner by describing himself as its “slave.” Not only that, but consumption neutralizes men’s sex drive (the IKEA catalogue replaces pornography), the physical demonstration of masculinity.8 The narrator frames his dissatisfaction as a product of the marketplace, both his role as a laborer and as a consumer: “I was tired and bored with my job and my furniture, and I couldn’t see any way to change a thing. Only end them. I felt trapped. I was too complete. I was too perfect. I wanted a way out of my tiny life” (172-173). To imagine “a way out of” his “tiny life,” the narrator creates an alter-personality, Tyler Durden. Tyler responds to the narrator’s impotence by implementing a process whereby the narrator, and fellow sufferers of post-Fordist consumption, can retreat to an economy which organically fosters a culture valuing conventional masculinity. Tyler believes this can be accomplished through a two-step process. First, Tyler argues that the narrator needs to return to Fordist labor practices and lifestyle, but only as a means of moving still further back and recuperating folk economy and culture. For the narrator, as for Tyler, the retreat to Fordism acts as a necessary stepping stone to the ideal era, embodied in a pre-modern economy and its associated folk culture. Fordism is insufficient to fully rehabilitate masculinity because its labor practices do not organically produce a patriarchal culture9; instead, Fordism functions as a gateway to folk culture, wherein a pre-modern economy leads to shared values, including a definition of manhood premised on violence and women’s subordination.

According to Tyler, the resurrection of Fordist labor practices enables the imposition of a more masculine mode of life:
“You have a class of young strong men and women, and they want to give their lives to something. Advertising has these people chasing cars and clothes they don’t need. Generations have been working in jobs they hate, just so they can buy what they don’t really need. We don’t have a great war in our generation, or a great depression, but we do, we have a great war of the spirit. We have a great revolution against the culture. The great depression is our lives. WE have a spiritual depression. We have to show these men and women freedom by enslaving them, and show them courage by frightening them.” (149)

According to Tyler, “young strong men and women” experience a “spiritual depression” as a result of over-consumption (“chasing cars and clothes they don’t need”). Although he seemingly refers to “men and women” equally, the novel only portrays one woman: Marla. She does not actively participate in the “revolution” and, in the main, only functions as a love interest for both Tyler and the narrator. Thus, it is men who must fight “a great war of the spirit” and thereby reverse the emasculation which results from consumption. By “enslaving” men in a Fordist production line, Tyler argues, they learn “freedom.” According to Tyler’s logic, the slavery of Fordism is empowering, whereas the slavery of post-Fordism causes depression. This is because, under Fordism, slaves act (precipitating war and revolution) whereas post-Fordist slaves are subjected to the tyranny of consumption.

For Tyler, however, Fordist labor does not necessarily lead to a culture which values and encourages men’s achievement of a masculine identity. But Fordism’s militarized subservience proves useful because it enables the inculcation of a masculine ethos and the creation of an army, which precipitate a return to folk culture. The narrator details the regulation of the Fordist assembly line in this manner: “this clockwork of silent men with the energy of trained monkeys,
cooking and working and sleeping in teams. Pull a lever. Push a button. A team of space
monkeys cooks meals all day, and all day, teams of space monkeys are eating out of the plastic
bowls they brought with them” (130). The narrator describes each Fordist job as a “brainless
little honor” “assigned” by Tyler (131). This labor contributes to the creation of a new culture,
which will provide “freedom” and “courage.” This culture, however, does not arise
spontaneously from Fordist labor, but is imposed by Tyler. For instance, Tyler inculcates
members of Project Mayhem with the idea that they are interchangeable: “When I come home,
one space monkey is reading to the assembled space monkeys who sit covering the whole first
floor. ‘You are not a beautiful and unique snowflake. You are the same decaying organic matter
as everyone else, and we are all part of the same compost pile… Our culture has made us all the
same. No one is truly white or black or rich, anymore. We all want the same. Individually, we
are nothing’” (134). Tyler so thoroughly controls the “space monkeys” that the narrator thinks:
“Everybody in Project Mayhem is part of Tyler Durden, and vice versa” (155). Fordism is
useful because it requires workers to simply take orders, fulfilling a particular role without
asking questions about the project as a whole. Workers who accept this mentality excel at taking
orders, acquiescing to the demand that they participate in guerilla warfare and consequently
achieve masculinity through violence. This is analogous to the manhood instilled by the
military, described by Bob Connell in “Masculinity, Violence, and War”:

The state is an instrument of coercion: this remains true whatever else about it varies. It
uses one of the great discoveries of modern history, rational bureaucratic organization, to
have policy-making centralized and execution down the line fairly uniform. Given this,
the state can become the vehicle of calculated violence based on and using hegemonic
masculinity. Armies are a kind of hybrid between bureaucracy and masculinity… It is
the *relationship* between forms of masculinity—physically violent but subordinate to orders on the one hand, dominating and organizationally competent on the other—that is the basis of military organization. (128-129)

Tyler dictates a lifestyle (the “space monkeys” must live in a barracks, complete a violent mission once a week, and participate in fight club) which demands subservience but at the same time toughens its adherents, transforming them into men.12

Fordism, however, is insufficient because it does not organically produce a patriarchal culture. This culture must be imposed from without, even if—once that culture is promulgated and accepted—it runs without reference to its creator’s desires. As Mathias Nilges argues: “*Fight Club* is a novel about the shocking insight that resistance to post-Fordism is indeed capable of producing desiring structures that paradoxically lead subjects to willingly subject themselves to Fordist exploitation, seeking enjoyment in the restoration of a paternalistic leader.” (62). Nilges continues: “the goal of fight club and of Project Mayhem is completely to reduce the men’s bodies to objects of Fordist utility. However, it should now be obvious that this is not to be read as an act of opposing the logic of capitalism but, like the opposition to post-Fordism’s anti-Oedipalism, as merely an act of opposing the immaterial nature of post-Fordist capitalism, while nostalgically idealizing the function of the body within Fordism” (66). While the culture (Project Mayhem) looks to exploit the “Fordist utility” of men’s bodies by expanding that utility from the assembly-line to the destruction of society, these two are not necessarily linked. Tyler dictates the terms of Fight Club and Project Mayhem’s culture; masculinity does not naturally emanate from Fordist labor. Indeed, Henry Ford (in opposition to Tyler) believed that the high wages derived from assembly line labor enabled workers to purchase factory-produced goods.
The resurrection of Fordist labor practices and the culture Tyler creates to capitalize upon the assembly-line mentality are ultimately intended to destroy society, freeing men to recuperate a folk culture which will confer an organic, immutable masculinity. That is, Project Mayhem intends to use military-style tactics to overthrow consumer culture, and ultimately transform men into hunters and gatherers: “We wanted to blast the world free of history…. Tyler said, picture yourself planting radishes and seed potatoes on the fifteenth green of a forgotten golf course. You’ll hunt elk through the damp canyon forests around the ruins of Rockefeller Center, and dig clams next to the skeleton of the Space Needle… We’ll paint the skyscrapers with huge totem faces and goblin tikis” (124). The ideal labor, according to Tyler, confers a fundamentally masculine lifestyle. The labor is physical and necessarily repudiates consumption: “Imagine… stalking past department store windows and stinking racks of beautiful rotting dresses and tuxedos on hangers; you’ll wear leather clothes that will last you the rest of your life”’ (125). Tyler elevates use value (“clothes that will last the rest of your life”) over aesthetics (“beautiful rotting dresses and tuxedos”). In this pre-Fordist utopia, there is an organic connection between labor and culture; men can eschew feminized consumption because it is not useful. These hunters and gatherers do not want “beautiful rotting dresses and tuxedos” but serviceable, lasting clothes that will facilitate labor.

Arguing that *Fight Club* makes a compelling case for the undesirability of re-asserting paternal authority, Nilges collapses Fordist labor practices and culture with that of pre-Fordism; he claims that both represent a “nostalgic attachment to physicality” (67). While this reading provides a cogent critique of a similar urge implicit in both maneuvers, it flattens distinctions that Palahniuk is interested in making. In particular, Palahniuk is critical of Fordist labor practices and culture but he does not invoke a similar assessment of the desire to resurrect folk
culture. Palahniuk portrays Fordism as feminized to critique its failure to produce a culture which instills and values masculinity. This becomes apparent when the Fordist production line produces women’s soaps (87, 131-132), rather than cars or other machinery. Or, when the space monkeys must garden, a conventionally feminine activity, and deploy folk knowledge of plants to make the soaps: “Teams of space monkeys plant basil and thyme and lettuce and starts of witch hazel and eucalyptus and mock orange and mint in a kaleidoscope knot pattern… Another team of space monkeys picks only the most perfect leaves and juniper berries to boil for a natural dye. Comfrey because it’s a natural disinfectant. Violet leaves because they cure headaches and sweet woodruff because it gives soap a cut-grass smell” (131-32). The culture Palahniuk yokes to Fordist assembly line is corrupt because it does not emerge organically from the labor practices; the masculine ideal is imposed rather than an inherent manifestation of the values associated with the Fordist economy. Meanwhile, folk culture in Fight Club retains its association with masculinity.

Further, while Nilges indicts the “rise of misogynistic logic that… hides behind what may indeed appear to constitute an anti-capitalist critique,” “the regression to atavistic gender conventions” is not merely a lamentable corollary to an effective critique of the nostalgic urge to return to Fordism (62). Indeed, Palahniuk does not depict the return to a patriarchal folk culture as a misguided response to post-Fordism. In the postscript, Palahniuk claims that the only means of escaping post-Fordism involves becoming a member of a folk culture, marked by an annual festival celebrating violence. That is, he contends that the urge implicit in Fight Club captures a valuable vestige of folk culture:

There have always been fight clubs…. In the mountains of Bolivia—one place the book has yet to be published… every year, the poorest people gather in high Andes villages to
celebrate the festival of ‘Tinku.’ There, the *campesino* men beat the crap out of one another. Drunk and bloody, they pound one another with just their bare fists, chanting, ‘We are men. We are men. We are men...’ The men fight the men. Sometimes, the women fight one another. They fight the way they have for centuries. In their world, with little income or wealth, few possessions, and no education or opportunity, it’s a festival they look forward to all year long. Then, when they’re exhausted, the men and woman go to church. And they get married. Being tired isn’t the same as being rich, but most times it’s close enough. (217-218)

In Palahniuk’s description, the Bolivians “fight the way they have for centuries.” Presumably, this is because their culture has remained isolated (they live in the “one place” *Fight Club* “has yet to be published”) and thus changed little over time.

Yet, somehow, the reasons for which Bolivians participate in “tinku” resemble the causes of late-20th century working class American men’s powerlessness: they have “little income or wealth, few possessions, and no education or opportunity.” The correlation between Palahniuk’s imagined Bolivians and lower-class American men becomes apparent when the postscript is placed alongside a passage in the novel wherein the narrator jumps Raymond Hussel, a man who earns “minimum wage,” and demands that Raymond return to school, earn a degree, and escape “working a shit job for just enough money to buy cheese and watch television” (155). This passage indicates that Raymond Hussel is more impoverished than the native Bolivians (as imagined by Palahniuk). Although Hussel and the Bolivian folk laborer both face a subordinate position and lack of wealth, Palahniuk’s imagined Bolivians integrate masculine rituals into the life of the community and, as a result, their culture buttresses manhood despite the community members’ powerlessness. In this pre-Fordist culture, fight clubs do not exist as underground,
secret societies but as part of an accepted tradition. Raymond doesn’t have a folk culture and community to sustain him; instead, he lives a solitary life, eating “cheese” in front of the television instead of a meal surrounded by friends and family. Palahniuk’s Bolivians, on the other hand, share a culture in which a violent, patriarchal masculinity is annually asserted. In the novel, the individual choice to act as a misogynist is deemed insufficient; instead, the narrator aspires toward a culture wherein misogyny is an unquestioned norm.

My reading of Palahniuk’s novel runs counter to many critics, such as Eduardo Mendieta, who view *Fight Club* as depicting the recuperation of masculinity through an assertion of individualism. While Mendieta astutely chronicles *Fight Club*’s failure to produce a viable community through Project Mayhem, his contention that Palahniuk poses individualism as the only adequate, manly response to post-Fordism fails to account for the novel’s romantic attachment to folk culture: “The *Fight Club*… becomes the desperate means to incite solidarity among strangers by means of a community of secrecy… It is not ironical that in the *Fight Club*… a quest for viable masculinity ends up re-enacting the very rituals that have eviscerated masculinity in the first place: misogyny, militarism, bullying, terrorism, and gratuitous violence. Tyler Durden, the central character… is the alter ego that men must exorcise. Men must free themselves from the ghosts of a masculine Olympus, whose only existence is to vitiate any feasible and realistic sense of maleness” (397). For Mendieta, Palahniuk’s narrator reclaims masculinity when he rejects Tyler Durden, representative of an outmoded manhood defined by “misogyny, militarism, bullying, terrorism, and gratuitous violence.” Mendieta goes on to argue that Palahniuk’s novels, *Fight Club* included, depict “heroes” who “are testimonies to the resilient power of individuals to resist even the most invasive and persistent onslaughts by culture on the physic life of freedom and individuality” (395). Here, Mendieta’s reading of *Fight
McGurl’s phrase). 
While I agree that Palahniuk’s text depicts a “white minority discourse,” assaulted by mainstream culture, I take issue with Mendieta’s contention that *Fight Club* eschews community. Palahniuk negates the power of Fordist labor and culture to resuscitate masculinity but does not dismiss the role of community in bolstering manhood altogether. That is, folk culture acts as the ideal community toward which white men should aspire because it expresses the values of white male individuals as a shared tradition. At the same time, Palahniuk’s ideal community does not require members to compromise their individual beliefs, values, or masculinity – because the shared culture is an outward manifestation of those beliefs, values, and idealized masculinity.

McCarthy’s *All the Pretty Horses* similarly invokes an idealized native population as a means of imagining a cohesive community in which masculinity is premised on violence and patriarchy. Throughout the novel, John Grady is compared to the Comanches in order to capture his embodiment of a way of life that is outdated. In describing the disappearance of the cowboy in the mid- to late-20th century, John Grady’s father, a fellow cowboy, says, “We’re like the Comanches was two hundred years ago” (25). As with the disappearance of the frontier and the waning of the cowboy, the Comanches epitomize a lost way of life. Although the narrator describes the Comanches as “violent,” they are also imagined in distinctly nostalgic terms: “in the rose and canted light… the low chant of their traveling song which the riders sang as they rode, nation and ghost of nation passing in a soft chorale across that mineral waste to darkness bearing lost to all history and remembrance like a trail the sum of their secular and transitory and
violent lives” (5). This passage manifests a sense of loss for the passing of the “low chant of their traveling song.” In making a comparison between a white American cowboy and Comanches, McCarthy indicates that the marginalization experienced by these two groups is commensurate.

Sally Robinson details the reasons for which this type of maneuver is problematic:

> [W]hile the identity politics of the dominant shares many assumptions and rhetorics with an identity politics of the marginalized, the two politics are not, and never can be, fully commensurate. Like arguments for ‘reverse racism’ or ‘reverse sexism,’ the strategies through which white men represent themselves as disempowered depend on a systematic erasure of the ways in which white and male power are socially and institutionally embedded. What makes that power so deeply embedded is, precisely, a historically verifiable, if sometimes tenuous, equation between white masculinity and a disembodied, unmarked, abstract personhood. (21)

John Grady initially identifies the cause of his displacement as a changing economy. By the mid-20th century, ranch land in Texas becomes more valuable as an oil field than a space to raise cattle (15). But it becomes obvious, almost immediately thereafter, that 20th century social equality movements, in particular women’s liberation, exacerbate John Grady’s ability to earn a living as a cowboy. The novel opens with his Grandfather’s funeral and his mother’s inheritance of the ranch. As his mother’s lawyer tells John Grady: “Son, not everbody thinks that life on a cattle ranch in west Texas is the second best thing to dyin and goin to heaven. She dont want to live out there, that’s all. If it was a payin proposition that’d be one thing. But it aint” (17).

While the changing economy functions as the impetus behind the sale of John Grady’s family ranch, its dissolution comes as a result of a woman’s desire to explore the wider world, as the lawyer surmises: “she’s a young woman and my guess is she’d like to have a little more social
life than what she’s had to get used to” (17). Without reference to her 16-year-old son (and who consults a teenager on major financial decisions?), she decides to sell the ranch and pursue a career as an actress. This behavior mirrors her abandonment of John Grady when he was an infant; immediately after he was born, she left him in the care of Latina houseworkers, moving to Hollywood in order to become an actress (25). In so doing, John Grady’s mother functions as a symbol of the late-20th century “liberated” women. Not only does she abandon her baby but she divorces his father, ultimately dispossessing both men of the ranch and a means of earning a living. Although the novel is set in the mid-20th century, the portrayal of John Grady’s mother implicates late-20th century concerns about Second Wave feminism and women’s increasing independence.16

Jane Tompkins, in *West of Everything* (1992), claims that the Western owes its inception to late 19th century women’s encroachment on conventionally masculine territory, and therein lends credence to my contention that McCarthy’s novel responds to Second Wave Feminism. Tompkins argues:

Given the pervasiveness and the power of women’s discourse in the nineteenth century, I think it is no accident that men gravitated in imagination toward a womanless milieu, a set of rituals featuring physical combat and physical endurance, and a social setting that branded most features of civilized existence as feminine and corrupt, banishing them in favor of the three main targets of women’s reform: whiskey, gambling, and prostitution. (44)

In the late 20th century, the women’s movement was defined, in part, by the desire for the independence to choose personal destiny, free of familial obligations. John Grady’s mother epitomizes this. So it is not surprising that John Grady travels to Mexico, wherein McCarthy
imagines that women remain in a subordinate position, incapable of freely choosing a spouse or a
career.\textsuperscript{17} John Grady’s desire to retreat from Second Wave Feminism also captures the reasons
for which he looks to escape the changing economy: he is displaced from a traditional masculine
role and thereby made to feel obsolete and unnecessary. Tompkins makes the connection
between women’s burgeoning rights, technological advances, and men’s desire to retrench
masculinity on the frontier:

Most historians explain the fact that Westerns take place in the West as a result of the
culture’s desire to escape the problems of civilization... My answer to the question of
why the Western takes place in the West is that the West was a place where technology
was primitive, physical conditions harsh, the social infrastructure nonexistent, and the
power and presence of women proportionately reduced. The Western doesn’t have
anything to do with the West as such. It isn’t about the encounter between civilization
and the frontier. It is about men’s fear of losing their mastery, and hence their identity,
both of which the Western tirelessly reinvents. (44-45)

“Technology” and the accompanying economic transformations, portrayed by McCarthy as the
movement from horse to car and the conversion of ranch land into an oil field, function in a
manner similar to women’s increasing “power and presence” – to dispossess men of “their
mastery.” These changes foreshadow the late 20\textsuperscript{th} century economy’s more dramatic
displacement of manual labor in favor of service work, a transition captured in the final
installment of McCarthy’s Border Trilogy when the cowboy’s utility diminishes to the point at
which he simply becomes a stock character in film (discussed in more detail later in this
chapter).
To escape his profession’s obsolescence, John Grady retreats to Mexico, a space wherein the folk labor associated with cattle ranching is still valued and necessary. With his childhood friend, Lacey Rawlins, John Grady applies for work at the “Hacienda de Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción,” “a ranch of eleven thousand hectares” which “ran upwards of a thousand head of cattle” (97). In this environment, John Grady is valued for his skills with horses. He is even pulled aside to confer with the owner of the Hacienda, Don Héctor, and receives a promotion: caring for prized horses (117, 126). With Don Héctor, John Grady shares a sensibility, rooted in an idealization of folk labor: “there were two things they agreed upon wholly and that were never spoken and that was God had put horses on earth to work cattle and that other than cattle there was no wealth proper to a man” (127). McCarthy depicts Mexico as a residual economic sphere in which John Grady can still earn a living as a cowboy. In this folk culture, John Grady’s skills correspond with a viable profession; in the U.S. his labor is obsolescent.

McCarthy thus positions Mexico as a frontier, the “safety valve” as described by Frederick Jackson Turner. This foreign country provides a space in which John Grady can make a living as a cowboy (something no longer available in America), but it also unexpectedly (for John Grady) fosters a culture which invalidates the code of ethics he views as the natural counterpoint to his labor. That is, McCarthy depicts Mexico as a space in which cattle ranching is divorced from the cowboy identity. John Grady realizes that Mexicans’ disregard for the moral and ethical underpinning of the cowboy’s labor undermines his masculinity as effectively as Second Wave Feminism and a changing economy. This becomes apparent when John Grady is arrested in Mexico on suspicion of horse stealing. He defends himself with a truthful account of his role (or lack thereof) in the affair. The Mexican captain, unimpressed with John Grady’s tale, replies:
“You have the opportunity to tell the truth here. Here. In three days you will go to Saltillo, and then you will no have this opportunity. It will be gone. Then the truth will be in other hands… Who can say what the truth will be then? At that time?” (168). Here the “truth” does not necessarily reflect historical accuracy, but expediency. The captain offers John Grady the opportunity to shape the truth -- but John Grady declines, saying, “There aint but one truth... The truth is what happened. It aint what come out of somebody’s mouth” (168). In his veneration of the “truth,” John Grady adheres to the cowboy ethos; he refuses to fabricate a story, even if doing so would prevent imprisonment.

When detained and jailed by Mexican authorities, John Grady manifests his first violent inclinations. He defends himself from an attack by a fellow inmate and therein kills the assailant. Here, John Grady exercises violence in order to save his own life (not the staged events of fight club – something that purports to be more “real” than late 20th century gym culture) (201). The violence in prison also functions as a means of establishing a masculine hierarchy. To prove their worth, Rawlins and John Grady must engage in daily battles with fellow inmates:

They spent the whole of the first day fighting and when they were finally shut up in their cell at night they were bloody and exhausted and Rawlins’ nose was broken and badly swollen. The prison was no more than a small walled village and within it occurred a constant seethe of barter and exchange in everything from radios and blankets down to matches and buttons and shoenails and within this bartering ran a constant struggle for status and position. Underpinning all of it like the fiscal standard in commercial societies lay a bedrock of depravity and violence where in an egalitarian absolute every man was judged by a single standard and that was his readiness to kill. (182)
Richard Slotkin, in *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America* (1992), argues that this violence is a fundamental element of the Western:

[T]he Myth represented the redemption of American spirit or fortune as something to be achieved by playing through a scenario of separation, temporary regression to a more primitive or ‘natural’ state, and *regeneration through violence*. At the core of that scenario is the symbol of ‘savage war’… The premise of ‘savage war’ is that ineluctable political and social differences—rooted in some combination of ‘blood’ and culture—make coexistence between primitive natives and civilized Europeans impossible on any basis other than that of subjugation. (12, Slotkin’s emphasis)

John Grady’s trajectory seemingly epitomizes Slotkin’s description of the frontier myth. He separates from his family and country in order to regress into “a more primitive or ‘natural’ state.” The “ineluctable political and social differences,” wherein Mexicans do not respect or venerate the cowboy ethos, cause John Grady to engage in violence. Yet, McCarthy’s protagonist notably departs from Slotkin’s schema at the point of “regeneration.” John Grady struggles to reconcile himself with the moral implications of his violent behavior and afterward seems to retreat from the company of other human beings (this is the point at which he and Rawlins part ways).

Although John Grady feels remorse for murdering his assailant, an American judge compares this killing with the juridical decision to send someone to the “electric chair” (292). Justifying John Grady’s murder of the prisoner, the judge invokes shared rules for appropriate behavior and places John Grady in a position to enforce these rules, with the power to decide who should live and who shouldn’t. In describing John Grady as enacting justice, the judge manifests faith in John Grady’s character. This derives from the judge’s familiarity with the
cowboy ethos and certainty that John Grady embodies this identity. When charged with horse-stealing at the end of the novel (the very same crime he was accused of in Mexico), John Grady says, “I aint a liar.” To which the Judge responds: “I know you aint. This is just for the record. I dont believe anybody could make up the story you just now got done tellin us” (288). In America, John Grady’s identity as a cowboy functions to validate his “story”; he seemingly exudes trustworthiness. Although the judge appears to indicate that John Grady’s story leads to his exoneration, the tale is fundamentally a frontier myth, in which the only respectable actor is the cowboy. Later, when he recounts to the American judge the reasons for which he chose to kidnap, beat, and nearly kill a Mexican official, John Grady provides further justification for the judgment in his favor: “I wasn’t even mad at him. Or I didn’t feel like I was. That boy he shot, I didn’t hardly even know him. I felt bad about it. But he wasn’t nothing to me… The reason I wanted to kill him was because I stood there and let him walk that boy out in the trees and shoot him and I never said nothing” (292, 293). Here, John Grady violently rebels against being forced, seemingly against his nature, to be passive while a crime is being committed. Although the American judge asserts that it wouldn’t “have done any good” for John Grady to have attempted to save the “boy,” John Grady says, “But that don’t make it right” (293). Here, John Grady manifests an uncompromising set of morals, associated with the cowboy code. This code, disregarded in Mexico, is respected and venerated in America.

Because Mexican culture does not share the same moral compass, John Grady returns to the U.S. despite bleak prospects for a career as a cowboy. At the end of the novel, Rawlins asks John Grady: “Where is your country?” John Grady responds: “I dont know.. I dont know where it is. I dont know what happens to country” (299). Here, John Grady indicates his isolation; he is no longer a member of an imagined community, with shared values and goals. McCarthy,
however, approximates this imagined community through his novels. That is, McCarthy generates an imagined community, united by a belief in the importance of the cowboy code of ethics and nostalgia for the culture depicted in *All the Pretty Horses*. The popular success of this novel attests to the resonance of John Grady’s character, his labor and ethics. McCarthy alludes to the existence of this community in *The Crossing*, the second novel in the Border Trilogy. A wise old man tells Billy Parham, another young American cowboy wandering Mexico:

>The task of the narrator is not an easy one… He appears to be required to choose his tale from among the many that are possible. But of course that is not the case. The case is rather to make many of the one. Always the teller must be at pains to devise against his listener’s claim—perhaps spoken, perhaps not—that he has heard the tale before. He sets forth the categories into which the listener will wish to fit the narrative as he hears it. But he understands that the narrative is itself in fact no category but is rather the category of all categories for there is nothing which falls outside its purview. All is telling. Do not doubt it… Ultimately every man’s path is every other’s. There are no separate journeys for there are no separate men to make them. All men are one and there is no other tale to tell. (155, 156-57)

In this passage, the narrator invokes a shared culture, manifest in the “tales” all listeners have “heard” “before.” These tales call upon collective values which enable the Border Trilogy to resonate with a widespread American audience, as its popular success attests. Here, the narrator collapses distinctions, most notably those of race, ethnicity, and class (gender is not an issue because the narrator only refers to “men”) in order to imagine a community whose shared values are expressed in the frontier myth.
This community is not only apparent in the readers who identify with the tale, but also within formal aspects of the novel which collapse the cowboy characters into one another, signaling a culture with shared values. McCarthy’s writing style often employs pronouns whose referents are not always apparent. This has the effect of collapsing the distinctions between characters in the novel. Specifically, this inability to immediately distinguish the pronoun referent typically occurs when John Grady is surrounded by his young, male, and white cowboy companions: Rawlins and Blevins. For example, as the three boys travel into Mexico, the narrator says,

At just dark they benched out on a gravel shelf and made their camp and that night they heard what they’d none heard before, three long howls to the southwest and all afterwards a silence. You hear that? said Rawlins. Yeah. It’s a wolf, aint it? Yeah. He lay on his back in his blankets and looked out where the quartermoon lay cocked over the heel of the mountains… He lay a long time listening to the others breathing in their sleep while he contemplated the wildness about him, the wildness within. (59-60)

In this passage, the narrator refuses to identify each character in terms of who is speaking or acting. It is unclear whether John Grady or Blevins or both respond to Rawlins’ questions; more so, it isn’t entirely obvious to whom the “he” refers. While John Grady is the focus of the novel, he is not the only referent when the narrator deploys the word “he.” This indeterminacy, deliberate on McCarthy’s part, is deployed to signal a sensibility shared by these three travelers. Their characters appear nearly interchangeable in so far as they embody the cowboy identity, in terms of labor and values.

On a larger scale, characters are difficult to distinguish throughout McCarthy’s Border Trilogy, of which All the Pretty Horses is the first. Each of these novels tells the tale of the
cowboy, who becomes outdated and outmoded as a result of the social and economic transformations of mid- to late-20th century, and attempts, disastrously, to retreat to a more primitive environment in Mexico. Critics have put forth a variety of arguments as to why McCarthy wrote three novels depicting similar characters, undergoing similar trials. Several scholars posit that McCarthy requires three novels in order to perform an extended meditation on a particular theme or literary convention. For instance, Patrick W. Shaw offers this explanation: “McCarthy is fascinated by travelogues and the Bildungsroman. Few plots are more serviceable than to set an adolescent on the road, let him experience life’s difficulties, and have him (or at least the reader) emerge as a wiser individual” (257). Shaw goes on to argue that McCarthy makes a “metafictional statement” in these two novels that “[f]iction is created out of nothing and ultimately vanishes into nothing again. What it may mean is revealed only by the traces left in that vanishing” (258). Alternatively, Charles Bailey argues that McCarthy’s Border Trilogy asks: “Where is the all-American cowboy at?” Bailey contends that McCarthy ultimately demonstrates that “[h]e is dead. Or he has played, at best, an extra’s role in the drama of American life. The romantic hero has passed. The tragic hero has become pathetic. In the twenty-first century, the anti-hero has regressed into a second childhood. Who is the new hero, now that these are all relegated to irrelevance? Who knows? Cities of the Plain and the Border Trilogy end with ‘an uncommon want’: ‘I want a hero’” (301). Situating McCarthy’s thematic preoccupations within the postmodern drive to deconstruct the narrative, Shaw and Bailey provide cogent readings of the Border Trilogy. At the same time, these critics don’t question why McCarthy positions the cowboy as the best means of exploring these concerns, nor do they provide social and economic context which might more fully illuminate the reasons for which
McCarthy’s nostalgia for the American West, so overwhelmingly manifest in the Border Trilogy, finds resonance with contemporary readers.

The imagined community created through McCarthy’s Border Trilogy ultimately demonstrates the obsolescence of the cowboy and the frontier. This type of character can only exist within the confines of a novel or a film. Although at the close of All the Pretty Horses John Grady can eke out a living as an itinerant ranch-hand in the U.S., this irregular labor eventually dies out. Post-Fordist labor practices eventually ensure that cowboys, such as Billy Parham (featured in the next novel in McCarthy’s Border Trilogy) can only earn a living as a movie extra: “In the oncoming years a terrible drought struck west Texas…. There was no work in that country anywhere. Pasture gates stood open and sand drifted in the roads and after a few years it was rare to see stock of any kind and he rode on…. Till he was old. In the spring of the second year of the new millennium he was living in the Gardner Hotel in El Paso Texas and working as an extra in a movie” (264). McCarthy depicts the cowboy becoming a mere Hollywood convention—the cowboy isn’t an actual person performing manual labor but an image to be consumed. For McCarthy, this indicates that Americans may still venerate the same values, as the endurance of the cowboy in the popular imagination attests, but the obsolescence of the cowboy’s labor indicates that those values do not organically emerge from working conditions and therefore cannot be sustained.

Palahniuk’s narrator is similarly derisive of men who go to the gym in order to achieve an appearance of strength rather than honing muscles as a means of performing physical labor (or engaging in violent fights): “Fight club gets to be your reason for going to the gym and keeping your hair short and cutting your nails. The gyms you go to are crowded with guys trying to look like men, as if being a man means looking the way a sculptor or an art director says” (50). Both
novels look for a space in which an idealized culture, based upon patriarchal values, organically emerges from labor practices. For Palahniuk, the Fordist and post-Fordist economies unseat a holistic folk culture, in which culture and masculinity emerge naturally from the community’s economy. Palahniuk imagines folk labor as contributing to a culture in which masculinity is organically defined. This nostalgic response to post-Fordism, resurrecting physical labor and the culture associated with it, is not simply problematic because, as David Harvey argues, fetishizing “locality, place, or social grouping” denies “that kind of meta-theory which can grasp the political-economic processes... that are becoming ever more universalizing in their depth, intensity, reach, and power over daily life” (117). Beyond that, nostalgia for folk culture also marks the desire for a community which unquestioningly values patriarchy, misogyny, and violence.

Although McCarthy demonstrates that this organic relationship between folk labor and an ethical code cannot be recuperated, *All the Pretty Horses* remains a nostalgic novel which romanticizes patriarchal, violent masculinity, the basis of the cowboy identity. This nostalgia becomes apparent in McCarthy’s writing style, particularly in moments wherein the narrator describes John Grady’s labor. For instance, the narrator describes John Grady’s encounter with wild horses in this manner:

He took the first one that broke and rolled his loop and forefoothed the colt and it hit the ground with a tremendous thump... Before the colt could struggle up John Grady had squatted on its neck and pulled its head up and to one side and was holding the horse by the muzzle with the long bony head pressed against his chest and the hot sweet breath of it flooding up from the dark wells of its nostrils over his face and neck like news from another world. They did not smell like horses. They smelled like what they were, wild
animals. He held the horse’s face against his chest and he could feel along his inner thighs the blood pumping through the arteries and he could smell the fear and he cupped his hand over the horse’s eyes and stroked them and he did not stop talking to the horse at all, speaking in a low steady voice and telling it all he intended to do and cupping the animal’s eyes and stroking the terror out. (103-104)

This lyrical, mystical description evokes respect for John Grady’s mastery of the horse and nostalgia for a time when this sort of labor was necessary. But even more so, it demonstrates John Grady’s absolute communion with horses, as becomes manifest in his dreams: “as he was drifting to sleep his thoughts were of horses and of the open country and of horses. Horses still wild on the mesa who’d never seen a man afoot and who knew nothing of him or his life yet in whose souls he would come to reside forever” (117-118). Here, John Grady imagines a spiritual union between horses and man. Alongside their human partners, horses participate in the labor and also share a soul. Thus, only horses can provide John Grady with the community he seeks; they respect his labor and values, and in consequence, allow him to achieve mastery over them.

It is therefore not surprising when the narrator describes John Grady’s role as horse breaker: “the voice of some god come to inhabit” the horses (105). Ultimately, John Grady doesn’t need the imagined community of readers (or film viewers), because he identifies with his horse.

The novels discussed in this chapter, like those analyzed in the previous two chapters, depict the return to folk culture as the best means of recuperating masculinity. Notably, the fiction examined in these chapters struggles to persuasively conjure an environment in which folk culture can be sustained. Because all the novels I have analyzed in the foregoing chapters imagine the need for an actual space in which to retreat and develop or foster a folk culture, they grapple with the ramifications of idealizing something that doesn’t exist – or won’t exist in the
near future. Gilbert, in *The Last American Man*, makes this clear when she idealizes Conway’s retreat to a uninhabited space and resurrection of a folk culture as the only means by which masculinity may be recuperated:

What makes Eustace seem, on first encounter, like the last of some noble species is that there is nothing ‘virtual’ about his reality. This is a guy who lives, quite literally, the life that, for the rest of the country, has largely become a metaphor. Think of the many articles one can find every year in the *Wall Street Journal* describing some entrepreneur or businessman as being a ‘pioneer’ or ‘maverick’ or a ‘cowboy.’ Think of the many times these ambitious modern men are described as ‘staking their claim’ or boldly pushing themselves ‘beyond the frontier’ or even ‘riding into the sunset.’ We still use this nineteenth-century lexicon to describe our boldest citizens, but it’s really a code now, because these guys aren’t actually pioneers; they are talented computer programmers, biogenetic researchers, politicians, or media moguls making a big splash in a fast modern economy. But when Eustace Conway talks about staking a claim, the guy is literally staking a goddamn claim. Other frontier expressions that the rest of us use as metaphors, Eustace uses literally. (121)

In the following chapter, I will explore novels by Colson Whitehead and Maxine Hong Kingston which capture the difficulties, as well as the unique potential, of defining masculinity metaphorically (something Gilbert implicitly derides); that is, modeling manhood on that which is captured in traditional folk tales or, more accurately, adapting those tales to define masculinity according to the labor available at a particular moment in time.
1 For the definitive history of the way in which labor and consumption have been gendered in America, see Ann Douglas.

2 In Workforce America!: Managing Employee Diversity as a Vital Resource (1991): “As we approach the next millennium, organizations throughout America are facing an extraordinary new challenge—unlike any they have confronted in the past. Analysts believe this current challenge will have a powerful impact on our future as a productive society. Yet few U.S. institutions seem adequately prepared today to deal effectively with this momentous change—the increasing cultural diversity of the American workforce. By cultural diversity, we are referring primarily to differences in age, ethnic heritage, gender, physical ability/qualities, race, and sexual/affectional orientation” (xvi).

3 Michael Kimmel, in Manhood in America (1994), chronicles the perceived assault on white middle class masculinity: “[t]he structural foundations of traditional manhood—economic independence, geographic mobility, domestic dominance—have all eroded. The transformation of the workplace—the decline of the skilled worker, global corporate relocations, the malaise of the middle-class manager, the entry of women into the assembly line and the corporate office—pressed men to confront their continued reliance on the marketplace as a way to demonstrate and prove their manhood” (197). Kimmel explains that “[a]lthough these economic, political, and social changes have affected all different groups of men in radically different ways, perhaps the hardest hit psychologically were middle-class, straight, white men from their late 20s through their 40s. For these were not only the men who inherited a prescription for manhood that included economic autonomy, public patriarchy, and the frontier safety valve but also the men who believed themselves entitled to the power that attended on the successful demonstration of masculinity… As a result, many middle-class, white, middle-aged heterosexual men—among the most privileged groups in the history of the world—do not experience themselves as powerful” (262). Also see Susan Faludi and Hamilton Carroll.

4 One response to this was to idealize a retrograde white male work environment, repudiating the growing numbers of women and minorities who entered into white collar professions, once the (nearly) exclusive preserve of white men. Heather Hicks, in The Culture of Soft Work (2009), argues that “the best-selling business book in history,” In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America’s Best-Run Companies (1982), portrays the American workplace as “untouched by the political efforts of the 1970s Women’s Movement. In their introduction, for instance, Peters and Waterman intone that ‘the excellent companies require and demand extraordinary performance from the average man,’ and they continue to portray the American workforce as almost exclusively male. In keeping with this perspective, they elevate the best workers they discover in their survey of American companies to a masculine pantheon of ‘heroes,’ ‘godfathers,’ ‘champions,’ ‘pioneers,’ and ‘mavericks.’ Women, meanwhile, make only fleeting appearances, mainly as mothers, daughters, wives, and consumers” (1). While not looking to revive the industries predominant in mid-century America, Peters and Waterman look to restore the white collar domain to white men. Deny men’s participation in consumer culture by insisting on their role in business world, rather than in the domestic environment, comparing them to physical laborer: “heroes,” “champions,” and “pioneers.”

5 Sally Robinson makes a similar claim about white masculinity:

6 While the Western, with its conventional emphasis on the extermination of or battles with “savages,” might seem at odds with Palahniuk and McCarthy’s admiration of native populations, these novels subjugate in a different manner: by appropriating Native American culture. These novels obliterate the particular beliefs of different tribal nations and historical accuracy in service to white men’s projections.

7 At the same time, Deloria argues that Indianness also signifies an authentic Americanness: “they had turned to Indianness as the sign of all that was authentic and aboriginal, everything that could be true about America. But they also turned to Indianness as a way of making an absolutely new start” (180).

8 It can be assumed that he refers to men here because women notoriously do not consume pornography in great numbers.

9 Here, Palahniuk anticipates, from the opposite end of the political spectrum, Stephanie Coontz’s argument regarding the modern era.

10 This also speaks to the way in which Tyler enslaves members of project mayhem. In slavery, laborers lose their name, marked only by their use value. Those with the same use value are considered the same, interchangeable. Tyler releases them from slavery when they have been killed: “Only in death will we have our own names since only in death are we no longer part of the effort. In death we become heroes” (178). Echoes the military.
This sentence undoubtedly refers to the narrator’s schizophrenia, implicitly acknowledging his alter personality as a part of himself. At the same time, the narrator indicates that “everybody in Project Mayhem” shares the same goals and values—and thereby seemingly become interchangeable, like the workers on a Fordist assembly line.  

12 This inculcated military mentality becomes particularly apparent when the narrator attempts stop project mayhem. It is only when a member of project mayhem is killed that the narrator comes to terms with the effects of violence: “A man is dead, I say. This game is over. It’s not for fun anymore.” In response, “the anonymous voice of the chapter leader” calls out: “The first rule of fight club is you don’t talk about fight club” (178). In “Wars, Wimps, and Women: Talking Gender and Thinking War,” Carol Cohn argues that “Certain ideas, concerns, interests, information, feelings, and meanings are marked in national security as feminine, and are devalued. They are therefore, first, very difficult to speak… And second, they are very difficult to hear; to take in and work with seriously, even if they are said. For the others in the room, the way in which the physicist’s comments were marked as female and devalued served to delegitimate them. It is almost as though they had become an accidental excrescence in the middle of the room” (134). This manifestation of “wimpiness” seemingly justifies violence against that person (135-37).

13 Although Palahniuk claims that women also “fight one another,” he does not address their reasons for doing so. Certainly, the battling women do not chant “we are men.” Palahniuk’s Bolivian folk culture functions in a manner similar to the ways in which late 20th century hippies utilized Native American imagery: “Heirs of the white middle class of the 1950s, the communals worked hard to counteract their parents’ America, perceived in terms of consumptive excess, alienated individualism, immoral authority, and capitalism red in tooth and claw. As an antidote, they promoted community, and at least some of them thought it might be found in an Indianness imagined as social harmony” (Deloria 155).

14 In Palahniuk’s imagined Bolivian community, members do not need to adhere to Fight Club’s primary rule: silence regarding the existence of fight club. This is because fight club is an unquestioned norm in the Bolivian folk culture and therefore does not need to be discussed. The creation of the fight club rule imposes one of the traits associated with masculinity in the U.S: a refusal to engage in talk. Jane Tompkins discusses the association between masculinity and silence: “For the Western is at heart antilanguage. Doing, not talking, is what it values… The position represented by language, always associated with women, religion, and culture, is allowed to appear in Westerns and is accorded a certain plausibility and value… But in the end, that position is deliberately proven wrong… Because the genre is in revolt against a Victorian culture where the ability to manipulate language confers power, the Western equates power with ‘not-language.’ And not-language it equates with being male” (50, 55). Of course, Fight Club’s rules are a manifestation of what Palahniuk wants to get away from: the creation, imposition of masculinity rather than its organic emergence from a way of life.

15 The novel depicts liberated women, embodied in John Grady’s mother, as shirking responsibility to their families. Although John Grady’s father, a war vet who gambles away money, isn’t much better, his mother is portrayed in a much harsher light. War seems a legitimate excuse for gambling binge. A desire for freedom doesn’t seem like a good excuse for abandoning family. The demonization of women becomes obvious through John Grady’s cold relationship with his mother; meanwhile, he and his father manifest a shared sensibility, they ride together and his father dispenses adviceJohn Grady’s father experiences emasculation that sounds eerily similar to that described by Susan Faludi in the post-Vietnam era. In Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man, Faludie claims that for the Vietnam War veteran, “[t]he loved one whom the man imagined himself supporting and protecting was often doing just fine on her own, and she didn’t much appreciate his efforts to assert his authority” (29). As a result, the veteran feels emasculated: “The frontier, the enemy, the institutions of brotherhood, the women in need of protection—all the elements of the old formula for attaining manhood had vanished in short order. The boy who had been told he was going to be master of the universe and all that was in it found himself master of nothing” (30).

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17 See Duena Alfonsa’s lecture (136-137), which details women’s subordinate position in Mexico.

18 But Mexico is not an empty space to settle; Henry Nash Smith in Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth (1950) repeatedly describes the way in which American culture imagines the frontier as “a vacant continent drawing population westward” (3). Frontier idealized by Turner, according to Nash Smith, “the wilderness beyond the limits of civilization was not only an area of free land; it was also nature. The idea of nature suggested to Turner a poetic account of the influence of free land as a rebirth, a regeneration, a rejuvenation of man and society constantly recurring where civilization came into contact with the wilderness along the frontier” (253). Rather, McCarthy emphasizes John Grady’s encounters with a well-established, foreign culture in Mexico. While this depiction of Mexico falls under the rubric of New Western History, it is not necessarily a groundbreaking movement toward capturing an unbiased account of the West. While Mexican inhabitants are acknowledged, they are not given a fleshed-out perspective. Positioned as the unknowable Other. Cooper remarks upon this: “McCarthy’s depictions
of minorities are often even more ethically troubling. Alejandra, a blue-eyed Mexican girl with a European education, is John Grady Cole’s love interest in *All the Pretty Horses*, while swarthier Mexicans constitute the dangerous element in the novel, guarding and populating the prison. This example is just one indication of the consistent association of the ethnic ‘other’ with evil” (17).

I am certainly not the first to comment upon the ethical underpinnings of John Grady’s actions. Lydia Cooper responds to McCarthy scholars who argue that his novels appear nihilistic by analyzing shifts in narrative perspective, indicating characters who strive for a moral compass. In her analysis of *All the Pretty Horses*, Cooper argues that “[t]he external journey John Grady takes is marred by failure, but his internal journey, while dark, is also heroic in the sense that his appreciation of his own culpability deepens and matures” (84-85). Further, she claims that “John Grady’s attempts at morality suggest his belief that internal morality matters existentially, regardless of the efficacy of the external action” (78). While I certainly agree with Cooper’s analysis of *All the Pretty Horses*, I look to expand upon her work, demonstrating how morality functions as the basis of John Grady Cole’s masculinity and the patriarchal culture that these ethics underpin. Morality not simply an interesting aspect of McCarthy’s corpus but foundational to American culture, something McCarthy imagines to be nearly extinct as a result of economic change.

Robert L. Jarrett: “Cormac McCarthy’s Sense of an Ending: Serialized Narrative and Revision in *Cities of the Plain*” (in *New Directions*): “In McCarthy’s trilogy, all tales indeed are ‘one’” (316), in that each novel revises the theme of “the expulsion from paradise” present in canonical American literature, such as: Faulkner’s *The Bear*, Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*, Hemingway’s *In Our Time* and Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (317). Jarrett argues that “In the trilogy, McCarthy’s characters ‘fall’ into a series of self-conscious narrations that constitute their compulsive attempts to delineate the meaning of their lives through a self-interpretation that itself takes the form of a dialogic renarration of their experiences to a fictionalized witness… it is this obsessive recreation of secondary narrative in the Border Trilogy that is primary, suggesting the awareness of the narrative itself of its postmodern, revisionary… status” (320). “Each novel of McCarthy’s Border Trilogy, in similar fashion, ironically erases and revises its tradition and the previous novels within the series. Each novel becomes part of something like a mathematic series or function, meaningless in and of itself, pointing ironically to the more general formula or literary consciousness expressed by the series as a whole” (325). Jarrett insightfully argues how repetition demonstrates a set of shared values, around which the tales are structured. Jarrett, however, does not address how masculinity plays a central role in this repetition; how the shared values are designed to reveal an ideal masculine model, one which is slipping away.

This is how John Grady can imagine himself similar to the Comanches; he may only share one trait (both embody a vanishing mode of life) and this seems to provide the basis of the shared journey, but this seems to override any other differences.

Jane Tompkins observes that “[p]hysical sensations are the bedrock of the experience Westerns afford… L’Amour puts you inside the hero’s shirt, makes you taste what he tastes, feel what he feels… For Westerns satisfy a hunger to be in touch with something absolutely real” (3). Just as John Grady retreats to Mexico in order to pursue a career as a cowboy, readers and viewers, through their consumption of the Western, look to appropriate a relationship with “something absolutely real.” What does McCarthy’s novel tell us about this urge on the part of the reader/viewer?

As Tompkins argues, “The emotion that the taming of horses leaves behind is not so much triumph as nostalgia. Nostalgia for the Wild West, for the untamed body, for the spirit and energy conveyed by the presence of horses… that nostalgia becomes the Western’s explicit theme” (102).

Tompkins clearly describes the nostalgia manifest in the relationship between cowboy and horse is featured in the Western: “So the question is, What are horses doing in Westerns? Their presence seems natural to us, but for most of the nineteenth century horses figured very little in popular fiction. Their gradual appearance… at the beginning of the twentieth century coincides with the disappearance of horses from daily life… This suggests that horses fulfill a longing for a different kind of existence. Antimodern, antiurban, and antitechnological, they stand for an existence without cars and telephones and electricity… Horses express a need for connection to nature, to the wild. But it is nature in a particular form… power, motion, size, strength, brought under human control and in touch with the human body” (93).
In the incongruously titled *Barbarians Led by Bill Gates* (1998), Jennifer Edstrom and Martin Eller chronicle the early years of the Microsoft Corporation, countering the widely accepted narrative of the company’s origin in the collaboration between computer nerds by portraying it as a battlefield of testosterone-infused egos. One of the most striking moments occurs when Edstrom and Eller recount Bill Gates’ first public appearance at the 1983 “computer distributors’ exhibition” which was “the scene, where industry go-getters had to be, and where opinion makers and trendsetters gathered in full force” (39), saying, “At Gates’s keynote speech, the lights dimmed, and a spotlight followed him to center stage in front of standing-room-only audience. His fingerprint-smudged glasses reflected light. Dandruff dusted his collar. He looked like central casting’s idea of a technical genius, which was, of course, all part of the image being marketed” (42). Here, Edstrom and Eller imply that characteristics associated with nerdiness (“fingerprint-smudged glasses” and “dandruff”) are “part of the image being marketed” rather than Gates’ unselfconscious appearance. Yet the claim that Gates manufactures the facade of a dork seems patently absurd. “Fingerprint-smudged glasses” and “dandruff” are difficult to simulate and thereby unlikely elements of a carefully honed “image.” Possibly, however, Edstrom and Eller mean to suggest something slightly more plausible: that though Gates has “fingerprint-smudged glasses” and “dandruff,” these attributes mistakenly indicate their bearer is a timid “technical genius.”

Indeed, *Barbarians Led by Bill Gates* repeatedly describes the Microsoft founder in highly masculinized terms. They note that “[w]orking for Chairman Bill had been like white-water rafting, not ocean cruising” (18), enumerate his “hardball methods” (30), and comment that, at one point in the 1980s, “Gates had the Mac bee in his war bonnet” (49). Other employees
at Microsoft similarly embody, according to Edstrom and Ellers, hyper-masculine personae. Their depiction of Pam Edstrom, the only woman at the company, is particularly striking. Edstrom is described as “a diminutive woman… driven, not just by ambition but the very real need to put food on the table. This motivation helped turn her into one of the most aggressive, calculating, successful public-relations executives in the country” (31). Although Edstrom is a woman and a mother, she is not a nurturing presence in the professional world. To the contrary, Edstrom possesses traits strongly associated with masculinity: aggressiveness, calculation, and success. Lacking a feminine presence, Microsoft became, according to Edstrom and Ellers, a “boys’ club of techies who relished their Animal House ways” (36). Here, Edstrom and Ellers undermine expectations once again. Typically, “techies” are thought of as meek brainacs who gather to solve complex problems rather than engage in beer-soaked socializing. Not only that, but Barbarians Led By Bill Gates implies that these employees are fundamentally sexist, as evidenced by their membership in a “boys’ club” and the implied intent of maintaining the corporation’s masculine atmosphere. Even as Edstrom and Ellers attempt to negate Gates’ nerdy persona with “hardball” business tactics, the further comparisons between “hardball” methods and “white water rafting” or “war” (or any of the other metaphors used throughout the book) imply that a ruthless corporate persona isn’t quite masculine enough, either. The metaphors which relate corporate behavior to physically demanding and dangerous labor indicate that the late 20th century corporate world’s association with masculinity only occurs through metaphor.

Colson Whitehead, in John Henry Days (2001), similarly imagines the need in the late 1990s to reinvigorate white collar workers’ masculinity. Rather than metaphorically comparing service work with physical labor or war, Whitehead’s protagonist, J. Sutter, imagines himself similar to John Henry, the folk hero, in order to imaginatively achieve manliness. As recounted
by the official press release for the John Henry stamp, cited by Whitehead, the legend’s reputation and masculinity derive from several intertwined aspects of the story: “Since the 1870s, John Henry has been extolled as a strongman born with a hammer in his hands and the ability to drive steel for ten continuous hours… John Henry challenged a steam drill to a race and swung his hammers so hard that he beat the machine. Railroad workers who arduously labored during the building of the nation’s rail system literally sang the praises of this hero” (16). Although a portion of John Henry’s manhood derives from his physical power, Sutter emphasizes and identifies with the manhood inherent in the “strongman’s” victory over a machine. Eventually, however, Sutter comes to realize that late 20th century service work cannot reasonably sustain comparison with John Henry’s 19th century challenge because he believes that no contemporary American laborer can evade complicity with the prevailing industries (consumerism and pop). Sutter then chooses another detail of the folk tale to highlight as the key to masculinity: John Henry’s devotion to his wife. In so doing, Whitehead revises the traditional John Henry tale to locate masculinity in the domestic sphere. For Whitehead, the folktale’s inherent mutability has particular resonance at the close of the 20th century because this adaptability enables the narrator to highlight an attribute of manliness, implicit in the John Henry legend but not conventionally emphasized, which directly addresses the concerns regarding the limitations of a service economy.

Whitehead’s assessment of the folktale’s utility in reimagining late 20th century masculinity finds an interesting counterpoint in Maxine Hong Kingston’s China Men (1980). Kingston portrays the unsuccessful attempt to create a railroad folktale, celebrating the strength and heroism of Chinese immigrants laboring in the Sierra Nevada Mountains during the second half of the 19th century (the same time period in which the John Henry tale emerged). In China Men,
the absence of a folktale, highlighting the heroism and masculinity of Chinese railroad laborers, reflects the unique difficulties encountered by these immigrants, conventionally associated with service work, as they sought recognition for their achievement of normative American masculinity, rooted in physical strength. Dominant white society refused to concede to Chinese immigrants a manhood rooted in the mastery of difficult and dangerous labor; at the same time, these laborers were unable to override traditional Chinese masculine ideals in order to perceive their work as manly. For Kingston’s narrator, the railroad can only be rehabilitated as the basis of a heroic folktale if the laborers’ success is formulated in terms of their contribution to the wellbeing of their families and creation of future American citizens. Kingston, in response to Chinese Americans’ unique historical trajectory in America, writes an entirely new folktale to locate the recuperation of manhood within the paradigmatic feminine realm: the private sphere.

Despite their very different commentaries on the failure of conventional railroad heroism and their distinctive reasons for locating the achievement of masculinity outside the labor market, Whitehead and Kingston explore masculinity through a return to railroad labor, performed in a much earlier historical period. In order to do so, both authors incorporate a similar formal element: interweaving narratives that span history and cross genres. These novelists intersperse autobiography, myth, historical fact, and fiction. Throughout, Kingston and Whitehead show the ways in which the folktale is manipulated to suit the purposes of individual men and women, attesting to this particular narrative form’s ability to address a multitude of historical situations. While Whitehead and Kingston find this adaptability empowering, they also highlight the limitations of the folktale’s mutability. Checked by reality or preconceived notions, a folktale can fail to provide men with a means of imagining themselves as masculine. For Whitehead and Kingston, therefore, the folktale must adapt to the particular historical and
social constraints of its audience or lose its power. The business world, on the other hand, utilizes a more rigid schema. Metaphors comparing service work with physically demanding labor concentrate on a single trait (strength) associated with conventional masculinity – and cannot be altered or fleshed out to suit changing circumstances. This inflexibility ensures that contemporary men continue to embrace traditional notions of manhood, despite their inability to actually enact these versions of masculinity.

It is a generally accepted fact that the American economy significantly changed during the 1970s. In “An America That Works: The Life-Cycle Approach to a Competitive Work Force,” a report commissioned by the U.S. government (1990), the new economy faced by late 20th century laborers has the following characteristics: “Much has been said and written lately about the shift from a manufacturing to a service economy, from an economy based on the organization and manipulation of physical resources to one founded on collecting, processing, and distributing information. Knowledge and information have become the key raw materials of the contemporary economy, adding most of the value to what we make or deliver and making us more or less competitive” (82). This passage highlights the burgeoning “service economy,” which David Harvey terms “flexible accumulation” and describes as “a direct confrontation with the rigidities of Fordism. It rests on flexibility with respect to labour processes, labour markets, products, and patterns of consumption… greatly intensified rates of commercial, technological, and organizational innovation… a vast surge in so-called ‘service sector’ employment as well as entirely new industrial ensembles in hitherto underdeveloped regions… a new round of… ‘time-space compression’” (147). For Harvey, labor in the late 20th century is distinctive in its need to adapt to (or employ “flexibility” in) a substantially “intensified” pace and increased fluctuations in the marketplace.¹
The “service economy” has often been described as a “feminized” marketplace. Donna Haraway, in “Cyborg Manifesto” (1985), argues that labor in the 1970s and 1980s has become “feminized” through the “flexibility” that Harvey describes as central to the economy: “Work is being redefined as both literally female and feminized, whether performed by men or women. To be feminized means to be made extremely vulnerable; able to be disassembled, reassembled, exploited as a reserve labour force; seen less as workers than as servers; subjected to arrangements on and off the paid job that make a mockery of a limited work day” (166).

“Flexibility,” for Haraway, acts as a feminizing agent in that the worker who is “able to be disassembled, reassembled” becomes interchangeable and “vulnerable.”² The late 20⁰ century service economy unmanned the growing legions of university-educated, white collar workers, whom businesses viewed as largely interchangeable and consequently exposed these employees to market fluctuations and instability. In the media, white collar workers tend to be portrayed as emasculated for entirely different reasons: these laborers are imagined as physically weak and sexually impotent. Taken to an extreme, popular culture denigrates nerds as embodying the lowest form of manhood. For instance, the television sitcom, “The Big Bang Theory,” chronicles the lives of four male scientists who generate laughter through their wimpiness, irrational fears, inability to attract women, and social awkwardness.³ The gendering of intellectual labor is especially pronounced in racial or ethnic stereotypes. African American men are often labeled virile, physically strong, and masculine, while Asian and Jewish American men tend to be associated with intellect and weakness.⁴

While the feminization of intellectual labor has occurred throughout U.S. history, in the latter half of the 19⁰ century and early portion of the 20⁰, white collar workers were engaged in running manufacturing operations – and thereby achieved masculinity through association
(however removed) with physical labor. In the 1970s and 1980s, those operations were failing and in the process of being replaced by a service economy. In this “feminized” labor market, metaphoric strength and toughness enable men to recuperate labor as a defining element of masculinity. Simon Bronner (2005) explains the power of metaphor to allow men access to masculinity: “Manliness involves the characteristics that extend, and typically symbolize, the cultural values and traditions of being a man… The ‘traditions’ men know are those they communicate to one another in their social interaction and are shaped by what women do, and such traditions often are inherited from a previous generation. They embody and express manliness, and provide common fonts of symbols, images, and practices from which to derive and shape meaning. Even if not ‘performed,’ such traditions provide metaphors to think with and sometimes live by” (xii, my emphasis). Bronner argues that “traditions” of manliness, derived from folktale and commonly circulated heroic ideals, need not be enacted or “performed,” but simply imagined (“to think with”) in order to enable men to achieve masculinity.

Throughout the late 20th century, many public figures and businessmen called upon physical strength or warrior-like attributes in order to infuse masculinity into their labor practices. For instance, Donald Trump, in Trump: Surviving at the Top (1990), attempts to assert the masculinity of his chosen enterprise, real estate, an industry conventionally feminized in its remove from “actual” labor. When Trump formulates his theory of business, he invokes the figure of the warrior:

I was up at West Point not long ago… standing before a statue of General Douglas MacArthur, and I couldn’t help but be struck by the inscription, which was taken from a speech he’d made… ‘Your mission remains fixed, determined, inviolable… It is to win
our wars. Everything else in your professional career is but corollary to this vital dedication. All other public purposes, all other public projects, all other public needs, great or small, will find others for their accomplishment'…. The general was talking to soldiers, of course, but I felt that what he said applied to me. My main purpose in life is to keep winning. And the reason is simple: If I don’t win, I don’t get to fight the next battle. (13)

Trump metaphorically transforms real estate dealings into a masculine activity, “war,” by comparing his labor to that of General MacArthur. In so doing, Trump justifies self-interest (i.e. abandoning “all other public needs”) by describing his agenda (earning profits) as a “mission” and “vital dedication,” imagined in defense of the country.8 Similarly, Lee Iacocca’s autobiography (1985) imagines masculinity as derived from service economy labor. Although Iacocca was president of Ford Motor Company, and thereby associated with the manufacturing industry, traditionally perceived as masculine, his path to success was not routed through the physical labor of the plant or even the nuts and bolts of engineering, but a suddenly more promising avenue: “I wanted to stay at Ford, but not in engineering. I was eager to be where the real action was—marketing or sales. I liked working with people more than machines” (31). Here, Iacocca redefines masculine labor. The “real action” occurs in “marketing or sales,” premised upon a conventionally feminine skill, “working with people,” rather than the traditionally masculine path to success: “machines.”9

Heather Hicks, in The Culture of Soft Work (2009), describes the phenomena wherein late 20th century business men, employed in the service economy, ascribe masculinity to conventionally feminine skills and traits. She opens her analysis with an account of “the best-selling business book in history,” In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America’s Best-Run
Companies (1982), arguing that “[r]ather than granting the conventional association between the concepts of irrationality and femininity… they characterize irrationality as a masculine form of genius” (1, 2). She claims that this reassignment of irrationality to the masculine realm is a pervasive phenomenon, the result of the late 20th century marketplace:

In their celebration of businesses that privilege what appears to be a feminine ontology, Peters and Waterman herald the emergence of what I call ‘soft work.’ While the term ‘hard work’ is equated with industrial machinery, hard bodies, and a no-nonsense, command-and-control style of management, soft work is performed in an economy sustained by software, soft bodies, and soft management techniques. Representations of soft work in novels and films, as well as a host of popular arts and sociological, political, and corporate publications suggest that this new socioeconomic formation has realigned the signifiers of economic production with those of femininity. Soft work collapses the boundaries between worker and consumer, rationality and emotion, publicity and privacy, the real and the unreal, the American and ‘un-American,’ and the managerial and magical. (3)

According to Hicks, “soft work” heralds the realignment of labor’s gendered signifiers; the late 20th century service economy is associated with conventionally feminine attributes, which male business leaders co-opt into masculine traits. For instance, in Peters and Waterman’s bestselling business tome, they metaphorically transform rationality into rigidity and conformity (the antithesis of American manhood), while irrationality breeds a commitment to individualism and action (the hallmarks of American manhood) (16).
Colson Whitehead’s novel, *John Henry Days*, details the impact of “soft work” on the masculinity of J. Sutter, a freelance writer who travels to endless publicity events and pens articles to promote the hyped product.\(^{10}\) David Harvey chronicles increasing demand for advertising and marketing services, such as those provided by Sutter, in the late 20\(^{th}\) century:

Flexible accumulation has been accompanied on the consumption side, therefore, by a much greater attention to quick-changing fashions and the mobilization of all the artifices of need inducement and cultural transformation that this implies. The relatively stable aesthetic of Fordist modernism has given way to all the ferment, instability, and fleeting qualities of a postmodernist aesthetic that celebrates difference, ephemerality, spectacle, fashion, and the commodification of cultural forms” (156).

Harvey notes that “quick-changing fashions” necessitate relentless and vigorous marketing: “the need to accelerate turnover time in consumption has led to a shift of emphasis from production of goods (most of which, like knives and forks, have a substantial lifetime) to the production of events (such as spectacles that have an almost instantaneous turnover time)” (157). Sutter contributes to the “production of events” with his freelance articles, touting the “quick-changing fashions.” In producing “events,” as opposed to “goods,” Sutter’s labor is associated with the service economy.

In his position within the service economy, in general, and as a freelance marketer, specifically, Sutter establishes a tenuous masculinity. James Cantano, in *Ragged Dicks: Masculinity, Steel, and the Rhetoric of the Self-Made Man* (2001), delineates the characteristics of manhood in the late 20\(^{th}\) century:

[O]ne of the key elements of this reworked self-making is its call to anti-institutionalism, to a rejection of the status quo and the flabby, bureaucratic, nonmasculinity embodied in
the aging fathers and the corporate powers-that-be... authentic masculinity is regularly embraced through two related motifs... : (1) the unbridled power of verbal self-making and (2) uncontested freedom of workplace craft and creativity, a form of productive power that translates masculine effort into self-making. Both motifs enact a particular agency, a control over acts of making – of self and of one’s products. (188)

Although free-lancing appears to embody “anti-institutionalism” in its flexibility and rejection of corporate employment, Sutter understands his labor as reinforcing the “status quo”; he and his ilk are “fellow mercenaries in their covert war against the literate of America... At stake: the primal American right of free speech, the freedom, without fear of censor, to beguile, confuse and otherwise distract the people into plodding obeisance of pop” (Whitehead 47). Here, Sutter attempts to formulate his work in manly terms (i.e. he fights a “war”), but this conventionally masculine endeavor becomes disgraceful, in that it encourages “plodding obeisance of pop.” Not only do Sutter and his fellow freelancers further corporate interests, but the methods by which they do so fall short of Cantano’s “uncontested freedom of workplace craft and creativity.” According to the narrator, there are only three acceptable formats for the puff piece from which the freelancers do not deviate (72).

Although freelancing does not provide the foundation of a masculine identity, Sutter does not seek out an alternative form of writing that might establish manhood. According to Sutter, in the post-Fordist economy, there is no masculine form of writing because corporations transform all efforts into pop. Sutter discovers this truism early in his career, when his college internship disillusioned him about the possibility of integrity and, thereby masculinity, in writing. Interning at an alternative newspaper, Sutter hopes to write the “stuff he didn’t find in the papers his parents read,” believing that “[h]is parents were in on it... by their deep middle-class sin. They
were complacent and a fascist government needed people to be complacent, to turn a blind eye” (171). Here, Sutter imagines himself as a vigilant free-thinker, masculine in his evasion of conformity. But, as he discovers, the alternative weekly was bought by a “liquor manufacturer who engineered ad campaigns to urge underage drinking and put up big billboards in minority neighborhoods” and supported “various conservative groups”; in consequence,

[e]very day in that place reduced his notions. Reduced the first day by the serried fluorescent rods in the ceiling panels; diminished by the pallid green light on the neutral prefab sections of the cubicles; made entirely small by the rectitude of scratchproof desks, which were not alive with the artifacts of fabled counterculture, like maybe vermilion-tinted bongs encrusted with resinous murk, or rainbow posters detailing the famous gigs of the psychedelic dead, not even an errant roach, a little something to lubricate the old brainstem under deadline. Downright corporate. (169)

For Sutter, a corporate atmosphere signals conformity. Notably, Sutter accepts the facade of the workplace (“fluorescent rods,” “cubicles,” “scratchproof desks”), more so than the newspaper’s coverage of events, of which “he had noticed no change… over the last few years” (171), as indicative of complacency. In so doing, Sutter positions appearance as an accurate reflection of reality or truth, the very belief he attempts to avoid by pursuing a career in investigative reporting. As a result of his experiences at the alternative newspaper and, subsequently, as a freelance writer, Sutter abandons high-minded goals. When offered a book deal to write a history of hip-hop, Sutter realizes that “[b]oth he and the music are too jaded. They grew up together and are too old to pretend that there is anything but publicity” (136). As John Updike notes his review of John Henry Days, Sutter suffers from the “very contemporary predicament,
that of talent lost in ‘the brittle domain of irony’ and selling itself short in cranking out promotion pieces” (2).

Because his position within the service economy inescapably entails emasculation, Sutter calls upon the John Henry folktale to infuse manhood into his work. Apparently cognizant of his physical inadequacies, Sutter doesn’t compare himself to the railroad hero in terms of raw, bodily power. Instead, Sutter chooses to imagine his similarity to John Henry as stemming from a shared commitment to besting corporate interests. As recounted by Whitehead’s omniscient narrator, the John Henry legend emerges in the 1870s, after the steel driver victoriously battles a machine, built to replace human laborers on the railroad, and subsequently dies. In the portions of the novel which recount John Henry’s life as a steel driver, Whitehead demonstrates the means by which a historical account becomes a folktale, marked by a hero of mythic proportions. For instance, after John Henry agrees to a match with an Irish steel driver, the shaker, L’il Bob, immediately begins memorializing the contest; he “thought up lines he could sing for tomorrow’s contest” (147). Through song, easily memorized and repeated, L’il Bob venerates John Henry’s strength and victory over adversaries. The matches between John Henry and other steel drivers act as precursor to the battle between man and machine; L’il Bob’s songs position John Henry, prior to his victory over the machine, as a man apart, with heroic capacities. As such, on the day of the battle between man and machine, John Henry’s fellow workers already view him as a hero because he has something “in him that was not in them” (385-386). The railroad workers view John Henry as a hero, having something “in him that was not in” anyone else. After John Henry beats the machine, then dies, his legend is told and re-told through song, oral stories, and, eventually, movies.
John Henry’s defeat of a machine becomes a particularly salient metaphor in the late 20th century labor market. If a service-economy worker imagines himself as a latter-day John Henry, pitted against the forces of technology and exploitation, then that worker can achieve a measure of masculinity, comparable to the railroad hero. Sutter envisions himself in just such a position, as he goes for the “record” of attending publicity events, non-stop, for eight months: “It isn’t as if he bet anyone any money that he could do it. Go for the record. It is a competition between him and himself. Or him and the List. Depending on how you looked at it. He had bet himself he could do it. Hadn’t he? Looking back it seems to him that he just started doing it and it made a certain sense so he kept going” (233). A fellow junketeer clarifies the “competition” by explicitly comparing Sutter’s attempt at the “record” and the John Henry tale: “‘You have your machine to beat and I have mine.’ They left it at that” (236). In imagining himself as a late 20th century John Henry, Sutter believes that his relentless pursuit of pop culture will confer a type of martyrdom and legendary status. The current record holder, Bobby Figgis, disappeared after an unprecedented junket and is presumed to have suffered a mental breakdown. Fellow freelancers discuss Figgis with a measure of awe; Sutter looks to appropriate some of that glory.

Sutter realizes, however, when digging a grave and surrounded by the unmarked remains of 19th century railroad laborers, that his attempt to re-enact the John Henry battle with a machine no longer has relevance: “He was tired out from this one simple task, and in the same dirt he was feebly scratching into lay dead men who did more back-breaking work in a day than he had done in his whole life. And the legendary John Henry, nearby or not nearby in the ground. He tried to think of what the modern equivalent would be for his story, his martyrdom. But he lived in different times and he could not think of it” (378). Here, Sutter’s physical weakness establishes his effeminacy; Sutter can only “scratch” at the dirt wherein lay “dead men
who did more back-breaking work in a day than he had done in his whole life.” Although Sutter, on previous occasions, imagined himself as a late 20\textsuperscript{th} century John Henry, he now feels that there is something lacking in the “modern” story. Sutter discovers the missing element when standing inside the tunnel created by John Henry and the other, unsung railroad workers:

So small beneath this grand arching and the infinite tons crouching above him considering pounce and collapse. That’s how he feels now – small. Step in here and you leave it all behind, the bills, the hustle, the Record, all that is receipts bleaching back there under the sun. What if this were your work? To best the mountain. Come to work every day, two, three years of work, into this death and murk, each day your progress measured by the extent to which you extend into the darkness. How deep you dig your grave… This place defeats the frequencies that are the currency of his life. Email and pagers, cell phones, step in here and fall away from the information age, into the mountain, breathe in soot. Unsettling but calming, too. The daily battles that have lost meaning are clearly drawn again, the opponents and objectives named and understood.

The true differences between you and them. And it. (321-22)

For Sutter, late 20\textsuperscript{th} century “battles” between laborer and employer “have lost meaning” because the lines between “opponents and objectives” have collapsed. Sutter’s battle with his “machine,” the attempt to set the record for junketeering, only upholds corporate interests. The more he travels, the more he writes, and, ultimately, the more publicity he generates. Although he had been able to sustain a comparison between himself and John Henry throughout the majority of novel, after Sutter experiences the fundamental, physical differences between laboring on the railroad in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century and working in the service economy of the late 20\textsuperscript{th} century, he becomes aware of the distinctions between himself and the folk hero. That is, when immersed in
publicity and “pop,” Sutter assumes that stories can be altered or applied in any manner, without respect to historical particulars. Frederic Jameson refers to this as the “weakening of historicity” (6), a hallmark of the postmodern era. Only when able to step outside late 20th century pop culture can Sutter establish distinctions between historical moments and assess the ability of the John Henry folktale to address the concerns of contemporary society.

Yet, simply because the battle between man and machine fails to provide a blueprint for late 20th century manhood, the novel does not imply that the John Henry folktale loses applicability altogether. Indeed, Whitehead indicates that the John Henry ballad is never finished, but is always ready for modification to suit the needs of the next person:

Song done? Not yet. He knows that. Like a dollar bill it changes hands. Others will hear it and add a verse, goose the rhythm, slow it down to fit their mood, temperament, to fit the resonance set up in them by the arrangement of plates on the kitchen table that morning. Same thing he did… He wasn’t there at Big Bend. This is his own John Henry, who he figures is a man like himself, just trying to get along. And if the man who taught him the song has his own John Henry, let him. The next man will have his. Someone else will change his verses and today’s John Henry will be gone, or secret in altered lines like memory. (102-03)

William Ramsey, in “An End of Southern History: The Down-Home Quests of Toni Morrison and Colson Whitehead” (2007), argues that this mutability reflects “a vitally progressive potential—namely its radical tendency towards openness, not fixity” (783). Yet the freedom to refashion the John Henry folktale does not necessarily entail a “radical tendency towards openness.” As the novel demonstrates, mutability is a vital characteristic of the folktale, but the
process by which a legend becomes open to new meaning must necessarily be subject to historical constraints. Indeed, that “openness” is only imagined by postmodern culture and invalidated by Sutter as he stands in the railroad tunnel and realizes that, to have power, the folktale must capture or represent the difficulties faced by a particular historical moment. Consequently, the novel’s narrator offers a different version of the well-known tale, addressing the concerns particular to late 20th century service workers. As envisioned by the narrator, John Henry’s labor is heroic because it is motivated by love; he works on the mountain in order to put away savings and ultimately start a life with Abby: “The wagon arrived at the grading camp and John Henry saw the mountain heaped up to Heaven and knew right then that he had lied. He had told Abby that when he returned they would get married. John Henry would save his wages and come back a rich man. Or rich enough to start a life with her… he saw this mountain and knew that this one was different. It will kill him” (240, 241). Here, John Henry’s masculinity is premised on his desire to be with Abby and ability to act as a provider.

Following the reimagined John Henry folktale, Sutter re-defines manhood. After a weekend pursuing Pamela Street, Sutter discovers a new “objective.” Pamela offers Sutter the chance to pursue love, if he abandons his pursuit of the Record, and this promising new means of defining himself is perfectly timed to take advantage of his realization that his challenge to the List is unsatisfying (388). The alternative, joining Pamela, offers uncertainty but also promise. The “story” that Sutter derives from his interactions with Pamela “is not the kind of thing he usually writes. It is not puff. It is not for the website. He does not know who would take it. The dirt had not given him any receipts to be reimbursed. He does not even know if it is a story. He only knows it is worth telling” (387). Despite the uncertainty (he “does not know who would take it” or “if it is a story”), Sutter finds a purpose: writing something that is “worth telling.” But
because the piece Sutter intends to write “is not puff” and does not have a readily identifiable audience, in writing it he removes his labor from the marketplace. That is, Sutter rejects a position within the labor market and, in so doing, seemingly gestures toward an alternative masculinity, centered in the domestic. Importantly, this masculinity does not involve acting as a breadwinner, the conventional masculine role within the private sphere.

While this alternative approach to masculinity, located within the domestic sphere yet a repudiation of the provider role, seems to provide an anti-patriarchal model for contemporary gender relations, this isn’t an entirely satisfying conclusion to the novel. In *John Henry Days*, Whitehead depicts the emasculation caused by the service economy, but fails to imagine how manhood might be reconciled with late 20th century conditions of labor. Indeed, Whitehead seems to imply that there is no means of claiming masculinity within the marketplace. At the same time, he reimagines the paradigmatic feminine sphere as capable of conferring many traits associated with conventional masculinity. Whereas business leaders implausibly attribute manliness, in the form of physical strength or warrior-like bravery, to service work, Whitehead recovers traditionally masculine traits like individualism and non-conformity within the domestic sphere. That is, Sutter doesn’t redefine masculinity; he merely relocates the site of its achievement.

*China Men* offers a very different perspective on the railroad and the heroism which emerged from it. Written about Chinese men who immigrated to America during the mid-19th through the mid-20th centuries, Kingston’s novel captures these workers’ attempts to transform demeaning, emasculating working and living conditions into a form of heroism. Many scholars look to Kingston’s inclusion of Chinese railroad and plantation workers in her narrative as a means of countering dominant society’s erasure of these immigrants’ participation in professions
typically associated with masculinity (Goellnicht 198). Feminists insist, however, that Kingston does not simply recuperate manhood, according to American ideals of physical strength, by valorizing Chinese immigrant labor in traditionally masculine fields. More so, these academics analyze the ways in which Kingston refuses to portray normative Chinese manhood as an alternative ideal toward which men should strive. In particular, these scholars analyze Kingston’s retelling of traditional Chinese folktales, arguing that her revision of these legends effectively critiques patriarchy by comparing the emasculating conditions of immigration with women’s conventional position within Chinese culture. Detractors argue that, in portraying the immigrants as incapable of achieving the manhood captured in traditional Chinese fables, Kingston perpetuates one of two stereotypes: that of the effeminate Asian or of overtly patriarchal Chinese culture. Both readings of Kingston view Chinese folktales, in their traditional form, as a powerful means of asserting patriarchy and masculinity. Scholars, however, fail to note the way in which Kingston exposes these legends as espousing a masculinity fundamentally inaccessible to the immigrant laborers and therefore contributing to these workers’ inability to achieve a sense of manhood.

Kingston’s novel, chronicling the Chinese immigrants who labored on the Sierra Nevada railroad, recounts working conditions similar to those described in Whitehead’s narrative of John Henry. But *China Men* shows how the racism encountered by Chinese immigrants, as well as those immigrants’ adherence to conventional Chinese masculine ideals, forecloses the emergence of a railroad hero from their ranks. To demonstrate the reasons whereby a folktale fails to emerge, the narrator recounts the Chinese railroad laborers’ struggle to achieve a victory over the railroad owners but ultimately recounts the failure to create a legendary masculinity. Rather than battle a machine to prove their worth and ensure job security, the Chinese workers strike for
higher wages and shorter hours. The laborers immediately begin the process of memorializing the strike as heroic: “The men sang new songs about the railroad. They made up verses and shouted Ho at the good ones, and laughed at the rhymes. Oh, they were madly singing in the mountains. The storytellers told about the rise of new kings” (141). The creation of “new songs about the railroad” embodies the process whereby new heroes, or “new kings,” come into existence. This process echoes the initial stages of folktale creation, as depicted in *John Henry Days.*

Unlike the unilateral victory enjoyed by John Henry, however, the railroad owners in *China Men* refuse to concede the strikers’ triumph. The strike, although a heroic stand against an exploitative employer, does not confer masculinity because the railroad owners “diminish the victory” by saying “‘We were planning to give you the four-dollar raise all along!’”; in consequence, the workers do not view it as a unilateral success (144). Many scholars point to this negation on the part of the dominant society, but fail to address how the Chinese immigrants participate in the denigration of railroad heroism (“no use singing and shouting over a compromise and losing nine days of work”). Most often, critics point to dominant society’s silence regarding Chinese railroad laborers as the reason for these workers’ exclusion from conventional American masculinity, based in physical strength, but do not discuss how Kingston portrays the absence of that account or its belittlement in Chinese American families as contributing to emasculation. The most commonly cited instance whereby *China Men* demonstrates dominant society’s erasure of Chinese railroad labor occurs in the narrator’s description of the completion of the Sierra Nevada line: “While the demons posed for photographs, the China Men dispersed. It was dangerous to stay. The Driving Out had begun. Ah Goong does not appear in railroad photographs” (145). The official documentation of the
completed railroad line only captures the images of white men; as such, the historical records contain no evidence of Chinese labor on the Sierra Nevada line. King-Kok Cheung, in “The Woman Warrior versus The Chinaman Pacific: Must a Chinese American Critic Choose between Feminism and Heroism?” (1990), provides a cogent analysis, which aligns with the scholarly consensus, of this scene: “Chinese American men, too, have been confronted with a history of inequality and painful ‘emasculating’…While many built railroads, mined gold, and cultivated plantations, their strenuous activities and contributions in those areas were often overlooked by white historians. Chinamen were better known to the American public as restaurant cooks, laundry workers, and waiters, jobs traditionally considered ‘women’s work’” (235).

David L. Eng, in Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America (2001), argues that Kingston’s novel seeks to remedy the missing records of Chinese immigrant railroad laborers: “for Kingston and Chin the irony of their situation is this: there are no pictures of their railroad ancestors to be seen… these Chinese American male laborers lack official documentation—a history of visible images—a lack that threatens to consign their existence to oblivion. Seeking a history for these men—fighting for those images that would ‘threaten to disappear irretrievably’—thus entails for Kingston and Chin radical new methods of looking” (36-37). While I agree that Kingston’s narrative looks to recall “a history for these men,” she also demonstrates that the forces which would “consign” the Chinese railroad laborers “to oblivion” do not simply stem from a “lack” of “official documentation.” Eng, too, notes Kingston’s emphasis on the power of Chinese convention to manufacture a “given-to-be-seen,” which effectively erases the heroism of the railroad workers; but Eng focuses his analysis on the liberatory potential of individual characters who perceive reality differently than the “given-to-be-seen.” This project, while fascinating, does not necessarily investigate the particular
pressures shaping the Chinese “given-to-be-seen,” nor does it take into account the impact of Chinese traditions on the masses of immigrants, for whom convention acted to foreclose a new masculinity reflective of a different cultural context or capable of compensating for the difficulties of life in a racist environment.

The railroad laborers’ inability to define masculinity outside Chinese convention, which endorses traits unavailable to these workers, becomes apparent when the strike is compared with John Henry’s battle with the machine. While the John Henry legend similarly faces an absence of official historical records, Whitehead portrays the dearth of documentation as the foundation of the folktale’s power. This is because black folk culture perpetuates the John Henry legend through oral culture; the scarcity of factual information on the hero enables the story to change according to the “next man’s” need. Although Chinese immigrant laborers experience a similar erasure from official U.S. history, they do not, among themselves, perpetuate heroic myths attesting to their role in building the railroad. Kingston’s narrator relates the reasons why Chinese immigrants and their descendants do not disseminate a heroic railroad tale when Ah Goong posits “another idea that added to his reputation for craziness. The pale thin Chinese scholars and the rich men like Buddhas were less beautiful, less manly than these brown and muscular railroad men, of whom he was one. One of ten thousand heroes” (142). Ah Goong’s argument that the “railroad men” embody beauty, manliness, and heroism is dismissed by his fellow laborers as “craziness” because it does not align with traditional Chinese ideas of masculinity. Kam Louie, in *Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China* (2002), details conventional Chinese masculinity, as embodied in the two traits *wu* and *wen*. While *wen* is associated with “literary and other cultural attainment,” *wu* centers around the “martial, military, force and power” (10). Louie argues that
either *wen* or *wu* or both *wen* and *wu* were perceived to be essential for men of substance. This *wen-wu* paradigm is particularly relevant to understanding masculinity because it invokes both the authority of the scholar and that of the soldier. Chinese masculinity... can be theorized as comprising both *wen* and *wu* so that a scholar is considered to be no less masculine than a soldier. Indeed, at certain points in history the ideal man would be expected to embody a balance of *wen* and *wu*. At other times only one or the other was expected, but importantly *either* was considered acceptably manly. (11)

Ah Goong references normative masculinity, in the form of *wen*, when he attempts to upend “Chinese scholars” as the ideal form of manhood. His fellow laborers, however, are unwilling to redefine masculinity. Although *wu* remains an alternative means of achieving manhood, their labor on the railroad and the perceived failure of the strike do not qualify the workers as “soldiers.” Precluded from achieving either conventional Chinese masculine model, the railroad laborers cannot imagine themselves as manly heroes.

At the same time, Chinese workers take pride in their labor and celebrate the completion of the railroad: “There were two days that Ah Goong did cheer and throw his hands in the air, jumping up and down and screaming Yippee like a cowboy. One: the day his team broke through the tunnel at last... The second day the China Men cheered was when the engine from the West and the one from the East rolled toward one another and touched. The transcontinental railroad was complete” (144, 145). Ah Goong “cheers,” as personal victories, the achievements which bring renown and financial prosperity to the railroad company. This marks a very different tale from that of the John Henry legend; John Henry is known for besting the railroad owner’s interests, while Chinese immigrants, like J. Sutter, function profoundly within and for business. Sutter takes no pride in promulgating “plodding obeisance to pop,” but the Chinese
railroad workers interpret their contribution to the completion of the transcontinental line as a signifier of inclusion in a society which had overwhelmingly restricted their access to citizenship: “The white demon officials gave speeches. ‘The Greatest Feat of the Nineteenth Century,’ they said. ‘The Greatest Feat in the History of Mankind,’ they said. ‘Only Americans could have done it,’ they said, which is true. Even if Ah Goong had not spent half his gold on Citizenship Papers, he was an American for having built the railroad” (145). According to Kingston, Chinese immigrants’ history of legal exclusion leads them to embrace a definition of success widely divergent from that of a newly freed, but recently enfranchised, slave (or, for that matter, the late 20th century white collar worker).

This victory, however, is not communicated to Ah Goong’s family. The narrator tells of her childhood, when she was informed that “[y]our grandfather built the railroad” (126), yet this knowledge does not confer respect upon Ah Goong. When taking family portraits, “Grandmother chased him away. ‘What a waste of film,’ she said. Grandfather always appears alone with white stubble on his chin… When we children talked about overcoat men, exhibitionists, we meant Grandfather, Ah Goong, who must have yanked open that greatcoat—no pants. MaMa was the only person to listen to him” (127). If, as Susan Sontag claims, “[t]hrough photographs, each family constructs a portrait-chronicle of itself—a portable kit of images that bears witness to its connectedness” (8), Ah Goong’s dismissal from the photograph demonstrates his rejection as a substantive member of the family. Indeed, the grandchildren do not hear of Ah Goong’s heroism; they are free to imagine him as a sexual deviant or “overcoat” man. When MaMa “listens” to Ah Goong, he does not recount laboring on the railroad, striking for higher wages, or achieving a sense of American citizenship, but describes himself as a hero within the Chinese myth of Gold Mountain.
Called the “Gold Mountain,” the United States was imagined as a place wherein masculinity, premised on success as a provider as well as the ability to achieve mythic heroism, may be realized. For many Chinese men, the traditional labor of farming did not guarantee the wellbeing of their families or allow them to attain legendary status. For Ed, Kingston’s semi-autobiographical father, life as a Chinese schoolteacher proves to be less ennobling than demoralizing, and certainly not an easy means toward wealth. The narrator relates the night that Ed hears the Gold Mountain fable and decides to join the sojourners:

Grading papers night after night for years, BaBa became susceptible to the stories men told, which were not the fabulations like the fairy tales and ghost stories told by women. The Gold Mountain Sojourners were talking about plausible events less than a century old. Heroes were sitting right there in the room and telling what creatures they met on the road, what customs the non-Chinese follow, what topsy-turvy land formations and weather determine the crops on the other side of the world, which they had seen with their own eyes. Nuggets cobbled the streets in California, the loose stones to be had for the stooping over and picking them up. Four Sojourners whom somebody had actually met in Hong Kong had returned from the Gold Mountain in 1850 with three thousand or four thousand American gold dollars each. These four men verified that gold rocks knobbled the rivers; the very dirt was atwinkle with gold dust. In their hunger the men forgot that the gold streets had not been there when they’d gone to look for themselves.

(41)

The “plausible events” which occur on Gold Mountain are in fact fabulous (“Nuggets cobbled the streets” and “the very dirt was atwinkle with gold dust”). Men, despite their own experience “that the gold streets had not been there,” do not strain to believe the tale of easy riches because
they have a “hunger” to achieve wealth (to return to China with “three thousand or four thousand American gold dollars”) and thereby manhood (become a “hero”). In this moment, Chinese men exhibit a willful belief in the possibilities available on Gold Mountain.

Like the “heroes” who recount tales of easy money, Ed participates in the creation of the Gold Mountain folktale. Despite his newfound awareness, after immigration, of the contradiction between the imagined Gold Mountain and the actual conditions in America, Ed writes letters for other Angel Island detainees, extending the heroic myth: “They told their wives and mothers how wonderful they found the Gold Mountain. ‘The first place I came was The Island of Immortals,’ they told him to write. ‘The foreigners clapped at our civilized magnificence when we walked off the ship in our brocades. A fine welcome. They call us “Celestials.”’ They were eating well; soon they would be sending money. Yes, a magical country. They were happy, not at all frightened. The Beautiful Nation was glorious, exactly the way they had heard it would be” (57). The Chinese immigrants do not disrupt the Gold Mountain tale with reality; instead the “Beautiful Nation” was “exactly the way they had heard it would be.” The letters enable the immigrants to achieve masculinity in their Chinese villages because they portray the Sojourners as mythological heroes, welcomed as “Celestials” by Americans. Beyond the letters in which Ed describes his American life in mythical terms, he sends money to his family in China, thereby confirming the reality of Gold Mountain.

The Gold Mountain folktale serves Chinese immigrants as a compensatory mechanism for the difficulties and humiliations they endure in America. Throughout the novel, Kingston refers to Chinese immigrants as “sojourners,” indicating her understanding of their status as permanent aliens who adhere to their native culture and ultimately intend a return to China. In using the term “sojourner,” Kingston alludes to the work of scholars like Paul Siu, who in 1952
published “The Sojourner,” calling upon extensive research and analysis of Chinese laundrymen in his dissertation (unpublished until 1987), arguing that “[t]he sojourner clings to the cultural heritage of his own ethnic group in spite of many years of residence abroad…. up to the present time the Chinese laundry remains a folk institution which is organized on the basis of the Old World heritage of kinship system and personal relations, and that the laundryman’s life organization oriented to social isolation and segregation, and that the laundry is an instrumentality to that effect” (Siu 4). Siu claims that Chinese immigrants do not assimilate into mainstream American society as a result of persistent racism; because the “laundryman does not see any chance of getting satisfaction in this country, he” “tie[s] this hope to his native land, and become[s] a sojourner” (Siu 20). Due to the racism Chinese immigrants encounter in America, Siu argues that they tie their identity and masculinity to their status in the Chinese village.

Centrally, this masculinity is premised upon living within an all-male community. Although women are important, their essential role in buttressing masculinity is predicated on their physical absence. Because their wives cannot witness the reality of Gold Mountain, the Chinese immigrants are able to establish a mythic masculinity. In making this claim, my analysis runs counter to the majority of scholars who discuss the impact of U.S. immigration laws on Chinese laborers’ masculinity. Donald Goellnicht, King-Kok Cheung, and Jachinson Chan point to the emasculating impact of exclusionary immigration laws which prohibited the entrance of Chinese women into the U.S. until the mid-20th century; these scholars argue that access to American citizenship and the rights entailed therein enable the demonstration of a masculine “heterosexual identity” (Chan 5) through fathering a “subsequent generation” (Cheung 235). While the enforcement of Chinese immigrant bachelor communities no doubt negatively impacted men like Ah Goong, Kingston demonstrates an unexpected benefit of exclusionary
immigration practices: the ability to perpetuate the Gold Mountain myth and thereby achieve masculinity in their Chinese community. As wives, children, and extended families arrive in America in the mid to late 20th century, the reality of the Gold Mountain becomes obvious, evacuating the folktale of its power to confer masculinity. Rather than revising the folktale, and thereby the definition of masculinity, to account for life in America, the Chinese families adhere to conventional notions of manhood – and thereby perceive the laborers as emasculated.

After demonstrating the impossibility of traditional folk tales to address and celebrate the heroism of Chinese immigrants, Kingston’s narrator attempts to transform Ah Goong into a legend, without recourse to railroad imagery (conventional American manhood) or the Gold Mountain legend (traditional Chinese masculinity). She recounts the end of Ah Goong’s life, in the 1906 San Francisco earthquake: “The family called him Fleaman. They did not understand his accomplishments as an American ancestor, a holding, homing ancestor of this place. He’d gotten the legal or illegal papers burned in the San Francisco Earthquake and Fire; he appeared in America in time to be a citizen and to father citizens. He had also been seen carrying a child out of the fire, a child of his own in spite of laws against marrying” (151). Here, heroism and masculinity do not derive from physical strength, victorious battles, scholarly acumen, or accumulated wealth. Instead, Ah Goong’s “accomplishments as an American ancestor” most notably include fathering citizens. As such, Kingston offers the domestic sphere as a space of masculine recuperation. Although the narrator’s description of Ah Goong “carrying a child out of the fire” aligns with conventional notions of masculine bravery, the narrator cites the apocryphal account more so to emphasize the heroism of fatherhood as it occurs in opposition to American immigration statutes; Ah Goong does not save an indiscriminate child, but “a child of his own despite laws against marrying.” And while Ah Goong’s attainment of U.S. citizenship
marks a fundamentally public achievement, the narrator’s interest in this accomplishment centers on its ramifications in the private sphere, wherein Ah Goong functions as a “a holding, homing ancestor of this place.” Interestingly, Ah Goong exploits the destruction of official records in order to establish himself as an American citizen. Unlike the missing documentation of John Henry, the papers burned in the aftermath of the San Francisco earthquake do not prove beneficial because they enable the endless modification of a folktale. Instead, the destruction of documentation allows all Chinese immigrants to tell one tale: that of belonging, of citizenship. Kingston’s narrator describes the way in which Chinese immigrants utilize the lack of official records to achieve formal rights, whereas John Henry’s followers exploit similar conditions to recuperate a sense of personal worth.

Notably, Eng claims that “Kingston’s literary project interrogates the relationship between heterosexuality as it underwrites a project of white racial oppression… she avoids prescribing new (hetero)sexual content to replace the old. …[r]eleased from patriarchal norms, the unmanned China Man offers the possibility not only of resignifying Asian American masculinity but of envisioning a new set of gender roles outside traditional boundaries” (98, 101). I certainly agree with Eng’s appraisal of China Men as a rethinking of gender roles, but at the same time, as I demonstrated in previous paragraphs, Kingston does not reject heterosexuality as the basis of masculinity. Indeed, the source of Ah Goong’s heroism involves the claim to citizenship – something that, as Goellnicht, Cheung, and Chan argue, fundamentally involves an ability to demonstrate heterosexuality through fathering. What Kingston demonstrates, through Ah Goong, is that fatherhood might be divorced from “martial violence and patriarchal oppression” (98), the objectionable underpinnings of heterosexuality, as Eng relates. That is, Ah Goong questions patriarchal privilege in China when he attempts to
exchange a son for daughter and in his pursuit of American citizenship he makes a feminine trait, self-sacrifice, the basis of fatherhood.17

Indeed, this turn toward a domestic masculinity acts as the very sort of heroism infamously attacked by Frank Chin, who notably describes dominant stereotypes of Asian American men as “completely devoid of manhood” because “our nobility is that of an efficient housewife” (“Racist Love” 68). His well-known attack on Warrior Woman (and, by extension, Kingston’s other autobiographical novel, China Men) positions the emasculated characters as “fake”: “With Kingston’s autobiographical Woman Warrior, we have given up even the pretense of reporting from the real world. Chinese culture is so cruel and she is so helpless against its overwhelming cruelty that she lives entirely in her imagination. It is an imagination informed only by the stereotype communicated to her through Christian Chinese autobiography” (26). Chin places Kingston, and her depiction of Chinese immigrant men’s emasculation, within the realm of the imaginary, or “fake.” In so doing, Chin rehabilitates the conventional associations between masculinity and the real, femininity and the imagination. According to Chin, when written from a place of “authenticity,” male Chinese American protagonists are no longer emasculated: “Sui Sin Far (Edith Eaton), Diana Chang, and Dr. Han Suyin write knowledgably and authentically of Chinese fairy tales, heroic tradition, and history. Their greatest departure from all the Chinese American autobiographies and autobiographical fictions is in their descriptions of Chinese men. Read them, and this fact jumps out of their books: the only Chinese men who are not emasculated and sexually repellent in Chinese American writing are found in the books and essays of Sui Sin Far, Diana Change, and Dr. Han Suyin” (12). These authors, according to Chin, chronicle the “Chinese American real” (12). The “real” is based in accurate knowledge of Chinese “fairy tales, heroic tradition, and history.” Importantly, the
“true” Chinese folktale promulgates virtues conventionally associated with masculinity:

“[Chinese folktale] expresses the civilization founded in history, the ethic of life that is war, and the belief that all men and women are born soldiers. We are born to fight to maintain our personal integrity. All art is martial art. Writing is fighting. In Western civilization, which is founded on religion, the individual trains himself to better express faith, belief, and submission to a higher moral authority, to overcome reality with dreams, and defy the effects of knowledge with belief” (35). Here, Chin argues that Chinese and Chinese Americans embrace “the ethic of life that is war,” a masculine basis for a culture. Additionally, Chin salvages the masculinity of post-Fordist Chinese American intellectuals, such as himself, by claiming that Chinese tradition positions “writing as fighting.” On the other hand, Chin feminizes “Western civilization,” by describing it as “submission” and based in “dreams.” According to Chin, autobiography (feminine, because Western, genre) emasculates because written from the fantasy of stereotype. Fiction (masculine because “writing is fighting”), meanwhile, instills and reveals manhood because it is written from the real.

Although the reinscription of the domestic sphere as a masculine realm marks a seemingly progressive development in the definition of gender roles, at the same time it does not entirely solve the problems identified by Whitehead and Kingston. In retreating, entirely, from the marketplace, Sutter fails to imagine ways in which the late 20th century labor might offer an alternative to conventional masculinity, premised on independence, an opposition to corporate interests, and craftsmanship. Kingston, similarly, does not envision a means of defining manhood as a product of labor, in conventionally feminized fields, nor as reflective of feminized laborers performing work traditionally associated with masculinity. Both, moreover, reinscribe heterosexuality as central to any definition of manhood. In Aberrations in Black, Roderick
Ferguson describes the drive toward heteronormativity as the perpetual displacement of a condemnatory name-calling: “Black middle-class persons had to demonstrate their compliance with heteropatriarchal cultural standards as a way of proving their distance from ‘obviously’ pathological subjects and social relations and as a way of claiming access to state and civil society” (75). At the outset, Kingston can be viewed as participating in this process described by Ferguson; that is, Kingston attempts to rehabilitate the domestic realm as a means of recuperating the manhood long denied to Chinese laborers by U.S. immigration laws. Yet Kingston’s characters do not demonstrate compliance “with heteropatriarchal cultural standards”; *China Men* endorses a traditionally patriarchal role, fatherhood, but at the same time, defines this role in terms of a conventional feminine virtue: self-sacrifice. Similarly, Whitehead, in looking to the private sphere as a solution to the late 20th century masculinity crisis, eschews conventional domestic “heteropatriarchal cultural standards,” as evidenced by Sutter’s refusal to act as a breadwinner. At the same time, however, the “cultural standards” upheld by Sutter reflect the masculine ideals traditionally achieved in the marketplace. Perhaps, in her exploration of the reasons behind the absence of a Chinese American railroad myth and the limited power of the Gold Mountain tale, Kingston realizes what Alan Dundes apprehends in “The Crowing Hen and the Easter Bunny: Male Chauvinism in American Folklore” (1980):

> The male bias in American culture is not just reflected passively in American folklore, it is also actively transmitted to each new generation of Americans, often unconsciously or unselfconsciously, through folkloristic means… The existence of male chauvinistic folklore is probably far more serious than the custom of patronymic naming or the male insistence upon virginity or marital fidelity so as to better establish biological paternity. It is more serious because it is not so obvious. Generations of American children have
been exposed to the gamut of folklore... As folklorists, we know that folklore is a primary vehicle for the communication and continuation of attitudes and values. (160, 174)

*China Men* depicts the ways in which the "communication and continuation of" patriarchal "attitudes and values" within folklore prohibits certain men, particularly Chinese immigrants, from achieving a sense of masculinity. In consequence, Kingston creates an entirely new legend in order to capture the unique experiences and historical trajectory of Chinese laborers; the valorization of this alternative form of heroism avoids reinforcing patriarchy because it is crafted without reference to conventional folktales.
See Wigfield, *Post-Fordism, Gender, and Work* (2001), for a detailed overview of the debates surrounding the causes and hallmarks of the late-20th century economic transformation. While many economists disagree on the source of the late 20th century transformations in capitalism, most “indicate that in recent years there has been a search for a new form of economic development based on production and labor flexibility” (Wigfield 3).

Haraway’s diagnosis of the late 20th century economy, however, elides the class differences among service-economy workers. To be sure, Ivy League-educated MBAs are certainly part of the service economy, but they are not “exploited as a reserve labour force” in the same manner as a high school dropout, working at a fast food restaurant. More recently, Linda McDowell argues that the service sector disproportionately feminizes working class men: “Waged employment, identified as a core element in the social construction of a masculine identity (Connell 1995), has altered in its nature and form and, in particular, in its associations with masculinity. Service-sector work, especially at the bottom end, demands care, deference and docility as key attributes of a desirable workplace identity—characteristics that are more commonly identified as feminine than masculine traits and it seems that women rather than men are now preferred employees. Indeed, for many men, and especially young men at the beginning of the twenty-first century, there seems to be growing evidence of a reversal of long-standing relationships between gender and achievement” (McDowell 3). Prior to the era of “flexible accumulation,” working class jobs tended to be associated with masculinity (the achievement of other attributes of manhood—most notably, becoming a breadwinner and the accumulation of wealth—of course, did not usually follow). In the era of flexible accumulation, however, “service-sector work” replaces manufacturing as the main source of blue-collar employment; this new form of labor requires “characteristics that are more commonly identified as feminine.” Not only do late 20th century jobs require skills associated with femininity, but the cumulative effects of these jobs emasculate men: “Disadvantaged in the service sector, rejected as marriage partners as rates of divorce rise and women remain single longer, even biologically redundant as new technologies alter the social relations of reproduction, it is small wonder that growing numbers of men feel out of place in the new millennium” (McDowell 4).

The examples of on-screen nerds abound. For instance, look to Screech on “Saved by the Bell” or Steve Urkel on “Family Matters.” On the big screen, “The Forty Year Old Virgin” and “Napoleon Dynamite” provide ample evidence of the dork’s perceived emasculation.

See Ron Eglash, “Race, Sex, and Nerds: From Black Geeks to Asian American Hipsters” (2002) and Daniel Y. Kim *Writing Manhood in Black and Yellow* (2005). Also see discussions of African American men’s disinclination to excel in academics (Kunjufu, Harper, and Majors), and analyses of contemporary Asian American men’s emasculation resulting from a perceived association with advanced schooling. In terms of Jewish men’s perceived lack of masculinity, see Shostak and Boyarin.

James Cantano chronicles the effects of the failing steel industry on the masculinity of middle and upper class men (187-188).

Tom Wolfe’s description of Silicon Valley’s inception, in “Two Young Men Who Went West” (2000), also reimagines labor conventionally associated with femininity as a masculine endeavor. Wolfe’s hero, Bob Noyce, the founder of Intel, embodies movie-star heroism: “The stare, the voice, the smile—it was all a bit like the movie persona of… Gary Cooper” (24). Gary Cooper, who often acted in Westerns, embodied an American masculine icon: the cowboy. Wolfe positions Noyce as ground-breaking, and masculine, in terms of management style. Noyce does not embrace corporate hierarchy (the very force that corrupted Iacocca): “Corporations in the East adopted a feudal approach to organization. There were kings and lords, and there were vassals, soldiers, yeomen, and serfs, with layers of protocol and prerequisites, such as the car and driver, to symbolize superiority and establish the boundary lines… Noyce realized how much he detested the Eastern corporate system of class and status with its endless gradations, topped off by CEOs and vice-presidents who conducted their daily lives as if they were corporate court and aristocracy. He rejected the idea of a social hierarchy at Fairchild” (39). Here, according to Wolfe, Noyce embodies the American trailblazer, committed to equality and a rejection of the outdated, feminizing social hierarchy of Europe. At the same time, however, Noyce’s management style aligns with the feminine: concentrating on collaboration and listening to the ideas of others. Wolfe imagines Noyce as fostering microchip engineers modeled on the cowboy: “He wasn’t a boss. He was Gary Cooper! He was here to help you be self-reliant and do as much you could on your own. This wasn’t a corporation… it was a congregation” (52-3). Indeed, Wolfe repeatedly describes the management model upon which Noyce establishes Silicon Valley as the “frontier” (40, 41).
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indicates the “truth.” He hopes that the “insinuation” of “classic athleticism” will bring about the hoped-for
demonstration of masculinity.

Here, as with his assessment of the corporate atmosphere of the alternative weekly, Sutter believes that appearance
does not simply define themselves in terms of Chinese values and not all intend to
return to China. For this essay, I focus on the centrality of China in order to flesh out a means by which Kingston’s
immigrants delimit masculinity. In a longer version of this article, I also focus on how Kingston’s semi-
autobiographical father, Ed, defines masculinity in terms of American norms.

17 Kingston’s embrace of a domestic masculinity incites an infamous attack by Frank Chin, who notably describes
her novel as upholding the dominant stereotype of Asian American men as “completely devoid of manhood” because “our nobility is that of an efficient housewife” (“Racist Love” 68). His well-known attack on Warrior Woman (and, by extension, Kingston’s other autobiographical novel, China Men) positions the emasculated

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10 Whitehead’s novel has received scant critical attention. For the most part, reviewers and scholars focus on John
Henry Days as a commentary on the postmodern era (see Inscoe) or examine the implications of Whitehead’s choice
to position a black man as the service economy everyman (see Bell) or a combination of the two (see Updike,
Ramsey). None invoke masculinity as a topic of discussion. I will discuss, in some depth, Whitehead’s depiction of
postmodern culture – and will engage scholars as the argument develops. While I assume Sutter’s position as a late
20th century white collar everyman, his status as such does not represent an avenue of investigation in this article.

9 At the same time, however, Iacocca revives the association between intellectual labor and weakness when he
describes the impact of presidential perks on his business acumen: “I was getting soft, seduced by the good life.
And I found it almost impossible to walk away from an annual income of $970,000… I couldn’t face reality. Of the
seven deadly sins, I’m absolutely convinced that greed is the worst. Deep down in my character there must have been
a weakness. People say I’m decisive and hard-as-nails when the chips are down. But where were those
qualities when I needed them?” (121). As a result of his position as president, removed from the “action” of sales
and marketing, Iacocca is “seduced” into “soft[ness],” a trait associated with femininity, and thereby loses his
masculine qualities (the ability to be “decisive” and “hard-as-nails”). While Iacocca redefines marketing as
manly, he cannot rescue the masculinity of the “soft” executive. It seems that, for Iacocca, there are limitations to
the imagination’s ability to infuse masculinity into service work.

8 Ronald Reagan also stands out as a particularly salient example of this. After a prolonged period of peace and
prosperity following World War II, in the 1960s and 1970s the United States faced social upheaval, as well as
economic and military setbacks. All of these contributed to the emasculation of those conventionally associated
with power: white men. White men are implicitly positioned as the model U.S. citizen and consequently, the U.S.
becomes metaphorically emasculated. Reagan sought to reassert American masculinity through conservative social
programs, premised on the masculine traits of self-reliance. Susan Jeffords explains how Reagan’s image served to
buttress his social policies: “Reagan was able… to portray himself as both a ‘real man’ and a ‘real president’… For
this reason he was able to foster what many have come to recognize as a revolution in U.S. social organization and
to implement clear-cut policies—both foreign and domestic—that would define the nation’s identity and agenda for
the next eight years… it was a revolution whose success pivoted on the ability of Ronald Reagan and his
administration to portray themselves successfully as distinctly masculine, not merely as men but as decisive, tough,
aggressive, strong, and domineering men” (11, my emphasis).

7 See Hamlin Garland. While this reference may seem out of date, Garland exemplifies the attitude of someone
immersed in the previous form of capitalism: the industrial age. As such, Garland demonstrates how real estate was
previously apprehended and why Trump feels the need to transform its gendered associations.

15 Certainly, however, Kingston’s novel complicates this reading of Chinese immigrants. As many scholars have
noted, the characters in China Men do not simply define themselves in terms of Chinese values and not all intend to
return to China. For this essay, I focus on the centrality of China in order to flesh out a means by which Kingston’s
immigrants delimit masculinity. In a longer version of this article, I also focus on how Kingston’s semi-
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14 See also Duncan (52).

13 See Frank Chin The Big Aiiieeeee!

12 See Goellnicht, Eng, and Cheung

11 See also Lowe (11-12).

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characters as “fake” because they exemplify Western stereotype and do not embody the virile values contained within conventional Chinese folktales (“Come All” 26). Unlike Kingston, Chin believes that Chinese-immigrants and -Americans can recuperate manhood within the realm of traditional folktales. When written from a place of “authenticity,” which requires accurate knowledge of Chinese “fairy tales, heroic tradition, and history,” Chin argues that Chinese characters attain masculinity: “[the Chinese folktale] expresses the civilization founded in history, the ethic of life that is war, and the belief that all men and women are born soldiers. We are born to fight to maintain our personal integrity. All art is martial art. Writing is fighting” (“Come All” 35). Here, Chin salvages the masculinity of post-Fordist Chinese American intellectuals, such as himself, by claiming that Chinese tradition positions “writing as fighting.” In the process, \( wu \) and \( wen \) converge; Chin asserts that \( wen \), scholarship, simultaneously indicates \( wu \), the martial. Although they arrive at different assessments of traditional Chinese legends, Chin and Kingston both view conventional folktales as rooted in patriarchal values. Kingston, however, demonstrates how certain men, in particular Chinese immigrants, cannot access the masculinity of traditional legends; in consequence, Kinston rewrites heroism without recourse to the values and characteristics of conventional folktales. At the same time, Chin’s understanding of the folktale’s power diverges significantly from that of Whitehead. Rather than a mutable, adaptable narrative, Chin asserts that there is only one authentic version of each legend. While Chin’s project endorses a retrograde masculinity, he manages to achieve what Whitehead and Kingston fail to do: address the feminization of labor in the late 20\(^{th}\) century by infusing masculinity into service work.
Works Cited


