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The White Male Protagonist in Post-9/11 Literature: Depression and Contemporary Solutions

During an interview at the Book Expo America this past May, Jonathan Franzen remarked, "Unfortunately, white male power is alive and well right now, and it takes a particularly anxious and damaged white male to embrace how problematic that makes it to be a white male." We can hardly approach this statement without considering it in the context of Franzen's area of expertise, realistic fiction. It's true that in the past fifteen to twenty years, there's been a rise in literature by white men that examines the depression and anxiety of white men in modern society. And it's certainly not a new topic for Franzen, whose two most recent works, *The Corrections* and *Freedom* (excluding his new novel *Purity*, to be published September 1st), follow the symptoms and depression of respective middle-aged white men Gary Lambert and Walter Berglund in their struggles to come to terms with their lives. While Gary is torn between loyalty to his mother and his wife whilst simultaneously feeling distanced from his family as a whole, Walter's dreams of solving world overpopulation and saving the environment seem attacked on all sides, most notably by his son and by his wife, from whom he eventually separates. Yet these narratives beg larger questions: are Gary and Walter the men to whom Franzen's quote applies? What kind of anxious and damaged white male is Franzen referring to, and how does he contend with the so-called "problem" of white manhood? Does this contention allow these characters to emerge from their depression, and what does that journey say about American society?

In addition to Franzen's *The Corrections* and *Freedom*, recent novels such as Don Delillo's *Falling Man*, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, Ben Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha*

Station, Chad Harbach's *The Art of Fielding*, and Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds* seek to answer these questions by equating waning white American masculinity with loss of agency and the onslaught of depression. The male protagonists at the center of these narratives are undoubtedly "anxious and damaged", even those with an otherwise privileged life, such as Adam of *Leaving the Atocha Station*, an Ivy-educated student on a Fulbright scholarship in Madrid, who aggressively lies to friends, abuses illicit and prescription drugs, and laments to the reader of the helplessness of his situation. In this essay, I've broken down the depression that links the protagonists of these narratives into a set of comparable symptoms, which are notable both in how they realistically mirror typical and atypical symptoms of depression as defined by the National Alliance on Mental Illness, such as substance abuse, aggression, and hopelessness, and in how they dramatize protagonists' perceived loss of agency through emasculation.

Indeed, Franzen's phrase "anxious and damaged" may best apply not to depressive symptoms experienced by protagonists, but to depression's role as both a cause and effect of its victim's loss of masculinity. Behind the surface contexts of male anger and depression lies a long-lived cultural fear of emasculation. As Michael Kimmel examines in his cultural histories, *Manhood in America* and *Angry White Men*, the individual white man's fear of losing agency to women, minorities, and more masculinized men dates back to the Colonial Revolution, when masculinity was established not as an inherent quality of maleness, associated with European notions of class and inheritance, but rather as a male characteristic that must be proven to validate worth. As I will address more fully in a section below, over the course of the subsequent hundred and fifty years, maintaining masculinity became a game of adaptivity: for

instance, while in the 1800s men were told that they should distance themselves from their homes, leave child-rearing to mothers, and be intellectual and sensitive, the Industrial Revolution brought with it instructions for men to make their presence known in their homes, teach their sons to be manly, and strive to be physically robust and unemotional themselves. The mobility of masculinity led men of the WW1 and WW2 eras to turn to ideals for example, flocking to the image of the physically strong, adventurous Superman, or the upholding father figure, who will soon be discussed in further detail. However, male anxiety was soon to be exacerbated, as the 1960s, in turn, introduced minority and women's movements to the political and social scenes, progressively displacing white men from center stage. The end of the post-WWII economic boom in the mid-seventies further aggravated this situation, ushering in the reactive Reaganomics of the eighties, which through the theory of trickle-down economics, gave tax cuts to the wealthy and middle class that arguably attempted to recuperate white men to economic dominance. However, the economic decline of the nineties resulted in substantial changes in white male employment, the impact of which has carried through to today, especially on the blue-collar level. As Kimmel writes, white men came to believe their masculinity and their patriarchal role as family provider to be endangered by the rise of women and minorities in political sway and in the workplace.

In contemporary literature, feelings of emasculation translate themselves into the experience of the loss of autonomy. Because many men, especially those who are hypermasculine, tie their senses of identity to their grip on masculinity, loss of masculinity thus becomes the undoing of agency, rendering men psychologically

incapable. This experience easily manifests itself in men's feelings of "damage" and depression. In many of the novels we will examine, white men's experience of depression allows them, as Sally Robinson writes, to both plea victimhood as individuals and demand a "remasculation" of the American system in the name of mental health. Through this claim to injury, men thus defensively combat their fears of obsolescence by marking themselves as weak in order to become culturally visible. However, in the same hand, their depression indicates a nostalgic yearning for a bygone era, in which white male supremacy and the patriarchy remained largely unchallenged by women or minorities. For the United States, a nation founded by white men, white male supremacy is in many ways tied to a national sense of American greatness, as in, for instance, the glorified image of rugged individualism as a character behind the Manifest Destiny ideal. When one fails, the popular fear goes, the other falls. Thus, rebounding questions of American decline may signal nothing more than patriarchal fears of the social changes of the last fifty years.

Critical debate on the issue of white male fears of obsolescence and the plea of victimhood in the post-9/11 era is rich and multifaceted. Although A. O. Scott argues that "the death of adulthood" has prompted white men's openness to detachment from their senses of agency, I contend that the white male relationship to autonomy is tempered by a fear of being lesser: white men only seek the removal of agency by their own hands. When threatened by women, minorities, or other white men, white masculinity is liable, as Hamilton Carroll explains, to cite itself "as the most needy and the most worthy recipient of what it denies it already has", and thus ensure its privilege through "liability" (10). While Scott presents two ideals of the white American man in

the forms of the patriarchal father figure and the adulthood-rejecting societal escape artist, I agree with Kathy Knapp that the protagonists within the novels we will examine “counteract a triumphant narrative of American exceptionalism” visible in both of Scott’s models (xI). Instead, I argue, white male protagonists most often fit Roy Scranton’s trope of “the trauma hero”, which, while it follows a protagonist’s experience of trauma and subsequent recovery, manages to avoid addressing the wider consequences and minority impact of the trauma by focusing solely on the experiences of the individual. The trope thus becomes a method for white masculinity to assert victimhood and advocate for a revival of cultural dominance while avoiding the inequalities created by white male privilege.

However, not all of the novels examined here adhere to this trope. Both *The Road* and *The Art of Fielding* avoid establishing narratives that degenerate into myopic reassertions of white male power. At face value, these stories could not be more different. One follows a father and his son on their journey through an emotionally and environmentally ravaged dystopian landscape, while the other revolves around two materially comfortable baseball players attending a small idyllic college. However, both narratives diverge from the well-cemented allegory of revived masculine dominance by reinventing white masculinity rather than recuperating it. While they may arrive at different solutions to the conundrum of white masculinity, both novels hold to the same ideal: the progressive future is one in which white masculinity finds autonomy not by rejecting society and its institutions, by attempting to reestablish the patriarchy, or by claiming grievous injury, but by opening itself to participate in privilege-equalizing societal reformation.

Understanding Depression

A recent article published in *Psychology Today* asked, “Is our society manufacturing depressed people?” (Schwartz). According to the Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance, major depressive disorder affects 14.8 million adults in America per year, or 6.7% of adult population. Although women experience depression at twice the rate of men “regardless of racial or ethnic background or economic status,” the Suicide Awareness Voices of Education organization records that 79% of all suicides in the US are male - four times the rate of suicide in females. Why does this gender gap exist? Experts hypothesize that men’s conformity to male gender role norms makes them more prone to expressing atypical symptoms of depression that allow their mental illness to go undiagnosed. For instance, masculinity norms tell men that it is inappropriate to express suffering through tears, or through the historically feminine term “hysterics.” Men are instead prone to vent their depression and anxiety through substance abuse, anger, and aggression, though they typically do conform to some standard symptoms of depression, such as feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. However, the manifestation of depression and its symptoms can feel emasculating to men, both because depression is a historically feminine ailment, and because it stems from and further implies a feminizing loss of agency. As a response to the fear of not fulfilling traditional gender role norms, and as a reactive precaution against depression, some men begin to conform especially highly to masculine gender role norms by self-identifying as hypermasculine characters. However, when these men are unable to prevent themselves from experiencing depression, or begin to feel their grip on masculinity wane, they become even more prone to depression.

Thus, not only do these various symptoms act as motifs throughout the novels examined in this essay, but they also function as both causes and effects of men's fears of emasculation and the loss of agency. Since depression enables white men to claim injury, which allows the plea both of victimhood and for remasculation, each symptom in these novels functions as a microcosm of this plea. We will examine three of the most common typical and atypical symptoms now, beginning with substance abuse.

As a motif, substance abuse becomes a way for depressed characters to surrender their autonomy, thus excusing themselves from their responsibilities to society and the institution, while simultaneously distancing themselves from their depression and life problems. Several protagonists in the novels I mentioned above, including Gary of *The Corrections*, Schwartz of *The Art of Fielding*, and Adam of *Leaving the Atocha Station*, all express some degree of alcoholism or drug abuse that emasculates them while creating a claim of victimhood that paradoxically opens the door to remasculation. For instance, in the case of Gary, an upper middle class financial manager who feels marginalized in his own home, irrationality accompanies alcoholism. In one memorable scene, his decision to be the man of the house and cut the bushes while drunk leads to a self-inflicted gash on his hand that should have demanded stitches. Instead, he hides this injury from his wife and children as mental proof of both his emasculation and his status as victim of the house. As Sally Robinson writes in *Marked Men*, physical injury becomes a representation of psychological suffering.

Conversely, alcoholism and recreational drug addiction afford *Leaving the Atocha Station*'s protagonist Adam an escape from reality, lightening his outlook on the world and his own existence, and distancing him from his social problems and creative

obligations. Yet his addiction and otherwise daily prescription to anxiety medication allow him to wallow in his depression and victimhood, even as he advances through his fellowship as an American student in Madrid. As Adam observes, “the ritual of taking [the pills] was a Eucharistic rite of self-abnegation in which I acknowledged to myself that I was incapable of facing the world without designer medication and thereby absolved myself of some portion of my agency” (Lerner 100). Thus does Adam validate his self-medication through a plea of victimhood, while simultaneously surrendering his sense of autonomy in the process.

In combination with other symptoms of depression, the effectiveness of this claim to injury builds. For instance, Harbach’s character Schwartz is a senior at the fictional Westish College, who begins to suffer an addiction to prescribed pain medication when he realizes that he has sacrificed his future as a lawyer in the name of his best friend’s baseball career, while destroying his knees in the process. This alone would create an aura of injury that could foster a claim of emasculation. However, Schwartz’s supposed victimhood is made more dramatic by his identification as a hypermasculine character. The weakening of Schwartz’s physical body in tandem with a loss of mental self-control therefore creates a strong statement of lost autonomy, and thus, depression-stimulating emasculation.

We must keep in mind that feelings of emasculation can be seen as both a symptom of male depression, and a cause. In particular, characters who embrace hypermasculine tendencies, which include aggressive attitudes, bulky, well-muscled bodies, and decisive leadership, seem particularly likely to experience a loss of agency when their grip on masculinity wanes. As Kyle Hucke concludes in a 2013 study,

Hypermasculinity Attitude Profiles and Depressive Symptoms in Emerging Adult Males, “emerging adulthood may be a time when males are at an increased risk of developing depressive symptoms due to fear of failing to fulfill traditional masculine roles,” which some males may attempt to process “by adopting maladaptive and exaggerated hypermasculine attitudes... as a reactive coping strategy” (2). When this proves unsuccessful, depression deepens. Sterling, the sergeant who both bullies and protects his platoon in *The Yellow Birds*, is a good example of this. Through his violent aggression, fearless bravery, and physical strength, Sterling fits the hypermasculine role almost perfectly. Yet though the story’s protagonist, the enlisted soldier Bartle, may view him as a leader, Sterling is nothing more than another cog on the wheel of the stratified military society, following the orders of those above him. Indeed, the novel implies he originally developed hypermasculinity in exact conformity to the role the army set out for him as a soldier. As Bartle reflects toward the end of the novel, “the truth is [Sterling] cared nothing for himself. I’m not ever sure he would have realized he was permitted to have his own desires and preferences... Everything he’d done had been in response to a preexisting expectation” (187,188). When Sterling is forced to act outside of the army’s wishes for the benefit of the men in his platoon, his sense of identity comes under crisis. He no longer knows how to exist outside of the army’s expectations, and thus is utterly emasculated. After he is set on leave, without any help in transitioning back to civilian life, he has no method for developing an alternative model of masculinity or mode of being that would give meaning to his existence. And so, fitting to the army to the end, he kills himself in an act of violence.

Of course, not all hypermasculine men meet such a violent ending. Like Sterling,

The Art of Fielding's Schwartz falls victim to depression because he is being pushed out of a world -- the athletic arena of a small college -- in which his hypermasculinity reaped him enormous rewards in social status and athleticism, and into a world where muscles and aggression won't help self-advancement: the high-paying legal career to which he aspires and which he fails to attain when he is rejected by every law school to which he applies. However, as Kyle Hucke writes, "there is also evidence that hypermasculine attitudes may be more multidimensional and that different profiles of hypermasculine attitudes may be associated with different behavioral and psychological outcomes" (2). Unlike Sterling, Schwartz is not consumed by his depression at the end of *The Art of Fielding*. Rather, he comes to terms with his weakened physical body, while taking a job as coach of the Westish baseball team, where he can apply his talent as trainer to lead the team and college he has always loved. Schwartz is thus unique from the vast majority of depressed white male characters studied in this essay, because he reconstructs his sense of masculinity to give himself a measure of autonomy, while learning to act within society rather than attempting escape from its constraints.

However, most characters are not so lucky. With the exception of *The Yellow Birds* and *The Road*, all the novels featured center around middle-class white men living in comfort and safety, with friendship, family and sexual intimacy, who nonetheless feel unconnected to others, and fundamentally purposeless and directionless in their lives. *The Corrections*' Gary, for instance, is a perfect example of this unhappy modern man. Though he has a wife and three sons, and lives in a wealthy neighborhood, having fulfilled the middle-class ethos of upward mobility, he's fundamentally unhappy, and for reasons he can't fully articulate. As the name of one chapter of the novel proclaims, "The

More He Thought About It, The Angrier He Got” (Franzen 137). Like Walter in *Freedom*, Franzen’s post-9/11 response to the attack on the World Trade Center, Gary’s anger is used to legitimize his feelings of victimhood and attempt to create an aura of righteousness.¹ Although, as mentioned earlier, he also pursues a status of victimhood by distancing himself from his wife and children, he faces a paradox of agency much like that created by substance abuse. His wife, recognizing his symptoms, insists he is depressed, yet Gary, in self-defense, distances himself from this diagnosis and thus his wife because “he was afraid that if the idea that he was depressed gained currency... every word he spoke would become a symptom of disease” (Franzen 161). As Catherine Toal writes in *Corrections: Contemporary American Melancholy*, for Gary, the possibility of a diagnosis of depression dismantles “the legitimacy of any claim to authority, whether of critical commentary or fatherly control”, thus fully removing him from his sense of agency (6).

Similarly, throughout *Leaving the Atocha Station*, Adam both fears his purposelessness and embraces how it allows him to surrender agency. Although he is a talented poet on scholarship in Madrid, he has almost no self-confidence. In one scene, he confesses to a friend that he had lied about his mother’s death. Yet when she receives this without question, he is intensely angered by what her acceptance implies, reflecting, “As one part of me insisted to some other part of me that this was wonderful, a reprieve, that I could let go of my guilt and laugh about it with Teresa, I heard myself proclaim,

¹ For this reason it is unsurprising that *Newsweek*’s Jennie Yabroff writes that *The Corrections* “anticipates almost eerily the major concerns of the next seven years,” reminding audiences “how many of the preoccupations we’ve labeled as ‘post-9/11,’ or ‘Bush era,’ in fact predate both.”

‘My mother is sick.’” (Lerner 84, 85). For readers, these characters’ self-pitying surrender of their masculinity is distancing. Compared to the characters of *The Yellow Birds* or *The Road*, who act with purpose in traumatic situations even as they feel themselves forcibly emasculated, Gary and Adam seem not even weak and egotistical, but outright childish. Even *Falling Man*’s protagonist Keith, who lives a life of privilege similar to Gary or Adam’s, is at least partially justified in his depression, because he has endured the trauma of escaping the World Trade Center on 9/11. So what basis do Gary and Adam have for succumbing to depression? Is their anger and frustration with the system at all justifiable?

Contexts of the Depressed White Man

The reason behind the white male protagonist’s depression and anger lies in cultural history and recent changes in society expectation. I believe the issue can be best summed through the contemporary problem of “The Death of Adulthood”, as A. O. Scott names it in his essay by this title. Scott suggests that the dominance of the American white man is waning in sexist power, and that, “in doing away with patriarchal authority, we have also, perhaps unwittingly, killed off all the grown-ups” (2). The problem is that adulthood, as conceived by Americans, is represented by the patriarchal father figure. While Scott claims that since the colonists revolted against the “corrupt, unreasonable and abusive father figure”, King George III, American culture and literature has rejected the demands of adulthood, I disagree (3). Historically, the father figure has garnered much respect in America, as through characters such as *The Godfather*’s Don Vito Corleone, *To Kill a Mockingbird*’s Atticus Finch, and *Father Knows Best*’s everyman Jim Anderson. However, the economic and social changes of the past twenty years have

worn upon the accreditations of the patriarchal family head, who seems to have lost the respect of those beneath him, and thus his power. For instance, *The Corrections* is in many ways the story of the family head Alfred's fall, as he succumbs to Parkinson's and dementia. At the end of the novel, his wife Enid walks away from his deathbed relieved to be rid of him. Similarly, although the novel was written pre-9/11, the recent publication of *Go Set a Watchman* forces readers to see Harper Lee's idealized father figure Atticus Finch "now not merely as a hero, a god, but as a flesh-and-blood man with shortcomings and moral failing", as Natasha Trethewey writes in *The Washington Post*. After all, the patriarchal father figure has come to represent the historically cemented institution, in all its repressive attitudes toward non-whites and non-males, and its guileless promotion of white male privilege. As Scott claims, its death call has been sounded.

Yet Scott is not wrong in pointing out that an alternative to the ideal of the patriarchal family head has existed for decades in the form of the white male eager to escape the responsibilities of adulthood and adherence to the institution. Indeed, "the typical male protagonist of our fiction has been a man on the run, harried into the forest and out to sea, down the river or into combat - anywhere to avoid 'civilization', which is to say the confrontation of a man and a woman which leads to the fall to sex, marriage and responsibility" (Fiedler). Nowhere is this better represented than the unique American ideal of the cowboy on the open plain. Think of the classic western *Shane* (1953), the story of a mysterious, handsome cowboy who rides into town, rescues the residents from a ruthless cattle baron representing the abusive father figure, and then rides back out again, refusing any thanks or payment on the way. Perhaps the most

quintessential example of the escape artist ideal comes in the words of Huck Finn, as he explains to the reader, “the Widow Douglas she took me for her son, and allowed she would sivilize me; but it was rough living in the house all the time, considering how dismal regular and decent the widow was in all her ways; and so when I couldn’t stand it no longer I lit out. I got into my old rags and my sugar-hogshead again, and was free and satisfied.” This ideal is one that has not disappeared or been condemned by popular culture – for instance, the recent film *Mad Max: Fury Road* follows the journey of a man who is roped into helping a collection of women escape a harem. When he not only delivers them to safety but restores them to control of the empire formerly ruled by their husband, rather than accepting praise or reward, he takes off again into the unknown.

But does this mean the American man has always been racing to escape agency? Yes, but it’s more complicated than that. American men only like to lose agency when they themselves are the ones choosing to take it away – not women, or minorities, or other, more masculine American white men. Even in the loss of autonomy, men only feel secure when they are in control. Think of Gary, who is impelled from depression to paranoia in his “persistent suspicion that Caroline [his wife] and his two older sons were mocking him” (Franzen 137). Even as he succumbs to alcoholism to remove his sense of agency, he is driven to distraction by the idea that his wife may be undermining him. Rather than being liberating, as is the loss of autonomy by self, the loss of agency by force becomes undue abuse, and another method through which to claim victimhood. True to this point, though Gary knows his alcoholism is making his family lose respect for him, he would rather blame his wife for telling his children that

he's depressed, rather than blame himself for acting strangely, getting drunk, and screaming at his sons for little reason.

Another pertinent example of this effect is *Falling Man's* Keith, a survivor of the attack on the World Trade Center, who later on conducts an affair outside his marriage even though it "contradicted what he'd lately taken to be the truth of his life, that it was meant to be lived seriously and responsibly" (Delillo 137). How could he choose to act in contradiction to his values? In part, his affair is a rejection of the institution, which tells him cheating is wrong even though it gives him sexual pleasure. Yet it's also a conscious choice to surrender agency and prove the trauma-based depression he's experiencing. Were his wife cheating on him, and thus taking away his sense of autonomy, Keith would be devastated and enraged. Yet knowing he's doing the same thing to his wife does little in the long term to impact him.

Yet these revelations regarding masculine relationship to agency raise more varied questions. Why do depressed white men in the 21st century feel they've lost agency? Why are they so eager to gain it back? Is this relationship with agency a post-9/11 development or a tenet of American society? The answer lies in cultural history.

Masculinity, agency, and manhood have been tightly interlaced in the American white man's justification of identity since the time of the colonial revolution. When America divorced itself from the United Kingdom, it also separated from Britain's genteel form of patriarchal masculinity, with the justification that it was effeminate. In its place, American men adopted a new mythic ideal of white masculinity, the "Self-Made Man." However, as Michael Kimmel writes in his cultural history, *Manhood in America*, "if social order, permanence, could no longer be taken for granted and a man

could rise as high as he aspired, then his sense of himself as a man was in constant need of demonstration,” in particular to those who could best smear it, other white men (32). Masculinity thus morphed into a fashion runway of physical show, an outfit “that can be bought and paid for”, and a cheap validation of the self-made American man’s patriarchy, funded in exchange by “emotional emptiness” and “chronic terrors of emasculation” (Boudreau, 37, *Performing American Masculinities*, Kimmel, 29).

The best example of this is perhaps the American military, which to this day clings firmly to the masculine ideals on which it was founded. As Kimmel writes, in the early 20th century, “the celebration of the military spirit [became] a virulent reaction against the perceived feminization of American manhood by the deadening routine of office work or the loss of autonomy and other craft values among the growing proletariat” (83). Men were trussed up in uniforms, drilled into physical shape in training schools, and sent overseas with a flourish of tax-funded propaganda. The aggressively masculine attitude fostered in training schools and on bases has become a key foundation of military culture. Even today, the military is well known both for its backlash against female and homosexual soldiers, and its “process of indoctrination”, as *The Yellow Birds* author Kevin Powers calls it, by which it encourages soldiers to develop exaggerated senses of masculinity that both enrich their dedication to violence and increase their sense of agency (Powers, Interview). Yet as I discussed earlier, hypermasculinity doesn’t necessarily give men agency, especially upon release from the army. Indeed, as in the cases of Bartle and Sterling, soldiers in *The Yellow Birds* who deal with the horrors they’ve seen and committed by, for instance, becoming violently drunk in a brothel, exaggerated masculinity can simply shoo away self-control. As Powers, puts it,

People who can run really fast or lift a lot of weights – that has real capital within the culture of the military. So when you get home and you want to go to a bar and beat people up or whatever, you just think, ‘Well, this is stupid. This doesn’t give me any satisfaction. This doesn’t make me feel like I’m much of a human being. So what do I do?’ (Powers, Interview)

The hypermasculinity that should signify agency thus only makes returned soldiers feel as though they’re losing control.

The turn of the 21st century brought a change in the American white man’s response to the demands of masculinity that is evident in works such as *The Corrections*, *The Art of Fielding*, and *Leaving the Atocha Station*. Rather than being anxious and fearful of losing agency, men have become angry, and angrily depressed. Michael Kimmel, in his book *Angry White Men*, calls it “aggrieved entitlement.” The promises of middle class life and tenets of the American Dream -- upward mobility, economic freedom, boundless opportunity – all “those benefits to which you believed yourself entitled have been snatched away from you by unseen forces larger and more powerful” (18). But how has this happened? How could this happen? David Savran argues that “the end of the post-World War II economic boom and the resultant and steady decline in the income of white working- and lower-middle-class men” formed the most significant of a series of socioeconomic challenges faced by American men in recent decades. For instance, outsourcing in manufacturing resulted in the loss of 2.5 million manufacturing jobs from 2000-2005, while according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 80% of the jobs lost in the 2008 recession were male. As Reihan Salam wrote in a 2009 article entitled *The Death of Macho*, “surly, lonely, and hard-drinking men, who feel as though

they have been rendered historically obsolete, and who long for lost identities of macho, are already common in ravaged post-industrial landscapes [such as] America's Rust Belt". Backlash blaming women and minorities, fed by white supremacist groups, Tea Party politics, and radio leaders such as Rush Limbaugh and Mike Savage, redirect male anger from the source it may reasonably identify on its own. As Ed Kilgore writes in *Washington Monthly*, "GOP elites think anyone who opposes entitlement cuts or trade agreements or at least some form of immigration reform are 'vulgar,' too, so maybe Donald Trump as a right-wing 'populist' with a conservative working class base of support makes more sense than one might initially imagine". In other words, the blue collar American white man has been betrayed, not by government lobbied by women and minorities, but by "the rich, the powerful, the corporate magnates, the corporate lobbyists and their plutocratic sycophants in legislatures and state houses"(Kimmel 13, 14). While between 1983 and 2009, the top five percent of Americans took home 82% of wealth gain, the bottom sixty percent lost 7.5% of their income. As Michael Kimmel writes in *Angry White Men*:

Say, for example, you're an autoworker... Left to your own devices... you may conclude that it is the fault of rapacious corporate moguls, who line their pockets and pay themselves fat bonuses and who squeeze every drop they can from America's working man. You might even list to the Left and make common cause with others in similar situations and try to get the government to regulate the industry, raise wages, protect benefits, and institute national health care. You might even work with your union. (37, 38)

Thus, though educated white male anger may accurately be directed toward the widening American socioeconomic gap between rich and poor, propaganda funded by the wealthy is effective in redirecting male attention to the changes cultivated by the rise of identity politics in the 1960s and the emergence of women in the workplace.

Yet it must also be noted that most of the protagonists in the novels examined are white-collar workers, or are in college in order to become them. Though they may be angry at the system, it is not they who have come under its greatest abuse – indeed, many times they have exploited it, as in the case of Adam, who spends most of his scholarship in Madrid wasting his time, concluding his stay by presenting a hastily crafted poem that wins him much praise from the scholarship foundation. Yet the protagonists nonetheless find ways to blame others, most notably women and minorities, for their anger and depression. For example, when Gary's brother Chip in *The Corrections* loses his job, he blames a young female student for seducing him, and a non-white female professor for stealing his tenure. Why blame others when they are not at fault? As Hamilton Carroll writes in *Affirmative Reaction*, “claiming white injury is a way of protesting the erosions of white men's historical advantage while denying that advantage ever existed” (5).

And there is some craft to this claim. For hundreds of years, white male dominance has retained itself through its invisibility, its opaqueness to analysis. Sally Robinson, author of *Marked Men*, writes that as the unmarked body, the white male has set itself up “as the self-evident standard against which all differences are measured: hidden by history” (1). Yet she also believes times are changing. Since the late 1960s, when identity politics first rose to the political scene, women and minority movements within the US have begun to decenter white men's hold on the public and political

spheres. For instance, whereas white male authors may once simply have been read as authors, they are now read as white, male authors who speak not for all of society, but only those experiences that fit within the portion of society they inhabit. We can sense frustration with this cultural shift, for example, in Jonathan Franzen's assertion in his 1996 *Harper's Magazine* essay "Perchance to Dream" of "the death of the social novel" (3). As he writes, "the institution of writing and reading serious novels is like a grand old Middle American city gutted and drained by superhighways... what remain, mostly, are ethnic and cultural enclaves", which he, as a straight white male, cannot write about, or make profit from (5). Of course, this assertion isn't quite true – although Franzen might not get away with writing about an immigrant Latino family in the Bronx, for instance, his novels about the patriarchal white family are critically acclaimed best-sellers, praised as "work of total genius", "frighteningly, luminously authentic", and, in the words of David Foster Wallace, "a testament to the range and depth of pleasures great fiction affords" (Anderson, *Boston Globe*). Yet in propounding the death of his writing category, Franzen places himself in the category of victim, and by doing so, asserts white maleness as its own, special ethnic category, wronged by those who misunderstand it and properly distanced from the once all-powerful patriarchal institution. And it is not only in nonfiction essays that Franzen and other novelists assert victimhood. As Robinson writes, literature of white male crisis is "characterized by two competing interests: to heal a wounded white masculinity, and thus to remasculinize America, but also to dwell in the space of crisis and thus to reimagine the dominant meanings of white masculinity" – in short, to reestablish white male authority in all its masculine power of previous centuries (11).

Contemporary Contexts

But what does this have to do with the depression experienced by the white protagonists in post-9/11 novels? In the essay “The Trauma Hero,” Roy Scranton criticizes the mythic trauma hero, a literary trope that traces the idealized soldier’s journey from innocence to trauma to recovery. Though novels such as *The Yellow Birds*, “may portray a loss of innocence that makes the dirty war in Iraq palatable as an individual tragedy,” he writes, “they only do so by obscuring the connection between American audiences and the millions of Iraqi lives destroyed or shattered since 2003.” Though this is a heavy accusation to lay upon *The Yellow Birds* and one that warrants further discussion, I believe this myth of the trauma hero is applicable, and beyond war narratives. As a trope, the trauma hero appears in post-9/11 literary accounts of male depression ranging from *Falling Man*, in which the main character Keith narrowly escapes the twin towers during 9/11 and spends the novel recovering, to *The Art of Fielding*, in which protagonist Henry falls into a depression after accidentally knocking out a beloved teammate with a misplayed baseball, and must relearn how to play the game he has loved since childhood. Each of these novels are stories of journeys from innocence to new understanding, and each are prompted by a traumatic event that inflicts crippling depression upon the otherwise healthy, otherwise privileged straight white male protagonist. As Anita Wohlmann writes in her essay “Depression and Aging in Jonathan Franzen’s *The Corrections*”, “depression stands in opposition to western norms of progress, success and growth”, marking the depressed “as socially marginal and deviant” (199). Thus does the myth of the trauma hero become another vehicle through

which white male authority claims individual victimhood, and therefore seeks to recover and reestablish itself in clear dominance within the public sphere.

However, the privileged white male protagonist's depression and anxiety has symbolic meaning and consequence beyond the claim of injury to self or to white males as a group. As Carroll writes, the "enduring image of the disenfranchised white man has become a symbol for the decline of the American way" (2). How much popular fear of American decline stems from recent infiltrations of the United States by terrorists versus from the deterioration of white male power is arguable – but their combined sway on the public cannot be discounted. In exploring 9/11's impact on American white male authors and their characters, we can better understand how the political and economic changes of the last decade have influenced our literary culture.

In her literary study, *American Unexceptionalism: The Everyman and the Suburban Novel After 9/11*, Kathy Knapp argues that rather than directly examining the physical and emotional costs of the first act of war to strike our nation's original soil since the War of 1812, post-9/11 literature more often circles the issue, presenting "an anxious everyday that is often as banal as it is nerve-wracking" (xiii). The works are linked, as Elizabeth Anker writes in "Allegories of Falling and the 9/11 Novel," by a range of motifs that allow the post-9/11 novel to expose "the fractured American self-image through the insecurities of white, upper-middle-class manhood" (468). The most obvious of these motifs is of course the depressed male, but his existence comes into greater meaning through the lens of the "falling man." Though the most significant appearance of this image may be in Don DeLillo's novel by the same name, it appears

almost unconsciously in a number of other novels, including *The Yellow Birds*, in which the suicidal character Murph is discovered dead, having been thrown from a tower.

The motif of the dissonant father-son relationship, which appears in four of the seven novels examined here, also speaks to the impact of 9/11 upon the American cultural consciousness. As Frank Rich wrote in the *New York Times* only nineteen days after 9/11, “on a day when countless children in America lost their fathers, the rest of us started searching for a father, too” (1). This crisis can be seen to stem a major plotline in Jonathan Franzen’s *Freedom*: the relationship between father and son. Joey is a college student when 9/11 occurs, and as a result of the crisis, gets involved with a company selling shoddy weaponry to the troops in Iraq. When Joey becomes uncomfortable aiding in the company’s illegal activities, he is forced to reconcile with his liberal father Walter to get advice. 9/11 thus becomes the basis both for Joey’s crisis with his father, and their reconciliation.

Similarly, the motif of divorce spans the literature of the era, providing a fascinating contrast between pre- and post- 9/11 literature, especially when examined in Franzen’s work. The publications of Franzen’s two bestselling novels, *The Corrections* and *Freedom*, frame the 9/11 moment: *The Corrections* was published just five days before the attack, *Freedom* just a few years after. Both novels feature dysfunctional families dominated by the parents’ twisted marriages. However, a key distinction between the two works stands out: Walter and Patty of *Freedom*’s marriage dissolves into a separation verging on divorce, while *The Corrections*’ couple of an equal generation if slightly younger age and children, Gary and Caroline, do not even discuss the possibility, though their marriage is in many ways equally dysfunctional. This difference frames the

overall impact of the 9/11 crisis upon American literature: while pre-9/11 novels called for the new rise of the American male and for the reestablishment of the American spirit, post-9/11 works, as Knapp writes, “depict unexceptional, imperfect middle-age white everymen” whose stories ultimately “counteract a triumphant narrative of American exceptionalism that is itself past its prime” (xI).

Contemporary Solutions to White Male Power

However, though contemporary white male literature may contradict traditional narratives of American exceptionalism, in many ways it only does so by introducing the white male victim to the stage, to serve as the paradigm of white masculinity’s current crisis, and voice a demand for American remasculation. As Kathy Knapp writes in her article “The Return of the King”, “white male power works to protect its own interests, precisely by staging and restaging its own death” (1). The implication of the escape of protagonists from depression, whether passively observed or cheered on by immersed readers, is the prediction of white masculinity’s continued dominance in America’s future. In a recognizable pattern, white masculinity (and thus, white male experience of agency) is first challenged by external stimuli or the rise of rights-seeking minorities, and then triumphantly justified and restored in entirety by the individual, who rises heroically to the alarm of depressive symptoms. In this way, novels that depend on this trope fail to offer a contemporary narrative solution to the predicament of white male power, as identified by Franzen in the quote at this essay’s beginning. Of all the novels examined in this essay, only two, *The Art of Fielding* and *The Road*, find alternative narratives with which to illustrate the white male’s depression, without returning protagonists to total previous agency and thus recuperating white male power in the process. These two

novels therefore reinvent white masculinity, each offering a solution by which white manhood may function in a future that will undoubtedly include power-wielding women and minorities. How, then, do they do it?

The Road by Cormac McCarthy is the only novel examined that is characterized by extended trauma, rather than a period of or total lack of trauma. The narrative focuses on an unnamed father and son, journeying through an environmentally ravaged, sparsely populated countryside. They suffer depression and anxiety verging on suicidal inclinations, due not to some internal stimulus, but in response to the cannibalistic, near-dead world they inhabit. Unlike protagonists of other novels examined here who feel purposeless in their safe, self-indulgent lives, father and son live solely purposeful lives, focused on attaining food, water, safety and comfort. In the end of the novel, and in contrast to the other examined protagonists who survive with their white male power recuperated, the father of *The Road* dies shivering in the woods, having failed to escape his depression or heal his fractured sense of agency.² McCarthy's novel is thus not a story of white masculinity pleading injury by the hand of ethnic or cultural minorities, as much as it's the tale of the 'good guy' minority fighting for life against the 'bad guy' majority. These 'bad guys,' represented by cannibalistic, slave-keeping, violence-prone men, murdering and thieving on others for personal gain, may be seen to represent the top 5% of Americans who saw such a wealth gain in the 21st century while the income of lower classes declined. The virulent standoff between 'good guys' and 'bad guys' also reflects rising income inequality in the United States, which often seems to pit the poor

² The exception in this instance can be made for Sterling of *Yellow Birds*, who also dies in his novel's conclusion – however, his death is a suicide, and thus arguable a successful escape from depression as well.

against the rich. Thus, though over the course of the narrative the father loses an equal if not greater amount of agency than the protagonists of other post-9/11 novels, he is not claiming to be threatened by women or minority groups, but rather is suffering actual threat and damage by other, stronger men in positions of power. Rather than attempting to recuperate white male power, The Road encourages a reinvention of white masculinity. The death of the father at the end of the novel, which leaves the son alone in the only world he has ever known, solves the predicament of white male power through a generational hop. With the father's death, the son, who grows up aware of the 'bad guys' and the danger they put him in, rather than having to learn about them like his father, is released into the hands of an unfamiliar family who promises to protect him. The last character to speak to the son as the novel concludes is a female, the mother of the new family, imparting words of guidance for the child's life in the new world. Thus, though the father surrenders to his depression to the extremity of death, *The Road* presents a paradigm of progressiveness dissimilar to other post-9/11 novels that myopically reject the societal institution as they restore their protagonists to former positions of agency and power.

The basis of *The Art of Fielding* is fundamentally different from that of *The Road*. Rather than following life in dystopia, the setting of *The Art of Fielding* is arguably utopian: a quiet, private college campus set in the modern day, whose baseball team rises, through the dedication of a small cadre of talented players, from a position of little recognition to the finals of the competition. Although the novel follows five characters through a baseball season at Westish, two in particular are of interest to us: Henry, the star shortstop whom, as mentioned earlier, accidentally knocks out another player with a

misthrown baseball and subsequently loses his throwing ability to the yips, and his best friend Schwartz, whose depression stems both from frustration with Henry's suffering, and from his failure to get admitted to law school and thus lack of a post-graduate plan. On the surface, their narratives don't seem too different from those that model American remasculation. Though they suffer through the throes of depression, Henry and Schwartz's lives are certainly not awful: they have caring teammates, family and friends, and a support system there for them should they choose to use it. The difference manifests itself in how the characters recover from depression. While the recuperation of protagonists within most of the other novels we've studied reinstates them in former positions of autonomy and power, such as Keith, who returns to his wife and son during his depression and then leaves them again as he recovers, Henry and Schwartz are not so restored at the novel's conclusion. Although there's the suggestion Henry may be drafted by the MLB in the coming year, he's still struggling to throw well, and likewise, Schwartz may have a job at Westish as coach but his thought process suggests it is temporary. However, the fact that Schwartz and Henry have not been restored, *tabula rasa*, to their previous standings in society, is a positive suggestion that they may have learned from their bouts of mental illness, and are prepared to live with more humbled views of themselves and their masculinities. As Harbach remarked in a personal interview, "at the beginning of the book [Schwartz] has one kind of idea of his ambition, but at the end of the book... he's really making the decision based on what actually nourishes him, [which is] the community at Westish... and not the biggest name law schools he can find" (Harbach, interview). By the novel's conclusion, Schwartz and Henry have gained maturity and new self-understanding. The reinvention of masculinity

featured in *The Art of Fielding* thus manifests itself in a step toward a new form of adulthood, where white men understand their talents and their limitations within a societal situation that they may not choose, but make the active choice to participate in.

It is true that the vast majority of post-9/11 literature written by white males and centered on depressed white male protagonists manages to distance itself from pre-9/11 forms of masculinity such as the patriarchal father figure and the societal escape artist. However, having achieved this, it fails to offer a farsighted or progressive version of masculinity beyond the self-identified victim of an emasculating societal structure. The accomplishment of these men, at the conclusions of their novels, seems to be nothing more than the fulfillment of a paradigm of childishness. However, *The Road* and *The Art of Fielding* both offer new solutions to the previous novels' failure to address the abuse of white male power, through two methods of masculine reinvention: generational displacement, in which reformation develops through the upbringing of children taught to see where and how privilege hides, or progressive adulthood, in which men embrace adulthood through new awareness of societal privilege and how it functions to and against their benefit. Through either method, conscientious awareness of how privilege and white male power function within American society forms the basis of white male desire to participate in equalizing cultural reformation.

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