

“FIND WHAT YOU'RE AFRAID OF MOST AND GO LIVE THERE”: THE CYBORG
METAPHOR AND CHUCK PALAHNIUK'S *FIGHT CLUB* AND *INVISIBLE MONSTERS*

by

LAURIE NORRIS

(Under the Direction of Michael Moran)

ABSTRACT

Through Donna Haraway's “Cyborg Manifesto” (re-cycled through Mikhail Bakhtin's heteroglossic tongues and the French Feminists' rhetoric of laughter), I discuss ways that the cyborg metaphor proves apt as a means of re-defining self and resisting being “self-ed,” directing my gaze toward the works of Chuck Palahniuk, specifically *Fight Club* and *Invisible Monsters*. Palahniuk offers those of us dissatisfied with our consumerist, materialist cultures a way out of our objectifying social coding. His ways are fraught with peril and danger, but they are also liberatory. By reading his novels through the critical filter of Haraway's metaphor, we can experience the adaptability and resistant potential of the cyborg.

INDEX WORDS: Chuck Palahniuk, Donna Haraway, Mikhail Bakhtin, *Fight Club*, *Invisible Monsters*, Cyborg Theory, Identity, Perpetual Present, Laughter, Resistance

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LAURIE NORRIS

AA, Oxford College of Emory University, 2000

BA, Georgia State University, 2004

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LAURIE NORRIS

Major Professor: Michael Moran
Committee: Christy Desmet
Michelle Ballif

Electronic Version Approved:
Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
August 2008

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CHAPTER ONE

THE BEGINNING OF THEORY

In our society, technology is so prevalent and pervasive that it influences every aspect of culture. For my project, I examine the way that the metaphors of technology (images of coding and hacking) influence the development of personal identity in and via literary discourse.

Utilizing a lens of Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" (re-cycled through Mikhail Bakhtin's heteroglossic tongues and the French Feminists' rhetoric of laughter), I intend to discuss some of the ways that the cyborg metaphor proves apt as a means of defining self and resisting being "self-ed." The cyborg creates a variable persona which in turns resists the creation of a subject "I" and its dependent "others." I direct my gaze here in particular to the works of Chuck Palahniuk, specifically *Fight Club* and *Invisible Monsters*. In these two novels, I see Palahniuk offering those of us dissatisfied with our consumerist, materialist cultures a way out of their objectifying social coding.

Especially with his earliest novels *Fight Club* and *Survivor*, many readers see Palahniuk's violent and graphic texts as romanticizing and glorifying the obscene. Popular readers and commercial reviewers took these books literally, failing to notice that the stories all but drip with irony. Many critical readers, though, find themselves drawn to Palahniuk's work for the very

irony and cynical social commentary that popular readers overlook. In a direct address to those popular interpretations (and reviewers chastising Palahniuk for his near-pornographic levels of violence), Kevin Alexander, in the *Journal of Men's Studies* almost a full decade after *Fight Club* was first published, redeems the novel's brawling anti-hero, writing that

Tyler Durden does not seduce the narrator¹ [or the reader] into immoral acts or introduce [us] to violence; [we are] already involved in immoral acts and already faced with violence. Tyler Durden repositions [us] within culture so that [we face] the people [we hurt] and they can hit back. Tyler Durden orchestrates a fair fight, re-connecting 'fight' with its etymological origins from the old English *fecht*, which connotes an honorable confrontation. (Alexander 267)

Alexander's piece seats Palahniuk's debut novel squarely within our larger cultural debate about the nature of masculinity in society. Alexander concludes,

the brilliance of Palahniuk's novel is its ability to capture the psychological tension of contemporary white, heterosexual men² in light of the transformative effects of liberatory movements on American culture. It addresses the impossibility of satisfying the contradictory cultural demands placed on men,

1 Henceforth in my text, the narrator will be referred to as "Joe," mimicking Palahniuk's move in his own text.

2 That Alexander ultimately defines the characters of Palahniuk's novel as heterosexual is problematic and somewhat reductionist. While only depicted as having sexual relations with women, Tyler's cyborg-ian identity (the ease with which he adapts to changing setting and situations) certainly marks him as "queer" if not homosexual. As for the narrator, commonly referred to as Joe, his obsession with Tyler, if it does not mark him as closeted, changes potential definitions of heterosexual. Tyler is Joe's primary fetish object in the novel, the site and seat of his passions. As critics often point to, when in the novel Joe brutally attacks an angelically attractive young man, claiming he wanted to destroy something beautiful, the attack is spurred by Tyler's playful attentions directed toward that other young man and not at Joe. Alexander's sexual definitions of these characters seem indicative of most critics general apprehensions about Palahniuk's texts: addressing either the sexual politics or the role of violence, but never both. Critics seem afraid of directly associating either "straight" male bonding practices (as much of the violence is read as being) with homosexual attraction. Equally, gender-concerned critics appear nervous about introducing sexualized violence into non-normative gender identity issues. The lack on both sides, I think, is ultimately damning.

who, in relinquishing power, are expected to renounce the traditional, defining rituals of manhood while continuing to fulfill the functions those rituals were designed to prepare them for: to physically defend without training in single combat, to exhibit bravery and valor without physically imposing themselves on anyone else, to conquer without dominating, to acquiesce without surrendering, to control their environment without being controlling, to attain victory without defeating anyone, and to remain ready to fight without fighting; (Alexander 267)

and while this conclusion is a powerful and positive reading of Palahniuk's text, it is also limiting. While trying to rehabilitate the violence of Palahniuk's text, frequently pointing out that “the ethics of violence are context-specific” (Alexander 267), Alexander reduces *Fight Club* to a story about male bonding.

But at least Alexander addresses Palahniuk's writing. Most critical work being done with and about the Palahniuk *oeuvre* centers around the film adaptation of *Fight Club*, often ignoring the existence of the originary text all together. David Fincher's film version of the novel is a fascinating and (mostly) faithful adaptation, but it is not the novel. In my research for this project, in trying to get a sense of what the larger conversation about these works might be saying, I was greatly disheartened. The only one of Palahniuk's now seven novels (his non-fiction work being a horse of an entirely different color) receiving any critical attention is *Fight Club*. On top of that shock, most critical readers are not actually paying attention to the novel, favoring instead Fincher's adaptation. The few pieces I found addressing any version of *Fight Club* echo Alexander's method: focusing either on the violence in the story or the novel's

homosexual undertones. Needless to say, I believe these critics, while doing some interesting work,³ are overlooking some of the most fascinating things happening within Palahniuk's writing... and happening not just in *Fight Club*, either.

Before I dive head first into my project, I think I need to define the theoretical lenses through which I read Palahniuk, and in turn the ways that I read Donna Haraway's work, Haraway providing the foundation for my own philosophical approach. Just as many readers take Palahniuk without irony, so too many theorists tend to take Haraway's work, particularly her cornerstone piece, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, far too literally. I read her work not as a discussion of the melding of science-fiction into "real" (read: literal rather than literary) life, but rather as a metaphor for the influences of technology and the sciences on cultural beliefs and practices.

3 I recommend Daniel Tripp's article from *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* entitled "Wake Up!": Narratives of Masculine Epiphany in Millennial Cinema", Robert Westerfelhaus and Robert Alan Brookey's piece in *Text and Performance Quarterly* "At the Unlikely Confluence of Conservative Religion and Popular Culture: *Fight Club* as Heteronormative Ritual" and their *Critical Studies in Media Communication* article "Hiding Homoeroticism in Plain View: The *Fight Club* DVD as Digital Closet", Stacy Thompson's *Cinema Journal* article "Punk Cinema", Alex Tuss' article from *The Journal of Men's Studies* "Masculine Identity and Success: A Critical Analysis of Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley* and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*", and Krister Friday's excellent piece in *Postmodern Culture* "A Generation of Men Without History': *Fight Club*, Masculinity, and the Historical Symptom". I've found Friday's work in particular especially helpful in tailoring my own readings of Palahniuk's texts. Though I take issues with much of what Friday concludes, this article comes closest to reading the novel as a full text: Friday is not afraid of mixing sex and violence in pursuit of understanding.

Typically, the word “Cyborg,” hearkens forth mental images that probably have more to do with James Cameron movies than gender identity issues. Those sci-fi robots, super-powerful minglings of man and machine, are the literal cyborgs. Or at least, these readings are as literal as the limitations of current technology allow.⁴ They represent the fantastical possibilities of screen and laboratory. Terminators and Robo-Cops are not the only cyborgs wandering through our imaginations and our world, though. Alongside Hollywood's acetylene golems walk more important, more significant cyborgs: the metaphors. The metaphoric cyborg is theory, an imagined response/product to/of our binary obsessed civilizations.⁵ In societies where identity must fall in one of two camps (no matter what name given those “camps:” gender as man-or-woman, race as black-or-white, creed as faithful-or-not, class as rich-or-poor, whatever), the cyborg resists. The cyborg, a being at once “I” and “Other,” animal and machine, product and response, is far more terrible and awesome than any being technology has envisaged. It is “the awful apocalyptic telos of the 'West's' escalating dominations of abstract individuation, an

4 While the potentials of technology to make Haraway's cyborg a literal reality deserve study, such study would be out of place in this project. Since I use her work as a metaphor rather than a scientific template, I don't think it is my place to address these limitations here. The way I see things, technologically, we are on the verge of having the ability to physically meld man and machine in the ways Haraway discusses. We already extend human life through direct mechanical manipulation through things like prosthetic limbs and pace makers. I don't doubt that within my life time science will develop AI technologies advanced enough to if not mimic then facilitate all human functions. Personally, I expect these technological advances to come to us at large from the Porn world... but that is a discussion for another day.

5 In trying to represent on the page the ways in which the cyborg manipulates culture, I intend my writing to visually reflect that culturally disruptive and yet simultaneously re-creative nature. As I discuss further on in this paper, the cyborg's cultural battlefield is writing and discourse. My hope, whether I'm successful or not, is to bring that battle onto the pages of this text and into this discussion.

ultimate self untied at last from all dependency” (Haraway 150-151). No longer forced to choose one category over another because she can be both sides of a binary simultaneously, the cyborg is untied from the constraints placed upon “her” by the dominant paradigm under which “she” lives. The cyborg is revolution.

According to Donna Haraway, the feminist and scientist who first posited the cyborg as a new potentiality of feminine being, the cyborg figure melds the animal and the machine into one human-oid identity. The metaphorical cyborg “is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Social reality is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world-changing fiction”(Haraway 149).

She,⁶ the cyborg, shapes “her-self” out of coded material, i.e., her social context. Being both “social reality” -- codes developed by society to quantify, qualify and codify identity -- as well as “fiction,” -- an exertion of her-self upon her construction -- the cyborg is more than the sum of her parts. Her “social reality” side acts in response to (and is created by) the dictates of the society she lives in. She understands that, for instance, women are generally assumed to wear their hair longer than men as a signal of femininity. But, because of her “fictive self,” the cyborg can resist that social impulse. In my somewhat inconsequential example, the cyborg recognizes

6 Though pronouns are problematic in reference to any feminist work, they are doubly so when referring to a being whose identity and gender are in flux; nevertheless, Haraway assumes a female being when conceptualizing the cyborg, and a pronoun facilitates discussion. Unless otherwise stated, the Haraway-Cyborg will be a woman.

that her society judges her femininity by her hair length but chooses to wear hers shorter as an expression of personal taste and resistance. In defying the assumptions of her society, the cyborg can then change her society. When others “catch on” to her new fashion for shorter hair, societal assumptions about this aspect of femininity may begin to change. In this way, she is as a god, at once in the world yet not of it, an avatar of herself refashioning society through her refashioning of her-self.

What's more, the cyborg can potentially free herself from the anxieties of social reality via her fictive “nature.” As Haraway writes of the liberated cyborg,

Unlike the hopes of Frankenstein's monster, the cyborg does not expect its father to save it through a restoration of the garden; that is, through the fabrication of a heterosexual mate, through its completion in a finished whole, a city and cosmos. The cyborg does not dream of community on the model of the organic family, this time without the oedipal project. The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust. Perhaps that is why I want to see if cyborgs can subvert the apocalypse of returning to nuclear dust in the manic compulsion to name the Enemy. Cyborgs are not reverent; they do not re-member the cosmos. They are wary of holism, but needy for connection- they seem to have a natural feel for united front politics, but without the vanguard party. The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential. (Haraway 151)

Not bound to social reality by a sense of past and tradition, the cyborg's fictive side allows her to “be” distinct (psychologically, culturally, emotionally, even physically) from that which “births”

her. Antagonisms inherent in socially constructed identities, the tensions created by the very existence of the binaries, the constant pull-and-tug between the two sides of binaries, subside. She need not pit herself against anything to define her-self, since she contains the potential to become anything. Her duality gives her the prerogative to be any and all or even none.

While the cyborg may be free from social constructions of herself, her existence in society is still problematic. Being any and all leaves the cyborg in a state of political limbo. As Haraway puts it, “to be One is to be autonomous, to be powerful, to be God; but to be One is to be an illusion, and so to be involved in a dialectic of apocalypse with the other. Yet to be other is to be multiple, without clear boundary, frayed, insubstantial. One is too few, but two are too many” (Haraway 177). She may make her-self, but the cyborg will still come into conflict with the social reality she has deconstructed. The dominant paradigms of her society, in order to maintain their status (and by their status as writers of the Grand Narratives, of her culture), will resist her changes, often violently. Her “her-self” identity is secure, but her being is not.

Even the cyborg's being-ness within the theoretical community is tenuous. Donna Haraway's work has influenced many other feminist scholars, both positively and negatively. Some like Susan Bordo and Nancy Hartsock question the political motivations of problematizing self-hood as Cyborgs do. Their objections resonate with fears that postmodernism and technology-friendly theories function to surreptitiously relocate power and voice back in the

“male.” These more traditional feminists fear,

Whether the postmodern subject, fragmented and in flux [as the cyborg so inherently is], is not after all merely another incarnation of the masculine subject of the Enlightenment. Gender, [then] has been deemphasized in order to allow the male subject to be renaturalized as “human.” (Halberstam 448)

Judith Halberstam here voices the concerns of the likes of Bordo and Haraway: that in trying to define femininity, Haraway has created another means for gender (and thus identity) to be essentialized. Afraid of having their gains thrown back upon them, Bordo and Haraway et al. dread the cyborg as a metaphor being itself re-coded back into line with the Grand Narrative of Western gender identity “written” throughout Western Civilizations from the Renaissance through the Victorian period and on into the Twentieth Century.

What these critics have failed to recognize is that technology does not automatically equate with subject oppression. The voice gained by minorities will not be silenced simply through participation in new technological paradigms. Rather, technology, though often gendered as female and therefore frightening by many working in early cybernetics and technology theories, is a construction just as gender and identity are constructions. What's more,

Gender, [...] like computer intelligence, is a learned, imitative behavior that can be processed so well that it comes to look natural. Indeed, the work of culture in the former and science in the latter is perhaps to transform the artificial into a

function so smooth that it seems organic. In other words, gender [and identity itself], like intelligence, [have] a technology. (Halberstam 443)

If identity and technology are already inherently linked, then the stratification of subject-hood so feared by the likes of Bordo and Hartsock is already present in the idea of the subject, in the “I” of self. Halberstam elegantly summarizes this point, writing that,

Subject-hood becomes problematic, fragmented, and stratified *because* marginalized Others begin to speak. The concept of the unified bourgeois subject [...] has been shot through with otherness and can find no way to regroup or reunite the splinters of being, now themselves part of a class, race, and gender configuration. (Halberstam 448)

Halberstam also counters critics decrying that the cyborg woman functions as seductress, the malevolent lure away from what is natural to what is artificial and therefore dangerous. She points out that “the mistake lies in thinking that there is some 'natural' or 'organic' essence of woman that is either corrupted or contained by any association with the artificial [...F]emininity is always mechanical and artificial-- as is masculinity” (Halberstam 454). The idea of identity is a product of interacting social realities. All notions of self are in some way constructed and therefore somehow artificial. Halberstam's recognition of the artificiality of all gender, and hence identity as well, opens up Haraway's more femininely-limited description of the cyborg.

The potential for the cyborg to rehabilitate not only the feminine in our time but also the masculine cannot be overlooked. If the feminine is a construct forced upon physical bodies as a

response to cultural coding (the feminine therefore filling some need within society), so too, then, is (and does) the masculine. Unfortunately, while both “genders” are constructions of the cultures recognizing them, the masculine has, since time in *memoriam*, dominated. Feminism rests on the foundation of this dominance. As Haraway writes,

To be feminized means to be made extremely vulnerable; able to be disassembled, reassembled, exploited as a reserve labor force; seen less as workers than as servers; subjected to home arrangements on and off the paid job that make a mockery of a limited work day; leading an existence that always borders on being obscene, out of place, and reducible to sex. (Haraway 166)

Masculinity created the feminine to be the “other” against which it could fashion itself. Or, as Luce Irigaray points out, “the feminine, which was originally just different, is now practically assimilated to the non-masculine. Being a woman is equated with not being a man” (Irigaray 64). In a pattern recognizable throughout Western history, masculinity (as “I”) could only define itself as what it is not (“I” am not the “other.” The “other” is bad, so “I” must be good).

Despite wielding this power for “self” creation (in itself an appropriation of the female and her ability to reproduce life and quite literally create new “selves,” and therefore a sort of backhanded compliment by traditional masculinity toward the feminine subjugated), the masculine is no less a response/product to/of culture than the feminine. The masculine “I,” which begets the feminine “other,” creates itself. If the feminine is made, though, then the other half of its binary must also be a creation. Either both are fictions (fabricated), or both must be essential

(basal); as a binary, whatever is true for one side must necessarily apply to the other (with regards to that nurtured versus natural query). Any theory attempting to explain the role of the feminine within culture must also address the masculine, or risk rendering itself moot. And because “*no objects, spaces, or bodies* are sacred in themselves; *any component* can be interfaced with any other if the proper standard, the proper code, can be constructed for processing signals in a common language” (Haraway 163 *emphasis added*), we must make room for explanations of the masculine in our theories. Though Haraway envisioned only feminine cyborgs, her work answers this theoretical call and can be equally applied to the masculine. She (inadvertently) presents this potentiality in her “Cyborg Manifesto,” writing of the troubles of essentiality and technology,

Our best machines are made of sunshine; they are all light and clean because they are nothing but signals, electromagnetic waves, a section of a spectrum, and these machines are eminently portable, mobile -- a matter of immense human pain in Detroit and Singapore. People are nowhere near so fluid, being both material and opaque. Cyborgs are ether, quintessence. The ubiquity and invisibility of cyborgs is precisely why these sunshine-belt machines are so deadly. They are as hard to see politically as materially. They are about consciousness - or its simulation.
(Haraway 153)

The participatorily-coded nature of the cyborg can address the feminine and the masculine.

Because the cyborg is not essential, not reducible to any single side of the binaries, all avenues of gender are open to the cyborg.

The plastic nature of the cyborg's identity, at once response/product to/of coding, is also an act of performance. Since the cyborg can shed identity, re-boot his or her coding, at will, all aspects of the cyborg-self are performance, chosen and affected if not necessarily artificial. In point of fact, since “the power to impose a shape upon oneself is an aspect of the more general power to control identity” (Greenblatt 1), the cyborg alone has the capability to override cultural coding, the power paradigms which created the gender binary in the first place. The cyborg's performative identity, its ability to re-code as necessary, makes the cyborg THE agent for change in society.

Within the cyborg's revolution is an embracing of transgression. In picking and choosing which code will suit her (or him) for survival, the cyborg needs must reject some aspects of a larger culture. In that rejection, she/he flaunts her/his chosen code in the face of power. And if true that power (and the Powerful) uses definitions of gender and sexuality to enforce cultural standards, those definitions demand transgression. To be free of the definition put upon “self” by the dominant paradigm, the cyborg must transgress. She/he must choose to become the embodiment of the sacrifice of transgression, giving up the so-called comfort afforded by the dominant in order to gain freedom from it's oppressive definitions of self. She/he is the perversion of “sexuality as a power, a potential for the body to act or be in a certain way [,and t]he regulation of sexuality is an encounter with other powers, the power to know, to master

others, to form oneself” (Colebrook 217). Yet perversion and transgression do not preoccupy the cyborg quite the way they do those not acknowledging his or her own constructed nature; cyborgs openly accept transgression. This acceptance figures the cyborg as a potential liberator (liberating “othered” gender and identity from the traditional power paradigms that create them) in that she/he shines a proverbial light upon Power. Through perverting defined identity, defined gender, defined sexuality, the cyborg gains a level of “self-”awareness those still trapped within the dominant lack. Through re-defining her/himself, the cyborg can upset the dominant Power. The cyborg alone holds this outsider's potential, this subverting power. In the cyborg's pliant identity rests the potential to not only respond and react to cultural stimuli but to anticipate and create stimuli of her or his own. Without the cyborg's adaptive abilities, individuals lack the self-awareness, the self-hood, to do anything but respond to their coding. Judith Butler recognizes that this power also lays inherent in gender performance (specifically of queer “drag”⁷), writing that, “[it] serves a subversive function to the extent that it reflects the mundane impersonations by which heterosexually [and paradigmatically privileged] ideal genders are performed and naturalized and undermines their power by virtue of effecting that exposure” (Butler 231). Thus,

7 Such a gender performance central to and deconstructed by Palahniuk's *Invisible Monsters*, quite pointedly through Brandy and Evie, but also more subtly through Shannon and Manus (Manus' performance also incorporating the performance of his sexuality).

whether feminized or as constructionally-aware masculine, the cyborg confronts the power paradigm head-on by forcing it to respond and react to her/his new stimuli.

This confrontation occurs in discourse. As a metaphor, the cyborg cannot take up literal “arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing end them”⁸, she/he must spread the seeds of revolution through code. As culture is built upon its discourse, so too the codes shaping identity are spelled out through language. Peoples and cultures are information systems, and the agents of change (the cyborgs) manipulate those systems. Transgression through language provides the cyborg the means for hacking cultural coding. If Foucault is correct that

If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression. A person who holds forth in such language places himself to a certain extent outside the reach of power; he upsets established law; he somehow anticipates the coming freedom, (Foucault 6)

the cyborgs feed on the chaos created through transgression. Order breeds hegemony, and chaos, liberty. Every act of disobedience, every hack, breaks the cyborg that much further away from the chains of the binary, “the couplings which make Man and Woman so problematic, subverting the structure of desire, the force imagined to generate language and gender, and so subverting the structure and modes of reproduction of 'Western' identity, of nature and culture, of mirror and eye, slave and master, body and mind” (Haraway 176). Specifically, the cyborg finds liberation

8 Hamlet: 3.1.67-68

through subverting discourse, by injecting chaos into her/his communication codes. Through writing, she/he is freed to re-write her-self (or him-self, or what ever sort of queered gendered self the cyborg chooses to code as), just as Palahniuk's narrators do.

This chaos may be liberating, but it remains politically treacherous, as said narrators also discover. The cyborg must still find safe harbor amidst the wreckage of culture she/he has created. For the cyborg, “writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other” (Haraway 175), therefore, “[c]yborg politics is the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly, the central dogma of phallogocentrism[; and t]hat is why cyborg politics insist on noise and advocate pollution, rejoicing in the illegitimate fusions of animal and machine” (Haraway 176). As I hope to demonstrate shortly, Chuck Palahniuk's characters grapple with this treacherous freedom of the cyborg, often failing yet striving nonetheless to escape the prisons created for them by the materialist civilizations they find themselves living within.

CHAPTER TWO

BAKHTIN AND THE FRENCH: MULTIPLICITIES AND LAUGHTER

I have chosen these two novels for my project, 1) because I truly enjoy them, but more importantly 2) because I see in Palahniuk's characters and in the actual form of his text a way of applying the cyborg metaphor to texts not overtly defined as science-fiction or as feminist. I see in Palahniuk's writing an evolution of sorts. When the cyborg is overlaid upon his novels, we can see characters struggling with the practical implications of the cyborgian identity, struggling and failing for the most part. Neither of the narrators/protagonists here qualify as the adaptable and liberated cyborg, but each surrounds him or herself with personas that do qualify. Palahniuk's characters respond to the same cultural anxieties that the cyborg addresses, but the author refuses to allow his protagonists the same easy and optimistic access to cyborg coding that Haraway assumes in her writings (a move on Palahniuk's part that seems to some how anticipate and address Haraway's more techno-phobic critics by at once acknowledging her metaphor's shortcomings while presenting, through Tyler and Brandy, characters substantiating Haraway's ideals.). That Palahniuk consistently and constantly uses multiple characters as cyborgian stand-ins also serves to strengthen the potential of Haraway's original metaphor in its literary

applications. The cyborg, to be successful at re-coding cultural discourse, must be in plurality and flux, perpetually.

If writing is a special type of communication between peoples, then the cyborg acts as a sort of “third voice” in conversation. Being fluid and plastic, being adaptable, the cyborg is an interloper on the narratives of ideology. Because she can shed her/his skin at will, recode her/his identity and in turn hack the programs that created her/him, the cyborg is not an original participant in the “conversation.” She/he eavesdrops or ignores as she/he chooses, interjecting into the conversation as she/he wills. The cyborg interrupts, disrupts, engages then changes the conversation. Having destroyed discourse and remade it in her/his own image, the cyborg moves on to an/other conversation(s).

One of the cyborg's secret weapons in this discourse guerrilla war is her/his “present” nature. Being infinitely changeable, the cyborg has escaped the trap of time. She/he does not obsess over the past; the past is dead, untouchable and therefore unimportant. She/he does not worry about the future; an infinitely changeable future poses no threat to the avatar doing the changing. What's more, past and future are illusions created by the human mind to quantify and codify being. Because she/he defies this codification, refusing to be what is made of her/him, the cyborg is free of the trap of time. She/he, through her/his plasticity of identity, exists in a perpetual present.

At this point, Mikhail Bakhtin must be formally introduced into my conversation-of-sorts. He has been hiding here all along, lurking within Haraway's "Manifesto," peeping over the edges of her theories and my interpretations. The idea of perpetually being, language and discourse always becoming in/through text, is a foundation stone in Bakhtin's theory of Novel. It is the gerund that makes the novel special, much as it does the cyborg. As Jérôme Game points out, "for Bakhtin, the actual [literary] work is never *already-here (déjà là)*, nor there, nor in itself: it is for ever *to be, to become – coming*" (Game 505). Becoming, while making reference to a future and therefore hope of cycle-break, is firmly and perpetually grounded in the present. It is a constant repositioning/recoding of "self-ness," adapting to changes in the flux of the time paradox. Because "becoming" can never "be" (i.e., finished), it is free from the oscillation trap of history. The gerund allows for the linguistic distance necessary to change "I" to "self." "I" ever always exists with "other," but "self" is somehow distinct yet not quite defined, and therefore "self" is not quite bound as "I" is. "Self" is fluid.

One might counter that "the aspiration for uniqueness" (Game 505), a bounded distinction between one and an/other, is an inherent human trait. But uniqueness is itself an impossibility. We are all products and responses to larger cultural coding and therefore all parts of the same wholes. Uniqueness strives for the "I," an act which renders itself impotent. To "be" singular is a lie bound/imprisoned within a larger lie. To "be" is to fit into a grand narrative,

which is to render individuality obsolescent. The petite narratives of “self” [and thus plurality] provide “being” and voice. “One” must become “part” to speak, as in “participant.” “One” is silenced by “one's” self-imposed isolation from the “other” it creates. That “self-ness” can create petite narratives is a feature centrally important in relation to Bakhtin's sense of the novel as multiply voiced: since

To talk is to talk to someone who hears us, that is to say who enters and recognises[sic] a part of his self, his notions, his intonations in our speech; one cannot talk alone; moreover, one cannot talk to a complete stranger, someone who by being so alien, would be as it were deaf, [then] through this process of recognition of his voice among others, [the reader of the novel] will eventually be able to grasp how he himself is in fact the member of a whole [...], that he is one, but one among others and that there is no unity without plurality. (Game 504-505)

More significant still, any insistence on the individual or unitary tongue is oppressively false.

Single-voiced language is a tool for cultural creation and domination; it leaves no room for “self,” in that it demands the “I” and its subsequent “other.” By that demanding, the single-voice fails to notice that it is but a part of a greater multiple-voice, a heteroglossia; as Bakhtin states, “every utterance participates in the 'unitary language' (in its centripetal forces and tendencies) and at the same time partakes of social and historical heteroglossia (the centrifugal, stratifying forces)” (Bakhtin 1981 272). As a result, the novel in its multiplicity, and heteroglossia in general, provides the perpetuality and pluralizing used by the cyborg in her/his politicizing of discourse.

In this plurality, this perpetuality, the “self” and the cyborg become, in Bakhtin's term “unfinalizable,” because “so long as a Man is alive, he lives by virtue of being uncompleted and of not yet having spoken his final word” (Bakhtin 1984 59). If by referring to the conviction that we should all contain the possibility to be always non-coincident with ourselves, unfinalizability then stands for a definition of human freedom (Game 508). Human Freedom comes through a perpetual present, but such perpetuality is only possible through the fluidity of the metaphorical cyborg. As Harro Müller writes, the cyborg through her/his unfinalizability, is aware of the paradox of time in which we all exist:

If each thing is just one congealed version of its possibilities, and if the field of possibilities cannot be finalized, what is thereby articulated is pluralization of conceptions of time that must be recursively formulated. I am aware of the paradox that I think about and observe time in time. I am aware of the unending play of actuality and possibility; and at the same time, I must constantly replay it without reaching the goal or the end. (Müller 530)

The cyborg's ability to constantly adapt and recode, to constantly replay out the paradox, makes her/him unfinalizable. She/he cannot be bound in time, just as she/he cannot be bound in one static identity “I.” She/he is immanence: “*the space/time coordinates when/where the present becomes perpetual because it fuses with the future, that is to say it fuses with the sum of all possibles, and so, becomes a potentiality, a never-finalizing 'thing'*” (Game 508).

Yet this unfinalizability, this “ceaselessly becoming” in Irigaray's words, threatens cultures, or as Irigaray prefers, civilizations. The dominant ideologies controlling history and intent upon shaping future to suit their needs fear those unbound from time and the Grand Narrative. Because, as Lynn Worsham notes, “violations of the accepted codes through which the social world is organized and experienced have the power to disorient and disturb” (Worsham 86). Also present within this subversion is the refusal to take the dominant paradigms seriously. If they can be destroyed through the cyborg's perpetuality, then their threats of assimilation become absurd rather than menacing. When faced with the black hole of the dominant, the force of its immense gravity pulling everything and everyone into its clutches, the cyborg stands upon the event horizon and laughs. Hers/his is the “laughter of intertext and multiple identifications. It is the conflictual laughter of social subjects in a classist, racist, agesist, sexist society. It is the laughter we have now: other laughter for other times. [The cyborg and her/his laughter] remain on the horizon with a new social subjectivity” (Russo 73). She/he laughs because she/he recognizes the absurdity of the moment; other immutable individuals (those still trapped in the “I/other” paradigm) can only weep at the terror of be consumed by the dominant.

Part of what allows the cyborg to laugh instead of weep is her/his refusal to be contained and codified. The cyborg cannot be theorized since she/he “is not, precisely speaking, an

inscription of a specific content but an inscription of heterogeneity” (Worsham 88). The cyborg, through her/his heteroglossia in discourse, through her/his perpetuality, through the chaos that she/he injects into her/his cultural coding defies definition. In her resistance, “destroying already coded forms [of what she/he should be, cyborgs] rediscover their nature, their identity, and are able to find their forms, to blossom out in accordance with what they [have made of themselves]” (Irigaray 103).

While other acts of resistance, other subcultures may become frozen once generally available and therefore emptied of radical potential, in other words objectified then systematized, codified and replicated into the mainstream, the plasticity of the cyborg withstands this absorption (Worsham 97). As soon as part of her/his code has become assimilated into the dominant again, the cyborg responds in turn by hacking the dominant once again, laughing all the while. As Worsham points out,

This laughter is not that of an anarchist or nihilist. It should suggest instead that literacy itself [literacy being the battleground for the resisting cyborg] is a regime of meaning to be interrogated regarding its power to recuperate the power of those already in a position to order and give meaning to the social world. (Worsham 93)

In this laughter, filled with purpose and revolution rather than the meaninglessness of nihilism, the cyborg can fulfill the redemptive promise of any resistance. If “though the fate of every practice of resistance may be incorporation and neutralization, [through the cyborg and her/his

adaptability] it is still possible to set resistance in motion again as such” (Worsham 101). Every time the dominant attempts to recode and thus reduce the cyborg's impact, she/he simply hacks again. While on the surface this seems yet another cycle, in that the cyborg elicits real change within the code of the dominant, this cycle is dynamic, not static. The cyborg's laughter is a resistance of small and subtle (perpetual and heteroglossic) steps.⁹

What I find most intriguing about Palahniuk's work, though, is not necessarily how his characters fit into this cyborg framework of resistance and recoding, but rather how his texts transform his readers into cyborgs... if only for the ephemeral moments we spend reading his stories. While we immerse ourselves in his stories, we readers take on the heteroglossic perpetuity that defines cyborg discourse. And much like for his protagonists, we need

9 I must note that Irigaray in particular of the French Feminists would be one of those protesting Haraway's technologically-based metaphor of feminine identity. Irigaray favors the natural over the fabricated, seeing in technology the controlling and dominating language of patriarchy. She is right to be nervous, as so many early techno-theorists did express their own apprehensions about the negative potential of technology through feminized terms. That said, the cyborg is more than the computers and artificial intelligences that Irigaray seems so hesitant to embrace. The cyborg is a product of patriarchal coding, yes, but she/he can also recode her-/himself at will. The cyborg contains within her/his mutability the sort of disruptive yet creative power Irigaray locates in the purely “natural” world. And while I must admit that I have been seduced by the beauty of Irigaray's writing, I do think she misreads the natural and the potential of the future. I do not chide her for the sense of hope that infuses her work, but I do take issue with the way that she places so much emphasis on the possibilities of “tomorrow.” In her book *Je, tu, nous*, she writes that “repetition without progression is wearisome, exhausting, and damaging. It's as if every birthday marks a stage of this futureless becoming, or else a fairly abstract sum of facts that are practically devoid of sense and continuity” (107). Here she is addressing the way women have been trained to fear growing older, and while I commend her sentiment that aging gracefully can be a beautiful thing and that trying to remain forever young is unhealthy at best, Irigaray's focus always on the tomorrow overlooks the possibility of today, of this moment. The cyborg's perpetuity allows her/him to appreciate the now in ways that Irigaray's “future natural” misses out on.

Palahniuk as a guide in our cyborg-ness; without his influence, we cannot sustain the plasticity of the cyborg (just as Joe needs Tyler and Shannon needs Brandy to seek out liberation).

In these texts in particular but in all writing generally, discourse is perpetually present. Even when the narrative flashes forward or backward in plot time, the reader remains ever only present right where we read. Past and present and future collide and coalesce in the act of reading.

Achronos text like Palahniuk's novels is really constantly chronological in that the text for the reader is constantly in the "now." When we read, shifting from narrative moment to narrative moment free from linear constraints, we cease to experience the time paradox oscillation. Past and future become one in the present of our reading.

What's more, Palahniuk's novels are exceedingly heteroglossic. Not only do we experience a symphony of character voices (often through the fractured identity of the narrator alone), the politics of Palahniuk's texts bring his personal voice into the work as well as the voices of proponents on each side of the moral divides making mine-fields of his stories. And because his narrator's frequently address us as readers directly, our voice enters into the conversation of the text. And in carrying our side of the conversation, we bring with us all of the voices in our own heads discussing the politics of Palahniuk's texts. Through this conversation, Palahniuk creates a plurality in us, and for the time we spend in his conversation, we become unfinalizable.

In the chapter that follows, I delve in to *Fight Club* and *Invisible Monsters*. In an attempt to interject some of the cyborg's disruptive yet productive chaos into my own writing, I employ some intentionally tumultuous formal techniques. My goal is to complicate my own discursive process in the hopes of “seeing” anew my own text. I also intend the following chapter to slow my own readers down. I want you to dwell in the moment of my text, to be, for a few pages at least, in a state of perpetuity. My text meanders, circling in on and around itself. You can choose to gloss over parenthetical interjections or not. However you choose to read my text, I hope you come away from the experience “seeing” my writing in a way that these preceding chapters have sought to suppress.

CHAPTER THREE

DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

Existence is a paradox. Time is paradox, or at least our experience of it is.

History cannot exist because the present DOES exists. History shapes the present; but, then, the present is what allows history to exist. Without the present and the promise of a never attainable future, history cannot be. The future, ironically, will never come. History is fiction, and the future will never materialize: both are lies created to explain culture. Both are products of code.

“Joe” and Tyler and “Tyler”

“Joe,” the name chosen by the narrator of *Fight Club*, is trapped in his conception of time, a slave to his sense of history. Bound in the oscillation of past and future and unable to objectify himself within/from his culture, Joe cannot exist in the present. He spends his life obsessing over either a past he cannot change (and which has therefore irreparably formed him now) or a future that will never quite come, both always out of his reach and still forever in his gaze. Joe's incessant count-downs haunting the opening chapters of *Fight Club* highlight the character's focus on this linear/progressing time:

We're down to our last ten minutes. [Joe then explains to us, his readers, how to manufacture explosives.] Nine minutes. [Joe next ponders the hygiene of Tyler's gun in his mouth.] Eight minutes. [Joe now imagines the soon-to-be image that will be in front of him: the Parker Morris Building collapsing in time-lapse mental photography.] Seven minutes. [Joe spends a few lines justifying his narrative a bit.] Six minutes. [Joe begins introducing the love triangle between himself and Tyler and Marla (or would that be love rectangle with "Tyler" added in for good measure?), only to dismiss any concerns about love in favor of obsession with ownership and dominance.] Five minutes. (13-15)

Not only is Joe quite literally looking ahead to the explosions, he metaphorically looks beyond the destruction to an imagined time after, writing/saying, "it's weird to think the place where we're standing will only be a point in the sky" (13). Joe is incapable of being in the present. He must impose a framework of history/future onto his experience of time.

Joe's obsession here with history imprisons him in the existence he creates "Tyler" to escape through. Only in the NOW can his cultural coding be subverted and corrupted, because only the perpetual present is free from the constraints of the time binary. The perpetual present requires the negation of the self and the absence of the "I," which, as an artifice of time and the binary culture, crumbles away when time is stopped. The cyborg, in as much as she/he can re-code, thrives in a perpetual present, experiencing the full effects of freedom. The cyborg does not concern herself/himself with either past or future; both are aspects of the code which she/he violates. She/he destroys the past and the future with every transgressive act. Joe concerns himself almost exclusively with past/future, never really noticing the present moment.

Joe's obsessions prevent him from attaining the liberation he seeks, from *becoming* as cyborg. As he objectifies everything and everyone in his life, Joe separates himself from community. He creates an "I" of his self, an "other" of everything/one else. We can see this in his near pornographic level of descriptive detail, particularly of munitions. The excess of these descriptions, the loving yet unsettling detail, the careful and practiced tone/diction fetishizes while distancing Joe and his reader from the horror of the descriptions' content: "you take a 98-percent concentration of fuming nitric acid and add the acid to three times that amount of sulfuric acid. Do this in an ice bath. Then add glycerin drop-by-drop with an eye dropper. You have nitroglycerin" (12). This is a near perfect example of Joe's failings: things become sources of obsessive desire, overtaking his focus and attention, pushing him ever further away from "others." His fantasies seek to make him an "I;" he turns his obsessions into "others" to make a singular-self of himself.

In missing out on the moment, when objectifying the world, Joe cannot see the absurdity inherent his coding, inherent in power. The cyborg laughs at power. Joe does not. Joe weeps. More accurately, Joe is desperate to weep. Tormented by insomnia, which he defines writing, "this is how it is with insomnia. Everything is so far away, a copy of a copy of a copy. The insomnia distance of everything, you can't touch anything and nothing can touch you" (21), Joe crumbles. As a cure for this disease, Joe tries to live vicariously through other people's tragedy

(“My doctor said, if I wanted to see real pain, I should swing by First Eucharist on a Tuesday night. See the brain parasites. See the degenerative bone diseases. The organic brain dysfunctions. See the cancer patients getting by. So I went.” [19]), weeping as release, pretending death to be able to experience “life.”

Unable to find respite from our cultural insomnia, we are all pushed by the dominant paradigm/Grand Narratives of our cultures/civilizations to the razor's edge choice: weep or laugh. Joe's shortcomings rest on his choice of crying over laughing. When confronted with abjection via history/future and the notion of potential, Joe seeks weeping. He longs to cry. The only way he can find release is through tears, by giving in and allowing himself to become prey for the predator of the dominant paradigm (TIME). He doesn't laugh at absurdity; he weeps at its might, declaring “this is when I'd cry because right now, your life comes down to nothing, and not even nothing, oblivion[...] It's easy to cry when you realize that everyone you love will reject you or die. On a long enough time-line, the survival rate for everyone will drop to zero” (17). Joe confuses this momentary catharsis with liberation, claiming that “every evening, I died, and every evening, I was born. Resurrected” (22); but he is, at best, not aware of what he's doing, or at worst, lying to himself and his reader (and thus lying to the posterity he holds so obsessively dear). Weeping traps him in the oscillation of time. He is only resurrected, or rather re-created, in the image-of-Joe developed for him by the paradigm/paradox (TIME). Joe's death and rebirth are

not truly liberating but simply placebo. Much like insomnia can't really be treated with sleep drugs ("My doctor said, 'Insomnia is just the symptom of something larger. Find out what's actually wrong. Listen to your body.'" [19]), self-awareness can't be met with despair. Laughter is the only cure, the only way out of the cycle.

Which is why "Tyler" becomes. The weeping doesn't work, so the resistant part of Joe that brought "him" to the edge of the abyss, to the event horizon of existence within the paradigm in the first place, creates "Tyler" as a way for Joe to laugh (unfortunately for him, Joe merely fetishizes "Tyler" into oblivion). Joe longs for release from his consumption, but he will not allow himself to be released. He enjoys his sickness too much to seek a real cure, is too comfortable in his prison not to rebuild it where-/whenever he goes despite his yearning to be free. He begins to crave death as an escape, as he tells us readers when he writes,

I melt and swell at the moment of landing when one wheel thuds on the runway but the plane leans to one side and hangs in the decision to right itself or roll. For this moment, nothing matters. Look up into the stars and you're gone. Not your luggage. Nothing matters. Not your bad breath. The windows are dark outside and the turbine engines roar backward. The cabin hangs at the wrong angle under the roar of the turbines, and you will never have to file another expense account claim. Receipt required for items over twenty-five dollars. You will never get another haircut. (31)

Joe's insomnia has reached his soul. He can't sleep because he can't feel. He can't feel because he has allowed himself to be reduced to consumer-not-man. Tragedy becomes product.

Human experience functions now, only worth its profitability in the grand “metaphoric insomnia struggle,” or in Joe's words, “this should be so sweet, but no,[...] I'm watched by Marla” (37). Marla represents Joe's Big Brother fear of being caught in his death-wish, support-group lies. For Joe, under Marla's watchful gaze, even death-as-experience is reduced to count-down, a sort of blast-off space-mountain adventure-ride. Death is a means to an end, experience is a salve for symptoms but not a treatment/cure for his (society's) disease. With Marla lurking like a “tourist” in the support group meetings, too, Joe can't pretend that he isn't exploiting these people, these pained and dying “others.”

At this moment, Joe ticking off the stages of parasite-ridden Chloe's death, Marla is the cyborg, the adaptable being confronting Joe with his own immutability and falsity. Whereas Joe siphons off other peoples' experiences (death/tragedy/feeling) to pacify his nagging insomnia, Marla experiences these “others” as paths to liberation. Confronted with the abyss, Marla appreciates. She laughed. Marla

Wants is all. The cancers, the parasites. Marla's eyes narrow. She never dreamed she could feel so 'smarvelous. She actually felt alive. Her skin was clearing up. All her life, she never saw a dead person. There was no real sense of life because she had nothing to contrast it with. Oh, but now there was dying and death and loss and grief. Weeping and shuddering, terror and remorse. Now that she knows where we're all going, Marla feels every moment of her life. (38)

Marla still exploits experience and “others” (viewing the people at these meetings as means to

an end to a certain extent), but she has moved one step closer to the cyborg and away from the dominant paradigm.

She appreciates moments, just like Tyler. He appreciates moments in and of themselves, as opposed to Joe who needs to fit those moments into a larger scheme in order to find/make meaning. In not recognizing the potential of each moment, Joe cannot re-cognize himself. Unlike Joe, Tyler (not “Tyler,” an important distinction) recognizes that since all history is teleological, and all history is constructed, then all constructions are teleological. Therefore all self is constructed, too. Re/cognizing history re-constructs self, which is essentially Tyler's manifesto, a manifesto he lays out to Joe when he says,

“Sticking feathers up your butt,” Tyler says, “does not make you a chicken.”

Oh, I say, so I'm sticking feathers up my butt [...] Tyler says, “At least Marla's trying to hit bottom.” [...]

Tyler says I'm nowhere near hitting the bottom, yet. And if I don't fall all the way, I can't be saved. Jesus did it with his crucifixion thing. I shouldn't just abandon money and property and knowledge. This isn't just a weekend retreat. I should run from self-improvement, I should be running toward disaster. I can't just play it safe anymore.

This isn't a seminar.

“If you lose your nerve before you hit bottom,” Tyler says, “you never really succeed.”

Only after disaster can we be resurrected.

“It's only after you've lost everything,” Tyler says, “that you're free to do anything.”

“Where you're at, now,” Tyler says, “you can't even imagine what the bottom will be like.” (69-70)

For Tyler (and to a certain extent, for Marla) and for the cyborg, we must be not only able but also willing to destroy everything that we “are” in order to escape what others have made of us. We must transgress. We have to do more than reject; we must actively destroy, deconstruct. From that destruction will rise a phoenix, a more adaptable and malleable being.

Tyler's (a Tyler divorced from Joe's imagined “Tyler,” in that the imagined “Tyler” is Joe's sub-consciously chosen alter-ego. Tyler, though, as a persona, has escaped the bounds Joe initially imposed upon him. But this is not yet the time for Tyler vs “Tyler.”) ultimate goal is to destroy that same framework of trained wants and so-called needs. Joe seems at once aware of Tyler's plan but resistant to what his “partner” is really attempting when “the tower, all one hundred and ninety-one floors, will slam down on the national museum which is Tyler's real target” (14). Tyler tries to explain his intentions to Joe, crying, “This is our world, our world [...] and those ancient people are dead” (14). But Joe's response, “If I knew how this would all turn out, I'd be more than happy to be dead and in Heaven right now. Seven Minutes” (14), reveals his resistance to Tyler's revolution. Joe's promise to record Tyler's legacy, following close on the heels of his death “wish,” again points to how close Joe comes to grasping Tyler's plans and yet how very far from the point his understanding remains.

Joe misreads Tyler's desires just as he misreads his alter-ego's intentions. Joe begs Tyler for mercy by promising to make him a legend. Tonguing the gun barrel into his cheek, Joe pleads,

“you want to be a legend, Tyler, man, I'll make you a legend. I've been here from the beginning. I remember everything. Three minutes” (15). By way of us readers, via the narrative set forth in the novel, Joe will record the legacy he assumes Tyler wants. Only, Joe really promises to colonize this narrative with his own obsessive desires, just as he did his apartment with Ikea furniture; Joe refuses to acknowledge his own role in Tyler's supposed desires for legend/legacy. Since Joe will not recognize himself as the Tyler everyone else sees, Joe cannot see that he makes himself legend through “Tyler,” that he wants the legacy, that he desires history remember him.

“Tyler” is Joe's creation, a panacea for his culturally induced insomnia and Joe's means for acting out his fetishizing desires for history. But “Tyler” takes on a life of his own, becoming Tyler. “Tyler” is a tool of Joe's cracked psyche, but Tyler is a fluid and adaptable persona with goals and desires apart from Joe. “Tyler” follows the paths set out for him by Joe and hence by Joe's coding. Yet, in creating an alter-ego that functions in order to resist culture, Joe allowed “Tyler” to adapt into Tyler. “Tyler” resists Joe, recodes himself into the much more real Tyler. Only, Joe never recognizes Tyler, just the version of the persona the narrator created. Because Joe never admits his own complicity in Tyler's schemes, in Tyler's activities, Joe can only ever see “Tyler,” the created and therefore controllable character. But Tyler has become more real than Joe. In recoding himself apart from Joe's fetishistic desires, Tyler becomes cyborg. He

unites social reality and fiction into one persona. Tyler fulfills all of the revolutionary potential Joe situated in “Tyler” but refused to loose upon himself. In Project Mayhem, Tyler seeks to destroy both the past and the future to bring about that revolution. Bringing down the economic structures of the culture which created him, Tyler wishes to enforce a perpetual present on everyone.

Trying to save himself from the revolution, Joe, in killing “Tyler,” clings to an illusion of hope in a future that will never come. Waking up in the hospital after shooting “Tyler” and himself, Joe finds him-self as Tyler. Everyone recognizes Tyler Durden lying in that hospital bed, all but Joe. He is distinct from the identity the world sees in him. In this distinction, Joe is trapped in Tyler's perpetual present. He cannot escape the dual nature of his new self. While he has attained “Tyler's” goal of a legacy in history by killing his alter-ego (the legacy Joe decides “Tyler” wants at the beginning of his narrative/end of their story), Joe has doomed himself. Because he cannot recognize the falsity of either past or future, Joe-as-Durden is bound in a prison of freedom. He is not longer trapped by the culture that he and Tyler wanted to change, but Joe is incapable of re/visioning himself as anything other than what that culture made him to be. Because Joe killed the “Tyler” in his head (but not the Tyler that the world sees), he no longer has any outlet. He cannot appreciate the freedom that Durden wrought, because he could

only experience transgression through “Tyler.” With “Tyler” disposed of, Joe is left alone: forever the product of culture-code, unable to recognize or respond.

If history and future don't exist in the perpetual present (or are subsumed into the present) “Joe's” identity will be forever trapped in that dual-singularity of the wink at the hospital. He will only be what others define him as. Self-hood only comes from community. “Them” makes us. “You” perpetuate me. Quite literally, “you” completes “me.” The perpetual present is successful. It functions where Joe fails and breaks down. The whole survives the part. The cyborg functions because she/he perpetually/constantly reconstructs herself/himself from broken parts of the perpetual present. In her/his ever-renewing whole, the cyborg survives the violence of self-hood and history/future. In her/his constant reconstruction, she/he thrives on the event horizon of identity, laughing at the so-called gravity of the dominant. Joe is not cyborg because he is not participant in his reconstruction; it is foisted upon him. Tyler might be cyborg, but “Tyler” gone and Joe refusing re-cognition, Tyler does not survive the future.

Shannon, Shane and the queen supreme, Brandy Alexander

While Joe is a troubling figure in *Fight Club*, Shannon (the eventually-named narrator of *Invisible Monsters*) is a bit of an enigma. She plays a “best-supporting role” (18) in her own story. The true star of *Invisible Monsters*, the character actually in control of the narrative is Brandy Alexander, the embodiment of literary-alized cyborgs. “Nonstop continuous live action

theater” (18) that she is, Brandy is a he who has rewritten her-self for the simple purpose of doing so. She is not trying to find some essential part of her being not formerly represented by her physical self. She identified as male and as heterosexual. She choose to go against that self-identification, to transgress what she was taught was natural. She embraced perversion simply because it is perverse (and as a response against the corruption he experienced of power, that the paradigm was flawed, and she then should he be). Brandy overshadows Shannon now, much like he did when she was known as Shannon's older brother, Shane.

Shane and Brandy exert incredible control over the entire narrative of Shannon's story. Shane haunts Shannon's family life, her parents forgetting their living daughter through their obsession with the hate crimes they expect because of their dead, gay son. Shannon feels so overshadowed by Shane, that she grows to hate him. Brandy comes to dominate Shannon's life just as much, choosing Shannon's aliases and life-stories on her whims, leaving Shannon to lamenting that “some days, I hate it when Brandy changes our lives without warning. Sometimes, twice a day, you have to live up to a new identity. A new name. New relationships. Handicaps. It's hard to remember who I started this road trip being” (64).

But it is Brandy's ability to recode the identities of those around her that make her such a powerful force for revolution. Because both Shane and Shannon are only what was made of them, as Shannon points out when she writes “*nothing of me is original. I am the combined*

effort of everybody I've ever known" (104), they cannot recode themselves without Brandy's intervention. They need her persona to find the freedom they both seek. The Brandy Alexander persona, as a sort of social free agent, can control history and future through her constant recreation of them. Shannon recounts a moment of this control, writing that Brandy said

The third most boring thing in the entire world is your sorry-assed past. So Brandy never asked me anything. Bulldozer alpha bitch she can be, we meet again and again in the speech therapist office and Brandy tells me everything I need to know about myself; (112)

and because "take charge princess who she is, Brandy Alexander never does ask my real name. The name who I was born. Miss Bossy Pants right away gives me a new name, a new past. She invents another future for me with no connections, except to her, a cult all by herself" (107).

Brandy is the hacker-programmer; Shannon (and ultimately Shane, being that Brandy is Shane's performance of his sister's appearance), is the operating system.

Shane discovered the key to identity freedom, the password, as it were, necessary to hack into cultural coding: to be other than what is decided for him, he must become other than he "is." As Brandy tells Shannon, we have to do the opposite of what we've been trained to do, to want the opposite of what we've been trained to want; Brandy tells Shannon (and us readers) to "do the things that scare you the most" (221). Only in this reversal of expectation can we escape the roles laid out for us by our societies. Shane, in becoming Brandy, escapes the essentiality that

creates “I” and “others.” In becoming Brandy, Shane reveals how constructed and performed we all already are. There is nothing essential in any of us. We are all products of our civilizations.

Or in other words,

The same way a compact disk isn't responsible for what's recorded on it, that's how we are. You're about as free to act as a programmed computer. You're about as one-of-a-kind as a dollar bill.

“There isn't any real you in you,” she says. “Even your physical body, all your cells will be replaced within eight years.”

Skin, bones, blood, and organs transplant from person to person. Even what's inside you already, the colonies of microbes and bugs that eat your food for you, without them you'd die. Nothing of you is all-the-way yours. All of you is inherited.

“Relax,” Brandy says, “Whatever you're thinking, a million other folks are thinking. Whatever you do, they're doing, and none of you is responsible. All of you is a cooperative effort” (217-218).

As Brandy, Shane makes a joke of essentiality and expectations, a big, black, bloody joke of resistance:

Brandy says, “The best way is not to fight it, just go. Don't be trying all the time to fix things. What you run from only stays with you longer. When you fight something, you only make it stronger.”

She says, “Don't do what you want.” She says, “Do what you don't want. Do what you're trained not to want.”

It's the opposite of following your bliss.

Brandy tells me, “Do the things that scare you the most.” (220-221)

Shannon takes that command to heart, writing that “what [she] needs to do is fuck up so bad [she] can't save [herself]” (224).

The way Shannon chooses to “fuck up” is telling and also what distinguishes her from Joe. He remains imprisoned in his own life because he destroyed his liberator; Shannon finds liberation at the end of her story in giving herself over completely to her savior. Shannon comes to understand her brother and his choices, finding healing of her own wounds by reconciling with her wounded brother (Shane-as-Brandy spent his life searching for Shannon, trying to reconcile with the sister he transformed himself into, Shannon being the only person Shane believed could ever understand him). When Shannon relinquishes her identity to her brother/Brandy, she does so out of love. In that sibling affection, through the bond that Shane and Shannon share now because of Brandy, the sister and brother both manage to break free of the identities decided for them by an oppressive cultural coding. Both have mutilated themselves beyond original-recognition, but through that mutilation have created themselves in their own images. Self-hood was all an act, a sham, and yet that sham brought freedom in its destructive and disruptive beauty, its *bella barbaridad*. Shannon lost her face and gained a family. Shane lost his manhood and gained his freedom. Brandy-the cyborg saved them all.

Chuck and His Children

The chronology of these narratives (start at the end, end with the beginning again, constantly jumping around with no real time-anchor) is the time paradox in literary action. For *Invisible Monsters*, Shannon points out quite explicitly how she jumps us readers around through

time, recording moments like when Brandy cries at the beginning of the novel, “even if you can't love me, then tell me my life,' Brandy says. 'A girl can't die without her life flashing before her eyes” (Palahniuk 1999 18-19), but then jumping back to a “then” again, “jump to this one time, nowhere special, just Brandy almost dead on the floor and me kneeling over her with my hands covered in her Princess Alexander partytime blood” (*ibid* 284). Shannon relives these moments over and again, constantly shifting around in time but never letting us lose sense of a particular moment. Joe does something similar, if less self-conscious (as reflects Joe's failings as a character and narrator), when chapter 11 starts in a South America of Tyler's mind, flashes across space to France, back in time to the present in a parking lot, out of time to an ideal of American life, jumping then to a future furious Marla, back to the even more distant present with a currently wrinkled Marla, and finally settling back in to a semblance of the present with Joe and “Tyler” hiding from any variation on Marla. Through the conversation that is the narrative here (“I couldn't tell you [dear reader] this until now because I want you to know how discovering this felt” [Palahniuk 1999 139]), Palahniuk/Joe/Shannon encapsulate(s) the oscillation of past and future, trapping the paradox (TIME) itself in our (as reader) perpetual present.

Only when reading something so overtly achronos as these texts (and the majority of Palahniuk's texts as an *ovuer*¹⁰) can the reader escape the paradox of time. While we read, we

10 Ignoring the simply reversed chronology of *Survivor*, the novel I consider Palahniuk's weakest in that it relies almost entirely upon its gimmick of a time-frame to accomplish any narrative work. While the text does display

put every narrative into our own present. By jumping around narrative-time, though, the text refuses to allow us-as-readers to shape a chronology from THIS narrative, to force a time-order upon the chrono-chaos of the text: “When you realize that the story you're telling is just words, when you realize you can crumble it up and throw your past in the trashcan,' Brandy says, 'then we'll figure out who you're going to be” (Palahniuk 1999 61). The time-structure of these narratives demand we, as readers, relinquish control over our experience of time. We cannot expect the linear progression of events that our cultures train us to demand. In the time we are in Palahniuk's narrative, we are perpetually present. Palahniuk's texts create cyborgs of his readers, if only for the time and space that we are in his textual world.

His chronologies are not Palahniuk's only tools for disrupting our reading experience and liberating us from our coding. His textual form consistently denies expectations, violates and transgresses the rules of “proper” grammar. The author frequently employs single-word sentences, often of gerunds like “Genuflecting” (Palahniuk 1999 25): complete grammatical worlds that defy traditional rules. They read like as memory grabs. Described before its name

much of Palahniuk's trademark style, it lacks much of the political potential present in the rest of his texts. The novel isn't helped anymore either by its storyline, which today carries a great deal more cultural meaning than it did when first published. The tale of an airplane hijacker holding prisoners hostage demands we, as a society, remember the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Any sort of revolutionary or liberatory potential that may have resided within *Survivor* initially is now washed away by an ocean of reality.

can be located, pinned down, only later rushing onto the page once re-membered, these sentences link disparate sections of story and text together across time and page-space.

The same is true of Palahniuk's use of listing (Joe lists munitions, Shannon drugs). The lists and single-word sentences are repeated motifs across a particular text, but they also cross Palahniuk's entire body of work. The author challenges his readers to tie every tale together through his distinctive style. His stories become concurrent, simultaneous. In that simultaneity, his texts exist within the same moment of reading-time. Combined with their narrative achronology, Palahniuk's style renders his texts all perpetually present. As participant in his series of connected moments, we take on not only perpetuality but also plurality. Each reader becomes connected to every other reader in the moment of the text. We become part of a larger whole, a community. Through this perpetuality and plurality, we all have the opportunity to become cyborg ... if for only the time we spend in Palahniuk's text.

CHAPTER FOUR

EPILOGUE

“Paradoxification, pluralization, modalizing, asymmetricalization; individual times of subsystems that cannot be synchronized from an external point; past present and present past, present future and futural present: these are all starkly disjunctive. The future is unknown in some familiar way; the future never begins” (Muller 532).

Time is the name we have given to our experience of being. It is both a substance of the universe and an accident of humanity. Our experience of time is mediated, not just by the speed of light which transmits the visual signals of change to us in a bodily way, but mediated by the stories we create to shape and define time. History is an amalgamation of the fleeting bits of time experience we manage to trap within our memories. The future is an illusion born of desires projected out beyond ourselves now. By our self-stories, past and future are the two sides of our time-experience coin. The present is the coin. In an Aristotelian sense, past and future are but accidents of the substance that is the present. All that is “real” of time is now, this moment in our experience of being. Time is a story.

“Without transition, there cannot be linear history. This means that in traditional histories-- especially histories that justify or explain a certain distinctiveness of period, culture, or nation-- the present and its uniqueness must be both present and absent in its own historical record or tradition. Similarly, an identity with a narrative history of its own must be, quite simply, external and

internal to its own temporal antecedents and matrices. This identity must be present in the sense that all its constitutive events or elements are now, in retrospect, seen as expression or harbingers of the same, but identity must also be absent from its past, insofar as its uniqueness came to be and (necessarily) emerged from difference” (Friday 9).

Stories we tell ourselves color our experience of being. They bond and link us to the rest of existence. Stories also make us distinct, separating one self from an/other. The stories we make up are a part of us individually but also part of us culturally. While one may “write” a story, that story “writes” the one as well. We are all products of the bonds and distinctions created by our stories. With every new story, though, the individual “writer” creates new links and separations, changing all the stories to come before and after. Story is the most powerful tool in our experience of being. Story contains within the potential to imprison or free, depending on which bonds are made or broken by the story. Story is terrible and beautiful, frightening and exciting.

“In my view, we have to be free female subjects. Language represents an essential tool of production for this liberation. I have to make it progress in order to have subjective rights equivalent to men, to be able to exchange language and objects with them” (Irigaray 66).

“The cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. It is oppositional, Utopian, and completely without innocence. No longer structured by the polarity of public and private, the cyborg defines a technological polls based partly on a revolution of social relations in the oikos, the household. Nature and culture are reworked; the one can no longer be the resource for appropriation or incorporation by the other” (Haraway 151).

For story to free us, to liberate us from the domination of those demanding us subscribe to their versions of history and future, we must write in and of the present. Our stories must exist outside of created/mediated time while still maintaining connections to it. Our liberating stories must be made perpetually present if we are to write ourselves free.

“When you understand,’ Brandy says, ‘that what you’re telling is just a story. It isn’t happening anymore. When you realize the story you’re telling is just words, when you can just crumble it up and throw your past in the trashcan,’ Brandy says, ‘then we’ll figure out who you’re going to be’” (Palahniuk 1999 61).

The power of story, though, lends this tool to the service of those desiring dominance. As such, freedom demands resistance. The agent most capable of writing stories of resistance must be free from the prison of time, must be free from the bonds of the “I” and the “other.” This agent must be able to be potential. This agent must be fluid and plastic of self in order to be always becoming, to embody perpetuality. This agent must also be present within stories in order to write out of them. This agent must be the potential of being in and out, real and story. This agent must be cyborg.

Few authors have their fingers on the pulse of contemporary life as Chuck Palahniuk. His tales of disaffection, anger and ennui speak to the anxieties of our time. Palahniuk does not just scream his frustrations into the winds. His stories examine possible solutions, potential cures for

our cultural diseases. And while his characters' hope often comes at a very high price, they find ways out of their societal bonds.

Appreciating this liberatory potential in Palahniuk's texts requires a critical lens. Without a certain amount of self-awareness, without a certain amount of distance and distinction from the cultural stories that shape us (stories that Palahniuk tears apart and creates anew through his narratives), we cannot recognize the escape plans his novels map out. We need a critical ear to hear his joke. Missing the joke renders his stories desolate, mere reiterations of the diseases already plaguing our cultures.

Donna Haraway's metaphor of the Cyborg is one lens, one critical filter allowing us to experience Palahniuk's joke. The cyborg, as a metaphor for identity, is both a part of culture and agent for change within it as well. The cyborg is infinitely adaptable, resistance embodied. Through her resistance, she appreciates Palahniuk's joke. The cyborg laughs. The cyborg is the punch-line, the solution. Palahniuk does not simply posit this way of being to us readers, though. Through his texts, we can become cyborg. While in his stories, we are resistance. We become the perpetual and the plural... if only while we read. Together, Haraway and Palahniuk offer effective, if difficult answers to the problems that materialism (and through its objectification of "self-ness," individualism and the oppressive "I") has posed to our society. Together the two writers change the way we can experience our being.

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APPENDIX 1

BRIEF SUMMATIONS

Since Palahniuk's novels are obviously not common-knowledge reading, I am going to risk spoiling some of their narrative fun and provide summaries for the two texts I am working with in this project: *Fight Club* and *Invisible Monsters* (Palahniuk's first novel and first novel with a female narrator, respectively). Since Palahniuk employs achronological story-structure in all of his work, surprise narrative twists are one of the author's calling cards, as it were. I am going to risk sucking some of the joy of discovering their secrets on your own in the service of elucidating my own reading of the significance of the texts. Again, I apologize for the spoilers, but really, you should have been reading his work all along already anyway.

Fight Club is the story of an unnamed narrator's struggle with insomnia, both literal and metaphorical. Often referring to himself as “Joe” (inspired by a series of *Reader's Digest* articles “where organs in the human body talk about themselves in the first person: I am Jane's Uterus. I am Joe's Prostate” [Palahniuk 1996 58]), the narrator finds himself sleepwalking through his life, sopping with his own materialist-induced ennui. As a safety recall coordinator for an unnamed American automotive company, Joe finds himself ethically compromised and identity deprived.

Deprived, that is, until he meets the beguiling Tyler Durden. After a bizarre series of events leave him homeless (“The police think maybe it was the gas. Maybe the pilot light on the stove went out or a burner was left on, leaking gas, and the gas rose to the ceiling, and the gas filled the condo from ceiling to floor in every room. The condo was seventeen hundred square feet with high ceilings and for days and days, the gas must’ve leaked until every room was full. When the rooms were filled to the floor, the compressor at the base of the refrigerator clicked on. Detonation. The floor-to-ceiling windows in their aluminum frames went out and the sofas and the lamps and dishes and sheet sets in flames, and the high school annuals and the diplomas and telephone. Everything blasting out from the fifteenth floor in a sort of solar flare” [Palahniuk 1996 44-45]), Joe moves in with Tyler, only after the pair enter into a curiosity driven fist fight in a bar parking lot. So invigorated by their first encounter with physical violence, the pair begin to draw a crowd. Inspired by the crowd and by the vitality they each profess to feeling after a fight, Tyler and Joe form “Fight Club” as a place for other men to come together and share in the experience.

Joe moves about through his life quite happily, until he realizes that Tyler has begun spreading the word of Fight Club without him. Tyler turns their derelict home into barracks for his new paramilitary endeavor: Project Mayhem. Quickly spiraling out of his control, Joe's life becomes a series of terrifying and confusing encounters after another. Suspicious about Tyler's

motives, Joe sets on in search of answers only to be confronted with a fantastic truth: he is Tyler Durden. Or rather, Tyler is an alter ego Joe's mind created in order to handle the stresses of his life. Now Tyler has taken control. Desperate to confront "Tyler" and regain control, Joe forces a showdown. Shooting himself in the face, Joe believes he has killed "Tyler." Tyler, though, the mastermind behind Fight Club and Project Mayhem, cannot be taken out that easily. The rest of the world sees "Mr Durden" in Joe's face; so when our narrator awakes in a hospital after the shooting, he finds Tyler still very much alive: hiding out from the world he helped create in a mental hospital, Joe finds that

every once in a while, somebody brings me my lunch tray and my meds and he has a black eye or his forehead is swollen with stitches, and he says:

"We miss you Mr Durden."

Or somebody with a broken nose pushes a mop past me and whispers:

"Everything's going according to the plan."

Whispers:

"We're going to break up civilization so we can make something better out of the world."

Whispers:

"We look forward to getting you back." (Palahniuk 1996 208)

Because he failed to recognize what Tyler Durden really meant to the world, that the creation was more significant than the creator, Joe remains imprisoned in the world he created for himself through "Tyler."

Palahniuk's third novel, *Invisible Monsters*, a recounting of how Brandy Alexander, “the long-stemmed latte queen supreme of the top-drawer party girls” (Palahniuk 1999 12), came to be lying, shot and bleeding, at the foot of the stairs of a mansion engulfed in flames, is also a story about recreating the world in a new, broken image. The narrator for this novel, also unnamed-- at least until chapter 30 of 32-- tells the tale of how she met one Brandy Alexander while in intensive-care rehab after her jaw was shot off, ruining the narrator's burgeoning modeling career and her relationships with her fiancé and best friend along the way. Brandy was in the rehab center for physical and vocal therapy following her extensive sexual reassignment surgeries, though she had yet to take the last drastic step in becoming a woman. The narrator, who we learn is/was named Shannon in her past life of care-free beauty, runs away from the rehab center, fleeing a nurse hellbent on setting Shannon up in a love match with some other horribly mutilated patients and Shannon herself dead-set on killing the best friend and fiancé who appear to have orchestrated Shannon's shooting. Along the way, Shannon stops to pick up Brandy, her new role model and life guru, from the derelict luxury hotel-home of her/his benefactors (a trio of drag queens living off the immense profits of their Katty Kathy talking dolls, dolls which they have been paying to have Brandy surgically transformed into resembling). The pair, along with a variously-drugged former-fiancé stowed away, set off in search of Brandy's long lost sister and Shannon's sense of purpose.

By the end of the novel, which actually brings us back to the beginning of the story, we have learned that a teen-aged Brandy, once called Shane, ran away from his family home into the arms of his drag queens, allowing himself to be turned into herself because it was the worst mistake he could think of making. Evie, the narrator's best friend, is also a transgender woman and a friend of Brandy's, and had been carrying on an affair with Shannon's former fiancé, Manus Kelly, a Vice Squad detective who also happens to have blackmailed a teen-aged Shane into homosexual sex. We also learn that Shannon is the long-lost sister that Brandy has been seeking, and that Brandy knew who the narrator was all along (in fact, all of her/his surgeries were to transform Shane into the image of his sister, Shannon, and the drag queens were inspired by Shannon's modeling photos in the creation of their Katty Kathy doll). The biggest shock of all, though, is that Shannon shot her own face off in an attempt to escape her beautiful life and become a real person, free from materialistic and egotistic concerns. In the final chapter of the novel and the story, after Brandy's life is saved and her appearance restored by the dotting drag queens, Shannon relinquishes her life over to her transformed brother, telling him (to Shane and not to Brandy) that she is leaving him

All my identification, my birth certificate, my everything. You can be Shannon McFarland from now on. My career. The ninety-degree attention. It's yours. All of it. Everyone. I hope it's enough for you. It's everything I have left [, and then demanding of him,] be famous. Be a big social experiment in getting what you don't want. Find value in what we've been taught is worthless. Find good in what

the world says is evil. I'm giving you my life because I want the whole world to know you. I wish the whole world would embrace what it hates.

Find what you're afraid of most and go live there. (Palahniuk 1999 293-294)

In abandoning her old life, the narrator finds her freedom to live whatever life she wants to create. In rejecting what the world expected of them, both Shannon and Shane found a piece of what they wanted in themselves.