

The Wound at the Heart of Vision: Fraught Masculinities, Marked Bodies, and the  
Subject of Disability

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William Bradley Kanyusik

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Siobhan S. Craig

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**Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my mom and dad.

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## Introduction

The Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial in Washington, DC includes two statues of the thirty-second president, both cast in bronze. One, the most recent addition to a memorial with a storied history, is a life-sized depiction of Roosevelt seated in a replica of the wheelchair he designed for himself by adding wheels to a straight-backed, armless kitchen chair (two larger bicycle wheels were added at the front sides of the chair and two smaller ones from a tricycle were affixed to the chair's rear sides). Roosevelt is said to have preferred this chair to more cumbersome standard wheelchairs of the period because he found his invention to be more convenient for work and travel, but also because using it allowed the President to publicly deny that he spent his life largely dependent upon a wheelchair. When asked about his disability, FDR told one newspaper editor: "As a matter of fact, I don't use a wheelchair at all except a little kitchen chair on wheels to get about my room while dressing [ . . . ] and solely for the purposes of saving time" (Roosevelt, quoted in Gallagher 92).

The statue depicting FDR in his wheelchair is a simple affair. Roosevelt sits relaxed and dignified, his back straight, with his two feet planted on the chair's improvised footrest. The wheels are clearly visible: there is no mistaking the chair's purpose. The statue was added to the Roosevelt Memorial in January of 2001 in response to protests surrounding the memorial as originally designed and unveiled in 1997, which depicts the seated president wearing a large cape that entirely obscures any visible marker of his disability. In the interim, as a concession, two small metal casters were added to

the back of the first statue to represent the President's wheelchair. As Christopher Clausen notes: "the committee that designed the memorial had acceded to Roosevelt's wish that he not be shown in [a wheelchair]," but subsequent protests from disability rights groups lead Congress to authorize the construction of a new memorial that reflected the full complexity of FDR's embodiment (24). Where proponents of the original design argued that the elision of Roosevelt's disability from his memorialized likeness respected the President's desire to keep his disability private, critics of the design felt a memorial that kept FDR's disability hidden from public view even as it commemorated him only served to "replicat[e] the segregation and privatization of disability," as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson explained in an article about the controversy published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in January of 2001 (1). Garland-Thomson continues:

The memorial's present and future audiences, we [disability-rights activists and scholars in disability studies] had argued, would consist of people whose consciousness had been transformed by civil-rights movements that included the disability-rights movement, and by the Americans With Disabilities Act, the landmark law that mandates full integration of people with disabilities into American society. (Garland Thomson, "The FDR Memorial: Who Speaks From the Wheelchair" 1)

The controversy surrounding the FDR Memorial indicates some of the complexity surrounding issues of disability identity and representation. The ADA "acknowledges that disability depends upon perception and subjective judgment rather than on objective



bodily states: after identifying disability as an ‘impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities,’ the law concedes that being legally disabled is also a matter of ‘being regarded as having such an impairment’” (Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies* 6). Roosevelt’s consciousness of the impact upon his public life of both his physical bodily impairment and public perception of his identity as a disabled man (exemplified by his concerns regarding his wheelchair as a visible marker of disability) provides a historical example of the multivalent nature of the modalities of disability as a discursive category in American culture.

In her piece written on the occasion of the re-dedication of the FDR memorial in 2001 (and the continued controversy surrounding it at that time), Garland-Thomson notes, “FDR’s strategy in the depression had been to alter the environment to meet the needs of the people. It was parallel, we reasoned, to the idea that people with disabilities need a material situation that accommodates the differences of their bodies and minds” (2). Yet Roosevelt’s own desire to police public awareness of his disability was largely informed by cultural attitudes that remained dominant as late as the mid-twentieth century. Prior to the Second World War, physical disability was viewed as something to be kept secret, to be hidden from public view. Disability rights advocates have argued that this neglect of disabled individuals, which continued well past the end of the First World War, arose in large part from the widespread stigmatization of disability both within the medical establishment and among the general public at the time, attitudes that greatly influenced the manner in which disabling injuries and illnesses were understood and treated. As Hugh Gregory Gallagher, an early disability rights advocate, has noted:

“in a very real although subconsciously motivated sense, the handicapped were viewed as flawed in moral character as well as in body” as late as the 1920s. He explains:

The physical handicap was, as it were, an outward sign of some inner weakness. It was widely held that treatment, to be effective, must have a punitive quality to it. The superintendent of the Society for the Ruptured and Crippled exemplified this attitude as he explained the mission of his society: to provide “science to prune and brace and train the poor little shrunken faces into a development of symmetry and grace; earnest and loving hearts and hands to minister to their material comfort; devoted teachers to stimulate and train the neglected minds and stagnant brains into an activity that will transform from ignorance and vice into moral purity and beauty.” (Gallagher 30)

Here, the doctor’s statement exhibits, in an extremely narrow minded sense, the logic of the docile body as understood by Michel Foucault, taking the understanding of the malleability of human bodies Foucault describes to such a radical extent as to harm the patient through treatment rather than aid physical wellbeing or mobility. Thus we see that, even into the mid-twentieth century, rehabilitative medicine was dominated by the idea that the disabled body should be “subjected, used, transformed, and improved” (Foucault, “Docile Bodies,” 138) and, failing that, hidden from view. As Garland-Thomson has observed, “much of Foucault’s analysis of the modern subject reveals the way marginalized individuals—such as disabled people—have been enclosed, excluded, regulated” (*Extraordinary Bodies* 35).

Disability studies scholars have approached Foucault's work in relation to disability with varying degrees of acceptance and to varying degrees of success. In *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*, Lennard J. Davis explains that most work on the subject of disability "until quite recently, has been written [. . .] by professionals who work with, medically treat, or study the disabled. In that discourse, people with disabilities have been an object of study, and the resulting information produced has constituted a discourse as controlling as any described by Michel Foucault" (2). Tobin Siebers criticizes Foucault for using "natural metaphors to describe the health and vigor of the premodern soldier, while deliberately representing the modern one as malleable, weak and machinelike" (58). Siebers is correct to note that "docility begins to resemble disability" in Foucault's analysis; yet his argument that Foucault himself privileges the able body, that Foucault believes that "hidden underneath the docile body—the body invented by the modern age and now recognized as the only body—is the able body" mischaracterizes Foucault's views on subjectivity, in which the 'disabled body' *and* the 'able body' would both be concepts produced as functions of a culture's power structures.

While scholars in disability studies have often read disability in literature and film primarily as a problematic signifier for otherness, and psychoanalytic film critics have seen disability more broadly as a representation of lack itself, I contend that neither of these positions fully accounts for the role disability assumes in literary and cinematic texts produced in the United States following World War II. My scholarship seeks to reconcile tensions in contemporary film theory between traditional scholars who restrict

themselves to purely visual analyses of the film medium and work by more recent critics who seek to overturn the ‘regime of vision’ in film studies by focusing instead on the role of physical sensation in the experience of an ‘embodied’ film spectator. More broadly, I situate my project at the intersection of gender studies, disability studies, and the recent turn to phenomenological film theory in the discipline of film studies. From a disability studies perspective, the reality of disability is often described as both an effect of cultural stigmatization and an embodied reality—in an ableist culture, disabled people are seen as different, and feel this difference in their embodied selves. For some disability studies theorists, post-structuralist theorizations of the body cannot ‘feel’ disability and, as such, cannot take a full account of disability identity. The recent bodily turn in film theory represents an attempt to ‘flesh out’ understandings of film spectatorship by taking a fuller account of the subject position of the film viewer than afforded by the primarily visual paradigm of psychoanalytic film theory. I place my own analysis of postwar visual culture in a broader context of narratives—both literary and cinematic—that demonstrate difficulties faced by disabled individuals seeking recognition through the ableist cultural narratives of the World War II-era.

Although Henri-Jacques Stiker argues that the modern view of disability emerged following the First World War with the development of the modern prosthetic device and an accompanying shift to a rehabilitative model of treatment for veterans who were disabled as a result of their military service, the “new awareness of disability” (121-124) precipitated by the unprecedented violence of the First World War identified by the author was only further exacerbated by the events of the Second World War. The crisis of

masculinity I discuss in this dissertation, though it began in many ways with the events of the First World War, does not reach full fruition until after the Second World War approximately thirty years later in an immense codification of discourse surrounding masculinity and the able body, which in many ways still operates today. In a sense, then, I am borrowing a theoretical move from Foucault, who in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality* argued that “what is peculiar to modern societies, in fact, is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it *ad infinitum*, while exploiting it as *the secret*” (35). Foucault postulates that what distinguishes modern discourse about sexuality is not the repression of sexuality but the proliferation of controlling discourses surrounding it:

power mechanisms that functioned in such a way that discourse on sex [. . .] became essential. Toward the beginning of the eighteenth century, there emerged a political, economic, and technical incitement to talk about sex. And not so much in the form of a general theory of sexuality as in the form of analysis, stocktaking, classification, and specification, of quantitative or casual studies [that strove] to take sex “into account.” (23-24)

Foucault thus traces a crisis of sexual definition beginning in Europe as early as the late seventeenth century and culminating in at the end of the nineteenth century in an explosion of discourse surrounding sexuality through which “there was installed [. . .] an apparatus for producing an ever greater quantity of discourse about sex, capable of functioning and taking effect in its very economy.” I would like to suggest that the

Second World War functions, for the United States, as a similar historical moment for understandings of disability.

My project is the first of its kind in that it attempts to locate the birth of current discourses surrounding disability and masculinity in a specific historical moment. Although treatment of physical disability had become much less punitive by the end of the Second World War in the mid-1940s, disability itself was still highly stigmatized in many ways even as it grew to be more accepted in American society in general. As disabled individuals became more accepted and visible within society, disability itself was subjected to greater scrutiny by social apparatuses that evolved subsequent to the end of the First World War, in many cases directly from the military's own power mechanisms, which often attempted to connect deviations in the body from assumed norms to the essential nature of disabled subjects themselves. Some of these specific mechanisms were officially instituted as early as the First World War, but many of them developed and proliferated subsequent to that conflict. David Serlin notes that:

during the draft for the Great War in 1917, for example, the army institutionalized examinations for "patulous anus," during which a gloved physician tested a male recruit's sphincter muscle to see if it had lost proper resistance due to unnatural activities. In slightly less invasive settings, trained examiners also began to apply the methods of physical anthropology to determine the fitness of potential soldiers. This marked a huge methodological shift from the ways that recruitment manuals and inspection officers had assumed that visible ablebodiedness—that is, what

could be measured with the naked eye—was a prerequisite for serving in the military. (Serlin 160)

What remains important to note, however, is that although the First World War can again be seen as the origin of a paradigm shift in thinking about presumed links between deviance and non-normative embodiment, we do not see the full consequences of this initial shift until later, in the context of World War II. Similarly, the “anthropological approach to the study of soldiers to determine their fitness based on racial hierarchies” developed in the 1920s in collaboration with the War Department by Charles B. Davenport and Albert G. Love, who earlier were proponents of the eugenics movement in the United States, “had an enormous influence later during the mobilization for war in Europe and Japan when [the program] was translated into other types of physical fitness.” At this same time, Serlin notes, William Sheldon developed the concept of the *somatotype*, which divides the normative range of body types along a spectrum of bodyweight using the designations endomorph, mesomorph, and ectomorph, categories which themselves came to be implicitly gendered. (160-161).

Serlin argues that by the 1940s, the figure of the masculine mesomorph—characterized by broad shoulders and a lean but muscular physique—presented an idealized form of masculinity in both American popular culture and within the medical establishment. In contrast, the ectomorph body type became associated with “soft rounded hips, fleshy buttocks, gynecomastia (breast tissue deposits), and gestures that might be considered as ‘girlish’” (161). This linking of a specific body type to heteronormative masculinity reinforced the notion that one’s body could be read like a

text, that physical difference merely embodied a more fundamental deviance from society that was essential to the person. Yet the conflation of features of physical embodiment (rounded hips and fleshy buttocks) with a person's mannerisms (gestures that might be considered 'girlish') in the description of the ectomorph demonstrates the extent to which such classifications remain subjective. Nevertheless, images of idealized masculine bodies populated the American imagination during this time, and were circulated throughout the culture through film, on television, and in print ads, ultimately with the explicit purpose of creating a specific image of militarized, able-bodied heteronormative masculinity during the period of the war (162). This proliferation of images and discourse, however, failed to cohere into the stable picture of American masculinity the emerging military-industrial complex sought to produce, and culminated instead in the emergence "by the mid-twentieth century [of] two competing though overlapping ideologies, informed by the symbolic meanings that Americans attached to notions of disability [ . . . ] within U.S. military culture. Both preyed on the fear that normative versions of American masculinity were under attack," Serlin argues. He explains:

In the first, military culture affirmed the military male body as mesomorphic, competent, virile, and heterosexual. As the hostile attitude toward the endomorph made clear, the perceived feminization of the military was an especially potent anxiety among many in the armed forces. [ . . . ] A second and competing military ideology affirmed the disfigured male amputee as mesomorphic, competent, virile, and heterosexual. Patriotic stories about veterans convalescing or undergoing physical



therapy treatments occupied a semipermanent place in news reports, feature films, radio broadcasts, and local and national newspapers. These popular images and narratives were directly influenced by the fiercely heterosexual culture of rehabilitative medicine, especially its orthodox zeal to preserve the masculine status of disabled veterans. Among military and university researchers, rehabilitating an amputee's masculinity along with his body was an implicit goal that exposed the military's discomfort with physical weakness and vulnerability as well as its own homophobia. (170-171)

This preoccupation of postwar American culture with the disabled male body can, in many ways, be tied to two related factors: the increased visibility of disability in American culture during the postwar period as vast numbers of disabled soldiers rejoined society after suffering what would have in earlier periods been life-ending injuries, and an increased focus on the part of the medical and military establishment on bodies that differed from the norm as markers of deviant forms of masculinity. The rehabilitative project of military medicine, though it made great advancements during this time and without question helped countless men adapt to sudden drastic changes to their bodies and their senses of self as a result of war-related injury or trauma, nevertheless cannot be easily separated from broad cultural anxieties surrounding the male body in relation to notions of masculine sufficiency that are fundamentally exclusionary in nature.

Thus, although disability did become increasingly visible in American society following the First World War, the notion of disability proved fundamentally disruptive

to the masculine subject during this time. Disabled masculinity is so unthinkable for Hemingway that disability itself cannot be addressed directly in his first novel, published in 1926. In my first chapter, “The Wound at the Heart of Vision: ‘Impaired’ Masculinities, Disability Metaphors, and the ‘Subject’ of Disability,” I read Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* (1956) as texts exploring links between disability and the depiction of masculinities excluded from normative conceptions of the traditionally gendered family, an exclusion reinforced by the expatriate status of both of the novels’ protagonists. Read together, *Giovanni’s Room* and *The Sun Also Rises* demonstrate that, in postwar contexts, disability and illness come to be seen as preventing male figures that are ill or disabled from fulfilling the sexually aggressive role often associated with a masculine figure in a heterosexual relationship. This chapter also attempts to account for the unique subject position created when a putatively able-bodied masculine subject that becomes disabled following an unexpected injury continues to identify with a narrative of able-bodied masculine sufficiency he now perceives as irrevocably lost. Where *The Sun Also Rises* depicts such a subject position specifically, *Giovanni’s Room*, through its association of non-normative masculinity with disease and other forms of physical impairment, demonstrates the workings of a similarly fraught subject position occupied by homosexuality in the post-World War II context. In this chapter, I read formations of disabled and queer masculinity in conjunction and against one another, using Judith Butler’s post-structuralist account of the materialization of the gendered body and Eve Sedgwick’s discussion of the closet as a structure of knowledge formation to unpack the

way in which disability as a subject position functions in relation to other forms of otherness and alterity in the postwar period. In this way, I seek to account for the way in which disability as a representative trope comes to be rhetorically impacted upon other identity formations. This discussion of disability as a unique subject position in a postwar context is subsequently developed throughout the remainder of my dissertation.

My second chapter, “Disability, Masculinity, and the American War Documentary,” investigates propaganda images produced by the War Department that played a crucial role in regulating normative notions of masculinity in postwar America. I focus in particular on the documentary films made by John Huston during his enlistment in the U.S. Army during the Second World War. Unedited footage of John Huston’s war documentaries deemed too controversial to be released to the public by the military, now housed at the National Archives, demonstrates the extent to which depictions of lasting disability threaten heteronormative narratives of American masculinity. This chapter focuses in particular on the final two films Huston made for the War Department, *Battle of San Pietro* (1945) and *Let There Be Light* (1946). Where the former film was highly censored by the military to limit its depiction of the lasting effects of wartime injuries, the latter film further stigmatizes physical disability in order to posit psychological war trauma as easily treatable in comparison to physical war wounds. This chapter deals with the depiction of rehabilitative medicine in official filmic documents commissioned by the United States military, but it is also, more broadly, is an investigation of the nature of the documentary medium itself, using Mary Ann Doane’s theories of cinematic contingency

and the archive to examine Huston's films as a case study to explore the complexity involved in making sense of history through archival material like documentary films.

My third chapter, "The Problem of Recognition: The Disabled Male Veteran and Masculinity as Spectacle," explores issues of gender and sexuality and the depiction of physical disability in William Wyler's *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946). In the film, protagonist Homer Parish—played by disabled non-actor Harold Russell—faces difficulty renegotiating newly altered relationships with his loved ones while adjusting to the physical limitations faced by a double amputee. Wyler's film acknowledges the real life difficulties involved in physical disability while emphasizing how disability often undermines traditional notions of masculinity in society. Wyler's visuals—which draw on documentary aesthetics for realism—challenge assumptions about "normal" bodies, anticipating current work by theorists of embodiment and subjectivity like Judith Butler and demonstrating that our bodies cannot be understood apart from the symbolic network of the culture in which we live. This chapter also adopts a transnational perspective to place my discussion of American responses to disability in the wake of war in dialogue with texts produced by European countries that experienced the violence of the Second World War directly on their own shores, contrasting the postwar crisis of American masculinity depicted in Wyler's film with the examination of the post-fascist masculine subject in Italian neorealism.

My fourth chapter, "The Returning and the Repressed: Economies of Violence and the Anxieties of the Homefront," discusses texts that specifically address the violence inherent in the formation of masculine subjectivity, exploring how disability interacts

with the formation of heteronormative masculinity as constituted through the exclusion of any term seen to destabilize that subject position. The first half of the chapter discusses Ann Petry's novel *Country Place* (1947), Richard Brooks's novel *The Brick Foxhole* (1945), and Ted Allenby's narrative from Studs Terkel's "*The Good War*": *An Oral History of World War II* (1985), three texts that depict the violence elicited by threats to masculine sufficiency as narrowly defined in the World War II-era period. Where Petry and Brooks's novels are accounts of the men who respond violently to external threats to masculinity as narrowly-defined in the postwar period, in his interview with Terkel, Ted Allenby discusses his use of violence as a tactic to deal with his own homosexuality while serving as a closeted soldier in the marines and then the navy from the mid-1940s to the early 1960s. The chapter's second half consists of an extended reading of John Sturges's *Bad Day at Black Rock* (1955), a film in which the inclusion of a disabled veteran as the protagonist in a western film destabilizes all standard narratives of both disability and masculinity. Ultimately, this chapter uses these personal accounts to detail the broad social effects of the culmination of the culture of scrutiny that developed following the Second World War as the United States moved into the Cold War, as cultural understandings of disability and masculinity became increasingly complex.

I close my dissertation with a coda entitled "FDR's 'Splendid Deception,' or the American Presidency-as-Closet," which discusses Hugh Gregory Gallagher's 1985 non-fiction book *FDR's Splendid Deception*, a biography written by the author (an early disability rights advocate) that focuses on Roosevelt's experiences with polio and the way in which the lasting physical effects of the illness influenced the President's public

persona. In this brief section, I argue that Gallagher's interest in Roosevelt's efforts to control public awareness of his disability and the author's fascination with FDR's sexuality result in a depiction of the President's disability identity specifically as a closeted formation. Gallagher's text constructs its version of FDR as a closeted subject in precisely the manner described by Sedgwick in her landmark 1990 book *The Epistemology of the Closet*; moreover, Gallagher's book itself enacts a problematic 'unveiling' of Roosevelt's disability through the text's inclusion of eighteen "long suppressed photos" of Roosevelt using his wheelchair.<sup>1</sup> This coda concludes my dissertation by returning to the figure of FDR as an ambivalent expression of World War II-era masculinity while also returning specifically to notions of the closet as understood by Sedgwick as a potential way to understand the subject position of the disabled individual.

World War II fundamentally changed our understanding of gender and sexuality by unsettling established social roles during the conflict, but the role of the violence of war in precipitating these changes should not be understated. Under European fascism, national myths depended on heteronormative notions of masculinity for their coherence; after the war, the diminished status of the post-fascist male subject rendered fascist ideology untenable, while the devastated landscapes of war-torn countries served as an ever-present reminder for those living in Europe after 1945 of the Second World War's unprecedented levels of violence and destruction (Judt 13, 19). In contrast, the physical

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<sup>1</sup> This quotation is taken from the book jacket of the original hardcover edition of *Splendid Deception* promoting the inclusion of these photos as a selling point of the book.

landscape of the United States, left largely untouched by war, stood in stark opposition to the disorder of postwar Europe. Yet, despite striking differences between postwar life in Europe and America, the United States nonetheless encountered similar uncertainties to those countries that experienced wartime violence directly. Understandings of postwar disability, however, differed between Europe and the United States. Returning home from war, disabled American GIs learned to live with broken bodies presenting a constant reminder of the lasting impact of wartime violence otherwise absent in America's pristine postwar landscape; these men faced particularly pronounced difficulties reintegrating into postwar American society, due largely to the destabilizing effect of physical disability on traditional, heteronormative notions of masculinity. While historical traumas such as war challenge the legibility of even 'normative' masculinities, it is my contention that representations of wartime disability—which stage a sudden loss of masculinity in a subject that once epitomized maleness through his physicality—uniquely demonstrate the fraught and fragile nature of all masculinities in the postwar era.

**Chapter 1-The Wound at the Heart of Vision: ‘Impaired’ Masculinities, Disability Metaphors, and the ‘Subject’ of Disability**

This chapter examines two texts of American expatriate experience in which illness or disability cause or stand in for a male protagonist’s exclusion from postwar American society. Focusing on Ernest Hemingway’s first full-length novel, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), and James Baldwin’s second novel, *Giovanni’s Room* (1956), I read these depictions of ‘impaired’ masculinity against each other to trace changes in interconnected notions of wellness, the able body, and heteronormative masculinity from the end of the First World War in 1918 to the end of the Second World War in 1945. These works, representing early touchstones in the literary careers of both writers, bracket my study of postwar masculinity and disability. Though a thirty-year timespan separates the two novels I will discuss, both works are structured by a similar relationship between ableist notions of bodily health and heteronormative notions of American masculine identity. Both Jake Barnes and David, the novels’ respective protagonists, struggle with issues of self-definition tied explicitly to a similar perception that their divergence from masculinity as heteronormatively constructed marks them as fundamentally different in essence from other ‘normal’ men. This difference is experienced so palpably by both figures that their exclusion from postwar America is reinforced in by a self-imposed exile from their home country; moreover, both texts depict their protagonist’s deviation from the norm through a structure of signification associating wellness and ability with heteronormative masculinity and American identity.



Read together, *Giovanni's Room* and *The Sun Also Rises* demonstrate how, in the postwar context, disability and illness come to be seen as preventing male figures who are ill or disabled from fulfilling the sexually aggressive role often associated with a masculine figure in a heterosexual relationship. Moreover, both Hemingway and Baldwin's novels explicate relationships between the operation of the closet as understood by Eve Sedgwick and cultural understandings of masculinity, the able body, and heteronormativity in ways that are similar, but distinct, in each text—a relationship so foundational to the meaning of the two texts that it permeates the language of both. Moreover, the important distinction that, at heart, *The Sun Also Rises* concerns disability as a cultural signifier for otherness and alienation while *Giovanni's Room* deals with homosexuality and its cultural valences makes a comparison of the linguistic and rhetorical structures of the two works particularly fruitful, rather than contradictory. None of the central characters in *The Sun Also Rises* are (ostensibly) homosexual, yet Jake Barnes's wartime injury and resulting impotence destabilizes the masculinity of all of the male figures present in the text—potent or not—to the extent that gender, too, becomes fluid and unstable as constructed by the novel. Likewise, all of the characters in *Giovanni's Room*, both heterosexual and homosexual, are depicted as being, strictly speaking, able bodied; yet structures of wellness and straightness are so closely aligned in the novel as to be all but indistinguishable. This is not to suggest, however, that disability identity and the operation of the closet are functionally one and the same; rather, that disability, sexuality, and gender identity are so powerfully over-determined in

heterosexist ableist society as to be always already implicated in each other's cultural significance.

In reaction to the prevalent tendency in disability studies to position disability as a “master trope,” evinced by still-canonical early works of disability studies like Mitchell and Snyder's *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and The Dependencies of Discourse*, one of my interests in my dissertation is to show how disability comes to be rhetorically impacted<sup>2</sup> upon other discourses (particularly those of race, gender, and sexual identity) in a way which complicates, but does not subsume, other aspects of identity formation for the subject. Although recent works of scholarship gesture towards a more complex understanding of the place of disability in identity formation, the tendency remains to construct disability identity as a newly understood transcendental signifier, through the logic that disability as a discursive category somehow trumps other ‘minority’ identities because disability is at once minoritizing and universal (because most individuals are likely to experience some form of disabling condition at one point or another during their lives.)<sup>3</sup> In this dissertation, I am particularly interested in examining how a sudden onset of disability impacts the sense of self of a person whose identity was, at least in part, predicated on the possession of an ‘able’ body, an experience which makes particularly

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<sup>2</sup> A phrase used by Sedgwick to describe the way in which the homosexual signification comes to be overdetermined in the knowledge structures and cultural productions of modern society, a phenomenon I will discuss at greater length later in this chapter.

<sup>3</sup> Margarit Shildrick's book *Dangerous Discourses of Disability, Subjectivity, and Sexuality* (2009), for example, performs a complex and nuanced reworking of disability subjectivity, combining the insights of phenomenology, psychoanalysis, queer theory, and a Deleuzian investigation of “global corporealities,” to ultimately ask: “what would it mean, ontologically and ethically, to reposition dis/ability as the common underpinning of human becoming” (10).

visible the structures enabling our shared notions of heteronormative masculinity. As such, I read Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* as a dramatization of what happens when an unexpected injury transforms a subject's body from 'able' to 'disabled' and, as such, shifts the individual's subject position *within* the gendering matrix to one that exists outside that matrix—this is the heart of Jake Barnes's wound, and his dual identification with both normative and abject positions in postwar society actually in effect *heightens* his experience of difference.

James Baldwin's evocation of a similarly divided subjectivity through his closeted protagonist David is a large part of what makes *Giovanni's Room* such a complex work, and has been a significant source of the contentious nature of the critical debates surrounding the novel. Because *Giovanni's Room* was initially marginalized both by the literary establishment at the time of its publication<sup>4</sup> and within certain circles of African-American studies due to the book's homosexual content, a good deal of important scholarship has been devoted to unpacking the relationship between race and sexual identity present in the novel. Robert Reid-Pharr has written that viewing the novel "as Baldwin's anomaly, the work with no black characters" long caused scholars to disregard the significance of blackness within the text; Reid-Pharr, in contrast, sees racial identity as one of the text's central concerns, arguing "that the question of blackness, precisely because of its very apparent absence, screams out at the turn of every page" of a novel in

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<sup>4</sup> As Josep M. Armengol explains, Alfred A. Knopf rejected Baldwin's second novel after publishing *Go Tell it on the Mountain* due to the publishing company's concerns over the homosexual content of *Giovanni's Room*, and notes the novel's cool reception with critics at the time of its release as well: "many reviewers in the mainstream press described Baldwin's new novel as sexually deviant, [and] African American critics saw it as racially deviant as well" (671).

which “race is one of the central signifiers” (*Gay Black Man* 125,103). More recently, Josep M. Armengol has discussed connections between blackness and homosexuality as constructed by Baldwin in *Giovanni’s Room*, arguing “that in *Giovanni’s Room*, as in *Another Country* [. . .], race is deflected onto sexuality with the result that whiteness is transvalued as heterosexuality, just as homosexuality becomes associated with blackness, both literally and metaphorically” (673). To disregard the role of race in *Giovanni’s Room* would be to do violence to Baldwin’s text, and results in an oversimplified reading of his novel. Yet it is crucial to note that an experience of exclusion from society combined with the desire to identify oneself with the normative subject position is often a feature of nearly all subjectivities, particularly those that embody ‘minority’ identities.

#### I) Dangerous Supplements and The Epistemology of the Closet

In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick argues that a crisis of homo/heterosexual definition inflects most crucial spaces of knowledge production in modern Western culture to such an extent that since the end of the nineteenth century the ‘open secret’ of the closet has come to structure our understanding of both sexual and gender identity in fundamental way. Sedgwick follows Foucault in asserting that this crisis of knowledge is “consequently and quite indelibly marked with the historical specificity of homosocial/homosexual definition, notably but not exclusively male, from around the turn of the century” (72). Sexual identity within the epistemology of the closet rests on a socially determined structure of knowledge and secrecy, acknowledgement and disavowal, that produces in individuals a constant, subtle, and largely unconscious

policing of both self and other as constructed individually (through internalized norms of gender), and interpersonally (through our daily interactions with friends, loved ones, acquaintances, and strangers).

In her reading of Melville's *Billy Budd*, Sedgwick foregrounds the extent to which sexual knowledge and, ultimately, knowledge more generally, is not predicated on meaning derived unproblematically through direct interaction with the world; instead, knowledge of sexuality accrues through supplemental meanings in which hetero/homosexual definition becomes axiomatic as *the* open secret, which—despite its cultural centrality—remains organized around “a radical and irreducible incoherence” (85): this “process, narrowly bordered at first in European culture but sharply broadened and accelerated after the late eighteenth century, by which ‘knowledge’ and ‘sex’ become conceptually inseparable from each other—so that knowledge means in the first place sexual knowledge; ignorance, sexual ignorance; and epistemological pressure of any sort seems a force increasingly saturated with sexual impulsion—was sketched in Volume I of Foucault's *History of Sexuality*” (73). In her book, Sedgwick conducts a series of close readings of canonical texts (many of which have been previously identified as containing strongly gay-themed undercurrents) to demonstrate the centrality of homo/heterosexual definition to broader notions of identity and knowledge; in so doing, she attempts to unpack the complex network through which homosexual identity is signified and encoded in texts that express homosexual themes either covertly or explicitly. Sedgwick writes:

I have described this crossing of epistemology with thematics as a  
 ‘rhetorical impaction.’ The adjective is appropriate because such a

crossing can be effected only through a distinctive *reader*-relation imposed by text and narrator. The implicit compact by which novel-readers voluntarily plunge into worlds that strip them, however temporarily, of the painfully acquired cognitive maps of their ordinary lives [. . .] on condition of an invisibility that promises cognitive exemption and eventual privilege, creates, especially at the beginning of books, a space of high anxiety and dependence. [. . .] Any appeal, for instance, to or beyond ‘knowledge of the world’ depends for its enormous novelistic force on the anxious surplus of this early overidentification with the novel’s organizing eye. (97)

Of note in the above description of how novels produce and convey knowledge is the extent to which signification depends on the surplus produced through the ‘rhetorical impaction’ of meanings beyond what is made explicit by the words an author uses to effect meaning in a text. Jacques Derrida’s concept of linguistic supplement strongly influences Sedgwick’s understanding of the process of rhetorical impaction described in *Epistemology of the Closet*. Derrida outlines his conception of linguistic supplement in *Of Grammatology* through a reading of Rousseau’s *Confessions*, in an essay entitled “That Dangerous Supplement.” As Barbara Johnson notes, Derrida’s understanding of supplementarity plays upon the notion that “in French, the word *supplément* has two meanings: it means both “an addition” and “a substitute.” Johnson explains:

The logic of the supplement wrenches apart the neatness of the metaphysical binary oppositions. Instead of “A is opposed to B” we have

“B is both added to A and replaces A.” A and B are no longer opposed, nor are they equivalent. Indeed, they are no longer even equivalent to themselves. They are their own difference from themselves. “Writing,” for example, no longer means simply “words on a page,” but rather any differential trace structure, a structure that *also* inhabits speech. “Writing” and “speech” can therefore no longer be simply opposed, but neither have they become identical. Rather, the very notion of their “identities” is put in question. (Johnson xiii)

Key for Derrida is that although Rousseau in his text attempts to keep the two meanings of *supplément* absolutely distinct, in actual practice the “the shadow presence of the other meaning is always there to undermine the distinction.” For this reason, Rousseau’s text on some level always functions against its own intentions. Yet, as Derrida demonstrates, all texts are haunted by the shadow presence of supplementary meanings that escape the intention of the author in the moment of writing: texts function against themselves “not just by creating ambiguity, but by inscribing a *systematic* ‘other message’ behind or through what’s being said” (xiii.) For Sedgwick, such supplementarity allows texts like Melville’s *Billy Budd*, Wilde’s *Picture of Dorian Gray*, and James’s “The Beast in the Jungle” to function as meditations on homosexual themes and/or to signify homosexual identity without depicting homosexuality ‘itself’ or mentioning it explicitly. This type of signification is possible because the crisis of homo/heterosexual definition Sedgwick describes is so strong and pervasive in twentieth-century Western culture that its shadow

presence permeates all its relationships, and resonates in many of the texts the culture produces.

Derrida's own description of linguistic supplement and its implications for practices of writing and reading demonstrate the extent to which his ideas underlie Sedgwick's understanding of the broader implications of the relations of the closet, and his discussion helps further unpack this relationship. As Derrida notes, the supplement is, by definition, an exterior addition to the meaning of the text that exceeds the intention of the author in the moment of writing (145). He explains the workings of this exteriority through his discussion of Rousseau's writing practice in *The Confessions*, and insists that to understand the nature of linguistic supplement in relation to Rousseau's writing, one must take equal account of one's own *reading* practice in the process through which meaning is produced:

The question is therefore not only of Rousseau's writing but also of our reading. We should begin by taking rigorous account of this *being held within [prise]* or this *surprise*: the writer writes *in* a language and *in* a logic whose proper system, laws, and life his discourse by definition cannot dominate absolutely. He uses them only by letting himself, after a fashion and up to a point, be governed by the system. And the reading must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of language that he uses. This relationship is not a certain



quantitative distribution of shadow and light, of weakness and force, but a signifying structure that critical reading should *produce*. (158)

Thus, an author is to a certain extent *caught* in the matrix of signification he or she uses to create meaning, and the reader may, through his or her own reading practice, access certain supplemental meanings present in a given text beyond those specifically intended by an author in the moment of writing. Any meaning conveyed by a text is therefore to some extent unstable. Applying this concept more broadly to the nature of knowledge and identity formation, as Sedgwick does, helps us to understand the complex nature of identities that are socially constructed yet often come to be perceived as somehow essential, immutable, and even totalizing in relation to the subject's identity. As Sedgwick demonstrates throughout her book, the instability of the social structure the epistemology of the closet has concrete effects in the real world, notably in the form of violence in cases of so-called 'homosexual panic.'<sup>5</sup>

Sedgwick also discusses different ways literary texts, most notably *Billy Budd* and "The Beast in the Jungle" explore homosexual panic in relation to various characters' anxieties surrounding tensions between one's public persona and his or her private identity. The narrative of "The Beast in the Jungle," for example, is structured around an absent epistemological center, characterized by a deferral of meaning rather than its arrival: John Marcher waits "for the thing to happen that never does happen," an event unnamed in the text, which the protagonist has from his earliest days known will

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<sup>5</sup> Introducing her argument in *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick discusses the use of the concept of "homosexual panic" as a legal justification for hate crimes in contemporary society, which has been used to "permit and 'place,' by pathologizing, the enactment of a socially sanctioned prejudice against one stigmatized minority" (19).

someday occur, and, in occurring, will determine in a fundamental way the course of his life subsequent to that event (253). Unspecified within the story and central to James's depiction of his protagonist, this event becomes over-determined and overinvested with meaning. Sedgwick explains:

For John Marcher, let us hypothesize, the future secret—the secret of his hidden fate—importantly includes, though is not necessarily limited to, the possibility of something homosexual. For *Marcher*, the presence or possibility of a homosexual meaning attached to the inner, the future, secret has exactly the reifying, totalizing, and binding effect we described earlier in regard to the phenomenon of the Unspeakable. Whatever (Marcher feels) may be discovered along those lines, it is, in the view of his panic, *one* thing, and the worst thing, “the superstition of the Beast” (394). His readiness to organize the whole course of his life around the preparation for it—the defense against it—remakes his life monolithically in the image of *its* monolith of, in his view, the inseparability of homosexual desire, yielding, discovery, scandal, shame, annihilation. Finally, he has “but one desire left”: that *it* be “decently proportional to the posture he had kept, all his life, in the threatened presence of it.” (205)

James's careful construction of his story in this way foregrounds both the intersubjective nature of identity formation and the extent to which identity formation as such remains an ongoing process: one can never fully arrive at their own identity; one is always “in process.” James depicts the centrality of the perspective of *the other* to one's sense of self

by distributing the shared burden of Marcher's "secret" between the protagonist and his close friend, May Bartram. In the story, John Marcher's life centers around his "sense of being kept for something rare and strange, possibly prodigious and terrible, that would sooner or later happen to [him]": an indistinct sense, which, in the novel, James references as "the deepest thing within" Marcher himself. Both Marcher and Bartram are therefore said to possess an understanding of Marcher in his essential nature, which is to some extent shared but, importantly, is not identical. This perspectival split is in part what allows James to keep Marcher's secret both essentially indeterminate and always, to some extent, deferred within the structure of the narrative. Moreover, the relationship created by the knowledge shared between Marcher and Bartram creates a reciprocal structure so central to both their identities that their very status as human becomes the implicit stake of their strange friendship, a relationship that remains pointedly ambiguous throughout the story. Discussing the implications of their relationship, May Bartram tells Marcher that "if you've had your woman, I've had [. . .] my man." Marcher responds by asking her if she feels this makes her "all right," and she replies: "I don't know why it shouldn't make me—humanly, which is what we're speaking of—as right as it makes you." Of crucial importance in this exchange is the instability it invokes: May Bartram is only *all right*, *only human*, to the extent that her association with Marcher marks her as so (257). Moreover, crucial to Sedgwick's analysis is the notion that "The Beast in the Jungle" evokes homosexual themes even though specific homosexual content remains entirely absent in the text: "This is how it happens that the outer secret, the secret of having a secret, functions, in Marcher's life, precisely as *the closet*. It is not a closet in

which there is a homosexual man, for Marcher is not a homosexual man. Instead, it is the closet of, simply, the homosexual secret—the closet of imagining *a* homosexual secret. Yet it is unmistakable that Marcher lives as one who is *in the closet*” (205). Thus, “The Beast in the Jungle” is instructive in revealing both the workings of the closet and the extent to which these dynamics structure our daily lives, relationships, and status as human beings: coming to understand what May Bartrand has told him, Marcher states: “You help me to pass for a man like any other. So if I *am*, as I understand you, you’re not compromised”; Marcher must “repay” the debt he incurs to May Bartram in this economy, she says, “by going on as you are” (258). Though Sedgwick argues “the element of deceiving the world, of window dressing, comes into their relationship *only* because of the compulsion he feels to invest it with the legitimating stamp of visible, institutionalized genitality,” I would assert (as in my above discussion of Marcher and Bartram’s relationship) that the economy of their particular arrangement *requires* from Marcher his continued closeted appearance, even following Bartram’s death (206).

## II) Disability, Melancholic Modernism, and the Derridean Economy of *The Sun Also Rises*

The notion of passing—of one’s ability to conform in appearance to a category of personhood (e.g., race, gender, or sexuality) while in some sense embodying a difference from the way in which the category is normatively constructed—is a central feature of *The Sun Also Rises* and the novel’s depiction of disability identity. The novel tells the story of Jake Barnes, a man injured in the First World War who is, as a result of his

injury, rendered impotent and thus prevented from carrying out a romantic relationship with Brett Ashley, a woman with whom he meets and falls in love during his convalescence in an Italian hospital following his injury. The novel follows Jake and his friends, expatriates living in Paris following the end of the war, as representatives of the Lost Generation—individuals, identified by the term coined by Gertrude Stein, and associated with the widespread dissolution that accompanied the end of World War I. In the novel, Hemingway uses Jake’s impotence as a symbol representing all that has been lost as a result of the Great War. Discussing Jake’s disability and its broader significance within the narrative of *The Sun Also Rises*, Greg Forster writes:

The war wound clearly stands as the psychic yet physical sign of a lost masculine potency. Precisely because he was once “whole,” and precisely because he has lost that wholeness in a war dividing the old world from the new, Jake bears an emblematically modern male consciousness, haunted by the memory of a potency and plentitude it cannot recover. The wound defines him as fundamentally lacking, devoid of authentic substance; it suggests that the thing which once gave content to identity by differentiating men hierarchically from women—the penis—is now both literally and structurally inaccessible. (60)

On a conscious level, Jake’s understanding of his injury exhibits “the conflation of desire with the real” that Judith Butler criticizes in *Gender Trouble* as a central feature of the formation of a heteronormative gender identity: “the belief that it is parts of the body, the ‘literal’ penis, the ‘literal’ vagina, which cause pleasure and desire [that] is precisely the

kind of literalizing fantasy characteristic of the syndrome of melancholic heterosexuality” (96). It is for this reason that Jake’s injury can be used by Hemingway to signify a metaphorical wounding of all men as a result of the First World War and, more broadly, for the epistemological break separating the prewar and postwar worlds. In his argument, Forter locates the dissolution accompanying the Great War and its ambivalent resolution within the context of accompanying social changes that occurred between the end of the 1800s and the early to mid-1900s, as “opportunities for self-making afforded by small-scale capitalism began to disappear [and] men became increasingly reduced to parts in a bureaucratic machine unable to achieve the sense of autonomy so central to the meaning of manhood they inherited.” Added to this sense of economic disenfranchisement, Forter notes, was an increased challenge to “middle class male social power [. . .] by women and ethnic minorities” and an accompanying concern regarding the “feminizing effects of modern urban living” produced by these changes (56). Although Forter is correct in identifying literary modernism as a response to these social crises, the modernist movement is also more generally understood as a response to the physical and psychological toll of the First World War’s unprecedented violence, which ultimately resulted in a near-total loss of faith in the old world’s previously taken for granted notions of a civilization based on rigid class distinctions and a notion that war was an honorable and noble pursuit (Judt 5)<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> My third chapter contains an in-depth discussion of Judt’s *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*, focusing in particular on the contrast the historian implicitly draws in his book between a feminized postwar Europe reduced to rubble and a United States that has been remasculinized by war and newly arrived as a world power following the conclusion of the war.

A crucial element of Jake Barnes's war wound allowing it to function as it does in *The Sun Also Rises* is the way in which the wound marks Barnes's being as other—entirely changed from his pre-injury self—while remaining essentially unnoticeable to others in the course of everyday, casual interactions. Although both the reader and Jake (as well as Jake's close friends) remain constantly aware during the course of the novel of the implications of Jake's injury, he is neither scarred nor debilitated in a way noticeable to the casual observer. As such, the figure of Jake Barnes can simultaneously represent both an impossibly idealized masculinity and its irrevocable absence and loss. Barnes is not subject to the stigmatization that might be elicited by a visible physical disability, yet he remains conscious of his feeling that he no longer qualifies as a man in a sense that he understands. By eliding any direct visual representation of Jake's injured body in the novel and referencing the injury for the most part only obliquely, Hemingway heightens the effect of this representative strategy, increasing the valences of Jake's disability in the text. Key moments in the book when Barnes gazes at his injured body utilize a careful separation of the viewpoint given to the reader through Jake's first person narration and the characters own view of himself, so that the specific details of Jake's injury remain withheld from the reader, as in this passage: "Undressing, I looked at myself in the mirror of the big armoire beside the bed. That was a typically French way to furnish a room. Practical, I suppose. Of all the ways to be wounded. I suppose it was funny. I put on my pajamas and got into bed" (38). Discussing this episode, Forter argues, "the power of the scene derives in part from the fact that Jake declines to name the wound, as well as from his refusal to tell us what exactly he's feeling. Such omissions and understatements load

his [subsequent] crying with an emotional intensity that resides in its very lack of specificity” (66). Moreover, even in this instance, the reader retains his or her view of Jake as *intact*, unscarred: withholding the sight of Jake’s scarred body has the strange effect of heightening our awareness of the contrast between Jake’s former able-bodied self and the feelings regarding his newly altered sense of identity evoked by this particular scene.

Forter posits a melancholic relationship between literary modernism and post-World War I masculinity, writing that modernism’s responses to crises of gender identity “could be said to remain melancholically fixated on a lost masculine ideal that is fundamentally toxic, and that they themselves show to be unlivable. This fixation makes it impossible to mourn or fully work through their losses—or to see in those losses an opportunity for reinventing masculinity in a less rigidly constrained, less psychically defensive, and less socially destructive fashion” (59). Forter identifies such a melancholy understanding of idealized masculinity at work in *The Sun Also Rises*: “a version of manhood Jake’s wound has rendered increasingly difficult to sustain [. . .] a masculinity committed to penetration as the sign of sexual mastery” (67). Hemingway’s dependence on such a construction of masculinity in his writing puts his male characters in an inescapable double-bind, Forter asserts, wherein “the wound also carries the opposite meaning: the loss of a genteel, sentimental, and implicitly feminine masculinity,” associated in the novel (problematically) with Robert Cohn. “The problem with Cohn,” Forter asserts, “is that he *has not himself been wounded*.” Forter explains:



There are other characters in the novel of whom this is literally true—Mike, Bill, and Brett, for example. But they at least “know about” the wound; they have been metaphorically, if not literally, damaged, and have and have sufferance the kind of disillusionment the novel in part approves. [. . .] Cohn, in contrast, continues to behave as if a host of values the wound renders hollow are still in fact live possibilities. (60-61)

The version of masculinity constructed by Hemingway in *The Sun Also Rises* (and, more generally, in the rest of his work) is thus radically and fundamentally unstable: even phallic mastery comes, paradoxically, to represent a kind of loss of potency as “the absence of the wound works to castrate Cohn. The actual loss of a penis, in contrast, functions paradoxically as the sign of real manliness, saving Jake from [. . .] the risk of sentimental softening that would render him, in Hemingway’s eyes, insufficiently ‘hard,’ insufficiently modern—and therefore, insufficiently manly” (61). Hemingway’s use of a disability metaphor in his text, though highly problematic, is thus much more complex than the symbolic uses of disability discussed by David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder in *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*, which asserts that disability frequently functions in texts as a cultural signifier for otherness wherein “disability provides a common formula for differentiating a character’s uniqueness through the identifying features of physical ‘quirks’ or idiosyncrasies” such that “disability cannot be accommodated within the ranks of the norm(als), and, thus, the options for dealing with the difference that drives the story’s plot is twofold: a disability is either left behind or punished for its lack of conformity” (10, 56). Mitchell and Snyder

mention *The Sun Also Rises* in passing in their wide-ranging study, arguing “the novel deviates from the prototypical modernist equation of disability with social collapse. In this way Hemingway accomplishes a full-fledged disability critique of contemporary society when his protagonist openly refuses to ‘work up’ his disability into a metaphor for the lost generation at the suggestion of his fishing buddy” (165). This assertion is generous at best, and decontextualizes Jake’s disability—divorcing its significance in the text from the novel’s complicated but ultimately troubling attitude toward most forms of otherness and alterity; moreover, reading Jake Barnes’s impotence as *narrative prosthesis* in this way elides disability’s actual function in the novel, which is to mark the protagonist simultaneously as *other* and as an *everyman*.

Nevertheless, the version of masculinity Hemingway celebrates in his work, and in *The Sun Also Rises*, in particular, is fundamentally exclusionary: the author is unable to let go of the idealized version of masculinity his book attempts to mourn, and as such, also forecloses the possibility of offering a more empathetic, inclusive version of male identity. “Phallic manhood has been idealized *as lost*,” Forter argues, “but only once it has been displaced from a psychic content or meaning to a style”: by eliding direct references to emotion in his text, the author of *The Sun Also Rises* attempts to evoke feelings of immense loss without falling prey to the same sentimentality marked as “soft” and “un-modern” in his text (65). Hemingway’s minimalist writing style and the strategy of elision through which it functions rests on a Derridean economy of supplement, which creates in the text a dense web of significations centered around Jake Barnes, the novel’s disabled protagonist, whose impotence figures, literally, as the obstacle preventing him

from living what he considers to be a normal life and, figuratively, evoking the aimlessness and desolation of the entire Lost Generation. Hemingway's choice to give Jake Barnes an injury that renders him unable to engage in sexual intercourse but which remains unnoticeable in most public social situations allows the disability to function discursively in the text in multiple ways simultaneously, despite its being rarely referenced in the book directly.

The injury, its effect on Barnes, and its broader symbolic resonance is introduced in the text early on in an exchange between the protagonist and a young prostitute named Georgette, who appears in the novel only briefly. The pair, who have just met, drink imitation absinthe and flirt after Barnes catches her eye when she passes his table at on the outdoor terrace of a café, and then share an intimate cab ride together on the way to meet Jake's friends. As the scene moves from the public space of the outdoor café to the relative privacy of a Parisian cab, Hemingway underscores the way Jake's injury has drastically changed his life and his sense of self, evoking themes the text will relate to Jake's disability throughout the progression of the novel. Cuddled against the protagonist in the cab's backseat, the young woman looks up at him expecting to be kissed. When she touches Jake, he pushes her hand away. At first, he only references his injury obliquely: the woman asks, "What's the matter? You sick?" Jake responds, "Yes," to which she replies: "Everybody's sick. I'm sick, too." This exchange plays with different inflections of illness in the text, one of the central metaphors of *The Sun Also Rises*. Initially, when the young woman asks if Jake is sick, she likely means him to take her question literally, yet presumably she might be asking if the protagonist's lack of desire indicates a

homosexual identity. Jake's affirmative response to Georgette, however, as a tacit admission of his impotence, connects disability to metaphorical notions of illness that pervade the text, and the woman's statement: "Everybody's sick. I'm sick, too" extends the metaphor to encompass what, for the woman, one can assume indicates feelings of general malaise on her part. A bit later, after talking indirectly about Jake's previous comment acknowledging his "sickness," Georgette asks him directly what is wrong, and he replies: "I got hurt in the war," to which she responds, "Oh, that dirty war." Using Barnes's perspective as first-person narrator, Hemingway continues: "We would have probably gone on and discussed the war and agreed that it was in reality calamity for civilization, and perhaps would have better been avoided" (24-25). Through this dialogue and narration, the novel introduces its preoccupation with Jake's disability and the character's continual awareness of the injury's effect upon his relationships with women, as in the previously described scene in which Jake enacts a pick-up ritual that, due to his injury, he does not carry to its completion.

Moreover, through this scene, Hemingway begins to build negative associations in his novel among notions of illness, filth, disability, and various forms of non-normative sexual identity, which come to be pervasive throughout the narrative as the novel's opening introduces a series of binary oppositions that come to structure the text in its entirety. Hemingway's writing draws contrasts by pairing and opposing the terms clean/dirty, health/illness, ability/disability, youth/age, masculine/feminine, and heterosexual/homosexual, among others. Working in this way, Hemingway presents his readers with a world that is starkly and cruelly divided. "Western thought, says Derrida,

has always been structured in terms of dichotomies or polarities [. . .] These polar opposites do not, however, stand as independent and equal entities. The second term in the pair is considered the negative, corrupt, undesirable version of the first, a fall away from it” (Johnson viii): thus, Jake Barnes’s disability and impotence signify a fall from his previous state of able-bodied potency prior to his injury in the war, a fall Hemingway metaphorically extends to all of post-World War I society through Georgette’s recognition of herself in Jake’s ‘illness.’ This metaphorical transference occurs again, later in Part One, between Jake and Brett Ashley in a scene that mirrors Jake’s earlier exchange with Georgette. Following a brief interlude in which Jake introduces Georgette to Brett, Robert Cohn, and Cohn’s wife Frances at a restaurant, Jake and Brett leave the restaurant and take a cab around Paris and have an oblique but loaded conversation about the status of their relationship in light of Jake’s injury. After separating for the night, Brett returns, intoxicated, to Jake’s hotel. They talk briefly, and then part again, after the following exchange:

Brett: “Good night, darling.

Jake: “Don’t be sentimental.

Brett: “You make me ill.”

We kissed good night and Brett shivered. “I’d better go,” she said. “Good night darling.”

Here, Brett shivers after kissing Jake as though a *physical* transference of contamination has occurred, corresponding with Brett’s statement “You make me ill” just prior. Brett’s statement reiterates Georgette’s association of Jake’s character with illness in the earlier

scene, and her involuntary shiver further reinforces this as a *reciprocal* relationship. The book restages this scene between Jake and Brett several times throughout the narrative, most notably at its conclusion, as Brett laments the lost potential of their unconsummated relationship (251).

*The Sun Also Rises* is structured around the absent center of Jake Barnes's traumatic wartime injury: it is the event to which all elements of the text indirectly refer. In addition to repeated oblique references to Jake's injury, at several moments in the narrative, the novel either displays or stages that trauma, displaced through metonymic substitution. The first notable instance of this practice occurs in a scene that constructs an intimate association between Jake Barnes and Count Mippipopolous through a triangulation with Brett Ashley. Unlike the relations of triangulation described by Sedgwick in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire*<sup>7</sup>, however, this connection of two men mediated through the third term of a female character signifies not coded homosexual desire, but connection of two men through the physical scars they retain as a result of their war wounds and their resulting emasculation. Following an exchange in which Brett tells Jake in veiled but uncertain terms that she couldn't live in a relationship with Jake that doesn't include penetrative sex, she goads the count, a current lover, into displaying arrow wounds he received in the course of his involvement in "seven wars and four revolutions." In this scene, Brett and the count

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<sup>7</sup> In *Between Men*, Sedgwick "attempted to demonstrate the immanence of men's same-sex bonds, and their prohibitive structuration, to male female bonds in nineteenth-century English literature. [. . .] *Between Men* focused on the oppressive effects on women and men of a cultural system in which male-male desire became widely intelligible primarily by being routed through triangular relations involving a woman" (Sedgwick 15).

assert that the three are alike in that they have all “been around a great deal” and “seen a lot.” The imprecision of their euphemistic language renders the meaning of their statements pointedly indistinct, increasing the supplemental character of their words. When the count asks Brett and Jake if they have seen arrow wounds, Brett replies, “let’s have a look at them,” and the count complies:

The count stood up, unbuttoned his vest, and opened his shirt. He pulled up the undershirt onto his chest and stood, his chest black, and big stomach muscles bulging under the light.

“You see them?”

Below the line where his ribs stopped there were two raised white welts.

“See the back where they come out?” Above the small of the back were the two same scars, raised and thick as a finger.

“I say. Those are something.”

“Clean through.” (67)

Following the display, Brett turns to Jake and says, “I told you he was one of us,” reinforcing the connection already established between the three characters earlier in the scene. The passage’s language eroticizes the count’s display of his wounds, and the physicality of his description emphasizes masculine characteristics, yet the count remains essentially emasculated in his relationship with Brett as she often implies that his age complicates physical intimacy, reproducing in their relationship a similar dynamic to the one preventing Jake and Brett’s successful coupling. Moreover, the intimate connection created in this scene between Jake and the count through their relationship with Brett

allows the count's performance to act as the display of Jake's own wound to Brett, to Jake himself, and also, to the reader of the novel. The scene thus accomplishes multiple aims for Hemingway, establishing Brett's attraction to and complex relationship with figures of wounded masculinity, while forcing Jake (and through him, the reader) to examine in a mediated fashion the wound that for the protagonist defines his character. Hemingway's act of substitution in the scene thus allows him to reveal the physical site of Jake's wound (in a sense) while ultimately leaving that revelation deferred. Moreover, Brett's inclusion in the equation through her use of the pronoun "us" allows the scene to do more than simply link the two male figures through the bodily cost of past violence. Brett's assertion that, like Jake and the count, she has "seen a lot" implies intimate understanding on her part of the two men's private pain and, also, the emotional cost paid as Brett has come to "know" these men.

A similar act of substitution occurs later in the book, further structuring the novel around the absent center of Jake's injury. As the novel progresses, Jake continues to be burdened by his feelings for Brett and becomes increasingly troubled as he passively observes her displays of affection to a host of other men, in particular Robert Cohn and Pedro Romero, a young bullfighter with whom she becomes involved when the group of expatriates travels to Pamplona for the Fiesta of San Fermin and the running of the bulls. Brett's lovers fulfill her sexual needs, but do not replace the feelings of love she still clearly harbors for Jake. *The Sun Also Rises* is a novel of very little action, and for the most part, the undercurrent of violence running through the section of the book that takes place during the fiesta is expressed in a controlled fashion by the bullfighting scenes in



which Romero carefully executes bulls through the choreography of the fight.

Uncontrolled violence, however, erupts suddenly in several important moments: two of which result from Robert Cohn's anger at learning Brett has begun sleeping with Romero and one involving a secondary character, a young husband and father killed during the running of the bulls. The first instance of violence is notable because it is Jake—a figure usually characterized by his passive responses to events in the novel—who instigates an altercation with his friend. Provoked by Cohn's anger regarding Brett's promiscuity, Jake swings at Cohn, whom we have previously learned was once a middleweight boxing champion at Princeton, and he responds by badly beating Jake. Later in the same chapter, the group sees a young man who they do not know gored during the bull run, a scene that is not depicted in the novel. Back in town, Jake explains the scene to a waiter, detailing how the man was hurt: “‘Here.’ I put one hand on the small of my back and the other on my chest, where it looked as though the horn must have come through. The waiter nodded his head and swept the crumbs from the table with his cloth” (201). In this instance, Jake's gesture demonstrating the manner of the young man's injury directly recalls the count's display of his scars for Jake and Brett. The waiter reacts in disgust, explaining that he feels such displays of violence are a meaningless waste of life.

Although the death of Girones seems unimportant to the novel, its inclusion sets up what becomes a key passage of the book detailing the significance of Jake's disability. Jake recounts for the reader the young man's obituary from the local paper, noting: “he was twenty-eight years old, and had a farm, a wife, and two children” (202). This description of the what the dead man has left behind also serves as a list detailing the

heteronormative life Jake believes he can no longer have due to his impotence: a life symbolized by property and family. The waiter's reaction, that Girones died "All for sport. All for pleasure. [. . .] Just for fun" recalls the cynical tone of Jake's earlier reference to World War I and its effects on both his life and upon society more broadly, in one of the novel's few explicit references to the conflict. More often, the text references the effect of that historically specific violence on Jake's body, his life, and his sense of self indirectly, as in the following passage:

The bull who killed Vincent Girones was named Bocanegra, was Number 118 of the bull-breeding establishment of Sanchez Taberno, and was killed by Pedro Romero as the third bull of that same afternoon. His ear was cut by popular acclamation and given to Pedro Romero, who, in turn, gave it to Brett, who wrapped it in a handkerchief belonging to myself, and left both ear and handkerchief, along with a number of Muratti cigarette-stubs, shoved far back in the drawer of the bed-table that stood beside her bed in the Hotel Montoya, in Pamplona. (203)

This passage extends the connection already established between Girones and Jake in Barnes's previous conversation with the bartender in a way that is paradigmatic of Hemingway's mode of writing, and, as such, is notable for both its form and content. The passage, made up of two sentences, represents a departure from the author's generally terse prose and creates through these sentences a sequence of relationships that signify Jake's injury while ultimately withholding its revelation from the reader by building between key phrases a series of associations, the symbolic resonance of which intensifies,

in particular, over the duration of the second sentence. The uncharacteristically long second sentence focuses on a series of transactions: the killing of the bull and the taking of its ear by Romero, his gift of the ear to Brett, and her wrapping of the ear in a handkerchief which once belonged to Jake, given to her by the protagonist in a gesture that, though purely utilitarian in the context of the narrative, also resonates as a gesture of affection. The bull's ear, clearly phallic, can be seen as yet another veiled reference to Jake's castration, and the wrapping of that object in Jake's handkerchief—a traditionally feminine token of affection—inverts and destabilizes the association of penetrative mastery with masculine sufficiency upon which the text insists, underscoring Jake's emasculation and the impossibility of the relationship he and Brett desire. The image of these two tokens of love, hidden in the back of Brett's bed table drawer, one wrapped within the other, conjures for the reader an image of Brett in solitary mourning, smoking and crying over an ideal of romantic love that for her remains unrequited for the novel's duration. Working in this way, Hemingway utilizes the logic of supplemental meaning to once again show us the site of Jake's trauma while ultimately keeping it hidden. Derrida's discussion of linguistic supplement as it functions in *The Confessions* is also instructive in how to read this particular section of *The Sun Also Rises*:

Through this sequence of supplements a necessity is announced: that of an infinite chain, ineluctably multiplying the supplementary mediations that produce the very thing they defer: the mirage of the thing itself, of immediate presence, of originary perception. That all begins through the

intermediary is what is indeed “inconceivable to reason” (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 157).

Yet, for this reason, as Derrida notes, meanings that accrue through supplement must by their nature exceed and surpass the author’s intent in writing. Moreover, by relying so completely upon the logic of supplement to signify Jake’s injury and its accompanying destabilization of heteronormative masculinity, Hemingway heightens the extent to which signification is always already unstable: as a result, *The Sun Also Rises* depends for its creation of meaning upon binary oppositions the novel sets up but is unable to sustain.

This unstable logic of Hemingway’s text unravels as it proceeds, lending a slipperiness to the author’s language seemingly contradictory to his aims as a realist writer. In certain instances, however, Hemingway takes advantage of the linguistic excess described by Derrida in “That Dangerous Supplement” to elicit multiple meanings from his language. Arriving in Spain, Jake, Bill, and Robert Cohn decide to spend a night in Bayonne before continuing on to Pamplona in the morning, where they will wait for the arrival of Brett and Mike. According to Jake, “it was a nice hotel, and the people at the desk were very cheerful, and we each had a good small room” (95). In the morning, the three men tour the city. Barnes initially describes Bayonne as “a very clean Spanish town” and Hemingway, through the voice of the narrator, again repeats the adjective “nice” several times in describing various attributes of the town and the town itself—a pointedly indistinct term with mostly positive connotations (96). The trio rent a car to take them to Pamplona and, after stopping for drinks, Cohn goes ahead to the hotel while Jake and Mike arrange for their luggage to be sent down to them. At this point, Jake

makes an apparently innocuous observation, stating: “While we were waiting [for Cohn] I saw a cockroach on the parquet floor that must have been three inches long. I pointed him out to Bill and then put my shoe on him. We agreed he must have just come in from the garden. It was really an awfully clean hotel” (97). Here, Hemingway modifies the adjective “clean” with the particularly loaded modifier “awfully,” adding a cynical comment on the previously established cleanliness of Bayonne characteristic of Jake’s world-weariness, yet the modification also subtly demonstrates the unsustainability of both Hemingway and his narrator’s efforts at understanding the postwar world through simple divisions.<sup>8</sup>

Close analysis of Hemingway’s language in the rest of *The Sun Also Rises* reveals a similar pattern at work throughout the novel, as characters repeatedly attempt to define their lived experiences in an untenably black or white fashion. This epistemological instability, however, extends most notably to the construction of masculine *and* feminine gender within the novel. Of particular note is the early passage that introduces Brett from Jake’s point of view as she enters the *bal musette* where Jake has taken Georgette after encountering her on the street, when Brett arrives by taxi accompanied by a group of young Parisian gay men:

A crowd of men, some in jerseys and some in their shirt-sleeves, got out. I could see their hands and newly washed, wavy hair in the light from the

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<sup>8</sup> Recall also the count’s earlier statement that the arrows that wounded him went “clean through” his body, an instance rendered more significant by the author’s fraught usage of the word “clean” later in the book, the implication being that the count’s masculine body was not only penetrated as a result of his wounding, but has also been in some sense contaminated.

door. The policemen standing by the door looked at me and smiled. They came in. As they went in, under the light I saw white hands, wavy hair, white faces, grimacing, gesturing, talking. With them was Brett. She looked very lovely and she was very much with them. (28)

Critics discussing this passage tend to focus on what its representation of homosexual males, taken from Jake's point of view, tells readers about the protagonist's attitude toward non-normative formations of masculinity. Daniel S. Traber notes "that Jake essentializes homosexuals—"They are like that"—so as to configure them as another negative example supporting his social philosophy is obvious" (245). Nancy R. Comley and Robert Scholes argue that Jake's vision "disembodies" the figures accompanying Brett, seeing them "synechdochically, as fragments of men" in an effort to disassociate from himself the otherness they represent: "the homosexuals are built like 'normal' men yet (Jake might think) do not choose to be 'normal,' while Jake, who has a 'normal' man's sex drive, has been left only fragments of sexual apparatus. He cannot perform, though he desires to do so, while the homosexuals can perform and yet do not desire 'normal' heterosexual sex" (44). Similarly, Wolfgang E. H. Rudat argues, "in order to tolerate himself as he is with regards to sexual status, Jake will have to learn to tolerate other men who have a sexual preference different from his own" (174). Yet it is important to note the emphasis placed upon Brett in the above passage through repetition: she is identified (somewhat ambiguously) as being "with" these men, a status which is emphasized and invested with meaning through the subsequent phrase "She looked very lovely and she was very much with them." One assumes Brett has not been "with" these

men in a carnal sense, and so the passage implies an association of similarity with the men rather than one that is sexual: she is thus described as “lovely” and as being “very much with” a group of men who defy normative gender construction as defined within the novel. One might argue that Brett’s femininity is *reinforced* through an association with other potentially feminized figures, yet the passage also associates Brett’s physical attractiveness with a depiction of non-normative femininity that reinforces the heterosexism of the text (that these men are not “men” in the traditional sense), and which ultimately undermines the stability of Brett’s gender in the novel.

Although the previously discussed dominant critical perspective on this section of *The Sun Also Rises* accounts for Jake’s *attitudes* towards otherness and alterity, feelings that are in no way unique to his character in the novel, viewing the *bal musette* scene solely in this way elides the larger implications that scene has for gender as constructed in the novel. Traber notes that “the encoded smile [Jake] shares with the policeman when Brett’s crowd enters connotes [Jake’s] attempt to salvage a sense of stability,” (245) but Brett’s own gendered appearance as described by Jake upon her entry to the *bal musette* highlights both her conscious flouting of traditional femininity through her adoption of a flapper’s short hair and unconventional clothing and also a more fundamental gender instability inscribed in her description at the level of language, as in this passage:

Brett was damned good-looking. She wore a slipover jersey sweater and a tweed skirt, and her hair was brushed back like a boy’s. She started all that. She was built with curves like the hull of a racing yacht, and you missed none of it with that wool jersey. (29-30)

Jake's gaze clearly objectivizes Brett, but not in a straightforward fashion. He finds her "damned good looking" in spite (or perhaps because) of her boyish hair, and her depiction here recalls Jake's previous description of the gay men who accompany her entrance. Additionally, the passage accentuates Brett's feminine body through a simile lending her appearance a touch of the masculine: her clothes (a jersey—like the ones worn by her male companions—combined with a skirt), presumably not straightforward woman's attire, fail to hide a body with "curves like the hull of a racing yacht": the specificity of this simile lends a strangeness to it, and complicates the traditional association of ships and the feminine with phallic notions of competitiveness and mastery. Together, the above cited passages may thus be taken to demonstrate how gender operates as "the repeated stylization of the body, a repeated set of acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 45); what is most notable, however, about Hemingway's linguistic objectification of Brett is how author's use of repetition actually serves to *denaturalize* Brett's gendered body as presented in the novel, much in the same way the Steinian repetition in the previous passage fragments and denaturalizes male bodies in that instance. Butler has commented at length and with great nuance on the destabilizing effects of the reiterative practice of gender performativity, first in *Gender Trouble* and then in *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* In Butler's view, normative bodies emerge as a product of discourse through a process of materialization impelled by the regulatory effects of a culture's power structures. Central to Butler's argument is the notion that, because gender materializes as



the effect of a reiterative citational practice, the normative gendered body always remains in process, never fully realized. Butler writes:

That this reiteration is necessary is a sign that materialization is never quite complete, that bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled. Indeed, it is the instabilities, the possibilities for rematerialization, opened up by this process that mark one domain in which the force of the regulatory law can be turned against itself to spawn rearticulations that call into question the hegemonic force of that regulatory law. (*Bodies that Matter* 2)

Although many of Hemingway's descriptions of gendered bodies evoke just such an instability—the failure of even the most carefully chosen language to fully comply with the regulatory force of law the author attempts to inscribe on the bodies he depicts—the instability described by Butler comes to pervade the text of *The Sun Also Rises*, and not just the author's descriptions of physical embodiment. As a modernist text, *The Sun Also Rises* is, at its heart, about a group of characters struggling to make sense of a world in which outdated modes of knowledge production no longer suffice. This is why so many of the concerns of the novel (and its characters) are, on a fundamental level, epistemological: the status of knowledge itself is very much of central importance to the novel and its thematic elements. Characters, most notably Jake Barnes, repeatedly try and fail to create fixed identities for themselves and others as the narrative progresses, a narrative which often questions how, precisely, one is supposed to *be* a man or *be* a woman in a new, postwar world.

One facet of this thematic concern is the importance of proper names in the novel, which are used at times to provide subtle commentary on the roles of various characters in the book. Hemingway, for example, gives Robert Cohn's domineering wife, Frances, a name that could be either masculine *or* feminine, presumably to underscore what the author views as her inappropriately masculine role in her marriage to Cohn, highlighting Cohn's inability to constrain her non-feminine behavior.<sup>9</sup> Yet I would like to suggest that the most complex example of this phenomenon in the text involves the gendering and naming Lady Brett Ashley, who—as the novel repeatedly explains—gained her royal title through marriage. This background, in fact, has direct bearing on how we are to read Brett's romantic relationship with *Jake* in the novel. Cohn, already infatuated with Brett early in the book, requests Jake tell him about her, asking, "What do you know about Lady Brett Ashley, Jake?" He replies, "Her name's Lady Ashley. Brett's her own name. [. . .] She's getting a divorce and she's going to marry Mike Campbell" (46). In this same scene, Jake reveals to Cohn the circumstances surrounding the relationship Jake and Brett shared following the end of the war: that she was a Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse in the hospital where he convalesced following his wartime injury (46). Later in the novel, we learn (from a conversation between Mike Campbell and Jake) the circumstances

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<sup>9</sup> Take, for example, the following sentence describing Robert Cohn's relationship with Frances: "The lady who had him, her name was Frances, found toward the end of the second year that her looks were going, and her attitude toward Robert changed from one of careless possession to the absolute determination that he should marry her"(13). Here, the awkward use of passive voice by the author displaces Cohn as the subject of the sentence and emphasizes his wife's unusual name, materially reproducing the character's passivity in his relationship with "the lady who had him."

behind her receiving a royal title, and the details of her previous marriage to Lord Ashley, which sheds important light on Jake and Brett's relationship:

Ashley, chap she got the title from, was a sailor, you know. Ninth baronet. When he came home he wouldn't sleep in a bed. Always made Brett sleep on the floor. Finally, when he got really bad, he used to tell her he'd kill her. Always slept with a loaded service revolver. Brett used to take the shells out when he'd gone to sleep. She hasn't had an absolutely happy life, Brett. Damn shame, too. She enjoys things so. (207)

This scene, detailing the circumstances behind Brett's unsuccessful first marriage, is noteworthy for its similarity to what little we know about Jake and Brett's own relationship in that it reinforces Brett's relationship pattern of being drawn to figures of impaired masculinity.<sup>10</sup> More notable, however, is the extent to which heteronormative marriage in this case fails to create a fixed gender identity for Brett through her acquisition of her husband's surname. Like many of the other notable female characters in the text,<sup>11</sup> Lady Ashley's given name, "Brett," more commonly names a man than a woman. Similarly, Lord Ashley's surname is often used as a woman's first name, but sometimes is a man's name. Thus, the full name "Lady Brett Ashley," through it denotes a feminine aristocratic title, complicates the heteronormative gendering traditionally

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<sup>10</sup> A pattern further repeated when Brett nurses an injured Pedro Romero following his violent altercation with Robert Cohn upon Cohn's learning that Romero has also slept with Brett, an incident Hemingway uses to further demonstrate what he views as Cohn's improperly directed masculine energy. In this instance, the reader also learns that Mike's relationship with Brett began because "she was looking after [him]" following an injury (205-6).

<sup>11</sup> e.g., Francis. Georgette, as a feminized form of the masculine "George," would also fit with this category.

accomplished by a woman's married name, rendering "Lady Brett Ashley" pointedly androgynous. The specific phrasing of Cohn's question to Jake early in the novel is thus particularly loaded. When Cohn asks: "What do you know about Lady Brett Ashley, Jake?" the arrangement of the words linearly on the page creates further ambiguities characteristic of a text that constantly undermines the binary oppositions through which it assigns, in particular, gender identity. In order to elucidate how this works, we might rewrite Cohn's question: *What do you know about Lady/Brett Ashley/Jake?* to better visualize the effect. The question remains unchanged when spoken, but when read in this fashion, the revised sentence accentuates how Hemingway's words always already undermine the gendering effect they attempt to perform, by troubling the binary opposition of gender upon which meaning in his text rests. Separating the sentence into the binary sets *Lady/Brett* and *Ashley/Jake* reveals how both the masculine and feminine as constructed in the novel by necessity contain the trace of the opposing term. We might thus read Robert Cohn's question: "What do *you* know about Lady/Brett Ashley/Jake?" as the central question of the novel itself, a novel which again and again insists that its characters must *designate* both themselves and others through a process of cognitive differentiation that must fail by its own design.

### III) James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* and the Wound at the Heart of Vision

Various critics have discussed the intertextuality present between both "The Beast and the Jungle" and *The Sun Also Rises* and James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, identifying clear parallels between the work of James and Baldwin's depictions of

closeted homosexual desire and between Hemingway and Baldwin's uses of a postwar Parisian setting to explore the dynamics of American expatriate experience in relation to identity formation. As Bryan R. Washington has argued, *Giovanni's Room* revises "'The Beast in the Jungle,' naming what the Master will not name, chaining the figure of the beast to the taboo of homosexuality" (71). Baldwin's second novel, *Giovanni's Room*, narrates the expatriate experience of David, a closeted gay man who leaves America in the 1950s and pursues a romantic relationship with a man named Giovanni while living in Paris. While critics like Robert Reid-Phar note how Giovanni's southern Italian heritage allows Baldwin to explore the erotic and social implications of the two characters' interracial homosexual relationship, the novel's setting (foreign yet uncannily familiar to Baldwin's protagonist) allows the novel to demonstrate the complex interrelationship of heteronormative understandings of the body, wellness, masculinity, and sexuality, which become increasingly fraught following the Second World War. As noted, the homosexual relationship around which *Giovanni's Room* centers is often understood in racialized terms. Although David can be seen as a stand-in for Baldwin himself, the character's whiteness is emphasized by the author immediately, in the opening pages of the book, as the character looks at himself in a mirror: "My reflection is tall, perhaps rather like an arrow, my blonde hair gleams. My face is like a face you have seen many times. My ancestors conquered a continent, pushing across death-laden plains, until they came to an ocean which faced away from Europe into a darker past (3). Washington notes, "although the narrator is white, as is every other figure in the text, racial oppression is an implicit concern" of the text as the novel opens, somewhat jarringly, with David's

acknowledgment of “his complicity in racial conquest. And this recognition marks the beginning of an associative pattern compelling the reader to explore the connections linking Giovanni’s persecution with the African Americans” (72). Similarly, Reid-Pharr argues:

There are a number of clues in this passage to alert the reader to the ideological work accomplished within Baldwin’s text. His use of the autobiographical “I” both conflates his identity with that of his protagonist, David, and signals us that what he is interested in here is the subject of identity formation. David’s consideration of his reflection demonstrates, moreover, Baldwin’s fascination with the relationship of the Object to the Inverse, the One to the Other. David is indeed the *real life* (American) character who considers the fate of the already, or almost already dead Giovanni. In the process, he faces away from Europe, away from whiteness, and from received notions of masculinity and sexuality to a nebulously darker past. (126)

While the book certainly deals with the complex interactions between heteronormativity and race, as the protagonist “struggles with the erotic and social implications of choosing either “the white woman,” Hella, or “the colored man,” Giovanni,” as Reid-Pharr has argued, Baldwin’s writing also elucidates how metaphors of illness figure in the operation of the closet (*Once You Go Black* 110).<sup>12</sup> I would like to suggest that, through

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<sup>12</sup> Discussing the significance of Giovanni’s Italian heritage in Baldwin’s novel, Josep M. Armengol explains: “Italians began to be considered white only upon their arrival in the United States. As James R. Barrett and David Roediger (1997) note, it was in part

its narrative, Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* evokes metaphorical notions of illness that emerged in the mid-twentieth century, and moreover, that the metaphors Baldwin uses to signify his protagonist's fraught relationship to his sexuality evoke the operation of the closet as understood by Eve Sedgwick. The dislocation provided by the novel's Parisian setting forces David to confront his homosexuality, which he views as an illness, a taint existing deep inside himself that has invaded his body like a cancer, making him different in essence from "normal" men. Although he clearly seeks to identify with American notions of heteronormative masculinity, it is only in Paris that David can confront the fundamental instability characterizing normative notions of maleness, wellness, and sexuality.

In *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, Kaja Silverman argues that the Second World War catalyzed a fundamental unsettling of conceptions of gender and sexuality, which found expression in a body of texts "attest[ing] to a massive loss of faith in traditional masculinity, [. . .] which dramatize the implications of that dissolution not only for gender and the family, but for the larger society," even if they do not necessarily

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through organized labor activity that previously nonwhite groups became white." Armengol further notes, "In the early twentieth century, Italians immigrating to the United States, like all others arriving on America's shores, were asked to fill out a standardized immigration form. In the box for race, they were given two choices: North Italian or South Italian. By World War II, however, the only option they had for the race question was 'white.' In this context, then, Giovanni, as an Italian in Europe, may be considered nonwhite or black" (678). Baldwin's designation of Giovanni's racialized identity in the novel thus serves to further unravel the binary oppositions upon which David attempts to anchor his identity at the start of the novel. As an American living in the 1950s, David would be unlikely to consciously recognize Giovanni's Southern Italian identity as blackness, despite Giovanni's minority status in European society at the time.

deal explicitly with the Second World War or its aftermath (54).<sup>13</sup> One key difference between the First and Second World Wars, I would argue, is that World War II gave the United States, through its ascendance as a world power, an opportunity to re-instantiate many of the cultural myths that had previously been destabilized: first by World War I and the cultural instability of 1920s, and then by the socioeconomic instability of the 1930s. But the surface normalcy afforded by the tidy cultural narratives that sprang out of the end of World War II was kept in tension by an undercurrent of often-violent anxiety surrounding masculinity and sexual identification that came to define America's relationship to both its own subjects and the broader world as the cold war emerged. In *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin's protagonist, David, undergoes a crisis of identification while living in Paris in the 1950s precisely because of the strength of the postwar narratives informing sexual identity formation. In the novel, we see that the protagonist, David, clearly identifies with heteronormative constructions of American masculinity, even though he is excluded from them: "The vision I gave my father was exactly the vision in which I myself most desperately needed to believe," he says, longing to conform to a vision of masculine identity defined by wife and family (20).<sup>14</sup> In

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<sup>13</sup> My third chapter includes an in-depth discussion of Silverman's work on fraught postwar masculinity, in which she uses the term 'dominant fiction' in reference to an understanding of reality that is exclusionary by nature, which labels non-normative those masculinities not included in the traditionally gendered equation of family (16).

<sup>14</sup> Baldwin's repeated invocation of vision as a trope in *Giovanni's Room* clearly differs from the metaphors of impaired sight used by Wright and Ellison after the First and Second World Wars. In *Native Son*, Richard Wright uses the trope of blindness, most notably in the ever-present ghostlike and sightless Mrs. Dalton, to represent a white America that, though clearly often dangerous to those marked by it as other, remains willingly collectively blind towards outsiders like the African-Americans living in Chicago's "black belt" (85). Moreover, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. notes that Ellison



*Giovanni's Room*, both David and his father understand masculinity in heteronormative terms: David attempts to prove his masculinity in part through heavy drinking, a pursuit which the elder tacitly approves, as the practice aligns with the specific notions of heteronormative masculinity David's father—a drinker and a womanizer—himself upholds. Discussing his son with a concerned family member, David's Aunt, his father states: "All I want for David is that he grow up to be a man. And when I say man [. . .] I don't mean a Sunday school teacher." Paradoxically, it is precisely David's desire to conform to American notions of normative masculinity that causes him to leave that country in order to "find [himself]," an impulse the narrator describes as uniquely American, and doomed—in his case—to fail. David states, "I think now that if I had any intimation that the self I was going to find would turn out to be only the same self from which I had spent so much time in flight, I would have stayed home (21). As Reid-Pharr notes, "David has run away already from 'America,' which in this instance refers not simply to a geographical location of a complex of political and social structures but also a patriarchal economy that produces maleness as the lack of lack, a fiction that David is never able to maintain" ("Tearing the Goat's Flesh" 131). Yet despite David's inability to 'escape himself' through his expatriate experience, he initially attempts to conform to heteronormative masculinity during his time abroad, asking his girlfriend Hella to marry him before she departs Paris for Spain. Baldwin writes:

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"signifies" on Wright in *Invisible Man* "with *invisibility* as an ironic response of absence to the would-be presence of blacks and natives" (106). If Baldwin's metaphors can be said to be signifying in *Giovanni's Room*, then Baldwin signifies as a man who is gay as well as black.

I told her that I had loved her once and I made myself believe it. [. . .] And all these nights [with Hella] were being acted out under a foreign sky, with no one to watch, no penalties attached—it was this last fact which was our undoing, for nothing is more unbearable, once one has it, than freedom [. . .] But people can't, unhappily, invent their mooring posts, their lovers and their friends, anymore than they can invent their parents. (5).

David's wish to be with Hella stems from his broader desire to conform to the heteronormative gender role a relationship with her offers. Deeply conventional, David's fiancé seems out of place in the bohemian world David has come to inhabit—albeit with some ambivalence—while living in Paris. Hella herself acknowledges her conventional nature, stating: “You know, I'm not really the emancipated girl I try to be at all. I guess I just want a man to come home to me every night, I want to be able to sleep with a man without being afraid he's going to knock me up. Hell, I want to be knocked up. I want to start having babies. In a way, it's all I'm good for” (123).

Even after beginning his relationship with Giovanni, David writes his father to tell him he intends to marry Hella, despite the fact that deep down he has no intention of doing so. Yet when David begins his relationship with Giovanni, a bartender at a Parisian gay bar he begins frequenting after Hella's departure for Spain, the narrator's experience of newfound ‘freedom’ in a foreign setting becomes increasingly fraught as he is unable to reconcile his clear homophobia with the feelings he develops for Giovanni. Initially, David attempts to distance himself from the gay men he meets in Paris, creating in his mind a strict separation between himself and other men who express their homosexuality

more openly than does the protagonist; Baldwin reflects this separation in the language David uses when discussing other male homosexuals. Describing one of the patrons of the gay bar he frequents while living in Paris, David states: “It looked like a mummy or a zombie—this was the first, overwhelming impression—of something walking after it had been put to death. [. . .] It carried a glass, it walked on its toes, the flat hips moved with a dead, horrifying lasciviousness.” The dehumanization evident in David’s use of the pronoun “it” to describe this man becomes more explicit in his description of Guillaume, the owner of the bar: “His utter grotesqueness made me uneasy; perhaps the same way the sight of monkeys eating their own excrement turns some people’s stomach. They might not mind so much if monkeys did not—so grotesquely—resemble human beings” (40). Here, we see David’s attempt to construct the gay men he meets in Paris as entirely different in essence than himself, another species who, for David, represent “a receptacle of all the world’s dirt and disease” (54).<sup>15</sup>

Illness serves particularly well as a metaphor for the protagonist’s fraught understanding of homosexuality because it recalls homophobic notions that homosexuality can be transmitted like a contagion. Jacques, an elder American businessman, born in Belgium, who also frequents the bar where Giovanni works, comments presciently on the effect of homophobic social structures on David’s

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<sup>15</sup> With perhaps intentional irony on Baldwin’s part, David’s quite conscious dehumanization of the gay men he describes here by associating them with monkeys bears a striking relationship to Marlow’s dehumanizing, animal-like descriptions of native Africans with “faces like grotesque masks,” who are said to “crawl on all fours [. . .] black and naked,” who Marlow often perceives as a single, undifferentiated entity: “a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling [. . .] a black and incomprehensible frenzy” from which Marlow similarly seeks to constantly differentiate himself in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1963, 1964, 1979).

understanding of himself and his relationship with Giovanni: “You are afraid it may change you,” he says, and continues, commenting:

If you think of them as dirty, then they *will* be dirty—they will be dirty because you will be giving nothing, you will be despising your flesh and his. But you can make your time anything but dirty; you can give each other something which will make both of you better—forever—if you will not be ashamed, if you will only not play it safe. [. . .] You play it safe long enough [. . .] and you’ll end up trapped in your own dirty body forever and forever and forever—like me. (57)

Susan Sontag observes the emergence in the twentieth century of an understanding of illness and its treatment in terms of “metaphors [that] contribute to the stigmatizing of certain illnesses and, by extension, of those that are ill” (*Aids and its Metaphors*, 99). This formulation demonstrates an abrupt shift from metaphorical understandings of illness in earlier periods: while “the Romantics invented invalidism as a pretext for leisure, and for dismissing bourgeois obligations in order to live only for one’s art,” in the twentieth century illness came to be seen as “a ruthless, secret invasion” to be countered by aggressive treatments (*Illness as Metaphor* 34, 5). Following World War II in particular, illness and other bodily impairments become markers of non-normativity irreconcilable with masculinity as traditionally constructed; these metaphors often come to signify the threat to the social order non-normative masculinities pose to straight society. Illness, Sontag notes, often figured in Nazi rhetoric for all “that corrupts morally and debilitates physically.” Prewar, Romantic notions of illness made men

singular, but they were still men; postwar, illness and disability make the ‘impaired’ masculine subject different in essence from the images of normative masculinity that surround him on all sides as notions of illness often become irreconcilable with masculinity as normatively constructed (216).

Throughout the novel, David remains unable to conceptualize his relationship with Giovanni outside of a heteronormative framework. Contrasting his life with Giovanni to the relationship he imagines he could have with Hella, David tells Giovanni:

What kind of life can we have in this room? What kind of life can two men have together, anyway? All this love you talk about—isn’t it just that you want to be made to feel strong? You want to go out and be the big laborer and bring home the money, and you want me to stay here and wash the dishes and cook the food and clean this miserable closet of a room and kiss you when you come in through the door and be your little girl. (142)

David has dated and slept with women, but his male lovers figure in his imagination as proof for him of his own inscrutable difference from other men. Recalling his first sexual experience with a man, David states: “For a while he was my best friend. Later, the idea that such a person *could* have been my best friend was proof of some horrifying taint in me [ . . . ] I cried for not understanding how this could have happened to me, how this could have happened *in me*” (6). This description corresponds both to Sontag’s understanding of twentieth-century notions of illness as a ruthless, secret invader and with Sedgwick’s description of homosexuality as constructed within the *Epistemology of*

*the Closet*: David worries over the notion of something deep within him that makes him “different in his essential nature than the normal men around him” (Sedgwick 92); it is, he says, a thought that lies “at the bottom of my mind, as still and awful as a decomposing corpse” (16). As previously discussed, Sedgwick follows Foucault in historically locating the epistemological crisis she identifies as having its origins in social changes culminating in European culture in the late nineteenth century (Sedgwick 1). For Foucault, this particular historical moment marks the emergence of a homophobic understanding of homosexuality as “a new specification of individuals [. . .] a species” whose essence became definable by even a single sex act (42-3), a notion which emerged roughly concurrently with the earliest changes in cultural understandings of illness identified by Sontag. Sedgwick writes:

Foucault among other historians locates in about the nineteenth century a shift in European thought from viewing same-sex sexuality as a matter of prohibited and isolated genital *acts* [. . .] to viewing it as a function of stable definitions of *identity* (so that one’s personality structure might mark one as *a homosexual*, even perhaps, in the absence of any genital activity at all). (82-83)

Baldwin’s representation of his protagonist’s internalized and often self-directed homophobia clearly resonates with a Foucaultian understanding of the modern construction of homosexuality, as his first gay experience marks for him a moment of change the narrator identifies as both awful and irrevocable; yet the effect of this understanding of homosexuality is to produce a binarism so unstable that it, in effect,

undermines heteronormativity as well, even on the level of language, a linguistic excess bearing a striking similarity to Hemingway's own slippery and (at times) indistinct prose. (For example, when he learns that Giovanni has had relationships with both men and women, David states that he, too, is "sort of queer for girls" (30).) As the novel concludes, Hella finds David in a gay bar in the company of a new lover after searching for him for several days. No longer able to hide his sexuality from the woman he once planned to marry, David confesses to her that he has had sexual relationships with men and she ends their relationship, telling him she plans to return to the United States.

Yet in the closing of *Giovanni's Room*, we see the evidence, and perhaps, ultimately, failure, of the Foucaultian notion of "confession as one of the main rituals we rely on for the production of truth" (Foucault 58). Structuring Baldwin's novel is the protagonist's compulsion to confess: David's begins the novel stating his wish to repent, although for what, he does not specify (6); As discussed previously, Sedgwick places her discussion of the relations of the closet within "the process, narrowly bordered at first in European culture but sharply broadened and accelerated after the late eighteenth century, by which 'knowledge' and 'sex' become conceptually inseparable from one another—so that knowledge means in the first place sexual knowledge; ignorance, sexual ignorance [in which] "modern Western culture has placed what it calls sexuality in a more and more privileged position to our most prized constructs of individual identity" (Sedgwick 73). The end of *Giovanni's room*, however, troubles this relationship as, ultimately, David's sexuality remains, for him, inscrutable, and Baldwin emphasizes the futility of the protagonist's attempt to find himself. At the moment of his final attempt to embrace

heteronormativity by severing his relationship with Giovanni in an attempt to commit to a marriage to Hella, David feels palpably his separation from the dominant fiction of heteronormativity; the novel closes as it began, with David gazing at himself in a mirror: “my mind was empty,” Baldwin writes, “or it was as though my mind had become one enormous, anaesthetized wound [. . .] *One day I’ll weep for this. One of these days I’ll start to cry*” (145). Unable to let Hella “be a woman” through a relationship with him, David stands alone at the novel’s end, facing a body in the mirror he cannot reconcile with his own: “And I look at my body,” he says, “which is under a sentence of death. It is lean, hard, and cold, the incarnation of mystery. And I do not know what moves in this body, what this body is searching. It is trapped in my mirror as it is trapped in me and it hurries toward revelation” (168). Yet the novel ends not with the revelation of truth, but merely “the revelation of the confession [. . .] coupled with the decipherment of what it said” (Foucault 66): Baldwin’s narrative ends with an impaired vision, a distortion in a mirror, a wound still seeking closure.<sup>16</sup>

For Reid-Pharr, “here again [at the novel’s conclusion] we see the reference to death, the site at which the distinctions between the inside and out, the self and the other, give way, allowing only the articulation of ghost-like subjectivities. Strikingly, David’s ghost body becomes inexplicable. He can no longer fashion a narrative by which to describe it. It is distinct from the self, which remains victim to a type of body logic that

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<sup>16</sup> Joshua Parker has noted a correspondence between the concluding scene of *Giovanni’s Room* and the scene in *The Sun Also Rises* I previously discussed in which Jake stands naked before his hotel room mirror. Describing the two authors’ similar uses of a Parisian setting, Parker argues: “each narrator [. . .] builds a city of words while describing the irremediable impediment of his sexual relations with an Anglo woman” (53, 40).



he cannot yet understand.” Reid-Pharr’s reading of the final scene of Baldwin’s novel is compelling, yet I would like to extend and revise it slightly to argue that the concluding pages of *Giovanni’s Room* posit precisely the complex relationship between the novel’s protagonist and his *embodiment*, and provide as such an instructive model for understanding some of the complexities involved when subject formation involves disability, as evidenced in his self-narration as he looks into the mirror: “My own hands are clammy, my body is dull and white and dry. I see it in the mirror, out of the corner of my eye” (168). Here, the first sentence foregrounds the corporeality of David’s body and his awareness of and intimate identification with it as such: David refers to his hands as “my own” and describes himself proprioceptively, in terms of his own body’s sensory perception of itself as a distinct object in the world. The second sentence, by comparison, is remote and distant, and focuses on a visual mode of perception foregrounded as doubly mediated: David sees himself, not directly, but “in the mirror, out of the corner of [his] eye”: a sense of self simultaneously mediated by the sort of recognition he receives from others, and by his own subjective interpretation of this recognition, perspectives which are both already informed by culturally constructed attitudes towards his sexuality.

“In the last scene of ‘The Beast in the Jungle’ John Mercier becomes,” in Sedgwick’s reading, “not the finally self knowing man who is capable of heterosexual love, but the irredeemably self-ignorant man who embodies and enforces heterosexual compulsion. In this reading, May Bartram’s prophecy to Marcher that ‘You’ll never know now’ (390) is a true one” (210). In the corresponding end scene of *Giovanni’s Room*, however, the insight into knowledge is different. Self-knowledge is not actively

denied: it is revealed as impossible to possess or, at the very least, as incredibly difficult to attain. For Sedgwick, this is the true source of panic elicited by the epistemology of the closet. Moreover, although *Giovanni's Room* does not deal with disability in a literal sense, (and I want to be careful to underscore here that I wish in no way to equating disability with other, distinct minority experiences) the complex network of intersubjective relations depicted by Baldwin in his novel provide a useful model for thinking about subjectivity as experienced by disabled individuals, which must simultaneously account for one's proprioceptive, bodily experience of self and the way in which disability identity is constructed as other through a complex network of significations and social forces, cultural depictions of otherness, and legal discourse; and also interpersonally, through the responses disabled individuals receive from others in daily experience. The fullness of disability identity must at least in part be understood through the logic of the supplement: "The image is neither in or out of nature": existing neither fully out in the world nor in one's own embodied self (Derrida, *Grammatology* 149). And yet this results, as we see with both Hemingway's Jake Barnes and Baldwin's protagonist David, in a wounded vision: of self as other, and never as whole.

## Chapter 2-Disability, Masculinity, and the American War Documentary

The well-known incident in which General George S. Patton physically assaulted a soldier suffering from what is today known as posttraumatic stress while touring a field hospital in Italy, which was widely reported and was dubbed “Patton’s Slap” in a December 6, 1943, article in *Newsweek*, demonstrates the violence inherent in the policing of heteronormative gender roles. As the *Newsweek* article explains, Patton struck the man upon learning that the convalescing soldier had been relieved of duty following a traumatic experience in battle, despite his not having received physical wounds. Although military doctors had been aware of the effects of shell shock since at least the First World War, Patton himself did not believe that the soldier’s condition warranted medical care. The article explains:

In the thick of the Sicily campaign and not far from the front, Patton was touring hospital tents near San Stefano. He went the rounds commending the wounded soldiers. Then he came upon one who sat on the edge of his cot. “Where are you wounded?” asked Patton. The soldier, a “shell shock” case, mumbled something about hearing shells that never landed and guessed it was his nerves. Well known for his disbelief in the reality of “shell shock,” Patton flew into a rage, called the soldier “yellow-bellied,” and gave him a back-handed cuff that knocked off the man’s helmet lining. A nurse lunged at the general but was restrained and led away weeping. As he was leaving, he heard the soldier sobbing. He strolled

back and slapped the private again. At about the same time, Patton similarly unbraided another “shell-shock” victim. (“Patton’s Slap,” *Newsweek*, 6 December 1943, quoted in Edgerton 32-3)

Although the report of the story does not reference gender or sexuality directly, the masculinity of both the soldier struck by Patton and Patton himself are the implicit stakes of the exchange, which importantly plays out through a triangulation with a third, female figure: the nurse who attempts to defend the traumatized soldier when Patton first physically assaults him. “Patton’s Slap” is a physical act but it also has a rhetorical force, marking the recipient as deficient in his performance of heteronormative masculinity in opposition to figures of proper masculinity who bear their physical injuries with quiet stoicism.

The exchange between Patton and the soldier also recalls the structure of the climactic moment of Melville’s *Billy Budd*, in which the title character is compelled to maintain his position of heteronormative masculine sufficiency by striking and killing Claggart, the master-at-arms of the HMS *Bellipotent*, a figure Eve Sedgwick has argued represents the closeted homosexual in a coded fashion in the story. In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick writes that in the moment of Melville’s *Billy Budd* when Billy strikes and kills Claggart as Captain Vere watches “the reader is both threatened with an incited to violence” through his or her implication in the act precisely because the act can not be seen as a simple act of violence: the true violence of Budd’s act is its marking function, which forces Claggart into a position of abjection before the eyes of both Vere and the

reader. “Patton’s Slap,” like “Melville’s Fist<sup>17</sup>,” enacts the violence of signification through a physical gesture, but Patton’s assault of his subordinate as recounted by *Newsweek* modifies the dynamics of the episode depicted by Melville, altering the trajectory of the violent signification the General performs through his own violent acts. Where Billy Budd’s closed fist acts to signify Budd’s violent adherence to heteronormative masculinity, marking Claggart as other in a gesture that designates Budd as excessively *masculine* through his performance, Patton’s open-handed slap works to designate the crying soldier as other through a performance mocking the recipient’s perceived effeminacy. The presence of the female nurse, and her attempt to defend the assaulted soldier, furthers the emasculating nature of the episode for the soldier in question, whereas Vere’s presence in Melville’s scene serves to illustrate the fraught nature of the masculine authority from which Billy Budd’s signifiatory act derives its power. Yet in both the fictional telling of a shipboard murder from the late nineteenth century and a news magazine account of an actual incident of violence taken from the 1940s, the boundaries of heteronormativity are similarly policed with violence.

William C. Menninger addressed the American military’s concerns regarding the masculinity of its fighting men in the lead-up to World War II in his book *Psychiatry in a Troubled World: Yesterday’s War and Today’s Challenge*, in which he attributes the

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<sup>17</sup> The term “Melville’s Fist” comes from an article written by Barbara Johnson entitled “Melville’s Fist: The Execution of Billy Budd,” in which Johnson examines the rhetorical effects of Melville’s story, arguing “it is a dramatization of the twisted relations between knowing and doing, speaking and killing, reading and judging, which make political understanding and action so problematic. As Johnson asserts, “the ‘deadly space’ or ‘difference’ that runs through *Billy Budd* is not located *between* knowledge and action, performance and cognition: it is that which, within action, prevents us from ever knowing whether what we hit corresponds to what we understand” (599).

increased incidence of war-related mental trauma during World War II as compared to World War I to “the fact that the country went into the most pathological of human activities—war—against its desire and without preparation. Men who had been ill-prepared for war by peaceful life in our democracy had to face a tough, hard, long, costly conflict.” Published in 1948, the book is an account of military psychiatry based on Menninger’s time as Chief Consultant in Neuropsychiatry to the Surgeon General of the Army, a position he held from 1943-1946; as such, Menninger’s book provides an example of the tone and rhetoric of the American War Department in the lead up to World War II, which was deeply informed by the socioeconomic upheaval of the previous decade of America history, as well as the United States’ sudden entry into active combat in the early 1940s following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Discussing World War II-era propaganda, Erik Barnow identifies the filmmaker’s task as such: “as to the faithful, to stir the blood, building determination to the highest pitch; as to the enemy, to chill the marrow, paralyzing the will to resist” (139); yet the implicit purpose of American war documentaries in the lead up to war following the Depression was more complex than a simple “stirring of the blood.” According to Barnow, when General George Marshall outlined for Frank Capra the purpose behind what would become the well-known *Why We Fight* series, he mentioned specifically his concerns regarding the masculinity of his recruits, many of whom had been drafted into service. Barnow writes, “the General explained that in the American army, civilians would outnumber professional soldiers by fifty to one. The Germans and Japanese were sure, the general

said, that these American boys would be too soft for war; but Marshall felt they would fight like tigers—if they knew why they were in uniform” (157).

This chapter argues that the documentary work done by John Huston for the United States War Department during World War II uniquely elucidates the fraught relationship between American masculinity and ableist notions of both physical and mental health in American culture. Like many prominent Hollywood filmmakers of the 1940s, John Huston enlisted in the military during World War II to make films for the Office of War Information. Although his wartime output—three films produced between 1943 and 1946—represents only a small fraction of the director’s filmography, critics and biographers alike tend to agree that Huston’s military experiences profoundly affected his life and shaped his later film career, despite Huston’s well-known contentious relationship with military brass during his enlistment. While *Report from the Aleutians* (1943), the first film made by Huston for the military, is generally consistent both ideologically and formally with the broader canon of American wartime propaganda produced during World War II and features only a few references to U.S. casualties, the two subsequent films Huston made for the Office of War Information during his enlistment were initially not well received by the director’s superiors. Where *Battle of San Pietro* (1945) was censored by the US government to limit Huston’s intended graphic depiction of American injuries and casualties in the film, *Let There Be Light* (1946), which deals with the treatment of psychological trauma in returning veterans, was originally suppressed entirely. According to an often repeated story, after seeing an early version of *San Pietro*, the generals overseeing the project angrily accused Huston of

using his position as a military filmmaker to make an anti-war film, and demanded the director remove many of the more graphic scenes present in his initial cut.<sup>18</sup> The official reason given for the repression of *Let There Be Light* (which went unseen by the general public until the 1980s) was a concern for the privacy of the combat veterans who appeared in the film and a fear on the part of the army was that the film's release might negatively impact future recruitment.

The objectives of this chapter are to place these particular War Department films in the broader context of documentary scholarship largely missing from previous discussions of Huston's War Department documentaries, and moreover, to examine these films as cultural objects demonstrating how ableist notions of heteronormative American masculinity were codified in the postwar period, in large part through the collaboration between the United States government and the Hollywood filmmakers the military enlisted to produce their propaganda images. Prominent scholars of American documentary Jonathan Kahana and Paula Rabinowitz both focus their interventions in the field of documentary studies on historical periods known for producing social documentaries that tend toward revolutionary or, at least, progressive aims. Choosing to concentrate primarily on films made either during the 1930s or between the 1960s and 1980s, these critics leave aside the military sponsored films of the 1940s in their analyses

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<sup>18</sup> A number of scholars who have worked on Huston's war department output reference this episode in their scholarship, including Edgerton (30), Garrett (9), and Bertelsen (249). Huston himself describes the episode in his autobiography, *John Huston: An Open Book*, explaining that upon seeing the film for the first time, his supervisors accused him of making an anti war film, to which Huston tells us he "replied that if I ever made a picture that was pro-war, I hoped that someone would take me out and shoot me." (119). Garrett and Bertelsen both repeat the story more or less exactly as Huston tells it in his autobiography.



by choice. Kahana writes that he chose not to discuss the American documentaries of the World War II period in *Intelligence Work: The Politics of American Documentary* “because other moments better demonstrate how emancipatory energies of social documentary inspire formal and technological innovation, or vice versa” (35). Similarly, Rabinowitz writes in her introduction to *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary* that her aim in writing the book was to focus on specific instances of documentary production linked to periods of pronounced radicalism in the United States, elucidating the relationship between “the major political issues galvanizing radical critiques during the twentieth century—the Depression, the Vietnam War, civil rights and decolonization, women’s and gay and lesbian liberation [. . .] and documentary rhetoric” (8). My chapter therefore seeks to historically situate the documentary output of the United States War Department during World War II in relation to the documentary forms and strategies that preceded it and to those that would develop following the World War II-era. Additionally, this chapter uses Huston’s War Department films as a test case to problematize understandings of physical disability and mental illness that emerged during and after World War II, which operate in large part by excluding non-normative forms of masculinity from the traditionally gendered equation of wife and family.

The fraught relationship between disability and masculinity present in Huston’s war films has gone largely unexamined. Scholarship on Huston’s war documentaries tends to focus on the constraints the director faced while working for the military, discussing his reenactment of combat footage in *San Pietro* in particular and the effect of this restaging on that film’s historical value. Lance Bertlesen’s essay “San Pietro and the

‘Art’ of War,” published in *Southwest Review* in 1989, remains the only substantial scholarly treatment of the *San Pietro* archival footage. The article discusses Huston’s staging of most of the onscreen violence for the documentary, and the censorship the film was subjected to at the hands of the generals overseeing Huston’s shooting of the film (230-256). Greg Garrett makes a similar argument in his 1993 essay published in *War, Literature, and the Arts*, stating “knowing that many of *San Pietro*’s battle scenes were consciously composed, our knowledge and respect for John Huston the filmmaker increases, and, paradoxically, his artful, created scenes give us the best idea of the terror and exhilaration of actual infantry combat” (9). Garrett’s analysis of *Let There Be Light* continues this trend, examining Huston’s final War Department documentary in the context of his fictional films, and speculates that the film’s suppression was rooted in the director’s subversive adaptation of film noir aesthetics in his documentary practice (31-2). The fraught nature of the depiction of the psychoneurotic soldier’s masculinity in the film, however, has received almost no consideration in the surprisingly brief scholarly treatment of *Let There Be Light*. For example, Lesley Brill discusses the importance of homecoming in the narratives of recovery presented in the film, while eliding the extent to which these narratives rely on heteronormative notions of masculinity that have served to exclude many individuals from both military service and, more broadly, society at large (111-119).

#### I) The Culture Industry and the Remasculinization of America

The story of American documentary film during World War II can be understood

in part as a transition from films produced by relatively autonomous artists—government funded filmmakers working under the auspices of the New Deal who nevertheless retained a good deal of creative and ideological independence—to War Department propaganda made by Hollywood filmmakers who enlisted in the military to work as a part of the war machine. Although most well-known documentary films made during the Depression and subsequently during wartime were both government-sponsored, the close relationship of the culture industry and the military industrial complex that characterized American film production during World War II led to an abrupt shift in the ideological content of state-sponsored documentary film in the lead up to the official entry of the United States into the war. During the Depression, the Roosevelt administration's New Deal policies were developed and implemented by a variety of government organizations that "often overlapped and competed with one another" as they sought to ameliorate the various crises that arose from the economic and agricultural instability of the 1930s (Ellis and McLane 80). Various critics have noted how this decentralization fostered a complicated relationship between the state administering New Deal policies, the filmmakers working to promote these policies, and the general public addressed by social documentary of the period. As Kahana notes, the social documentaries of the New Deal era aimed to do more than simply inform viewers about important issues or government services, and thus moved beyond an "instrumental address" of the audience to a more complex relationship with the viewing public. Kahana argues that the

instrumental address [of documentary film] was modified under the aegis of the New Deal to serve a related but somewhat different end, the

creation of publics. These forms of association took as their subject (and sometimes their object) those directly and indirectly affected by the social, agricultural, and economic crises befalling the country. Through documentary work, intellectuals from across the political spectrum exerted corrective pressure on the institutions that spoke for the masses, from organs of capitalism to the government and the left in its organized forms.

In this way, Kahana asserts, Depression-era American social documentary sought to do more than simply instruct the masses or influence public opinion: during this period, documentary “serve[d] not only the didactic functions of pedagogy or promotional functions of propaganda or publicity but also the generative function of the public sphere,” building the case for the policies it promoted by attempting to build a unified sense of purpose among the individuals who made up its audience (96). Documentary represented state interests, but not exclusively. In addition to presenting the point of view of the government sponsors of their projects, artists like Pare Lorentz and Dorothea Lange sought to put pressure upon the state on behalf of ordinary Americans; moreover, generally speaking, the documentary practice of the 1930s sought activist goals of social change. Rabinowitz writes:

For a time—and Lange and Lorentz perhaps best embody this—the practice of socially engaged image-making, ‘art’ as ‘propaganda,’ as political discourse, as historical fact, even historical agent implied seeking out privation, imaging need, and hoping these representations would produce actions. For the implicit meaning of documentary is not only to

record but to change the world—to evince material effects through representation—and to do so through highly personal interventions into public life. (102)

As the 1930s drew to an end, however, changes in America’s foreign policy and the accompanying emergence of the military-industrial complex exerted an increasingly direct influence on American culture. Jack C. Ellis and Betsy A. McLane note that, even before the United States officially entered the war, the Roosevelt administration’s material support of allies like the British through lend-lease programs necessitated a more unambiguously positive depiction of United States agriculture than was provided by films like Robert Flaherty’s *Power and the Land*. As these authors note, though *The Power and the Land*’s narration argues that modern production will only increase crop yields, “images [. . .] of despoliation created by cutting down the timber and cultivating all of the available land, like those in *The Plow That Broke The Plains*, carry dramatic weight,” undermining the film’s intended depiction of America as the “breadbasket of democracy” (89). As Kahana notes, images from *The Power and the Land* “remained virtually unseen in the United States—the film was shelved by the government when the American entry into World War II made its grim view of agricultural capitalism untimely” (91). Thus, while a decentralized apparatus of production provided individual artists a forum for personal and political expression under the New Deal, mobilization for war in the early 1940s restricted the autonomy of filmmakers working on behalf of the United States government. When America officially entered World War II, U.S. government control of state filmmaking was centralized, first by President Roosevelt’s appointment of Lowell

Mellet to the position of Coordinator of Government Films in 1941, and second, by the creation of the Office of War Information by presidential executive order in 1942 (Doherty 42-3).<sup>19</sup> This centralization of film production under military supervision (rather than a variety of individual government agencies like the Farm Security Administration) reduced the level of autonomy for state filmmakers that had been afforded to Depression-era social documentarians, but the character of the collaboration between the federal government and the filmmakers it employed also changed more fundamentally when Hollywood partnered with the War Department to produce newsreels as well as feature-length non-fiction films and short documentaries for internal military use and for release to the general public. Government collaboration with Hollywood initially met with skepticism from figures like Lorentz, who believed a relationship between the federal government and Hollywood would compromise the integrity of the American government's documentary film project: "It's not easy," Lorentz argued, "to step out and find men who are trained in the recording of facts. There is a great deal of difference between recording facts and recording fiction and drama" (quoted in Kahana 121). In fact, what came to distinguish the military-sponsored

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<sup>19</sup> The United States Film Service, a short-lived previous effort at organizing U.S. government film production under one roof, was established by Roosevelt prior to U.S. in 1938 and placed under the direction of Pare Lorentz, and was "intended to make films propagandizing the policies and activities of all departments of government," but was shut down in 1940. According to Ellis and McLane, film scholar Robert Snyder blames the termination of this service on congressional opposition to the New Deal and a lack of sustained support for the program from President Roosevelt, as well as Hollywood opposition to the program and a negative reaction on the part of the public to the bleak portrayal of the western and southwestern United States by Lorentz in previous films like *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (86, 90).

documentary films of the World War II period were their use of narrative conventions common to Hollywood's fiction films.

Though wartime propaganda is generally invested in heteronormative notions of masculinity, the American War Department's documentary project was begun with issues of masculinity specifically in mind, due in part to the undermining American masculinity by the socioeconomic realities of the previous decade. Because body ideals are bound up in both intimate notions of personhood and public notions of national identity, the well being of a nation is often linked to the bodily well being of the individual subject. Rabinowitz argues that Dorothea Lange's depression-era photos turned the bodies of their subjects into images that were consumed publically as metaphors standing in for the Depression, connecting individual bodies to a 'disabled' national body. Rabinowitz writes:

Lange not only figured the publicity of the private, but her discovery of the intimate moments of individuals standing apart from a social apparatus and coiled within their own bodies according to Sally Stein's complex reading of the meanings of bodily harm and pain in both the national and Lange's imagination, Lange found a visual language for conveying physical pain and exhaustion. In a nation focused on FDR's crippled body as a metaphor for the economic paralysis facing the nation, Stein argues, Lange, a crippled woman, foregrounded isolated bodies leaning on feeble supports to suggest the ruinous effects of social forces on individuals.

*(They Must Be Represented 88)*

As the private pain of disability became a public metaphor for America's 'paralysis' during the depression, the masculinity of both individual men and the nation as a whole became intertwined with America's economic struggles; Lange's photographs in particular evoke both the personal and the collective implications of the harsh realities of the Depression on American family life. Rabinowitz writes, "in her attention to the individual face, Lange presents the connections between 'human' and 'erosion' in a way that Lorentz does not. Here the plow breaks up more than the plains—the land—it destroys a community, a way of life, families and individual bodies and finally alters the nation as a whole" (*They Must Be Represented* 87).

As the Depression came to an end and the United States mobilized for war, notions of the documentarian as "itinerant intellectual"<sup>20</sup> gave way to the figure of the embedded filmmaker who (at least in theory) lived and worked alongside the troops and functioned as a part of the military machine. Collaboration between the War Department and Hollywood filmmakers seemed to close down the space of critical inquiry opened up by progressive social documentarians in the previous decade: if the impulse of the social documentaries of the 1930s was to document the effects of the Depression on the lives of individuals and families and, hopefully, to serve as a catalyst for positive social change, the purpose of the documentary films produced for the U.S. military by the Office of War Information was quite different, and belied the cultural anxieties of a nation that found itself moving swiftly into war following a decade that had undercut traditional masculine

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<sup>20</sup> Kahana's term used to describe the vocation of Depression-era New Deal documentarians (58).



gender-identity and destabilized the heteronormative family by undermining men's ability to perform as breadwinners and, by extension, heads of households.

II) From Trust to Suspicion: Documentary Rhetoric and the Military Industrial Complex

*Report from the Aleutians*, the first (and most traditional) of Huston's war documentaries, can be read as a straightforward narrative of American masculinity reclaimed through war; the film, as Gary Edgerton notes, "was a part of the 'War Department Historical Series' and was essentially designed as a public relations and informational piece about the major theaters of combat attended to by Allied forces." In his discussion of Huston's war trilogy, Edgerton aligns Huston's early film with other American war propaganda films, like those directed by Frank Capra, which the critic argues sacrifice artistic integrity for compliance with the wishes of the military. Of Huston's film, Edgerton writes:

What resulted [in *Report from the Aleutians*] was a traditional military documentary that can be characterized as effective advocacy, conservative in ideology, and traditional in film form and style. [. . .] The primary impressions that the movie imparts are 'morale is first-rate [. . .] and getting stronger,' and that the Japanese are being kept at bay in the North Pacific while the Americans rapidly rebuild their sea power after the tragedy of Pearl Harbor. (28)

The film's narrative tells a story of soldiers remasculinized, transformed through their

incorporation into the machine of war. *Report from the Aleutians* places little emphasis on individual men, and focuses instead on the way the soldiers have come to function as part of a cohesive unit. Early in the film, the narrator emphasizes this collectivity, explaining that “bookkeepers, grocery clerks, college men [and] dirt farmers” have been changed through their enlistment in the military into “soldiers now, as though all their lives they’ve been nothing but.” The film references casualties anonymously and after the fact, and individual accomplishments, when singled out, are highlighted in the context of images of the war machine to emphasize each man’s relation to a larger whole. Yet despite the similarity of *Report from the Aleutians* to more standard examples of wartime propaganda produced by Hollywood filmmakers in collaboration with the American War Department, Huston’s work as a documentary filmmaker differs from better-known examples of World War II-era propaganda in important ways. Though it likely happened by chance, Captain Huston’s assignments were in some sense more complicated than those of other filmmakers working for the Office of War Information. Where John Ford was tasked to document the turning point of the Pacific Theater in his award-winning film *The Battle of Midway*, the conflicts depicted in both *Report from the Aleutians* and *Battle of San Pietro* required extensive shaping by Huston’s hand to produce narratives that aligned with the propagandistic aims of the Office of War Information. In his discussion of *Report from the Aleutians*, Edgerton notes that Huston was asked by the War Department to dramatically recreate the film’s final scene in order to depict a “completely successful mission,” eliding the loss of several warplanes during the actual bombing run that was restaged in the film’s finale (Huston, quoted in Edgerton 29).

Despite Huston's elision of these casualties from *Report from the Aleutians*, the time the filmmaker spent at this remote outpost was largely uneventful, and the resulting film focuses mainly on the banal day-to-day experiences of the American soldier (Edgerton 29).

*Battle of San Pietro*, in contrast, depicts the harrowing nature of infantry combat during World War II, and unlike *Report From the Aleutians*, has been noted for the emphasis it places on the individual soldier as a method of heightening dramatic tension. Bertelsen writes that early in the film "Huston constructs a generalized, heroic image of the infantry [. . .] but as the moment of actual attack approaches, the soldiers of the 143rd regiment are strongly individualized. They are shown separately, full face, close up—smiling, talking, worrying, their eyes full of deference and humor and fear—in a way that makes disturbingly clear their humanity and the non-military aspect of their being" (234). Gilles Deleuze has discussed the role of the close-up in viewer identification and empathy formed through the cinematic viewing experience, creating a structure of feeling that arrests the viewers attention, momentarily pulling them out of the "chain of narrative events" made seamless through the combination of the "perception- image" and the "action-image" wherein "the perception of a situation leads to a (motivated) action which in turn leads to another action" through the logic of continuity editing (Elsaesser and Hagener 60). The close-up, which Deleuze calls the affection-image, constitutes a unity all its own, which "abstracts it from [the] spatio-temporal coordinates" created through continuity editing (Balázs, quoted in Elsaesser and Hagener 60). Huston's use of the close-up, like Lange's own attention to the face in her photographs, focuses attention on

the personal, human aspect of the events it depicts, so that the film's isolated images undermine the depersonalization of violence present in many propagandistic depictions of combat.

The individuation Huston accomplishes in specific moments of *San Pietro* through the rupturing effect of the close-up is encouraged more generally by the structure of the film itself, as sound and image combine to extend the effect of Huston's attention to the individual face in certain of the film's shots to the entire film itself. The film's spoken prologue establishes *San Pietro*'s somber tone, addressing the high cost of American operations on the Italian peninsula in 1943, emphasizing the necessity to the war effort of taking the Liri Valley by force from German control at a time when the attention of the U.S. Armed Forces was focused on England. The film's narrative is framed with an acknowledgement that the divisions depicted in the film were undersupplied, and that their objective was one of diminished expectations "conducted on an extremely limited scale." Concerning the liberation of the village of San Pietro, the prologue's narrator states: "We took it, and the cost in relation to the later advance was not excessive. By its very nature, this success worked bitter hardships upon each individual soldier, calling for the full measure of his courage and devotion." The ambivalent tone established by the prologue remains as the film's narrative progresses.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Though the military intended the film to be made "specifically for American audiences on why the advance of the U.S. Army in Italy had slowed to a virtual halt" (Edgerton 30), and some (including the generals in charge of the project at the time) have interpreted the film as a work of subversive protest, Huston himself said undertook the project as a tribute to America's fighting men, stating "it was anything but done out of hatred of war on my part. It was done out of a profound admiration for the courage of the men who were involved in the ghastly thing" (Huston, quoted in Edgerton 30).

Moreover, where *Report from the Aleutians* (like most American war documentaries of the period) encourages a broad yet depersonalized public identification with the goals and aims of a wartime state, *San Pietro* encourages viewer identification with the individual soldier rather than with a monolithic construct. The film's voiceover, read by John Huston himself, departs from the "Voice of God" narration typified in propaganda films of the period, using the pronoun "we" when describing the affecting of events on the infantrymen depicted in the film. Thus, the viewer is further encouraged to identify with the men present onscreen in a more intimate, one-to-one basis than the authoritarian model of documentary filmmaking allows.

Huston's aim of humanizing individual soldiers and emphasizing a personal connection to their hardships in *San Pietro* is similar to the rhetorical strategy commonly used by Depression-era New Deal filmmakers working to construct a public sphere that they hoped would facilitate dialogues through which progressive change could be realized. One of the defining characteristics of Depression-era social documentary, Kahana asserts, is its frequent use of deictical voice-over:

In deixis, the speaker makes overt reference to the physical context that joins the speaker and listener, by a set of markers that include personal and demonstrative pronouns, adverbs marking time and location, and verb tenses. Deictical speech, which Christian Metz describes with the formula "I-Here-Now," emphasizes the immediacy of communication and the reversibility of the speaker's and the listener's positions. A deictical utterance is one in which the identity of the "I" and the "you" are

determined by the present act of speaking. (110)

As Kahana argues, New Deal social documentary of the early 1930s adopted an informal conversational tone “to make the voice-over commentary humane and sympathetic [by] giving the awesome phenomenon of state power a local and familiar character. Its aim was to reduce the sense of the state as a transcendent authority over the people and establish, in its place, the eminence of governmental power” (113, 107). Deictical address represents an attempt on the part of the filmmaker to cultivate a sense of shared cultural experience between the film’s annunciator and its viewer.<sup>22</sup> In *San Pietro*, Huston’s voiceover retains some—but not all—of the informality of deictical address, allowing the viewer to empathize with the infantrymen depicted in his film while still retaining a degree of distance from the events taking place on screen: Huston’s image and sound tracks work together in *San Pietro* to create a startling intimacy with his subjects; ultimately, however, the viewer is neither addressed directly by the voiceover nor encouraged to feel as if he or she is participating directly in the events depicted onscreen. Although Huston’s narration does impose an “official” ideological position onto his film on behalf of the military (a didactic specificity *cinéma vérité* later attempted to counteract by creating an impression of spontaneity in its narratives), the informality of *San Pietro*’s address collapses the comfortable distance from onscreen events afforded to the viewer by Voice of God narration, which (as critics of documentary like Charles Wolfe note)

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<sup>22</sup> Kahana references the FERA informational short *The New Frontier* as a prime example of deictical voiceover, citing lines of narration such as “While we’re down this way, we’ll drop in on one of the neighbors” and “Wanna know where the water comes from? All right, we all know the answers: here’s the community water works” as examples of deictical speech’s subtle emphasis of the “temporary hierarchy of speaker and addressee” characteristic of narration in New Deal social documentary.

implies observation from “an indefinite and unstable ‘elsewhere,’ relative to the world of the image and the screen” rather than the “position of omniscience” suggested by the technique’s name (Kahana 107). In this way, *San Pietro*’s voice-track emphasizes the immediacy of the images shown onscreen by presenting a perspective closer to that of the participants in the battle rather than that of a distant, impartial observer.

Huston’s non-mythologizing depiction of the common infantryman makes the film’s violence unsettling to watch and the film itself generally incompatible with the aims of the War Department documentary project of the World War II period, even though the film’s narrative was altered at official request prior to its release to lessen this effect in the cut of the film that was eventually seen by the public. As Edgerton explains, Huston initially intended the film to end with a sequence composed “of several easily recognizable American soldiers now being placed into body bags as their previously recorded words are heard in voice-over speaking about what they thought the world would be like after the war” (30). In contrast, the coda of the released version of *San Pietro* takes place after the battle has ended, and juxtaposes the hardships of the soldiers previously depicted in the narrative with reassuring images of liberated San Pietro villagers after the battle’s conclusion; nevertheless, these images subtly underscore the cost of violence on the civilian population of San Pietro. Tellingly, able-bodied men are conspicuously absent in footage of a village now populated mainly by women and children: the only adult male shown in the film’s final sequence is an elderly man limping amidst the rubble, aided by a cane. Yet despite the traces of carnage that remain unmistakable in this final sequence, its tone is markedly different than the bleakness that

characterizes the rest of the film. In the coda, the film's perspective shifts from that of the infantrymen to the liberated civilians, in particular the children of the village: adopting the perspective of one of the young children shown wandering amidst the village rubble, the narrator states, somewhat naively: "Tomorrow, it will be as though the bad things never happened." Cultural notions of the normative family are thus subtly inscribed the narrative closure of Huston's film as *San Pietro* gestures implicitly to the return of a time before war disrupted the lives of the village's children, despite the conspicuous absence of able-bodied adult men in the film's final sequence.

Despite the graphic nature of the released version of *San Pietro*, the official version of Huston's film is selective in the elements of wartime carnage it makes visible to its audience. The unedited footage shot by Huston during the Italian campaign available for view at the National Archives includes long sequences of reenacted battle footage demonstrating the extent to which Huston intended to focus his film on graphic images of death. One particular reel of footage, for example, contains several similar shots of a slow pan from the a backdrop of the peaceful landscape of Italy down to a helmet, pierced by a bullet hole, beside the hand of a fallen soldier, and another reel contains a more extensive series of sequences in which soldiers repeatedly enact death scenes: one unit can be seen advancing again and again across the same field as one soldier and then another fall to the ground after being apparently shot by an unseen enemy. The soldiers advance, fall, and then get up and continue advancing. Yet despite the clear intent to show *battlefield* casualties evinced by this footage, different footage completely excised from the final film indicates the extent to which Huston's editing



process limited the film's depiction of the lasting effect of disability on the veterans of the Italian campaign. National Archives holdings related to *San Pietro* also contain newsreel footage shot by Huston during the Italian campaign, including two differently edited sequences of comedian Joe E. Brown entertaining convalescent troops outside of a field hospital. In the first version of the sequence, Huston's footage foregrounds the presence of injured soldiers in the crowd while Brown does a comedy routine mimicking a pitcher at a baseball game; in the second version of the sequence, only those soldiers in the crowd without visible injuries are seen, and Huston shifts his focus from the servicemen to the comedian and his routine. Likewise, in the official version of *San Pietro*, heroic deaths can be shown in a surprisingly graphic nature, but the film's narrative carefully elides any depiction of lasting damage done to living human bodies. Paradoxically, it seems more threatening to show a viewer images of a grave injury survived at great cost to one's body than it is to show the results of death itself.

Viewing the unedited archival footage of *San Pietro* affords one the opportunity to see the results of Huston's "battlefield" shoots prior to the influence of Huston's military overseers and, moreover, without the narrative shaping Huston himself imposed on the images through editing and voice-over. In his 1931 essay "A Short History of Photography," Walter Benjamin anticipates the primacy of the photographic image as a cultural signifier for realism in the twentieth century, but cautions that in an increasingly image-saturated culture, it is not the image but its caption that becomes "the most important part of the photograph": photographs do not stand on their own, but instead depend on historical and political context for meaning (Benjamin, quoted in Rabinowitz,

*They Must Be Represented* 21.)<sup>23</sup> Scholars of documentary film extend Benjamin's concept of captioning to explain the form's rhetorical principles: documentaries embed meaning in the relationships they create through selective editing and in the juxtaposition of sound and image; "reality" does not reside in isolated images. Likewise, raw footage is film without intentionality, an object that can only make meaning in relation to itself. Silent and without caption, the footage of the Huston archive exudes an uncanny voyeurism only partially suppressed in the finished film by the subtle communalism inscribed upon the film's images through voice-over. In shooting *San Pietro*, Huston often composed shots with camera's view partially obscured: soldiers are often seen from the vantage point of a camera operator hidden behind tree branches, barbed wire, or other objects that clutter the visual field. At times, shots like these seem to simulate the point of view of an infantryman observing the battle from a position of cover, but the context of these images changes when the camera's gaze records footage of apparently fallen soldiers from a position of assumed safety, implicating the viewer in an uncomfortable act of surveillance. A particularly striking sequence of unused footage shows a soldier from medium distance, shot from behind as he kneels over the body of a man, apparently a fallen comrade. As the camera pushes in for a clearer shot, the soldier turns his head several times, acknowledging the camera's presence with eye contact before briefly

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<sup>23</sup> Benjamin also discusses the role of the caption in his essay "The Author as Producer," writing: "It goes without saying that photography is unable to say anything about a power station or a cable factory other than this: what a beautiful world! [. . .] For it has succeeded in transforming even abject poverty, by recording it in a fashionably perfected manner, into an object for enjoyment. [. . .] What we require of the photographer is the ability to give his picture a caption that wrenches it from modish commerce and gives it a revolutionary useful value" (230).

cradling the fallen man's head in his arms. The meaning of this sequence is essentially indeterminate as it lacks the structure and documentary captioning that presents viewers of *San Pietro*'s finished cut with narrative cues shaping their reception of the images included in the officially released film. Nevertheless, the voyeuristic tone of these shots is unmistakable, and viewing the scene seems to violate the privacy of both the living and the dead.

Where close-ups early in the released version of the film generally encourage an empathetic identification with the soldiers they depict that is reinforced by the informality of Huston's narration, this scene—viewable only as a silent image—further complicates the I-Here-Now formulation through which New Deal voiceover sought to bridge the gap between viewer and subject. When the kneeling soldier looks back at Huston's camera, his action functions primarily as an acknowledgement of the filmmaker's presence in the moment being recorded, but the soldier's return of the gaze in this instance also marks a moment that undermines the connection between viewer and subject the finished film attempts to construct by presenting a viewing dynamic that both illustrates and challenges the power imbalance inherent in Huston's privileged viewing perspective in this scene. The difficulty inherent in reading the archival outtakes of Huston's film, however, is inseparable from their lack of caption. As Rabinowitz explains, caption is particularly important in scenes involving ethical issues related to the representation of the body. She writes, "history is where pain and death occur but it is in representation that the facts and events gain meaning. As 'star' of the documentary, the presence of the body, especially the body in pain, signifies truth and realness which seem to defy contextualization," yet

without caption “the camera’s view is disembodied and so dehistoricized, while filmed bodies are simultaneously overinvested with meaning yet deprived of agency [. . .] raw footage needs editing, bodies need historicizing” (Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented* 21, 22).

In *Intelligence Work*, Kahana traces a historical shift in the ideology and rhetoric of American documentary film: “a simple historical shift between two structures of feeling, from trust to suspicion” reflecting an increased cynicism regarding politics and social structures in Cold War-era America (35, 38). Huston’s camera in the previously described scene of voyeurism moves in a way that would in subsequent years become coded to indicate covert surveillance at times implying an ideological position of cynical distance from events subjected to critique by the filmmaker’s gaze. I would like to suggest that what we see in both Huston’s unedited footage and, to a lesser extent, in the official version of *San Pietro* are the contradictory impulses of a filmmaker pinned between two historically specific positions of documentary rhetoric. Both Kahana and Edgerton point out how documentary movements of the 1960s and 1970s like *cinéma vérité* emerged in part as a result of technical innovations in film and sound recording equipment during World War II (Kahana 39; Edgerton 31). Edgerton points out that *San Pietro*’s final cut blends the authoritarian elements of World War II-era documentaries made by the Office of War Information with “formal elements that are closely associated with the *cinéma vérité* movement of the 1950-1960s, such as longer takes, hand-held and mobile camerawork, and on-the-spot interviewing,” and argues that these elements allow Huston—like later practitioners of *cinéma vérité*—to adopt a more objective point of

view in this film, letting “these pictures stand on their own without interpretation” (Edgerton 30). Yet objectivity in documentary cinema almost always proves to be an illusion, or at best, a rhetorical strategy. Kahana explains that, as a result of the codification of documentary practice that occurred during the Depression, “by the end of the 1930s, documentary named not only a form but a position” and an accompanying awareness that “no image of the world [is] a neutral one” (63). Kahana thus argues that the “blossoming of forms and methods in documentary [following the Second World War] is matched, however, by increasing suspicion of the concept of the public, and the public sphere, in American culture; indeed, publicness began to be constituted [. . .] by a discourse of suspicion” (Kahana 38).

What one sees when viewing *San Pietro* in its totality—both in its form as a refined object of calculated state filmmaking and as the unshaped artifact housed in a government archive—are the contradictory impulses of a filmmaker pinned between two historically specific positions of documentary rhetoric: trust and suspicion. Depriving the viewer of the anchoring presence of an authoritarian voiceover, *San Pietro*’s narrative structure heightens the extent to which the film overinvests its violent imagery with meaning, an effect furthered by the absence of the film’s soundtrack in the archival footage. Cinematic signification always involves surplus, but this is particularly true in the case of ‘non-fiction’ film precisely *because* traditional documentary narrative asserts a one-to-one fidelity between actuality and the events shown on screen. Despite the presumed reality of their films, documentary filmmakers select the images we see and leave out others; moreover, through editing, film constantly produces meanings and

associations beyond the control of the filmmaker. As a result, the viewer remains always aware that he or she is only shown a partial picture, and yet this in actual effect heightens the extent to which images on screen constantly produce, and thus, are overinvested with meaning.

Yet *San Pietro* also tells us something larger about the documentary film project itself. In *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, Mary Ann Doane argues that “the significance of cinema [. . .] lies in its apparent capacity to perfectly represent the contingent, to provide a pure record of time.” Doane writes that the actuality, the documentary form that was also the earliest form of cinema itself, “appeared to capture a moment, to register and repeat ‘that which happens.’” Doane asserts that the actualities made by early filmmakers like the Lumières “produced continual evidence [of] the drive to fix and make repeatable the ephemeral” (22). Documentary rhetoric itself (especially the specific forms of documentary rhetoric one sees emerging following the Second World War) signifies the real precisely by enacting for the viewer the seemingly contradictory purpose of cinema itself: as staged actuality, documentary conveys an urgent sense of immediacy precisely through the dramatization of contingency. The complexity of this impulse, however, is made particularly apparent by certain moments in the staged archival footage taken from *San Pietro* when contingency erupts from a scene like the one in which an American soldier spontaneously returns the gaze of the state’s vision, destabilizing for a moment the ideological position of state documentary but also the subject/object relationship of cinema itself.

III) Mental Trauma, The “Veteran Problem,” and John Huston’s *Let There Be Light*

The physical health and mental stability of returning veterans was a concern for both the military and the American public even prior to the end of World War II, and the depiction of soldiers suffering from mental trauma in the entertainment culture and news media following the war was not often less than sympathetic. Films like George Marshall’s *The Blue Dahlia* (which was originally intended by scriptwriter Raymond Chandler to tell the story of a murder committed by a mentally disturbed ex-bomber pilot prior to censorship under the Hays Code at the request of the Army) and newspaper articles with headlines like “Veteran Beheads Wife With Jungle Machete,” “Ex-Marine Held in Rape Murder,” and “Sailor Son Shoots Father” transformed diffuse cultural anxieties about returning vets to specific fears of violence to sell newspapers (Edgerton 33). Although stories like these were largely exaggerated, the media scare regarding the potential for disturbed soldiers to commit acts of violence against their own families reveals the extent to which public fears about emotional trauma in returning veterans were rooted in a deeper, more subtle anxiety regarding the fate of the American family and the ability of American men to regain their place in society under the shadow of the violence of a recently ended foreign conflict. Yet these anxieties regarding the fate of American men returning from war were not entirely unfounded: returning from war, the American G.I. faced a variety of very real challenges in the second half of the 1940s. Rabinowitz cites Louis L. Bennett’s study published September 1944 in the social work journal *Survey Midmonthly* indicating that “some ‘problems’ noted by the director of Veterans’ Service Center in New York included ‘family difficulties,’ ‘education and

jobs,' 'housing,' and 'emotional disturbance and instability'" (*Black & White & Noir*, 278). The results of this study highlight the multifaceted nature of the issues facing veterans who sought to re-enter civilian life following the end of the War. While the American public remained preoccupied with sensational accounts of rare and isolated incidents of violence among returning soldiers, the United States government enacted programs to deal with the emotional duress and socioeconomic dislocation experienced by many veterans, at times conflating the two issues in ways that stigmatized both physical disability and psychological trauma. Rabinowitz argues that despite the feminization of American welfare state in contemporary discussions of government's responsibility to support less fortunate members of society, American welfare programs were originally conceived in part as "strategic investments [. . .] to help the millions of returning World War II veterans reenter civilian life" (158). She writes:

The plight of the returning GI had been seen as a "problem" years before the War ended. [. . .] The pages of social work journals and social psychology studies within the Research Branch, Information and Education Division of the United States Army, and other federal agencies fretted about the massive influx of young men into an America now booming with war production. These GIs had left a far different America—one reeling from a decade of depression, which forced the first unified federal welfare programs to secure Social Security and unemployment insurance, as well as provide "relief" for poor, unemployed urban families and displaced rural farmers. During the 1930s, welfare was



understood as a response to a crisis—as a defense against social disarray, anarchy and fascism, and as a relief from privation. By the time the United States entered the Second World War, welfare was officially trumpeted as a national defense. (*Black & White & Noir*, 159)

The reasoning underlying this sort of official rhetoric is the idea that the American populace, and American men in particular, represented a valuable and threatened national resource. National programs aiding returning veterans buttressed the masculinity of American men, and by extension, the security of the country. In this context, physical injury and mental illness represented a threat to American safety and prosperity, and these anxieties were only exacerbated by the socioeconomic realities faced by America's veterans as they returned from war to a now unfamiliar postwar America. Rebecca Jo Plant notes that, as a result, “in the aftermath of World War II, commentators routinely linked the issues of mental health and democratic viability, and mental illness emerged as a major preoccupation, even something of a cause célèbre.” Pressured by the attention focused on mental illness following the War, congress passed the National Mental Health Act in 1946, which represented the first government effort to fund the research and treatment of mental illness in the United States. Plant argues:

The sense of urgency which informed these developments stemmed from a widely held conviction that mental health constituted a critical—and critically endangered—national resource. In large measure, this conviction arose from the experiences of World War II, when the US Selective Service rejected a

staggering number of men (1,100,000) on psychological and neurological grounds. Yet despite this extensive screening, during the war nearly 40 per cent of all medical discharges were for neuropsychiatric reasons (Herman, 1995). Frequently reiterated in the popular press, these alarming statistics created an image of a weak and emasculated citizenry, psychologically unfit to defend the nation (Furnas, 1945; Hersey, 1945; Lynch, 1945). If mental illness made America vulnerable to external enemies, it also threatened to erode the nation's democratic order from within. (183)

Thus, the U.S. military's own efforts to understand and treat mental trauma in enlisted men reveal different valences of the concerns also preoccupying the American public. In 1948, Menninger, chief of Army Psychiatry during World War II, published *Psychiatry in a Troubled World: Yesterday's War and Today's Challenge*, a book assessing the effectiveness of army psychiatry in dealing with psychological issues before, during, and immediately following the War. The book represents on Menninger's part an attempt to account for the shortcomings of the military's response to mental trauma experienced by soldiers in wartime; though Menninger's fraught relationship to the psychiatric establishment in the United States is reflected in some of the book's more ambivalent moments, overall, the book in general tends to portray the United States military sympathetically and deflect criticisms of the United States Army, Army psychiatry, and the majority of American soldiers, despite the high incidence of cases of mental trauma during and after World War II. The book accomplishes this deflection in part through its comparison between the First and Second World Wars, through which Menninger

underscores the increased severity of World War II's violence in comparison to the previous conflict and emphasizes the advances made by psychiatry in the period between 1918 and 1941 (5). Presumably written for a military rather than popular readership, the book does not concern itself with the sensational fears of the general public regarding the safety risk veterans might present to their loved ones, but rather addresses the belief amongst military officials that "in their great numbers" psychologically wounded soldiers might become "ruthless robbers of manpower" (121). In the build-up to war, the military had been concerned draftees were feigning mental deficiencies to be excused from military service, and following the war, this concern shifted to a belief that those traumatized by violence overseas might return home unwilling or unable to work.

Huston's third War Department documentary, *Let There Be Light*, belongs to a subgenre of the nonfiction films commissioned by the Office of War Information that documented the military's efforts to rehabilitate soldiers following physical war wounds or war-related psychological traumas, often addressing the specific concerns potential employers might have about the employability of returning veterans. As such, the film participates in the military discourse surrounding mental trauma following World War II through a narrative linking mental stability to physical well-being that emphasizes both a sound mind and able body as necessary preconditions for reintegration into a normative family unit and productive postwar life. As Edgerton notes, on its surface, "the plot structure of [*Let There Be Light*] is meant to put the 'nervously wounded' veteran in the best possible light," yet the film often conflates physical disability and the effects of mental trauma in troubling ways in order to accomplish this aim. As a part of this

strategy, the film includes a prologue that serves to minimize the role of psychological wounds in the displacement experienced by returning soldiers. Text shown at the start of the film states that treatment techniques shown in the film “have been particularly successful in acute cases, such as battle neurosis” but that “equal success is not to be expected when dealing with peacetime neuroses which are usually of a chronic nature,” thus emphasizing that wartime mental traumas are *temporary* conditions unrelated to the character of the soldier himself. The written prologue concludes with a statement affirming the film’s objectivity and documentary value: “no scenes were staged. The cameras merely recorded what took place in an army hospital.” In this way, the prologue sets up and betrays the film’s divided purpose and bifurcated point of view: while individual sequences of the film seem to make conscious use of the tropes of documentary verisimilitude later codified in the *cinéma vérité* movement (keeping the camera’s rolling so they “merely record” actual events) and portray the patients of Mason General with startling vulnerability, the film’s broader narrative arc is presented through narration that, at times, directly contradicts what the viewer sees onscreen in order to conform with the reassuring thesis put forth at the start of film that mental trauma in returning veterans, though widespread, can be dealt with easily and effectively.

Huston structures *Let There Be Light* as a three part narrative: the arrival and initial evaluation of the soldiers who will be treated at Mason General Hospital; their treatment through a combination of individual talk therapy, group therapy sessions, and psychopharmacology; and their rehabilitation, which concludes when the men reunite with their families and loved ones at the film’s end. The first section of the film focuses

particular attention on the intake interviews the army psychiatrists conduct with the soldiers whose treatment the film will detail. These interviews highlight the primary obstacles to be addressed in the film through therapy: survivor's guilt, homesickness, and the more acute traumas experienced by soldiers that often elicit physical symptoms in the men. First introducing the men as a group, narrator's voiceover highlights the physical symptoms of trauma the initial in-depth interviews touch upon:

Here are men who tremble, men who cannot sleep. Men with pains that are nonetheless real because they are of mental origin. Men who cannot remember. Paralyzed men whose paralysis is dictated by the mind.

However different the symptoms, these things they have in common: unceasing fear and apprehension, a sense of impending disaster. A feeling of hopelessness and utter isolation.

The narrator's initial description of the men entering treatment at Mason General emphasizes the physical manifestations of their emotional trauma: although the description does highlight the emotional hardship and isolation experienced by soldiers experiencing posttraumatic stress, these men are identified, first and foremost, as "men who tremble." The above quoted passage is the first of many instances in the film in which the physical and mental effects of wartime trauma are conflated in order to elide the lasting effect of trauma, which often goes unseen. Later in the film, the narrator explains: "Modern psychiatry makes no sharp division between the mind and the body. Physical ails often have psychic causes, just as emotional ails might have a physical basis." Although mind and body do certainly exert a mutual influence on each other,

Tobin Siebers has noted the care taken by the disability community in parsing the differing effects and cultural registers of physical disability and mental illness. Advocates for the physically disabled have expressed concerns regarding the conflation of physical and mental disabilities due to a fear that the “misrepresentation [of a physical disability] as a mental condition will have a detrimental effect on [the disabled individuals’] ability to organize themselves politically” (79). Siebers writes:

The tendency of the social model [of disability] to refer to physical states as mental ones [. . .] is a political, and hardly a neutral one, because it often represents impairment as the product of mental weakness. [. . .] Behind the ideal that physical disability may be cured by acts of will or the imagination is a model of political rationality that oppresses people with mental disabilities. (79)

The conflation of the effects of physical and mental trauma in *Let There Be Light* is analogous to the position criticized by Siebers, logic that is born out in a subsequent scene depicting a man suffering from psychosomatic paralysis, or “conversion hysteria,” described thusly: “organically sound, his paralysis is as real as if it were caused by a spinal lesion.” Though this dialogue does underscore the reality of the impairment of mental trauma for those who suffer from it, the scene’s progression links the man’s recovery nearly completely to the loss of his condition’s visible symptoms, his physical impairment. Edgerton notes that

several critics have rightly pointed out that the above described scenes in *Let There Be Light* create the strong impression that many of these patients

are quickly and miraculously cured despite several sections in the narration that qualify the dramatic turnabouts on the screen as merely the first steps toward rehabilitation. The major flaw in the film certainly is this strong disposition to believe in the unfailing powers of the various military psychiatrists at Mason General” (35)

Yet Edgerton’s own analysis elides the connection between physical impairment and mental illness sustained throughout the film. While Huston’s film does clearly attempt to “assert that a psychoneurotic impairment is no more disgraceful than a physical injury,” as Edgerton argues, this analysis oversimplifies the relationship between mind and body as it is understood in *Let There Be Light*. While treating the above-mentioned soldier for the “purely psychological” roots of his paralysis, the psychiatrist asks him to discuss his anxiety related to his life as a soldier, the effect his absence has on his family back home, and his recent crying spells. The soldier in question discusses his difficulty “holding things in,” and the Army psychiatrist responds, “well, we can help you do that.” During the treatment that follows, the soldier is given sodium amytal, and undergoes a regression while in “a state similar to hypnosis.” The drug is said to provide “a shortcut to the unconscious mind” so that the military psychiatrist can more easily “remove through suggestion those symptoms which impede the patients recovery”: the *physical* manifestation of the soldier’s emotional trauma that prevents him from walking without assistance. Rather than discuss the wartime experiences that have led to the soldier’s treatment, the army psychiatrist inquires instead about anxieties the soldier has regarding his father’s ability to maintain authority within his parents’ marital relationship: it is the

cursory working through of these familial dynamics that is shown to lead to the soldier's recovery of his motor skills, rather than the address of any specific war experience, treatment which leaves the soldiers legs "good and strong" at the conclusion of the brief interaction depicted onscreen. The score swells during this scene, heightening dramatic tension as the psychoneurotic soldier regains his ability to walk almost miraculously. Although the narration does note "the fact that he can now walk does not mean that his neurosis is cured," the soldier himself is told: "When you wake up, you'll keep on walking perfectly well." This example is typical of the strategy of the film: while one element of the film might acknowledge the limitations of Army Psychiatry's treatment of the men in its care, other elements enforce a radically different interpretation of the events, conveying a narrative that minimizes the role of the war in the difficulties experienced by returning veterans and presenting the working through of any trauma that has occurred as a straightforward and entirely successful process. Although some scenes in the film do show soldiers working through specific wartime experiences with the aid of an army psychiatrist, the moments emphasized in the narrative as significant breakthroughs either directly portray or strongly imply that if a patient's physical symptoms can be alleviated, he is as good as cured and generally avoid specific discussion of the soldiers' wartime experiences.

In the event soldiers are deemed too traumatized to reintegrate normally into society, the psychiatric discourse of the period takes pains to place the blame on individual men for their troubles, rather than address that their wartime experiences account for their feelings of distress. Though not explicitly mentioned, the draft is clearly



implicated in the anxieties surrounding mental trauma in returning soldiers: “We [were forced to take in] men with strong neurotic disposition[s],” Menninger writes in *Psychiatry in a Troubled World*: “[These men] were placed in the Army where they did not want to be; they were subjected to many stresses, both physical and psychological. With both a weak motivation and a weak personality the army did not have much chance of making good soldiers out of such men.” (131) The official voice of *Let There Be Light* often expresses just these sentiments in describing the soldiers’ response to their course of treatment; towards the end of the film, again emphasizing the role of alleviating *physical* symptoms of trauma in the recovery process, the narrator explains: “All those symptoms, like being unable to speak, stuttering, they have an underlying anger and resentment in the deeper parts of the personality [of the individual soldier]. You could almost say it like this: Underneath ‘I can’t, you can find I won’t.’” *Let There Be Light* thus undertakes a project of elevating army psychiatry that works hand in hand with the film’s overall goal: minimizing the role of the war itself in the dislocation experienced by returning psychoneurotic veterans.

*Let There Be Light*’s narrative also illustrates the extent to which the understanding of recovery presented by the film relies on heteronormative cultural notions of the nuclear family. According to the film, central to the psychically wounded soldier’s convalescence and eventual reintegration into society is his recovery of a feeling of “personal safety” to bring him “out of his isolation” and make him “feel like other people.” The soldier accomplishes this task by regaining an “experience of safety” which, according to the army psychiatrist in charge of Mason General’s group therapy sessions,

“stem[s] childhood safety” that “itself would stem from the parent’s safety”: the key to reintegration into wider society is, implicitly, reintegration into a normative family unit and the working out of any neuroses that might prevent such a reintegration from being successful. This dialogue, which occurs immediately following the scene depicting the “cure” performed on the soldier experiencing hysterical paralysis reinforces the logic of that earlier scene and demonstrates the extent to which the group therapy sessions at Mason General rely on the same narrative of Oedipal displacement demonstrated when the patient regains his ability to walk after a cursory confrontation of his feelings towards a father the young man is told was unable to adequately exercise his authority in a heteronormative familial triangle. At this point in the film, the psychiatrist warns the soldiers attending group therapy not to keep their emotional difficulties to themselves, contradicting some earlier instructions given in individual therapy sessions, and asks several men previously shown undergoing one-on-one psychiatric treatments to discuss anxieties they felt during childhood, rather than any recent traumas related directly to war. The film explains “the basic method of psychiatric treatment” is “discussion and understanding of the underlying causes of the symptom” but such discussion rarely addresses the direct causes of a soldier’s trauma, and instead relocates the cause of each individual’s traumatic response onto a site less problematic for the military: formative childhood experiences the psychiatrist interprets as producing weak character traits in the adult patient.

Deleuze and Guattari note the extent to which modern psychiatry relies on just such narratives of oedipal displacement in the practice of psychoanalysis: “We have seen,

following Foucault how nineteenth century psychiatry had conceived of the family as both cause and judge of the illness, and the closed asylum as an artificial family charged with internalizing guilt and with instituting responsibility, enveloping madness no less than its cure in a father-child relationship everywhere present” (359). Deleuze and Guattari’s criticism of psychoanalysis, that it tends to impose a narrative of familial dysfunction onto the patient’s experiences—reducing a complex web of socially produced desires to the Oedipal relationship—is useful to consider in relation to the psychotherapy sessions depicted in *Let There Be Light*, which substitute family neurosis for a historically specific trauma of combat; the end result of this process is a movement of blame for the trauma of war from the military onto individual soldiers and their families. “Sick desire stretches out on the couch, an artificial swamp, a little earth, a little mother,” Deleuze and Guattari write of the patient of psychoanalysis, quoting *Aaron’s Rod*, D.H. Lawrence’s depiction of Europe following World War I: “Look at you, stumbling and staggering with no use in your legs. [ . . . ] And it’s nothing but your wanting to be loved that does it. A maudlin crying to be loved, which makes your legs go all rickey” (Deleuze and Guattari 334). Mason General’s treatment of hysterical paralysis literalizes Lawrence’s metaphor,<sup>24</sup> creating a repeatable script into which the particulars of each patient’s life are inserted, diagnosed as rooted in familial dysfunction, and “cured” through a cursory working through of the psychiatrist’s narrative. By focusing primarily on physical manifestations of psychological trauma and locating the cause of

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<sup>24</sup> The quotation Deleuze and Guattari discuss here is taken from a scene in Lawrence’s novel in which Lilly and his wife criticize Jim Bricknell for his repeated infatuations with younger women.

these physical symptoms in the soldiers' upbringing, Army psychiatry—despite its best intentions—creates the impression that any lingering effects of combat on a soldier are the shameful result of a personal failing rooted in a family dynamic that fails to conform with the social norms reinforced by the film's narrative.

Where many of *Let There Be Light*'s sequences employ narrative techniques like continuity editing and montage to reinforce the film's official logic, the long, unedited scenes portraying psychiatric interviews with individual soldiers, like Huston's close-ups in *San Pietro*, present a rupture which almost entirely undermines the didacticism of *Let There Be Light*'s storyline, as psychiatrists "listen to the stories of the men, who tell them the best they can." In these scenes, Huston gives primacy to the men's individual stories, and we see firsthand the difficulty involved in self-narration both following a specific trauma, but also under the conditions of modernity more generally. In *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, Doane makes use of the concept of "shock," which Walter Benjamin understands to be the paradigmatic experience of modern subjectivity, to describe the role of cinema in "conceptualizing contingency in modernity" (Doane 13). Doane notes that, in Benjamin's argument:

First, shock is specified as that which is unassimilable in experience, a residue of unreadability. In being parried by consciousness, it never reaches the subjective depths (of the unconscious, of experience) that would confer upon it stable meaning. Second, shock is defined in terms that associate it with pathology. The subject must defend himself/herself against it at the risk of losing psychological integrity or equilibrium.

Consciousness is above all “protective.” Third, the defense against shock embodies a privileged relation to time. The rationalization of time (its division into discrete entities—seconds, minutes hours, and its regulation by the clock) is a symptom of the foreclosure of meaning in the defense against shock (an incident is “assigned a precise point in time in consciousness at the cost of the integrity of its contents”). Rationalization supplants, displaces, or, in a sense, *mimics* meaning.” (Doan 14)

Taking a cue from Deleuze and Guattari, I see the narrativizing impulse of army psychiatry as depicted in *Let There Be Light* mimicking meaning, foreclosing for the subject of psychoanalysis the possibility of working through his or her traumatic experiences through therapy. Doane explains that “shock is not to be avoided or rejected in a historically regressive nostalgia for the auratic. Instead, it must be *worked through*” (14). The difficulty inherent in parsing the significance of *Let There Be Light* lies, in part, in the fact that the film does in fact depict isolated moments in which individual soldiers work through their specific war related traumas, but these instances do not merge seamlessly with the overarching message the film itself insists upon. Early in the film, one soldier is told by his psychiatrist that “a display of emotion is all right” and is “sometimes very helpful,” but only after he nearly discontinues his treatment after breaking down and crying in front of Huston’s camera. It is thus difficult to know how the extent to which the presence of a film crew influenced the unfolding of the treatment witnessed in the film. As the soldiers recall their experiences at the request of the psychiatrists at Mason General, they also perform their neuroses for the camera. Yet in

these sequences, it is the startling moments of genuine insight on the part of the patients that stick with the viewer, rather than the tidy didactic narratives the psychiatrists inscribe on these experiences through their analysis, often with the aid of pharmacology. Doane notes the role of consciousness, for Freud, is to “protect the organism against excessive stimuli,” noting:

This stimulus shield would, of course, be tougher, more impenetrable, in a highly developed technological society. In Benjamin’s argument, such a society requires a heightened consciousness to parry the shock effects of urban existence. The human organism increasingly becomes surface. For Benjamin, what are lost in this process are memory traces and the full experience of the event exemplified by storytelling, as opposed to the communication of information or mere sensation” (13).

As the men undergoing treatment at Mason General attempt to regain a sense of stability through self-narration, their progress in working through their traumatic experiences is often arrested by official Army psychiatry’s repeated insistence on surface, on regaining legibility as a masculine subject within postwar society, rather than an experience of depth, which, though it doubtlessly would be painful, would likely prove deeply therapeutic and perhaps even healing.

Army psychiatry’s insistence on surface rather than depth in their treatment of the psychoneurotic soldier is mirrored in the structure of the film itself, particularly at its conclusion. The final sequence of *Let There Be Light* underscores the relationship constructed by the film among notions of mental stability, the able body, and narratives

of heteronormative masculinity as the soldiers complete their final group therapy session, reunite with their wives and girlfriends, and then, importantly, demonstrate their *physical* health, as the viewer is shown the now rehabilitated vets playing a baseball game, intercut with flashbacks highlighting not the soldiers mental trauma but the physical impairment it caused: the “kid at bat” no longer suffers the tremors he did just eight weeks prior, and runs the bases with ease, and the young man who treated for hysterical paralysis scores a home run his first time up at bat; but the narration preceding this coda underscores that the one thing that will surely cure the psychoneurotic soldier is for him “to find someone [. . .] that you can learn to feel safe with,” a romantic partner to substitute for the missing safety of childhood. Thus we see the overall narrative effect of *Let There Be Light* is to reproduce the narrative repeatedly extolled by the Army Psychiatrists at Mason General. The surface narrative of Huston’s *Let There Be Light* thus attempts to fulfill a similar purpose for its viewers as is the narrative given to the soldiers it depicts by their doctor, yet the film’s authentic moments of self-disclosure remain unresolved by this narrative arc, and are at odds with the didactic nature of the film. The end result is a film that cannot construct a stable meaning for the viewer. Psychiatrists give conflicting advice at different points in the film, and many of the film’s individual moments undermine the stability of meaning the film remains unable to create through the clear-cut narrative of rehabilitation *Let There Be Light* tries, but is unable to successfully construct.

### Chapter 3-The Problem of Recognition: The Disabled Male Veteran and Masculinity as Spectacle

In an interview published in the New York Times on November 17, 1946, William Wyler stated that his primary goal in making *The Best Years of Our Lives* was to create a realistic depiction of the struggles facing veterans returning from World War II, claiming “Great pictures can't be entirely fictitious.” In the interview, Wyler continues: “Pictures that will live on for years, like ‘The Birth of a Nation’ and ‘Gone With the Wind,’ [have] great historical events in the background. The trouble with Hollywood is that too many of the top people responsible for pictures are too comfortable and don't give a damn about what goes up on the screen so long as it gets by at the box office” (Pryor 1). *The Best Years of Our Lives* was, in fact, both a commercial and critical success, despite a frank treatment of the complex realities of postwar America that was fairly unique within the canon of post-World War II Hollywood cinema. Wyler’s desire for historical verisimilitude in his film led him to cast a disabled non-actor, Harold Russell, as one of the film’s three protagonists. Although he had not acted in commercial films prior to acting in *The Best Years of Our Lives*, Russell appeared in a 1945 War Department documentary, *Diary of a Sergeant*, which depicted the rehabilitation of a sailor injured in a training exercise, who learns to use metal prosthetic hooks in the place of his hands following a double amputation. This documentary, released a year before *Let There Be Light*, follows a narrative trajectory similar to Huston’s film, and, although *Diary of a Sergeant* depicts the physical rehabilitation of disabled veterans rather than individuals



recovering from the psychological wounds of war, both films rely on similar cultural notions of masculinity in constructing their plots.

Wyler would take up this theme with much more complexity in *The Best Years of Our Lives*, focusing on World War II's destabilization of notions of the family and masculinity as normatively constructed in postwar America. Although the film portrays the experiences of three men returning from the war, each of whom face his own struggles reentering society following their service, Wyler focuses in particular on the exclusion Russell's character experiences due to his physical difference from other men around him. The ex-military man's disability stages a sudden loss of masculinity in a subject whose physicality once epitomized maleness, challenging assumptions about the boundaries demarcating normative bodies and demonstrating that masculinity cannot be understood apart from the symbolic network of an ableist culture. Unresolved formal tensions within *The Best Years of Our Lives* complicate the film's genre classification and its presentation of both 'normative' and 'non-normative' masculinities through the representational excess presented by Wyler's casting of a disabled non-actor to play Homer Parish, the film's physically disabled protagonist.

In *The Best Years of Our Lives*, Homer Parish's disabled body serves primarily as a visual marker of difference from notions of heteronormative masculine identity and, as such, provokes discomfort in other characters (and potentially in film viewers) as a disruption of *specular* masculinity as constructed within traditional cinema. For this reason, this chapter considers at length the implications presented by a disabled protagonist for notions of cinematic identification within the primarily visual system of

signification described by feminist psychoanalytic film theory. When I turn to a phenomenological understanding of film spectatorship near the end of this chapter, I do this not to invalidate a former body of scholarship, but to consider an additional dimension of experience located in specific moments of *The Best Years of Our Lives*, moments in which an able-bodied spectator might be both encouraged and challenged identify—on a corporeal level—with a body visually marked as different from his or her own.

I) Recognition, Remasculinization, and Rehabilitative Medicine in *Diary of a Sergeant*

From the start, *Diary of a Sergeant* consciously aestheticizes the events it presents, beginning with a prologue dramatizing the amputation of Russell's hands. Viewers are introduced to the film's protagonist abruptly—we see the sailor's face briefly as a trauma team rushes him into an operating room on a gurney, anaesthetizes him, and prepares him for surgery. The details of the operation itself are only implied. Low angle shots simulate the point of view of the patient as he lies on his back, the top of his head in view at the bottom of the frame, his face obscured by the bulky facemask of a World War II-era anesthesia vaporizer. The sequence ends with a dissolve transitioning to an image of a hand writing in the pages of a diary dated June 6, 1944. A voiceover explains “this was the day I lost both my hands” and a quick cut introduces the startling sight of Russell lying prone in a hospital bed with his handless arms bandaged and suspended above him in a position reminiscent of a gesture of surrender.

The opening sequence of *Diary of a Sergeant* foregrounds Russell's dependence on others and the physical limitations he now faces as a double amputee. When the camera returns to the previous shot of the protagonist in bed, we now see that a female nurse writes Russell's diary entries for him; a voiceover emphasizes the sailor's helplessness, explaining, "On this June day in 1944, someone else's fingers were writing down my words in my diary. But there just weren't any words for many of the things I thought of."<sup>25</sup> The monologue further emphasizes the young man's sudden feelings of lack, as Parish reinterprets memories from his past from his new perspective:

Like remembering a kid's party where they tied my hands behind my back and made me take a bite out of an apple hanging by a string. I thought of the time in the meat market where I worked before the war, when I sliced the tip of my right middle finger and had to get along with my left hand for a week. Just the tip of one finger, and I was fifty percent helpless.

Here, Russell's words generate pathos by hinting at the fragility of all bodies, while emphasizing the permanence of the young man's new condition. Like most able-bodied people, Russell has experienced temporarily disabling situations in the past, but his old memories take on a new horror as they come to underscore that this disability will not be a temporary condition: he wonders how he will get by "now, with stumps instead of

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<sup>25</sup> Ironically, the film also deprives Russell of speech as the voice we hear speaking the man's words throughout the film is not his own, but an anonymous voice actor, a narrative choice on the part of the film's director that literalizes one of the primary modes of presentation working to stigmatize disability. As Rosemarie Garland Thomson notes: "from folktales and classical myths to modern and postmodern "grotesques," the disabled body is almost always a freakish spectacle presented by the mediating narrative voice" (10).

fingers, and palms, and wrists.” How would it be,” he asks, “when I couldn’t even handle a cigarette by myself?” This sense of helplessness is made more palpable by the envy the protagonist feels towards other disabled veterans who “got theirs in combat,” unlike Russell, whose injury resulted from a stateside training exercise that ironically occurred on D-Day. Unlike the other wounded men he meets in rehab, Russell notes, “I didn’t have a German scalp hanging from my belt. I didn’t have a purple heart. I didn’t even have an overseas ribbon—all I had was no hands.”

The implicit purpose of the film’s extended prologue is to emphasize the emasculating nature of Russell’s disability, and the newfound difference he feels from his old self; like *Let There Be Light*, the narrative of *Diary of a Sergeant* will be one of masculinity reclaimed following a war-related trauma. Initially, Russell resigns himself to a life of feminine pursuits like “knitting sweaters for the Red Cross [. . .] with [his] feet” until he sees a War Department short documentary feature, *Meet McGonegal*, about a disabled veteran of World War I, who uses prosthetic hooks to do “all the everyday things [Russell] never thought [he’d] do again.” Inspired by the promise of living a “normal” life, Russell throws himself into his rehabilitation. In *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Literature and Culture*<sup>26</sup>, Rosemarie Garland Thomson argues that:

The meanings attributed to extraordinary bodies reside not in inherent physical flaws, but in the social relationships in which one group is

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<sup>26</sup> A field-defining work in disability studies, Thomson’s book is an early effort to use post-structuralism to examine disability identity through a constructivist view of the body, which sees disability primarily as a product of an ableist society rather than quality inherent in non-normative bodies.

legitimated by possessing valued physical characteristics and maintains its ascendancy and self-identity by systematically imposing the role of cultural or corporeal inferiority on others. Representation thus simultaneously buttresses an embodied version of normative identity and shapes a narrative of corporeal difference that excludes those whose bodies or behaviors do not conform.” (7)

By including the sequence in which convalescent soldiers watch a visibly disabled man work his prosthetics as a part of their own rehabilitation, *Diary of a Sergeant* dramatizes the role of received images and cultural narratives in the both rehabilitative process and, more generally, in the process of identity formation itself: it is not until Russell’s character in the documentary is shown a depiction of what successful rehabilitation looks like that he is able to even conceive of living a fulfilling life with his new disability, let alone to begin his process of reintegration into society. The remainder of the film details both Russell’s physical rehabilitation and an accompanying social readjustment to a life with prosthetics; a crucial part of this narrative is Russell’s reclamation of his sense of masculinity. Part of the rehabilitative process depicted in the film is a dance hosted by the military on behalf of the convalescent men during which amputees learn to dance on their prosthetic legs. In fact, the film confronts, with surprising frankness, the effect of the Russell’s disability on his confidence with women. During a sequence in which the protagonist receives a furlough from his rehab to return home, Russell considers approaching a young woman who shares his train car, but decides against it for fear that his prosthetics might frighten her; here, he confronts the dilemma of having to choose

between his functional prosthetic hooks and ornamental “dress hands that look natural covered with gloves,” which he hopes might be less off-putting visually but would render him largely helpless.

Once home, however, Russell displays for the camera a superior control of his utilitarian prosthetics—in sequences similar to those depicted in *Meet McGonegal*—as he is shown showering, washing his face, and brushing his teeth. The film’s only reference to the lasting aftereffects of the war’s violence occurs when the narrator notes “there aren’t many men left in our neighborhood since the war” and that, for this reason, no one has been present to help his mother perform masculine tasks in her son’s absence.<sup>27</sup> Ventriloquizing Russell, the narrator takes care to explain: “Nothing [else] had changed at home. [. . .] Everything else was the same” as before the War. Yet despite the documentary’s upbeat conclusion, this sequence obliquely references the extent to which the United States *has* been changed by the events of World War II, and the entire film subtly underscores the extent to which notions of the normative family and the masculinity of both individual soldiers and the nation as a whole are at stake in this new, uncertain world.

## II) Genre Trouble: Historical Trauma and the Gendering of Melodrama

Wyer decided to cast Russell in *Best Years of Our Lives* after seeing *Diary of a Sergeant*. Impressed with the young man’s performance in the documentary, the director became interested in the sailor’s personal narrative, incorporating elements of the

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<sup>27</sup> *Diary of a Sergeant* contains no references to Russell’s father, whose presence is not depicted in the film.

Russell's experiences depicted in the documentary into the fictional narrative of his film.

Discussing the circumstances surrounding the film's conceptual development with

Thomas M. Pryor, a writer for the *New York Times*, Wyler stated:

We decided to take up this boy where *Diary of a Sergeant* left him and show him returning home fully readjusted and determined to live among other people and to act like them in every respect. We wanted to show people that these disabled men were thoroughly capable of doing ordinary things with artificial hands; that we, in fact, are the ones who are maladjusted, since we annoy and embarrass them with our patronizing attentions. (Pryor 1)

Although Wyler's comments presciently anticipate the perspective of a constructivist view of disability—locating America's 'disability problem' following the war in the fabric of society rather than in the individual bodies of wounded veterans—his remarks nonetheless emphasize the importance that normative conceptions of the body retain in narratives of rehabilitation, in which the disabled soldier's goal is to "live among other people and act like them in every respect." In Wyler's narrative, Homer Parish (Russell's character) returns home after losing his hands in an aircraft carrier fire that ends his military career, and faces difficulty negotiating newly altered relationships with his loved ones while adjusting to the physical limitations he—like his real-life counterpart—now faces. While the fictional film borrows a number of elements from its documentary precursor in its depiction of the physical effects of the main character's disability, Wyler's narrative emphasizes to a greater degree the notion of disability as a complexly

embodied, culturally located identity that destabilizes normative conceptions of masculinity, as Parish is troubled more by newly altered relationships with his loved ones than by the physical limitations facing a double amputee.

Wyler's desire to create a film "written by events" (Wyler, quoted in Silverman 66) within the Hollywood studio system results in a formal tension in the film itself, which plays out both aesthetically and narratively in the feature. *The Best Years of Our Lives*, notable among post-World War II American films for its frank and nuanced depiction of physical disability in the war's context, uses the conventions of melodrama to explore how wartime injuries destabilize notions of gender and sexuality in the postwar world, despite Wyler's use of a documentary aesthetic in shooting parts of the film. By using melodrama to explore the hardships faced by a disabled veteran, *The Best Years of Our Lives* inverts the gender dynamics of a genre that traditionally explored women's issues during and after World War II; this subversion of genre underscores Parish's fraught relationship to his masculinity as he learns to live with a new dependence on others that runs counter to the self-sufficiency emphasized in his military background. Yet all three protagonists in the film face problems conforming to the normative masculine roles awaiting them upon their return to the United States following military service. Where Homer Parish must reclaim his masculinity through marriage, Fred Derry and Al Stevenson must reclaim theirs through integration into the new postwar economy, which has been transformed by social changes that occurred while they were away at war. Moreover, heightening all three men's struggle to take up the mantle of postwar masculinity are their individual difficulties processing wartime traumas: Stevenson has



developed a drinking problem that prevents him from functioning in his upper-class position as a bank manager and Derry clearly suffers from posttraumatic stress,<sup>28</sup> but Parish is the character most pointedly excluded from reintegration into postwar life due to his physical disability. Yet, while historical traumas such as war challenge the legibility of even “normative” masculinities, Wyler’s film demonstrates how representations of wartime disability—which stage a sudden loss of masculinity in a subject that once epitomized maleness through his physicality—uniquely elucidate the fraught and fragile nature of all masculinities.

Following World War II in particular, the physical and mental trauma of war, as well as the unique challenges faced by returning veterans like Parish, irrevocably altered not only our understanding of the male body, but of masculinity itself. Yet linking all three protagonists’ postwar experience in *The Best Years of Their Lives* is their frustration with feelings of passivity running counter to heteronormative notions of masculinity. While Homer Parish’s struggle to reintegrate into postwar life following his injury is the most pronounced source of conflict in *The Best Years of Our Lives*, the character’s disability (and the passivity it signifies) stands in for a broader crisis of masculinity also faced by Fred Derry and Al Stevenson, the film’s other male protagonists, who encounter similar—if seemingly more surmountable—challenges as they try to rejoin the lives and

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<sup>28</sup> As noted in my second chapter, posttraumatic stress disorder was called “war neurosis,” “combat fatigue,” or “combat exhaustion” after World War II, euphemistic terms representing a shift in tone from earlier descriptors of combat-related psychological ailments like “shell shock.” This shift in discourse was often addressed specifically in documentary films made by the US War Department in response to postwar anxieties regarding the mental stability of returning veterans (see, for example, the 1945 film, *Combat Exhaustion*.) I use the contemporary term to describe Fred Derry’s mental state throughout this chapter.

families they had left behind. All three veterans must, ultimately, prove their ability to establish their position as head of a normative family unit within the changing landscape of postwar America, despite the obstacles they face as a result of their war experiences. While Wyler presents Derry and Stevenson's recoveries from their psychological wartime traumas as inseparable from their reintegration into the world of work, his film links Parish's recovery of his own masculinity exclusively to the success of his relationship with Wilma; other aspects of his new life as a civilian, such as work, remain unaddressed in the film.

Kaja Silverman argues that the violence of World War II, coupled with the conflict's broader social effects, caused a fundamental breakdown of masculinity as a stable epistemological category following the war precisely because "our 'dominant fiction' or ideological 'reality' solicits our faith above all else in the unity of family, and the adequacy of the male subject" as normatively constructed (*Male Subjectivity* 15-16).<sup>29</sup> Returning from war, men subjected to traumas (both historical<sup>30</sup> and personal) found

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<sup>29</sup> Silverman defines the term "dominant fiction" in the context of her argument as follows: "'Dominant fiction' is opposed here neither to an ultimately recoverable reality nor to the condition of 'true' consciousness. 'Fiction' underscores the *imaginary* rather than the delusory nature of ideology, while 'dominant' isolates from the whole repertoire of a culture's images, sounds and narrative elaborations those through which the conventional subject is psychically aligned with the symbolic order" (54). Although Lacanian psychoanalysis provides much of the framework for Silverman's argument in *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, her notion of the dominant fiction clearly references "a social relationship between people that is mediated by images" that results in a perceived unity but actual separation, as described by Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle* (12).

<sup>30</sup> Silverman defines "historical trauma" as follows: "A historically precipitated but psychoanalytically specific disruption, with ramifications extending beyond the individual psyche," or "any historical event, whether socially engineered or of natural occurrence, which brings a large group of male subjects into such intimate relation with

they could no longer recognize themselves in the cultural narratives they once easily inhabited: in the postwar world, it is difficult, especially for the “family man,” to come home. Melodramas of the post-World War II period responded to this historical moment by expressing these anxieties obliquely through their depictions of the domestic sphere, incorporating an ideological dimension at times overlooked in considerations of the genre that focus on its visual elements, such as the frequent use of a color-saturated *mise-en-scène* to express the emotional inner lives of its (often female) protagonists. Christine Gledhill argues that post-World War II melodrama often concerns “a bourgeoisie ‘decaying from within’ in Eisenhower’s America” (34, 14), while Susan Hayward notes how these postwar films reflect “the social order [...] through the personal” to express the different valences of oppression experienced within postwar family dynamics (203). As it centers on the fraught nature of American family dynamics following World War II, *The Best Years of Our Lives* certainly qualifies as a melodrama; yet the film’s focus on male characters negotiating their relationships to redefined masculine roles in the postwar context pushes the boundaries of the genre by bringing out contradictions present in the gender roles inhabited by the film’s masculine protagonists. Like later postwar melodramas such as those made by Douglas Sirk, we see in *The Best Years of Our Lives* a clear concern with a loss of faith in the very notions that come to constitute the American dream of postwar prosperity; yet, where Mary Ann Doane has argued that melodramas of the post-World War II period tend to express a female protagonist’s anxieties regarding the limitations of small town life in middle America through a depiction of

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lack that they are at least for the moment unable to sustain an imaginary relation with the phallus, and so withdraw their belief in the dominant fiction” (*Male Subjectivity*, 55).

claustrophobic domestic settings (285), *The Best Years of Our Lives* reveals its own subtle pessimism regarding the postwar dream by showing that, following World War II, male veterans met similar anxieties regarding feelings of passivity upon returning from war and rejoining the families they left behind.<sup>31</sup>

In “Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on Men in Mainstream Cinema,” Steve Neale argues that men undergo an entirely different process than female figures when subjected to the cinematic gaze due to the different erotic registers of male bodies in cinema, and because the male protagonist’s subject position is often defined in opposition to the passivity that defines the female figure in traditional cinema. Neale writes that, in films focusing on heteronormative male relationships, the erotic nature of the gaze must by necessity be repressed in order to allay homophobic anxieties resulting from the display of the male body to another man, but that this repression of eroticism “seems structurally linked to a narrative content marked by sado-masochistic phantasies and scenes [...] especially evident in those moments of contest and combat [...] at which a narrative becomes pure spectacle” (12). Here, male bodies are “stylized and fragmented [and] heavily mediated by the looks of the characters involved” much like female characters subjected to cinema’s traditional male gaze, but, unlike a woman rendered passive by the cinematic apparatus, specularized male figures are characterized by

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<sup>31</sup> Wyler’s film certainly belongs to a body of post-World War II texts intended to assuage public fears regarding the reintegration of veterans into postwar American society, as Chopra-Gant and Gerber foreground in their own readings. Both authors, however, acknowledge a cynical undercurrent fairly unique within the canon of postwar reintegration narratives running counter to the film’s more positive surface message (Chopra-Gant 551; Gerber 31-37).

“bodies unmarked as objects of erotic display” looked upon “not by desire, but rather by fear, or hatred, or revulsion” (14). Homer Parish anticipates—and sometimes receives—just such a gaze from those he interacts with, but, unlike Parish, most able-bodied specularized masculine figures retain the perceived potency associated with the traditional male hero in cinema (12). These notions of American masculinity, however, also emerge in part out of a postwar experience that differed greatly from those countries that experienced wartime violence on their own soil for the duration of the conflict.

Tony Judt argues that by reducing the male population of many European countries considerably and Europe’s presence on the world stage immensely, World War II allowed the United States to rise further as a world power while producing a European continent feminized by wartime violence (13, 9). The aftermath of World War II caused those countries that experienced its violence directly to reassess their future roles as players on the world stage; this was particularly true in Europe. Under fascism, national myths depended on heteronormative notions of masculinity for coherence; after the war, the diminished status of the post-fascist male subject rendered fascist ideology untenable, while the devastated landscape of postwar Europe served as an ever-present reminder for those living in European countries after 1945 of the war’s unprecedented levels of violence and destruction (Judt 13, 19). In contrast, the physical landscape of the United States, left largely untouched by war, stood in stark opposition to the disorder of postwar Europe. Returning from war, disabled American GIs learned to live with damaged bodies presenting a constant reminder of the lasting impact of wartime violence otherwise absent in America’s pristine postwar landscape; these men faced particularly pronounced

difficulties reintegrating into postwar American society, largely due to the destabilizing effect of physical disability on traditional, heteronormative notions of masculinity.

Moreover, these cultural narratives themselves elided deep uncertainties regarding the fate of the traditionally gendered equation of wife and family, despite the United States' increased role as a world power following the war. As Hayward notes, male unease surrounding the newfound economic independence experienced by women who entered the American workforce during wartime as well as a more general dissolution resulting from "the failure of the post-war American ideology to deliver promises" led to an anxiety that—though not always directly expressed within the dominant culture—was certainly present during the period, and often found expression in texts produced by the influx of foreign-born directors who, like Wyler, came to Hollywood during the 1930s and 1940s and could view "the contemporary United States and American masculinity in crisis [...] from a distance" (206). Central to this crisis was the contradiction between a masculinity defined through action and dominance and a more complex reality that undermined these straightforward narratives of America's place of dominance in the postwar world.

### III) Fraught Masculinities, Marked Bodies: The Postwar Landscape and the Postwar Man

In *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*, Judt considers at length the uncertainties faced by Europe in the aftermath of World War II, and the way these forces influence global politics to this day, arguing that the cumulative effect of the First and

Second World Wars was the dissolution of the coherent myths by which the people and nations of Europe made sense of themselves and their place in the world; yet, because the discrediting of European illusions that began in the aftermath of World War I does not reach its full realization until the end of World War II, the postwar period that comes to define the modern age follows the second “great war,” not the first (2). If we are to use World War II as a demarcation point for understanding the present, however, then we must view the war and what followed it not teleologically, but through the eyes of Walter Benjamin’s Angel of History: “Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet” (257). Notions of masculinity are clearly implicated in this wreckage, as Judt notes when discussing the diminished status of European males—both in number and stature—following the war. Judt writes:

Much has been made of [the] over-representation of women in postwar Germany especially. The humiliated, diminished status of German males—reduced from the supermen of Hitler’s burnished armies to a ragged troupe of belatedly returning prisoners, bemusedly encountering a generation of hardened women who had perforce learned to survive and manage without them—is not a fiction. (19)

Billy Wilder’s *A Foreign Affair* (1948) captures scenes of a bombed-out Berlin with a documentarian’s eye while Wilder’s plot uses the upheaval of gender roles as material for a screwball comedy, only hinting at the deeper implications of the instability of sexual categories in the postwar context. The film’s humor comments on the tenuous place of

the postwar man in gendered relationships while attempting to reaffirm heteronormative notions of masculine sufficiency. Through its reliance on Hollywood formulas mandating the closure of all narrative threads to satisfy its audience, *A Foreign Affair* demonstrates the impulse “to make whole what has been smashed” in the aftermath of war, as Walter Benjamin notes, but Wilder’s film uses humor to comment on the tenuous place of the postwar man in gendered relationships (Benjamin 257). Throughout the narrative, the film’s male protagonist, Captain John Pringle, demonstrates his mastery of a feminized postwar Berlin by flouting army regulations, participating in the black market, and maintaining an illicit relationship with Erica Von Schlutow, a cabaret singer and former Nazi hiding from the authorities in Berlin. Siobhan S. Craig argues that in *Foreign Affair* “American masculinity—newly refurbished in military supremacy—collapses, its vacuity as an epistemological category undermined by the chronic inability of an American soldier to maintain gender stability as he crosses and recrosses its ruptured boundaries” (72). Moreover, *A Foreign Affair* subtly demonstrates the way in which, in the postwar context, the destruction of the European landscape further serves to feminize the continent, much like a disabled body implicitly feminizes the masculine subject. Wilder made *A Foreign Affair* just three years after he was commissioned by the United States Department of War to direct *Death Mills*, the first film to document the Allies’ discovery of Nazi atrocities during the liberation of Europe. Where *Death Mills* is a relatively straightforward (yet harrowing) example of the documentaries produced by the US government during and after the Second World War in support of the war effort, *A Foreign Affair* uses documentary footage of postwar Berlin shot by Wilder with the aid of



the Department of War intercut with scenes shot on a soundstage to reinforce the fictional film's illusion of verisimilitude. Wilder's fictional account of postwar Berlin begins with a clear revision of Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935), as a lone American military aircraft descends from the sky over the ruins of postwar Berlin. Where Riefenstahl's film depicts a godlike Hitler descending from above over a natural landscape gradually giving way to the orderly urban space of Nuremberg, Wilder's film begins with shots that mirror Riefenstahl's in point of view while showing an urban Germany reduced to rubble by Allied bombs. The implied relationship between the opening sequences of these two films is clear: the illusion of order imposed by fascism has been destroyed by American military might, conferring upon the Allied forces the mastery of land and air once forcibly maintained by Hitler's Third Reich; this sequence (and its correspondence to its fascist antecedent) Craig argues, "foregrounds the intense ambivalence that suffuses this film about the aftermath of Nazism" (71). Inside the American aircraft, a team sent to Berlin to aid in reconstruction efforts discuss the wreckage visible from their privileged vantage point. Though most of the talk focuses on the specifics of bombing campaigns, one member of the team notes that Berlin now "looks like chicken innards at frying time." Through this simile, rendered in the stereotypical American vernacular of Hollywood, one sees a subtle linkage between a landscape ravaged by war and an abject, mutilated body.

Tropes linking landscape and the body are, with rare exceptions, always gendered. Yet where traditionally this trope genders the landscape as a feminine entity acted upon by masculine forces, in the postwar context the broken landscapes of Europe

come to be associated with the abject bodies of male subjects renegotiating their relationship to masculinity. In *Postwar*, Judt notes the parallel between the disruption of masculinity as a stable epistemological category and the disruption of the cityscape that occurred as a result of the wartime destruction of European cities. His book opens with a descriptive passage evoking scenes of destruction that, for him, offer “a prospect for utter misery and desolation.” Judt writes:

Photographs and documentary films of the [postwar period] show pitiful streams of helpless civilians trekking through a blasted landscape of broken cities and barren fields. Orphaned children wander forlornly past groups of worn out women picking over heaps of masonry. Shaven-headed deportees and concentration camp inmates in striped pajamas stare listlessly at the camera, starving and diseased. Even the trams, propelled uncertainly along damaged tracks by intermittently available electric current, appear shell-shocked. Everyone and everything—with the notable exception of well-fed Allied occupation forces—seems worn out, without resources, exhausted. (13)

Judt’s description none too subtly emphasizes the spectacle of postwar destruction captured by American and European filmmakers in documentary and fiction films. Of note in this description of recently liberated Europe is the conspicuous absence of men, or at least specific reference to them, until the very end of the passage. Postwar Europe is a landscape of “pitiful and barren fields” and “heaps of masonry” populated by “orphaned children” and “worn out women,” who are placed in opposition to “well fed liberators,”

implicitly male. Although Judt notes the limitations of understanding the reality of postwar Europe solely through received images like these, his language nonetheless demonstrates the extent to which gender is implicated in depictions of postwar wreckage. The landscape has been feminized by wartime trauma, but this feminization is shown to demonstrate *male* lack. Moreover, Judt describes the postwar landscape using metaphors of bodily injury: French coastal towns “eviscerated by the US air force” are only one example in an exhaustive catalogue of destroyed cities that “serve as a universal shorthand for the pity of war” (16). While Judt argues that World War II and its aftermath ultimately produced the birth of a new Europe, the author frames his argument by highlighting markers not of birth, but of death and dismemberment, absence and loss; moreover, these images serve as metonymic signifiers linking abject bodies and fraught masculinities to a landscape likewise violently altered by war (1).

*Germany Year Zero*, the final—and bleakest—film in Roberto Rossellini’s war trilogy, explores the darker side of gender relations in postwar Germany, focusing directly on the effects of the dissolution of fascism on the psyche of German males. The film details the last days in the life of Edmund, a thirteen-year-old German boy forced to shoulder the full weight of manhood while his brother, Karl-Heinz, hides to avoid prosecution as a war criminal and his father wastes away from the effects of an unnamed consumption-like illness. Edmund spends most of his time wandering aimlessly through the rubble of Berlin, in part out of a desperate attempt to find work to help feed his family but also to avoid the bombed-out apartment he, his father, brother, and sister share with five other families. In his narrative, Rossellini explores at length the diminished nature of

German males—both in number and stature—in postwar Germany. In Rossellini’s film, male characters repeatedly comment on just this fact. Men still sympathetic to Nazism, like Edmund’s former teacher Herr Enning, continue to equate masculinity with the ideology plainly seen crumbling around them: “A fine situation we’re in. Before, we were still men, National Socialists. Now we’re just Nazis.” Under the dominant fiction of National Socialism, masculinity was synonymous with one’s status as a soldier or his membership in the Nazi Party. Now these terms have been decoupled, masculinity is set adrift in a sea of uncertainty and the word Nazi is now a synonym for criminal, or worse. Edmund’s family and those around them note his father’s illness as a burden (“All that fuss with their father--tea, hot water bottles, hot compresses. This can’t go on.”); but this literal sickness also functions metaphorically for the state of all post-fascist German men: “Sick! We’re all sick!” comments the nameless patriarch of Edmund’s shared household when one of his daughters defends Edmund’s family for using limited shared resources to care for their own ailing father. He tells his daughters “No one has it any better,” implying his statement that “We’re all sick” refers all Germans, but all of the figures explicitly associated with illness in the film are male (*Germany Year Zero*).

Illness, Susan Sontag notes, often figured in Nazi rhetoric for all “that corrupts morally and debilitates physically”: anything violently excluded from the fascist dominant fiction (*Illness as Metaphor* 59).<sup>32</sup> Of note in *Germany Year Zero*, however, is the way metaphorical illness clearly destabilizes the masculine subject. For Silverman,

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<sup>32</sup> In *Illness as Metaphor*, Sontag notes “syphilis was to become a standard trope in anti-Semitic polemics. In 1933 Wilhelm Reich argued that ‘the irrational fear of syphilis was one of the major sources of National Socialism’s political views and its anti-Semitism.’” (59).

“‘male’ and ‘female’ constitute our dominant fiction’s most fundamental binary opposition”; the dominant fiction influences all aspects of personhood for subjects seeking recognition within its narrative, but its “many other ideological elements [. . .] all exist in metaphoric relation to these terms [and] they derive their conceptual and affective value from [the] relation” of a male/female binary opposition (35). This binarism, however, more fundamentally structures the ideological makeup of fascist states and, as such, renders their dominant fictions particularly unsustainable. In his study of the German Freikorps, the volunteer armies organized by officers returning from World War I to quell populist uprisings among the German working class, Klaus Theweleit argues that fascist ideology is built upon the violent exclusion of the feminine from the psyche of the male subject; Theweleit argues that though this exclusionary impulse structures the construction of all masculine subjectivities under fascism, it operates most explicitly in soldiers. The Freikorps in particular interests Theweleit because its members later became the core of Hitler’s SA and, in some cases, key figures in the Third Reich. In her forward to Volume I of *Male Fantasies*, Barbara Ehrenreich notes that, while it would likely be an oversimplification cite this organization as the sole source of fascism’s rise in Germany, it is clear that the “organizational strength [. . .] of the Freikorps” played a key early role in shaping the relationship between German fascism and masculinity (x). Theweleit argues that in documents recording how these soldiers related to women—largely the men’s own letters—one sees the formation of their masculinity through an exclusionary matrix producing a binarism associating women with fluid elements of the physical landscape (bodies of water) and males, physically and psychologically, with

rigid elements of the landscape: “a body with fixed boundaries” (244). For Theweleit, recurrent images of floods in the soldiers’ letters represent the threat femininity exerts on the soldier-male’s body, and the author points to examples from their letters showing “the way in which soldier males freeze up, become icicles in the face of erotic femininity”; this erotic femininity can be literal or figurative. Theweleit writes:

By reacting in that way, in fact, the man holds himself together as an entity, a body with fixed boundaries. [. . .] Now when we ask how that man keeps the threat of the Red flood of revolution away from his body, we find the same movement of stiffening, of closing himself off to form a ‘discrete entity.’ He defends himself with a kind of sustained erection of his whole body, of whole cities, of whole troop units. Junger: “Only steely individuality could hold out there without slipping into the whirlpool.  
(244-5)

This process of materialization through which masculinity emerges resonates with Foucault’s understanding of the soldier’s malleable, ‘docile’ body, militarized over time as “he [learns] the profession of arms little by little.” The machine-like body of the soldier emerges from a process of materialization, maintained through an ongoing internalized self-policing of the body itself. Foucault writes, “the soldier has become something that can be made; out of a formless clay, an inapt body, the machine required can be constructed; posture is gradually corrected; a calculated constraint runs slowly

through each part of the body, mastering it, making it pliable, ready at all times” (135).<sup>33</sup>

Yet through the obsessive (if largely unconscious) focus on individual body parts necessitated by this process, the soldier-male implicitly acknowledges that his body is not “an indissociable unity” but a construction that must constantly be re-produced through a reiterative process (137); the body of the soldier male, then, comes to ‘matter’ as all gendered bodies do.<sup>34</sup> Hence the constant awareness on the part of the soldier-male of literal and figurative threats to his bodily continuity and, implicitly, his masculinity: “The flood is close at hand, then, either in oneself or on the outside. The men seem to relate every actual or imminent flood directly to themselves, each one to his own body. The terrain of their rage is always at the same time their own body; this feeling is found in every single utterance associated with the ‘Red flood’” (Theweleit 233). The flood imagery through which the men of the Freikorps imagine threats to the stability of their masculine bodies clearly resembles a metaphorical understanding of illness as “a ruthless, secret invasion” to be countered by aggressive treatments in military terms; for this reason, illness is a particularly effective metaphor as used by Rossellini in *Germany Year Zero* to signify the dissolution of fascist masculinity in postwar Germany (Sontag 5).<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Notably, Foucaultian notions of the docile body subtly inform the language used to describe the rehabilitative project of military medicine: in *Diary of a Sergeant*, the soldiers undergo large portions of their physical rehab in a wing of the hospital devoted to orthopedic occupational therapy nicknamed “The Workshop.”

<sup>34</sup> As Judith Butler reminds us, ‘sex’ “is a regulatory ideal whose materialization is compelled, and this materialization takes place (or fails to take place) through certain highly regulated practices” as “an idealized construct which is forcibly materialized through time” (1).

<sup>35</sup> Although Theweleit takes care to note that *Male Fantasies* is not concerned with homosexuality, latent or otherwise, the author’s formulation of a threat to masculinity as a covert invasion “close at hand [. . .] either in oneself or on the outside” resonates not

Moreover, Rossellini's film dramatizes the implications of fascism's collapse on a German understanding of family predicated on fascist notions of heteronormative masculinity. In *Germany Year Zero*, Edmund's status as child limits his ability to help his family survive the harsh conditions of postwar Berlin. The film's opening shots evoke Judt's description of a postwar European landscape, in which everything from spatial codes to gender norms seem irrevocably disrupted. Early in the film, in the context of these images, Edmund is denied work digging graves because he is too young and begins to wander aimlessly through the literal and figurative rubble surrounding him. Unsupervised, he comes under the influence of his former teacher, who continues to espouse Nazi ideology. Edmund discusses his family's dire situation and his father's ill health with Herr Enning, who advises him that "life is a cruel struggle for survival where one must deal mercilessly with the weaklings [who] are just a burden to us" (Žižek 39). Edmund takes this advice literally, poisoning his father and killing him. Although Enning recoils in horror when he learns what Edmund has done, Slavoj Žižek notes that Edmund's response—"You just talked about it, I did it!"—"in no way suggests a shift of responsibility to the teacher." Edmund's statement is merely "a cold, impassionate ascertaining of the [. . .] absolute *gap* that separates words and deeds" (42). Žižek's argument that the film represents not "a story of how the morally corrupted Nazi ideology

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only with metaphorical understandings of illness but also with the operation of the closet as understood by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, which produces a binarism so unstable that "every impulse of every person [. . .] could be called homosexual desire" (92). This correspondence does not imply the simplistic understanding of fascism as repressed homosexuality criticized by Ehrenreich, however, but rather demonstrates a complex interrelationship between heteronormative understandings of the body, wellness, masculinity, and sexuality (xi).



can spoil even a child's innocence and induce him to accomplish patricide," but rather that Edmunds "act [. . .] cannot be properly located [and] is therefore somehow interminable," demonstrates the near complete collapse of ideology in the postwar context. Yet this is what makes the film so unsettling: for Žižek, Edmund's patricide is "at the same time an act of supreme cruelty and cold distance *and* an act of boundless love and tenderness, attesting that he is prepared to go to extremes to comply with his fathers wishes" (40). Rossellini underscores the instability of the Nazi dominant fiction in the events leading up to the film's finale when Edmund, trying to sell a recording of one of Hitler's speeches, plays it on a portable phonograph for two British soldiers to hear: "all of a sudden, Hitler's voice resounds through the debris-filled hallways; the accidental passerby grow stiff marveling at the sudden appearance of this uncannily familiar voice" (Žižek 42). What this scene emphasizes, with its juxtaposition of images of ruin irreconcilable with Hitler's statements regarding the grandeur of the Third Reich, is not just, as Žižek argues, "the invisible pervasiveness of the corrupt Nazi ideology," but also its now obvious falseness: the juxtaposition between sound and image in this scene lays bare the untenability of the fascist "will to totality" by which "the dominant fiction neutralizes the contradictions which organize [its] social formation [through] the non-recognition of the infinite play of differences," as described by Silverman (54).

For Edmund, who previously had fully taken up fascist ideology, Nazism's dissolution is also his own. In the film's haunting final minutes, the child wanders alone through the rubble of Berlin and, somehow, we know he is headed toward his death. As Žižek notes: "A group of children refuse to let him join their game [. . .] so he awkwardly

plays hopscotch alone for a few moments, but he is unable to let himself go into the game—childhood is lost for him” (39). He begins a long, slow climb up into a deserted building and the heart of the any-space-whatever. He stops periodically, peering through the large holes in the broken walls at the rubble below him, foreshadowing his suicide. Picking up a discarded piece of metal that is uncannily pistol shaped, he ponders it, placing its barrel-shaped end to his forehead. Reaching the building’s top floor, he seems strangely isolated, even in his solitude. He seems not to hear as his family, who have been searching for him, call to him from the street, and he leaps to his death in the rubble below an open widow; Edmund, a sacrificial witness to the ideological dissolution of the postwar world, ends his own life, engulfed by the postwar rubble that surrounds him.

#### IV) The Problem of Recognition: The Disabled Veteran and Masculinity as Spectacle

The uncertain postwar realities faced by America, though less obviously visible than those of Europe, similarly rendered untenable the notions of American masculinity based on mastery of one’s environment following World War II. Scenes early in Wyler’s film foreshadow the struggles its principle protagonists will face in returning home from war, as the trio of veterans view the American landscape from the vantage point of an airplane, much like the protagonists of *A Foreign Affair*. In this case, however, the plane carries American veterans returning home from the Pacific and European theaters and the landscape in question is not a war-torn one like Japan or Germany, but the United States; here, Wyler’s images and dialogue underscore the difference between the overseas and American postwar experience in comparison to Wilder’s film. As the men watch the

Midwestern countryside—divided into even sections of farmland—pass below them as they sit in the nose of the plane, their conversation turns to the markers of postwar prosperity they see below them: roadmaps and automobiles. Parish, who served in the navy on a flattop aircraft carrier before his injury, comments on the surprise he feels witnessing the beauty passing beneath him during this, his first ride in an airplane, remarking he “never knew things looked so pretty” from above. Derry, a former bombardier, replies, “I never thought so. This used to be my office.” In the scenes that follow, there is subtle foreshadowing of the separation each of the film’s protagonists will feel from the American postwar dream as the film progresses. Here, seen through glass and from above—what was once, during the war, a position of dominance—postwar America is something these men can see but not touch; the distance between these men and home is already palpable, and subsequent shots in the sequence reinforce Derry’s comparison between this “nice view of the good old USA” and the vantage point he previously occupied when dropping bombs over Germany as Wyler presents his viewers with images evoking newsreel footage of bombing runs.

While discussing the American landscape passing below them, the protagonists pointedly reference what will serve to prevent their reintegration into American society—most notably for Homer Parish, the loss of his hands and the prosthetic hooks the Navy has given him as a replacement. Although his family already knows of his injury, he worries that Wilma, his high school sweetheart, will no longer be able to love him because of his disability: “Wilma’s only a kid. She’s never seen anything like these hooks.” Following this reference to his injury, Parish recalls his career as a celebrated

high school football player just before the three men see a new airport full of decommissioned warplanes waiting for the scrap yard, destined to be “stripped of their engines and propellers [...] like Homer, disabled and unwanted” (Silverman, *Male Subjectivity*, 80); yet this scene, and its pointed comment on the perceived value of those surviving soldiers who sacrificed their bodies for their nation, serves to connect Parish’s disability to broader uncertainties facing the American man in postwar America when Wyler, in the film’s climax, refers back to these images as Fred Derry recalls his own psychological war trauma before overcoming his own posttraumatic stress.

Unlike Homer Parish, Fred Derry’s reintegration into postwar life comes comparatively easily, in part because his trauma is psychological and not physical and, as such, is not subject to the same stigmatization physical disability is shown in the film to elicit. His primary obstacles to reintegrating into home-life are his class and the recurrent flashbacks he suffers, unable to process the wartime trauma he experienced when his plane caught fire and crashed during his final bombing run. His poor job prospects, however, do not prevent him from attracting the eye of a fellow veteran’s daughter and his vulnerability—revealed to his sweetheart when she discovers him having a nightmare about his plane crashing—only increases her attraction to him; nevertheless, his posttraumatic stress is shown to be the central obstacle to his happiness. After being fired from his drugstore job for punching a customer who was harassing Homer, Derry walks to the local junkyard where old military aircraft are turned to scrap metal for the building of prefabricated houses and wanders among rows of planes in various stages of disassembly. Shots of twin-prop planes missing both engines, which appear to have been

sawed off, visually recall Homer's severed hands: these planes, used up by war and discarded when no longer useful, clearly stand in for those soldiers who sacrificed their bodies for their nation. Derry approaches a bomber like the one in which he used to fly, and climbs up into his "old office," the bombardier's perch in the nose of the plane. Here he relives his trauma one last time, coming out of his reverie when the junkyard owner demands to know what he is doing. Sympathizing with Derry, the owner offers him a job; this moment coincides with Derry's ability to get his memories "out of his system," as he says: the cure for Derry's trauma is his reintegration into the world of work, and his recovery follows almost miraculously.

Thus, *The Best Years of Our Lives* connects issues of space, place, and postwar trauma in ways that parallel European cinema of the time, further underscoring differences between the European and American postwar experience. For Gilles Deleuze, Italian Neorealist films like *Germany Year Zero* demonstrate a postwar collapse of both "the sensory-motor schema which constituted the action-image" of prewar cinema and the sensory-motor coherence of human bodies. Deleuze argues that the traumas of the Second World War specific to Europe propelled European film into the future—like Benjamin's Angel of History—leaving American films behind, at least in terms of formal innovation; moreover, Deleuze argues that the postwar innovations of European films are inseparable from their thematic interest in bodies and landscapes irrecoverably altered by the violence of war, characterizing the protagonist of the Neorealist films made following the war as a man experiencing a metaphorical paralysis in the context of a disrupted

physical landscape like the one Judt describes in *Postwar*: a postwar masculine subject *defined* as passive rather than active. Deleuze writes:

The post-war period [...] greatly increased the situations in which we no longer know how to react to, in spaces we no longer know how to describe. These were “any spaces whatever,” deserted but inhabited, disused warehouses, waste ground, cities in the course of demolition or reconstruction. And in these any-spaces-whatever a new race of characters was stirring, a kind of mutant: they saw rather than acted, they were seers.

(xi)

In Italian Neorealist films in particular, Deleuze observes the emergence of a new type of sight, unfettered by tired Hollywood clichés, tied to the impaired mobility and sensory disruption that many individuals experienced in the context of World War II’s destruction of Europe: this new vision plays out as time is represented in film directly through long static shots, rather than through the aestheticized camera movements of classical Hollywood continuity editing. Thus, Deleuze writes, in Neorealism “the character has become a kind of viewer. He shifts, runs, and becomes animated in vain, the situation he is in outstrips his motor capacities on all sides, and makes him see and hear what is no longer subject to the rules of a response or an action. He records rather than reacts. He is prey to vision, pursued by it or pursuing it, rather than engaged in action” (3).<sup>36</sup> Thus, the

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<sup>36</sup> Of note in Deleuze’s description of postwar sensory-motor impairment is its correspondence to the motor impairment characteristic of childhood, a time when one “shifts and runs” while struggling to keep up with surrounding adults, figures who “outstrip” the child’s still developing motor capacities. Often seen following a few steps behind an adult, struggling to keep up, the Neorealist child is a seer witnessing the

disruption of film's sensory-motor schema identified by Deleuze in the context of Europe's fractured postwar landscape necessarily undermines traditional notions of cinematic masculinity. Laura Mulvey argues that the masculine spectator's identification with the male protagonist is contingent on his identification with notions of mastery associated with masculine subjectivities, which become spectacle when subjected to the mediation of the cinematic apparatus. The male protagonist of classical cinema defines himself through a superior command of not only the situations he must by necessity overcome, but also through a superior command of his own body: he is "a figure in the landscape [who] can make things happen and control events better than the subject/spectator, just as the image in the mirror was more in control of motor co-ordination" during the Lacanian mirror stage of childhood (Mulvey 21). In *The Best Years of Our Lives*, Homer Parish is prey to vision precisely because his altered physicality stands apart from his surroundings, the unmarred landscape of America surrounding him upon his return from war. Yet the junkyard scene of *The Best Years of Our Lives*, by depicting the space wherein the debris of war (whether human or purely material) can be successfully reintegrated into the postwar economy, presents us with a uniquely American any-space-whatever, showing the interaction between the workings of capital and the postwar dominant fiction of the United States while elucidating the difference between Derry and Parish's postwar experiences, despite the clear associations between them presented in the film. Derry, who is able-bodied and whose psychological

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postwar world from a unique vantage point, simultaneously privileged and fraught. In *Germany Year Zero*, Edmund certainly qualifies as a "seer" in the Neorealist sense, an individual whose unique relationship to Deleuze's any-space-whatever enables a dangerous understanding of postwar realities.

disability is assumed to be temporary, can thus, unlike Parish, take on a new masculine role at the film's conclusion by realizing his value in the new economy as a worker, even if his new job lacks the glamour and status he enjoyed as a pilot and military officer. Parish, who now defines himself mainly through his visible physical difference from other men, is not offered the same opportunity in Wyler's narrative.

Moreover, the emphasis placed on Parish's highly visible disability in the film illustrates the impact of the character's altered physicality on both himself and others, as Wyler's camera repeatedly focuses on Homer's prosthetic hooks, linking his sense of social dislocation to the visual markers of his perceived difference from other men around him. The film's first scene introduces not Parish, but Fred Derry, and highlights how Derry's working-class status will limit his reintegration into postwar America as he is forced to wait several days for a plane to take him home to Boone City after arriving in the States following an honorable discharge from the Air Force, while a wealthy man receives preferential treatment from the airline and is allowed to board a plane with the same destination immediately after offering to pay for his sixteen pounds of excess baggage. Likewise, Parish's introduction scene foregrounds how his disability—like Derry's class—informs the response he receives when interacting with others; yet unlike the economic subtext subtly present in Derry's introduction scene, the scene introducing Homer focuses entirely on the struggles he faces as an amputee. When Fred Derry meets Parish while waiting for the military transport that will take them home, onlookers pause uneasily as Parish takes a pencil from a desk clerk to sign his name after the clerk offers to do it for him, assuming Homer's prosthetics prevent him from doing so on his own.



Here the film establishes how Parish's disability often impacts him socially more than physically as he exceeds the expectations placed upon him by others, eagerly demonstrating the ease with which he accomplishes tasks requiring complex motor skills with the aid of the hooks the Navy has trained him to use as hands. Later, when Parish refuses help lighting a cigarette, his disability becomes spectacle as the viewer wonders at the fluidity of motion with which Parish lights cigarettes for himself, Derry, and Stevenson.<sup>37</sup> As the three men smoke, he lists off the activities his prosthetics allow him to still perform: "I can dial telephones, I can drive a car, I can even put nickels in a jukebox. I'm all right," he says.

Yet despite his apparent confidence within the predominantly male environment of the Navy, Parish clearly remains anxious about his reunion with his family and, in particular, with Wilma. As the cab taking the three men home after they land in Boone City, Iowa, pulls up in front of Parish's childhood home, Wyler frames the three men in the car's rearview mirror as they sit lined up in the backseat, and Homer nervously suggests they stop at a bar rather than drop him off: clearly, all three men share anxieties regarding each of their homecoming reunions. However, subsequent scenes further demonstrate how Homer's disability pointedly excludes him from the postwar life he desires as, at times, the loss of his hands places him in a passive position irreconcilable

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<sup>37</sup> Robert Eberwine notes, "The sharing and exchange of cigarettes serves as a significant way of demonstrating bonding in among men in combat films. Virtually every new recruit into the armed services had to watch John Ford's *Sex Hygiene* (1944), a training film about venereal disease. Included in that film is a warning about sharing cigarettes. Later training films did not include this caveat, but, to the extent that sharing had at some point been presented as a potential risk, it is interesting to see how often the exchange of cigarettes signals the depth of a bond and trust among soldiers" (157).

with normative notions of masculinity. Central to Silverman's thesis in *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* is that "our dominant fiction calls upon the male subject to see himself, and the female to recognize and desire him, only through the mediation of images of an unimpaired masculinity" (42). In her reading of *The Best Years of Our Lives*, Silverman argues that "Homer's lack positions him in the relational position usually reserved for the female subject with classic cinema," due specifically to his disability (*Male Subjectivity* 42): "He has lost his hands—and with them his power to be sexually aggressive. [...] Every night, his wife will have to put him to bed, and it will be her hands that will be used in making love" (Robert Warshow, quoted in *Male Subjectivity* 71). Yet by defining Homer's position exclusively through his *lack*, Silverman's argument and its Lacanian framework elide a more complex reading of his disability. In *Disability Theory*, Tobin Siebers argues that a theory of "complex embodiment" is necessary to understand disability, postulating a reciprocal relationship between social representations and the body wherein "the body and its representations [must be seen as] mutually transformative" (25). Complex embodiment theories seek to modulate constructivist theories of the body by raising "awareness of the effects of disabling environments on people's lived experience of the body [while emphasizing] that some factors effecting disability [...] derive from the body" (Siebers 25). *The Best Years of Our Lives* uniquely underscores the reciprocal relationship present between bodies that differ physically from what is considered normal and the social structures that constitute these understandings of embodiment; this presentation of disability pushes against the framework of traditional psychoanalytic film theory.

Although the film shows Homer at his most vulnerable when he allows Wilma to see him without his prosthetics as she undresses him before bed, an earlier scene shows with more complexity how disability influences the negotiation of masculine subjectivities when a group of neighborhood children, including Homer's sister, witness one of Homer and Wilma's more tentative early interactions. Looking for Homer, Wilma finds him practice shooting in the shed behind his parents' house. As Homer finishes shooting and cleans his gun, their conversation broaches the subject of his injury and what it means for their relationship, but only subtextually. When Homer says his marksmanship is now "only fair," Wilma responds, "You did fine," attempting to persuade him that he still has mastery of his masculinity, but as they discuss the status of their relationship explicitly, Homer looks into the gun barrel to clean it, and Wilma asks anxiously if the gun is loaded. Homer rebuffs her question, saying, "Of course it isn't. Don't you think I know how to handle a gun?" As they talk, the children gathered outside watch through a window. Homer, noticing them, shouts: "You want to see how the hooks work? You want to see the freak?" and shoves his hooks through the window, shattering his reflection and terrifying the children looking through from the other side. This is the most notable in a series of scenes in which reflections in mirrors and windows figure prominently to demonstrate the three main characters' feelings of dislocation from the postwar world they have rejoined but from which they remain distant. Although it is tempting to read the aforementioned exchange as a scene in which Parish confronts the illusory nature of bodily coherence established during the Lacanian mirror stage in childhood, this formulation alone would not account for the destabilizing influence of the

presence of the neighborhood children on Homer and Wilma's private attempt to negotiate the terrain of their newly altered relationship. What we see instead in this scene is evidence of the intersubjective nature of the body as understood by Jean-Paul Sartre: that the body exists not only in relation to the self but that "it exists also *for-others*" (445). Prior to coming home, Homer seems more-or-less comfortable with his new appendages; it is not until his disability forces him to renegotiate his relationships with his friends and loved ones that he begins to see himself, through their eyes, as a "freak."

Thus Parish's sense of embodied self is emphasized as a social location, but a very complex one. This scene, in which Homer struggles as a disabled man to take up the mantle of masculinity, shows the difficulties inherent in parsing disability identity. Disabled bodies clearly destabilize the "exclusionary matrix by which [gendered] subjects are formed, [which] requires the simultaneous production of a domain of object beings, those who are not yet 'subjects,' but who form the constitutive outside of the domain of the subject," as described by Judith Butler in *Bodies That Matter* (3). Thus, disabled bodies, excluded as they are by dominant ideologies, offer a cogent critique of the forces producing normative notions of sex and gender. Yet while it is clearly a culturally located position, disability also uniquely clarifies Butler's often debated position on corporeality: even if we think of the body itself as a construction, this in no way undermines the felt reality of the body for anyone, whether they consider themselves disabled or not. Moreover, it is Parish's *perceived* lack that places him outside the traditional masculine position within classic cinema, which "impose[s] masculinity as a 'point of view'" (Mulvey 29). Just as Homer struggles with his own passivity, his visual

presentation presents a stumbling block to the viewer seeking to identify with a masculine protagonist: the heightened realism achieved through Parish's portrayal by a visibly disabled actor defamiliarizes the character's body, undermining the process of identification central to how cinema makes meaning. Cinematic vision itself rests on a denial of passivity: "film must at all costs conceal from the viewing subject the passivity of that subject's position" through the suturing of the viewer's gaze to that of the cinematic apparatus, which Silverman refers to explicitly as the metaphorical "suturing over of a wound." Suture is successful, Silverman writes, "at the moment when the viewing subject says, 'yes, that's me' or 'yes, that's what I see'" ("Suture" 205).

For Silverman, "Harold Russell's double amputation does not 'make the movie spill over into the real world,' but it does situate the image of Homer Parish's arms on a different level of representation than the rest of the film." Silverman writes: "At every other point, there is a dimension of performance or simulation to which the stumps and hooks cannot be subsumed. Russell's injury is no more 'present' than any other profilmic event; it too is recorded, and its 'unfolding' is purely 'fictive.' However, in this instance the filmic representation exercises a strong referential pull, seeming to point beyond the text and Russell's acting to his body and the traces left there by the war." Here again, Silverman resorts to the trope of male lack to explain even the realism of Russell's portrayal of Parish in the film; Russell's lived physical body and the lack experienced by the character he plays become nearly inseparable in Silverman's analysis. Because of the reality of Russell's amputation, she explains:

Homer's stumps and compensatory hooks constitute a crisis not only of vision but of representation—a crisis which is the result of combining documentary detail with the spectacle of male castration. [. . .] There is a sort of doubling up of belief, a reinforcement of the disavowal Metz and Comolli identify in the cinematic experience [which] *negates the cinematic signifier* [my emphasis], inclining the spectacle even more precipitously than usual towards the referent or object. Yet at the same time what most passes for 'the real thing' in *The Best Years of Our Lives*—what provokes the representational 'lurch' toward the profilmic event—is precisely what classic cinema is generally at most pains to deny, and against which it marshals such protective measures as projection, disavowal, and fetishism: male lack. (Silverman 72-74)

Notably, Silverman uses the language of physical experience to describe the representational effect Russell's disabled body evinces in its signification of a fictional character's embodiment: you do not "lurch" with your eyes—you lurch with your body.<sup>38</sup> It is clear from the above passage that despite the privileging of the visual throughout Silverman's argument there remains some representational excess of signification directly related to Wyler's use in *The Best Years of Our Lives* of a disabled non-actor in

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<sup>38</sup> Lurch, n: A sudden leaning over to one side, as of a ship, a person staggering, etc. Also, a gait characterized by such movements. Lurch, v: To make a lurch; to lean suddenly over to one side; to move with lurches. (OED)

the role of Homer Parish. Silverman's language—slipping here from the visual to corporeal—seems to indicate that in the scenes that focus directly on the *visual* evidence of Parish's amputation evince in the critic a response that cannot be fully accounted for within the paradigm of visual signification alone.

V) “Fleshing Out” the Visual

Within disability studies, the stigmatization of disabled people is generally considered to be a primarily visual phenomenon. Disability identity is discussed as being formed through an intersubjective relationship wherein it is almost always a non-disabled *viewing* subject whose vision others the disabled individual according to a perceived visual difference from cultural versions of normalcy. This understanding of the intersection between disability identity and the forces of an ablest culture understandably squares well with both constructivist understandings of the body and psychoanalytic theories of film that liken cinematic signification to a linguistic system as understood by post-structuralists. Thomson writes:

If the male gaze makes the normative female a sexual spectacle, then the stare [elicited by disabled bodies] sculpts the disabled subject into a grotesque spectacle. The stare is the gaze intensified, framing [the disabled] body as an icon of deviance. [. . .] The stare is the gesture that creates disability as an oppressive social relationship. And as every person with a *visible disability* [my emphasis] knows intimately, managing,

deflecting, resisting, or renouncing that stare is a part of the daily business of life. (26)

Disabled people are described as being *seen* as different and as *feeling* this difference in their embodied selves. In a polemical move that exhibits a common complaint with constructivist understandings of the body as well as post-structuralism more generally, Tobin Siebers criticizes Judith Butler's account of embodied subjectivity, which he argues privileges "the pain of guilt to produce conformity with what she calls the 'morphology' of the heterosexual body," arguing further that "pain in current body theory is rarely physical" (61, 63). For Siebers, post-structuralist theorizations of the body do not "feel" disability and, as such, cannot take full account of disability identity. In a similar vein, academic film theory itself has taken a "bodily turn" of late in an effort to take fuller account of the subject position of the film viewer than afforded by the primarily visual paradigm of psychoanalytic film theory. Theorists like Vivian Sobchack argue that "more often than not, the body, however privileged, has been regarded as an object among other objects—most often like a text and sometimes like a machine" in visual paradigm currently dominant in film theory (3).

Sobchack argues that the visual paradigm of psychoanalytic film theory over-privileges the eye, constructing an ontology of film that ignores the input of the other sensory organs in its understanding of how cinema makes meaning; vision alone cannot fully account for film's impact on the viewing subject because: "The perceiving subject is itself defined dialectically as being *neither* (pure) consciousness *nor* (physical, in itself) body. Consciousness . . . is not a pure self-presence; the subject is present and knows



itself only through the *mediation* of the body, which is to say that this presence is always mediated, i.e., is indirect and incomplete” (Gary Madison, quoted in Sobchack, 4).

Sobchack thus proposes that the cinematic viewer be considered a *cinesthetic subject*.

She writes:

The cinesthetic subject both touches and is touched by the screen—able to commute seeing to touching and back again *without a thought* and through sensual and cross modal activity, able to experience the movie as both here and there rather than clearly locating the site of cinematic experience as onscreen or offscreen. As a lived body and a film viewer, the cinesthetic subject subverts the prevalent objectification vision that would reduce sensorial experience at the movies to an impoverished “cinematic sight” or posit anorexic theories of identification that have no flesh on them, that cannot stomach “a feast for the eyes.” (71)

This bodily turn in film theory presents a potentially productive moment for disability scholars seeking to engage with film studies beyond surface discussions of social stigmatization because both disability studies and embodiment film theory see the physical body and its representations as mutually constitutive. Moreover, disability theory and emerging theories of the embodied spectator often understandably make similar rhetorical moves in their reconsiderations of the relationship between the body and image culture. Yet it is crucial to note that Sobchack’s formulation of a cinesthetic subject also represents an *inward* turn for film theory, as it focuses (by her own admission) on intensely subjective individual responses to the “tactility” of the film

viewing experience. We “feel” what is projected on the screen through an identificatory process that reinscribes experiences projected on the screen back onto our own lived bodies. Sobchack explains:

Insofar as I cannot literally touch, smell, or taste the particular figure on the screen that solicits my sensual desire, my body’s intentional trajectory, seeking a sensible object to fulfill this sensual solicitation, will *reverse its direction* to locate its partially frustrated sensual grasp on something more literally accessible. That more literally accessible sensual object is *my own subjectively felt lived body*. Thus, “on the rebound” from the screen—and without a reflective thought—I will reflexively turn toward my own carnal, sensual, and sensible being to touch myself touching, smell myself smelling, taste myself tasting, and, in sum, sense my own sensuality.

(Sobchack 76-77)

The previously discussed scene in which Homer Parish breaks the window of his father’s shed as his fiancée and the neighborhood children watch seems a natural site to apply a cinesthetic perspective, given the scene’s intense combination of visual and tactile elements. One will remember that in this scene Parish’s response to the voyeuristic eyes of the neighborhood children represents a rare moment of actual violence in the film: here, by “showing how the hooks work,” Parish performs his own abjection; yet, somewhat counterintuitively, it is in this performance that abjection undoes itself as a

subject position.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, it is in this moment when Parish is most at prey to vision that the tactile erupts violently from the scene in a sudden crystalizing moment—literally shattering the glass in which he has only previously been reflected. But this is both a visual and a tactile shock—a sensory overload implicitly connected to the unseen trauma that happened earlier to Parish’s hands. In this moment we are given vicarious access to the *experience* of trauma at the center of the film—but only for a moment: we see the violence that was done to Parish’s hands but it is also violence done to us.

The crucial question, however, is what is actually accomplished *filmically* by this shattering of glass? It is tempting to say that, here, the able-bodied viewing subject no longer just sees Parish’s disability, he or she *feels* it as well: as Parish’s hooks crash through glass the kinesthetic subject vicariously inscribes pain on to his or her own fleshy hands (pain, crucially, that Parish’s metal appendages do not themselves feel). Sobchack argues:

The cinema, while encouraging a certain bodily knowing, also, and in that very process, opens up the recognition of a peculiar kind of non-knowing, a sort of bodily aphasia, a gap which sometimes may register as a sense of dread in the pit of the stomach, or in a soaring, euphoric sensation. [. . .]

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<sup>39</sup> For Kristeva, and encounter with the abject at its “most elemental” provokes a bodily response, regardless of whether the stimulus provoking the response is visual or tactile. She explains, “when the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk—harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail paring—I experience a gagging sensation and still, farther down, spasms in the stomach; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire” (2-3). Purely visual experiences often elicit bodily responses; more importantly, even involuntary bodily responses to encounters with the abject are always already informed by the forces that structure subject formation.

Out of these tensions are generated a series of differences, gaps or discontinuities between knowing and feeling that sometimes sharpen into a sense of the uncanny. (75)

Thus, the imperfect match between the cinesthetic subject's vicarious bodily experience and the fictional experience projected onscreen would actually be seen as a productive disjuncture, a gap which produces meaning. It is crucial to note, however, that the tactile elements of this particular scene in no way overturn the primacy of the visual in this particular film, they merely present a way of undoing for a moment, the oft criticized, seemingly inscrutable hierarchical relations of the visual regime of psychoanalytic film theory. The stigmatization Parish faces in the film remains primarily visual; it is the tactile, working in conjunction with the visual—not in opposition to it, that opens a space in the regime of vision demonstrated by the film, yielding a *potential* space for radical empathy with the disabled subject on screen, momentarily destabilizing the “social relationship between people that is mediated by images” described by Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle*, which produces among its subjects a perceived unity but actual separation (12).

Although the vulnerability present in Wyler's depiction of all three veterans prevents an easy identification with any of the three protagonists throughout his film, it is Homer Parish's remasculinization that remains most pointedly unresolved at the film's conclusion. Yet the final scenes of *The Best Years of Our Lives*, by once again creating spectacle from Parish's disability, prove to be so unsettling to notions of normative masculinity as to undercut the apparent reclamation of masculinity that the other two

protagonists undergo in the film, and even the narrative closure of the film itself.

Silverman notes “the contact of flesh and steel” as Homer and Wilma recite their vows belies the anxiety still surrounding their marriage, crystallizing the “crisis of vision” that structures Homer’s intersubjective relationships (*Male Subjectivity*, 87). Similar visuals used by Wyler connecting all three protagonists throughout the film take on a broader resonance in this final scene as Parish’s disability comes to signify a dislocation from society for all three men. Following World War II in particular, depictions of disability at times come to stand for the powerlessness felt by the postwar man in the wake of war. Although the focus has returned to the visual in the film’s denouement, the final image of hooks touching hands is made more haunting and resonant through its evocation of the previously discussed moment of “tactile” perception and the partial, vicarious identification this offers the able-bodied spectator. The visual disjuncture of “the contact of flesh and steel” retains a trace of tactile signification broadening the resonance of the film’s conclusion, undermining the cognitive dissonance produced by the Society of the Spectacle. Ultimately, in *The Best Years of Our Lives*, Parish’s impairment stages a sudden loss of masculinity in the film not because of the physical limitations that his character faces, but due to the disruption of *specular* masculinity that the character’s highly visible disability presents, demonstrating the extent to which masculinity itself cannot be understood apart from the symbolic network of an ableist culture.

## Chapter 4-The Returning and the Repressed: Economies of Violence and the Anxieties of the Homefront

The section of Studs Terkel's *"The Good War": An Oral History of World War Two* entitled "Reflections on Machismo" includes the narrative of Ted Allenby, who enlisted in the marines in December of 1942 and later received a dishonorable discharge from the Navy in 1963 when his superiors discovered he, then a naval chaplain, had been having a love affair with another serviceman, his male assistant. Ted enlisted in the marines, he tells the author, as soon as he turned eighteen. In his interview with Terkel, Allenby's states:

I enlisted in the Marine Corps. This had a good deal to do with my being homosexual. In my middle teens, I made a discovery. My dad was a pharmacist. In his drugstore they had a lot of bottles, some which had a skull and crossbones. That's how I perceived the label "homosexual." I'll wear a skull and crossbones, and I'm not gonna let anybody see this. It's bad, it's a disease, it's a poison. This is my dirty little secret. [. . .] How do you deal with it? You deal with it by trying to prove how rugged you are. After all, homosexuals are sissies and pansies. You're not a man. You're not a male, you're not female, you're nothing. I chose the marines for that reason. It's the toughest outfit. This business about the Marine Corps builds men became a slogan. It was something we believed. (179)

In his testimonial, Allenby speaks of himself as marked—visually—by what he sees as his essential and immutable difference from other men; as he tells Terkel, his desire to identify an exclusionary version of masculinity through military service comes to be expressed in his life as violence that is both self-directed and projected onto those around him (179). Thus far I have examined the cultural valences of disability in postwar America by focusing in particular on men whose experiences of injury and trauma rendered untenable the cultural narratives of masculinity foundational to American identity in the mid-twentieth century, but my broader concern has always been to trace different ways non-normative masculinities come to be marked in the postwar era. I begin my final chapter with Ted Allenby's words because the passage above encapsulates particularly well the violence inherent in the ableist narrative of masculine sufficiency upon which the American male identity has come to rest. Yet Allenby's story is also about a side of American military experience that is, even today, often still largely suppressed within military culture. Allenby comments that, despite his fears about being outed during his military service, he nevertheless found solace in the deep sense of connection he experienced with other closeted soldiers, even when they did not speak explicitly of their shared experiences of difference (180-181); although Allenby was initially drawn to military service as a way to prove he was a man in a heteronormative sense, ultimately his life in the military also played a part in his eventual self-acceptance.

In part, this chapter concludes my dissertation by delving into some of the repressed histories of the World War II era, exploring how they intersect with the non-normative formations of masculinity on which my project has focused, marking the

period with their absent presences. It also deals, in part, with genre texts like pulp and noir—those texts in which Rabinowitz has argued we find expression of “the foundation for the masochistic fantasy” that is symptomatic of “mid-twentieth-century American culture” (*Black & White & Noir* 11, 14). Over the course of my first three chapters I have traced different modalities of disability as they interact with formulations of masculinity constituted through the violent exclusion of any term that is seen to destabilize the masculine subject by association with otherness or alterity. In his interview with Terkel, Allenby speaks frankly of the way in which, early in his life, his internalized homophobia led him to attempt to violently police how others perceived his sexual identity. This chapter concludes my dissertation by examining texts in which such violence erupts, recurs, and returns as a symptom<sup>40</sup> of a culture’s attempts to repress or cast off those male subjects whose presence is not easily reconciled with masculine subjectivity as it is brutally constituted in postwar America.

To elucidate the violence inherent to the formation of heteronormative masculine subjectivity, I devote the first half of this chapter to a discussion of three texts that explore the policing of masculine identity from perceived threats to its sufficiency through aggressively violent acts. This chapter begins with a discussion of Ann Petry’s 1947 novel *Country Place*, which tells the story of the homecoming of Johnny Roane from the war in Europe as he questions his masculinity and begins to act violently after coming to suspect that his wife has been unfaithful to him during the time they spent

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<sup>40</sup> Laplanche and Pontalis define the return of the repressed as “the third and last phase of repression, wherein the repressed element of the psyche returns in “the guise of symptoms, dreams, parapraxes, etc.” (351).



separated by the war. Against the backdrop of small-town, rural America, Petry's novel depicts an undercurrent of violence in American culture similar to the harsh realities she explored in her debut novel *The Street* in 1946, substituting her first book's urban setting of 1940s Harlem for a idealized vision of America she depicts as existing largely in the minds of *Country Place*'s white, middle-class characters. The chapter continues with a discussion of Richard Brooks's novel *The Brick Foxhole*, published in 1945, which deals with male soldiers deployed stateside during the Second World War and details the emasculation they experience as a result of their exclusion from actual combat during World War II. The novel, set on the American homefront near the conclusion of the war, is structured by an economy of violence that develops out of the central characters' anxieties surrounding the location of male sexual impulses, and concerns the direction of male sexual desire into socially acceptable channels. Deprived of both the combat experience they believe would invest them with masculine potency and a socially acceptable outlet for sexual desire (as their deployment separates them from available women despite their remaining in the United States while serving their wartime assignments), the men depicted in *The Brick Foxhole* express their perceived emasculation through eruptions of violence seemingly at odds with their surroundings, far removed from the carnage of a foreign war. Though both *Country Place* and *The Brick Foxhole* deal in part with soldiers' fears regarding infidelity on the part of their spouses during the war, these texts also grapple with the broad social effects of World War II on postwar society, examining the interrelated nature of class, gender, physical ability, and racial identity in the homecoming narratives of returning veterans. I also return to

Allenby's narrative to show the workings of the violence of signification in a subject whose internalized, and often self-directed homophobia further complicates the exclusionary impulse I trace in the chapter's first sections by presenting his sexual identity as something he simultaneously views as the essential, defining feature of his being and also something he might be able to exclude from his life through a practice of ritualized violence he seeks to find in military service. Taken together, the Terkel, Brooks, and Petry texts demonstrate the constitution of masculine subjectivity through the violent exclusion of anything not included within a narrowly constituted nexus of ableist heteronormative masculinity.

This chapter concludes with an extended reading of John Sturgis's 1955 film *Bad Day at Black Rock*, which concerns events that unfold when a disabled American veteran returns to America searching for the father of a young Japanese-American soldier who died saving his life in battle during the Italian campaign and learns that the man's father was the victim of a racially motivated murder while his son was away at war. *Bad Day at Black Rock* has been read by Philip F. Norden as a straightforward story of a disabled American soldier's remasculinization through further violent heroic deeds following the war as he avenges the murder of his friend's father despite being physically impaired by the loss of the use of an arm; Norton's analysis, however, elides the subtle yet pervasive destabilization of heteronormative masculinity presented by the addition of the protagonist's disability to a straightforward action story published in *American Magazine* in 1947. *Bad Day at Black Rock*'s use of a disabled male figure as the protagonist in an action-oriented Western film so deeply complicates the equation of masculine sufficiency

I elucidate in this chapter's first half as to leave its narrative empty of symbolic content by the film's conclusion, illustrating a fundamental breakdown of masculinity as an epistemological category in the postwar period and, ultimately, the futility of violence a literal act and also its failure as a means of signification.

I) American Homecomings and Postwar Economies of Violence

Where William Wyler set *The Best Years of Our Lives* in a romanticized Hollywood version of small-town Iowa to emphasize his protagonists' displacement from that idealized vision of postwar American prosperity upon their return to the States following the war, Ann Petry's *Country Place* deals with similar themes regarding the limitations of small-town life in a postwar context as her characters lament the passing of simpler times as a more complex, fast-paced urban lifestyle gains primacy following the war. Against this backdrop, Petry explores undercurrents of masculine violence in postwar America through a narrative that draws heavily, as Rabinowitz argues, from hardboiled fiction and the noir films of the postwar period. In "Pulping Ann Petry: The Case of *Country Place*," Rabinowitz details the "generally scathing reviews" Petry received for *Country Place* following the novel's publication in 1947 (a departure from the critical acclaim the author had previously received for *The Street*), and argues that "like the dozens of film noirs Hollywood was churning out while Ann Petry wrote her major works, her novels are best read as one views any example of B-movie genres—skipping the predictable plot and watching the films instead, noting the atmospheric lighting, catching the scraps of snappy dialogue, tracking the moody interiors" and noting

their insights into the contrast between dominant cultural narratives emphasizing an optimistic outlook for the United States following the conclusion of the war and the darker depiction of postwar American culture emphasized by pulp fiction and film noir.

Rabinowitz writes:

Where social chaos appeared openly visible on the teeming city streets, rural America, with its drowsy small towns and mid-sized cities built around a single industry—like *The Narrows* powerful Treadway Munitions, based on Bridgeport's Remington Works—masked class and ethnic and racial tensions within mostly impenetrable homes and isolated landscapes. (50)

By framing *Country Place* in the narrative voice of Doc, the man who runs the town drug store, Petry emphasizes the small town atmosphere the novel evokes to draw contrasts between the attitudes of the town's white, middle-class residents and those held by the author herself, while also lending a voyeurism to a story mediated largely through small town gossip. In this way, the novel depicts a pervasive discontent with small town life on the part of its characters following the war, as the promise of postwar prosperity has seemingly missed the town. These socioeconomic realities serve as the backdrop for Johnny Roane's feelings of emasculation when upon his return to his hometown he and his wife must live with his parents in Roane's childhood home and sleep in a bed his mother purchased for his bedroom when "he was fifteen and growing fast and she said he needed a man-sized bed" (23). It is here that Roane commits his first violent act after returning from overseas, raping his wife when she refuses his sexual advances, and then

attacking her again when he becomes convinced her reluctance to sleep with him indicates she has slept with another man (26). The next day, when Johnny repeats his accusation of infidelity, Glory, his wife, answers: “Of course not [. . .] how could there be [anyone else]? There aren’t any young single men left in Lennox. The ones who went off to war got married before they left. There’s nobody around but old men and wrecks of young ones—the ones who came back without arms or legs” (29). That Johnny is financially unable to live with his wife outside of his parent’s home undermines cultural narratives of remasculinization linked to the Second World War, and the marriage bed he shares with Glory—ironically “man sized” and provided to them by his mother—fails as a site for Roane to enact his remasculinization according to his understanding of masculine sufficiency. Johnny Roane’s only response when he encounters challenges to his narrowly defined version of masculinity is violence, but Petry thoroughly undermines the efficacy of his acts throughout her narrative. Yet Petry’s text also demonstrates that even veterans who escaped physical injury were viewed as potential sources of social unrest and came to embody public concerns regarding so-called deviant sexualities following the war. Rabinowitz writes:

Like so many works of popular culture during and immediately after WWII, *Country Place* ponders “the problem of the vet,” which, along with the “disease hazards” of “sexual delinquency” (as Eliot Ness pathologized interracial sex and unfaithful wives during wartime) was a growing concern among the military, law enforcement, journalists, social workers, and educators, not to mention pulp fiction writers and Hollywood B-

moviemakers, during and immediately after the war. [. . .] Vets were seen in the words of Glory, referencing Dickens, as having “gone queer in the head.” (53, 149)

Rabinowitz notes that “by the mid-1930s, queer had come to mean both odd or crazy and homosexual or effeminate in American slang,” arguing that, when Glory finally does sleep with local gas station owner Ed Barrel and Johnny finds out about it, Glory “defiantly declares she ‘slept with Ed [because] he’s a man and you’re not’ (142).” “Petry, like so many other pulp and noir writers, is linking the war to changes in masculinity and emerging sexualities,” Rabinowitz explains (54). Thus, works of pulp like *Country Place* demonstrate that public concerns focused on issues like the “veteran problem” were inseparable from broader cultural anxieties related to gender and sexuality as well as the racial and class tensions which many mainstream narratives elided in their depiction of postwar America; works like *Country Place* (and, Wyler’s *Best Years*) demonstrate that concerns among the American public surrounding disabled veterans cannot be neatly separated from a broader crisis of American identity during the period. Concerns regarding the sexual identities of returning soldiers were in fact often related directly to their status as veterans. Jennifer E. Langdon writes:

As the war drew to a close and Americans contemplated the demobilization of millions of GIs, these competing representations of masculinity raised profound doubts about the very possibility of a “return to normalcy,” both for civilians and the GIs themselves. Much of the postwar discourse on demobilization was dominated by the political

concern that the returning veterans, damaged by their wartime experiences with violence, death, and military discipline, might be vulnerable to the lure of fascist demagogues. However, experts were also deeply concerned that the war had unleashed an aggressive and dangerous male sexuality. Of particular concern were the intense homosocial (and potentially homoerotic) bonds created by the war experience. (126-127)

Langdon notes that World War II “marked a critical turning point in the creation of gay communities throughout the United States,” as overseas deployments provided closeted soldiers the opportunity to explore desires they may have been less likely to express in their stateside lives (130).<sup>41</sup> Though Langdon argues that: “truly, World War Two was something of a national ‘coming out’ experience,” Sedgwick notes the significance of the Stonewall Riots in June of 1969 in demarcating a turning point in gay self-definition and also the reality that “the reign of the telling secret was scarcely overturned by Stonewall” (Sedgwick 63, 67). Thus the postwar years were complex in that many minority groups became an increasingly acknowledged presence in the United States during this time, but cultural acceptance of minority identities in the mainstream often lagged behind this increased visibility.

The extent to which modalities of visibility *vis à vis* both queerness and disability come to be increasingly complicated in the postwar years is made clear by David Serlin

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<sup>41</sup> See John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman's book *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988) for further discussion of the role played by the Second World War in the development of gay communities in the United States, which provides much of the historical context for Langdon's own argument (130).

in his essay “Disability, Masculinity, and The Prosthetics of War, 1945-2005,” in which he discusses the “Amputettes,” a group of disabled servicemen who performed campy musical routines at Walter Reed Medical Hospital in the spring of 1945, dressed in drag outfits that prominently displayed the new prosthetic limbs they were learning to utilize as a part of their rehabilitation following wartime injuries. As Serlin notes, “newspaper descriptions [of the Amputettes’ performances] are refreshingly cheeky and lack disapprobation, running counter to the claims of most historians and cultural critics who have interpreted the 1940s as an era of heightened insecurities about appropriate gender roles and normative sexual behaviors, especially among soldiers,” importantly adding, however, that “the popular appeal of [these] drag performances ‘lined up’ neatly with the patriotic fervor of rehabilitation culture during World War II, thereby allowing soldiers and rehabilitation therapists to diffuse their putatively queer content” (157, 160). The Amputettes’ performances display a visible marker of disability in the context of a drag performance, paradoxically to diffusing potential anxieties surrounding both terms. By framing the use of the prosthesis specifically as part of a performance, the Amputettes allay fears that either queerness or disability marks a constituent part of their identities. In her theory of gender performativity, Judith Butler argues that the “exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed [. . .] requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet “subjects,” but who form the constitutive outside of the domain of the subject” (3). As I have shown throughout my dissertation, and particularly in my first chapter, narrowly defined formulations of disability and queerness similarly disrupt the matrix of heteronormative identity formation such that, in certain



contexts, to be queer or disabled similarly positions one as the constitutive outside of the masculine subject. The Amputettes' performance realigns the association between queerness and disability in a way that largely deflects the violence of signification that Butler's comments describe, but only within the context of postwar rehabilitative culture.

## II) The Brick Foxhole: Homosexual Panic and the Epistemology of the Closet

Set prior to the end of the war, the narrative of *The Brick Foxhole* focuses primarily on the insecurities of Corporal Jeff Mitchell, a young man who, after enlisting in the Armed Forces, comes to be employed as an illustrator making animated propaganda films for the military, working as a part of the immense bureaucracy of the stateside arm of the war machine. In the author's note introducing the novel's first edition (published in 1945 by Sun Dial Press), Richard Brooks depicts the lot of enlisted men serving in "brick foxholes," which the author describes as "a barracks somewhere, anywhere in America." Brooks's preface contrasts the lives of these stateside soldiers to that of men whose active duty was spent overseas in combat. As Brooks explains, brick foxholes

house millions of men, men of all kinds, who have been suddenly wrenched from the normal pursuits of civilian life and thrown together under abnormal conditions of preparation for war. Almost everything about their new life is unnatural: the discipline, and tedium of standing in lines and waiting around, the drilling, the fatigue, the excess of animal spirits they finally know as their bodies are toughened up and they become

more physically fit than they ever have been before, the lack of privacy, the dearth of feminine companionship, and the sharpening of every male tendency of the daily impact of a thousand factors and incidents that go into the making of a soldier's world. (vii)

In this description of stateside military life, Brooks juxtaposes the banal day-to-day existence of soldiers awaiting deployment with the masculine potency figuratively embodied by the soldier, which is meant to emerge as military training shapes body and mind into an impossibly idealized construction of masculinity. The passage describes men whose natures, though not essentially altered, have been fine-tuned so that their every impulse is directed toward military aims and combat objectives; the novel concerns the effect this process has on soldiers excluded from direct military action due to non-combat deployments. Jeff feels particularly lacking because, as an artist producing propaganda, "he kills Japs with pictures" rather than bullets. The novel's perspective itself reinforces this distinction between the 'fighting men' of the army and soldiers who are not selected for combat duty. In the opening scene, the narrator explains: "A soldier went overseas and he forgot how to talk. A soldier stayed in the United States, cooped up in a brick coffin, and all he did was talk," immediately setting up a contrast between enlisted men not selected for overseas duty and the stoic and taciturn nature of a 'real soldier,' valorized during the period, who learns to "keep things in" as one soldier treated for PTSD in *Let There Be Light* is told to do by the staff of Mason General.

Jeff Mitchell's internal self-scrutiny of his masculine identity becomes explicitly epistemological when it is directed outward at other men rather than inward, toward

himself. This becomes most clear when he first meets Mr. Edwards, the novel's only explicitly homosexual character, whose violent death—though it is not depicted directly in the book—serves as the text's central event. As Jeff struggles to define the man through the differential system of language, his interest in Mr. Edwards seems almost phrenological, as he focuses his attention on the man's facial features as markers of difference the protagonist consciously struggles to interpret:

Jeff looked at the man's face in the rear-view mirror. The first thing that struck him was that Mr. Edwards was pale. The sun had not touched his face. He had a thin nose and deeply set eyes. They were pale eyes. The brow was good. The cheekbones high. The face was hungry. Jeff didn't know what the hunger was. He knew, however, that it wasn't for food. The man's clothes told him that, and the high-priced car. Mr. Edwards had full, red lips and his teeth were almost too white. Jeff made a mental sketch of him. He saw that the outstanding feature in the man's face was his eyes. Yes, and something else. The heavy lines that started at the nose and formed a deep parenthesis around the mouth. Jeff looked at the hands on the wheel. They were graceful hands. Too graceful. The fingers were thin and long, the wrists slender and flexible. There was something familiar about the man and yet Jeff knew he had never seen Mr. Edwards before. (86)

In the passage above, Jeff constructs Mr. Edwards as other by attempting to locate the difference he identifies as embodied by the man in his specific physical characteristics,

yet the passage is most notable for the process of (mis)recognition it depicts: despite the protagonist's intense scrutiny of Mr. Edwards's physicality, Jeff's conclusions about him remain indistinct. The protagonist insists there is "something familiar about the man," but it is only after he hears another soldier mock Edwards for his sexuality that "Jeff knew from Monty's tone that Mr. Edwards was a fairy" (86); it is only through Monty's speech act that the violence of signification transforms Edwards from someone who is "familiar" to someone who, for these men, embodies otherness and abjection on an essential level. The process of willful misrecognition depicted here is similar to the act of othering Baldwin's protagonist performs in *Giovanni's Room* when he explains that the patrons of Guillaume's bar repulse him precisely because of his inability to successfully construct them as other, despite the lengths to which he goes to dehumanize the men through his animal-like description of them. Where Baldwin would later use a Parisian setting to explore the epistemological instability inherent in identity formation, Brooks shows the extent to which homophobic violence is a physical manifestation of the violence of signification, as the soldiers force Edwards into a position of abjection, first with their words and then, when that fails, with their fists.

Jeff Mitchell's focus on Mr. Edwards's physiognomy is notable for what it tells us about how epistemologies come to be constructed. Sedgwick argues that the understanding of same sex desire has been problematically linked to "two contradictory tropes of gender" since approximately the end of the nineteenth century. As Sedgwick writes, homosexuality has traditionally been understood either through a "trope of inversion" that constructs the homosexual as "a woman's soul trapped in a man's

body’—and vice versa” or a “trope of gender separatism,” which inverts the previous formulation, postulating that “far from its being of the essence of desire to cross boundaries of gender, it is instead the most natural thing in the world that people of the same gender, people grouped together under the single most determinative diacritical mark of social organization,” that of gender, “should bond together also on the axis of sexual desire” (87). As Sedgwick explains, “gender-separatist models would thus place the woman-loving woman and the man-loving man each at the ‘natural’ defining center of their own gender, again in contrast to inversion models that locate gay people—whether biologically or culturally—at the threshold between genders” (88). Ultimately, Brooks’s novel remains invested in an essentialist view of homosexuality, despite the sympathy Jeff Mitchell is clearly shown to have for the character of Mr. Edwards.<sup>42</sup> Jeff’s own understanding of Mr. Edwards’s identity, however, remains pinned between the two tropes of gender identification Sedgwick lays out in her discussion of the construction of homosexual identity. Though Brooks differentiates Jeff from the other soldiers in this scene through his feelings of guilt regarding what the protagonist understands is about to happen to the man they have just met, much of the dramatic tension in the scene derives from the fact that the reader is meant to recognize Edwards as a homosexual—as other—

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<sup>42</sup> As Langdon notes, “Brooks’s juxtaposition of Mr. Edwards and Max Brock—the novel’s despised Others—is also significant. In sharp contrast to Max’s performance of manly heroism and Universalist Americanism, Mr. Edwards’s performance of womanliness—from his good manners to his pathetic tears—mark him as weak and pitiable. Brooks is clearly contemptuous of the “hunger” that drives Mr. Edwards, and his constant iteration of the man’s anxious, desirous responses to the GIs’ come-ons—grateful glances, blushes, nervously licked lips, and hard swallows—implies that Mr. Edwards ‘asked for it’” (132).

before Jeff himself comes to this realization. The recognition of ‘homosexuality’ Brooks attempts to elicit from his readers depends upon Jeff’s description of Mr. Edwards’s physical characteristics, drawn for the reader in a manner evocative of the exaggerated scrutiny of a cartoonist’s illustration. Yet despite Jeff’s attempt to ‘locate’ Mr. Edwards’s alterity in his individual physical characteristics, the description itself fails to cohere into a stable depiction, instead remaining fragmentary and strangely indeterminate. The concreteness with which Jeff attempts to depict Edwards comes undone in the subtly indistinct construction of phrases like “his teeth were almost too white” and “They were graceful hands. Too graceful.” Jeff seizes upon these characteristics as markers of alterity the protagonist insists he can perceive in Edward’s *body*, but he ultimately fails to successfully localize this excess in any of the specific physical markers he attempts to utilize in his description. Moreover, what the passage ultimately demonstrates is the extent to which Jeff is unable to parse his conscious attempt at othering Mr. Edwards (by insisting upon elements of Edwards’s physicality as visible markers of sexual deviance) from the insistent familiarity of the indeterminacy he ultimately *identifies* with in Mr. Edwards. The passage illustrates both misrecognition and recognition as occurring simultaneously, and perhaps, as necessarily two parts of the same intersubjective identificatory process. Jeff identifies with his vision of Mr. Edwards not (necessarily) because he himself is or fears that he might be homosexual; rather, what he seems—on some level—to recognize is instead indeterminacy *itself*, and I would like to suggest that it is this recognition of indeterminacy—this demonstration of the instability of

epistemological knowledge itself—that elicits violence as a response from the other soldiers.

In his discussion of his own sexual identity, Ted Allenby, the closeted marine from Terkel's *Good War*, describes the various ways his identity has been constructed specifically as a process of signification. In the passage quoted at the start of this chapter, Allenby explains his fear that, from an early age, homosexuality has marked him visibly as other. In his terms, it is an identity from which he can separate *himself*—it is a skull and crossbones he *wears*—but homosexuality also becomes for him something akin to a foreign body that has invaded his own, “a disease” or “a poison” that he fears has become an immutable, essential part of his being. Allenby's discussion of the violence he enacts as a result of his internalized homophobia follows the same logic as the violence enacted by Jeff Mitchell's fellow soldiers, but Allenby's story—that of a gay man who uses violence to police the reception of his sexual identity by those around him—adds an additional layer of complication to the equation I am discussing in this chapter. In his account of his time spent in two branches of the Armed Forces from 1942-1963, Allenby details the complexity involved in military service for closeted soldiers. In his interview with Terkel, Allenby states:

As I look back, there were other marines in boot camp who were probably homosexual, but they were as frightened and furtive and as much in the closet as I was. Military officialdom didn't seem to care one way or the other. The only time homosexuality was discussed was in barracks banter

and filthy locker-room jokes. Lets go roll some queers tonight. Or, you goddamn cocksucker. (180)

Asked to speak about his feelings regarding such “banter,” Allenby states he participated in the exchanges out of fear that if he did not, his fellow soldiers would become suspicious of his sexual identity. Allenby tells Terkel, “You develop quite a repertory of tricks to prevent detection. Be even more vociferous than everybody else.” Yet Allenby’s interview complicates this narrative of closeted service when he expands on the place of homosexual identity in the Armed Forces during the Second World War. He tells Terkel, “I think the Marine Corps is a kind of sadomasochistic outfit.” He explains:

A great deal of sexual feeling is expressed. In those days we marines wore leather belts. They got rid of them because marines were using them as weapons in fights with swabbies or each other. You’d take that leather belt and wrap it around your fist and it became something like brass knuckles. I remember we’d slap each other with ‘em, back and forth. It was a game of skill, to see how quickly you could dodge and duck and how hard you could hit the other guy. We’d have these welts on our back. [. . .] There’s an old axiom. If you can’t love, you gotta hate. If you can’t show affection show aggression. A great deal of homosexuality was shown in the barracks. [. . .] It was never done with real meanness. Instead of a pillow fight, we’d fight with these leather belts. (180)

Terkel’s questions structure the interview in such a way to juxtapose the indeterminacy of the acts violence—interpretable as both homophobic and homoerotic—with seemingly



clear-cut examples of more traditional “machismo” to undermine stereotypical depictions of either straight or gay masculinity that could potentially emerge from Allenby’s narrative. Immediately following this passage, for example, Terkel asks Allenby: “Do you know if you killed anybody at Iwo Jima?” and Allenby replies: “Of course I did. I was a machine gunner.” In this instance, the sparseness of Allenby’s reply and its lack of emotional affect contrasts immediately with the excess that characterizes his description of the marines’ homosocial locker-room behavior at the barracks.

Allenby also details more positive experiences from his time as a soldier, including the companionship he found with other closeted recruits and the romantic relationships he had during both of his enlistments. The inclusion of these experiences in Allenby’s narrative further complicates cultural narratives about the role of the military in “forming” men:

You have good buddies. It is something subconscious. I had one in San Diego. We were lovers, but we never had a sexual encounter. There was the intimacy, the closeness, deep, deep feelings, little subtle things that you reserve just for that special person. He was a deeply religious kid, Baptist. We were both homosexuals, but neither of us would dare use that word with each other. He didn’t go to Iwo Jima with me. War brings people together very quickly and separates them just as quickly. It was a traumatic experience when I said goodbye to him. (180)

As Rabinowitz notes, “men can be together in America only by dying together [in war] or through the triangle of the third, the other woman, who dies instead” (*Black & White &*

*Noir* 9), but Allenby's narrative expresses realities often only expressed in a coded fashion in American culture during this period. In his interview with Terkel, Allenby discusses both the surprising amount of unofficial permissiveness of the military towards same-sex relationships during the Second World War and the subsequent tightening of regulations regarding the private lives of enlisted men following the war's conclusion. Allenby notes that "by [the mid-1950s] trapping homosexuals had become quite a hobby, especially for military intelligence. Unlike World War Two, the military had considerable preoccupation with homosexuality" (184). Although it is likely an oversimplification to assert that the military was unconcerned with issues like homosexuality during wartime, it is clear that during the late 1940s and into the 1950s an increasingly invasive culture of scrutiny began to become increasingly codified in the United States, characterized by government-sponsored reports like the *Senate Report on the Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government* in 1950 and the conduct of the House Committee on Un-American Activities that followed on that legislation's heels early in the decade (Serlin 176). This decade also saw the introduction of the Uniform Code of Military Justice across all four branches of the military, which specifically forbade homosexual activity, from then on considered grounds for expulsion from military service. At the close of his interview with Terkel, Allenby recalls his own discharge from the military after twenty years of service following the discovery of his year and a half long love affair with another Naval chaplain. "One day I was placed under arrest," Allenby states, explaining: "The charge was violating Article 125, Uniform Code of Military Justice. That's sodomy. The UCMJ came in in the early fifties" (Terkel 185).

III) “Something to Build On”: Masculinity, Myth, and the Crisis of the Action Image

Early in John Sturges’s 1955 film *Bad Day at Black Rock*, a sexual tension for the most part lacking in the rest of the film erupts between the protagonist, John J. Macreedy (Spencer Tracy), and Hector David (Lee Marvin), when Macreedy finds the man—a henchman for local tough Reno Smith (Robert Ryan)—waiting in the hotel room he has procured for his stay in Black Rock, Arizona. Tracy’s character, a World War II veteran who has lost the use of his left arm as a result of an unspecified wartime injury, has just arrived in Black Rock and will soon learn that Smith and his henchmen have murdered the father of the man who saved his life during the war. Macreedy rents a room in the local hotel proceeds upstairs. Hector David instructs the desk clerk to find out all he can about the stranger, and heads upstairs to “crowd him a little.” Macreedy enters his room after freshening up in the hotel’s shared washroom and finds David stretched out on the bed. The resulting verbal exchange is loaded with homoerotic subtext, which Lee Marvin’s character means to use to intimidate the protagonist:

Macreedy: Guess maybe you’re in the wrong room.

David: You think so? What else you got on your mind?

Macreedy: Why, nothing else, I guess.

David: If you had half a mind, boy, you would have paid attention to what Pete, downstairs, said. He said this room here’s for us cowboys—for our every wish and comfort.

Macreedy: And this one is yours, I guess?

David: When I'm in town. And I'm in town, as any fool can see. You can see that can't you, boy?

When Macreedy offers to gather his belongings and find another room—refusing to acknowledge the game of intimidation playing out in this scene—David replies: “If you really wanted this room, we could maybe settle your claim without all this talk. I believe a man’s nothing unless he stands up for what’s rightfully his.” David’s response conflates the unmistakable eroticism in his statements with masculine violence as he attempts (in the first of many such exchanges in the film) to provoke Tracy’s character into a fight that would justify, in response, the use of force against a person the townspeople view as an outsider and a threat; notably, however, this exchange is the one place where such homoerotic tension erupts in the narrative.<sup>43</sup> Despite its placement early in the narrative and its apparent innocuousness in comparison to the direct threats of bodily violence the protagonist will later face in the film, the scene itself is one of the most profoundly violent moments the film. From the beginning, Macreedy’s unexpected presence in the town elicits from most of the town’s inhabitants the subtly loaded resistance characteristic of racial or sexual prejudice, and the coded innuendos in this scene in particular—directed to a wounded veteran—subtly reference the widespread concerns

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<sup>43</sup> The Coen Brothers use a very similar scene in their 2001 throwback to classic noir, *The Man Who Wasn't There*, to make a postmodern comment on the practice of depicting same-sex desire in a coded fashion in the noir films of the postwar period, when Ed Crane (Billy Bob Thornton) meets Creighton Trolliver (John Pallotta) in a seedy hotel room to discuss a business partnership and Crane spurns a thinly veiled sexual advance on Trolliver’s part, asking outright “is that a pass?” and telling him “you’re out of line, mister.” The Coen’s scene decodes the presence of same-sex desire in classic noirs; in Sturges’s 1955 version of the same exchange, this depiction—though not represented directly—is so straightforward as to be nearly undisguised.

among the American public regarding the gender identity of soldiers returning from foreign deployments.

In a sense, the scene begins the film by replicating for Macreeedy the position in the town experienced by Komoko, the murdered man (who was a racial outsider in *Black Rock*), allowing the film, as several critics have noted, to function—like Fred Zinnemann's *High Noon* (1952)—as an allegorical representation of Hollywood blacklisting during the Red Scare (Streamas 108). Viewing Macreeedy's disability as a signifier for either racial or political stigma, however, does not fully account for the implications of the inclusion of a disabled protagonist in the film. Issues of gender and sexuality are almost always at play where disability is concerned, and yet none of the available scholarship on *Bad Day at Black Rock* fully addresses this concern as present in Sturges's film. One might be tempted to argue that the previously discussed early scene sets up an equation in the film linking violence and homosexual sex acts, wherein physical violence substitutes for sexual violence for the remainder of the film; the conspicuous absence of similarly coded exchanges from the rest of the film complicates such an equation, but the clear homoeroticism of the hotel room scene early in the film nevertheless colors the film's subsequent depictions of violence such that heteronormative masculine sufficiency remains always at stake in the violent altercations that unfold between Macreeedy and the cowboys as the film progresses. *Bad Day at Black Rock* thus belongs to a group of postwar American films exploring the nature of American masculine identity as it relates to violence, and can be seen as a thematic precursor to later films like Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1968) and Sam Peckinpah's

*Straw Dogs* (1971). Like David Sumner (Dustin Hoffman), Peckinpah's protagonist in *Straw Dogs*, Macreedy faces subtle and then blatant harassment from the male inhabitants of an insular, rural community until he is eventually provoked to respond to their hostility with acts of force.

Sturges's *Bad Day at Black Rock* is rich and complex in its depiction of racism in the United States, and also for its evocation of the increasingly insular character of postwar American society during the Cold War. Although the film is set in 1945 immediately following World War II, it is steeped in the visual iconography of Western films set in the late 1800s, and follows the conventions of the Western genre. In the film, John J. Macreedy arrives Black Rock, Arizona and discovers a town-wide cover-up of a racially motivated murder that occurred during the Japanese-American internment during the Second World War. Though various critics have addressed the film's depiction of an often-repressed element of twentieth-century United States history, the significance of Macreedy's disability has been under-theorized in discussions of the film. Marita Sturken has noted *Bad Day at Black Rock* for its depiction of the absent presence of the Japanese-American internment in both the visual record of the Second World War and in national historical narratives of the period. Sturken writes:

The [American] government attempted through censorship to control the representation of the internment: it produced propaganda films depicting the camps as a benevolent exercise in civil obedience. The Federal government prohibited cameras in the camps, thus attempting to prevent any significant production of counterimages. This limited cultural

representation of the camps was compounded by the protracted silence of many of the former internees. (36)

A notable exception to this silence on the part of Japanese Americans who experienced internment is Miné Okubo's *Citizen 13660*, which consists of hand-drawn illustrations done by Okubo during the internment to document her daily experiences in two different camps, combined with text she later wrote prior to the book's publication by Columbia University Press in 1946.<sup>44</sup> Where *Citizen 13660* represents "the first personal documentation of the evacuation story" (Okubo ix), the 1992 documentary *History and Memory: For Akiko and Takashige* explores the internment's ongoing legacy by combining the remembrances of director Rea Tajiri's mother with images related to the internment from various sources, including *Bad Day at Black Rock*. Sturken argues that, "in *History and Memory*, Tajiri notes that the 1954 film *Bad Day at Black Rock*, directed by John Sturges, perhaps most powerfully reenacts the absent presence of the Japanese American internment" in our collective understanding of World War II, telling "its story through presenting absence" (40).<sup>45</sup> While certainly of interest for its depiction of one of

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<sup>44</sup> Reissued by Washington University Press in 1983.

<sup>45</sup> Explaining the importance of works like *Citizen 13660* and *History and Memory* as corrective narratives, Sturken writes that "in many ways, the [official] historical narrative of the internment remains intact" as "the internment continues to be narrativized as a regrettable step that appeared necessary in its time—not as bad as what other countries did." For Sturken, this mediated depiction of the internment meshes seamlessly with larger cultural narratives of the World War II period in troubling ways. "Even though the term 'concentration camps' was used by government officials and Presidents Roosevelt and Truman," Sturken argues, "the image of prison camps where people were peaceably assembled screens out the image of prison camps where people became ill and died and where residents were shot. The historical claim of the internment as benevolent remains fixed through its alliance with the claim of the use of the atomic bomb as inevitable, an

the under-represented aspects of World War II American history, *Bad Day at Black Rock* is no less notable for its inclusion of a disabled protagonist in a film that blends elements of film noir with the western genre. Though the film is set immediately following the end of World War II, Sturges's depiction of Black Rock, Arizona, is steeped in anachronistic visual iconography of The West, and the town itself is populated by characters drawn as self-conscious Western archetypes: men who refer to themselves as "cowboys" and enact their hypermasculine identities at through blatant intimidation and then outright violence when faced with the appearance of a mysterious stranger they fear has arrived to investigate a murder most of the town conspired to cover up four years prior to the film's beginning.

*Bad Day at Black Rock* is thus instructive in further demonstrating the cultural valences of physical disability in film by placing a once able-bodied masculine figure in the position of the male protagonist in a specific genre of film. My previous chapter discussed William Wyler's use of melodrama to examine how notions of passivity often accompany the social stigma surrounding physical disability, by examining the struggles of male protagonists through the lens of what was at the time generally understood to be a genre used to depict women's issues. Here, I am interested in examining the effect of 'disabling' the protagonist of what Steve Neale and others have identified as the quintessentially masculine genre of American film, particularly in the postwar period. Like Sturken, John Streamas has discussed Sturges's use of the Western to explore the repressed history of the Japanese-American internment in the American narrative of the

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act that was appropriate in its time. To question one of these narratives would be to question them all, hence they remain fundamentally unexamined." (36)



Second World War, discussing the way in which the film's pervasive whiteness comments, through the pointed absence of Asian-American characters onscreen, on the absence of Japanese American narratives in the national understanding of the Second World War period. As Streamas notes, "all the characters are white, and the protagonist Macreeedy is an unlikely champion of racial justice, a luckless veteran so badly injured in combat that he has lost the use of an arm," arguing: "Sturges seems to say that, even in a remote and desolate place such as Black Rock, to render a people absent is the surest way to write them out of history" (99, 104). In his analysis, Streamas connects Sturges's method of depicting the racism explored in *Bad Day at Black Rock* to the director's use of the Western genre to tell a story that takes place in the late 1940s rather than the late 1890s. Streamas writes:

Philip French lists *Bad Day at Black Rock* among "Post-Westerns," Hollywood films concerned with "the way in which the characters are influenced by, or are victims of, the cowboy cult; they intensify and play on the audience's feelings about, and knowledge of, Western movies."(19) Characters complicit in Komoko's disappearance invoke a privileged status for cowboys, as when the hotel's desk clerk tells Macreeedy that the rooms are reserved for cowboys and ranch hands, "for their every wish and comfort," and when a sinister Hector David (Lee Marvin) repeats to Macreeedy that the rooms are reserved for "us cowboys," for "our every wish and comfort" when cowboys are in town, "and I'm in town as any fool can see." Macreeedy is confronted by Reno Smith, who controls the

town through intimidation and fear, and who says, "Somebody's always looking for something in this part of the West. To the historian, it's the 'Old West.' To the book writer, it's the 'Wild West.' To the businessman, it's the 'undeveloped West.' They say we're all poor and backward, and I guess we are. We don't even have enough water. But to us, this place is *our* West. And I wish they'd leave us alone." (104)

John J. Macreedy's dramatic arrival by train at the film's beginning is a stock device of the Western, but Macreedy himself, dressed in a rumpled black suit and matching fedora for the duration of the film and thus visually emphasized as an outsider from the start, has more in common with the hardboiled detective exemplified by Dashiell Hammett's Continental OP than a he does with the conventional Western hero. It is particularly noteworthy that Macreedy's disability, a paralyzed arm resulting from a war injury, is an addition specific to Millard Kaufman's screen adaptation of the original source material, Howard Breslin's 1947 story "Bad Time at Honda." Kaufman has stated that he made John J. Macreedy, the film's protagonist, a disabled veteran in his adaptation of Breslin's story to increase audience sympathy with the film's central figure, and because he felt the added complexity would help entice Spencer Tracy to accept the role, which he had previously turned down due to his lack of interest in the part. Kaufman explains:

[Breslin's] story was enriched when [producer] Dore [Schary] suggested I give Macreedy, our fictional lead, a gimpy arm. Dore was convinced that no actor could resist playing a character with an impairment, providing the scarification was expressed tastefully or romantically (the attractive gash

on Tarzan's cheekbone, the wound Hemingway gave Frederic Henry which in no way interfered with his sexual gymnastics). [. . .]

Psychologically, symbolically, it was a shrewd ploy to squeeze empathy from the audience and direct it toward our protagonist; all of us are wounded in one way or another. But Dore gave Macreeedy a stiff arm for another more practical reason. He was still pursuing Tracy to play the part and thought the defect would help land him. (76)

This understanding of Macreeedy's character in *Bad Day at Black Rock*, and the protagonist's relationship to his disability is more or less reproduced in the few critical discussions that exist of Sturges's film. In *Cinema of Isolation*, Norden asserts that the protagonist's disability in *Bad Day at Black Rock* functions mainly as a device used by the screenwriter and filmmaker "to stress Macreeedy's difference from the other characters or to enhance his vulnerability" (197). Norden explains further:

The filmmakers also underscored Macreeedy's potential for victimization by casting an aging actor in the role; Tracy, a World War I veteran, was at 54 rather long in the tooth to be playing a recently discharged WW II enlisted man. Finally, and most importantly, they turned Breslin's explicitly able-bodied veteran into one with a missing arm. By pursuing such strategies, the filmmakers presumably wanted to increase the movie's tensions by stacking what they perceived as near-insurmountable odds against their courageous lead character, who in effect becomes 'remasculinized' through his heroic deeds. (189)

Norden reads the addition of Macreedy's stiff arm to the film version of Breslin's story in much the same way that Mitchell and Snyder discuss disability as a trope in *Narrative Prosthesis*: as a device used to heighten narrative tension and as a shorthand for marking the uniqueness of the disabled character. Such a reading reduces Macreedy's disability to a motivation for his character's pursuit of justice and an additional obstacle he must overcome in achieving his goals. While Norden does acknowledge the centrality of the protagonist's masculinity to the film's narrative, his analysis elides the extent to which the addition of a disability to the protagonist's character alters, on a fundamental level, how masculinity itself functions in the film versus the original version of the story.

Breslin's story emphasizes protagonist Peter Macreedy's intimidating physicality, depicting the mysterious outsider largely from the point of view of the town (a device similar to the narrative technique used by Petry in *Country Place*). Often referred to by the omniscient narrator simply as "the big man," an imposing figure who moves with grace despite his bulk (19, 20), Peter Macreedy's arrival is itself enough to break the town's silence regarding its role in the death of his friend's father. In Breslin's version, Macreedy cracks the case just by showing up and looking tough; the story's protagonist does not resort to actual physical violence at any time during the narrative. In fact, he hardly does *anything* in the story but make himself visible as he moves about the town asking questions of the guilty parties, who turn against each other when they find out that, before the war, "the big man had been a cop. Very much a cop. A boss one, they said" (26). Despite this background information, which the townspeople obtain through a phone call to the protagonist's native Chicago, Peter Macreedy remains largely a cypher

in the text: he simply *is* masculine sufficiency, a materialization of nothing more than masculinity as a rhetorical effect absent any actual content.

Unsurprisingly, Breslin's story enacts heteronormative gender roles in a more or less straightforward fashion in its narrative. In the one instance of violence depicted in the story directly rather than recounted for the reader after the fact, one of the toughs responsible for the murder attempts to intimidate the protagonist by ambushing and firing on him when Macreedy visits the crime scene accompanied by Liz Brooks, a young woman who has reluctantly agreed to assist the protagonist in his investigation:

The loud twang of metal on metal startled them. There was the high whine of a ricochet, and then, from the hills the flat slap of a rifle. [. . .]

Macreedy moved fast. He took one step, hooked a leg behind Liz's knees, deftly shouldered her over, and fell on top of her. They were on the ground before the station wagon's bullet-scarred fender stopped quivering. [. . .]

"Stay down," said Macreedy. The girl twisted beneath him, and he pushed her flat, holding her there with a hand on her shoulder, his arm rigid. [. . .]

He rolled away from Liz, and rose to a crouch, balancing on one fist like a football player. Macreedy's other hand held a gun, a square black automatic, compact and heavy. (22)

The ease with which Macreedy handles this situation is explicitly gendered, as the protagonist responds almost instinctively to protect the female accompanying him in a gesture filled with sexual tension that also contains an unmistakable hint of sexual violence. Yet even the story's only action scene ultimately emphasizes the essentially

specular nature of Macreedy's authority, when, after saving Liz's life by manhandling her to the ground and holding her beneath him, he tells Liz: "That gun of mine [. . .] It's a Beretta. Italian make. You might want to mention it around Honda. I'm not fond of people shooting at me" (23). Here, Peter Macreedy operates under the assumption that structures all of his interactions in the story: his performance of masculinity is itself so potent that, throughout the narrative, the assertion of its presence (even indirectly) is enough of a threat that actual violence remains unnecessary for him to remain in a position of mastery. Yet his performance, as Macreedy tacitly acknowledges in this instance, operates purely on the level of abstraction in the story; as such, it is telling that the protagonist's most direct invocation of masculine authority is mediated symbolically, in the image of his gun, through the female figure of Liz Brooks.

The addition of a disabled protagonist to Sturges's film complicates the above-described equation of masculine sufficiency by disrupting the spectacle of masculinity carefully maintained by Peter Macreedy throughout Breslin's version, in ways which neither Kaufman nor Norden account for in their statements regarding the film. Though John J. Macreedy's disability in *Bad Day at Black Rock* does serve an othering purpose in the narrative by subjecting the protagonist to the stigma often associated with a visible physical disability, his loss of the use of an arm in no significant way affects Macreedy's ability to function as the protagonist in a violent action film. Macreedy's disability instead causes the films' numerous antagonists to repeatedly underestimate the mysterious stranger's ability to take care of himself. One key difference between Breslin's story and the film version made nearly ten years later is the addition of several

violent action scenes in which Macreeedy incapacitates assailants in hand-to-hand combat with ease, despite the loss of his arm. In this way, *Bad Day at Black Rock* places its protagonist in a position similar to that of Homer Parish in *The Best Years of Our Lives*, as a disabled protagonist repeatedly exceeds the physical limitations placed upon him by the expectations of other characters in the narrative. *Bad Day at Black Rock* thus provides a useful counterpart to *Best Years* because it includes a similarly impaired protagonist portrayed by an ostensibly able-bodied actor (Tracy holds his left arm stiff and hides it beneath his suit coat for the duration of *Bad Day* to simulate his character's disability, whereas Harold Russell's metal prosthetics become the visual focus of nearly every scene of Wyler's film in which he is included). Where *Best Years* foregrounds the extent to which Parish has had to adapt to his disability, as the character (and thus the disabled actor playing him) is required by the part to repeatedly demonstrate the workings of his prosthetics, Tracy plays Macreeedy's disability very differently. Although the cowboys repeatedly reference the protagonist's damaged arm, Macreeedy's disability itself rarely seems to function for the character as an actual physical shortcoming for which he must compensate. Where much of Harold Russell's acting in Wyler's film constitutes the performance of his disability for other able-bodied characters and presumably a largely able-bodied film audience, Macreeedy's paralyzed left arm is only acknowledged through Tracy's performance as a physical hindrance in once instance, when he fumbles with a phone receiver for a moment while attempting to make a phone call to the state police to inform them of an attempt on his life.

Moreover, Sturges's places his disabled protagonist in an explicitly masculine environment, an anachronistic and uncanny version of the American West, transposed into the postwar period and thus placed directly into conflict with its historical context to increase the valences of the crisis of masculinity the film depicts. This juxtaposition is consistently referenced in the film, not only through its visual elements but directly, by the characters themselves, as in an early scene when the desk clerk at Black Rock's hotel (the set design of which references the visual iconography of the Western) tells Macreedy "This is 1945, mister: there's been a war on," in an attempt to dissuade the protagonist from staying in town by telling him that all his rooms are unavailable. The film's antagonists consistently underestimate Macreedy precisely because he does not project the sort of masculinity that the cowboys attempt, unsuccessfully, to perform. Yet the film also does not allow for a simple dichotomous reading of the cowboys excessive, almost histrionic masculinity and Macreedy's even, measured composure in the face of their resistance to his investigation and eventual attempts to kill him before he uncovers their secret. Although Macreedy initially resists responding to the cowboy's intimidation tactics in kind, with force, the film leaves open the question of whether or not the specific violent acts eventually committed by the protagonist are justified within the circumstances of the film. The first notable example of the film's subtle ambivalence to its own violence occurs after Macreedy is run off the road and nearly killed by Reno Smith's henchmen and then followed by them to the local saloon where he orders food as the toughs pursuing him enter behind him and begin to harass him. It is unclear at this point in the film whether Smith and his gang actually intend to kill Macreedy, or if they



still mean to scare him off with their increasingly dangerous methods of intimidation; yet the protagonist (in a reluctant show of force) easily incapacitates Coley Trimble (Ernest Borgnine) with repeated chops to the neck from his good arm after Trimble finally provokes Macreedy to violence by implying the protagonist's disability would make him helpless in a fight. Though the film consistently attempts to distinguish Macreedy's skillful and measured use of force when provoked from the cowboys' violent masculine excess, it is the protagonist who actually hits first in this instance, blurring the distinction between the two modes of masculine authority depicted in the film. In fact, Macreedy's reaction is both *precisely* what is demanded by Hollywood logic in response to a belligerent show of masculine force *and* a skillful deflection of masculine excess. What results is the creation of displays of cinematic action that do not make traditional 'sense' because they subtly contradict the sensory-motor coherence of the action-image as described by Deleuze. The violence in the bar fight scene inevitably escalates, but not in the way one has come to expect, as Macreedy responds by attempting to deflect the cowboy's assaults for as long as possible rather than meet them head-on. Deleuze describes a "crisis of the action-image" in postwar cinema, wherein "the sensory-motor links tend to disappear, a whole sensory-motor continuity which forms the essential nature of the action-image vanishes [as] clumsy fights, badly aimed shots, a whole out-of-phase of action and speech replace the too perfect duels of American Realism" (213, 214). Here, Deleuze writes primarily of the formal innovations that for him distinguished postwar European cinemas such as Italy's neorealism, which he views as the birth of a "new image [. . .] that can attempt to identify in the post-war American cinema, outside

Hollywood,” but what *Bad Day at Black Rock* demonstrates is a similar breakdown of coherence within formalist American cinema itself, inseparable from a breakdown in the violently constituted equation of traditional masculine sufficiency.

The film ratchets up the violence it depicts as its narrative progresses, carefully maintaining a balance between Macreedy’s reluctance to use force and the other men’s clearly violent intentions, so that each time the protagonist acts violently his response registers as largely justifiable given the circumstances while also being completely excessive in its resulting human damage. Macreedy’s responses to the cowboy’s threats of violence seem to operate on the level of pure reaction—they don’t seem to quite fit in the logic of the scenes in which they are included, and the protagonist himself often seems strangely detached from his actions and their results. Macreedy responds in the way demanded by the situations in which he finds himself, but his reactions feel a bit out of synch—as though he responds just before or just after the moment violence would logically erupt from the protagonist in such a scene. Deleuze notes that, in postwar film, “the first things compromised everywhere are the linkages of situation-action, action-reaction, excitation, response, in short, the sensory-motor links which produced the action-image. Realism, despite all its violence—or rather with all its violence that remains sensory-motor—is oblivious to where the synsigns disperse and the indices become confused” (210). The film’s climactic scene is a case in point. After revealing to Macreedy the circumstances surrounding Komoko’s murder, Doc Velie and Pete Wirth agree to get Macreedy out of town at nightfall, with Liz’s help. Liz pretends to help Macreedy, but instead drives him to the desert where Reno Smith is waiting. Here, the

film revises the shootout scene from Breslin's story extensively. As in the original version, Smith ambushes Macreedy, leaving the protagonist and Liz pinned behind the young woman's jeep. Unafraid, Liz steps forward, expecting thanks from the gang leader for her assistance in setting up Macreedy, and Smith shoots her, leaving no witnesses to the murder he intends to commit. Still crouched behind Liz's jeep, the unarmed Macreedy fashions a Molotov cocktail, filling a discarded bottle from the ground with gasoline from the jeep's gas tank as Smith repositions himself for a clearer shot at Macreedy. As in the bar fight scene, Macreedy acts decisively, throwing the bottle at Smith before the villain is able to take his shot, and Smith is engulfed in flames from the explosion, an image that anticipates the climactic violence depicted at the end of Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs*. Smith screams and writhes in pain on the ground until the flames burning his body go out while Macreedy watches with a strange detachment, an emotionless performance of excessive violence that complicates the film's apparently clear-cut moralism, foreshadowing the ambivalence of the film's conclusion. In *Bad Day at Black Rock*, what we are left with is a film that lays bare the radical incoherence Deleuze argues is depicted most frequently in postwar European film, placed in a specifically American context; what the film's depictions of physical violence ultimately demonstrate is thus not Macreedy's reclamation of his masculinity in any clear-cut sense, but instead his navigation of a landscape in which masculinity as a rhetorical effect—the libidinal currency of the Western genre—has lost all potency.

Narratives of masculine sufficiency become the film's explicit concern in its denouement, when we learn that the town's hostility to Komoko was instigated by the

fact that the Japanese American's cultural knowledge allowed him to draw water from the arid landscape of Adobe Flats (making Komoko's previously undesirable land an unexpected source of jealousy to the town's other men) and that Komoko's murder occurred after cowboy ringleader Reno Smith was denied entry in the U.S. military following Pearl Harbor after he is unable to pass the physical examination required for enlistment. Sore over his rejection from the service and denied an outlet for his anger at the Japanese (who he now perceives as a threat), Smith persuades his drinking buddies to accompany him to Adobe Flats and attempt to force Komoko to give up his land by burning down his home; Komoko, inside, dies as a result of the fire. That Smith suffers a similar fate at the hands of Macreeedy at the film's climax lends a harshness and cruelty to the justice meted out in the film, despite the protagonist's clear moral superiority to every other figure who appears in the narrative. In "The Western," Andre Bazin writes:

If it is to be effective [ . . . ] justice must be dispensed [in the Western] by men who are just as strong and just as daring as the criminals. These virtues, as we have said, are in no way compatible with virtue in the absolute sense. The sheriff is not always a better person than the man he hangs. This begets and establishes an inevitable and necessary contradiction. There is often little moral difference between the outlaw and the man who operates within the law. Still the sheriff's star must be seen as constituting a sacrament of justice, whose worth does not depend on the worthiness of the man who administers it.

Bazin adds that the mythic structure of the Western necessitates “the administration of justice, which, if it is to be effective, must be drastic and speedy—short of lynching, however—and thus must ignore extenuating circumstances, such as alibis that would take too long to verify” (146). As previously discussed, *Bad Day at Black Rock* carefully walks this very line, and in fact is consciously concerned with the problem of distinguishing necessary, just uses of violence from the violent acts of mob rule. Scenes throughout Sturges’s film comment on the emptiness of Western authority by demonstrating the powerlessness of the town sheriff. When Macreedy first finds Sheriff Tim Horn (Dean Jagger) dozing in the bed of an unused jail cell, Sturges positions his camera so that the sheriff’s badge is repeatedly framed between the cell’s bars, and later the badge itself is further shown to be an empty signifier of authority as it is passed from man to man after Horn fails to prove his loyalty to Reno Smith and Smith summarily strips Horn of his title as sheriff.

Yet *Bad Day at Black Rock*’s final scene depicts a fundamental rejection of the potency of myth itself. As Doc Velie walks Macreedy back to the train that brought him to town at the start of the film he asks the protagonist to give Komoko’s son’s Medal of Honor to the town, offering the vague explanation that he hopes the medal would help the town’s citizens by giving them “something to build on.” Macreedy wordlessly hands over the medal to Doc Velie and Velie tells him “Thanks Mr. Macreedy—thanks for everything.” Macreedy’s gesture ironically reverses the final scene from *High Noon*, released just three years prior. Generally understood as an allegorical representation of Hollywood blacklisting during the Red Scare, *High Noon*’s narrative is similar to *Black*

*Rock's* in that a lone protagonist is forced to defend himself in the face of a town's indifference to the law and justice. In the film, Marshall Will Kane (Gary Cooper) defends the New Mexico town of Hadleyville from outlaws he learns are coming to kill him in retribution for his running them out of town years earlier, bringing law, order, and prosperity to a once lawless territory. Kane kills the outlaws without the town's assistance after he proves unable to raise a posse to meet the outlaws because the town now feels that the outlaws' personal vendetta is against Kane himself rather than the town and, as such, is not their concern. When Kane throws his badge into the dust at his feet before leaving the town he has once again saved, his gesture is an expression of disgust with the town itself rather than expression of a loss of faith in what the badge represents.

*Bad Day At Black Rock's* revision of the earlier film's conclusion is more cynical than its predecessor. Will Kane's rejection of Hadleyville works as it does precisely because Kane himself has just reinvested the object he discards with symbolic potency; that Macreedy wordlessly ascends to give the doctor Komoko's Medal of Honor despite the ludicrousness of the request underscores the extent to which symbolic markers of masculinity have been shown to be empty of meaning in Sturges's film, yet both scenes demonstrate that, in mythic structure "any material can arbitrarily be endowed with meaning." Key to Roland Barthes's understanding of mythic structures outlined in his essay "Mythology Today" is that "mythical speech is made of material which has *already* been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication: it is because all the materials of myth (whether pictorial or written) presuppose a signifying consciousness, that one can reason about them while discounting their sustenance" (110). In *High Noon*,

when Will Kane discards his badge it is a meaningful act—at once an insult to and a rejection of the town he has rescued—precisely because the badge itself remains an object that means something, both within the mythic structure presented by the film and in the mind of the viewer. *Bad Day at Black Rock*'s revision of this exchange retains the message of the original scene by showing that town depicted in the film is itself unworthy of the symbolic masculinity it has come to reify. The difference is that MacCreedy (unlike Cooper's Kane) understands what the town does not: that the symbol itself has been rendered empty of meaning, the mythic structure it represents remaining mere form, void of content.

### **Coda-FDR's "Splendid Deception," or the American Presidency-as-Closet**

In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick writes that “an assumption underlying [her] book is that the relations of the closet—the relations around homo/heterosexual definition—have the potential for being potentially revealing, in fact, about speech acts more generally” (3). In my discussion of *The Sun Also Rises* and *Giovanni's Room* in my first chapter, I read the two texts in conjunction to demonstrate how the meanings of disability and queerness come to be rhetorically impacted upon each other in the postwar context. In *The Sun Also Rises*, one of Jake Barnes's clearest anxieties surrounding his disability—even if it is not specifically voiced by the character in the novel—is that his loss of masculine potency as narrowly defined by Hemingway in the narrative renders him uncomfortably similar to the homosexual men he despises; for this reason, the ‘nature’ of homosexuality is, fairly explicitly, one of the major concerns of the novel. I turn to Hugh Gregory Gallagher's *Splendid Deception* in this coda specifically because the knowledge structure it demonstrates through its own narrative is precisely that of the closet as described by Sedgwick, and yet the book itself is not—ostensibly—concerned with homosexuality in the least. I close my dissertation that has focused on disability's presence in texts produced primarily during the Second World War period with a brief discussion of this work published in the mid 1980s because I hope its inclusion in my project will demonstrate the extent to which the concerns I have discussed in this project, though they are rooted in a specific historical moment, extend well beyond the end of the Second World War.



In 1985, Hugh Gregory Gallagher, non-fiction author and early disability rights advocate, published a biography of Franklin Delano Roosevelt notable as the first serious effort to examine the life and political career of FDR through the lens of his disability. Though Gallagher began his writing career in the late 1960s and early 1970s covering topics like congressional gridlock and the struggle of the Inuit people to regain tribal lands from the United States government in 1971, with *FDR's Splendid Deception* the author turned his attention to writing primarily about issues of disability. It is his most well known work of non-fiction. Prior to writing about disability, Gallagher worked as a congressional aide in Washington, DC, where “he developed and drafted the language of what became the Architectural Barriers Act of 1968, a lauded precursor to the sweeping Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990. His legislation mandated that buildings funded with federal dollars had to be accessible to the disabled, which many opposed because of expense and aesthetic appeal.” The obituary for the author published in the *Washington Post* on July 16, 2004, notes: “although many worked to change the image of the disabled—from the pitiable, leg-braced waif in old March of Dimes promotions—Mr. Gallagher was far more concerned about practical questions, the personal and financial costs of living with a disability”; yet the author and advocate’s interests did extend to issues of representation as well, as he “played a major role in the 2001 decision to add a statue of Roosevelt in a wheelchair to the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial in Washington” (*Washington Post* B04). *FDR's Splendid Deception* combines Gallagher’s concern for the practical matters affecting disabled individuals with his interest in cultural representations of disability, examining the President’s conscious mediation of the

visibility and public knowledge of the extent of his physical impairment during his rise in politics and while he served as president.

In his book, Gallagher demonstrates a keen awareness of how negative stigma can affect the lives of disabled people, in particular those individuals dealing with visible physical disabilities, and he includes an insightful discussion of the damaging effects that such widespread stigmatization of disability in the early to mid-twentieth century had in shaping public policy and social behavior towards Americans whose visible difference from those around them served to exclude them almost entirely from a normal life. Yet the most striking element of Gallagher's book is the author's fascination with FDR's masculinity and sexuality, which at times lead the book to perpetuate some of the stereotypical attitudes disability studies as a discipline seeks to uncover and works to change. Through its focus on the conscious disavowal of the reality of Roosevelt's disability on the part of the President, the White House press corps, and even the public at large, *FDR's Splendid Deception* constructs the President's disability as the nation's open secret and FDR's public life in terms of a presidency-as-closet: although the specifics of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's lasting polio-related impairment were not general public knowledge during the President's lifetime, FDR's status as a disabled man was nearly universally understood but publicly unacknowledged and Roosevelt's maintenance of this relationship was, according to Gallagher, a near-constant concern for the President during his life in the public eye.

Rather than narrate the former president's life in strict chronology, the author organizes his book thematically: though the book does follow the events of Roosevelt's

life subsequent to his development of polio roughly in order of occurrence, Gallagher organizes each chapter around a specific aspect of the President's personal or political experience, using titles such as "Onset," "Crisis," "Rehabilitation," "President," and "War" to delineate each section's content. *Splendid Deception's* fourth chapter, "Attitudes," for example, provides background on the stigma attached to disability prior FDR's presidency, focusing in particular on the medical establishment's attitudes toward the alterity presented by a visible physical disability (29-30); these cultural prejudices clearly informed Roosevelt's own complex relationship to his disability when he entered public life in 1928 when urged by Governor Al Smith of New York to run as his party's replacement for the office after Smith's nomination as the Democratic presidential candidate (68-69). The book foregrounds the extent to which Roosevelt remained conscious of the potential harm a visible physical disability might do to his political ambitions. The text is particularly interested in the President's private feelings regarding disability and is structured around the author's own speculations regarding Roosevelt's virility and masculinity.

Early on, the book emphasizes Roosevelt's pre-polio virility, discussing the details of Roosevelt's infidelity to his wife, and explaining how, subsequent to his infidelity, FDR agreed to a sexless marriage as a condition of remaining married, "to avoid divorce, and to preserve the outward formalities of his marriage" so as to avoid a public scandal that would likely have thwarted his political aspirations (7). The image of heteronormative family that Roosevelt thus preserved became a central part of the man's public image. By leaning on his wife and sons during public appearances to aid his

mobility and for support, rather than relying on his wheelchair or crutches—visual signifiers of disability, FDR presented to the public an image of able-bodied masculinity; the Roosevelt family, then, served as both a physical support system and a prosthesis of heteronormativity while FDR sought and occupied public office. Gallagher later expands on the largely speculative details of the President's sex life later in the book, noting "Franklin D. Roosevelt appears to have been celibate from the age of thirty-six until his death twenty-seven years later" (130). In this context, the reader is meant to assume that FDR's voluntary loss of sexual expression following the revelation of his infidelity became involuntarily permanent as a result of Roosevelt's impairment from polio. Gallagher thus creates a narrative that strongly implies that FDR only becomes a good man, a faithful husband and loving father, through the emasculation that accompanies the revelation of his affair and, later, his impairment by polio.

Gallagher devotes an entire section of his book, positioned physically at the middle of the text, to his speculations regarding the intimate details of FDR's sex life, in a chapter simply entitled "Sex." The section cites a public statement given by one of Roosevelt's doctors regarding the President's health as evidence for the author's belief that FDR remained physically capable of sex despite his paralysis, and Gallagher asserts that "celibacy is consistent with Roosevelt's denial of his handicap," adding that Roosevelt's son James reportedly "told biographer Richard Thayer Goldberg that his father would have been 'too embarrassed' [by the impaired condition of his body] to have tried sexual relations" subsequent to his contracting polio (131). Yet Gallagher also argues:

It must be emphasized that Roosevelt was not asexual. He was extremely fond of women and they adored him. He carried on, in banter and flirtation, with secretaries, actresses, and princesses. But, aside from a lifelong love of Eleanor, he had but two lasting affairs of the heart. One was Missy LeHand, and the other was Lucy Mercer Rutherford. (133)

The “Sex” section of *Splendid Deception* is particularly strange at the points in which the author speculates about the details of the President’s emotionally intimate, yet apparently sexless relationship with his “private secretary” Missy LeHand, who served as Roosevelt’s “most intimate associate and comrade [. . .] from 1921 until the end of her life” twenty years later. Discussing their association, Gallagher writes, “there is no one word in the English language to describe Missy’s relationship with FDR. Perhaps the closest word would be partner; perhaps it would be lover (133). Notably, the indefinite particulars of the relationship, as described by the author, are strikingly similar to the relationship between John Marcher and May Bertrand in James’s “The Beast in the Jungle”; Bertrand states, “What saves us, you know, is that we answer so completely to so usual of an appearance: that of the man and woman whose friendship has become such a daily habit, or almost, as to be indispensable” (252); yet the boundaries of their strange friendship are left indistinct precisely because their relationship is defined almost completely by Bertrand’s intimate, unspecified knowledge of Marcher’s essential nature (257). As Sedgwick notes, the texts she argues most fully demonstrate the workings of the closet tend to be organized around an absent or hazy epistemological center structured by a deferral of knowledge rather than its revelation. *Splendid Deception* is precisely such

a text in that its narrative promises and fails to deliver intimate details of FDR's sex life and his disability—elements of Roosevelt's life that Gallagher assumes to be intrinsically connected.

In the "Sex" section of *Splendid Deception*, the author's use of the impersonal, indefinite pronoun "one" in order to speculate about the intimate details of the President's sexual life while strongly implying that the 'realities' he describes represent a universal experience for all disabled men—especially those who were at one time able-bodied. In the section, he describes what he considers to be the typical relationship that forms between a disabled man and an able-bodied woman, which he emphasizes as sexless, involving a life of sacrifice on the part of the woman. Referring to FDR's relationship with Missy LeHand, Gallagher writes, "it seems almost certain that FDR was not sexually intimate with Missy," citing the dangers an affair would have posed for Roosevelt's political ambitions, and the emotional pain knowledge of such an affair would cause for FDR's family. Gallagher continues, commenting, "it is impossible to be sure of the particulars [of their relationship]; one can only surmise. [ . . . ] Nevertheless, the basic facts of Roosevelt's case are common enough. The facts of an intimate relationship for a disabled man, according to Gallagher, are as follows:

By illness or accident a vigorous, virile, and narcissistic man finds himself a paraplegic. Perhaps, like Roosevelt, he had been successful and popular; admired by men, adored by women. And, perhaps, like Roosevelt, he had always been uncomfortable with naked emotion and feeling. The loss of muscle power is a blow to a man's self-esteem. The strength of the blow

is, indeed, fearful. The feelings generated are hard to express or deny. The man then finds a woman who, by intuition, understands the loss, the pain, the fear. She responds with love, out of service. They develop a relationship. She learns all the little tricks to help him make his way in social situations—ways to make others feel at ease; ways to make him feel less disabled and dependent by anticipating his requests, knowing his habits. For her it is a career of service, a vocation of love—almost like a nun. And, too often, she is like a nun in another way. There is no physical expression of their love. This becomes an unspoken, unyielding fact of their relationship. (138)

In Gallagher's formulation, disabled male heterosexuality, when projected onto the life of FDR, bifurcates the feminine figure as described by Sedgwick in her discussion of the structure of the closet in "The Beast in the Jungle," reducing Eleanor Roosevelt (and the children she and her husband share) to "camouflage [ . . . ] to the eyes of outsiders [ . . . ] a playacting of heterosexuality that is conscious of being only window dressing" that obscures the President's closeted identity as a disabled man from the American public, while reducing Missy to a presence in the closet as something that "softens its inner cushioning for his own comfort" (Sedgwick 206). Ultimately, Gallagher thus defines relations of disabled sexuality in precisely the same terms Sedgwick argues structure the closet for John Marcher and May Bertrand: "that of a willingly shared confinement" (207).

Gallagher's text enacts an outing of Roosevelt's disability through its inclusion of eighteen "long suppressed photos" of the former president, which visually foreground the effects of the poliovirus on FDR's body. These photos, tellingly, are placed in the middle of the book's "Sex" section, further underscoring the fraught association Gallagher constructs between Roosevelt's disabled body and his sexuality. The placement of the photo section, in fact, bisects this section of the book precisely at the moment when Gallagher's speculations about the effects of FDR's disability on his sex life are the most pronounced element of his discussion. "When the question is raised, 'Did Franklin have sexual relations with Lucy?' the answer, as in Missy's case, again must be, 'Probably not,'" Gallagher asserts—on a page directly opposite the last photo of Roosevelt included in the book, which depicts the man struggling to hold himself in a standing position during a public appearance, his arms braced stiffly against the railings of the small set of stairs he is shown descending in what is clearly a labored fashion (142, 143).

Gallagher's attitude toward FDR's disability and his sexuality, strange as it is, is actually less complex than it might seem. In his book, the author argues that the physical effects of polio alone would not have prevented Roosevelt from having sexual intercourse while simultaneously insisting, with certainty, that the President did not have sex subsequent to the bout with the illness that left him partially paralyzed. In *Enforcing Normalcy*, Lennard Davis argues, "the term disability, as it is commonly and professionally used, is an absolute category without level or threshold. One is either disabled or not" (1). Despite the empathy Gallagher demonstrates toward Roosevelt throughout the author's consideration of the life of one of the central disabled figures of



the World War II period, he nonetheless remains unable to conceive of disability identity in non-essentialist terms, but only when it comes to matters of sex. Because he is disabled, the Franklin Roosevelt of Gallagher's book is not allowed expression of his sexuality, even if logic and historical evidence demands that this lack of sexual expression must be the result of a personal choice motivated by shame and embarrassment. Davis argues that in cultural narratives about disability, "successful disabled people [. . .] have their disability erased by their success. [. . .] And as for the more famous people with disabilities—John Milton, Ludwig Van Beethoven, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, or even Stevie Wonder—we tend to see them as people who overcame their disabilities in ways we conventionally associate with the genius of creativity" (9). Gallagher's account of Roosevelt's life underscores the extent to which disability complicates conventional understandings of gender and sexuality, but specific role of disability in the author's book also allows him to create an impossibly idealized version of the thirty-second president. This narrative allows polio to assume an oddly curative function in Roosevelt's life by putting an end to his dalliances with women—but only by the President's choice. Gallagher's book thus, in a sense, complicates the equation Davis describes in manner that remains problematically essentialist in its depiction of a disabled male figure's relationship to his masculinity: though FDR certainly overcomes his disability in certain important ways, ultimately it is his disability that, in Gallagher's narrative, allows Roosevelt to become a good man. Through his experience of disability, FDR becomes able to fulfill the position of social and cultural responsibility that Jake Barnes knows he cannot: that of a husband and father.

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