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The Wounded Man: *Foxcatcher* and the Incoherence of White Masculine Victimhood

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Abstract

American cinema has recently favored representations of white men as victims of socioeconomic and political change. Recent scholarship on white masculinity suggests that representations of male victimhood enable white men to disavow that hegemonic white masculinity still fundamentally structures society. This essay argues that Hollywood’s wounded man similarly provides white masculinity with stable footing. I illustrate how the unintelligibility of screen masculinity evades criticism and, further, how melancholic male dramas nurture a traumatic attachment to victimhood. Examining the film *Foxcatcher* (2014), I show how unmasked portraits of white male victimhood function as counterparts to the hard-bodied action hero. The filmmaker’s effort to parse the distinction between material and superficial wounds reifies the experience of noble suffering as a superlative expression of aggrieved white manhood. *Foxcatcher*’s fragmented portrayal of white masculinity illustrates the elasticity of victimhood even where “crisis” suggests that white masculinity is open to revision.

Keywords: masculinity, film, victimhood, whiteness, melancholy

Based on true events, the critically acclaimed film *Foxcatcher* (2014) dramatizes the efforts of eccentric millionaire John du Pont (Steve Carrell) to recruit and train a group of elite American wrestlers to compete in the 1987 World Championships and the 1988 Olympic Games.¹ The film focuses on John’s intimate relationship with brothers Mark (Channing Tatum) and David Shultz (Mark Ruffalo), who he enlists in a project of national heritage restoration—a patriotic laden campaign to convey the values of American exceptionalism

through the spectacle of competitive sport. From his home near the hallowed grounds of Valley Forge, John pitches to Mark his grand effort to “make this country soar again.” Wealthy but devoid of talent, charisma, or physical aptitude, John plucks the former Olympians from their meager existence in middle America to serve as surrogates for his fantasy of national redemption. As Ann Hornaday observes, *Foxcatcher* portrays Mark and David as heroes who “failed to cash in on Ronald Reagan’s ‘morning in America.’”² In the tale’s tragic end, John descends into paranoia and fatally shoots David. Mark falls from Olympian heights to the brutal blood sport of mixed martial arts. In the end, neither the characters nor the nation are redeemed. Critics characterized the film as an account of downward mobility in an era when unbridled optimism in the American Dream collided with the structural limits of economic opportunity.³

Fusing hypermasculinity with nationalism, *Foxcatcher* prompts audiences to consider John’s perplexing fascination with both wrestling and the physical prowess of working-class heroes as proxies for his own embattled manhood as well as that of a purportedly emasculated nation. John’s failure to achieve the restoration of either points to the precarious and often violent performance of white masculinity that has become sutured to American exceptionalism. Released before Donald Trump’s bid for the presidency, *Foxcatcher* appears to be a prescient text that anticipated a campaign organized around a similar call for national restoration: “Make America Great Again.” Indeed, the film captures the contemporary politics of wounded white masculinity that served as one of the generative forces behind the Trump campaign. Both President Trump and *Foxcatcher*’s John du Pont place a premium on remasculinizing the nation, both extolling the virtues of zero-sum competition, subjugating one’s opponents, boastful pride, and receiving constant praise without accomplishment.⁴ Both speak to the perceived victimization of white working-class men by a so-called feminized society that has lost sight of the imperative to honor white men. Both envision white working-class men as a conduit to the revival of American exceptionalism via a nostalgic return to an imagined past where white men stood atop the socioeconomic hierarchy. *Foxcatcher* offers an allegory for the politics of white male injury that illustrates how hegemonic masculinity is continually renewed through proclamations of its own marginality. The film addresses the central contradiction of contemporary white masculinity: that white men may identify with strength and rugged individualism while also considering themselves vulnerable and wounded. The film offers a portrait of white masculinity that is incoherent: entitled white men demanding to be made whole again.

At the same time, it is this very contradiction that underwrites contemporary white masculinity. The incoherence of white masculine victimhood authorizes white men to disavow their status as unified hegemonic subjects. As Paul Johnson observes,

unintelligibility to others functions as a sign of White masculinity’s exclusion, and therefore marginal position, which authorizes subjects to deny White masculinity’s central role in structuring society. How, after all, can White masculinity organize a society in which it has no part?

To this point, the wounded man of contemporary Hollywood is a similarly fraught identity, betwixt the contradictions of an identity that at once calls itself both whole and fragmented. Although the film highlights the fissures in white masculinity, the organized unintelligibility of white masculinity makes possible narratives of victimhood. Hence, even as it highlights these contradictions, the film remains ambivalent about what constitutes victimhood. Although John and Mark's injuries are represented as largely superficial, David is portrayed as a victimized voice of reason—a populist icon who is punished despite his commitment to hard work and responsibility. For threatening John's ego, he pays with his life. Despite lucid moments of critique, the film's portrait of white masculinity leaves space for a legitimate politics of white male victimhood.

As contemporary white masculinity is often purposely unintelligible, I propose that incoherence is a fraught cinematic standpoint for rewriting the corrosiveness of white masculinity. White masculinity is maintained by laying claim to both hegemony and victimization, a delicate performance that would appear difficult to sustain where core contradictions are embodied in the same subject. While *Foxcatcher* does an admirable job of illustrating these contradictions, a cinematically incoherent and fragmented portrait of white manhood functions more as counterpart to the hard bodied action hero of Hollywood. This reading provides insights into the politics of Hollywood's *wounded man*: a melancholic subject who revels in victimhood to disavow responsibility for the corrosive effects of hegemonic masculinity. His ambivalent attachment to perceived trauma prevents him from overcoming feelings of loss, as it is the illusory demand to be made whole again that underwrites the case for masculinity's recovery. I conclude that the filmmaker's effort to parse the distinction between material and superficial wounds reifies the experience of "authentic" trauma as a legitimate expression of aggrieved white manhood. Thus, *Foxcatcher*'s fragmented portrayal of white male victimhood illustrates the elasticity of white victimhood even where the "crisis" of white masculinity appears open to revision.

Victimhood and masculine incoherence

Film scholars have observed patterns of masculine trauma, sacrifice, and regeneration in American cinema.⁵ Though repetitive, each film cycle takes on specific masculine anxieties that arise from the cultural context: from the redemptive violence of 1980s Hollywood's virile action hero⁶ to the 2000s wounded man whose emotional injuries serve as the grounds for remasculinization.⁷ Cinemas of masculinity are characterized by what Freud calls the compulsion to repeat, a pattern whereby films continually reiterate and revisit without mourning traumatic events.⁸ Central to Hollywood's melancholic man is their experience of perceived loss in status and entitlement with which he cannot cope. *The Wrestler* (2008) and *Crazy Heart* (2009) are two recent elaborations of this emerging motif.⁹ In both films, former celebrity performers tragically cling to the ruggedly virile masculinity of their youth as their health and careers wane. Respectively, Mickey Rourke and Jeff Bridges portray once-revered men who, as they age, ultimately prove to be socially disposable. Their forfeiture of status corresponds with the decline of their physical and emotional well-being and a deep-seated alienation that drives their self-destructive impulses.

These wounded white men have outlived their social utility and are, therefore, aggrieved without recourse. Estranged from their families, broke, suffering from addiction, and unable to sustain healthy relationships, these melancholic men are exemplars of the men's rights movement's dark portrait of the state of American masculinity. Contemporary men's rights activists posit that white men have been victimized by having to perform most of society's life-threatening labor, citing gender disparities in suicide, health problems, and opioid addiction.¹⁰ Moreover, they argue that white men have been emasculated by the family court system, affirmative action programs, man-hating feminists, gold-digging ex-wives, political correctness, job-taking immigrants, and queer visibility.¹¹ The wounded white male of Hollywood marks a repetition with difference in how the so-called crisis of masculinity is mediated: from compensatory displays of male power to narratives of marginalization. What remains constant, however, is the need for regeneration through revisiting traumatic events.

As Johnson observes, popular articulations of wounded white masculinity reflect the rise of a reactionary politics of white male resentment that appropriates victimhood even as it celebrates white male primacy.¹² In examining the Trump presidential candidacy, Johnson illustrates how white masculinity has been rearticulated in terms of vulnerability without structural precarity.¹³ While the socioeconomic status of white men remains comparatively undisturbed, white male victimhood asserts that relative gains by women, people of color, immigrants, and the GBLTQ movement threaten white men's social status.¹⁴ Aggrieved by feminism, multiculturalism, and demands for structural equality, the reactionary posture of white male victimhood brackets the historical context of male dominance in an effort to position men as casualties of identity politics.¹⁵ Although the victimhood claims of "objectively well off" white men lack veracity, Johnson argues that detractors of Trump-era masculinity often overlook that incoherence is precisely the point.¹⁶ By rendering masculinity unintelligible—even abject—a general sense of vulnerability that accompanies social change is reinterpreted as deliberate marginalization.¹⁷

Although the rhetoric of the Trump administration has forged a powerful script for the politics of white male victimhood, the masculinity crisis motif has been continually reinvented since the 1960s to warrant a return to the past.¹⁸ Sally Robinson observed that following decade's social upheaval, "white men in post-sixties American culture produced images of a physically wounded and emotionally traumatized white masculinity."¹⁹ Invoking victimhood seems counterintuitive if it is the case that hegemonic masculinity is defined by attributes such as physical strength, virility, self-reliance, and self-confidence.²⁰ Yet, victimhood is a powerful trope in American culture that elevates the moral status of the subject who suffers. John Mowitt's notion of "trauma envy" and Wendy Brown's theorization of "wounded attachments" illustrate how a preoccupation with victimization can forge political communities solely on the basis of shared trauma.²¹ Thus, Bryan McCann underscores the importance of distinguishing between therapeutic and material victimhood, the former an appropriation of victim status as a means of acquiring credibility and the latter a tangible experience with structural oppression.²² Masculine victimization is more characteristic of the former, and thus serves as a "convenient strategy by which publics can deflect blame and insist upon their own moral purity by being a victim or sympathizing with one."²³ Masculine victimhood encourages white men to speak about common

human vulnerability as if it were structural oppression. Hence, narratives of white masculine victimhood conflate material and therapeutic victimhood to destabilize the social conventions by which rights claims are adjudicated. Suffering of any kind, regardless of context, underwrites white men's efforts to lay claim to the status of victim.

The essay suggests that portraying white masculinity in terms of loss and victimhood belies that masculinity has never been whole. Susannah Radstone argues that nostalgic melancholy is a strategic maneuver that both defends against feelings of loss and evades the threat of feminism by refusing to move forward.²⁴ "Loss" constructs a fantasy that male subjectivity was both at one point complete and can be recovered by revisiting traumatic experiences. Here, Freud's distinction between melancholia and mourning explains how white men are encouraged to read the presence of difference and uncertainty through the lens of trauma.²⁵ Freud distinguishes mourning and melancholia as different responses to loss, or the perception of loss. While mourning is the process by which the conscious mind grieves a traumatic injury, melancholia entails an inability to fully register the loss of an object. Melancholia is a perverse form of nostalgia in which the narcissistic ego disavows a traumatic wound by psychically internalizing the existence of a lost object. Judith Butler argues that melancholia characterizes "those identifications which are formed from unfinished grief [and] are the modes in which the lost object is incorporated and phantasmatically preserved in and as the ego."²⁶ If the lost object cannot exist in the external world, it is made to exist within the psyche "to disavow that loss, to keep it at bay, to stay or postpone the recognition and suffering of loss."²⁷ For white masculinity, melancholia explains the fixation with remaking the present in the image of a time before men were supposedly wounded. As this lost object can no longer exist, it must be internalized, and so, object loss is experienced as ego loss. At the same time, melancholy is also accompanied by feelings of ambivalence concerning the lost object. The subject cannot overcome or move past their grief because they are conflicted—if not guilty—for perhaps desiring loss even if they felt attachment toward the lost object. Either way, the notion of wholeness is a mirage or a feigned form of subjectivity that can never be recovered because it is ultimately a fantasy. While white masculinity is strategically framed in terms of loss, it is more fitting to conceptualize it as a *lack*: an illusory sense that the male self, or subjectivity for that matter, was ever whole. The ambivalence that accompanies melancholy, in part, explains masculinity's incoherence: men seek to overcome their traumatic feelings of loss, and yet it is loss they require to make the case for masculinity's recovery.

White male victimhood is, then, a call to heal the subject who is largely unscathed by cultural trauma. As Claire Sisco King argues, the white male body in pain is the "exemplar of the citizen-subject" of contemporary cinema, a traumatic subject putatively made coherent through the logics of sacrifice.²⁸ Drawing strength from a position of marginality, white masculinity works surreptitiously to disavow critiques of its hegemonic status while constituting the grounds for a nostalgic return to an imagined past that existed prior to a traumatic loss. Indeed, the proliferation of representations of wounded white men illustrates that the present iteration of hegemonic masculinity is flexible, amalgamated, and diffuse, providing an alibi for its restoration.²⁹ King argues that wounded male cinema posits a "before" and "after" relationship in response to a perceived injury, reinscribing "a fiction

of subjectivity as a thing itself, discounting (if not disavowing) the extent to which subjectivity is a fraught, incomplete, and contingent *process of becoming*.³⁰ Thus, injury serves as the grounds for a fantasy of mastery, crafting a timeline in which an unfragmented male subject can be recovered. The recuperative logics of male trauma discourse are often allegories for national trauma, where the martyrdom of the suffering male subject operates as a kind of heroic salve that makes the nation whole again. The parallels between social and cinematic trauma discourse suggest that contemporary masculinity demands reinstatement as compensation for superficial injuries. Although men do suffer, the wounded man's demand to be made whole belies all evidence of his continued primacy.³¹ Thus, the politics of masculine recuperation is a redundant and defensive posture that sustains a fantasy of persecution.

This essay adds that total commitment to either marginality or primacy renders masculinity less tactically adaptable and all-encompassing. Less able to be pinned down, victimhood is a performance that folds suffering, persecution, and melancholy into the social fabric of white hegemonic masculinity. It allows white masculinity to lay claim to whatever form of subjectivity is contextually advantageous. As such, King argues, the hegemonic white masculinity is characterized by a kind of *noble* suffering or empowered marginality. This ambivalent performance of masculinity passes as both natural and immutable, in part, because white men are strategically positioned as an invisible center by which all Others are marked as different.³² Yet, masculinity is constructed through a series of delicate performances, particularly where the conflict between primacy and marginality is concerned.³³ White masculinity must have it both ways by remaining diffuse, evasive, and nimble to lay claim to multiple and contradictory subject positions at once.

The following analysis argues that *Foxcatcher* corroborates the delicate performance of incoherence by remaining ambivalent about white masculine victimhood. In one sense, the film un masks the petty injuries of privileged yet ineffectual men. In another sense, the film's indictment of white masculine victimhood also suggests that central character's specious claims to victimhood are made more suspect in relation to a verifiably authentic material experience of white victimhood. Situated as the foil to John and Mark, David represents what appears to be the genuine plight of the working-class white man. In disavowing John and Mark's glib performance of noble suffering, the audience is offered a cathartic experience of traumatic victimhood through David's death. With no delusions of grandeur, David is the film's voice of reason, intelligence, responsibility, and skepticism. Invested in the spirit of the American Dream, he approaches sports as a meritocracy where honest hard work is rewarded with success. That he is both admired and reviled by John and Mark legitimizes the claim that working-class men are real victims. Ostensibly, David is the tragic portrait of white manhood routinely referenced in men's rights literature. He also becomes the measure of difference between therapeutic and material victimhood. As a result, his death recovers white masculine victimhood from the remainder of the film's indictment. This analysis demonstrates two significant claims about contemporary representations of hegemonic white masculinity. First, empowered marginality is a position that allows white men to erase historical violence and, in turn, crudely mimic the identity politics of marginalized groups. Second, the wounded man of popular cinema masculinizes victimhood. To this end, *Foxcatcher* illustrates how the unintelligibility of contemporary

white masculinity evades indictment and, further, how melancholia nurtures a traumatic attachment to victimhood.

The incoherence of white male victimhood

This analysis draws from Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner's theory of cinematic transcoding to draw parallels between cinematic and social discourses of wounded manhood.³⁴ Transcoding explains how it is that sociopolitical struggles become encoded into cinema, rendering film the site of a "cultural proxy war" over what social world will be given presence on screen.³⁵ This process of transcoding from one discursive field to another reflects an inevitable and subtle migration of anxieties, struggles, and preoccupations of a culture that shuttles between public and popular texts. Hence, this analysis connects dialogue, character relations, narrative, representation, and other compositional elements of cinema to read the residue of social contexts that are encoded into the film. Read in the context of white male victimhood, the film refracts both the central contradictions in contemporary white masculinity and the cultural melancholia that precludes white men from moving forward. Thus, this analysis explicates how the wounded man makes space for victimhood even as it illustrates its incoherence.

Melancholy

The film begins by contrasting the dark banality of Mark's meager existence after winning Olympic gold with the bright opulence of John's fulfillment of the American Dream. Mark's loneliness is punctuated by the use of both low and harsh lighting, where John is introduced to the audience on a sunny day in an immaculate, brightly lit mansion. In their first meeting, the change in key signifies the dialectic between the dark circumstances of Mark's life and illuminated promises of John's. While their life circumstances are quite different, the film suggests that their connection is one of shared trauma, wherein both assert entitlement to the kind of status promised to white men in American culture. Mark's injuries stem from being denied a hero's welcome upon return from international competition. He extols the virtues of American exceptionalism, yet finds himself barely subsisting in his older brother's shadow. The audience is introduced to Mark through a series of short scenes that chronicle the ennui of his daily existence. He begins his day practicing alone in an aging gymnasium. Next, he speaks to a group of nonplussed elementary students about "the virtues it requires" to attain Olympic gold. He navigates the remainder of his lonely day in a visible malaise: standing in line for fast food, eating alone in his car, and eating ramen noodles alone in his austere apartment while staring at a painting of George Washington crossing the Delaware. The virtues of American heroism encapsulated in Mark's print of Washington's valor in the Revolutionary War gestures at the gap between his life circumstances and the life to which he feels entitled.

Like other wounded men, Mark has worked hard to achieve greatness, yet his talents remain unrecognized. Thus, he externalizes his blame, focusing particular animus toward David. Relatively inarticulate, Mark expresses his frustration by lashing out at David when the two spar in practice. At the conclusion to his day of solitude, Mark appears dismayed

when he finds David at the gym talking with men about another potential coaching position. The two then engage in a tense practice in which David continually outmaneuvers and dominates Mark. In response, Mark slams his head into David's nose. When David pins Mark, a close-up shot shows Mark's face flush with tears. This introductory portrait of Mark attends to the tension between agency and victimhood that leads men to lash out, externalize blame, and seek out recuperative strategies in response to perceived injuries. Mark believes he is entitled to greater accolades and that his attachment to David ultimately stands in the way.

John's injuries appear more trivial than Mark's but nonetheless connect the two as aggrieved subjects. Initially, his motivation for contacting Mark seems auspicious: to recruit the best US wrestlers to compete against the Soviets. After flying Mark to his family estate, John notes that his designs are more national in scope, explaining that "we as a nation have failed to honor you and that's a problem. Not just for you but for our society. When we fail to honor that what should be honored it's a problem." Later, John tours Mark through his state-of-the-art training facility, followed by an excursion to the Revolutionary War memorial at Valley Forge. As the audience is already aware, Mark seems predisposed to the patriotic symbols of America's founding. John explains to Mark, "Three thousand men died here. These patriots were willing to give up everything, including their lives, for freedom. I like to come here to remind myself what really matters. We're going to do great things Mark." Mark listens silently and nods. Naked appeals to patriotism aside, John ultimately cloaks his own intimate wounds in those of the nation. And while both are pleased to share each other's affinity for national heritage, the two ultimately bond over their mutual desire for personal recognition. Mark tells John that he "want[s] to be the best in the world," to which John replies "Good, I am proud of you."

John, however, is entirely unclear as to what he means when he speaks of the nation's lack of honor, why that is a problem for society, and how the nation will be redeemed through sport. Reading this exchange through the lens of masculine victimhood helps illustrate the racial and gendered entailments of his call for national redemption. As Michael Butterworth observes, professional sports often advance ideologies of militarism, nationalism, and hypermasculinity.³⁶ As a conduit to national redemption, then, John's professed love of wrestling sutures national identity to the physical subjugation of a foreign opponent. Wrestling, then, is a sport well suited to John's interest in both male prowess and noble suffering. As Roland Barthes notes, wrestling is "a spectacle of excess" that delivers an "exhibition of suffering" amplified as performers adopt "tragic masks."³⁷ Wrestling enacts a melodrama not only of subjugation but of spectacular emotion in both victory and defeat. Wrestling dramatizes the tension between primacy and victimhood and, more importantly, folds personal triumph and suffering into broader national transcripts. John's allusions to honor, heritage, and sacrifice suggest a vision of American resurgence underwritten by noble victimhood. This vision translates their personal ambitions into terms of national trauma, thinly veiling their own feelings of emasculation. These powerful white men seek reaffirmation of their status despite their apparent advantages. As such, the film presents their initial collaboration as a rebuke of the perceived relegation of white men's heritage.

While the film makes no explicit overtures to race, John and Mark's investment in American exceptionalism evinces an investment in the property of whiteness.³⁸ Which America does John wish to make "soar again?" One clue is divulged in the archival footage that precedes the film's opening credits. Vintage black-and-white home movies of the du Pont family present a past in which wealthy aristocrats enjoyed bourgeois rituals such as fox-hunting. The film's only portrait of America's past is of a white wealthy leisure class whose lifestyles were made possible by the sacrifices of the working class. Later in the film, when Mark arrives at Foxcatcher Farms, he receives a VHS documentary about the du Pont family that features similar footage and photographs to chronicle how the family amassed a fortune in munitions and chemicals (i.e., militarism and industrialism). John's nostalgia is for a time when white America consolidated its economic power on the backs of the poor and people of color. John wishes to continue the legacy of American exceptionalism by taking on foreign enemies in a spectacle of suffering and subjugation. John seeks to preserve a white image of American prosperity beleaguered by the rise of foreign competitors.

While Mark's injuries are exemplified through the drudgery of his daily routine, the film conveys John's wounds through his tenuous relationship with his mother. John is as much beleaguered by threats to his whiteness as he is by the prospect of feminization. To this end, John directs his hostility toward feminine symbols and uses the sporting male body as a surrogate to recuperate his own sense of manhood. Though rarely seen, Jean du Pont (Vanessa Redgrave) asserts a controlling presence throughout Foxcatcher Farms. The name references the annual equine foxhunts held at the du Pont estate—a sport that remains a source of pride for Jean. When Mark moves to Foxcatcher Farms to live in the "chalet," he is explicitly told that both the main house and Jean's horses are off limits, and more importantly, interaction with Jean is strictly prohibited. Traces of Jean's presence haunt Foxcatcher Farms—from portraits of her throughout the main house to her accolades that populate the trophy room.

John's choice of wrestling, along with his scorn for equine sports, signifies a simmering disdain for both his mother and femininity writ large. In short, Jean stands in for a disciplining femininity by which John feels victimized. And much like the film's incoherent version of masculinity, its portrait of femininity is also conflicted between an image of Jean as both domineering and weak. Jean's appreciation for fox hunting aligns her identity with feminized concepts of elegance, refinement, and grace; thus, it is fitting that John would embrace a hypermasculine sport premised on violent controlled aggression. Simultaneously, Jean represents narcissistic motherhood that nurtures dependence yet withholds affection. In response, John engages in open yet ineffectual rebellion against the feminine. For instance, celebrating Mark's victory at the World Championship, John has his wrestling team clear his mother's trophies from the central display case to make way for Mark's gold medal. In a mocking tone, John proclaims

horses are stupid. Horses eat and shit. That's all they do. It's all very silly. I love my mother very much but she . . . it's ridiculous. I wanted to do what you're doing. I do not share my mother's affection for horse flesh . . . Did the horse jump over the thing? Did you catch the fox, mother?

Holding up the medal, he declares “the proof is in the pudding. We caught the fox didn’t we. This is the fox.” Despite his ambivalent feelings toward Jean, John finds what she stands for to be frivolous, feminine, and by extension, inauthentic. By contrast, John later tells his mother that he is “leading men . . . giving them a dream and . . . giving America hope.” Jean rebuffs John’s attempts to prove his worth when she retorts: “I don’t care for wrestling. It’s a low sport and I don’t like to see you being low.” Here, Jean serves as the film’s castrating mother, neutering John’s attempts to forge a paternal identity. His references to the fate of the nation suggest that collective feminization is also the rationale for recovering the country’s embattled manhood. For John, “hope” is positioned in opposition to the feminine, a form of compensation for the nation’s collective emasculation at the hands of domineering women.

Oedipal trouble

Mark and John are troubled by ambivalent desires for their parental figures. John has been symbolically castrated by a narcissistic mother who continually thwarts his efforts to realize his identification with a socially acceptable version of masculinity. As a consequence of failed disidentification, John remains dependent on his mother for financial resources and companionship in the absence of paternal envy. According to Freud, in the absence of paternal law, the male child can become subject to excessive maternal investments that thwart the development of the superego.³⁹ John’s failure to submit to paternal law, in combination with his narcissistic mother’s lack of empathy, explains his outward expressions of entitlement when others do not conform to his wishes.⁴⁰ Furthermore, this sense of entitlement can also be accompanied by feelings of traumatic victimhood, in which the child “demand[s] reparation for early wounds to our narcissism, our self-love.”⁴¹ This reading of the film’s Oedipal relations suggests that the cinematic crisis of masculinity is a response to what Joshua Gunn and Thomas Frenz call the “cultural decline of the father figure.”⁴² This suggests a closer alignment with men’s rights discourse than at first glance. That is to say that film implies that white men’s sense of victimhood is derived from the decline of the nuclear family, an inability to disidentify with the narcissistic mother and submit to the law of the father.

These Oedipal dynamics unfold as John attempts to adopt a fatherly relationship with Mark. As they develop a stronger relationship, John recounts how as a child Jean paid other children to befriend him, and how he remained socially isolated until his friendship with Mark. Now in his fifties, John is unmarried, socially inept, and lives with his mother despite their ambivalent relationship. The film never addresses the subject of his father, leaving Jean’s narcissism as the primary explanation for John’s stunted emotional development. Though Jean is dismissive of his desire for approval and authority, John performs as if he were the man of the house, proclaiming himself to be a “leader of men.” For both Jean and the audience, John’s belabored efforts to act as the du Pont family patriarch seem fraudulent. His project of national heritage restoration represents rebellion against a castrating mother as well as a failed effort to reconstitute a metaphoric or cultural father. John’s embrace of wrestling, then, represents a desire to reenact a scene of paternal submission that he himself perhaps never experienced—and that he believes similarly plagues an emasculated nation.

The Oedipal dynamics of John's woundedness are amplified by his obsession with firearms and phallic military weapons. Immediately after mocking his mother's affinity for "horse flesh," the following scene depicts John at target practice with local members of law enforcement. He proceeds to brandish his firearm in the practice gym, discharging the weapon into the ceiling as a seemingly playful reminder that his team needs to accelerate their preparations. While the wrestlers display their physical prowess, John feels compelled to prove that he sizes up. Later, John purchases a tank, with the intention of mounting a 50-caliber machine gun on the top. He becomes petulant when he finds that the tank was not delivered with his specifications. John's preoccupation with weapons represents a latent desire for what he deems to be an appropriate expression of masculinity. His desire to purchase a military weapon of such magnitude represents an exaggerated form of masculine compensation. Moreover, John seems to psychologically regress in response to the weapon, reacting at first with childlike exhilaration followed by a tantrum after not getting his way. John's compensatory obsession with big guns makes him the counterpart to the hard body action heroes of 1980s cinema. And while John desires to be hard bodied, his weapons and wrestlers serves as symbols of phallic virility designed to mask his own inadequacies. Following the death of his mother, John ultimately acts on his paramilitary fantasies and disavows his castration when he murders David, the film's father figure. Although John is clearly overcompensating, his lesser version of white manhood can be judged only against the more authentic and redeemable form of masculinity embodied by David. John's superficial wounds are an affront to "real" white male victimhood.

Mark, too, shares John's preoccupation with emasculation; however, he suffers from a distinct form of father trouble. Having been abandoned by his parents, Mark was raised by his older brother, David. Whereas John seeks but fails to attain his mother's affection, Mark maintains a dependent yet adversarial relationship with his father figure. The film depicts David as more articulate, intelligent, and emotionally mature than Mark. He is married with two children and has worked to parlay his Olympic success into a sustainable career as a coach. Initially, David declines to join Team Foxcatcher on account of his obligations to his wife and children. Mark, by contrast, behaves more like an adolescent: prone to fits, pouting, and self-destructive behavior. And like John, Mark is unmarried, friendless, and socially awkward. Mark vacillates between affection and disdain for David. The film conveys the paternal struggle between David and Mark through both physical intimacy and violence. For instance, when Mark lashes out against David for his unwillingness to train with John, David patiently listens and tells Mark, "I'm proud of you." David, then, pulls Mark close to him, nestling his head between his chest and arm. With David gently caressing Mark's head, their long embrace resembles that of father and child. This patterned relationship is reinforced after Mark suffers a humiliating defeat at the Olympic trials. Mark retreats to his hotel room where he proceeds to repeatedly punch himself, tear the room apart, and gorge on room service. Following his display of pity and self-abuse, David finds him sulking in the fetal position. David repeatedly slaps him as punishment, and again, pulls him close to cradle him in his lap like a child. After the two reconcile, David helps Mark to purge the excess weight and qualify for the Olympics. Reluctantly acquiescing to David's paternal authority, Mark is infantile and subordinate in David's

presence. Mark is envious, even resentful, of David but remains unable to deny his authority. Hence, Mark personifies *ressentiment*, or suppressed feelings of envy and frustration that stem from perceived injuries, powerlessness, and an inability to articulate feelings of alienation.⁴³ Mark is neither able to craft a distinct identity from David nor overthrow his paternal authority.

John capitalizes on Mark's vulnerability with an implicit offer to undermine David's paternal authority and assume the role of benevolent father. In the process, John attempts to ameliorate the pain of his own sense of abandonment. After his victory at World's, John tells Mark that

you are more than David Schultz's little brother, Mark . . . he will always be your older brother, he will never let you be everything you can be. Mark you have been living in your brother's shadow your entire life . . . It's your time now.

Mark agrees, "cause everything that I've done, I feel like has somehow been credited to Dave. And, you know, I feel that it's time for me to distance myself from him. You know, become my own person." By reframing David as a barrier to Mark's success, John gives form to Mark's inchoate feelings of emasculation. In John's narrative, Mark's failures are the byproduct of an unpatriotic society and a jealous father. Indeed, this is also the broader cultural narrative that absolves white men of their systemic violence while blaming the authority of an overbearing state for their systematic emasculation. Both narratives address an audience unwilling to share visibility and success with others. Both praise their subject's exceptional qualities while redirecting blame toward a scapegoat.

On account of his frustration and naiveté, Mark is remarkably susceptible to manipulation. With his mediocre life circumstances sketched at the outset, it is easy for the audience to infer that Mark might be predisposed to a metanarrative in which he is predestined for greatness and that his accomplishments might contribute to American nationalism. Moreover, he would be amenable to the suggestion that he was not responsible for his life circumstances. As such, Mark represents a class of aggrieved men who believe that they are entitled to a larger share of society's opportunities. For men like Mark and John, the nation appears to have strayed from the core values of hard work, meritocracy, and patriotism. For example, Mark tells David,

the country has lost its morals and values and the kids are lost and they don't have any role models or heroes . . . I couldn't believe he [John] was saying all the stuff that is in my head all the time.

Mark's quest to recover "morals and values" expresses nostalgia for an indeterminate time in the past when society adhered to the virtues of hierarchy, strength, and individualism. John provides Mark with a language to name the sources of his alienation and channels his desire for supremacy into concrete action.

Humble and secure in his position, David seems wise to John's efforts to take advantage of Mark. Hence, David asks the obvious question, "What's he get out of all this?" Mark, however, is unable to articulate John's stake in wrestling. He emphatically responds:

"America. Winning." Like other aggrieved men, Mark is unflinchingly receptive to flattering praise that promises to return heroic men to the status to which they believe they are entitled. By contrast, David appeals to a critical audience that is skeptical of John's transparent self-interest. Mark has been enlisted to celebrate the values of the same bourgeois class that exploits his talents in their name. He resembles the horses of Foxcatcher Farms: powerful and venerable creatures that are cared for and trained to entertain their narcissistic masters. But the film's sympathies lie less with Mark than with David. Compared to John and Mark, David is an "authentic" victim of working-class exploitation. He is akin to the Trump Administration's populist figuration of the "forgotten man," a responsible, hard-working middle class man who he has been cheated out of the American Dream.⁴⁴ Thus, even as the film disabuses audiences of Trump-era victimhood, it posits the existence of an authentic casualty of the failed American Dream. This subject is doubly victimized by both the system and those masquerading with superficial wounds. The film courts antipathy toward the cultural decline of the father as embodied by both John and Mark's paternal inadequacy and the tragic death of David.

Keeping up appearances

Foxcatcher constructs white male victimhood as a choreographed performance of noble suffering that seeks to recover a lost object. The film also suggests that, at best, debunking of white masculinity is met with recalcitrance. At worst, peering behind the façade of white male victimhood can have fatal consequences. The film presents John as a failed father figure who must contrive a paternal identity to compensate for his castrating mother. Yet, as the film concludes, these appearances seem to hold together a fragile consensus between screen masculinity and a clairvoyant audience. Put differently, those who see through the contrived performance of victimhood are eliminated or silenced when white men lash out.⁴⁵ Hence, the film implies that such an endeavor risks provoking a more dangerous form of white masculinity.

In summoning Mark to Foxcatcher Farms, John illustrates his need for an audience of hard-bodied men to nurture his precarious ego. For instance, John coaches Mark to corroborate his fatherly ethos as he shows him off to his acquaintances. At a charity dinner, John seeks to impress his fellow philanthropists by introducing Mark as *his* Olympic gold medalist. He presents Mark with a prewritten speech to give to the same group, in which he explains, "I was looking for a father and I found one in the Golden Eagle of America [John]." For John's acquaintances, the speech appears to be a genuine expression of admiration for John as a mentor. For the clairvoyant audience, however, the speech is a contrivance designed to confer legitimacy on John as a father figure. John's façade grows more nefarious as he faces significant challenges to his manhood. Later in the film, Mark teaches John how to wrestle so that he can prepare for competition in the over-50 division of a national tournament. John summons Mark to a late night practice in the picture gallery of the main house. Mark allows John to pin him with his stomach to the floor, while John engages in a series of inartistic and fledgling moves that reflect his inexperience. With low key-lighting, high contrast shadows, and intimate close-ups, their practice is shot like a sex scene with the portraits on the wall serving as voyeurs. John is permitted to enact a fantasy of dominance for an audience of painted patriarchs. Mark's look of bemused frustration suggests

that he is humoring John. Later, while John celebrates his victory at the tournament, the camera cuts to John's assistant delivering an envelope of cash to his opponent, presumably to fix the match. While it is unclear if John realizes the extent of others' obsequiousness, it is clear that John relies on contrived performances to sustain his ego. Through the development of their "friendship," Mark is willing to corroborate the performance by constantly praising John and attending to his whims.

John's reliance on Mark as a surrogate for his own masculinity ultimately unravels their relationship. Moreover, as their relationship strains it becomes increasingly difficult for John to maintain the charade that he is a self-assured leader of men. As a result, John grows increasingly volatile and erratic. The moment that Mark begins to assert his independence, John slaps him and calls him an "ungrateful ape." In losing control of Mark, John decides to pay the high price of hiring David and supporting his family on Foxcatcher Farm. At first, Mark blames David for the situation and complains that he wanted to succeed on his own. After the relationship between Mark and John grows acrimonious, it is David who helps Mark negotiate adequate compensation in his exit from Team Foxcatcher. John's only stipulation is that he remain in Mark's corner during the Olympics. That the two can be so estranged—John so incompetent as a coach, and even more despised as a mentor, yet brazenly seeking to claim credit for Mark's accomplishments—bespeaks his investment in deceiving others.

Perhaps nothing speaks more directly to the dynamics of masculine contrivance than John's attempt to produce a documentary film about Team Foxcatcher. John employs a camera crew and director to edit together a series of staged events that portray John as a leader, mentor, and father figure. The film is designed to bolster his precarious identity and, above all, impress his unempathetic mother. Prompted by his mother's impromptu visit to the gymnasium, John hurriedly pretends to take charge of the practice by giving the wrestlers novice tutorials on remedial maneuvers. He also gives a bizarre speech in which he tells the wrestlers, "as a coach I want you to be champions in sport and winners in life. And also to be good citizens for America." With his attention divided between the cameras and his mother, the audience can infer that John is belaboring his identity as "coach" to no avail. Whenever the cameras are present, John asserts himself into the practice with meaningless advice. But for John, the documentary would be incomplete without testimonials from Team Foxcatcher. In one of the film's more uncomfortable scenes, the documentary director encourages David to praise John. He urges David to use words such as "excellence," "intensity," and "domination," words that he believes speak to John's interest. Skeptical, David laughs and expresses confusion as to the goal of the interview. Perplexed, David asks the director: "say what exactly?" The director replies, "he's your mentor." David feigns sincerity for the camera and declares, "John du Pont is a mentor to me." Nothing about their relationship, however, would suggest that David viewed John in that manner. His insincerity points to how Team Foxcatcher is designed to fashion for John a masculine self-image. The team members are paid dupes instructed to never step out of character and act as if the camera is not present. The cinematic audience, however, witnesses the painstaking efforts required to maintain fidelity to John's unattainable self-image. This film-within-a-film illustrates how screen masculinity requires an audience of collaborators to attest to the naturalness of masculine performances.

John's failure to fashion a masculine self-image ultimately leads him to lash out against those who see through the façade. Near the film's climax, John sits alone in the trophy room watching his self-produced documentary. The audience is given a sense of how many of the previously unintelligible scenes could be woven into a seemingly coherent narrative. Continuity editing helps string together a series of staged events into an authentic representation of the past. In the documentary, John describes himself as a "brother, mentor, a father, and a leader." Selected clips seem to praise John as such. Hence, the documentary tells a triumphalist narrative in which John is a father figure for the nation. This version of John markedly diverges from the inept victim portrayed throughout the film itself. In the gap between these two portraits looms the specter of violence. It is at the moment where the gap between reality and perception are their starkest that John decides to drive to David's house and shoot him in front his family. David, more than any other character, is the most skeptical of John's efforts to brand himself a leader. And while he never threatened as much, David is in a position to expose those aspects of John's self-fashioned masculine persona that are fraudulent. Thus, David's murder represents the dangerous entailments of exposing white male victimhood. That is, maintaining the façade of hegemonic masculinity demands that the men go to extraordinary lengths to become whole in response to a perceived injury. If one is entitled yet powerless, then envy and hatred can manifest in violence and self-abasement. John's actions remind the audience not merely of the fissures in hegemonic masculinity but of the logical limits of critique. If one is entitled, and they believe that they have been robbed of their culture, identity, and country, then violent retribution seems to be a legitimate response to demands for equality. John represents the dark side of the men's rights movement, those undercurrents that lay blame for men's suffering on identity politics.

The travails of the wounded man

This essay has argued that the wounded white man of contemporary cinema presents a strategically incoherent version of manhood. The wounded man demands to be made whole again despite both the theoretical impossibility of such a demand and the fact that all of his apparent privileges belie his claims to victimization. The contradiction between victimhood and primacy invites us to unmask a discourse that seems so utterly incoherent that it barely escapes casual scrutiny. Yet, incoherence and ambivalence are strategically vital to the construction of white masculine victimhood. Incoherence enables white men to disavow that masculinity still underwrites all social, economic, and political arrangements. If white masculinity appears fragmented, it is so that white men may feign injuries to evade responsibility for the social consequences of male primacy. Incoherence also enables white men to view themselves as traumatic subjects seeking to restore the world to a time when they were putatively whole. Such melancholia exploits white men's ambivalent relationship with trauma; namely, that men seek to overcome their perceived experience of loss, yet loss remains a continued necessity if men are to make recursive demand to be made whole again. *Foxcatcher* exemplifies how masculinity must constantly proclaim its own marginality if it is to be "recovered." Hence, masculinity is characterized more by lack than

by loss—a feeling of marginality characterized by what it has never and can never achieve: the fantasy of wholeness.

Culturally, the wounded man of cinema authorizes men to identify as a community of aggrieved subjects. The wounded man trope resonates with a growing class of white men who identify with the “alt right” and the men’s rights movement, both of which express melancholy and harbor fantasies of persecution.⁴⁶ President Trump’s call to “make America great again,” along with John du Pont’s summon to “make this country soar again,” hails a melancholic male subject who seeks compensation for their perceived injuries in a fantasy of return. It is imperative to ask: when was “again”? Presumably, as Lauren Berlant reminds us, such calls for national redemption dwells on the imagined time before feminism, the black freedom struggle, and queer activism fundamentally questioned heterosexual white men’s primacy.⁴⁷ The contradiction is that white men still retain much of the material advantage. The problem is that the abstract moment some white men wish to revive never existed. This is precisely the point. White men’s compulsion to return to the imagined scene of trauma keeps object loss alive as a perpetual justification for white men’s resurgence. Incoherence sustains a fantasy predicated on never actually addressing past trauma.

Working from concepts such as incoherence, ambivalence, and melancholy, this essay illustrates how the wounded white man temporarily stabilizes masculinity without moving forward. This is the case because incoherence and ambivalence enable men to lay claim to both strength and weakness; to be simultaneously martyrs and victims. Consider the incoherence of demanding that your history and experience be restored when both remain the *de facto* national identity. Or, that the indispensable rugged male subject can overcome any challenge except their own victimhood. If masculinity can never fully be recovered, appeals to traumatic loss perpetually sustain the fraught search of wholeness. As men with superficial wounds, John and Mark serve merely as foils to America’s “real” victim: the forgotten working-class male embodied by David. Thus, the film is less a critique of victimhood than a recalibration of what counts as true white male suffering. The film conveys its own sense of melancholy where it sympathetically portrays the loss and exploitation of the “forgotten man.”

Finally, the film belies its own efforts to expose white masculinity by positioning the knowing audience in a precarious position. At the film’s conclusion, white masculinity reconstitutes itself as more dangerous and recalcitrant. After being exposed, Mark and John lash out or silence those who would question their identities. The audience is positioned much like the character of David, skeptical of John’s rouse and Mark’s misguidance. Unfortunately, those who witness moments when white masculinity misfires are the likely victims when the wounded man lashes out. The film’s imagined audience is invited to assume the extraordinary risk and futility of unmasking. With so much at stake, clairvoyance becomes a fraught subject position for the audience to adopt. The film’s *dénouement* is illustrative of this point. Mark returns to competition in the brutal sport of mixed martial arts—an arguably more violent expression of hegemonic masculinity. An announcer summons Mark to the ring, where the previous competitors exit bruised and bloodied. The crowd jeers, hisses, and shouts demands for a gladiatorial spectacle of violence. With his shaved head and brooding appearance, Mark appears nowhere closer to his dream of

providing a role model for America's youth. Instead, Mark marches into battle to sacrifice his body for the edification of a bloodthirsty crowd. The America he wished to venerate cheers for violence and bloodshed, not those democratic values he pondered at Valley Forge. John and Mark's fate bespeaks the self-destructive impulses of resentment, where rage and envy meet powerlessness. In the final cut, white masculinity is portrayed as more sinister and violent after its claims to victimhood have been debunked. Thus, *Foxcatcher* approaches white masculinity with a tone of fear and even potential victimization for those who dare to speak out. But if victimhood has become masculinized, then accusations of fraudulence and unintelligibility only prove that trauma is the mark of real manhood.

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Notes

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27. Butler, "Melancholy," 23.
28. See King, *Washed in Blood*.
29. King, "It Cuts Both Ways."
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31. See Michelle Rodino-Colocino, "The Great He-Cession: Why Feminists Should Rally for the End of White Supremacist Capitalist Patriarchy," *Feminist Media Studies* 14, no. 2 (2014): 343–47.
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