

**Brutal Bodies:
Exploring Transgression through the
Fiction of Chuck Palahniuk, Poppy Z.
Brite, and Bret Easton Ellis**

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April 2016

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Abstract

This thesis explores how American transgressive fiction of the 1990s represents and interrogates transgressive processes in its extra-textual context. It shows in what ways transgressive fiction visualizes how transgression functions, not simply as a counter-cultural phenomenon, but more as a central social mechanism. The thesis makes four contributions. First, it critically assesses existing definitions of transgression as counter-cultural, instead conceptualizing transgression as a mechanism which (re)develops central social ideologies. The project traces how the transgression of ideological boundaries forms a cyclical process which (re)produces ideological frameworks. Second, the thesis uses this re-definition to explore 1990s transgressive fiction in its social context. The study investigates how the late 1980s, characterized by phenomena such as neoliberal politics and the HIV/AIDS epidemic, inspired transgressive fiction produced during the 1990s. Thirdly, the thesis constructs an interdisciplinary methodological approach to dissect how the body came to play a crucial role in this context as a site through which transgression occurred. Drawing from biopolitical and queer theory, the study deepens the understanding of transgression as both a literary phenomenon and a socio-political process. Finally, the thesis compares the work of three transgressive authors whose work has not yet been analysed together in depth. It analyses the fiction of Bret Easton Ellis and Chuck Palahniuk in combination with that of Poppy Z. Brite, an author who has, in comparison, been neglected by academia. The analysis results in an increased understanding of the dynamics of transgression in 1990s American fiction and society, showing that transgression is a cyclical process which reproduces and subsequently dissolves ideological boundaries, a practice which results in a temporary crisis which ultimately enables the (re)development of ideologies. The thesis concludes that transgressive fiction of the period represents, exaggerates and interrogates transgression as a cyclical process which (re)configures ideologies in its extra-textual context.

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Acknowledgements

No thesis is written in isolation, and this one is no exception. First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisors, Dr Jonathan Mitchell and Dr Rebecca Tillett, for their generous feedback and relentless belief in this project. My gratitude extends to Dr Sarah Garland and Dr Wendy McMahon, who supervised my project during its first year. Additional thanks to Dr James Annesley and Prof Nick Selby for agreeing to examine this thesis.

I have been fortunate enough to be part of a large research community which extends far beyond the University of East Anglia. Naming everyone who has supplied me with useful feedback, criticism, or plain emotional support, would turn this section into a thesis of its own. I therefore resort to thanking all the excellent academics I have encountered over the past three and a half years, and hope that we will continue to learn from each other in the future.

A very early draft of chapter five was presented at the British Association for American Studies annual conference in April 2015. Even though only five people showed up to my session (including the other panel members), the engaging discussion that followed my presentation has supplied me with many useful ideas which have greatly benefitted the project as a whole.

Last but not least, I salute my family and friends for their love and support, and for believing in this project even when I did not. This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Karel Biermann, my late grandfather. His fascination for all things odd and unusual has been a constant source of inspiration. *Goede reis!*

Chapter 1. Dead in the Water? Reading Transgression as a Central Social Mechanism

In 2003 Chuck Palahniuk, best known for his novel *Fight Club* (1996), declared transgressive fiction dead. He made his bold statement during an interview at a conference devoted to his work at Edinboro University, Pennsylvania, where he also read his notorious short story "Guts".¹ "Guts", published as part of Palahniuk's novel *Haunted* (2005), contains many themes which run through Palahniuk's entire oeuvre: explicit descriptions of sexual acts, violated bodies, and queerness. Several members of the audience fainted during his performance, much to the delight of the author himself. "Transgressive fiction is sort of loosely defined as fiction in which characters misbehave and act badly," he declared in response, "Sort of commit crimes or pranks as a way of either feeling alive, or sort of as political acts of civil disobedience" (*Postcards*). He went on to place his own work in this tradition of literary "misbehaviour", explaining that transgressive fiction can serve some kind of political goal – as is the case in Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975)² – or describe people acting "badly" simply because they enjoy doing so. However, Palahniuk also criticized transgression as a problematic literary label, not in the least because the events of 9/11 had an enormous impact on how his fiction was perceived. Suddenly, he states in *Postcards*, his work or other examples of transgressive fiction were no longer received "with any sort of sense of humour or enlightened social blablabla." A similar type of comment is offered by Bret Easton Ellis in his novel *Lunar Park* (2005):

Exploring that kind of violence had been 'interesting' and 'exciting' and it was all 'metaphorical' anyway – at least to me at that moment in my life, when I was young and pissed off and had not yet grasped my own mortality, a time when physical pain and real suffering held no meaning for me. I was 'transgressive' and the book was really about 'style' and there was no point now in reliving the crimes of Patrick Bateman and the horror they'd inspired. (181)

Like Palahniuk, Ellis appears to believe that transgressive fiction has lost its relevance after 9/11. Two of transgressive fiction's major authors, it seems, no longer identify as such after 9/11, and even think that transgressive fiction, as a genre, is now dead.

¹ Joshua Chaplinsky, Kevin Kolsch and Dennis Widmyer produced a documentary about the conference, released in 2003 as *Postcards from the Future*. The documentary features extensive interviews with Palahniuk, including his reflection on transgressive fiction and the place of his own work within the genre.

² *The Monkey Wrench Gang* tells the story of a group of environmental activists who engage in violent acts of sabotage, in order to stop a series of building projects which endanger the environment and nature of Arizona.

This thesis re-evaluates this assumption. Transgression is not a concept which is unique to the 1980s and 1990s, but a historically evolving process which took on a specific *form* and level of *importance* during this period. This study explores why transgressive fiction took on this specific form during this particular period, and how it represents and interacts with transgressive socio-political developments in its extra-textual context. Even though the specific form of American transgressive fiction conceived during the late 1980s and 1990s may be “dead” after 9/11, transgression as a critical concept transcends this period and constantly evolves along with its changing socio-cultural context. This thesis reads the work of authors such as Palahniuk as a *specific incarnation* of transgressive fiction which emerged in response to the particular shape of American society at the time. In order to understand how and why transgressive fiction took on this specific form during this particular period, the meaning of transgression as a critical concept needs to be explored. Palahniuk himself provides a useful starting point, suggesting that transgressive fiction is an evolving literary genre which responds to changes in the society it reflects:

[In] a way it's sort of good that [transgressive fiction is] dead in the water, because you can only stand on a soap box and shout for so long before you just turn into wallpaper. And maybe it's time that societal commentating or commenting has to be charming, and seductive, and really entertaining, the way it had to be in the forties and the fifties. (Postcards)

Transgressive fiction of the 1990s was not a fashionable (and therefore inherently limited) celebration of misbehaviour and criminality, as some critics claim.³ Instead, it was a type of fiction which explored transgression as a critical concept, and discussed transgression as a construct which existed both within fiction and in its extra-textual context.

This project makes four contributions. It starts by critically exploring transgression as a philosophical concept, moving beyond simplistic definitions of the concept as an umbrella term for any type of shocking or socially unacceptable behaviour, or fictional renderings of this. Instead, transgression is explored as a mechanism which (re)develops central social ideologies. Its analysis maps how the constant transgression of ideological, social and physical boundaries forms part of a cyclical process which constantly (re)produces and (re)shapes ideological values and frameworks. The second contribution consists of a reworking of transgression as an analytical concept to explore American transgressive fiction of the 1990s in its social context. The 1980s, characterized by both the increasing popularity of neoliberalism and the impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, formed the basis of the transgressive fiction produced by Ellis, Palahniuk and their peers during the 1990s. Transgressive fiction of the period represents, interacts with and exaggerates this

³ See Silverblatt (1993), Bayles (1996) and Tauchert (2008).

extra-textual context, and the transgressive processes which create and sustain it. Thirdly, in order to dissect this extra-textual context, in which the body came to play an increasingly important role as a site where transgression was enacted and central social ideologies were (re)formed, different theoretical strands are connected in order to develop an interdisciplinary analytical approach. Drawing from biopolitics, queer theory and cultural studies more broadly, this study deepens the understanding of transgression, not only as a cultural or literary phenomenon, but also a social and philosophical concept. Finally, the main focus is on the work of three transgressive authors whose work has not yet been analysed together in depth. While extensive scholarly work has focused on the oeuvres of Ellis and Palahniuk,⁴ their work is read here in combination with that of Poppy Z. Brite, an author who has, in comparison, been neglected by academia despite his⁵ significant cult status. While reading Brite together with Ellis and Palahniuk brings out the literariness of Brite's work, which is often obscured by his status as a popular culture figure, a more important consequence of this combination is that Brite's explicit engagement with queerness allows for a "queering" of Ellis and Palahniuk's work. Given the important role queer activism and theory played in the emergence of transgressive fiction in the early 1990s, the combination of these three authors enables a detailed exploration of the connections and contradictions which exist between queerness and transgression.

1.1. Moving Beyond Marginality: (Re)defining Transgression

One of the main aims of this thesis is to move beyond definitions of transgression as mere shock, violence and political incorrectness in order to show that it is more than simply misbehaviour, literary or otherwise, as Palahniuk claims. Transgression is not a marginal phenomenon, or an imprecise way to discuss non-mainstream ideas and behaviour, but a much more central social mechanism resulting from, and further developing, ideology. Throughout American history, the idea that society needs to move beyond, or transgress, its own boundaries to evolve appears in different forms. It can be traced back to the beat writers of the 1940s and 1960s and to texts such as Henry Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience"

⁴ See Young (1992) and Annesley (1999) for key texts on Ellis, and Mendieta (2005) and Sartain (2009) for in-depth analyses of Palahniuk's work.

⁵ Since 2011, Brite has openly defined himself as a trans man and prefers to be addressed as Billy Martin. Even though the works discussed in this thesis were published in the 1990s and Martin has since distanced himself from them, the author will be addressed as "he" and "him" throughout this thesis. To facilitate scholarly discussion, however, I have chosen to refer to the author by his former name which he used when publishing the novels, despite my awareness that he might not choose to do so himself.

(1866).⁶ Indeed, this “sloughing off of the old skin”, as D.H. Lawrence would have it,⁷ is a constituent feature of the collective American national identity. Transgressive fiction of the 1990s should be read as a reflection on and continuation of this tradition. Instead of posing the question whether transgressive fiction of the 1990s was an agent of change, whether it was rebellious or simply a confirmation of existing oppressive social tendencies, this study focuses on the question of how it makes transgressive processes in its extra-textual context *visible*. Transgressive fiction is not (always) transgressive *in itself*, but *reflects* the transgressive dynamics which occur in its socio-historical context. Because it reflects and exaggerates potentially disturbing extra-textual phenomena, transgressive fiction can indeed be disturbing in nature, but by exposing transgressive social mechanisms, it also allows for their critical dissection. Transgressive fiction may not always seem to be straightforwardly contesting problematic social phenomena such as sexism and violence, let alone be measurably reducing them, but it provides a virtual space for a critical analysis of these developments and the role transgression plays in their evolution.

This conceptualization of transgression as a social process, and transgressive fiction as its fictional representation, can only effectively be put into practice if one is aware of transgression’s conceptual limitations and potential pitfalls. Existing criticisms of the concept frequently regard transgression as a performance (or series of performances) solely intended to shock mainstream society and lacking any social or political agency. Many feminist critics, such as Ashley Tauchert and Martha Bayles, warn against a celebratory and uncritical analysis of transgression; they argue that oversimplified definitions of the concept tend to overlook its problematic aspects. While transgression gained popularity in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when it was used to describe a variety of cultural products which emerged at the time, its popularity also made the concept notorious and the subject of severe criticism. Tauchert, for example, attacks the concept’s presumed male bias and its obsession with extreme sex acts and violence against women.⁸ “Like the fumes of the automobile and heavy industry which befoul the atmosphere,” she

⁶ In “Civil Disobedience” Thoreau argues that governments are more harmful than beneficial to the people, and urges his readers to take their fate in their own hands rather than merely wish for change. He put his own ideas into practice by literally moving beyond the boundaries of society and choosing to live in a remote cabin, supporting himself (a social experiment described in *Walden* (1854)).

⁷ See Lawrence (1930), 79.

⁸ The discussion about transgressive cultural products and violence against women has its roots in the Sex Wars of the 1980s, which took place between anti-pornography and pro-sex feminists. This debate revolved around the issue whether pornography exploited women or could be a source of liberation. The anti-pornographic position is explored in Dworkin (1981), Griffin (1981), and MacKinnon (1987). For pro-sex views see Rubin (2011), and Califia (1994).

condemns, “transgression poisons our critical sensibilities” (2). Similarly, in her analysis of early 1990s transgressive visual art, art critic Martha Bayles criticizes the academic and popular tendency to celebrate the transgressiveness of artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano for similar reasons.⁹ “Beauty is Transgression, Transgression is Beauty; that is all they know on earth and all they need to know” (10) she argues, accusing critics and academics of taking a celebratory and uncritical stance when confronting transgressive art. Many works of art which proclaim themselves to be transgressive, Bayles states, actually break no important taboos and do not ask meaningful questions about current norms and ideas. Instead the use of the term is merely “a cheap gimmick” (16). Critics such as Tauchert and Bayles respond to a particular use of the term transgression, which became current in the early 1990s, and was used to describe a wide variety of shocking and extreme works of art which frequently contested social norms by explicitly depicting deviant sexual acts and extreme violence. Indeed, in analyses which overlooked this type of art’s more problematic aspects such as sexist violence, the term transgression has frequently been used as a synonym for shocking art with an unclear relationship to social activism. As a result, any analysis of transgression and transgressive culture should be wary of overtly celebratory and uncritical stances towards the concept and allow space for critical complexity.

Feminist attacks on transgression as a critical concept bring to light a second problem: the common use of imprecise definitions of transgression, which complicate discussions about transgression’s nature and social function. The tensions between simplistic readings of transgression and the concept’s critical potential are visible in the critical debate about transgression, which (re)emerged at the same time as the concept itself. Some critics interpreted the popularity of transgression and transgressive fiction primarily as a carnivalesque and ultimately apolitical development, borrowing Mikhail Bakhtin’s description of carnival as “the place for working out . . . a *new mode of interrelationship between individuals*, counterposed to the all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of noncarnival life” (*Problems* 123). Michael Silverblatt’s 1993 description of the genre’s rising popularity in the US, for example, focuses predominantly on the extreme nature of the texts and their writers. Interpreting the discussions he overheard during a writing workshop led by Dennis Cooper, whose 1991 novel *Frisk* contains explicit descriptions of murder, torture and child abuse, Silverblatt tries to define “this *new new* thing: transgressive writing”. “[T]ransgressive writing has violation at its core,” he

⁹ For a more detailed account of the controversy surrounding these artists, see Bolton (1992).

concludes, “violation of norms, of humanistic enterprise, of the body. Really, it's the Marquis de Sade who officiates at the American orgy.” Silverblatt describes transgressive literature as a marginal, subcultural phenomenon which is based on the Foucauldian idea that, as he phrases it: “Knowledge is found at the limits of experience.” However, the nature of that knowledge, let alone its practical social use, remains unclear. While Silverblatt acknowledges that transgressive culture has the potential to disrupt seemingly stable ideas, norms and conventions, he describes this disruption as temporary and limited. He appears to echo Bakhtin, who adds to his initial definition of carnival that it “absolutizes nothing, but rather proclaims the joyful relativity of everything” (*Problems* 125). In a playful and disruptive way, transgressive fiction crosses the borders of what is generally considered to be acceptable. In doing so, it opens up the possibility for alternatives without actually leading to concrete social change. Silverblatt therefore suggests that transgressive culture of the 1990s maintained close connections to the cultural mainstream from its very beginning. This implies, he argues, that “[w]e have accepted a level of transgression as permissible” and that transgressive fiction acts as a carnivalesque “safety valve” through which people can express anti-social feelings or frustrations. The relation between transgressive culture and the mainstream, Silverblatt states, is thus not straightforwardly antagonistic.

In contrast, transgressive fiction from the 1990s is frequently interpreted as providing a voice to marginal groups and creating a new form of social agency. In their introduction to the literary anthology *High Risk 2* (1994), editors Ira Silverberg and Amy Scholder reflect the critical tendency to attribute a revolutionary potential to transgressive culture, positioning it resolutely in opposition to a society which they perceive as dominant and oppressive. Transgressive fiction, Scholder and Silverberg argue, can be a liberation from, or resistance against, “increasing instances of government censorship” (ix). In the context of late 1980s and early 1990s America, they even envision transgressive literature as providing an essential form of agency for oppressed groups:

As the dominant culture forces disenfranchisement on more people, and encourages homogeneity, the number of groups labeled ‘transgressive’ grows exponentially: groups as diverse as HIV-positive women barred from abortion in their home states, to artists and art organizations limited by the restrictive funding mechanisms of a repressive government. The community of others – transgressors – grows. (*High Risk* xvi)

Scholder and Silverberg interpret transgression in a very specific way; it is seen as a mostly pejorative term attached to social groups which are deemed unsuitable to exist within the boundaries of social acceptance. In their view, transgression is a label used to legitimate

social exclusion, which creates problematic conditions for those deemed “unfit”.

Transgressive fiction is seen as a response to this development; it reclaims transgression as a badge of honour for those who resist their own stigmatization. According to Scholder and Silverberg, transgressive literature and transgressive culture more widely speak for the oppressed margins and create a form of agency for groups whose voices are likely to remain unheard, such as queer or non-white people.¹⁰

As a result of the ambivalent status of transgression during the 1980s and 1990s, many theorists, including Peter Stallybrass, Allon White and Chris Jenks, struggle to assess the value of the concept as a critical tool. The definition of transgression as a marginal and subversive phenomenon is often undermined by a sense of the concept’s limited social impact. Stallybrass and White adopt Barbara Babcock’s notion of “symbolic inversion” as their description of transgression and its function in its social context. “Symbolic inversion,” they argue, “may be broadly defined as any act of expressive behaviour which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values and norms be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious, social and political” (17). Stallybrass and White present transgression as an alternative to normative frameworks which interacts with norms *from outside*. This definition of transgression assumes a relatively stable set of “cultural codes” and “values” which are then contested by a transgressive process. This process originates primarily from a position which is antithetical to these codes. The assumed stability of cultural codes, however, is frequently contradicted by social practice. As a result, envisioning the “outside” from which transgression supposedly originates is complicated. Circumventing this problem, Chris Jenks therefore claims that “to transgress is also more than this, it is to announce and even laudate the commandment, the law or the convention” (2). “Transgression,” he continues, “is a deeply reflexive act of denial and affirmation” (2). In contrast to Stallybrass and White’s definition of transgression as a subversive anti-social process, Jenks instead envisions it as constitutive of social order. However, he subsequently struggles to find concrete examples of how transgression “laudates” or “announces” laws and conventions.

Transgression as a critical tool suffers from its ambivalent status as both a social and an anti-social process, and from the difficulty of establishing a connection between its abstract philosophical nature and its concrete manifestations in specific cultural contexts.

¹⁰ *High Risk* includes contributions of writers such as Kathy Acker and Sapphire, who frequently use their fiction to explore and interrogate social constructions of gender, sexuality, and race. Sapphire’s 1996 novel *Push*, for example, is narrated by a semiliterate black girl with HIV from a poverty-stricken and abusive background, who gradually develops her own identity through writing.

Readings of transgressive fiction as a powerful social agent appear to be either overambitious or imprecise, while interpretations of transgressive fiction as a mere reflection of its context tend to underestimate its creative powers. Both approaches question to what extent the definition of transgressive fiction as a form of political radicalism can function as a useful basis for any kind of social analysis. Focusing specifically on transgressive fiction, the situation is complicated further by the unclear link between transgressive events and processes in fiction and their potential impact on their extra-textual context. On one hand, some commentators point out the impact of extra-textual events on the development of transgressive fiction. Palahniuk's emphasis on 9/11 as an event after which "transgressive fiction died" (*Postcards*) suggests that the extreme confrontation with death in fiction's extra-textual context made the moments of death and violence rendered in transgressive fiction obsolete or inappropriate. On the other hand, some critics attribute transgressive fiction with the ability to influence and change its extra-textual context. In his analysis of transgressive fiction, M. Keith Booker focuses particularly on the question to what extent transgressive fiction can be attributed with any kind of social agency. Though "[e]ven the most transgressive works of literature do not in general immediately send their readers into the streets carrying banners and shouting slogans," he argues in *Techniques of Subversion in Modern Literature*, "[t]ransgressive literature works more subtly, by gradually chipping away at certain modes of thinking that contribute to the perpetuation of oppressive political structures" (4). Since this subtle form of transgression is difficult to trace in actual political environments, Booker concludes, "about the only hard evidence we have of such a power is the terror with which totalitarian regimes have traditionally regarded literary works that they deemed dangerous" (4). It remains problematic, Booker suggests, to attribute social agency to transgression and transgressive fiction, because the relationship between fiction and its extra-textual context is extremely difficult to assess.

A more productive reading of transgression, as developed in this study, reads transgression as a central social mechanism which both perpetuates and undermines ideology in a constantly evolving dynamic relationship. This understanding of the concept is better equipped to capture the complexities of transgression in an American context, which has a long history of regarding transgression as a basis for social development.¹¹ Transgressive fiction is a creative and transforming *reflection* rather than a direct *enabler* of the workings of transgression in its extra-textual context; while some works of

¹¹ Scholarly texts which further explore this tradition include Young (1992) and Annesley (1999).

transgressive fiction, in some circumstances, have some kind of revolutionary effect, it ultimately has an analytical rather than a revolutionary function. The socially constitutive function of transgression can be understood by returning to early philosophical definitions of the concept, which offer a precise consideration of transgression's relationship with social ideologies. Georges Bataille's definition of transgression, for instance, focuses on the socially constitutive function of the concept, indicating how it exists in a close relationship with the prohibitions and limits it interacts with. "Two diametrically opposed views are always possible on any subject," Bataille states in *Eroticism*, "[t]here exists no prohibition that cannot be transgressed. Often the transgression is permitted, often it is even prescribed" (63). Transgression, Bataille argues, is not revolutionary or incidental but a frequent, inherent and even *desirable* aspect of the dynamics of society. Transgression therefore ultimately does not endanger the stability of the norms and prohibitions it interacts with. "The frequency," Bataille argues, "– and the regularity – of transgressions do not affect the intangible stability of the prohibition since they are its expected complement" (65). Bataille's emphasis on transgression as a rebellious yet socially permitted concept implies that its potential for social change is limited and that it is largely inherent to existing social ideologies, which it helps to construct and maintain.

Bataille's definition does not account for transgressive fiction's frequently disturbing character, which does not appear to fit with his understanding of transgression as inherent to society and ideologically constitutive. Furthermore, the question of *how* transgression is inherent to society and maintains social order remains largely unanswered. Michel Foucault's analysis of the concept puts more emphasis on the flexible and constantly changing nature of transgression and its relation to ideology. This definition of transgression is able to capture the complex dynamics of the context in which 1990s transgressive fiction emerged, taking into account how this type of fiction was not only radical or rebellious, but also a reflection of the American belief in radicalism as a form of social development. Contrary to Bataille, who defines transgression in strongly religious terms as a negotiation of clearly demarcated taboos, Foucault envisions transgression as a way to establish and maintain social order in a post-religious world where rules and values are no longer self-evident and imposed by a super-human authority. Foucault's definition of transgression, as characterized by Lois McNay in *Foucault: A Critical Introduction*, is a form of "non-positive affirmation" (42) which creates and sustains social order through its subversion. "Transgression, then," Foucault crucially argues, "is not related to the limit as black to white, the prohibited to the lawful, the outside to the inside, or as the open area of

a building to its enclosed spaces. Rather, their relationship takes the form of a *spiral* which no simple infraction can exhaust” (“Transgression” 35, my emphasis). Instead of defining transgression and social limits as two opposed forces interacting with each other, Foucault defines the relationship between the two as a spiral-like co-dependency. While maintaining the idea that transgression can have a subversive effect, Foucault reads this subversive potential in a social rather than an anti-social or revolutionary way. The next section will work from this definition, to explore how the wide variety of transgressions which shaped American society during the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the fictional representations of this process, can be critically interrogated.

1.2. Dissecting Transgressive Bodies: Concepts and Theories

The transgressive fiction produced by Palahniuk and his peers came into being against a social background which was dominated by the belief in economic deregulation as a solution to the social issues which affected the US during the 1980s,¹² and which made the transgression of political, social and economic limits into a central political strategy:

With Reagan as its likeable, ever-optimistic standard-bearer and ultimate symbol the Republican right delivered what sounded like straightforward, commonsense solutions to the nation’s ills: cut taxes, shrink government domestic spending, encourage private investment, and keep the military strong while aiding those abroad who were fighting communist tyranny. (Wilentz 6)

Throughout Reagan’s presidency, attractive and seemingly uncomplicated narratives both constructed and communicated the neoliberal ideological framework which supported his economic and social policies. Reagan’s ideological beliefs acted as a series of narratives which were constructed and constantly amended in their social context. These ideologies emerged, not as oppressive and dominant social phenomena, but as dynamic and vulnerable constructions. Transgression functions as the process which fulfils the constant need for transformation, adaption, and (re)construction this vulnerability prescribes.

Reagan’s neoliberal politics were constructed within a framework of ideological narratives which paved the way for the politics of deregulation his government promoted. *It’s Morning Again in America* for example, the 1984 commercial made as part of Ronald Reagan’s presidential campaign, communicates economic policies and plans through an

¹² See Johnson (1991), Ehrman (2005), and Wilentz (2008) for detailed explorations of Reagan’s politics of deregulation.

idyllic narrative of family life.¹³ “It’s morning again in America,” the voice-over proclaims, “Today more men and women will go to work than ever before in our country’s history. With interest rates at about half the record highs of 1980, nearly 2,000 families today will buy new homes, more than at any time in the past four years”. Through its construction of the American family as an ideological idyll, *It’s Morning* creates a powerful narrative which communicates and enforces the ideological ideas on which Reagan’s policies were based. The story the commercial narrates does not only illustrate how tax breaks and other forms of deregulation could benefit American families, but actively (re)constructs the family in order to create the conditions for its proposed policies to be put into practice. Transgressive fiction of the period represents the transgressive dynamics of its context in an exaggerated and metaphorical form, evolving into a type of fiction which potentially “undermines and exposes [power]” (Foucault *History* 101). Novels such as Poppy Z. Brite’s *Lost Souls* describe the family as an incestuous and violent space and use these descriptions to expose how *It’s Morning* obscures the problematic consequences of the ideological picture it communicates – particularly the social inequality which increased during Reagan’s presidency, due to welfare cuts and tax breaks which primarily benefitted the rich.

Transgressive fiction, as a result, exposes the always-already present transgression at the heart of ideological narratives such as *It’s Morning*. It highlights transgression, not as an anti-social or marginal force, but as a process which (re)constitutes ideologies. *It’s Morning*, and the neoliberal belief in deregulation it promotes, may appear to be contradicted by the socio-economic reality of the 1980s, which was characterized by several financial crises and legal trials against prominent representatives of neoliberal ideals.¹⁴ When observed through the lens of Foucauldian theory, however, these crises emerge as a consequence of the neoliberal need to transgress and break down barriers which limit economic growth and expansion. The financial crises which affected American society as a whole, as well as the downfall of individual representatives of the neoliberal drive to growth, functioned as temporary moments of reconfiguration which resulted in ever-expanding financial practices. After the crises of the 1980s, neoliberalism continued to blossom during the 1990s, and the 1980s can even be read as a “rehearsal” (Ehrman 127) for this era of economic prosperity. “[C]rises are, in short,” David Harvey argues, “as

¹³ See chapter three for a more detailed analysis of *It’s Morning Again in America* and its use of the nuclear family as a metaphor to communicate neoliberal ideology.

¹⁴ Notable examples are the trials and convictions of Michael Milken and Ivan Boesky for insider trading in the late 1980s. Boesky was publicly defaced after his conviction, and his claim that “greed is all right, by the way” (qtd. in Green 1986) came to epitomize the problems of neoliberalism and 1980s financial culture. It was later paraphrased by Gordon Gekko, main character of Oliver Stone’s film *Wall Street* (1987), which is very critical of the neoliberal ideas it describes.

necessary to the evolution of capitalism as money, labour power and capital itself" (*Enigma* 117). The dependence of neoliberalism on transgression is an example of the idea that, as Foucault states, "[w]here there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority to power" (*History* 95). Transgression, or the crossing of boundaries up to the point of crisis, is therefore a creative process which fuels the development of neoliberalism as an ideological system and a set of economic policies.

In order to understand how fiction reflects and interrogates the workings of transgression as a social mechanism, this study supplements ideological analysis with biopolitical theory. The field of biopolitical theory,¹⁵ which focuses on the connection between physical bodies and ideological systems, provides insight into the interactive relationship between the two, because it shows how physicality can acquire a political function. Both within transgressive fiction and in the context it reflects, bodies acquired a crucial symbolic function as the sites where ideologies were (re)shaped through physical transgression. For example, Palahniuk's descriptions of men who voluntarily destroy their own and each other's bodies in orchestrated fights act as a metaphor for Reagan's emphasis on deregulation as a strategy which leads to freedom and progress. *Fight Club's* narrator and his friend Tyler Durden display a strong desire to eliminate the restrictions which complicate their establishment of freedom as a central social ideology. They attempt to realize their vision of a "free" society by destroying museums and other representations of authority, frequently injuring themselves and others in the process. *Fight Club's* emphasis on the mutilating effects of violence visualizes how deregulation as an ideological construct sits uneasily with the physical impact of events such as the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Borrowing harrowing descriptions of people with HIV/AIDS from its extra-textual context, the novel indicates that the unlimited freedom deregulation promised was a practical impossibility.¹⁶ *Fight Club's* descriptions of mutilated "bare life" (Agamben 4) acquire a political function as critical metaphors.

Transgressive fiction exaggerates its social context into a fictional universe in which bodies function as the primary objects through which power is exercised and ideologies are constructed. It frequently exaggerates its extra-textual context in order to explore how neoliberal politics of deregulation, such as the attacks on "social regulation, the network of

¹⁵ See, for example, Agamben (1995), Foucault (2008) and Esposito (2008).

¹⁶ *Fight Club* never mentions HIV/AIDS explicitly but does suggest that its main character could possibly be suffering from Kaposi's sarcoma, a type of cancer which often occurs following a HIV-infection. See chapter two for a more extensive exploration of this aspect of the novel.

environmental, health, consumer protection, and safety rules that had developed since the late 1960s" (Ehrman 91), affect the lives of citizens. In this study, biopolitical theories,¹⁷ which focus on the function of bodies as political beings, are used as a lens through which the obsession with physicality in transgressive fiction can be explained and analysed, because they offer a helpful perspective on the connection between politics and what Giorgio Agamben calls "bare life" (*Homo Sacer* 11).¹⁸ Descriptions such as those of the murder of a young boy in Dennis Cooper's *Frisk* (1991) or the extreme sexual escapades in Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984), expose the human cost of neoliberal policies such as economic deregulation and benefit cuts, and turn these socio-political "cuts" into literal destructions of queer and female bodies. Similarly, the gruesome descriptions of vampirism in films such as *Near Dark* (1987), *The Lost Boys* (1987) and *From Dusk till Dawn* (1996), and the literary oeuvres of Anne Rice and Poppy Z. Brite, interrogate social constructions such as the nuclear family and do not only show their inherent instability, but also highlight how they are constructed and perpetuated through physical violence. Other texts, such as Poppy Z. Brite's *Exquisite Corpse* (1996) and Jonathan Demme's film *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) use cannibalism as a trope to think through the capitalist emphasis on consumption and growth, presenting their cannibalistic characters as social representations instead of horrific anomalies.

Queer theory, finally, is adapted in this study to explore transgressive fiction in its social context. This choice does not only follow logically from the simultaneous emergence of transgressive fiction and queer theory during the early 1990s, and the various intersections which exist between the two,¹⁹ but also from queer theory's potential to analyse binary oppositions and the (sexual) social function of bodies. While queerness and transgression are not synonymous, the analysis of queerness does provide a platform for the development of transgression into a critical tool. In relation to transgression, queerness does not only refer to non-normative sexuality, but also to the strange, odd, peculiar, and eccentric dynamics of transgression and transgressive fiction. Many works of transgressive fiction do not only adapt a definition of queerness as non-heterosexual, but also shape queerness into a defamiliarizing tool. In Dennis Cooper's *Frisk*, for example, the deeply disturbing descriptions of violent sex acts between adult men and children invite critical

¹⁷ See also Hardt and Negri (2005) and Foucault (2008).

¹⁸ A different version of this idea is explored by Roberto Esposito in his discussions of immunity as a political strategy in *Bios* (2008).

¹⁹ In *Fight Club*, for example, the relationship between the narrator and Tyler Durden is described in homo-erotic terms, whereas his interactions with Marla Singer can be read as queer dissections of gender as a social construct. See chapter two for a more extensive exploration of this aspect of the novel.

considerations of heteronormativity, the demonization of sadomasochism and homosexuality, and the connections between pornography and sexual violence. By obscuring whether its violent scenes are mere fantasies of its main character, or depictions of behaviour which actually occurred, *Frisk* deconstructs the binary oppositions between fact and fiction, and heterosexual and non-heterosexual. Its descriptions of physical transgressions acquire a critical function, in which queerness is used as a point of departure for a critical look at sexualized and gendered inequality in its extra-textual context.

The bodies depicted in transgressive fiction are frequently queer bodies; they engage in non-heterosexual and/or sadomasochistic sex,²⁰ critically address heteronormativity and the social inequality it supports, and address the devastating effects of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.²¹ Queer theory therefore provides a useful starting point for an analysis of the critical function of physicality in transgressive fiction; it is capable of grasping how queer activism and the emerging HIV/AIDS epidemic shaped the social background against which this type of fiction emerged. One should be careful not to equate queerness with transgression and interpret both as radical social projects. Some queer theorists suggest that transgression and queerness are similar; Noreen Giffney even summarizes the main concerns of queer theory as “transgression, radicalism, inclusion and difference” (8). However, while transgression is a process which ultimately perpetuates and (re)develops the ideologies it disrupts, queerness in practice is often problematically read as a synonym for “gayness”, and thus often continues the strict differences between hetero- and homosexuality which transgressive fiction deconstructs. “The desirable social transgressiveness of gayness – its aptitude for contesting oppressive structures –” Leo Bersani notes in *Homos*, “depends not on denying a gay identity, but rather on exploring the links between a specific sexuality, psychic mobility, and a potentially radical politics” (*Homos* 56). This notion of non-normative sexuality as radical and anti-mainstream problematically develops transgression into a reactionary and potentially revolutionary force, but tends to overlook how transgression is also responsible for the maintenance of key social ideologies. “[E]very transgression, to establish itself as such, must simultaneously resecure that which it sought to eclipse,” Diana Fuss claims in *Inside/Out*, “Homosexuality,” she continues, “read as a transgression against heterosexuality, succeeds not in

²⁰ See, for example, Dennis Cooper’s *Frisk* (1991) which depicts sadomasochistic sexual encounters between its male protagonists, and Bret Easton Ellis’s *Less Than Zero* (1985) in which main character Clay engages in a series of sexual encounters with both men and women.

²¹ In Poppy Z. Brite’s *Exquisite Corpse* (1996), for example, queer and HIV-positive character Luke frequently engages in violent tirades against mainstream American “breeders”, whom he holds responsible for the fact that he has no access to proper medical care.

undermining the authoritative position of heterosexuality so much as reconfirming heterosexuality's centrality precisely as that which must be resisted" (6). Uncritical readings of queerness which read it as a synonym for anti-heterosexuality, rather than the questioning of the power and privilege of heteronormativity, run the risk of losing the critical sensitivity and historical awareness queer theory has to offer.

This project dissects the fictional bodies through which fiction represents and explores the transgressive processes at work in its extra-textual context, particularly the Reaganomic emphasis on deregulation and its social effects. Instead of merging "queer" with "gay" and reading both as transgressive and "therefore" revolutionary, queerness is used here as a "deconstructive practice" (Sullivan 50) to dissect the ideological function of bodies, interpreting queerness as a strange, odd, peculiar, and eccentric phenomenon which is concerned with "pushing the boundaries of the possible, showing up language and discursive categories more specifically for their inadequacies" (Giffney 9). Poppy Z. Brite's novel *Lost Souls* (1992), for example, queers the conceptualization of the nuclear family which features in *It's Morning*, and uses detailed depictions of gruesomely violated bodies to reveal the human costs of the neoliberal policies it supports. The story uses vampires as metaphors to show how neoliberalism "sucks the life" from people by economically exploiting them, and depicts the mutilated body of a young woman to emphasize the connection between "vampiric" capitalism and gender inequality. Transgressive fiction uses many techniques to represent and interrogate the workings of the society they are produced in. By focusing on flexibility and thinking through seemingly rigid ideological boundaries, queer theory is able to supply a critical mode of thinking which can be used to work through the surface of transgressive culture and analyse the more complex social dynamics which occur underneath.

1.3. Bodies in Context: Neoliberalism, HIV/AIDS and Transgressive Fiction

Transgressive fiction such as *Lost Souls* came into being against a social background in which ideology and physicality existed in a transgressive relationship. Even though the Reagan era was dominated by powerful neoliberal ideological imagery – culminating in the image of Reagan himself as "the ultimate American success story" (Cannon 17) – its promises of freedom, wellbeing and prosperity formed a sharp contrast with a major event

of the 1980s: the HIV/AIDS epidemic.²² Many critics²³ directly blamed the Reagan government for the devastating impact of HIV/AIDS on queer communities, arguing that its reliance on the nuclear family and heteronormativity did not permit support for people who did not subscribe to these ideals. When Reagan finally mentioned HIV/AIDS in a speech in 1987, the measures he proposed consisted of testing rather than education and prevention (Shilts 595). This approach created a strict division between heterosexual bodies which engaged in sexual and economic reproduction, and thus contributed to the construction of neoliberalism as an ideological and political system, and queer bodies which not only did not fit into this social configuration but were perceived as actively threatening its stability. An initially purely physical disease thus took on a political significance. The treatment of people with HIV/AIDS – or lack thereof – became a political process which enforced the idea of neoliberalism as a heteronormative and progressive form of freedom in contrast to a “queer” and lethal infection. Even though neoliberal ideology and diseased physicality appear to exist as separate entities, they became connected in a transgressive relationship in which the construction of the former depended on its engagement with the latter.

By reflecting neoliberal ideologies, revealing the physicality supporting them, and questioning the problematic relationship between ideology and physicality, transgressive fiction comments on the validity of neoliberalism as a model of social organization. It illustrates Foucault’s statement that “modern society is perverse” (*History* 47) and depends on the constant interaction with the violated bodies which it positions as antithetical to itself. Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* (1992), for example, shows how Patrick Bateman’s increasingly horrifying acts of rape and murder help him to maintain his neoliberal identity as a successful Wall Street trader, but also depicts how his practice renders him vulnerable, resulting in an identity crisis which causes him to state that “surface, surface, surface was all that anyone found meaning in” (361). Bateman’s increasing mental instability is an illustration of David Harvey’s assertion that “[t]he relation between representation and reality under capitalism has always been problematic” (*Enigma* 26), and shows that his dependence on greed and competitiveness is ultimately insubstantial. Bateman emerges as a more extreme version of extra-textual neoliberal figureheads such as Donald Trump and Reagan himself, who are ironically described as “masters of the universe” (11) by Tom Wolfe in his 1987 novel *Bonfire of the Vanities*. Just

²² Simon Watney usefully points out the difference between HIV and AIDS; HIV refers to the virus infection whereas AIDS refers to the infections caused by the virus (*Policing Desire* 2).

²³ See Kramer (1983), Shilts (1987), Bersani (1988), and Watney (1991).

like his extra-textual equivalents, Bateman lives in a “hyperreal” society (Baudrillard *Simulacra 2*) in which Trump, Reagan and Gordon Gekko, a fictional character from the film *Wall Street* (1987) all exist in the same reality.²⁴ *American Psycho* reveals the harmful effects of this fluid boundary between ideology and social reality by describing its physical effects in great detail, positioning violated bodies as a direct consequence of the ethics of greed and competitiveness Reagan’s definition of neoliberalism proposed.

Transgressive fiction frequently highlights the destructive effects of neoliberalism’s transgressive dependence on physicality by focusing on how it disregards and even wilfully destroys the bodies on which it is based. The ethical complications of this mechanism are explored in texts such as Poppy Z. Brite’s *Exquisite Corpse* (1996), in which the HIV-positive status of main character Andrew is a painful reminder of the vulnerability caused by his nature as a physical body. At the same time, Andrew views his body as a mere obstacle on his journey to freedom and power. His ability to play dead allows him to escape from the prison where he is incarcerated for murder, thus suggesting that unlimited power can be found beyond the limits of the physical body. Andrew’s complex relationship with his own body appears to be infused with Karl Marx’s commentary on commodity fetishism, which problematizes capitalism’s complicated interaction with physical objects. “There, the existence of the things qua commodities, and the value-relation between the products of labour which stamps them as commodities,” Marx argues in *Capital: Vol. 1*, “have absolutely no connexion with their physical properties and with the material relations arising therefrom” (77). When objects are traded in a capitalist system, according to Marx, their physical value is obscured by the value it acquires by its participation in the social process that is trade. Andrew becomes a fictional illustration of the problematic relationship between ideology and physicality in a neoliberal context. Ultimately *Exquisite Corpse* questions to what extent neoliberal ideology can exist without a physical basis to support it, and shows how it is fundamentally dependent on destructive interactions with physicality. Other transgressive texts similarly explore this relationship and the consequences of this form of social existence.

Whereas *Exquisite Corpse* uses HIV/AIDS to highlight the complex relationship between ideology and physicality under neoliberalism, other transgressive texts further enforce the connection between HIV/AIDS and neoliberalism by reading the former as a metaphor for the latter, thus undermining the idea that HIV/AIDS is antithetical to the freedom and progress neoliberalism proposes. Chuck Palahniuk’s novel *Fight Club* (1996)

²⁴ For a more extensive overview of the postmodern debates on “reality” see Lyotard (1984), Jameson (1991) and Žižek (2002).

initially depicts HIV/AIDS as a secretive and lethal disease which undermines the narrator's attempt to lead the perfect neoliberal consumerist life. While HIV/AIDS threatens the narrator's neoliberal lifestyle because it threatens his body, the novel also draws connections between the disease and neoliberalism, specifying how neoliberalism invokes the desire to destroy, and inspires the fight club which gives the story its title. "This was freedom," the narrator concludes, "Losing all hope was freedom" (22). Disease, *Fight Club* suggests, is not an anti-social phenomenon but a metaphor for the destructive and competitive ethics which govern the corporate environment in which the narrator works. Fight club, and its follow-up movement Project Mayhem, are depicted as social movements which enact themselves through violent physical interaction, ultimately designing a set of ideologies which are remarkably similar to those of the neoliberal society the narrator initially tried to escape from. "Under and behind and inside everything I took for granted, something horrible has been growing" (202) the narrator concludes towards the end of the novel, using a cancerous metaphor to signify that his apparently anti-social acts of destruction have further developed the oppressive capitalist society he earlier tried to escape from. Project Mayhem evolves into a terrorist movement which spreads rapidly and infectiously, discourages its members from asking questions and literally uses their bodies as a basis for the capitalist production of soap. *Fight Club*, like other transgressive texts, shows how neoliberalism is (re)constructed through the constant transgressive interaction with physical elements which initially appear antithetical to the ideological images it promotes.

By visualizing the transgressive processes which are taking place in its conflicted extra-textual context, transgressive fiction creates possibilities for their critical analysis. Its abundant violated bodies are metaphorical representations of the "serious and ambitious passion for violence" (Bersani "Rectum" 201) critics saw in the slow response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, because physical mutilation highlights how the neoliberal emphasis on (re)production requires a destructive transgressive relationship with non-normative bodies:

[W]e might wonder if AIDS, in addition to transforming gay men into infinitely fascinating taboos, has also made it less dangerous to look. For, our projects and our energies notwithstanding, others may think of themselves as watching us disappear. The heightened visibility conferred on gay men by AIDS is the visibility of imminent death, of a promised invisibility. (Bersani *Homos* 21)

Rather disturbingly, Bersani suggests that the devastating physical consequences of HIV/AIDS are the desired outcome of its mainstream description as a non-heterosexual, and therefore anti-social, disease. "Having the information," he argues, "to lock up homosexuals in quarantine camps may be a higher priority in the family-oriented Reagan

Administration than saving the heterosexual members of American families from AIDS” (201).²⁵ Not only does this statement depict the potential hidden agenda of Reagan’s government, it also shows that the maintenance of the version of American society it aims to preserve depends on the physical interaction with people perceived to endanger its stability, because of their different sexual orientation and/or potential contamination with a deadly disease. Even though the violence of texts such as *American Psycho*, *Exquisite Corpse*, or *Fight Club* is an exaggerated representation of their social context, they still reveal the disturbing transgressive processes at work in the society they reflect.

1.4. The Body of Work: What Is Transgressive Fiction?

Chuck Palahniuk’s statement in *Postcards* that transgressive fiction is “dead in the water” after 9/11 serves as a useful starting point for the creation of the “body of work”, or a corpus of texts which allows for the exploration of the issues described above. Just like the “death” of transgressive fiction should be interpreted as a temporary moment of change, rather than a definite ending of the genre, its descriptions of death function as moments of transformation and critical interrogation. Examples range from Tyler Durden’s assertion in *Fight Club* that “the first step to eternal life is you have to die” (11) and Andrew’s attempts to escape from his own body by playing dead in *Exquisite Corpse*, to Jame Gumb’s need for the death of several women to transform his own body in *Silence of the Lambs*, and the mass deaths the protagonists of *Natural Born Killers* leave in their wake to escape from their abusive childhoods. In all these texts, death acts as a transformative moment where the boundaries of the human body are broken down and transform the social situation in which they exist. This function of deadly bodily violation in fiction reflects the confrontations with death and physicality which occurred during extra-textual events such as the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Reflecting and expanding their social context, transgressive texts routinely use the violated and dying body to interrogate social ideologies, mimicking developments such as the emergence of queer activism in response to the rise of HIV/AIDS and its questioning of the harmful effects of heteronormativity.²⁶ In doing this, transgressive fiction echoes a long and varied cultural history in which death plays a crucial role as a moment of transgression and transformation, and functions as what Elizabeth

²⁵ Bersani appears to be referring to Health Secretary Otis R. Bowen’s proposal to force people with HIV/AIDS to be federally registered, and suggests that this information could be used to imprison or otherwise disadvantage patients.

²⁶ See Andriote (1999) for a more detailed overview of the connections between HIV/AIDS and gay activism in the US.

Bronfen and Sarah Webster Goodwin describe as a “site of paradoxes” (4), or a space through which contrasts and juxtapositions can be represented and explored. Palahniuk specifically uses death as a metaphor to think through the cyclical and dynamic nature of transgression when he remarks that “transgressive fiction, *for the time being*, is dead in the water” (my emphasis), turning the supposed “death” of transgressive fiction after 9/11 into a logical consequence of its fluid nature.

Even though many transgressive writers explore transgression through images of death and bodily violation, they write in radically different ways. The aim of this thesis is therefore not to construct a coherent genre with a specific political agenda in mind. Instead the novels of three authors are analysed in order to explore how transgressive literature differentially interrogates its context. Bret Easton Ellis gained popularity and notoriety with his 1991 novel *American Psycho* and has subsequently evolved into an author with both a substantial cult following and a number of academic studies devoted to his work.²⁷ Chuck Palahniuk’s career developed slightly differently, given that his debut novel *Fight Club* (1996) did not become a cult book until the release of its film adaptation in 1999. Nevertheless, he is frequently mentioned as a major transgressive writer²⁸ alongside Ellis, particularly because of their similar use of bodies and bodily violation to explore ideological tensions in 1990s America. Poppy Z. Brite has a different status, given that his work has been neglected by academia in comparison, and mostly exists as an underground phenomenon. Reading his work together with that of Palahniuk and Ellis, however, does not only allow for an analysis of his work in literary terms rather than as works of popular culture, it also helps to bring out the queer aspects of Ellis and Palahniuk. Both Palahniuk and Ellis tend to be ambivalent about their sexual orientation and the influence it has on their writing, but since neither (currently) identifies as heterosexual, the role queerness plays in their work deserves to be addressed. All three address transgression in their work in different ways, though each of them uses exaggeration in the form of a metaphorical use of grotesque, monstrous and violated bodies which interrogate seemingly stable ideologies. Brite’s use of cannibalism and vampirism, for example, critically engages with concepts such as capitalist production and the family as a socio-political unit. Together these authors explore a range of themes which shed light on the workings of transgression as a social mechanism, its depiction in literature, and the resulting interaction between literature and society.

²⁷ See, for example, Young (1992), Freccero (1997), Annesley (1998) and Baello-Allué (2011).

²⁸ See Sartain (2009), 41.

Ellis, Palahniuk and Brite write about transgression in different ways, using a variety of stylistic techniques to produce their own version of transgressive fiction which, despite its connections with other texts, always maintains a unique character. However, the first recurrent strategy in the work of all three is the use of repetition. Repetition is used to show how ideologies are constructed, transformed and maintained as series of narratives. *American Psycho*, for example, features lengthy repetitive descriptions of outfits, shopping sprees and restaurant visits. "In the shower I use first a water-activated gel cleanser," Patrick Bateman narrates, "then a honey-almond body scrub, and on the face an exfoliating gel scrub. . . . Next I apply Gel Appaisant, also made by Pour Hommes, which is an excellent, soothing skin lotion" (24-5). The repetitive description creates a satirical effect; Patrick Bateman's beauty routine involves such a high number of products that it would take him several hours to complete, making it almost impossible to occur on a daily basis. Repetition also defamiliarizes the extra-textual brands and products the novel describes in a Warhol-like fashion, highlighting the lack of substance of the advertising which promotes them. *Fight Club* uses repetitive advertising language to comment in more detail on the numbing effect of consumer culture. "We all have the same Rislampa/Har paper lamps made from wire and environmentally friendly unbleached paper," the narrator muses, "The Alle Cutlery service. Stainless steel. Dishwasher safe. The Vild hall clock made of galvanized steel, oh, I had to have that" (43). By repeating the language of Ikea catalogues the narrator reveals its artificial nature, undermining the idea that these products will provide safety since "no matter what goes wrong, at least you've got your sofa issue handled" (44). Instead, the fragment concludes that: "Then you're trapped in your lovely nest, and the things you used to own, now they own you" (44). Through their constant repetition of extra-textual advertising language, transgressive texts highlight its artificiality and place the reader in a distanced position which allows for critical analysis.

A different form of exaggeration used in transgressive fiction is the physical transformation of social hierarchies. By constantly questioning and subverting notions such as freedom and power through bodily processes such as castration, the binary notion of power as oppressive is swapped with a conceptualization of power as a productive network of power relations and conflicts. This technique visualizes the transgression of moral and legal boundaries by expressing them in physical terms, in a way which echoes Mikhail Bakhtin's definition of the carnivalesque:

What is suspended first of all is hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected with it – that is, everything resulting from socio-hierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality among people (including age). All *distance* between people is

suspended, and a special carnival category goes into effect: *free and familiar contact among people*" (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 123)

By removing hierarchical and legal boundaries, transgressive fiction creates a virtual space where the extreme implications of norms can freely be explored. The protagonists of Poppy Z. Brite's *Exquisite Corpse* (1996), for example, are never arrested or prosecuted, despite the illegal and sometimes very public character of their deeds. Even though the extreme behaviour described in the texts would be considered illegal or morally wrong in an extra-textual context, no correction or punishment occurs in the stories, because representatives of the law are depicted as being indifferent, deliberately corrupt, or are revealed to have no actual power. In *Exquisite Corpse*, Tran, the victim of cannibals Jay and Andrew, manages to escape from Jay's house and is stopped in the street by two police officers. When Jay offers them a generous amount of money, they choose to ignore Tran's bleeding injuries and the fact that he has clearly been drugged. Even when bystanders urge the police officers to take action, because Tran looks underage, they refuse to do so. The novel creates a disturbing connection with its extra-textual context by nodding to the actions of serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer, particularly his murder of Konerak Sinthasomphone, who also escaped from his killer and was sent home with him by the police.²⁹ Dahmer did not bribe the police officers who questioned him, but by explicitly adding money to the situation *Exquisite Corpse* highlights how social inequality was inextricably connected with neoliberalism in 1980s America. The story suggests that the police refuse to see what is occurring because it is outside the heteronormative narrative, effectively silencing and obscuring the position of the victims. *Exquisite Corpse* transforms an extra-textual act of violence into a critical comment on the state of the society it was conceived in, showing how violence is permitted, and perhaps even caused by, neoliberal society's emphasis on money and financial gain. The novel's accounts of the law as fluid eliminate the traditional idea of the law as restoring order, and instead turn supposed authority figures into suspect characters with shady moralities. This depiction of a fictional world without a clear law or authority allows for the critical interrogation of traditional ideas about social order and ideological stability.

The most prominent form of exaggeration used in transgressive fiction, however, consists of the dominant presence of bodily violation. "The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system," Mary Douglas argues in *Purity and Danger*, "Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious. The body is a complex

²⁹ See Masters (1993) for a detailed overview of Dahmer's murder of Sinthrasomphone.

structure. The functions of its different parts and their relation afford a source of symbols for other complex structures” (142). Transgressive fiction similarly develops the body into a social signifier, depicting its violation in various forms as a metaphorical representation of the ideological system in which it exists. *Fight Club*, for example, features detailed descriptions of wounds, mutilation and other forms of bodily violation, particularly in its depiction of the wounds created by fight club members when they fight with each other. Their wounds are an effect of fight club which seeps through into their daily lives and disrupts the boundary between their violent nocturnal activities and their daily lives as law-abiding citizens. “More of my lips are sticky with blood as I try to lick the blood off,” the narrator describes his bodily revolt during a work presentation, “and when the lights come up, I will turn to consultants Ellen and Walter and Norbert and Linda from Microsoft and say, thank you for coming, my mouth shining with blood and blood climbing the cracks between my teeth” (47). The result of the narrator’s nightly escapades literally seeps through into his daily life and almost stains the representatives from Microsoft who are listening to his presentation. Two elements which are unlikely to appear together in an extra-textual context, namely the radical physicality of the violated body and the clean, distant character of the corporate environment, are thus connected in an uncanny scene which invites the reader to interrogate how different the two worlds really are.

Apart from describing violated human bodies, transgressive fiction also develops violation by depicting superhuman or sub-human monsters in various shapes and sizes, ranging from vampires to the character of Andrew in *Exquisite Corpse*, who is able to negotiate the boundary between life and death. “Monsters are meaning machines” (21) Judith Halberstam argues in *Skin Shows*, emphasizing the importance of monsters as metaphorical figures which can embody various social ideologies and serve as spaces for their critical assessment. Precisely because they do not fit into existing classificatory systems, Jeffrey Cohen argues in “Monster Culture”, monsters can be used to interrogate seemingly rigid systems of thought. “And so the monster is dangerous,” he concludes, “a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions. Because of its ontological liminality, the monster notoriously appears at times of crisis as a kind of third term that problematizes the clash of extremes” (6). Transgressive fiction contains monsters and monstrous characters, which not only metaphorically represent extra-textual ideologies and ideas, but can also be used to expose and interrogate them. Taking the concept of the violated body even further, *Fight Club* graphically describes how the narrator injures himself in order to blackmail his boss into paying him a large sum of

money, to stop him from destroying the company's reputation. "The monster drags itself across the lovely bouquets and garlands of the Oriental carpet," the narrator describes, "The blood falls out of my nose and slides down the back of my throat and into my mouth, hot. The monster crawls across the carpet, hot and picking up the lint and dust sticking to the blood on its claws. And it crawls close enough to grab the manager of the Pressman Hotel around his pinstriped ankle" (116). The narrator literally turns himself into a grotesque monster whose violated body contaminates the manager's office. He crosses the physical boundary between them when he touches the manager, while the manager's horrified response emphasizes that this moment of physical contact undermines their normal power balance. Here, in an unlikely meeting of the powerful and the (supposedly) powerless, the relation between the two is fundamentally problematized. The narrator's own humanity is questioned by his alternative use of "the monster" and "my mouth", creating the basis for a critical assessment of his position as a narrator and highlighting his unreliability. By separating himself from "the monster", the narrator appears to reject the idea of personal responsibility, creating a distinction between his human self and his monstrous uncontrollable side.

This is but one of the ways in which the use of monsters and monstrous bodies allows transgressive fiction to pose a variety of complex questions regarding power and ideology, and to question its extra-textual context in ways which are not, or less readily, available to other genres and media. Violated bodies and death are tropes which constantly recur in transgressive fiction, because they are used as metaphors to explore how ideology and physicality exist in a dynamic transgressive relationship in the extra-textual context the texts interrogate. Palahniuk, Brite and Ellis each explore these issues in a different way; Brite, for example, borrows liberally from established horror traditions such as the vampire story, and transforms them into more complex social critiques. Palahniuk and Ellis are more explicitly political but simultaneously undermine simplistic interpretations of their works as radical. Ellis stresses that "this is not an exit" (384) at the end of *American Psycho*, and Palahniuk shows how the radicalism of *Fight Club's* protagonists is fuelled by mainstream ideologies which it ultimately supports. While many transgressive texts explore elements of extra-textual transgression in some detail – sometimes by explicitly referring to transgressive events, as Oliver Stone does with the Vietnam War in *Platoon* (1986), financial culture in *Wall Street* (1987) and the American fascination with violence in *Natural Born Killers* (1994) – Palahniuk, Brite and Ellis together offer a more coherent overview of the workings of transgression in the society their works explore. By reading their most

important texts in sequence, the spiral-like transgressive interaction between ideology and physicality can be understood, as well as its fundamental dependence on crisis and destruction as regenerative mechanisms.

1.5. Chapter Outline

This study explores how three transgressive authors represent and interrogate transgressive processes which take place in the extra-textual context of their novels. Following a preliminary exploration of the society in which their works emerged, a cyclical model of transgression appears. Firstly, in order to provide the economic growth and wellbeing its neoliberal ideological framework promised, the Reagan government created economic policies such as the deregulation of the financial sector and tax cuts, in order to facilitate capitalist competitiveness (Ehrman 38). Many of these policies were transgressive in that they moved beyond existing rules and regulations, and all of them served the ultimate goal of reinstating economic stability. In order to be able to implement these policies, however, the Reagan government developed a rigid conceptualization of the nuclear family as a basis for social organization. Even though supply-side economics, the main economic principle the Reagan administration adhered to, depended on deregulation and a breakdown of limitations, its implementation was made possible by conservative support, which revolved around the maintenance of strict social boundaries and the attempt to reinstall “family values”.³⁰ Despite the importance of the narrowly defined family ideal, however, post-Cold War neoliberal politics also caused the dissolution of economic limits. Developments such as globalization in the 1990s broke down geographical and national boundaries which restricted the free flow of information, goods, and people. Nevertheless, radical dissolution also made neoliberalism an ideology which was vulnerable to crisis, which is illustrated by the savings and loans crisis of 1987 and the downfall of individual Wall Street Traders as a result of insider trading scandals in the late 1980s. These crises proved to be temporary, and neoliberalism blossomed during the 1990s, suggesting that crisis is an inherent aspect of neoliberalism which facilitates its continuous development and growth. Transgression emerges from this background as a crucial

³⁰ Even though theorists such as David K. Williams argue that the Reagan presidency benefitted from the support of conservative movements such as the Christian Right, the relationship between the two was far from self-evident. While Reagan rarely explicitly expressed his support for the Christian Right, for example, the movement in turn was disappointed by the Reagan government’s reluctance to restrict abortion, access to pornography, gay rights, and other social developments which were perceived as threatening “family values” (Williams 3).

mechanism which does not only imply the negotiation and breakdown of limitations but also creates opportunities for its (re)development.

Transgressive fiction offers a kaleidoscopic view of this turbulent social background, tracing its origins and critically interrogating them in the process. Its explicit and often gruesome depictions of violated bodies function as metaphors through which the workings of transgressive processes in its extra-textual context are represented and questioned. In each of the following four chapters a different aspect of the transgressive cycle, such as reproduction or dissolution, is explored in detail. Four transgressive novels are analysed in detail, an approach which allows for an in-depth exploration of the multiplicity of transgressive fiction while also tracing the continuities between different works. The analysis focuses on how fiction represents extra-textual forms of transgression through the exploration of violated bodies, and shows how the texts employ various forms of physicality and exaggeration, ranging from vampirism to cannibalism, to make their point. In turn every chapter explores how fiction uses these various forms of physicality to reflect and comment on extra-textual transgressive processes. For example, chapter three on Poppy Z. Brite's novel *Lost Souls* traces how the story uses vampirism to represent how the ideological focus on the nuclear family evolved and came to function as the moral framework for Reagan's economic policies. Some themes, such as death as a transformative moment, sex as an enactment of power, and illness as a metaphor for crisis, run through all the texts and their evolution is throughout the study.

Chapter two focuses on Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996), and explores how the novel visualizes the transgressive interactions between neoliberal ideology and physicality. The story investigates freedom as a central neoliberal value, reflecting the importance of free markets and deregulation during the Reagan era and beyond. It does so by focusing on the masculine body, not only echoing the extra-textual emergence of the so-called crisis of masculinity during the 1990s, but also using the body as a site where ideological conflicts can be traced and represented. Initially the story uses the damaged and "feminized" masculine body to explore the suggestion that consumer culture restricts individual freedom. However, the narrator's redevelopment of the masculine body, symbolized by his invention of Tyler Durden, emerges from a desire to achieve a position of control *within* the neoliberal system, rather than as a means to escape from it. The transgressions of Tyler and the narrator, resulting in the establishment of Project Mayhem, should therefore be read as a form of ideological redevelopment which serves to reinstate and communicate freedom as a freedom of trade. The novel brings in a second social development, namely

the emergence of the militia movement, to illustrate the potentially harmful effects of this notion of freedom. Project Mayhem's dependence on the production and distribution of soap does not only reveal the harmful effects of capitalism on people – the story suggests that the soap is made from human fat – but also shows how seemingly anti-social movements such as the militia movement are the result of the prominence of freedom as a central American value. The final section of the chapter returns to the body, exploring how the character of Marla Singer queers the narrator's emphasis on masculinity as a basis for social organization, and resorts to questioning the oppressive effects of his belief in freedom as a predominantly economic phenomenon. Marla also contrasts the narrator's economic beliefs with a series of images of illness, culminating in the suggestion that the narrator is HIV-positive, and thus undermines the sharp distinctions between economic productivity and diseased "others".

Chapter three analyses Poppy Z. Brite's *Lost Souls* (1992). Following chapter two's focus on the transgressive interaction between ideology and physicality, this chapter focuses on how this interaction (re)produces ideological limits which support and maintain ideological constructs, such as the version of freedom *Fight Club* discusses. The chapter explores *Lost Souls'* analysis of the strict social boundaries which demarcate the nuclear family, and highlights how these limits allow for the use of people as capitalist workers. The novel enforces this connection between neoliberal policies and a narrow conceptualization of the nuclear family through its use of vampirism, echoing Marx's claim that "capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks" (*Capital* 342). The nuclear family is depicted as an exploitative environment with strict boundaries within which fathers act as capitalist "vampires" which "suck life" from women in order to produce their offspring. The physical transgressions of the novel's vampiric characters, which engage in incestuous sexual acts and enjoy drinking blood, act as metaphors for the exploitative workings of the family, and frame the family as a space of capitalist production. The last section of the chapter interrogates how the novel "queers" the nuclear family, positioning Ghost as a character who resists the vampiric family and even envisions the possibility of an alternative form of social organization. Resisting the sexual and capitalist strategies of vampires and "vampiric" humans, Ghost acts as an antidote to their reliance on harmful exploitation. While his destruction of two vampires near the end of the novel suggests that queerness can form the basis of a radically new type of social order, the survival of three other vampires also questions this

utopian idea and forecasts the intimate relationships between queerness and neoliberalism Brite explores in his later novel *Exquisite Corpse*.

Chapter four explores another Brite novel, namely *Exquisite Corpse* (1996). Palahniuk and Ellis are both well-known authors on whose oeuvres a wide range of academic and non-academic analyses have been written. In comparison Brite is rarely considered in an academic context, particularly outside the strict boundaries of popular culture studies. However, his work connects ideology and physicality from a distinctly queer perspective, offering a crucial overview of the interactions between these concepts and their enactment through transforming bodies. Following *Lost Souls'* focus on the (re)production of boundaries, *Exquisite Corpse* focuses on a related function of transgression: its dissolution of boundaries. The first section of the chapter explores *Exquisite Corpse's* depictions of the interactive relationship between neoliberalism and queerness, correcting *Lost Souls'* utopian suggestion that queerness can function as a basis for radical social politics. Whereas *Lost Souls* depicts queerness as an alternative to sexualized capitalism, *Exquisite Corpse* analyses queerness as existing in the centre of a neoliberal society which "cannibalizes" all forms of sexuality and sexual acts and turns them into capitalist commodities. The queer sex acts its protagonists engage in become a representation of, rather than an antidote to, the dissolving mechanisms the neoliberal system relies on to satisfy its need for growth. The chapter focuses specifically on the novel's representation of globalization through metaphorical depictions of cannibalism, exploring how the story echoes Karl Marx's definition of capitalism as "the metabolism between man and nature" (*Capital* 133). Jay's cannibalization of Tran, a Vietnamese immigrant, functions as a terrifying representation of how globalized capitalism results in the symbolic consumption of foreign workers and resources. The final section of the chapter is devoted to a more abstract discussion of transgressive dissolution, inspired by *Exquisite Corpse's* descriptions of death as an important transformative moment. Andrew, a character who regards his ability to pretend that he is dead as a way to become a "superman" (162) with unlimited ideological powers, is explored as a representation of the complex interactions between ideology and physicality under neoliberalism. Foreshadowing the disjointed relationship between neoliberal ideology and financial practice discussed in chapter five, this section questions to what extent corporate ideology can exist without a physical, corporeal basis.

Chapter five, finally, focuses on Bret Easton Ellis's novel *American Psycho* (1991). The chapter explores how neoliberal transgressive acts such as financial deregulation

culminate in crisis, but also shows that crisis is always temporary, because it eventually leads to a reestablishment of neoliberalism as an ideology and economic practice. The chapter zooms in to a place which can be described as the heart of 1980s neoliberalism: Wall Street during the period in which the financial sector became an increasingly risky business. The connection between finance and physical trade lessened due to the rising popularity of program trading and junk bonds, and Wall Street came to represent a glamorous lifestyle epitomized by the figure of the “yuppie” (Ehrman 114). *American Psycho*’s detailed descriptions of extreme violence, rape, torture and cannibalism function as metaphorical representations of the predatory aspects of 1980s capitalism. Patrick Bateman’s destructions of bodies also show how the increasing importance of a competitive “corporate” environment resulted in a lack of contact with “corporeality”, or social practice. The novel extrapolates the social inequality which increased during the Reagan presidency³¹ into acts of murderous violence. However, Patrick’s resulting identity crisis also suggests that corporate ideology without a corporeal basis is vulnerable to crisis and in danger of destroying itself. Here the novel nods to events such as the 1987 savings and loans crisis and the convictions of traders such as Ivan Boesky for insider trading as examples of neoliberalism’s collapse as a result of its own greed. Nevertheless, the novel describes crisis as a temporary phenomenon which is inherent to neoliberalism as an ideological and economic system, allowing it to constantly redevelop itself. “But even after admitting this,” Patrick explains at the end of the novel, “. . . and coming face-to-face with these truths, there is no catharsis. . . . There has been no reason for me to tell you any of this. This confession has meant *nothing*...” (362). Only by constantly transgressing its own boundaries, *American Psycho* concludes, the system can guarantee its more or less continuous existence.

Together, these four novels provide an overview of how transgressive fiction reflects transgressive processes in its extra-textual context, and how transgressive processes redefine, reshape and rebuild ideologies. Transgression emerges as a (re)constructive process, rather than a permanently disruptive and destructive act. The moments of crisis *American Psycho* describes do not indicate that Patrick Bateman’s neoliberal system of beliefs is about to collapse, but are creative events which reconstruct the ideologies he embodies. The next chapter explores the early stages of the transgressive processes leading up to the violent crisis *American Psycho* describes. *Fight Club* interrogates the effects of economic deregulation and the use of freedom as a central

³¹ See Wilentz (2009).

neoliberal ideology. Starting off with a protagonist who seemingly wants to escape from within the limits of his neoliberal society, the novel profoundly complicates its apparently straightforward narrative. The ideologies the narrator positions as central to his utopian social vision, namely hegemonic masculinity and capitalist freedom, emerge as conflicted and potential harmful ideas. While the narrator describes his transgressive behaviour as a rebellious attempt to create a better society, his efforts reinstate rather than eliminate the oppressive forces he initially laments.

Chapter 2. Transgression and Ideology: Freedom, Infection and Masculinity in *Fight Club*

“The first step to eternal life is you have to die” (11) Tyler Durden explains to the nameless narrator in the first chapter of *Fight Club*. This summative statement of Tyler’s system of beliefs recurs throughout the novel as a key concern of both the story’s fictional world, and the extra-textual context it reflects. Freedom, one of neoliberalism’s most central tenets, can only exist and persist through the constant transgression of the boundaries between this ideological construct and the physical objects it depends on. Transgression, as this early moment in the story and Tyler’s later actions suggest, is not a marginal act or series of acts, but a process which is instrumental in the development and maintenance of ideologies. As Karl Marx clarifies in *Capital*, capitalism’s key mechanism is the trade process, which means that “the products of labour acquire a socially uniform objectivity as values, which is distinct from their sensuously varied objectivity as articles of utility” (166). Capitalism as a system depends on interaction with physical objects, which it transforms into commodities that can be traded and exchanged. Marx suggests that this transformative process contains an element of violence, arguing that “[i]f [commodities] are unwilling, [man] can use force; in other words, he can take possession of them” (178). The freedom neoliberalism proposes is a freedom of trade, which depends on the possession and exchange of products and objects. *Fight Club* shows how this transgressive enactment of freedom as a central neoliberal value frequently takes the form of physical violence, borrowing Marx’s idea that “unwilling” commodities can be controlled and transformed through “force”. The novel describes violent acts which range from organized fighting to terrorist attacks, and depicts these as metaphorical explorations of neoliberal ethics of deregulation and trade.

Throughout *Fight Club*, ideological conceptualizations of freedom exist in a complex and conflicted relationship with physicality. The novel illustrates David Harvey’s comment that “[t]he relation between representation and reality under capitalism has always been problematic” (*Enigma* 26) when it reveals that Tyler is not a real person, but a hallucination invented by the narrator, which allows him to envision the individual freedom and agency neoliberalism promises him. The novel represents and explores the conflicted status of freedom as an ideological construct through its descriptions of a wide variety of violated and mutilated bodies. In its very first scene, the narrator and Tyler argue about the meaning of freedom, while the office building they are standing on is about to explode. By

sticking his gun into the narrator's mouth, using the transgression of the boundaries between their bodies to support his claim, Tyler enforces his belief that ideological freedom, or what he refers to as a form of "eternal life" unrestricted by bodily limits, requires physical death. His transgressive physical violence acquires a specific goal: the removal of physical restrictions which hinder the development of freedom as an ideological construct, even if this requires the murder of a former friend. While Tyler threatens to kill the narrator, who has been trying to stop him from continuing his terrorist attacks, his army of "space monkeys" tries to blow up the building they are standing on in an attempt to destroy "every scrap of history" (12). History, in Tyler's view, is the ultimate form of limitation, and he aims to destroy it in order to create a deregulated social landscape in which his definition of freedom can be implemented. Only by forcing the office building to collapse and land on the National Museum, "which is Tyler's real target" (14), can the physical restrictions society forces upon freedom be overcome.

Fight Club highlights the most problematic aspect of this philosophy by focusing on the gun Tyler uses to enforce his point, thus questioning to what extent physical violence truly leads to the form of freedom he promotes, and arguing that his emphasis on freedom of trade automatically comes with a need for oppression and inequality. The story which unfolds after this first scene cannot only be read as one about the actions of one individual, the account of an increasingly sour relationship between former friends, or the fight of an individual against a friend who turns out to be imaginary, it must also be read as a metaphorical analysis of the workings of transgression in the extra-textual context in which the novel was conceived. The novel echoes the Reaganite emphasis on deregulation as a political and economic strategy, which materialized in policies such as the tax cuts of the Economic Recovery Tax Bill of 1981. These policies served to achieve more abstract ideological goals, particularly "the perfect freedom to pursue one's individual dreams" and the elimination of big government, "the great destroyer of homes and individuals" (Wilentz 135-6). Early in *Fight Club* Tyler literally destroys the home of the narrator, forcing the narrator to take part in his quest to redevelop his individual freedom and eliminate the authorities which currently prevent him from doing so. However, the novel also shows how the belief in deregulation in its extra-textual context provoked unexpected harmful consequences. After the destruction of his comfortable home the narrator comes to live with Tyler in his derelict mansion, full of "rusty nails to step on or snag your elbow on" (57). His risk-taking has left him in an unprotected environment which functions as an exaggerated reflection of the Reaganite society where "Reagan and his advisers made little

distinction between removing anti-competitive barriers and dumping wholesale the provisions protecting worker health and safety and the environment” (Schaller 99). The freedom Tyler proposes, *Fight Club* suggests, can only be enacted by endangering the bodies of the workers on which the neoliberal system depends.

The story explores freedom as a highly contradictory ideological construct which relies on bodily violation to exist and persist. Through its descriptions of Tyler and the grassroots movements he creates, *Fight Club* unpacks how transgressive physical violence in its extra-textual context does not undermine neoliberalism as an ideological system, but ultimately originates *from* this system and perpetuates it. Even extreme actions such as Timothy McVeigh’s bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Building in Oklahoma City in 1996, or the earlier bombing campaign of the Unabomber, can be read as being motivated by a desire to re-define freedom, rather than question its status as a central social concept. In *Fight Club*,³² Tyler’s emphasis on freedom, and his use of physical violence to create it, function as (re)enactments of the neoliberal desire to deregulate and eliminate limitations, rather than the production of a fundamentally different form of social organization. The narrator helps Tyler to start a fight club where men meet to fight each other, an act which the narrator initially describes as a way to temporarily escape from their existence as unfree consumers. In order to enforce more drastic social reforms, they eventually start Project Mayhem, a terrorist organisation which displays many similarities with extra-textual militia movements, because it similarly relies on interaction with the bodies of its members, its enemies, and innocent bystanders to communicate and enforce its beliefs. Just like extra-textual militia groups and grassroots movements such as The Order, Project Mayhem gradually evolves into a strictly organized alternative army which engages in increasingly violent acts against people and institutions which are perceived as threatening their quest. Towards the end of the novel the narrator loses control over Project Mayhem and grows increasingly wary of the group’s politics, because he comes to question whether its reliance on physical violence truly enables the creation of the freedom it promises. At this point, *Fight Club* invites critical considerations of Project Mayhem’s status as an anti-social phenomenon, particularly through its juxtaposition of the movement’s anti-capitalist beliefs with its economic dependence on the commodification of human bodies. Both

³² *Fight Club*’s Project Mayhem displays particularly strong similarities with the Michigan Militia, of which Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh was an associate, and with the Silent Brotherhood, a white supremacist group which engaged in bank robberies, bombings, and murder of its enemies during the 1980s. It is also similar to the fictional terrorist movement described in Andrew McDonald’s novel *The Turner Diaries* (1978), which inspired both Timothy McVeigh and the Silent Brotherhood, which took their alternative name The Order from the novel.

Project Mayhem's violence and the freedom the movement tries to enforce are revealed to function as re-enactments of the aggressive politics of deregulation and suspicion of the "big government" (Wilentz 135) Reagan's presidency promoted.

Through Marla Singer, the main female character, the story reveals how the neoliberal configuration of freedom is predominantly a "freedom of the market" (Harvey *Brief* 7), which depends on the trade of physical objects and objectified people. While the narrator regards objects as major restrictions to his personal freedom, Marla reveals how he can only achieve his ideal because he interacts with objects and bodies. "I know all of this," the narrator reflects while standing on top of the Parker Morris Building, "the gun, the anarchy, the explosion is really about Marla Singer" (14). This statement does not only illustrate that the narrator is secretly in love with Marla, but also shows how his seemingly rebellious search for freedom is actually a re-enactment of the consumer culture he tries to escape from. Early in the story the narrator problematically describes consumer culture as a feminizing phenomenon which turns men into "guys trying to look like men" (50), and implicitly views Marla as a human representative of the restrictions on freedom this emphasis on consumerism supposedly entails. Marla, however, uses her objectified status to interrogate Tyler's beliefs and frequently ridicules Tyler's self-proclaimed acts of rebellion, which include inserting pornographic images into family films and urinating into the dishes he serves as a banquet waiter. During their first meeting she shows him her dildo, confronting him with the fact that his ideological ideas depend on physical acts, interactions with objects, and objectification. Marla's dildo visualizes the inherent inconsistencies of Tyler's beliefs; the dildo's nature as a mass-produced plastic object "made of the same soft pink plastic as a million Barbie dolls" (61) reveals how his seemingly anti-social acts are transgressive re-enactments of neoliberal ethics of consumption. Towards the end of the story, the narrator is forced to admit his attachment to objects when he refuses to let Tyler kill Marla, who wants to prevent her from intervening with Project Mayhem's plans to destroy civilization. "I am nothing in the world compared to Tyler," he concludes, "I am helpless. I am stupid, and all I do is want and need things" (146). By admitting that he needs the "things" he earlier rejected, including Marla, the narrator affirms his connection to the mainstream consumer society he tried to get away from. His attachment to Marla contests the idea that consumerism can be escaped, as he will always "need things", but the idea that all his actions are "really about Marla Singer" (14) also suggests that they are an affirmation of his connection to the consumerist system she represents, rather than an attempt at its abolishment.

Further developing Marla's revelations, *Fight Club* affirms its discussion of freedom as a highly problematic construct through its depictions of violated, mutilated and diseased bodies. The story develops the body into the primary space where the boundaries between freedom as an ideological construct and the physical objects through which it is exercised are being transgressed. Consequently, the violated body becomes the site where the dynamics of transgression are exposed and interrogated. Many of *Fight Club's* descriptions of violated bodies nod to events in the novel's extra-textual context, where physical violence was used to achieve political goals. Its depiction of an exploding office building, for example, almost literally imitates the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, where 168 people were killed and 680 were injured. "The Parker-Morris Building will go over," the novel's narrator describes, "all one hundred and ninety-one floors, slow as a tree falling in the forest. Timber. You can topple anything. It's weird to think the place where we're standing will only be a point in the sky" (13). *Fight Club* also appears to echo the reasons cited by Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City bombing's main perpetrator, for his terrorist attack on the building and its innocent occupiers. "[T]he bombing was a retaliatory strike," McVeigh told author Gore Vidal in 2001, "a counter-attack, for the cumulative raids . . . that federal agents had participated in over the preceding years" (108). *Fight Club* depicts its main characters as motivated by a similar belief in the viability of using extreme physical violence as a means to establish freedom, while simultaneously highlighting the human cost of adhering to this principle. After describing the fights the narrator takes part in, and depicting the terrorist acts he commits, the novel shows how the narrator tries to destroy his own body in an attempt to stop Tyler from dominating his mind.

Reading *Fight Club* in conjunction with the Oklahoma City Bombing indicates how the violent transgressive acts the story describes do not emerge from outside the society they attack, but function as responses to it, and can even be interpreted as aggressive redefinitions of the freedom society promotes. Instead of acting as a denial of the importance of freedom as a central social construct, the novel suggests that the terrorism it describes should be read as its affirmation. Tyler Durden's description of his own actions as contesting a society he perceives as oppressive displays many similarities with the reasons Timothy McVeigh gave for his decision to bomb a building to make a political point. Whereas McVeigh defended the bombing as a "retaliatory strike, a counter-attack" (qtd. In Vidal 108), *Fight Club* develops this argument in fictional form by claiming that Tyler's actions are motivated by his desire to "remind these guys what kind of power they still have" (120) and direct the members of Project Mayhem towards a revolutionary

overthrowing of the government. In the novel's extra-textual context, McVeigh explicitly characterized his own actions as a response to events where the American government violently clashed with its own citizens,³³ and frames his attack as an attempt at social redevelopment rather than destruction which mimicked the strategies used by the government he contested. "From this perspective what occurred in Oklahoma City was no different than what Americans rain on the heads of others all the time" (110) he argued in his letter to Vidal, defining the Oklahoma City bombing as primarily undertaken to fight a government which murdered its own people in order to discipline them. In *Fight Club*, the narrator describes violence as the only conceivable option to create the freedom he desires, arguing that "I was tired and bored with my job and my furniture, and I couldn't see any way to change things. Only end them" (172). *Fight Club* borrows McVeigh's conceptualization of terrorist violence as a "retaliatory strike" and a way to achieve social transformation, showing how its extreme nature acts as a deeply problematic attempt to redevelop freedom through physical transgression.

The story points out connections between militant terrorists such as McVeigh and major neoliberal thinkers such as Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek, illustrating how they all regard limitations posed by the government as obstructions to the execution of freedom. By drawing these connections, the novel is able to unpack some of the key problems of freedom as a neoliberal ideal, particularly its potential violent effects. Project Mayhem, the terrorist movement Tyler and the narrator form, depends on the trade of soap, and thus adopts the capitalist practices of the society it claims to attack. Its emphasis on trade reflects the thoughts of Milton Friedman, one of neoliberalism's major thinkers, who argues that "[t]he kind of economic organization that provides economic freedom directly, namely, competitive capitalism, also promotes political freedom" (*Capitalism and Freedom* 9). Project Mayhem's threats to police commissioners and other representatives of the law are an extreme form of this suspicion against a centralized government. In *Capitalism and Freedom*, Friedman argues that "the great threat to freedom is the concentration of power. Government is necessary to preserve our freedom, it is an instrument through which we can exercise our freedom; yet by concentrating power in political hands, it is also a threat to freedom" (2). Whereas Friedman briefly points out the complex relationship between the government and freedom within neoliberal thought, *Fight Club* explores this relationship in a more radical form by describing Project Mayhem as a movement which aims to create freedom, yet forces strict rules upon its members.

³³ McVeigh is referring to the Waco Siege here, a violent confrontation between the federal government and the Branch Davidian sect, in which 76 people died.

Tyler tells its members to shave their heads and not to ask any questions, and it is suggested that members who dissent from his politics should be killed. In this way the story explores the potential violent and oppressive consequences of neoliberalism's emphasis on freedom, which aimed to "curb the power of labour, *deregulate* industry, agriculture, and resource extraction, and *liberate* the powers of finance both internally and on the world stage" (Harvey *Brief* 1, my emphasis). The extreme violence of Project Mayhem is suggested as an integral part of the way the neoliberal government constructs freedom, rather than a series of isolated incidents.

Even though *Fight Club* is permeated with images of destruction, and depicts violence as a consequence of the belief in freedom as a value which can be enacted through production and trade, the story suggests that violence ultimately functions as a transgressive process which reinforces social boundaries. Freedom as an ideological construct, the novel suggests, does not match with its practical incarnations. This focus reflects how, following Reagan's attempts to deregulate the American economy and limit the powers of the federal government, some argued that his policies actually resulted in a government which was larger and more oppressive than ever before. Even though neoliberalism appeared to blossom during the early 1990s³⁴ the American government was frequently depicted as oppressive and violent, particularly by militarized grassroots organisations, which criticized the neoliberal connection between freedom and economics. "The fact that Timothy McVeigh did a desperate and destructive thing does not conveniently negate the fact that government in America has become too large and oppressive," Eric F. Magnuson, director of anarcho-capitalist group The World Libertarian Order, stated in his response to the Oklahoma City Bombing, "it simply underscores it" (qtd. in Vidal 132). *Fight Club's* narrator starts to question the practices of Tyler towards the end of the novel, as he becomes increasingly worried by Project Mayhem's reliance on extreme violence. The novel suggests that an obsession with freedom as an ideological construct causes him to overlook its problematic relationship with violence, and that this ignorance ultimately turns freedom into a self-destructive concept. While the narrator's quest to freedom may seem rebellious, it ultimately leads him back to the status quo as he ends up within the walls of a hospital or mental institution; imprisoned as a result of his initial quest for freedom.

³⁴ See Harvey (1997).

2.1. Infected Masculinity: Capitalism and Consumer Society

Fight Club departs from an assumption of freedom as a specifically masculine phenomenon, arguing that society's freedom is threatened by the compromised status of masculinity as an ideological and social construct. Annoyed by the restrictions consumer culture puts on him, *Fight Club's* narrator decides to reconstruct masculinity and use it as a physical basis for the reconfiguration of freedom he desires. At the beginning of the novel the narrator faces a "spiritual depression" (149) because he has become a "slave to my nesting instinct" (43). By referring to the urge to prepare the home for an upcoming baby, a feeling normally only experienced by pregnant women, the narrator presents himself as "feminized" by consumer culture, and therefore unfree. The "feminine" passivity enforced by consumer culture, he argues, has made masculinity into a hollow concept which does not reflect the declining social status of actual men. This statement appears to echo extra-textual critical thought such as that noted by Susan Faludi, who recorded that "what the fathers really passed on to their sons was not the GI ethic but the GI 'action figure', a twelve-inch shrunken doll whose main feature was his ability to accessorize" (36). *Fight Club* reflects a society in which men increasingly lost their dominant social status, and gradually moved away from the idealized versions of masculinity promoted by 1980s cultural products such as Sylvester Stallone's *Rocky* (1976) and *First Blood* (1982), who themselves were presented as a post-Vietnam War "remasculinization" of American culture.³⁵ Masculinity became increasingly diverted between its ideal shape as a "hard body" (Jeffords *Hard Bodies* 13) and its practical incarnation as a decreasing form of economic power. "The role of family breadwinner," Faludi summarizes this view, "was plainly being undermined by economic forces that spat many men back into a treacherous job market during corporate 'consolidations' and downsizings" (595). *Fight Club's* narrator problematically connects this diminishing economic power of men to the supposed "feminized" status men acquire due to the pressures of consumer society, reflecting concerns expressed by leading members of the men's movement such as Robert Bly. "[M]any of these men are not happy," Bly describes in *Iron John*, "You quickly notice the lack of energy in them. They are life-preserving but not exactly life-giving" (2). The interpretation of feminization as weakness and passivity paves the way for *Fight Club's* problematic reading of freedom as a specifically masculine phenomenon.

³⁵ Jeffords, Susan. *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989.

While the narrator's negative description of the restrictive effects of consumer culture appears to turn the novel into a critique of neoliberalism, which promotes masculinity as an anti-social road to freedom, the story actually shows how his drive to transgress economic and social limits is motivated by the system's own emphasis on deregulation and freedom of trade. The narrator's assertion that his persistent insomnia, caused by his stressful lifestyle, leads him to see the world as "a copy of a copy of a copy" (21) frames his ideas as a "copy" of Milton Friedman's statement that "[p]olitical freedom means the absence of coercion of a man by his fellow men" (15). The physical discomfort the narrator experiences is caused by the discrepancy between ideology and practice, rather than his lack of belief in neoliberalism's promise of "individual freedom, liberty, personal responsibility and the virtues of privatisation, the free market and free trade" (Harvey *Brief* 10). When he cynically remarks that neoliberalism encourages people to "[b]uy the sofa, then for a couple of years you're satisfied that no matter what goes wrong, at least you've got your sofa issue handled" (44), the narrator does not denounce neoliberalism as an ideological system, but criticizes its practical incarnation as a feminized consumer culture. As is the case in more radical texts such as Andrew MacDonald's *The Turner Diaries*, which also uses masculinity as a basis for revolutionary action,³⁶ the narrator constructs passivity as a state from which he establishes his call for action. "As long as the government is able to keep the economy somehow gasping and wheezing along, the people can be conditioned to accept any outrage," *The Turner Diaries* suggests, echoing sentiments first given voice in Philip Wylie's now infamous *Generation of Vipers* (1942), "Despite the continuing inflation and the gradually declining standard of living, most Americans are still able to keep their bellies full today, and we must simply face the fact that that's the only thing which counts with most of them" (6). In *Fight Club*, a similar conceptualization of society as encouraging feminized passivity is used as a starting point from which freedom as an ideological construct can be put into practice.

Fight Club describes how the narrator's desire for freedom relies on a rhetorical mechanism which equates feminized passivity with the need for action; by stating that his body is ill, he invokes the need to cure it, and thus redefine it. During the day he works as a recall coordinator who calculates whether recalling faulty products is financially worthwhile for companies and places and putting, to borrow Noam Chomsky's phrase, "profit over

³⁶ Throughout *The Turner Diaries*, femininity is used as a disturbing metaphor for weakness and passivity. Social liberalism (as opposed to conservatism) is described as "the world view of men who do not have the moral toughness, the spiritual strength to stand up and do single combat with life, who cannot adjust to the reality that the world is not a huge, pink-and-blue, padded nursery in which the lions lie down with the lambs and everyone lives happily ever after" (42).

people" (26). "If anyone ever discovers our mistake," he explains, "we can still pay off a lot of grieving families before we come close to the cost of retrofitting sixty-five hundred leather interiors" (96). Economic decisions are described in biopolitical terms as making a potential difference between life and death, and as a result objects acquire a lethal power over humans. In its description of this harmful mechanism, the novel reflects the thoughts of a social activist whose views radically differ from MacDonald's, but who nevertheless expresses a similar critique of capitalism. "Just as man is governed, in religion, by the products of his own brain," Karl Marx argues in *Capital*, "so, in capitalist production, he is governed by the products of his own hand" (772). While Marx regards this dominance of objects as one of the reasons why capitalism restricts the freedom of people, and should therefore be abolished, *Fight Club* describes how the narrator calls for a redefinition of neoliberalism instead, which envisions people as holding power over objects rather than the other way around. The narrator's anger is not caused by neoliberalism's reliance on physical objects, but by the power objects have acquired over people. Marx's assertion that: "It is no longer the worker who employs the means of production, but the means of production which employ the worker" (425) is echoed by the narrator when he states that: "You're trapped in your lovely little nest, and the things you used to own, now they own you" (44). Even though *Fight Club* superficially appears to make a statement similar to Marx's, rejecting capitalism due to its reliance on objects and restriction of people's freedom, the novel gradually shows how the narrator works towards reinstating his own dominance in an attempt to give himself the freedom neoliberalism has promised him. "Everywhere I go, there's the burned-up wadded shell of a car waiting for me," the narrator muses, "I know where all the skeletons are. Consider this my job security" (31). The narrator suggests that his insider knowledge of the neoliberal reliance on physical violence enables him to blackmail the people who are responsible. Rather than critiquing neoliberalism for its violent basis, as Marx does, the narrator attempts to realize the neoliberal promise of individualism and tries to use the system for his own advantage to become active and free once more.

The narrator initially appears to aggressively dismiss idealized masculinity when he claims that "[t]he gyms you go to are crowded with guys trying to look like men, as if being a man means looking the ways a sculptor or art director says" (50). However, this type of statement ultimately does not signify his desire to abolish this masculine norm, or the neoliberal system which promotes it through cultural products such as Rocky, Rambo, and

the figure of the cowboy.³⁷ Rather than merely *look* like a man, the narrator seeks the authentic truth beneath the simulated exterior: he wants to *be* a man, and have the freedom and power he associates with masculinity. The narrator's engagement with men who do not conform to this ideal is therefore not a contradiction of the hegemonic ideal of masculinity.³⁸ It is a form of transgression which functions as the first step towards a redefinition of masculinity as the basis for freedom and power, through the reconstruction of the masculine body. The narrator's obsession with bodies as ideological representations reflects the more general emphasis on physicality in American culture, described by Jean Baudrillard as the "omnipresent cult of the body" (*America* 35). "It is the only object on which everyone is made to concentrate," Baudrillard muses in *America* (1988), "not as a source of pleasure, but as an object of frantic concern, in the obsessive fear of failure or substandard performance, a sign and an anticipation of death" (35). The narrator explicitly engages with the masculine body as an "anticipation of death" when he visits Remaining Men Together, a support group for men with testicular cancer. "Bob's big arms were closed around to hold me inside," the narrator describes one of the men he meets at cancer support groups, "and I was squeezed in the dark between Bob's new sweating tits that hang enormous, the way we think of God's as big" (16). Men such as Bob, who has developed breasts as a reaction to his hormone treatment, appear to be excluded from the hegemonic masculine ideal the narrator described earlier. Following his desire to look like a "perfect" man, Bob now has breasts, mutilated genitals, and "two grown kids who wouldn't return his calls" (22). "It's a stupid way to live," he explains when talking about his past life as a bodybuilder, "but when you're pumped and shaved on stage . . . This is better than real life" (21-2). The confrontation with a man who no longer conforms to the masculine ideal, exactly because he initially desired to do so, provides the narrator with opportunities for the transgression of his own restrictive lifestyle. By hugging Bob and physically touching his disfigured body, the narrator escapes from the restrictions of the ideal "guys trying to look like men" (50) and starts to envision an alternative lifestyle which revolves around transforming his own body and his use of it.

This interpretation is intensified by the narrator's assertion that "losing all hope was freedom" (22), which suggests that he metaphorically cannibalizes the dying masculine bodies he encounters, to reconfigure freedom by reinventing the masculine body. Death

³⁷ Sean Wilentz argues that the figure of the cowboy took on a new meaning during the Reagan era: "[I]t was the unfettered, hardworking entrepreneur who takes risks and, living by the inexorable market laws of supply and demand, either fails the test or makes a fortune" (135).

³⁸ See Connell (2005).

problematically comes to signify the removal of physical limitations, and is developed into a means to transgress the restrictions which prevent him from living as a truly “free” man. Throughout the story, the narrator problematically overlooks the difference between his own symbolic illness, caused by mental discomfort, and the lethal physical illness characters such as Bob are facing. He consumes the physical pain and suffering of men who do not conform to the neoliberal ideal of healthy, successful personhood, and turns it into a strategy which he intends to use for his own good. Dead and dying bodies become profitable commodities which can be bought and sold, a development which suggests that the “freedom” promised by death is primarily one of capitalist trade. “Life insurance pays off triple if you die on a business trip,” the narrator cynically remarks early in the story, “I prayed for wind shear effect. I prayed for pelicans sucked into the turbines and loose bolts and ice on the wings” (26). Rather than a suicidal statement, caused by his oppression as a capitalist worker, the narrator’s utterances are examples of his transgressive encounters with death and his transformation of the masculine body into an ideological tool. Tyler’s statement on the very first page of the novel, “the first step towards eternal life is you have to die” (11), is not a contradictory argument, but a summary of the narrator’s belief that through bodily violation, freedom as an ideological construct can be reinstated. While the novel unpacks the problematic aspects of this strategy later on – particularly the human costs associated with the emphasis on death and bodily violation – many of the early chapters explore how the narrator comes to see the destructive transformation of masculine bodies as a method to (re)create an economically inspired definition of freedom.

Tyler Durden, a hallucination of the narrator who represents the “free” and active masculinity the narrator desires, emerges as a direct consequence of the narrator’s initial forays into death and physical destruction. Through Tyler, the narrator is able to articulate the form of masculinity he wishes to reinstate. Tyler permits him to engage in transgressive physical violation, with the ultimate goal to use this masculinity as a basis for a reimagined conceptualization of freedom. Tyler relies heavily on his muscular body to communicate his masculine identity, using his body to fight other men, destroy other people’s bodies, and ultimately reinstate the freedom he believes in. The emphasis on Tyler’s body, even though he is a hallucination which lacks the physical dimensions of the narrator, is a continuation of existing American cultural uses of the body, particularly, as Elaine Scarry argues in *The Body in Pain*, during times of crisis:

[A]t particular moments when there is within a society a crisis of belief – that is, when some central idea or ideological or cultural construct has ceased to elicit a population’s belief either because it is manifestly fictitious or because it has for some reason been divested of ordinary forms of

substantiation – the sheer material factualness of the human body will be borrowed to lend that cultural construct the aura of “realness” and “certainty”. (14)

Tyler conforms to existing neoliberal ideals of masculinity as muscular and powerful, and functions as an alternative to the narrator’s own “damaged” and powerless masculinity. Whereas the narrator represents the type of men suffering from a “lack of energy” (2) that Robert Bly describes in *Iron John*, Tyler conforms to Bly’s ideal of the “Wild Man” and functions as a role model and a spiritual guide showing the narrator the way towards his renewed masculinity. “Wild Man energy,” Bly explains, “leads to forceful action undertaken, not with cruelty, but with resolve. The Wild Man is not opposed to civilization; but he is not completely contained by it either” (8). Tyler becomes the Wild Man who rebuilds his own masculinity by rebuilding his own body, but *Fight Club* eventually problematizes this definition by depicting Tyler as a cruel character who displays a strong lack of resolve.

This early description of Tyler as a generic, idealised masculine body suggests that Tyler’s imaginary body functions as a transgressive object through which masculinity and freedom are effectively redeveloped. At the same time, the fact that Tyler is a hallucination of the narrator highlights that the powerful masculinity he represents is an ideological construction. “How I met Tyler was I went to a nude beach” the narrator describes (32), narrating how he first imagined Tyler. By describing both men as naked, and focusing particularly on the physical characteristics of Tyler’s body, the novel emphasizes the importance of physicality as a basis for ideological (re)configurations, while it simultaneously describes Tyler as a prime physical example of existing masculine ideals. “Tyler was naked and sweating, gritty with sand, his hair wet and stringy, hanging in his face” (32) the narrator describes, implicitly depicting Tyler as a “Wild Man” who is not concerned with the “feminized” and passive aspects of neoliberal consumer culture, but overlooking how Tyler is also an example of the image of masculinity put forward by that culture. Tyler’s rugged appearance invokes associations with the body of Rambo in *First Blood*, in which Rambo hides from a group of police officers in a forest, and inspires the narrator in a way which uncannily reflects the symbolic value of Rambo as a Reaganite symbol.

In 1985 Ronald Reagan demonstrated the closed-circuit of ideology when he mentioned Rambo as providing inspiration for dealing with a hostage crisis. “Boy, after seeing ‘Rambo’ last night,” Reagan claimed, “I know what to do the next time this happens” (qtd. in *LA Times*). In Reagan’s statement, Rambo’s idealized masculinity, as a product of ‘remasculization’, becomes tautologically presented as a source of inspiration with the

ability to enable and maintain liberation. In *Fight Club*, Tyler's physicality acquires a similar function as an ideological symbol which communicates and enforces the narrator's desires. The narrator's detailed description of Tyler's physique turns him into nothing more than a naked and sweaty body, a stylistic choice which communicates the suggestion that Tyler is merely a figment of the narrator's imagination. "If I could wake up in a different place," the narrator muses, "at a different time, could I wake up as a different person?" (33). Tyler emerges as this ideal "different person", and even though the narrator does not discover that Tyler is a hallucination until the end of the novel, he functions as a catalyst which enables the narrator's transgressive redefinitions of freedom through physical engagement.

Tyler's overwhelmingly essentialised masculine appearance allows the narrator to develop a form of physical interaction which allows him to take on an active position of freedom, rather than submit himself to a passive existence as a "feminized" consumer. When they start fight club together, Tyler and the narrator develop fighting into a performative process which transforms the masculine body and removes the limitations which restrict freedom in the narrator's daily life. "Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed," Judith Butler summarizes in her definition of gender as a performed construct, "are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means" (151). Fight club becomes a form of fabrication through destruction, and allows the narrator to establish a sense of control from where he further expands his own agency. "Your word is law," he aggressively summarizes the effect fight club has on his personality, "and if other people break that law or question you, even that doesn't piss you off" (49). *Fight Club* is not the first text to comment on fighting as a way to renegotiating "laws" or norms, and displays many similarities with Joyce Carol Oates's meditations on boxing. "The boxing match is the very image," Oates declares in *On Boxing* (1987), "the more terrifying for being so stylized, of mankind's collective aggression; its ongoing historical madness" (21). Fighting, Oates argues, is an inherent aspect of society with a long cultural history, and as such fulfils a range of social functions. The narrator and Tyler perceive their own fights as rebellious and anti-social acts, permitting them to exercise a form of masculinity they believe society does not allow. However, the story questions to what extent masculinity truly is an anti-social performance which will give them the freedom they desire, particularly by positioning Tyler as a hallucination with extremely destructive tendencies.

Fight club is ultimately described as a movement which is not (completely) rebellious but puts a significant amount of effort into reinventing existing ideological definitions of masculinity and freedom. Instead of searching for new configurations of gender and questioning the connections between freedom and masculinity drawn in popular culture, Tyler and the narrator develop fight club into a micro-society which does not challenge the status quo. "Nothing was solved when the fight was over," the narrator crucially explains, "but nothing mattered" (53). This statement does not only implicitly question the efficacy of fight club as a radical movement but also interrogates the narrator's problematic equation of fight club with support groups. Apart from overlooking the ethical issues associated with his equation of his own feelings of "illness" with those experiencing life-threatening diseases, the narrator ignores the difference between fight club and support groups in terms of control. He repeatedly stresses that fight club allows men to be "a god for ten minutes" (48-9) and exercise dominance by hurting others, thus becoming active consumers rather than passive consumer "slaves". By simultaneously presenting fight club as a support group for spiritually diseased men, however, the narrator ignores the fact that physical illness cannot be controlled or overcome in the same way as a "spiritual depression". Fight club thus perpetuates and intensifies the harmful aspects of the society it pretends to attack, thriving on an artificial form of victimhood which adapts and appropriates the pain of others without acknowledging the radically different specifics of their circumstances.

While *Fight's Club's* explicit criticism of idealized masculinity and the contrast with the diseased body of Bob appears to suggest a rejection of ideological views of masculinity, the story actually transgressively redefines constructed masculinity and freedom in physical terms, instead of problematizing their ideological nature and making room for alternative configurations. Tyler's function as a "Wild Man", whose body image acts as a counterweight to the perceived debilitating effects of neoliberalism, is an artificial ideal which signifies a new incarnation of the masculinity ideal rather than its rejection. "You see a guy come to fight club for the first time, and his ass is a loaf of white bread," the narrator describes, "You see this same guy here six months later, and he looks carved out of wood" (51). This description suggests that a body that "looks carved out of wood" is inherently superior to and more masculine than a body which looks differently. "Even with his two black eyes and blond crew cut, you see his tough pretty scowl without wrinkles or scars. Put him in a dress and make him smile, and he'd be a woman" (128) the narrator pejoratively states when he describes one of fight club's members, dismissing him as

“feminized” and therefore inferior to himself. Even though Bob eventually joins fight club and regards it as an alternative for Remaining Men Together, *Fight Club*’s establishment of an idealized male body image suggests that harmful visions of masculinity are not being abolished but redefined. Bob’s participation in fight club eventually causes his death when he takes part in a terrorist attack plotted by Project Mayhem, fight club’s more extreme incarnation. This suggests that there is ultimately no space for “diseased” masculinity in fight club and that its conceptualization of freedom, as a result, is limited. Fight club’s transgressiveness initially appears to lie in its aggressive dismissal of idealized versions of masculinity invented by capitalist consumer culture, paired with a strong desire to escape from this oppressive system and exercise individual freedom. As the novel proceeds, however, it develops fight club into a transgressive environment which redevelops ideological constructs through physical interaction, instead of contesting their existence.

2.2. Infecting Society: Developing Project Mayhem

Not satisfied with the existence of fight club as a marginal social group, Tyler and the narrator decide to create Project Mayhem, a movement which embarks on a process of radical social transformation through an attack on the body politic. “You can build a tolerance to fighting,” the narrator explains, “and maybe I needed to move on to something bigger” (123). Project Mayhem moves beyond the idea that masculinity is in crisis, echoing instead Tim Edwards’ statement that “masculinity in terms of the male sex role is itself *ipso facto* crisis-inducing” (17). “In this sense,” Edwards argues in *Cultures of Masculinity*, “masculinity is not *in* crisis, it *is* crisis” (17). Similarly, *Fight Club* maps the transformation of fight club from a marginal location for the enactment of infected masculinity *in* crisis into a space for the creation of a new mainstream definition of infectious masculinity *as* crisis. In doing so, the novel draws parallels between masculinity and the militia movement in its extra-textual context, echoing the metaphorical use of illness in 1990s discussions about the rapid spread of the militia movement. “Americans could not ignore this same *disease* in the body politic: it was *contagious*, and those *infected* were well-armed” (15, my emphasis) Kenneth Stern describes in his analysis of the rapid growth of the militia movement during the early 1990s. In its symbolic use of illness to signify danger and infectiousness, *Fight Club* also reflects 1980s discourse on HIV/AIDS as a “threat [that] loomed everywhere” (Shilts xxi). Despite the threat that emerges from its diseased and militarized nature, Project Mayhem’s transgressiveness does not lie in its

seeming resistance to society but predominantly in its use of bodily violation in order to (re)create freedom as an ideological construct. The movement transforms illness from a form of vulnerability into a type of aggressive action, but overlooks the differences between physical and symbolic illness, thus making itself vulnerable to reduplicating the inequality it claims to abolish. Ultimately *Fight Club* uses Project Mayhem to trace the violent consequences of neoliberalism's emphasis on freedom and turns the movement into a fictional representation of the exploitation on which capitalism relies.

In *Fight Club*, Tyler frames his terrorist actions as a direct response to the government's oppression of its citizens, and its inability to turn its promise of freedom into reality. He presents Project Mayhem as a movement which aims to fulfil the failed promises of the neoliberal government by violently installing the freedom social practice has persistently undermined. "The people you're trying to step on, we're everyone you depend on . . ." Tyler explains, "We control every part of your life. We are the middle children of history, raised by television to believe that someday we'll be millionaires and movie stars and rock stars, but we won't. And we're just learning this fact" (166). His dissolution, Tyler suggests, originates from society's emphasis on freedom as a powerful value and its simultaneous practical establishment of social inequality, which restricts his ability to exercise freedom as an individual. Tyler's desire for destruction, the novel suggests, originates from this contradiction and entails an infectious redevelopment of freedom in his own terms. His pointing out of governmental failure as a legitimization of his own actions echoes statements made in the novel's extra-textual context, particularly those made by Timothy McVeigh during his trial after the Oklahoma City bombing. As a defence of his actions, McVeigh cited a notorious 1928 law case which investigated the legitimacy of governmental wiretapping without judicial approval. "Our government is the potent, the omnipresent teacher. For good or for ill, it teaches the whole people by its example. *Crime is contagious*," Associate Justice Brandeis wrote in his dissenting opinion during the *Olmstead v. the United States* case, "If the government becomes a lawbreaker, it breeds contempt for law; it invites every man to become a law unto himself; it invites anarchy" (Olmstead, my emphasis). In *Fight Club*, Project Mayhem becomes a means to create the freedom that social practice currently does not allow, using the government's own violent strategies to achieve this goal.

Fight Club's discussion of Project Mayhem as an ideologically obsessed movement, which uses violence to enact the freedom it desires, develops fighting into an infectious act of warfare which eliminates the restrictions threatening Tyler's ideological reconstruction

of freedom. "What we have to do, people," Tyler dramatically states when he starts Project Mayhem, "is remind these guys what kind of power they still have" (120). Project Mayhem's insistence that society is in crisis and needs to be aggressively reconstructed, combined with its legitimization of its violent actions as protective measures taken during a physical and spiritual "war", resonates with the argument of extra-textual militia groups which frame their actions in a similar way. "Many of the people who join militias see themselves as Klan members did in the 1960s," Kenneth Stern argues in *A Force Upon the Plain*. "They do not define themselves as belonging to hate groups, but as *citizens trying to reclaim and preserve a way of life under attack*" (44, my emphasis). Even though extremely violent actions such as the Oklahoma City Bombing, committed by a former associate of the Michigan Militia, contradict the self-proclaimed "patriotism" (Faludi 413) of the militia movement, both the militia movement and the fictional Project Mayhem describe themselves as infectious social groups which originate from within society and which engage in a government-inspired politics of warfare. Project Mayhem's bombings of museums, offices and credit card company premises are not attempts at social destruction, but should be read as aggressive enactments of freedom as a freedom of trade, and attempts to assume a position of social dominance.

Working from this background, *Fight Club* develops illness and infection into symbolically regenerative mechanisms which destroy society in order to allow for its reconstruction. Largely ignoring the ethical implications of using illness as a strategy of social redefinition, the novel explores illness as a transgressive method which eliminates physical limits, creating the opportunity for Tyler and the narrator to establish a new type of society. "It's Project Mayhem that's going to save the world," Tyler specifies, "A cultural ice age. A prematurely induced dark age. Project Mayhem will force humanity to go dormant or into remission long enough for the Earth to recover" (125). Tyler's idealization of destruction echoes Susan Sontag's reflections on the social function of illness as a form of regeneration. "The sense of cultural distress or failure gives rise to the desire for a clean sweep, a tabula rasa," Sontag argues in *Illness as Metaphor*, "No one wants a plague, of course. But, yes, it would be a chance to begin again. And beginning again – that is very modern, very American, too" (173). Through its destruction of a credit card company building and a national history museum (14) Project Mayhem aims to do away with the restrictions of history and create room for the unlimited exercise of freedom. "You'll hunt elk through the damp canyon forests around the ruins of Rockefeller center, and dig clams next to the skeleton of the Space Needle leaning at a fort-five-degree angle," Tyler

envisions, “We’ll paint the skyscrapers with huge totem faces and goblin tikis, and every evening what’s left of mankind will retreat to empty zoos and lock itself in cages as protection against bears and big cats and wolves that pace and watch us from outside the cage bars at night” (124). However, the novel also reflects Foucault’s explorations of the symbolic function of illness, which specifies how symbolic illness and destruction ultimately lead to the reestablishment of limits. “The plague is met by order; its function is to sort out every possible confusion” (197), Foucault asserts in *Discipline and Punish*, illustrating how the transgression of physical boundaries, which illness evokes, ultimately supports the (re)creation of social order. Tyler’s vision indicates his desire to change the urban jungle into a natural jungle, re-creating an anarchist society where life is completely unregulated because there is no government. However, he also suggests that this desire for anarchy will ultimately result in the reinstatement of a form of social order.

The establishment of Project Mayhem occurs as a result of a series of physical transgressions, which reach their climax in the narrator’s positioning of himself as a mutilated and possibly diseased victim of capitalist exploitation. The fact that the narrator uses this monstrous version of himself to blackmail the hotel manager he works for, and use the money to fund Project Mayhem, suggests that Project Mayhem is a continuation of neoliberal mechanics of trade rather than an attempt at its abolition. When the manager refuses to pay him, the narrator injures himself, creating a situation in which his manager appears to be guilty of hurting him. “The monster crawls across the carpet, hot and picking up the lint and dust sticking to the blood as it claws,” the narrator describes himself, “And it crawls close enough to grab the manager of the Pressman Hotel around his pinstriped ankle and say it. *Please*” (116). Even though the narrator’s self-imposed monstrosity appears to turn him into an example of monsters as “disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration” (Cohen 6), it is only a temporary transgression of the boundaries which separate him from diseased and socially ostracised “others”. While the narrator uses his monstrous body to assume a position of economic power, he problematically does so by preying on the prejudice faced by people who suffer from actual physical illnesses such as HIV/AIDS. The basis for his blackmail of his manager consists of a series of physical pranks committed during his job as a banquet waiter, during which he and Tyler contaminated the dishes they served with urine and semen. The fearful response of the manager to this confession echoes the anxieties emerging during the early stages of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, during which the causes of the disease were not yet known and many believed that the disease could be

contracted through “routine household contact” (Shilts 301). The actions of the narrator, and the resulting establishment of Project Mayhem, should be read as temporary physical transgressions of the social boundaries which separate the narrator from genuinely oppressed and diseased people. Instead of questioning the origins of the manager’s fear, or the unequal economic relationship which connects them, the narrator uses physical transgression to overpower him.

The narrator’s earlier descriptions of his masculinity as damaged and diseased emerge as acts of voluntary transgression committed by an individual in an existing position of male privilege. Tyler and the narrator routinely use their masculine bodies to assert their dominance, reflecting Joyce Carol Oates’s statement that “a man’s masculinity is his use of his body” (*On Boxing* 72). “You’re a projectionist and you’re tired and angry,” Tyler explains, “but mostly you’re bored so you start by taking a single frame of pornography collected by some other projectionist that you find stashed away in the booth, and you splice this frame of a lunging red penis or a yawning wet vagina close-up into another feature movie” (29-30). From acts of exhibitionism, designed to shock unsuspecting audiences, Tyler and the narrator proceed to transgress physical boundaries by forcing people to ingest their bodily fluids. These actions emerge as confirmations of existing patriarchal power and form the basis of the narrator’s later blackmail of his manager. “I got mine hard and stuck it in all their orange mousses” (80) the narrator mentions, before cheerfully narrating how Tyler urinates in a bowl of tomato soup, forcing wealthy dinner guests to consume his urine and physically transgress the social boundaries which separate them. “Tyler and me, we’ve turned into the guerrilla terrorists of the service industry,” the narrator states, “Dinner party saboteurs” (81). What makes their actions so terrifying to the hotel manager is the threat of disease and contamination they pose. “Doing stuff got to be boring,” the narrator explains, directly followed by his description of a doctor telling him about hepatitis bugs. “I asked the doctor where we could get our hands on some of these hepatitis bugs” (85) he narrates, suggesting that Tyler and he consider infecting people with a dangerous disease. Ignoring how this plan could result in the infection and suffering of innocent bystanders, the narrator proceeds to describe Project Mayhem as a social infection with the potential to destroy society and create the possibility to start anew. By positioning his pranks as a continuation of being “bored” (29), however, the story frames this drive as one originating from a position of masculine privilege and proceeds to show how the pranks forecast a need for exploitation and oppression.

Freedom as a freedom of trade, unaffected by “coercion of a man by his fellow men” (Friedman 15), is conceptualized as an ideology which justifies inequality and depends on exploitation. The introduction of guns into *Fight Club* occurs as a pivotal moment in the story, which highlights how this specific conceptualization of freedom paradoxically depends on oppression. “It was so heavy for something so small,” the narrator describes the gun Tyler shows him, “as if a giant thing like a mountain or a sun were collapsed and melted down to make this” (122). Tyler views the gun as a powerful extension of the masculine body and lectures how “the barrel of the gun focuses the exploding power and the rocketing slug like a missile out of a silo, like our jism, in one direction” (122). The gun’s ability to consolidate power in physical form amplifies the novel’s critique of neoliberal freedom as a construct which allows a small elite to exercise power over exploited workers. “Tyler didn’t care if other people got hurt or not,” the narrator realizes, “The goal was to teach each man in the project that he had the power to control history” (122). The first time the narrator actually uses the gun occurs when he threatens an all-night-store clerk and forces him to talk about his failed dreams. “I know who you are,” the narrator tells the clerk after the clerk has told him that he wants to be a vet, “I know where you live. I’m keeping your license, and I’m going to check on you, mister Raymond K. Hessel. In three months, and then in six months and then in a year, and if you aren’t back in school on your way to being a veterinarian, you will be dead” (154). This scene reveals the sharp contrast between freedom as an ideology of unlimited power and its practical limitations; not only does the narrator ignore the social and financial restrictions which prevented Raymond Hessel from following his dreams, he also enforces Hessel’s freedom at gunpoint. Freedom is depicted as a neoliberal construction which problematically undermines itself when put into practice.

Violence and oppression, the novel suggests, are the physical constitutive strategies of the neoliberal adaptation of freedom as a central value. Freedom becomes a warped concept which enables the oppression of workers rather than their liberation. During his encounter with Raymond Hessel, the narrator realizes that he functions as the physical incarnation of Tyler, a realization which severely compromises his sense of himself as a free man. “This is what Tyler wants me to do,” he concludes, “These are Tyler’s words coming out of my mouth. I am Tyler’s mouth. I am Tyler’s hands” (155). This epiphany comes long after Tyler has first laid out his ideas and physically enforced them by burning the narrator’s hand with lye. “Tyler’s saliva did two jobs,” the narrator explains, “The wet kiss on the back of my hand held the flakes of lye while they burned. That was the first job.

The second was lye only burns when you combine it with water. Or saliva" (74). Tyler proceeds to tell him a parable which suggests that all modern societies are based on the destruction of people's bodies, and that his own violent acts are a logical continuation of this mechanism. Soap, Tyler argues, was accidentally invented when the ashes of sacrificed humans merged with fat. "When the soap fell into the river," he explains, "after a thousand years of killing people and rain, the ancient people found their clothes got cleaner if they washed at that spot" (77). Soap becomes a product which illustrates Tyler's belief that physical destruction and oppression are justified when they are used to achieve the higher goal of a "free" society. "Without their death, their pain, without their sacrifice," he concludes, "we would have nothing" (78). Tyler's beliefs emerge as a terrifying version of Marx's critique of capitalism as an ideology which turns human beings into physical tools. "From the standpoint of society, then," Marx argues in *Capital*, "the working class, even when it stands outside the direct labour process, is just as much an appendage of capital as the lifeless instruments of labour are" (719). As attractive as the prospect of individual freedom may sound in theory, *Fight Club* consequently suggests that social practice reveals that it can only be enacted through the violent transformation and destruction of people's bodies.

Tyler's violence, especially in relation to soap making, shows how capitalism, and therefore the neoliberal promise of freedom, are built on an unequal system of trade, consumption, and inequality. The novel particularly highlights the gendered inequality this system assumes and perpetuates, not only by making masculinity into the basis of the narrator's quest for power, but also by describing soap making as the mutilation of female bodies. Tyler produces his first batches of soap using fat from the body of Marla Singer's mother, which Marla keeps in the narrator's freezer so that she can use it for later cosmetic operations. "This stuff in the fridge at home," the narrator explains, "it was Marla's collagen trust fund. Whenever her mom grew any extra fat, she had it sucked out and packaged. Marla says the process is called gleaning" (91). When she discovers that her mother's excess body fat has been used to make soap Marla angrily shouts that "[y]ou boiled my mother!" (93), aggressively rehumanizing the bodily matter which Tyler viewed as a mere resource. After the fight between Marla and the narrator, Tyler ridicules her attachment to her mother's fat, and even sends Marla's mother a box of chocolates to guarantee a future supply of resources to expand his rapidly growing soap factory. "Things would have been worse," he argues, "if you'd accidentally eaten what was in one of those sandwich bags. If you'd got up in the middle of the night sometime, and squeezed out the

white goo and added California onion soup mix and eaten it as a dip with potato chips. Or broccoli” (90). Even though Marla calls the narrator “a ghoul and a cannibal” (90), Tyler maintains that he abides to some sort of morality, dismissing Marla’s concerns as an overreaction to what he perceives as a logical continuation of a long history of soap production from natural fat. Soap eventually becomes Project Mayhem’s main source of funding, a development which extends Marx’s analysis of capitalism’s use of worker’s bodies into a depiction of the literal use of bodies as a basis for soap.

Through its description of Project Mayhem as a capitalist movement which uses bodies to expand and grow, *Fight Club* shows how the freedom neoliberalism promotes depends on the violation and oppression of people, and thus problematically undermines its ideological promise. Soap becomes a physical and commercial product loaded with implications of power and violence which it simultaneously engenders and obscures, or “cleans”. “For the first time since I’ve known him,” the narrator realizes after moving in with Tyler, “Tyler had some real play money. Tyler was making real bucks. Nordstrom’s called and left an order for two hundred bars of Tyler’s brown sugar facial soap before Christmas. At twenty bucks a bar, suggested retail price, we had money to go out Saturday night” (87). Ironically Tyler’s main fat supply are the containers of cosmetic surgery clinics, which overflow with human fat removed during liposuctions, and by turning it into soap he sells it back to the people who paid significant sums to have it removed from their bodies. Project Mayhem becomes a movement which engages in economic trade and promotes the consumption of unnecessary objects. It produces and sells a product of the type the narrator used to describe as the origin of his “damaged masculinity”. The soap hardly has a physical purpose and functions predominantly as a decorative, status-enhancing product. As is the case in Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*, the primary function of this cosmetic product is not to physically clean, but to look impressive and expensive and obscure the dark undercurrents of the context it is produced in.³⁹ The soap produced by Project Mayhem would have fitted perfectly into the interior of the narrator’s destroyed condo and matched with his “set of hand-blown green glass dishes with the tiny bubbles and imperfections, little bits of sand, proof they were crafted by the honest, simple, hard-working indigenous aboriginal peoples of wherever” (41). However, it is still a physical object produced through violent bodily engagement with human bodies. The Paper Street Soap Company is described as an almost physical entity which consumes the bodies of its workers in order to guarantee a continuous production and growing profit. “Tyler’s rented

³⁹ See chapter five for an in-depth analysis of the significance of beauty products in *American Psycho*.

house on Paper Street,” the narrator describes, “is a living wet thing on the inside from so many people sweating and breathing. So many people are moving inside, the house moves” (133).⁴⁰ Not only does Project Mayhem appear to transform its members to slave workers, the freedom it promotes also depends on the production and consumption of products, and is thus the opposite of the radical social overhaul Tyler initially promised.

Fight Club uses Project Mayhem to engage in a detailed deconstruction of the internal contradictions evoked by neoliberalism’s conceptualization of freedom as “freedom of the market and of trade” (Harvey *Brief* 7). It maps how this ideal can only be established through constant transgressions of the boundaries between physicality and ideology, culminating in the literal use of bodies to produce soap. Despite its initial anti-social appearance, Project Mayhem exists as a capitalist “copy of a copy of a copy” (21), which reinstates its ideological illusion of freedom rather than its actual establishment. Not only does Project Mayhem profit economically from the consumer culture the narrator initially rejects, it actively copies its tendency to consume human beings and feeds the result back into society. It brainwashes its members, better known as space monkeys, and turns them into mindless workers with no agency of their own. “No one guy understands the whole plan,” Tyler explains, “but each guy is trained to do one task perfectly” (130), reflecting Marx’s statement that workers are transformed “into a part of a specialized machine” (547). Project Mayhem even uses the bodies of its members after their death to enhance its production and guarantee its growth. “The little spot of gold in the dirt is a molar with a gold filling,” the narrator observes with horror, “Next to it surface two more molars with silver amalgam fillings. It’s a jawbone” (136). Project Mayhem members who have died under suspicious circumstances are buried in the factory’s herb garden, functioning as a fertilizer for the plants which scent the company’s soap. While the movement appears to use the characteristics of capitalism in order to fund its terrorist subversion of society and its reestablishment of freedom, its soap factory indicates the deeply problematic implications of this process, because it ultimately denies its own members the freedom it promised them and forces them back into its productive mechanisms.

⁴⁰ The name Paper Street can be read as a pun which emphasizes the artificial ideological function of the products the soap factory creates. A “paper street” is a street which does not actually exist but appears on a map, for example because it has been planned but has never been built. Just like Tyler, who is a hallucination rather than an actual man, the Paper Street soap company is an ideological construction rather than an actual factory.

2.3. Rethinking the Ethics of Physicality: Queering Gender and the Politics of Illness

In describing Project Mayhem as a movement which bases the establishment of its freedom on existing capitalist mechanics of production and trade, *Fight Club* suggests that its conceptualization of freedom automatically depends on the engagement with objects and objectified people. Even though Tyler's speeches resonate heavily with the need to destroy physical limits in order to eliminate the boundaries which restrict the freedom he aspires to, the novel immediately indicates that this wish is an unattainable and potentially harmful one. The destruction of the narrator's carefully assembled apartment functions as a pivotal moment, which articulates the increasing influence of Tyler and inspires the narrator to celebrate the disappearance of his possessions. "A foot of concrete is important," he muses when he witnesses the aftermath of the explosion, "when a volcanic blast of burning gas and debris that used to be your living-room set and personal effects blows out your floor-to-ceiling windows and sails down flaming to leave just your condo, only yours, a gutted charred concrete hole in the cliffside of the building" (41). The narrator expresses delight when he realizes that he, at least temporarily, has been liberated from the need to consume and can start a new existence as a "free" man unencumbered by the demands of consumer culture. "May I never be complete," he concludes, "May I never be content. May I never be perfect. Deliver me, Tyler, from being perfect and complete" (46). The narrator moves into the derelict house Tyler occupies and initially welcomes its lack of comfort. "The house that Tyler rents, it has three stories and a basement. We carry around candles. . . ." he narrates, "The rain trickles down through the house, and everything wooden swells and shrinks, and the nails in everything wooden, the floors and baseboards and window casings, the nails inch out and rust" (57). Tyler's decaying house, which lacks comfort or beauty, differs radically from the narrator's former "lovely little nest" (44) and appears to offer the narrator a free existence which is not restricted by the need to consume and engage with objects. However, Tyler rapidly radicalizes once they live together, ultimately stating that: "[T]he first step towards eternal life is you have to die" (11). This statement problematically forecasts the potential harmful consequences of the narrator's quest for freedom, and suggests that freedom as an ideological trade-driven construct affects and destroys the physical objects on which it depends. Tyler's specification that "you have to die" (11, my emphasis) even suggests that this unlimited freedom comes at the cost of the narrator's own body.

Even though the story's explicit depictions of masculinity as being in crisis feed critical interpretations of the novel as being "about restoring to men a sense of their own masculinity and a hardened male body no longer softened and sapped by the feminizing influences of the dominant culture of late capitalism" (Buchbinder 2), *Fight Club* immediately problematizes the use of a gendered basis to uphold a fundamentally unequal definition of freedom. By taking the recreation of powerful masculinity as the basis for the (re)establishment of freedom, the narrator automatically positions freedom as a specifically masculine trait which depends on the maintenance of a sharp contrast with a problematic definition of femininity. Throughout the novel, femininity is defined as an obsession with objects and the submission to the mechanics of consumer culture. "What you see at fight club is a generation of men raised by women" (54) the narrator infamously explains, connecting the absence of fathers and the prominence of mothers to masculine discomfort in contemporary society, and reading this tension as the root cause of his perceived lack of freedom. "The people I know who used to sit in the bathroom with pornography," he states, "now they sit in the bathroom with their IKEA furniture catalogue" (43), developing the supposed emasculation consumer culture promotes into a general antipathy towards women and femininity. *Fight Club* describes a simplistic view of gender, which echoes controversial texts such as *The Turner Diaries*, where this juxtaposed gender model is used to support and legitimize the narrator's violent reconstruction of freedom which, by default, excludes women and other people who do not conform to Tyler's alpha-masculinity.

The novel resists Tyler's conceptualization of femininity as a passive obsession with objects by queering the power relationships between its masculine and feminine characters. Because Tyler regards being feminine, becoming feminine, or even just being associated with femininity as a form of weakness, femininity acquires the potential to weaken his masculinity. Throughout the novel Tyler's aggressive masculinity is constructed in contrast to the femininity of Marla Singer, the woman the narrator is secretly in love with. She represents the main threat to Tyler's ideas because, as the only substantial female character of the novel, "[w]ithout Marla, Tyler would have nothing" (14). The contrast between Tyler and Marla reflects extra-textual concerns about masculinity as being able to "implode into femininity" (Edwards 17), or losing its power as a result of its evolution towards "contemporary consumerist, fashion-conscious or sexually uncertain masculinities such as metrosexuality" (Edwards 17). Contrary to Tyler, who is an ideological hallucination, Marla is described as a substantial, individual woman rather than a

representation of idealized femininity. “Black hair and pillowy French lips. Faker. Italian dark leather sofa lips. You can’t escape” (36) the narrator muses, depicting Marla as a dark and rather sinister character. Crucially, Marla is referred to as a piece of furniture with lips looking “pillowy” like a “leather sofa”, a description which turns her into a physical object with the potential of being used and dominated. At the same time she becomes an object which looks back at its objectifier, changing the power dynamics between them by reversing the boundaries which separate them. “I can’t cry with this woman watching me” (22) the narrator complains after Marla has infiltrated his support groups and the two meet for the first time. In contrast to Tyler’s ephemeral nature, Marla arises as a substantial woman who has the potential to disrupt the violent strategies he uses to establish his own freedom at the cost of that of others.

While the narrator’s description of Marla as an objectified “thing” is a disturbing example of misogynist discourse, it also allows the story to highlight the narrator’s own attachment to objects. It emphasizes that the type of masculinity Tyler represents can only be constructed in contrast to Marla’s femininity, and that this need for contrast creates a form of dependency. “I am helpless,” the narrator laments when he admits that he loves Marla, “I am stupid, and all I do is want and need things” (146). Even though the description of Marla as a “thing” is disturbing, the narrator’s realization that he desires her undermines his ideological configurations of masculinity as dominant and in control. “She’s not going to start keeping her junk in this house,” he angrily muses when Marla asks him whether she can keep her mother’s body fat in his freezer. “The last thing I want is Marla moving in, one piece of crap at the time” (90). Marla nonetheless proceeds to physically invade the house on Paper Street, transgressing the narrator’s self-constructed boundary between idealized masculinity and objectified femininity. By placing her own body and that of her mother in the narrator’s house, she aggressively asserts that he cannot escape from the “things” he claims to despise and that his creation of fight club and Project Mayhem are recreations *of* rather than antidotes *to* the consumer culture he argued against earlier in the story. “You buy furniture,” the narrator laments in one of the first chapters, “You tell yourself, this is the last sofa I will ever need in my life. Buy the sofa, then for a couple of years you’re satisfied that no matter what goes wrong, at least you’ve got your sofa issue handled” (44). Marla, with her “Italian dark leather sofa lips” (36) suggests that she is a “sofa issue” (44) that cannot be “handled” (44) and that the unlimited power and control the narrator aspires to are an illusion.

Fight Club develops Marla into a figure who transgresses the passive objectified status the narrator tries to confine her to. Echoing Susan Faludi's description of 1990s masculinity as "ornamental", Marla exposes Tyler to a dildo, an act which highlights the artificial nature of his own idealized masculinity and exposes it as a construct which depends on physical objectification. The positioning of a fake penis as an object of power suggests that Tyler's masculinity depends on a physical foundation and that he is trapped within the restrictions of the narrator's physical body on which he preys. When Tyler enters Marla's hotel room for the first time his attention is immediately drawn to her dildo on the dresser. "On the dresser, there's a dildo made of the same soft plastic as a million Barbie dolls" (61) Tyler notices, unable to stop looking at it. Superficially, the presence of the dildo suggests that Marla does not need men for sexual pleasure and cannot be dominated through sex, undermining Tyler's perception of femininity as weak and submissive. In a more sophisticated sense, Marla's ownership of a phallus suggests that she has acquired the powers which the phallus symbolizes, and that she has constructed a form of masculinity which could potentially threaten Tyler's own identity. Foreshadowing Judith Halberstam's statement that "this is where it becomes hard to uphold the notion that male femininity presents a greater threat to social and familial stability than female masculinity" (6), Marla sarcastically remarks that: "Don't be afraid. It's not a threat to you" (61). The plastic appearance of the fake penis, described as being made from the same material as artificial dolls, confronts Tyler with the artificiality of his own constructed masculinity. It ridicules Tyler's practices of adding stills of erections into films, questioning to what extent the insertion of an image of a penis is an act of real power.

Because it shows that Tyler's masculinity is an artificial construct based on a warped interaction with physical objects, the dildo also confronts Tyler with the inherent vulnerability this interaction causes. The absence or disappearance of a physical basis for Tyler's masculinity comes to act as a threat to the stability of his conceptualization of freedom. Early in the story, this idea is introduced when the narrator's luggage is held at the airport, because his suitcase has started to vibrate during his flight. "Nine times out of ten," a security guard explains to him, "the vibration is an electric razor. . . . The other time, it's a vibrating dildo" (42). The narrator's potential dildo, or fake penis, becomes a security problem both in a practical sense – his suitcase is held for inspection – and in an ideological sense. On one hand ownership of a dildo suggests queer sexual activity, thus undermining Tyler's conceptualization of masculinity as anti-feminine and implicitly heterosexual. On the other hand his possession of a fake penis suggests that he has no real or functioning penis

and needs a replacement, a realization which undermines Tyler's definition of masculinity as unlimited and unrestricted power. The suggestion that he could possibly have no or insufficient "huevos" (21), or testicles, connects him to the damaged and "feminized" body of men such as Bob. While the narrator used Bob earlier as a diseased body in contrast to which he defined Tyler as an idealized and controlled epitome of masculinity, the encounter with the dildo weakens this distinction and suggests that Tyler represents a fragile construct which could possibly collapse. Eventually the story reveals that the vibration of the narrator's suitcase is caused by his cordless razor, but the *idea* of owning a fake penis is as threatening to his masculinity as *actually* owning one. By confronting Tyler with a fake penis Marla does not only assert her own "masculine" power but also makes him aware of his own vulnerability, questioning whether masculinity is able to support freedom as an unlimited construct.

Through Marla, the novel proceeds to develop this vulnerability into a critical dissection of masculinity as a viable ideological construct, ultimately developing castration into a transgressive form of physical interaction which reveals masculinity's inherent vulnerability. The narrator gradually begins to understand that he is controlled by an idea of freedom, and doesn't possess the power Tyler has promised him. The novel's repeated suggestions of castration anxiety connect the fear of bodily mutilation to the threat of identity collapse. When the narrator finally begins to question the practices of Project Mayhem and decides to confront its members, they attempt to remove his testicles. "You know the drill, Mr Durden," one of the members explains, "You said it yourself. You said, if anyone ever tries to shut down the club, even you, then we have to get him by the nuts" (187). At this point the narrator realizes that Tyler Durden is a hallucination, that the members know himself as Tyler, and that his belief in masculinity has evolved into a physically destructive configuration. This destructive side of the narrator's belief in masculinity is foreshadowed by Marla in earlier sections of the novel, where he positions Marla as connected to him in an almost oedipal fashion. "Me, I'm six years old, again," the narrator complains when describing the relation between Tyler and Marla, "and taking messages back and forth between my estranged parents" (66). This rhetorical move turns Marla into a mother figure who appears to be inspired by the Freudian conceptualization of castration, and who overpowers him by hinting at the threat of physical mutilation. She evokes the Freudian threat that "this part of him which he values so highly will be taken from him," conforming to Freud's statement that "[u]sually it is from women that the threat emanates; very often they seek to strengthen their authority by a reference to their

father or the doctor who, so they say, will carry out the punishment" ("Dissolution" 316). *Fight Club* also adapts the idea of the castrating father when it describes the animosity between the narrator and Tyler. Tyler evolves into a metaphorical threatening "father" who suggests that his construction as a powerful masculine ideal ultimately results in the destruction of the narrator's physical body. The novel's depictions of castration anxiety do not only indicate the fragility of the ideologies the narrator believes in, but also evolve into metaphors for the self-destructive implications of these constructs.

The fact that castration acquires the status of a key disciplinary mechanism within Project Mayhem suggests that the movement is fundamentally dependent on physical interaction, and that its dream of unlimited freedom is unattainable because it is restricted by the boundaries of the bodies and objects it engages with. Initially, Project Mayhem merely threatens its enemies with castration without actually putting its words into practice. "How far do you think you'll get in politics if the voters know you have no nuts?" (165) Tyler asks a police commissioner who is investigating Project Mayhem in order to prosecute its members. At this stage the mere idea that the commissioner lacks testicles, therefore lacks masculinity, therefore lacks power, is a sufficient threat to stop him from pursuing Project Mayhem. Gradually, however, Project Mayhem moves beyond symbolic threats and starts to interact directly with the bodies of its enemies. "I'm too scared to look in the fridge," the narrator describes, "Picture dozens of little plastic sandwich bags labelled with cities like Las Vegas and Chicago and Milwaukee where Tyler had to make good his threats to protect chapters of fight club. Inside each bag would be a pair of messy tidbits, frozen solid" (169). In its early stages Project Mayhem was framed as a movement which followed from fight club's desire to reconfigure masculinity through the physical act of fighting, and which would build from this practice to transform society in a "free" one by eliminating restrictions such as history and consumer culture. Through the transgressive act of castration the novel shows that this physical destructiveness ends up being self-destructive, that the movement is fundamentally dependent on physical objects and bodies, and that it can only exist at the cost of the violation of the bodies of its enemies, even if one of those enemies is its own creator.

After this abstract exploration of the paradox of freedom as a neoliberal idealization of trade, versus its practical incarnation as a creator of social inequality, *Fight Club* proceeds to engage more explicitly with its extra-textual context. The narrator's confrontation with HIV/AIDS shows that his idealized definition of freedom as unlimited may be unattainable, because he is bound by the vulnerable limits of his own body.

HIV/AIDS is never explicitly discussed in the novel, a fact which mirrors the treatment – or lack thereof – the disease got in the American media during the early 1980s. “One could have lived in New York, or in most of the United States for that matter,” Randy Shilts summarizes in *And the Band Played On*, “and not even have been aware from the daily newspapers that an epidemic was happening, even while government doctors themselves were predicting that the scourge would wipe out the lives of tens of thousands” (191). In *Fight Club*, the narrator is implicitly confronted with the disease when he visits a doctor to have a genital wart removed, and the doctor discovers a suspicious birthmark on his foot. “The medical student said everyone thought the birthmark was cancer,” the narrator explains, “There was this new kind of cancer that was getting young men. They wake up with a red spot on their feet or ankles. The spots don’t go away, they spread until they cover you and then you die. The student said, the doctors and everyone were so excited because they thought you had this new cancer. Very few people had it, yet, but it was spreading” (105). These symptoms are similar to those of Kaposi’s sarcoma, a form of cancer which is often associated with HIV/AIDS (Adler et al 71). The spot turns out to be an innocent birthmark, but the narrator still takes great care to hide it from the rest of the world. “Me, when I go to the beach, I always sit with my foot tucked under me,” he narrates, “. . . or I keep it buried in the sand. My fear is that people will see my foot and I’ll start to die in their minds” (106). The birthmark, which could be misread as evidence that the narrator is HIV-positive, undermines his own configuration of masculinity as powerful and free, because it suggests that he is ill, not in control, and possibly dying.

The narrator fails to see the significance of his brief encounter with HIV/AIDS until he recounts it to Marla. Marla is used in the story to dismiss neoliberalism as an “utopian project” (Harvey *Brief* 19), showing how it not only ignores but actively aggravates social inequality. Marla has asked the narrator to check her breasts for her because she has discovered a lump in one of them, and has obvious economic reasons why she cannot afford to leave this task to a doctor:

Marla hasn’t had health insurance for a couple of years so she’s stopped looking but this morning she looks and there seemed to be a lump and the nodes under her arm near the lump were hard and tender at the same time and she couldn’t tell anyone she loves because she doesn’t want to scare them and she can’t afford to see a doctor if this is nothing, but she needed to talk to someone and someone needed to look. (102-3)

Marla cannot afford health insurance and is possibly dying because her neoliberal society promotes individual responsibility, instead of providing accessible healthcare for the poor. Her diseased body is positioned as a consequence of policies such as Reagan’s budget cuts

of the early 1980s, which severely affected welfare programs aimed at low-income groups (Wilentz 141), and the “health care fiasco” (Wilentz 336) of the 1990s, during which President Clinton failed to establish a national healthcare insurance system. Marla’s diseased body becomes a sharp critique of the narrator’s belief in freedom; it reveals that freedom is actually limited to those with sufficient financial means to look after themselves. Even then, Marla suggests, some physical illnesses cannot be cured and, as is the case in the novel’s context, in which events such as the HIV/AIDS epidemic can be read as a “failure of the system” (Shilts xxii), her own diseased body shows that the narrator’s belief in freedom is inaccurate and harmful.

Contradicting the narrator’s idea that physical illness affects “others” who do not fit in with his configuration of freedom, and are therefore not his responsibility, Marla shows him that HIV/AIDS is an illness which is profoundly intertwined with neoliberal politics. During her discussion with the narrator, Marla mentions that this is the second lump she has found in her breast (108), and that she has been aware of her illness for a long time. Her description of the hospital she visited earlier, where she encountered women and children who appear to be HIV-positive, resonates with Susan Sontag’s description of HIV/AIDS, which frames HIV/AIDS as “everyone’s (potential) physical disease” (150). The dire circumstances in which HIV-positive people find themselves are an almost literal reflection of the novel’s extra-textual context, in which president Reagan did not speak about the disease until 1985 (Wilentz 185) and treatment was severely limited due to a lack of funding (Shilts xxii):

Before anyone knew any better, a lot of gay guys had wanted children and now the children are sick and the mothers are dying and the fathers are dead, and sitting in the hospital vomit smell of piss and vinegar while a nurse asks each mother how long she’s been sick and how much weight she’s lost and if her child has any living parent or guardian, Marla decides, no. If she was going to die, Marla didn’t want to know about it. (108)

Marla contradicts the popular conceptualization of HIV/AIDS as a “gay plague” (Shilts 126) and describes how the disease inspired practices where gay men “responded to the existential issues raised by aging and loss through the time-honored means of parenting” (Andriote 403). This description connects the argument back to the trope of the absent father, which runs throughout the novel. Early in the story the narrator describes the absence of his own father as one of the causes of his damaged masculinity, repeating Tyler’s dogma that: “What you have to understand, is your father was your model for God” (140). By connecting the absent father-trope to men dying from AIDS, Marla shows that AIDS is not an alien disease solely confined to gay men, but an issue which is directly

connected to heterosexual family life, and therefore to society in its entirety. This rhetorical move turns Marla into a character who critiques the virtual absence of governmentally organised HIV-prevention and research in the early 1980s, and places it in sharp contrast to the “celebration of freedom” (Wilentz 127) Reagan’s inauguration pretended to be.

Following Marla’s descriptions of phallic symbols and diseased bodies, *Fight Club* concludes that Tyler’s version of freedom is a utopian illusion. The story argues that freedom is a capitalist ideological construct which depends on the trade of objects and the commodification of worker’s bodies, and which can therefore never escape from the limitations of physicality. This conclusion is intensified by Marla’s descriptions of HIV-positive people, which undermine the Reaganite myth of freedom in an even more radical sense, because they show that the effects of the disease were aggravated by the prominence of “Americans whose politics and personal beliefs predisposed them to antipathy toward the homosexual community” (Koop qtd. in Garrett 302). The culmination of this critical dissection of freedom emerges in the narrator’s encounters with people who are dying from terminal illnesses. Initially the narrator starts visiting support groups because his doctor encourages him to meet people who are suffering more than he is. “My doctor said, if I wanted to see *real* pain, I should swing by First Eucharist on a Tuesday night,” the narrator reports, “See the brain parasites. See the degenerative bone diseases. The organic brain dysfunctions. See the cancer patients getting by” (19, my emphasis). The narrator follows this advice without understanding that his doctor wants him to consider his own privileged position. Instead he turns into a parasite uncannily similar to the “brain parasites” (19) the support group members are living with, using the contrast between himself and their diseased bodies to maintain his own identity and fuel his ideas of himself as a symbolically diseased martyr. Instead of reflecting on his own privileged position as a comparatively healthy man, he identifies with people who are severely ill and dying in an attempt to relieve his own depression. His visits to support groups become uncanny moments of consumption which ignore the physical suffering with which he is confronted. Marla and her diseased body function as unwelcome intruders which confront the narrator with the problematic ethical implications of his ideas. In the final section of the novel this power balance is disrupted in an even more radical sense, which suggests that the narrator’s belief in freedom ultimately turns against him.

2.4. The End of Freedom? (Re)establishing Limits

Throughout *Fight Club*, physicality functions as the key axis over which the narrator's ideological discomfort is played out. The narrator first transgresses the physical restrictions which limit his masculinity when he starts fight club, then watches the movement evolve into Project Mayhem, and is confronted with the illusory nature of his beliefs when Marla confronts him with diseased and dying bodies. When the narrator finally realizes that his belief in freedom is a utopian construct, he decides to reverse Tyler's practice of enacting ideology through physicality by using his own body to stop Tyler's harmful search for freedom. His realization that Tyler is ultimately uninterested in bodies and only views them as vehicles through which he can achieve his ideological goals turns Tyler into nothing but a capitalist hallucination, whose *modus operandi* is virtually identical to the capitalist use objects described by Marx. "However much capitalists bow down before things," Marx states in *Capital*, "their true god is immaterial. Rather than desire things for their material properties, capitalists actually seek that invisible and immaterial property they share: value" (127). When Tyler threatens to kill Marla and destroy the feminine "thing" the narrator desires, the narrator finally decides to stop the expansion of Tyler and the freedom he aggressively creates. In a reversal of Tyler's transgressive enactment of his ideological ideas on bodies, he tries to kill his own body in order to destroy the capitalist "god" Tyler has become, and escape from the neoliberal system of trade that Project Mayhem has violently recreated.

However, *Fight Club* engages with a later statement of Marx when it argues that neoliberalism is an inescapable system, echoing Marx's argument that "[i]n reality, the worker belongs to capital before he has sold himself to the capitalist" (*Capital* 723). The novel suggests that the narrator, as an individual, is unable to change or stop the capitalist mechanisms of Project Mayhem, because Tyler is an articulation of ideas which controlled the narrator before they took on the form of a rebellious masculine metaphor. "We're not two separate men," Tyler reveals, "Long story short, when you're awake, you have the control, and you can call yourself anything you want, but the second you fall asleep, I take over, and you become Tyler Durden" (167). Tyler Durden is revealed to be a dream which overtakes the narrator at night and offers the illusion of control, rather than actual individual agency. "Oh, this is bullshit. This is a dream. Tyler is a projection. He's a dissociative personality disorder" the narrator tells himself in an attempt to take control over the situation, "A psychogenic fugue state. Tyler Durden is my hallucination. 'Fuck that

shit,' Tyler says. 'Maybe you're *my* schizophrenic hallucination'" (168). While Tyler may not be physically "real", his ideological nature does make him impossible to control, particularly because his ideas have developed into an infectious movement which can no longer be controlled by a single man. "Under and behind and inside everything I took for granted, something horrible has been growing" (202) the narrator realizes with horror upon finding out that the movement and friend he perceived as real are actually figments of his own imagination. The uncontrollability of Tyler eventually points the narrator towards a horrific truth: Project Mayhem and Tyler are his newly imagined versions of freedom as an existing neoliberal value, rather than ideas which he created independently. Instead of existing as a "real" person providing a way out of the narrator's capitalist slump, Tyler is revealed to be the capitalist "God" for which the narrator has been longing all along.

Instead of functioning as a model for all the men who are repressed during the "crisis of masculinity", the narrator becomes a symbol for a society repressing its own citizens by succumbing to an unrealistic idea of "economic freedom [as] an indispensable means toward the achievement of political freedom" (Friedman 8). In its descriptions of the possible danger of HIV/AIDS, the novel briefly nods to the so-called protective measures that were taken during the Reagan era to stop the spread of the disease,⁴¹ and shows how the creation of boundaries between free, healthy men and diseased others undermines the idea that a neoliberal government automatically allows freedom for all. This suggestion reaches its climax when the narrator is physically separated from society and placed in a hospital. The exact nature of his illness remains unclear – he could be mentally ill, or possibly HIV-positive – but his society clearly regards him as a diseased threat which needs to be isolated from other people. "I've met God across his long walnut desk with his diplomas hanging on the wall behind him," the narrator describes, "and God asks me, 'Why?'" (207). The description of the doctor as "God" is the culmination of the narrator's descriptions of God which permeate the story. Read together, they suggest that the narrator has never actually desired freedom but has always been longing for a "God" who restricts his freedom. "The farther you run, the more God wants you back" (141) Tyler lectures, indicating that his eventual goal is submission rather than individual agency. The narrator's transgressive acts of violence should ultimately be read as an attempt to recreate "God", a set of values to which he can commit, and a sense of belonging and limitation. "The angels here are the Old Testament kind," he describes when discussing the hospital, "legions and lieutenants, a heavenly host who works in shifts, days, swing.

⁴¹ Garrett (1994) and Andriote (1999) both explore these measures in more detail; they range from blood banks refusing homosexual donors to plans for mandatory testing and quarantine.

Graveyard. They bring you your meals on a tray with a paper cup of meds. The Valley of the Dolls playset” (207). The description of the “angels” as “the Old Testament kind” suggests a return to “the way things were” or a reestablishment of a previous state rather than a progressive move forwards. Instead of frustration this description suggests acceptance: even though the narrator is ill, he has finally found a place where his actual desire, namely living in a structured environment, can be realized.

While the narrator’s violent transgressions of social and physical boundaries appear to result in the reestablishment of stability, *Fight Club* suggests that this equilibrium is unstable and in a constant state of reformation. The narrator’s own illness is connected to an infectious social illness which is ongoing outside the confinement of the hospital where he lives. His attempt to commit suicide and destroy Tyler’s body has failed, and the novel suggests that Tyler’s ideologies have survived and even gained in popularity *because of the narrator’s restricted status*, giving a new ironic meaning to Tyler’s assertion that “the first step to eternal life is you have to die” (11). “[E]very once in a while,” the narrator describes, “somebody brings me my lunch tray and my meds and he has a black eye or his forehead is swollen with stitches, and he says: ‘We miss you Mr. Durden. . . . We look forward to getting you back’” (208). Even though his potential mental health problems make him an unreliable narrator, the narrator suggests that Project Mayhem and its ideals of freedom and masculinity have survived because they are redefinitions of previously existing social models. Not only is the movement shown to be larger than himself and therefore uncontrollable, he is also equated with Tyler Durden and confronted with the horrifying idea that he has instigated the very violence he tried to stop.

Fight Club’s conclusion suggests that transgressive processes eventually lead to the (temporary) installing of boundaries and limits. Ideologies such as freedom and masculinity are depicted, not as ideas which can be fully controlled by people such as the narrator, but predominantly as constructs which overpower their supposed creators. Transgressive processes are not genuine acts of “breaking free”, but acts of ideological redefinition. *Fight Club’s* narrator ultimately refuses to read his actions in moral terms because “what happens just happens” (207), but “God”, or his doctor, keeps pushing him for moral reasoning behind his destructive acts. While the novel extensively suggests that the narrator’s actions are at least partially motivated by the absence of a nuclear family, it never explicitly explores how patriarchy and the nuclear family are connected to neoliberalism, both within the story and in its extra-textual context. The story’s positioning of the narrator’s restricted status as a condition for the continued existence of Project

Mayhem also suggests that the establishment of limits and boundaries is a key component of the transgressive (re)formation of ideologies. *Fight Club* finishes its exploration within the walls of a mental institution, but the implications of its conclusion are explored in other fictional narratives of the period. Poppy Z. Brite's *Lost Souls* offers a particularly thorough critical interrogation of the connections between patriarchy and capitalism, the nuclear family and neoliberalism, and limits and transgression.

Chapter 3. The (Re)productive Family: Limits, Patriarchy and Vampirism in *Lost Souls*

Fight Club ends with a depiction of the narrator, confined by the walls of a hospital. The novel argues that the physical restriction and separation of one individual sustains the proliferation of Project Mayhem and its aggressive trade practices. Due to his imprisonment, the narrator becomes both a scapegoat who distracts his society's attention from Project Mayhem's ongoing terrorist activities, and a martyr who inspires the "space monkeys" to continue their involvement in the movement. Limits are both a consequence *of*, and a necessary condition *for*, the Reaganite development of freedom as an overarching neoliberal value in the story's extra-textual context. These limits, *Fight Club* suggests, are established through the discursive development of the family into "an unequal institution premised on paternal authority and power" (Gittins 35). The novel repeatedly addresses the theme of broken families, and the narrator regards the absence of his own father as one of the causes of his initial feelings of depression. He constructs Tyler Durden as a fraternal figure who leads and instructs him, eventually developing him into an almost paternal force who replaces the masculine authority he has missed as a child. However, Tyler's violent and oppressive tendencies also suggest that the family functions as a space of control and oppression. "What you have to understand, is your father was your model for God" (140) one of Project Mayhem's members tells the narrator half-way through the novel. The narrator fails to grasp the significance of this statement until the very end of the story, when he refers to his psychiatrist or doctor as "God" and appears to be cared for by "angels" who dictate his daily movements (207). *Fight Club* concludes that it is exactly this network of limits and power relationships the narrator is looking to re-establish through his development of fight club and Project Mayhem, and that both movements are replacements of the nuclear family the narrator has been denied.

The family, however, is both a strictly limited unit and a producer of limits, performatively enacting neoliberal ideology, as Poppy Z. Brite emphasizes in *Lost Souls* (1992). *Lost Souls* narrates how the main character, Nothing, discovers that he is part of a family of vampires, led by his father Zillah. The vampire's exploitative habits cause them to clash with Wallace, the father of Nothing's human mother Jessy. When Zillah impregnates the human girl Ann, her ex-boyfriend Steve and his best friend Ghost seek revenge, which leads to the novel's murderous climax. Through this complex web of familial relationships, the novel interrogates the ideological function the family acquired in its extra-textual

context, reflecting the imagery found in media products from the 1980s. One significant example of such is the TV commercial *It's Morning Again in America*, which promoted Ronald Reagan during the 1984 presidential elections. The commercial features a conceptualization of the nuclear family which can be characterized as “a young, married, heterosexual, white, middle-class couple with two children – a boy (older) and a girl, all of whom live together in their own house. The husband is the main breadwinner and the wife is a full-time housewife/mother who may, however, work part-time” (Gittins 3). Media products such as *It's Morning* heavily depend on this specific ideological configuration of the family to create a framework for their neoliberal promises of freedom, wealth and wellbeing. “It's morning again in America,” the commercial proclaims. “Today more men and women will go to work than ever before in our country's history. With interest rates at about half the record highs of 1980, nearly 2,000 families today will buy new homes, more than at any time in the past four years. This afternoon,” it continues, “6,500 young men and women will be married, and with inflation at less than half of what it was just four years ago, they can look forward with confidence to the future.” The commercial combines this optimistic message with images of American citizens – notably only white ones who are part of nuclear families – on their way to work, leaving their houses in green suburbs or just moving into them, or embracing their relatives during their wedding celebrations. “It's morning again in America,” it concludes while showing the American flag being raised, “and under the leadership of President Reagan, our country is prouder and stronger and better. Why would we ever want to return to where we were less than four short years ago?” The commercial ideologically connects economic prosperity with nuclear families – both existing ones and ones that are yet to be created – and promotes neoliberalism, not just a set of economic policies, but also as a process which establishes and nurtures a set of social values and a specific sense of progress which make America “stronger and better”.⁴²

Lost Souls critically explores this configuration of the family, detailing how the nuclear family acquired a specific ideological function during the 1980s and evolved into “an idealized image” which denies “[t]he actual complexity of our history” (Coontz 1). Throughout *Lost Souls*, the nuclear family is described as a strictly demarcated space within which the power relations between its members are produced and reproduced. The novel's first chapter describes how families celebrate Mardi Gras, during which children are invited to eat a cake which contains a plastic baby Jesus. “[T]he child who finds a pink plastic baby in his slice will enjoy a year of good luck,” the novel explains, “The baby represents the

⁴² See *It's Morning Again in America* (1984).

infant Christ, and children seldom choke on it. Jesus loves little children” (3). This description evokes both a sense of belonging and of danger – summarized in the specification that children “sometimes”, or occasionally, *do* choke on the plastic model of Jesus – and amplifies its atmosphere of frightful familiar authority by its depictions of adults. “[O]ther women’s husbands pull other men’s wives to them under cover of Spanish moss and anonymity. . . . In the French Quarter the liquor flows like milk” (3) the novel describes, pairing images of endangered children with depictions of adults engaging in illicit sexual acts. Mardi Gras becomes a Bakhtinian social inversion where adults temporarily escape from within the strict boundaries of their marriages, while children symbolically ingest Jesus as an affirmation of their submission to the Christian faith, an affirmation which the novel subtly suggests has the potential for great harm. This description negotiates the development of the nuclear family as a form of “ahistorical nostalgia” (Skolnick 7), depicting the family both as a powerful form of social organization and as a construct which does not do justice to the diversity of social practice. While *Lost Souls* does not deny the importance of the family ideal as a social construct, which emerged as a central concern of movements such as the Christian Right during the 1980s,⁴³ the novel proceeds to explore the problematic effects, contradictions, and paradoxes this focus creates.

Lost Souls uses vampirism as a rhetorical means to uncover the physical basis of the nuclear family as an ideological construct, and highlights how the family came to function as a unit of ideological and sexual (re)production. The novel’s use of vampirism as a metaphor connects this image of the nuclear family as a productive site to the capitalist system it supports, echoing imagery used by theorists such as Marx, who declares that “[c]apital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks” (342). In *Lost Souls*, the limits of the family, as well as the power relationships *within* the family, are produced and reproduced through a variety of vampiric practices, which revolve around blood and sexual reproduction. Nothing, *Lost Souls’* main character, creates and emphasizes his connection to his vampire family by drinking blood together with his father Zillah, and by engaging in incestuous sex acts with both his father and his friends Molochai and Twig. “Come and be one of us,” Zillah suggests, “or suffer the consequences of your refusal: die, or be alone, and never drink from the bottle of life again. *For the blood was the life*” (160). By choosing to transgress the physical boundaries between his own body and the bodies of his relatives, Nothing places

⁴³ See Utter and Storey (2007) for an exploration of the Christian Right’s employment of “family values” as a political metaphor.

himself within the strict limitations of the vampire family. “You’ve consigned yourself to a life of blood and murder,” he realizes, “you can never rejoin the daytime world. And he answered himself: Fine. As long as I don’t have to be alone again” (173). The fictionality and horrific physicality of vampirism may appear to be fundamentally at odds with the idealistic conceptualization of the family as a form of social organization where “mom stays home looking after the kids, who are educated at home, and dad lives with the family and goes out to work” (Marsden 4). However, *Lost Souls* focuses on the vampiric use of blood and sex as physical bases of a rigidly demarcated family, and connects it to the Foucauldian description of society as “a symbolics of blood” and “an analytics of sexuality” (*History* 148).⁴⁴ The idealized nuclear family, the story argues, obscures its physical basis in acts of sexual reproduction and blood relationships, and illustrates how “reproduction and generationality are the main vehicles by which the national future can be figured” (Berlant 56).

Through its configuration of vampires as fictional representations of family-ideology, the novel explores key aspects of the family ideal. In particular, the story focuses on the nuclear family’s connection between heteronormativity and productivity, which positions (hetero)sexual reproduction as a condition for capitalist productivity, and excludes people who do not conform to these conceptual limits. While many critics have pointed out the connections between the popularity of vampires in 1980s fiction and the emergence of the HIV/AIDS epidemic,⁴⁵ *Lost Souls* never discusses the illness in any form, even though Brite describes it at length in his later novel *Exquisite Corpse* (1996). *Lost Souls* can therefore be read as a reflection of its social context, which framed HIV/AIDS as a problem which did not affect the “general population” (Grover 23), and regarded the disease predominantly as a concern of queer “others” who did not conform to the heteronormative idealization of the nuclear family as a hub of reproduction.⁴⁶ *Lost Souls*

⁴⁴ On one hand Foucault envisions a “society of blood – I was tempted to say of ‘sanguinity’ – where power spoke *through* blood: the honor of war, the fear of famine, the triumph of death, the sovereign with his sword, executioners, and tortures; blood was a *reality with a symbolic function*” (147) describing societies of the past as concerned with symbolic functions attached to bodily reality. “We, on the other hand,” he continues, “are a society of ‘sex,’ or rather a society ‘with a sexuality’: the mechanisms of power are addressed to the body, to life, to what causes it to proliferate, to what reinforces the species, its stamina, its ability to dominate, or its capacity for being used” (147).

⁴⁵ See, for example, Auerbach (1995) and Nixon (1997), who states that: “Vampirism, like AIDS . . . becomes a ‘lifestyle’ choice, where the vampire, like the homosexual, is potentially curable, and if not curable, then surely deserving of death” (127).

⁴⁶ In his biography of Reagan, Lou Cannon argues that: “He had hesitated in speaking out. When he finally spoke, he had failed to issue a clarion call. On an issue on which he might have demonstrated great leadership, Reagan was content to play the role of an exceptionally passive president” (736).

vampires reflect the strict social separations which caused Reagan's refusal to act upon the "gay plague" (Shilts 126). The novel describes vampires and humans as "separate races, races that were close enough to mate but still as far away from each other as dusk and dawn" (68). Contrary to most contemporary vampire stories, *Lost Souls* does not depict vampires as undead humans who have transformed into vampires after being bitten by an existing vampire. In *Lost Souls* vampirism is a marker of difference and separation, and acts as a metaphor for the social boundaries the nuclear family ideal created and perpetuated in the novel's extra-textual context.

However, the literal mingling of vampiric and "familial" bodies in the novel demonstrates how the nuclear family depends on physical transgressions such as "shared blood" and sexual reproduction, and how this emphasis on (re)production and growth echoes the ethics of the neoliberal policies it supports. While vampires in *Lost Souls* represent family-ideology, they frequently express the desire to transgress the family's rigid boundaries. Christian, for example, wishes that "his victims could rise again and run with him" (90). The vampiric family emerges as an unstable construct which constantly expands beyond its own boundaries, encountering social elements which clash with its rigid conceptualization. This use of vampirism to represent the conflicted nature of the nuclear family originates from older vampire stories such as Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), which presents an ambiguously sexualized vampire attacking a newly-wed couple. While *Dracula*'s British Victorian social context differs notably from 1980s America, the novel can still be read as one of the first depictions of the vampire as a metaphor for the instability of the heteronormative family. *Dracula*'s ending, which depicts the killing of the vampire and the restoration of the coherence of the family, seems to position the vampire as a fictional figure which exists in contrast to the family. Mina gives birth to Jonathan Harker's son who "knows her sweetness and loving care; later on he will understand how some men so loved her that they did dare much for her sake" (351). After the ordeal Mina and her husband have gone through they are finally blessed with a son who makes them into a "true" patrilineal family. The vampire appears to represent the opposite of the type of family Jonathan and Mina have now created.⁴⁷ However, *Dracula* interrogates rather than reinforces the stability of the nuclear family as an ideological construct. The encounters with the vampire which lead to its eventual destruction are characterized by physical

⁴⁷ Nicola Nixon traces the development of this symbolic status of the vampire to the 1980s, arguing that: "Evil vampires become a dangerous un-American 'anti-family' that tempts the good American boy to stray, offering the promise of adult sexual license and the allure of rock music, all-night parties, and unchecked troublemaking in comic-book shops and dumpy roadhouses" (122).

transgressions, such as the drinking of blood and the penetration of the vampire's heart with a wooden stake. Nuclear families are not only destabilized by forces which attack it from outside, but also by their own "vampiric" need to transgress the physical limits of its members.

In *Lost Souls*, the family becomes both a threatened space and a space of threat, ruled by the capitalist need for exploitation, (re)production, and consumption. Nothing, for example, is frequently sexually abused by his father Zillah, and Zillah does not hesitate to impregnate women before abandoning them. This focus echoes many vampire stories from the 1980s, which initially appear to consolidate the American family and defend it against hostile intrusion. However, these stories also use the vampire to interrogate the nuclear family as a violent ideological construct. In *The Lost Boys* (1987), for instance, vampires appear to be clearly defined enemies of the family who need to be (and eventually are) killed. The story is complicated, however, by main character Michael when he is infected with vampirism. His family, particularly his brother Sam, tries to protect him from the dangerous violence of the vampires. Together with his friends, the militaristic Frog brothers, Sam starts a war against the vampire family which seduced its brother, determined to eradicate them. While Michael is saved by his non-traditional family, who kill the vampires and expel them from their home, his family consists of his little brother, his eccentric grandfather and his single mother, and lacks a powerful dominant father figure. Max on the other hand, the "head" vampire who tries to lure his way into the family, clearly expresses the desire to (re)produce a nuclear family with himself in charge as the father figure and Lucy in the role of the mother. "It was all going to be so perfect, Lucy," he laments before being killed, "Just like one big happy family. Your boys, and my boys". In *The Lost Boys* there is no more space, it seems, for a traditional authoritative father. In this, the film differs from earlier vampire stories such as *Dracula*, where the vampire is eventually killed and the traditional nuclear family is restored, at least temporarily and superficially. As vampires evolve into late twentieth-century creatures they are still evil and deadly, but for different reasons, and the responses they evoke change. Rather than returning to the "traditional" family, as *Dracula* seems to do, *The Lost Boys* produces a different familial form. In turn vampires, while they appear to represent the complete opposite of the traditional family, also metaphorically representing it. *Lost Souls* combines both approaches, reading vampires both as representations of the family and as metaphors which enable its problematization.

3.1. Strategies of Reproduction: The Nuclear Family as a Productive Space

Through its use of vampires as metaphorical creatures, *Lost Souls* explores how the “reassertion of the male-dominated nuclear family” (Bruce 91) was used to support Reagan’s neoliberal vision of deregulation, freedom of trade, and economic growth in its extra-textual context. In the novel, the nuclear family functions as a site of ideological and sexual reproduction, where the (re)production of biological life facilitates a social model which revolves around patriarchal hierarchies, exploitation, and consumption. The “culture of life”, or what Utter and Storey summarize as the “concern over such family-related issues as abortion, sex education in the schools, homosexuality”, materializes into a fictional universe, where a vampiric obsession with sexual reproduction and blood acts as a metaphor for the connection between patriarchal “family values” and capitalist production. The novel describes the lust for blood, which dictates the lives of fictional vampires such as Christian, as a dependence on “the raw yolky taste of *life*” (67, my emphasis), and uses this image to critically explore the extra-textual “intensification of an ideological claim on life that links the substance of life to the health and strength of the nation” (Tomso 188).⁴⁸ Christian, for example, reacts with amusement when Wallace points a crucifix at him in an attempt to avenge his daughter’s death.⁴⁹ “You are a fool,” Christian tells him, “and your myths are wrong. It would not blacken my skin. It would not poison my essence. I have nothing against your Christ. I am sure his blood tasted as sweet as everybody else’s” (89). Christian reveals how he and Wallace, an archetypical evangelical Christian, are motivated by a similar obsession with life.⁵⁰ For both, the body functions as the physical site where the family, and the culture of life it represents, are realized and reproduced. Wallace, for example, establishes an incestuous relationship with his daughter, Jessy, in order to replace her mother, who took her own life. His actions echo those of vampires such as Zillah, who similarly uses sexual reproduction as a transgressive strategy to (re)produce their status as patriarch of their families. *Lost Souls*’ vampirism delves deeper into the implications of this construction, exploring how an emphasis on sexual reproduction and consanguinity both perpetuates the nuclear family ideal, and permits unequal and exploitative relationships between family members. The family, the novel suggests, forms the basis of a patrilineal

⁴⁸ An example of this is the proposed Family Protection Act of 1981, which aimed to “strengthen the American family and to promote the virtues of family life through education, tax assistance, and related measures” (Govtrack).

⁴⁹ Jessy, Wallace’s daughter, is Nothing’s mother and died while she gave birth to him.

⁵⁰ For a more detailed exploration of the connections between the culture of life, Reagan’s presidency and the Christian Right, see Williams (2011).

type of social organization which focuses on (re)production, and facilitates inequality and exploitation.

Lost Souls begins to explore the family as a construct which (re)produces the “culture of life” through a series of transgressive physical engagements by describing Nothing’s encounter with a mysterious albino priest. The albino functions as a symbolic “father” who introduces both Nothing and the reader to the (re)productive ethics of the nuclear family, stressing its nature as a space of patriarchal power, ownership, and belonging. Nothing and the albino initially meet when Nothing has just run away from his adoptive parents and is hitchhiking in search of a “strange boisterous family” (71) to which he can belong. The albino, an evangelist travelling through the American South, offers him a ride. “Where you headed?” the novel describes the beginning of their conversation just after Nothing has entered the car, “After a moment’s hesitation, the driver added, ‘Son?’” (119). The fact that the albino addresses Nothing as “son” invokes a religious situation, potentially a confession, but also places them in a patrilineal relationship from the very start of their encounter. This is enforced by the presence of a green plastic Jesus, the first element of his car’s interior noticed by Nothing, which evokes the “pink plastic baby” (3) described at the start of the novel. The albino identifies himself as a devout evangelical Christian whose pale appearance is a sign of “the hand of Jesus upon me” (121). According to the albino, his whiteness is an indication of his purity and turns him into a servant of God whose main task in life is to save sinners. The albino quickly discloses his intentions when asking Nothing whether he has been “saved” (120). After Nothing’s negative answer, the albino forces him to read religious tracts. “I could tell you were a sinner from the minute you climbed in,” he explains, “Christ shows them to me, and it’s my duty to save them. I got to do it. I got to do it” (120-1). Working from his definition of Nothing as a metaphorical “son” who needs to be “saved”, the albino establishes a strictly defined conceptualization of the family in which he functions as the authoritative father. Nothing, the albino’s actions suggest, needs to be drawn inside the boundaries of this family, or made to transgress the boundary which separates him from the albino and the familial ideology the albino embodies. At the same time, the need to “save” Nothing requires the albino to move beyond the limits of his own existence and reach out to the “sinner”. While Nothing does not greet the instruction to read religious tracts with enthusiasm, this scene does indicate what kind of “life” he is looking for: a life dominated by a clearly defined patriarchal family which provides him with a sense of belonging and ownership.

The family is presented in *Lost Souls* as a rigidly defined social unit which establishes strict boundaries between itself and the rest of society. It becomes a space where, to borrow a familiar phrase from *Fight Club*, “your father [is] your model for God” (140), and its members are provided with a sense of belonging and purpose, because they are part of a hierarchical (re)productive unit. Nothing’s running away from his adoptive parents is initially framed as a search for freedom and independence, inspired by “the ghosts of all the decades of middle-class American children afraid of complacency and stagnation” (29). As the novel progresses, however, it increasingly depicts Nothing’s search as one for a patriarchal nuclear family which differs significantly from his adoptive family. Even though “his mother [was] counselling disturbed children at a daycare center, his father doing something that had vaguely to do with finance” (72) Nothing does not feel part of a close-knit family, particularly because he perceives his parents as powerless. His mother, obsessed with her “crystal healing class” (27) conforms more to pagan or New Age-inspired forms of spirituality than to “traditional” religion, and Nothing feels estranged by her matriarchal dominance over his adoptive father. “He was strange to his parents,” Nothing declares when describing his adoptive family, “and they were incomprehensible to him. He rejected their world. There was nothing he could claim as his own” (70). Nothing’s desire to “claim” something, or someone, suggests that a desire for patriarchal power is the real reason for his conflict with his adoptive parents. “I don’t want to keep you from fulfilling yourself,” his mother urges, “I certainly don’t want to decrease your potential” (28), overruling his “impotent” (69) father’s futile attempts to control their son. *Lost Souls’* initial image of the modern family echoes the one portrayed in *Fight Club*, where modern fathers are similarly described as socially “impotent” humans whose masculinity is threatened because they have supposedly lost their patriarchal dominance and economic power. Affected by his father’s faint remnant of authority, Nothing “decided that he liked Father better than Mother these days, not that he liked either of them much” (28). His preference for his father, however faint and superficial, suggests that he longs for a family model where he is “owned” and can “claim” something or someone in return. Rather than celebrating the type of freedom offered by his mother, Nothing wonders “whether he could ever belong to anyone. Who would want him?” (70). He eventually finds the familiar form of power he desires when he meets Zillah and his fellow vampires, and appears to settle for a family model which is strictly hierarchical.

By describing how the relationship between the albino and Nothing quickly becomes sexualized, *Lost Souls* proceeds to explore how sexual reproduction functions as a

physical transgression which reproduces the family in literal form – by producing new members – and in ideological form. The novel shows how sexual reproduction acts as a representation of “the strict economy of reproduction” (Foucault *History* 36) and creates a hierarchical patriarchal family model which facilitates the enactment of capitalist ethics of production. Rather than a deviation of the heteronormative ethics of the nuclear family, the sexual encounter between Nothing and the albino should be read as a moment of instruction, which introduces Nothing to this connection between patriarchy and capitalism. The importance of physical engagement and proximity for the (re)production of the family is emphasized throughout the scene by the detailed description of bodily fluids. Nothing is confined by the limits of the albino’s speeding car, “unwieldy and enormous, salmon-pink splotched with great wound-like patches of rust” (119), and disciplined by the religious tracts he is forced to read out loud. While he realizes that he is trapped by the albino’s patrilineal power, he notices that the floor of the car is littered with empty milk cartons. Milk invokes images of breastfeeding and motherhood, but the odour of sour milk also reminds Nothing of “semen” (123). The family connection established by the albino is not just represented in physical form, but specifically in terms of sexual reproduction. Later on, Nothing is invited to perform oral sex on the albino and swallow his “milky” (123) semen, an experience which he claims “settled his stomach and made his whole body feel good” (123). The description of physical transgression as nourishing and productive forecasts Nothing’s later discovery that he is a vampire, and sets the scene for the novel’s persistent portrayal of the ideological family as an entity which depends on bodily interactions. “Did you know . . . that come has almost the exactly the same chemical makeup as human blood?” (124) Nothing is asked by a friend; a question he remembers right after his encounter with the albino. Not only are the albino and Nothing connected through the sexual acts they engage in, they are also revealed to depend on similar dynamics of transgressive reproduction.

In *Lost Souls*, this characterization of the family as a site where power hierarchies are reproduced both within its boundaries, and in its wider social context, is dissected through the use of vampires as metaphorical representations of the violent undercurrents of this conceptualization. The novel employs vampires as metaphorical creatures which represent how the nuclear family facilitates “an analytics of sexuality” (Foucault *History* 148), which turns sexual reproduction into a physical act with an ideologically productive function. The story does not only describe sexual reproduction as a physical process which produces children, but also depicts it as the transgressive (re)production of the family as a

hub of social power, where members exist according to “a sexual division of labour” (Zinn and Eitzen 10). Sexual reproduction becomes a hierarchical act of power which facilitates the construction of a patrilineal social model – represented by the close relationship between Zillah and Nothing – at the cost of the oppression of women and non-heteronormative people. After her sexual encounter with Zillah, the human girl Ann is described solely in (re)productive terms. “Inside Ann, two specks of life had glued themselves together, and deep inside her where all was raw and red and wet, something came alive,” the novel describes, “[a] microdot of meat, part human, part strange. Nothing’s half-brother, or his half-sister” (224). Ann is depicted as nothing but a vessel for the unborn child around which the violent events of the novel revolve. She appears as a physical object which has no function but to be used as a means for Zillah to reproduce his vampiric family. Heterosexual reproduction emerges as a practice which is used to facilitate a hierarchy in which “production” functions are divided by gender, both within the family and in the society it supports. *Lost Souls* embodies this power balance through its descriptions of family relationships, echoing the Biblical statement that “God created man in his *own* image,” and that the goal of mankind is to “[b]e fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over . . . every living thing that moveth upon the earth” (Genesis 1:27-8). Sexual reproduction is inherently connected to “dominion”, or the creation of patrilineal forms of power and production. Following its description of the albino as a representation of the “vampiric” nuclear family, *Lost Souls* positions vampires as “familial” beings which uncover the physical effects of the “culture of life” (Wilcox and Larson 144) the nuclear family represents and promotes.

Through its depiction of the family as vampiric, *Lost Souls* demonstrates how the nuclear family always already functions as a sexually reproductive unit of hierarchical power. Its exploration of Nothing’s search for a patrilineal family, and its detailed descriptions of its incestuous mechanics, acts as a critique of the unequal nature of the nuclear family in the novel’s extra-textual context. The story describes incest as an extreme representation of the family’s reliance on sex as a reproductive form of physical transgression. Early in the novel, Nothing describes how his desire for a strong family is connected to his sexual development. “He dreamed often of a strange boisterous family who laughed all the time and cuddled him and took him along wherever they went,” he narrates. “He discovered how to masturbate, thinking at first that it was something he had made up. Then he connected it with things he had read, and he learned how to turn it into a highly sensual experience” (71). *Lost Souls* follows existing commentaries on the family as

an ideological structure in which incest is a “normal” consequence of emphasis on sexual reproduction, or even a “necessary” aspect of its constitution, rather than an extreme aberration which contradicts its central values. “Incest, rape, and physical violence towards wives and children are all the logical conclusion to an unequal power relationship defined in terms of male authority within the family” (52) Diana Gittins states in her analysis of the family as a social ideal, connecting incest to the dominant position of men in the patriarchal system and their need to establish authority by crossing moral and physical boundaries. “As opposed to placing incest on the side of the ‘abnormal’,” Vicky Bell consequently suggests, “feminist contributions suggest that, on the contrary, given the power dynamics of male-dominated society and the understandings of sexuality we live out, incestuous abuse is in a sense unsurprising” (3). In *Lost Souls*, Nothing’s sexual development is connected to his desire for a vampiric, rigidly defined family in which power is (re)produced through incestuous sex acts. His desire to be “owned” and “belong” are read in explicit sexual terms, reflecting the reproductive role of sexual intercourse in the ideological family as a physical transgression which establishes patriarchal power relations.

The novel uses its depictions of incest to develop sex acts into powerful tokens of ownership, and employs descriptions of incestuous sex acts to interrogate how the nuclear family functions as “one of the primary mechanisms for perpetuating social inequality” (Zinn and Eitzen xiv). “Zillah had claimed him immediately,” Nothing narrates shortly after meeting his vampire family for the first time, “which scared him a little and excited him a lot” (140). Not only does Zillah claim Nothing as his own child by sexually abusing him, he also uses sex acts as means to express their family bond. “As Zillah’s arms tightened around him,” the story narrates, “Nothing heard himself say: ‘Daddy.’ Zillah kissed his eyelids, his forehead, his lips. ‘Yes, that’s lovely. Call me that’” (233). Even though this scene depicts a sexual relationship between two people of the same gender, it should not be read as a description of homosexuality, but as an incestuous and abusive one. “In a funny way, when two gay people of opposite sexes make it, it’s still gay sex,” Pat Califia explains in *Public Sex* (185), implying that the superficial nature of sexual acts does not always reveal or change the invisible systems underlying them. In a similar way, the sexual acts between men described in *Lost Souls* do not function as examples of gay sex, but as extensions of the ideologically reproductive function sex acquires within the vampiric family. Nothing’s sexual encounters with his father are manifestations of the power hierarchy their incestuous relationship creates, and enforce Nothing’s submission to his father’s patriarchal model of power. “Mine,” Zillah asserts, “Mine more than anything was before,

more than anything will ever be again, this is mine. *My seed, my blood, my soul*" (324, my emphasis). Zillah's desire to possess his son is described in explicitly physical terms, depicting his "seed" as a bodily fluid charged with associations of power. The physical transgressions Nothing and his father engage in create their family, not only as a hierarchical unit in itself, but also as a basis for a wider social model which is characterized by a patriarchal system of power relationships.

The violent character of the vampiric family reveals how the emphasis on "life" as a powerful ideological construct exists at the cost of death, suggesting that the construction of the family as a representation of the "culture of life" facilitates exploitation and inequality. The novel interrogates how the vampiric "symbolics of blood" act as a "reality with a symbolic function"⁵¹, which visualizes how the family as an ideological construct requires and permits transgressive interactions with bodies. "For the blood was the life" (154) Nothing muses multiple times throughout the novel, quoting from *Dracula* (132), and echoing the Marxist depiction of the vampire as a capitalist symbol which "will not let go 'while there remains a single muscle, sinew or drop of blood to be exploited'" (416). The consanguinity which characterizes the nuclear family – composed of a husband and wife who conceive their children together – takes on a more literal form in *Lost Souls* when the novel describes blood as a bodily fluid with a symbolic purpose. "There are those that suck blood," magician Arkady mentions when describing his experiences with vampires, "those who suck souls, those who feed on the pain of others" (275). Arkady is eventually killed by the two vampires who live in his house and who literally consume his life to sustain their own. "The twins fed for two hours," the story narrates, "They pressed themselves close against Arkady's body, and every crack and pore of their skin became a tiny mouth, a minuscule suckhole, questing deep into Arkady's tissue to extract every drop of *moisture*, of *vitality*, of whatever love might still be buried in Arkady's bitter heart" (322, my emphasis). Rather than causing Arkady to bleed to death, the mysterious vampire twins suck his body dry, leaving a mummified version of his corpse behind after reviving themselves with its life juices. "No more were they dry and brittle," Ghost describes when meeting them again, "No more did their skin look as if it might flake away from their bones at the lightest touch. Tonight their lips shone purple with rouge, and the ripe insides of their mouths glistened pink" (328). The novel develops vampires from creatures which merely drink blood to satisfy their own desires into metaphorical beings which are obsessed with "life", and consume that of others in order to increase their own strength.

⁵¹ See Foucault *History of Sexuality Vol 1*, 147-8.

At this point, the novel begins to complicate the stability of the “culture of life” as a political construct, and its validity as a supportive construct for capitalist ethics of production, pointing out that the destruction of a female bodies is problematically legitimized by the creation of new life. In *Lost Souls* vampires are lethal “[e]ven in the womb” (277) because vampire babies kill their mothers when they are born. The novel’s graphic depictions of vampire babies who kill their mothers function as a disturbing metaphor for the violent undercurrent of the family ideal. When Zillah and Nothing drink blood together for the first time, they do not create “a new achieved status, whether this be a political office or membership of an exclusive club or secret society” (Turner 95), but affirm their existing patrilineal relationship and mutual submission to productive ethics. “The bond was *forged in blood*,” Nothing muses, “of course, his and Zillah’s, and Jessy’s that had poured out of her. Nothing was of Zillah’s blood, and Zillah would not let him go now, not in a thousand years” (233, my emphasis). Zillah and Nothing “share blood” not only because they drink it together, but also because they are father and son, bound to each other by the blood of Nothing’s mother, who died while giving birth to him. Drinking blood functions as a physical act of consumption which symbolically creates the vampiric family as a strictly demarcated social unit, a constructive process which relies on destructive transgressive interactions with female bodies. Ann’s death during an illegal abortion, for example, is described as “a black nightmare of blood” (338) which leaves her body in a horribly mutilated state. The emphasis on blood as a defining marker of familialism undermines the nuclear family’s status as a benevolent ideal, and highlights its oppressive nature as a construct which fosters gendered inequality and exploitation.

While narrating how Nothing shares blood with Zillah, *Lost Souls* highlights a crucial paradox at the heart of the family ideal. Even though the nuclear family promotes a “culture of life”, it can only exist through the violent exploitation of its own members and people who do not or cannot conform to its norm of sexual reproduction, because it supports an exploitative ethics of production. Zillah and Nothing seal their familial bond by drinking the blood of Nothing’s best friend Laine, with whom he used to have a queer relationship. “Come and be one of us,” Zillah suggests, “or suffer the consequences of your refusal: die, or be alone, and never drink from the bottle of life again. *For the blood was the life*” (160). Drinking Laine’s blood and condemning him to death appears to function as the creation of a strict boundary between the vampiric ethics of “family life” and Laine’s queer

identity.⁵² “He lived in a different world now,” the novel summarizes Nothing’s new circumstances, “and could not cross back and forth” (176). Nothing himself communicates this sense of separation in even stronger terms. “You’ve consigned yourself to a life of blood and murder,” he realizes, “you can never rejoin the daytime world. And he answered himself: Fine. As long as I don’t have to be alone again” (173). However, while the death of Laine appears to be a prime example of the discursive framing of queerness as “the negativity opposed to every form of social *viability*” (Edelman 9, my emphasis), his apparent exclusion through death ultimately functions as a transgressive act of consumption. The description of Nothing’s lifestyle as one of “blood and murder” emphasizes how the nuclear family ideal can only be maintained through violent transgressive physical interaction, and shows that this dependence makes the construct inherently unstable and fluid. The scene in which Nothing is “actually *drinking* a life, swallowing it whole” (160) is not only a moment of radical separation, but predominantly indicates the fragile and temporary nature of that separation.

The literal consumption of Laine’s life functions as a pivotal moment in the story, and acts as a climax of the novel’s mapping of the connections between patriarchy and capitalism. Nothing’s drinking of Laine’s blood echoes Marx’s claim that “[c]apital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour” (*Capital* 342) and culminates in Nothing’s statement that: “Too much faith in anything will suck you dry. In this way, all the world is a vampire” (161). *Lost Souls* proceeds to use vampirism to explore how the nuclear family ideal supported the development of neoliberalism as a new capitalist incarnation in its extra-textual context. Because the nuclear family evolved into an ideological construct which justified social inequality, such as a proposed restriction of the access to abortion and a lack of care for people with HIV/AIDS, it also functioned as a moral framework for Reagan’s neoliberal policies. Paradoxically, the neoliberal politics of trade liberalization, tax breaks, and financial deregulation were established through conservative support.⁵³ *Lost Souls*’ description of the family as an unequal hierarchical unit allows the novel to explore how this politicization of the nuclear family facilitated the construction of a specific capitalist form of social organization.⁵⁴ From the initial encounter

⁵² This narrative of exclusion nods to extra-textual policies such as the proposed Family Protection Act, the aims of which included to “[o]ppose homosexuality by denying federal funds for any organization that advocates that sexual preference as a lifestyle” (Zinn and Eitzen 133).

⁵³ See Johnson (1991).

⁵⁴ This idea is also reflected in Foucault’s analysis of biopower in *History of Sexuality*, where he argues that: “This bio-power was without question an indispensable element in the development of capitalism; the latter would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic

with the albino, which evolves in a sexual transaction which introduces Nothing to his desire for blood and sex, the story evolves into a fictional universe where the family does not only sexually reproduce itself for its own sake, but where this reproduction supports a transactional perspective on the wider society in which the family exists.

3.2. Reproducing Capital: Developing the Family as an Economic Unit

After depicting the nuclear family as a transgressive space where “family values” are (re)produced through physical interaction, *Lost Souls* builds from this conceptualization to analyse how the family was used to frame and justify neoliberal policies in the story’s extra-textual context. The novel mimics the use of the nuclear family as an ideal to facilitate “the supply-side view that massive reductions in taxes and government regulation would unleash pent-up entrepreneurial energies and produce an economic boom” (Cannon 199). This focus is first announced through the depiction of Nothing’s encounter with the albino, which is used to show how the nuclear family acts as a sexually reproductive unit where neoliberal principles of trade and profit are enacted and developed. After Nothing has performed oral sex on the albino, the albino offers him money, a move which explicitly frames their transgressive encounter in terms of a transaction. Nothing has offered sexual favours to older men in exchange for money before, and after meeting the albino he seems upset by the nature of the transaction more than by the sexual acts it involved. “The albino gave Nothing five dollars,” the story narrates, “five lousy dollars” (124). The novel’s positioning of Nothing as an economically motivated vampire mirrors existing critical uses of the vampire as a capitalist metaphor. “[The] vampire will not let go,” Karl Marx states in *Capital*, “while there remains a single muscle, sinew or drop of blood to be exploited” (416). *Lost Souls* describes the family as a vampiric construct which creates the conditions for ruthless exploitation, and turns children such as Nothing into objects which can easily be traded and disposed of. While reading the albino’s religious tracts, Nothing studies the empty milk cartons covering the car’s floorboards, which feature photographs and descriptions of missing children. “He stared at the milk cartons,” the novel narrates, “saw again the eyes of the missing children. Little dark smudges in a sea of red and white, utterly helpless” (123). The placement of photographs of missing children on milk cartons is not

processes. But this was not all it required; it also needed the growth of both these factors, their reinforcement as well as their availability and docility” (140).

only a reflection of an actual social practice, but also suggests that the albino is somehow involved in the disappearance and exploitation of children as, indeed, he both exploits Nothing and aids in his disappearance. Although the implications of this suggestion are not explored, the novel does expand on its portrayal of the family as an ideological construct which justifies the type of aggressive practices Reagan's "gospel of freedom" entailed (Cannon 11).

The novel exaggerates this suggestion into a narrative universe where sexual reproduction functions *directly* as an economic and transactional process. The lethal pregnancies of Ann and Jessy are depicted as events of capitalist production which result from the story's conceptualization of sex as a "price" which can be paid in exchange for safety and protection. Jessy's obsession with vampires, for example, is described as a search for belonging, which culminates in her decision to move in with Christian after Zillah has impregnated her, declaring that she will "stay for good" (9). The phrase takes on a macabre meaning when she dies in Christian's house while giving birth to Nothing, and Christian only laments her death because it causes "[s]o much blood to go to waste" (10). By positioning the nuclear family as a construct which facilitates the conceptualization of sex as a violent transactional phenomenon, *Lost Souls* uses the vampire as a metaphorical figure to lay bare the transgressive reproductive system which underlies neoliberal ethics of production. The story connects vampires to neoliberalism by echoing Marx' claim that "[c]apital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour" (*Capital* 342). As well as the sexually reproductive foundation of social order, *Lost Souls* argues, the family becomes its basis to establish and legitimate economic production. In this focus the novel reflects Foucault's discussion of the family as a space for "endless transaction" (246), which is caused by "the neoliberal tendency to read traditionally non-economic social behaviour [i.e. marriage] in economic terms" (*Birth of Biopolitics* 246).⁵⁵

Lost Souls explores the family as a concept which both legitimates an unequal "sexual division of labour" (Zinn and Eitzen 10) and is maintained by this inequality in return. In the novel's narrative universe, the father takes on the role of the producer, who both produces in a sexual and physical sense (by conceiving children) and in an economic and ideological sense (by exploiting his offspring). Ann's father Simon, for example, regards her as a combination of valuable property and a free housekeeper. "He dragged the books off the shelves," Ann narrates, "he read the newspapers, but she was supposed to keep the house picked up. That was one of her duties. Simon was very big on duties" (259-60).

⁵⁵ This idea builds from an earlier discussion by Friedrich Engels, who argues that: "The single [nuclear] family is becoming the economic unit of society" (223).

Simon's family is characterized by a strict sense of organization and duty, which places Ann in a subordinate position where she is made to *work* for her father, the traditional "head of the household" (Wilcox and Larson 151) in a literal and symbolic sense. The positioning of Ann as a servant of her father also reflects Marx's discussion of sexual reproduction as a capitalist act which constructs and perpetuates the workforce. "The owner of labour-power is mortal," Marx argues in *Capital*, "If then his appearance in the market is to be continuous, and the continuous transformation of money into capital assumes this, the seller of labour-power must perpetuate himself in the way that every living individual perpetuates himself, by pro-creation" (275). In *Lost Souls*, Simon has not only conceived Ann, but also uses her as a participant in his mysterious blood-related experiments, turning her from his daughter into nothing but a body which supports his development of a new scientific theory. Apart from "vampirically" using her ability to work, he also uses her body in a more direct vampiric sense, "sucking" out her blood in order to support his accumulation of money.

The novel directly connects the depiction of women as bodies which merely serve as the "soil" in which men plant their "seed" to their economically submissive position. It reflects extra-textual conservative views of the family, which display a similar hierarchical vision in which each family member is "specially suited to certain tasks" (Wilcox and Larson 151). Throughout *Lost Souls*, fathers use their power to (re)produce their own lives both physically (by feeding on people or producing new vampires or human beings) and ideologically (by creating the conditions for their lifestyles to persist). They are "vampiric" creators who can only (re)produce at the physical cost of others. In order to sustain his position as a producer, Simon needs to transgress the physical boundaries between himself and his daughter, which results in a violent father-daughter relationship with disturbing incestuous undertones. "He trussed her to her own bedposts with rope," Ann describes, "and kept her tied there for seven hours, until she pissed herself and begged him to forgive her" (262). Ann is reduced to nothing but a submissive body which is dependent on Simon's abilities as a producer to exist and persist. Because the nuclear family promotes unequal gender relations, *Lost Souls* suggests, it is particularly suitable as a supportive moral framework for neoliberalism, a system which depends on the capitalist exploitation of workers. Whenever the novel's female characters try to escape from the oppressive power of their husbands, fathers, or boyfriends, they are physically punished, disciplined, and repressed. When Ann's boyfriend, Steve discovers that Ann has cheated on him with another man, he rapes her in order to assert his ownership of her body. "I know how to

make sure you won't do any more fucking around for a while" (108) he explains before transgressing the limits of her body in an attempt to dominate her mind. Penetration is turned into a violent disciplinary act which maintains Steve's position as a producer and a dominator. Ann, meanwhile, is not allowed to make her own choices within or beyond the patriarchal context of the nuclear family.

Families become inherently capitalist units of heteronormativity which do not allow alternative conceptualizations of economic organization. *Lost Souls'* rigid assertion of patriarchal power echoes the novel's extra-textual context, where the family ideal was developed into a political tool which negatively affected non-nuclear families, such as single-parent families, families where both parents were working, or families whose income fell below the middle class level.⁵⁶ By cutting funds for training programs for low-income groups and financial aid to low-income families, particularly single mothers, the Reagan government promoted a specific "traditional" version of the family and disadvantaged other familial types. Contrary to its emphasis on "spreading the gospel of freedom" (Cannon 11), it established itself as "the most conservative administration of the century" (Johnson 14). The characters of *Lost Souls* are equally unable to envision themselves outside the rigid boundaries of the nuclear family, and the hierarchically organized society it supports. "She didn't want to be a musician's wife, spending months alone in Missing Mile while he toured," Ann states as an explanation why she ended her relationship with Steve, "worrying about money during the bad years and groupies during the good ones" (105). Even though this statement appears to reflect a conscious choice by Ann, it shows that she is unable to envision herself in a relationship with a man where she is not financially dependent on him. This sense of economic inequality is also reflected by her decision to follow Zillah to New Orleans hoping that "when Zillah saw how she truly loved him, he would provide for her" (256).

Lost Souls extrapolates the harmful effects of the political marriage between patriarchy and capitalism into a critique of capitalist production. The novel depicts childbirth as the destruction of the female body, a symbolic culmination of the family's transactional sexual interactions which perpetuate patriarchal power. The vampiric reproduction the novel describes in detail always leads to the death of the vampire's mother, because vampire babies kill their mothers when they are born and leave their bodies literally ripped apart. "None of them had seen a child of their race being born," the

⁵⁶ William Chafe specifies that "Reagan slashed food stamp benefits, eliminated 300,000 CETA jobs, cut AFDC funds – leading to a reduction of more than 10 percent in the welfare rolls – and lowered the benefits of an additional 300,000 families receiving welfare assistance" (451).

novel specifies, “but they all knew that their mothers had died in childbirth. They would not have stayed around” (9). After Nothing’s birth, Christian looks at “the poor torn passage that had given him so many nights of idle pleasure. Ruined now, bloody” (10) and concludes that Nothing has literally torn his mother to pieces, injuring her body so badly that she died from blood loss. This destructive image of reproduction, which privileges the lives of children over those of their mothers, nods to Marx’s interrogation of capitalist reproduction, where he similarly highlights the violent effects of an all-encompassing reliance on production:

In economic formations of society of the most diverse kinds, there occurs not only simple reproduction but also, though in various degrees, reproduction on an increasing scale. Progressively more is produced and consumed, and therefore more products have to be converted into means of production. (*Capital* 745)

In *Lost Souls*, female bodies become the physical spaces through which neoliberal ideas are reproduced and are, as Marx puts it, “converted into means of production”. Vampires regard the death of women in childbirth as an unfortunate necessity at best, or an irrelevant side-effect at worst. “They didn’t care about the girl,” Christian narrates after telling Zillah and his friends that Zillah has made Ann pregnant. “It did not matter to them that another girl’s belly would swell with a malignant child, a child that would eventually rip her open and bleed her dry” (245). The novel uses these disturbing vampiric attitudes towards childbirth to frame sexual reproduction as an uncanny phenomenon, which facilitates economic exploitation by reducing women to bodies which can be used and manipulated.

Lost Souls depicts childbirth as a process through which children become “products”, legitimizing and perpetuating the capitalist system in which they are conceived. Christian describes Nothing as “a lovely baby, a sugar-candy confection of a baby” (10), implicitly comparing him to the plastic baby mentioned in the novel’s prologue which “represents the infant Christ” (3). Nothing is presented as a “confection” and an almost “plastic” baby, a capitalist product which is used for ideological purposes and can easily be disposed of. This representation of the child as “functional” and as a “product” (Kincaid 19) mirrors the novel’s extra-textual context, in which the child became an ideological figure loaded with associations of “divine purity” (Ariès 111). “Childhood has become a time to cherish and to protect from the modern Fall of growing up,” Gary Cross describes in *The Cute and the Cool*, “No longer are the aged those near God who have climbed the hill of life’s pilgrimage to glory. Rather, children are gifts sent down from God, divine lights, all too soon extinguished by life itself” (5). Consequently, the child becomes “a malleable part of

our discourse” (Kincaid 19) which is denied agency of its own and is used as a political symbol. In *Lost Souls*, Zillah greets the announcement of Ann’s pregnancy with glee, contemplating the idea that he can use the baby’s body to perpetuate his patriarchal power. “Eat my baby! Are you mad?” Zillah exclaims, quickly adding: “Nothing and I might eat it, but [Molochai and Twig] couldn’t have any” (245). Even before its birth, the new baby becomes a product which can be transformed, traded and used, and thus becomes caught up in a vampiric manifestation of Marx’s claim that capitalism depends on the constant reproduction of its own means. “All other circumstances remaining the same,” Marx argues in *Capital*, “the society can reproduce or maintain its wealth on the existing scale only by replacing the means of production which have been used up – i.e. the instruments of labour, the raw material and the auxiliary substances – with an equal quantity of new articles” (711). In *Lost Souls* children do not only function as literal new labourers, but also exist as ideological products which convey the dangerous exploitative undercurrent of the families in which they are born.

Lost Souls ultimately arrives at the question whether an alternative to the nuclear family is possible, and whether this reconceptualization of the family can do away with the neoliberal form of social organization the nuclear family supports. The novel begins to formulate this question through the character of Nothing, a child whose name echoes Kathryn Bond Stockton’s definition of the child as “a ghostly, unreachable fancy” (5). While his name suggests that he functions as a blank slate upon which ideology can freely be written, the novel also develops Nothing into a character who represents the moral void at the heart of the nuclear family as an ideological construct. “When the baby slipped out of Jessy,” Christian narrates when describing Nothing’s birth, “its head turned and its eyes met Christian’s: confused, intelligent, innocent. A shred of pink tissue was caught in the tiny mouth, softening between the working gums” (10). Nothing’s “intelligent” look suggests an agency which lifts him above the level of functioning as a mere ideological object which is used by others. His ambivalent status as a half-vampire, conceived by a vampiric father and human mother, causes him to question the violent capitalist form of exploitation the vampires practice. “I don’t know what’s right and what’s wrong,” Nothing tells Zillah towards the end of the novel, “Nobody except Christian ever tells me anything. . . . You don’t treat me like a son – you treat me like I’m half sex slave and half lapdog. . . . What kind of father are you, anyway?” (288). As the story progresses, Nothing begins to feel increasingly uncomfortable in his submissive position and begins to demand more individual agency. The tension between Nothing and Zillah invokes a contrast between, on

one hand, the optimistic idea that escape from the abusive family environment is possible, and on the other hand suggests that Nothing is simply trying to transform himself from a son into a vampiric father, in a modern rendering of the Cronos myth. This ambivalence is increased, and results in a violent climax, when the vampires are confronted with the “queering” influence of the desexualized, non-patriarchal and non-capitalist familial model Ghost and his friends represent.

3.3. Queering the Family: Inventing New Family Formations

Throughout *Lost Souls*, the heteronormative vampiric family is queered through its confrontations with Ghost and his friends. Ghost is a complex character who critically dissects and disrupts the violent foundations of vampiric capitalism, while also appearing to propose an alternative form of social organization. His rejection of heteronormativity and its undercurrent of inequality acts as a form of queerness, or a “resistance to identity categories or easy categorisation” (Giffney 2). Through Ghost, the story develops queerness into a form of social agency with the ability to critically interrogate heteronormativity, and even explores the possibility of an alternative familial model which is non-sexual and non-capitalist. Reflecting the heteronormative family discourse of the 1980s, however, much of the novel depicts Ghost as a form of “queer negativity” (Edelman 6) who embodies “the negativity opposed to every form of social viability” (Edelman 9). Ghost prevents Zillah from reproducing, and thus resists the family’s dynamics of sexual reproduction, when he lures Ann into undergoing an illegal abortion. He is motivated by his desire to save Ann from being killed when her baby is born, but is horrified when Ann unexpectedly dies during the operation. “Ann lay on her side,” the story graphically describes, “twisted into an attitude that was painful to look at. Her neck craned stiffly back. Her face was a grimace of pain. Crusted rivulets of blood ran from the corners of her mouth. Her hands were thrust between her outstretched legs as if she had been clawing at herself” (337). Apart from reflecting the horrific imagery used by “pro-life” activists in the novel’s extra-textual context, and depicting the mutilated female body as a politicized object, this scene also turns Ghost into the opposite of “futurism’s unquestioned good”, because it “marks the ‘other’ side of politics: the ‘side’ where narrative realization and derealisation overlap, where the energies of vitalization ceaselessly turn against themselves; the ‘side’ outside all political sides” (Edelman 5). *Lost Souls* reflects the problematic connection between

queerness and death by depicting Ghost as a queer agent of death who interrupts the reproductive cycle of the vampiric family.

The novel does not stop at this depiction of queer negativity, however, and also employs Ghost's queerness to "defamiliarize" the nuclear family. Rather than acting as a straightforward queer "negative" (Edelman 5) to the vampire's "positive", Ghost paves the way for an in-depth analysis of the political function of sexual reproduction. His "holy blue eyes" (147) appear to see through other people's facades, signifying his ability to read people's minds and foresee the future. The "pale, frail-looking boy whose hair was a little too long to meet the current standards" (49) can be read as a ghost, or a supernatural creature, but also a manifestation of the Holy Ghost, or religious spirit. He is defined in resolute non-capitalist terms as someone who "hated to carry cash, hated buying things at all" (162) and frequently works for free, preferring to focus on *Lost Souls?*, the band he forms with his friend Steve, and which gives the novel its name. Because of his strong anti-monetary and anti-capitalist beliefs, Ghost opposes the exploitative sexuality of vampires. Initially, this results in vampires avoiding him because he is "too asexual" (323), and develops him into a potentially powerful enemy. His rejection of the violent aspects of the vampiric family correspond with the doubts some vampires have about their own lifestyle. "I would not wish [vampirism] upon anyone" (230) Christian tells Nothing, revealing his ambiguous stance towards his own identity. "He wished his victims could rise again and run with him," the novel narrates, "others of his kind to share the smell of the streets past midnight, the long hot days with the shades drawn, the taste of sweet fresh blood" (90). Unlike Zillah, who hedonistically indulges in his need to kill people to survive, Christian resents his own vampiric identity, because it denies him connections with humans which go beyond exploitative consumer relationships. Ghost, on the other hand, is not trapped in the vampiric reproductive mechanism. He constantly transgresses the boundaries of vampiric families in his encounters with Nothing, engaging in a form of "sideways growth" (Stockton 13) which "locates energy, pleasure, vitality, and (e)motion in the back-and-forth of connections and extensions that are not reproductive" (Stockton 13). He also appears to realize, however, that this practice makes him an enemy of the vampiric family, and views his early encounters with vampires as a sign of "bad times coming" (166).

Lost Souls begins its queering of the family by redeveloping the home as a "familiar" space. Contrary to many other vampire tales, the novel omits the need for vampires to be invited to come inside in order to enter a house, thus enforcing their status as representations of the always already present patriarchal power relationships inside the

home. The emphasis within the story on houses reflects the importance of the house and the home as a physical basis for families in its extra-textual context, where the Reagan government devised a variety of “pro-family” policies which were related to home ownership.⁵⁷ The focus on the home as a “familiar” space is apparent in cultural products such as *It’s Morning*, which repeatedly depicts a white suburban house and explicitly shows a family *moving into* such a house. *Lost Souls*, however, depicts the traditional family home of Ann and her father as “a Victorian monstrosity gone to seed, its paint peeling, its edges softening” (109), turning the decaying building into a representation of the decaying nature of the family inhabiting it. The house is a Victorian house, built in an era described by Diana Gittins as one which made fatherhood into a dominant social category and confined women to the home (31). This house is not a “good house” (174), as the novel puts it, but a place where the cracks in the nuclear family ideal are beginning to show. The instability this description resonates with is further increased by the depiction of Zillah’s home, which consists of a battered van with no furniture apart from a mattress, “parts of its fabric caked with stiff stains that faded from dark maroon to nearly black” (35). Ghost’s house, on the other hand, is “scruffy” (174) but friendly. Even Nothing immediately recognizes it as “home” (177), making it “familiar” (52) in a non-vampiric sense. Ghost, its main occupier, inherited the house from his grandmother, Miz Deliverance, an unmarried natural healer who represents a non-nuclear approach to domesticity and family life. “White magic had happened here,” Steve states when describing the house, “This place had *sanctity*, dammit” (178). The descriptions of Ghost’s house have strong religious undertones and appear to reflect the Biblical statement that: “In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you” (John 14:2). The “sanctity” of Ghost’s house is aggressively defended by Steve when the vampires break into it, a move which turns the house not only into a symbol of family life but also into a battleground where contrasting ideological configurations of the family clash. This scene echoes the final confrontations found in vampire stories such as *Dracula* and *The Lost Boys*, but also uses Ghost’s “sanctity” to “queer” the capitalist family model represented by the vampires.

⁵⁷ Zinn and Eitzen specify that “[h]ome ownership is encouraged, for example, by allowing the amounts spent on interest and taxes on homes to be deducted from federal income tax. The 1986 income tax plan included several provisions considered pro-family (for example, provisions to raise the standard deduction for dependants and to increase the advantages for married couples filing joined returns over single filers)” (128).

Lost Souls proceeds to problematize the vampiric family by disrupting the patriarchal masculinity which forms the basis of its unequal and exploitative nature. Instead of treating women as means of production who are inherently inferior to “[t]he father as God” (Segal 24), Ghost criticizes men who oppress and dominate women. His best friend Steve is depicted as an aggressive heterosexual “Wild Man” (Bly 8) who is “queered” through their friendship and begins to question his own attitude towards women. Despite his negative opinion on vampires and other forms of authority such as religion, which he regards as “magical gobblede-gook” (48), Steve initially remains committed to patriarchal views on masculinity and the family, and strongly believes that men should “own” and be able to “use” their female partners. When he discovers that Ann has been cheating on him he reacts by hitting and raping her, mimicking the sexually abusive actions of many masculine characters in the novel. Ghost, however, contradicts Steve’s triumphant statement that “I guess she liked it pretty good” (167) by boldly arguing that: “That’s a shitty thing to say. She didn’t *like* it” (167). Steve realizes that his action was deeply problematic and describes this realization as “moment of absolute shock, like falling into deep icy water, when I realized that I had really for chrissake *raped* her” (169). Seen through Ghost’s queer eyes, rape becomes a horrible act of violence, and a reassertion of patriarchal power, rather than a “normal” act of discipline. Steve’s awareness of the harmfulness of his practices causes him to draw towards Ghost and form an alternative family, which differs radically from the hierarchical family model Steve used to subscribe to. “Ghost didn’t give a flying fuck about football,” Steve narrates, “Ghost could drink everybody else under the table and not get a damn bit weirder, and Ghost understood all the shit that had gone on over the past few months” (17-8). Steve truly is a “lost boy” or a “lost soul” who is looking for a new form of communal existence and adopts Ghost as his spiritual teacher. Through his friendship with Ghost, Steve is encouraged to break free from the ideological system which forces him, as a heterosexual man, into an abusive dominant social position.

Lost Souls “queers” the nuclear family through a series of physical transgressions, particularly the consumption of bodily fluids. Instead of recreating the strict hierarchical structure of the patrilineal type of family headed by characters such as Zillah, the novel explores whether, and how, a “brotherhood of man” (Yenor 153) can exist as an alternative to the “vampiric” family. Early in the story Steve tastes Ghost’s spit while Ghost is asleep, unconsciously mimicking the vampiric practice of establishing family bonds through physical transgression. “What was he doing sucking someone else’s spit off his finger?” (18)

he wonders, quickly dismissing his action as a meaningless one. However, his action becomes loaded with implications of power and politics when read in conjunction with the fear of bodily fluids provoked by the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the story's extra-textual context which, according to some, turned queerness into both a threat to the nuclear family and a lethal social threat.⁵⁸ This sense of threat culminates in the description of the kiss Ghost and Steve exchange in an attempt to deal with their fear of the vampires they are about to confront. Finding themselves in a New Orleans bedroom, searching for Ann in an attempt to save her from the hands of Zillah, Ghost and Steve try to enforce their familiar bond by physically transgressing the boundaries which separate their bodies:

"Don't you ever leave me. Don't you ever go, man-" Steve stopped, but Ghost heard the sudden hoarseness in his voice.

"No," said Ghost, "it won't be me who goes." He could say no more. Instead he would swallow those shadows smudging Steve's eyes; he would lick them away. He bent, and instead of finding Steve's eyes, his mouth met Steve's in a clumsy kiss.

They both grew tense. Ghost thought, No, oh no, that wasn't what I meant to do, and Steve's hands came up to push Ghost away. (305)

The family this kiss creates differs radically from the vampiric family: it is rigorously non-sexual and non-transactional. The kiss takes place shortly after a scene in which Arkady, an unreliable magician who claims that he can save Ann's life, has tried to trick Ghost into sleeping with him in exchange for his help. "You're not gonna make yourself into a whore for her," Steve angrily exclaims in response, "You're too good for that Ghost" (301). This exclamation acts as an aggressive rejection of the vampiric family as a unit of economic exploitation and appears to firmly establish Steve and Ghost as a "queer" family, or a brotherhood. Ghost, however, seems to think that their transgressions only have limited effects. "This one kiss would end," Ghost muses, "and there would not be another, because anything beyond this would be too much for Steve to deal with" (306). While *Lost Souls* suggests that queerness can critically interrogate the nuclear family and undermine its social power, the story envisions this power as restricted and unable to fully overthrow the social dominance of the family, and the capitalist system this ideological construct supports.

⁵⁸ This anxiety is reflected, for example, by the attitude of blood banks towards gay donors. Randy Shilts summarizes how, on one hand, critics called for the refusal of gay and possibly HIV-positive donors, while the blood banks hesitated to put this policy into practice. "The blood bankers were worried that they would not have enough blood," Shilts argues, "and would suffer economically if all gays were restricted; they also fretted about accusations that they would look like anti-gay bigots if all homosexuals were summarily rejected" (242).

The limitations of Ghost's ability to "queer" the nuclear family materialize in gruesome detail when he becomes involved in an orgy of violence against his will. After Ann's death, Steve is determined to avenge her and decides to kill the vampires. "Murderer," Ghost thinks when witnessing Steve murder Christian, "my best friend, my only brother. I once saw you run your car off the road to keep from hitting a stray dog. How could you stab someone through the heart?" (345). Ghost becomes entangled in a violent literalization of his status as a queer force which rejects the sexually reproductive and exploitative nature of the vampiric family. Echoing the problematic extra-textual idea voiced by some conservative social activists that queerness implies "the utter destruction of the family" (Dobson qtd. in Utter and Storey), he becomes involved in the literal eradication of a vampiric family. The vicious killing of the vampires functions as a metaphor for the discursive connections between queerness and death emerging in the novel's extra-textual context, and shows how the positioning of the family as "a uniquely vulnerable institution" was used to legitimize "'protectionist' measures, of an ever intensified censorship that will obliterate the evidently unbearable cultural evidence of that sexual diversity which stalks the terra incognita beyond the home" (Watney "Spectacle" 77). In *Lost Souls*, Ghost is caught up in this discursive regime when Zillah tries to kill Steve. Ghost decides to act, rather than merely stand by as a witness to Steve's bloody acts of violence. In order to save his friend, Ghost stabs Zillah in the head and kills the patriarch of the vampire family, thus fundamentally dislocating its stability. "Then he drove the knife straight into Zillah's temple," Ghost narrates, "and that was the hardest thing he had ever done" (345). Even though Ghost is pushed into the realm of "queer negativity" (Edelman 6) and shaped into a deadly enemy of the heterosexual family, he repeatedly expresses his discomfort about this process. Rather than regarding the death of the vampires as a justified revenge of Ann's death, Ghost laments the carnage, and regards it as a traumatic event.

The death of the vampires becomes a metaphor through which the novel debunks the status of the nuclear family as a central social construct, and criticizes its use as a justification for social inequality and capitalist exploitation. The story shows how, through its emphasis on heterosexual reproduction, the nuclear family constructs queerness into its deadly enemy, and thus creates the conditions for its own destruction. While Ghost acts as Zillah's nemesis, he is not a queer threat coming from outside the dynamics of the family, but arises as a product of the heteronormative system which turns him into an "impossible object, a *monster* that can only be engendered by a process of corruption through

seduction, which is itself inexplicable, since familialism lacks any theory of desire beyond the supposed 'needs' of reproduction" (Watney "Spectacle" 77, my emphasis). Zillah's death is thus represented as a consequence of his own predatory sexual behaviour: by impregnating Ann, and condemning her body to be destroyed because of his need to constantly produce new life, he evokes the wrath of Steve. While he tries to kill Steve, furthermore, he ignores the threat posed by Ghost, whom he has constructed into a lethal queer "other". "This was not the way Zillah had planned it," Nothing muses after Zillah's death, "Through all the stupid risks he took he had never considered the possibility of his own death" (346). Death is no longer only associated with queer "others", but drawn back into the centre of the nuclear family and framed as a direct consequence of Zillah's need to reproduce. "Blood for blood – that was right" (343) Steve concludes before leaving the site of the massacre, describing his actions as an imitation of the blood thirst of the vampires, and a response to their practice of exploiting and destroying their victims. "Just before they left the room," the novel describes the aftermath of the carnage, "Nothing had pulled the shade up. As the first ray of light touched the bodies of Zillah and Christian, their flesh began to smolder and crumble. In less than an hour it was only ash" (349). The death of two old and seemingly indestructible vampires, which results in the dissolution of their bodies, visualizes how the vampiric belief that "the blood is the life" (160) is harmful not only to its "enemies", but also to its own family members.

3.4. Touching Evil: Vampirism as a Cyclical Metaphor

Despite its extreme nature, the death of two vampires at the end of *Lost Souls* does not signify the complete collapse of the type of family they represent, and the capitalist social organization the nuclear family supports. Initially, the encounters between Nothing, the "void" existing at the heart of the vampiric family, and Ghost, its queer "other", appear to represent the subtle transformation of the monolithic family ideal into a more fluid range of "alternative families and a true community" (Andriote 15). Nothing and Ghost seem to evolve into metaphorical relatives as the story progresses, constructing a loose but significant familial bond. Nothing literally asks Ghost to "be my brother" (217) when Zillah temporarily leaves him for Ann as a punishment. "Zillah loves me," Nothing argues, "He'll let me stay now. I can stand it if you'll be my brother just for one minute" (217). While his encounters with Ghost enhance Nothing's "certain innocent dignity" and "kind of holiness" (187), Nothing eventually returns to the powerful company of Zillah. His "brotherly"

relationship with Ghost functions as a temporary aberration which supports him while Zillah is involved in the act of reproduction, and does not signify a permanent departure from the oppressive ethics of the vampiric family.

Nothing's choice is confirmed when he decides to remain with his vampire family after Zillah's death and take up the now vacant position of the patriarch. "Nothing was lost," Ghost realizes, "He might not know it yet – but, what frightened Ghost still more, he *might* know it. He might know it very well. He might have chosen it" (187). Even though Nothing is briefly confronted with an alternative form of familial and social organization, he eventually chooses to remain a "lost boy" and live as a vampire. The phrase that "Nothing was lost" can also be read as a pun, suggesting that the nuclear family Nothing is part of does not disappear, or is not "lost", after Zillah's and Christian's death. The novel's epilogue, set fifty years after Zillah's death, confirms this suggestion, and shows Nothing in a family relationship with Zillah's friends Molochai and Twig. "Molochai pulls his hand out of his pocket and opens his fingers," the novel describes, "Lying on his grubby palm is a hypodermic needle full of blood. Nothing opens his mouth. Molochai places the sharp tip of the needle – carefully, ever so carefully – on Nothing's tongue and pushes the plunger. The blood trickles down Nothing's throat, rich and sweet" (358). While Nothing and his family still depend on blood, the novel suggests that they no longer drink other people's blood directly but withdraw it using hypodermic needles. On one hand this suggests that some of the lethal consequences of Zillah's vampirism have been done away with, but on the other hand the story shows that their family is perpetuated and transformed rather than destroyed. "[T]hey have not forgotten their old customs" (357) the novel concludes, suggesting that Nothing's vampire family is a new incarnation of the family ideal which still revolves around the same basic principles.

The continued existence of the vampiric family in *Lost Souls* suggests that, while the nuclear family ideal may be a challenged construct, the capitalist system it supported during the 1980s persisted. "What vampires are in any given situation is a part of what I am and what my times have become" (1) Nina Auerbach states in her analysis of the vampire as a metaphorical figure, suggesting that vampires are fictional figures which can be adapted to represent a variety of evolving social issues. Initially, *Lost Souls* depicts vampirism as decaying, describing modern vampires as creatures who "wished that they had fangs but had to make do with teeth they filed sharp" (5). This image, on one hand, appears to reflect the demise of the "vampiric" nuclear family as a central social construct, echoing the extra-textual decline of conservative movements such as the Christian Right

towards the end of the 1980s.⁵⁹ On the other hand, the description suggests that the nuclear family was an imaginary ideal to begin with, and that it ignores the complexity of social practice. "Our recurring search for a traditional family model denies the diversity of family life, both past and present," Stephanie Coontz argues in *The Way We Never Were*, "and leads to false generalizations about the past as well as wildly exaggerated claims about the present and the future" (23). *Lost Souls* does not dismiss the nuclear family as a powerful construct altogether, and even suggests its resurgence by depicting Nothing, Molochai and Twig fifty years after Zillah's death, living together and forming the band Nothing always wanted to have. "Nothing leads his family out of the club in darkness" (359) the novel concludes, making Nothing the representation of the enduring power of vampiric capitalism. "Doesn't it fuck you up," Steve asks Ghost at the end of the story, "to know that we touched something evil, that it's still out there in the world?" (353). "I don't think anyone knows what evil is," Ghost replies, "I don't think anyone has the right to say" (354). Ghost suggests that evil cannot be solely be attributed to metaphorical vampires, concluding that "maybe they are just like us" (354), and that the "vampiric" marriage between patriarchy and capitalism will remain an influential normative force. Ghost's depiction of vampiric familialism as a concept which does not remain within the boundaries of the family unit foreshadows an aspect of transgression which Brite explores in his later novel *Exquisite Corpse*. In *Exquisite Corpse* a more fluid social model emerges, in which boundaries are in a permanent state of reconstruction. The novel reflects an extra-textual development which transformed neoliberal politics as Reagan's presidency drew to an end, and foreshadowed the globalized shape neoliberalism would take during the 1990s. While the conceptualization of the family as a rigid social unit proved an essential basis for the flourishing of Reagan's economic policies, those policies equally depended on the (temporary) destruction and dissolution of boundaries in order to satisfy capitalism's infinite aspirations to expansion, development and growth.

⁵⁹ See Wilcox and Larson (2006), 42.

Chapter 4. Multidimensional Dissolution: Cannibals and Queer Neoliberalism in *Exquisite Corpse*

Whereas *Lost Souls* (1992) focuses on the (re)production of limits within the narrowly defined surroundings of a predominantly white and heterosexual society, Brite's later novel *Exquisite Corpse* (1996) depicts transgression as a process which dissolves a multiplicity of limits existing within the multidimensional society it reflects. The novel emerged against an extra-textual background characterized by the expansion of neoliberal economic principles, such as trade liberalization and privatization, beyond the geographical boundaries of the US.⁶⁰ Taking into account how this process of economic globalization was executed through the transgression and dissolution of a variety of economic and social boundaries, *Exquisite Corpse* diverges from *Lost Souls*' rigid conceptualization of American society as primarily divided along a heteronormative axis of inequality. *Exquisite Corpse* discusses queerness, not as the potential basis for a radical non-neoliberal and non-heteronormative form of social organization, but instead develops queerness into a metaphor for capitalist practices such as economic globalization. The cannibalistic acts of consumption committed by its queer protagonists do not function as a critical antidote to globalization, but are used to explore and interrogate its social effects, such as the consequences of tax rises and privatization.

Exquisite Corpse uses HIV/AIDS as a critical angle to move beyond *Lost Souls*' discussion of queerness as the primary indicator of social inequality. *Exquisite Corpse* uses HIV/AIDS to connect queerness to neoliberalism, and depicts the effects of the disease to explore how the rigid social model laid out in *Lost Souls* contrasts with the transgressive dissolutions of economic globalization which characterized post-Cold War America.⁶¹ In its refusal to read queerness as a radical political construct, the novel prefigures critiques of queerness voiced by theorists such as Cathy J. Cohen. "[Q]ueerness, as it is currently constructed," Cohen argues in "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens", "offers no viable political alternative, since it invites us to put forth a political agenda that makes invisible the prominence of race, class, and to varying degrees gender in determining the life chances of those on both sides of the hetero/queer divide" (84). The reference to the

⁶⁰ See Stiglitz (2002) and Rowden (2009).

⁶¹ According to Andrew Jones (2010), globalization has a long history and has been closely connected to neoliberalism since the 1960s, but: "It is only since the late 1980s that globalization has become common coinage to these various literatures and spheres of discussion" (8).

HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 1980s in *Exquisite Corpse* is an illustration of the need to move beyond a focus on sexuality as a dominant social divide, because the epidemic did not only affect queer people but also highlighted racial and class-based inequality.⁶² The novel's main characters are either HIV-positive, as is the case with Luke and Andrew; live in fear of the disease, as happens with Tran; or express a covert desire to become infected, as voiced by Jay. HIV/AIDS is not described as a predominantly queer issue, but is connected through other forms of inequality via characters such as Tran. Tran, a young man of Vietnamese origins who is potentially HIV-positive, illustrates the complexity of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the novel's extra-textual context, where most of its patients are actually found in Sub-Saharan Africa⁶³ and where the conceptualization of HIV/AIDS as a disease which only affects gay men is effectively undermined.

Exquisite Corpse uses HIV/AIDS as a point of departure to explore how queerness is not antithetical *to*, but also constitutive *of*, the ethics of economic growth and market-based competitiveness promoted by neoliberal theorists and politicians.⁶⁴ The novel describes the lives of several cannibalistic queer characters, whose actions are fictional explorations of the extra-textual evolution of neoliberalism into a new form of imperialism, which rapidly spread beyond the boundaries of the First World.⁶⁵ During the 1990s, neoliberalism was exported across the boundaries of the US through trade agreements such as NAFTA and the establishment of organizations such as the World Trade organization. These transgressive dissolutions were supposed to facilitate international trade, and generate new possibilities for economic growth. Joseph Stiglitz, for example, describes globalization as “the close integration of the countries and peoples of the world which has been brought about by the enormous reduction of costs of transportation and communication, and the breaking down of artificial barriers to the flows of goods, services, capital, knowledge, and (to a lesser extent) people across borders” (9). This description of globalization emphasizes how, from the 1990s onwards, neoliberal ideals of free markets and financial deregulation were increasingly implemented and exercised across national borders. In a metaphorical narration of this development, *Exquisite Corpse's* main characters constantly transgress cultural and geographical boundaries in order to satisfy their need for consumption and growth. Andrew, for example, escapes from a British prison and flees to New Orleans, Luke frequently discusses his “Oriental” (129) sexual

⁶² See Whiteside (2008), 12.

⁶³ See Rowden (2009), 10.

⁶⁴ See, for example, Hayek (1960), Friedman (1962) and Niskanen (1988).

⁶⁵ See Hardt and Negri (2000).

preferences, and Jay seduces Tran in order to sexually and cannibalistically consume his exoticized body. These actions do not only illustrate queer sexual practices, they also function as metaphorical representations of the extra-textual evolution of first world neoliberalism into a globalized practice. Communicating a more extreme version of criticisms voiced by theorists such as Stiglitz, who argues that “to many in the developing world, globalization has not brought the promised economic benefits” (5), *Exquisite Corpse* shows how the transgression and dissolution of boundaries frequently resulted in exploitation and violence. Contrary to *Lost Souls*, the story does not depict its queer characters as antithetical to these practices, but as victims, or even as willing participants.

The novel makes concrete its suggestion of economic globalization as a violent transgressive process by describing its queer protagonists as capitalist and cannibalistic consumers. Through its graphic depictions of Jay’s and Andrew’s acts of murder and cannibalism, *Exquisite Corpse* explores how queerness and neoliberalism are connected, and how neoliberalism acts as a “queer” system which constantly transgresses its own boundaries. This connection between mainstream neoliberal society and cannibalistic queerness is highlighted by Brite’s use of a quotation from a newspaper article about Jeffrey Dahmer as a motto for the novel. “Records of the 1994 autopsy of serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer,” the citation reads, “reveal that officials kept Dahmer’s body shackled at the feet during the entire procedure, ‘such was the fear of this man’, according to pathologist Robert Huntington.” Jay, one of the story’s protagonists, is loosely based on real-life murderer Dahmer, who was sentenced to life imprisonment for the rape, murder and dismemberment of seventeen victims in 1992. The fear expressed by the officials dealing with Dahmer’s body is further explored in *Exquisite Corpse* through its descriptions of Andrew, who escapes from prison by playing dead and regains consciousness in the mortuary where his body is taken to for an autopsy. Andrew’s transgressive status as a man who navigates and dissolves the boundaries between life and death, however, does not cause him to function as an anti-social threat. Instead, he is positioned as a metaphorical representation of the ethics of consumption and competitiveness promoted by his society. “Murderers, skilled at belonging everywhere, seed the world” (67), Andrew argues, describing himself as a character which “seeds”, or develops the world, through his killing and consumption of people. This idea of the serial killer as a representation of the “murderous” tendencies of mainstream society, rather than a terrifying anomaly, disturbingly echoes the thoughts of Dennis Nilsen, an extra-textual serial killer to which the character of Andrew displays many similarities. “The population at large is neither

'ordinary' nor 'normal'," Nilsen wrote after his trial, "They seem to be bound together by a collective ignorance of themselves and what they are. They have, every one of them, got their deep dark thoughts with many a skeleton rattling in their secret cupboards" (qtd in Masters 15). Just like Nilsen, Andrew engages in murder, necrophilia and dismemberment, and envisions himself as a representation *of* rather than a contradiction *to* the values of his society.

The novel presents its queer cannibalistic main characters as metaphorical representations of transgressive neoliberalism at work. Through its depictions of queer characters who transgress geographical and physical boundaries in an attempt to satisfy their need for growth and consumption, the story illustrates how the neoliberal economic system in its extra-textual context increasingly came to rely on the transgressive dissolution of national and cultural boundaries. "I think once the body realizes it's definitely, irrevocably going to die at your hands, it begins to *work* with you," Jay muses when describing his murderous practices, adding a distinctly capitalist dimension to his cannibalistic practices (180, my emphasis). In his use of cannibalism to discuss capitalism, Brite draws on long established economic metaphors. Marx, for example, employed metaphors of eating and digestion in his description of capitalism as "the *metabolism* between man and nature, and therefore human life itself" (*Capital* 133, my emphasis). Brite's novel proceeds to depict cannibalism as the ultimate form of consumption, which enables its practitioners to dissolve the boundaries that separate them from their victims. "He never used to want his lovers dead," the story summarizes Jay's practices, "In the beginning he had only wanted them to stay with him, and it seemed no one ever would, not if given a choice in the matter. Somewhere along the way, control became a pleasure in itself. Then it became the main pleasure" (122). Jay's actions are motivated by his need to consume his victims to fulfil his desires, and they are a graphic metaphor for the dynamics of globalization in the novel's extra-textual context: for the ways in which globalization has often "not been followed by the promised growth, but by increased misery. And even those who have not lost their jobs have been hit by a heightened sense of insecurity" (Stiglitz 17). *Exquisite Corpse* represents this "increased misery" and "heightened sense of insecurity" through metaphors of cannibalism, rape, and other forms of physical consumption, literalizing the effects of globalization and its social consequences in a fictional world where people's desire to grow and consume results in the cannibalization of others.

The novel intensifies this focus by using New Orleans as its main setting, elevating the individual actions of its protagonists to a narrative level where they function as

representations of their society's drive to consumption and exploitation. The story positions New Orleans as a "physical" city on the geographical boundary of the US, which does not only facilitate what Mikhail Bakhtin calls "free and familiar contact among people" (123) but also functions as a bodily entity in itself. "I conquered the Mississippi in my heart as I stood there on the pier," Andrew narrates shortly after his arrival in the city, "I had no fear of it, or of this city it churned through. I had seen intestines and sphincters before; I was capable of handling them" (142). The description of New Orleans as a "body" with the potential to consume and digest people is not only communicated in the novel's covert references to the history of Louisiana as a slave state,⁶⁶ but predominantly by Andrew's exploration of the city as a carnivalesque space where physical boundaries are negotiated and (temporarily) dissolved.

At last I found a travel article among all the sales pitches. It extolled the humid vices of New Orleans, the jazz, the food, the other delicacies. My interest was piqued by the caption beneath a picture of a blood-red drink in a long stemmed glass, garnished with a cherry, a slice of orange, and a vivid green paper ruffle: New Orleans has over 4000 bars and nightclubs... (141)

Through its descriptions of New Orleans, and its association with the Mardi Gras carnival, *Exquisite Corpse* resists the idea of American society as a coherent, clearly demarcated entity. Mardi Gras' nature as a multicultural and transatlantic event inspires the story's representation of New Orleans as an example of the American "melting pot", while simultaneously highlighting the long history of geographical and cultural transgressions this status implies. The city becomes the location for a seemingly endless series of violent transgressions, culminating in the murder and cannibalization of Tran by Jay and Andrew, which function as metaphorical assertions of the city's status as "intestines" that consume and digest the people inhabiting it.

4.1. The Queer Body and Cannibalistic Reproduction

Instead of positioning queerness as a critical exploration of the harmful effects of heteronormativity, as *Lost Souls* does through its descriptions of Ghost, *Exquisite Corpse* reads queerness as a metaphor for neoliberal ethics of globalized consumption and commodification. Andrew's explorations of queer neighbourhoods, such as London's Soho

⁶⁶ The novel comments on the racial inequality which historically dominated Louisiana when narrating the story of one of Jay's ancestors, who was convicted for the abduction, rape and murder of several young boys: "Some were black children from the next town over and he probably could have gotten away with that, but some were Cajun kids, and one was a runaway from New Orleans" (171).

and New Orleans's French Quarter, illustrate how queer sex is "cannibalized", or absorbed into the capitalist dynamic of profit-generating consumption. This depiction of queerness significantly complicates *Lost Souls'* conceptualization of queerness as a potentially desexualized and non-capitalist phenomenon. *Exquisite Corpse* explores the connections between queerness and neoliberalism in more detail through Luke, an aggressively anti-heterosexual HIV-positive character who violently criticizes the refusal of the neoliberal government to provide the healthcare he needs. Even though Luke usefully reflects how the heteronormative bias of the Reagan government restricted the availability of treatment and care for queer HIV-positive people, he also adopts many of neoliberalism's oppressive politics, particularly its emphasis on competitiveness and consumption. He is a sexual consumer of exotic bodies, maintaining the white privilege that comes with his background, and copies the violent neoliberal rhetoric of his government when he demands that his tax money will not be used to support childbirth, "a *behaviorally caused condition* whose morality – or lack thereof – I deplore" (93). Even though *Exquisite Corpse* superficially retains the rigid boundaries between heterosexuality and queerness which characterize *Lost Souls* – Luke violently criticizes how heteronormativity leads to a lack of funding for HIV-research, due to its perception as a queer disease – the story proceeds to explore in depth how these boundaries are continuously dissolved.

Rather than reading queerness as an anti-capitalist phenomenon, *Exquisite Corpse* explores how neoliberalism "cannibalizes" all forms of sex and makes them "work" by turning them into commodities that can be traded. Tran, Luke's young Vietnamese ex-boyfriend, is part of a large group of young queer people who appear to resist the rules of capitalist society by engaging in the playful subversion of neoliberal ideals of trade, work, and consumerism. "There had been kids in full riot gear and flowered helmets," Brite narrates, "kids armed only with water bottles and baby pacifiers, kids who looked like Dr Seuss characters on mushrooms" (39). When describing one of the parties he frequents, Tran focuses on the carnivalesque deconstruction of riot gear and arms through the removal of their violent connotations as tokens of war and aggression. Tran and most of his friends appear to deliberately push themselves into the margins of neoliberal society because they are openly queer, dress in socially inappropriate ways, and are unemployed. Their refusal to be economically and sexually (re)productive makes them potentially dangerous, because they do not appear to conform to the ideal of the family as a heteronormative unit of production, as laid out in *Lost Souls*. Andrew therefore occasionally feels envious of young people such as Tran, who expose the potential of an

alternative form of social order which does not depend on violence and economic competitiveness. “I used to envy these kids their freedom,” he explains, “even if all it meant was living off Mum and Dad or on the dole. They could look like strange crosses between birds of paradise and walking corpses if they so desired. . . . They never had to blend in anywhere, and never cared to try” (55). Tran and his queer friends appear to function outside the capitalist boundaries of their society, unaffected by the pressures of consumption and production. The novel’s description of them as “walking corpses”, however, also indicates that their behaviour has potentially lethal consequences. Tran’s explorations of the queer scene of the French Quarter drives him into the arms of Jay, who eventually kills and eats him. Tran and his friends also depend on benefits or on their parents, which suggests that they cannot escape from the neoliberal dynamics of the family and (re)production. The novel therefore undermines the idea, embodied by *Lost Souls’* Ghost, that queerness can function as a non-mainstream alternative to heteronormativity and can provide a form of non-capitalist freedom.

The descriptions of Andrew’s cannibalistic sexual behaviour interrogate how the neoliberal system consumes and commodifies queer sex. They metaphorically represent how London’s and New Orleans’ gay scenes function as capitalist markets. When describing queer culture in London and New Orleans, Andrew frequently emphasizes its highly commercialized nature. “Gay London has a strenuously sanitary feel to it,” he narrates, “a kind of hygienic glitter. Even the sex shops and video stores are staffed by clean-cut young men who answer every question with cheerful courtesy, whether it is about the best coffeeshop nearby or the proper way to insert an anal plug” (57). A similar mechanism is at work in New Orleans where sex is turned into one of the major sources of economic prosperity: “Sex, or at least the ersatz rendering of it, seemed to be a major tourist attraction” (147). The novel’s description of queer sex as a commodified capitalist product resonates with extra-textual descriptions of gay bathhouses of the 1980s, which similarly functioned as spaces where non-heteronormative sexual acts were practiced and turned into highly profitable commodities. “Being smart capitalists, the owners of bars and bathhouses – frequently heterosexual and affiliated with the Mafia –,” John-Manuel Andriote argues in *Victory Deferred*, “gained control over the attitudes, behaviors, and spending habits of their gay patrons” (19). Andrew’s murder of “transients in the city” (1) is framed as an extreme fictional representation of the commercialization of queer sex. His murderous sexual encounters are depicted as capitalist transactions in which company is traded for (temporary) care. “I gave them good food,” Andrew states, “strong tea, a warm

place in my bed, what few pleasures my body could provide. In return, all I asked for was their lives. Sometimes they appeared to give those as readily as anything else” (2). Andrew problematically denies his victims agency and assumes that they are willing to give their lives in return for comfort, defining discomfort as a form of economic hardship. His framing of his murderous acts turns them into transactions which position death as a price well-paid for food and pleasure, but overlooks the fact that his victims have not actually agreed to the terms and conditions he sets. He thus aggressively draws his victims into a neoliberal trade relationship, undermining the idea of queerness as non-reproductive and non-neoliberal, and simultaneously using this connection to highlight the exploitative effects of framing queerness as a capitalist commodity.

Apart from constructing queerness as a phenomenon which is cannibalized and commodified into a neoliberal trade process, the story also develops the connection between neoliberalism and queerness into a critique of neoliberalism as a “queer” process which continually transgresses and dissolves its own limits. After his escape from prison, Andrew explores Soho and meets Sam, an American man with whom he has sex in a public toilet. “You can be put in jail for what we’re about to do, you know,” he tells Sam, “So a bit of privacy is essential” (62). It may appear as if Andrew resists society’s urge to allow only controlled, economically viable sex by engaging in sex which differs from the “ersatz rendering” (147) of sex mainstream society promotes, just as some of his extra-textual peers did during the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 1980s. “An inescapable and discomfiting point in describing gay people in the AIDS epidemic,” Andriote summarizes, “is the fact that many gay men in the early years of the epidemic – some of them still today – ignored the dangers of AIDS because, among other things, it meant having to change their sexual behaviour” (3). Andrew, however, does not regard his own disturbing sex acts as social radicalism, and instead describes his encounter with Sam as a process which develops Sam into a human ATM, whose wealth can be used to fund his escape to New Orleans. “I took the entire wallet,” Andrew describes after he has killed Sam, “The less identification was found on Sam, the more it would look as though he’d been murdered and robbed. Which of course he had” (65). Not only does Andrew turn himself into a neoliberal queer person who envisions their sexual encounter primarily as a transaction, he also stresses how the murder of Sam is an act of transgressive dissolution which temporarily cures his loneliness. “Before, I had only seen him as a means to an end,” Andrew remarks after the murder, “But in these final moments of his life, I *loved* him” (63-4, my emphasis). By narrating how he “loves” Sam as he dies, Andrew constructs a moment of erotic dissolution in which the

boundaries between victim and murderer become virtually invisible, echoing Georges Bataille's idea that "[o]nly in the violation, through death if need be, of the individual's solitariness can there appear that image of the beloved object which in the lover's eyes invests all being with significance" (*Eroticism* 21). Sam's death is a moment of continuity which allows Andrew to develop his identity as a queer consumer, because it supplies him with the financial means to flee from London to New Orleans.

Luke, one of the novel's other main characters, is a queer consumer of exotic bodies who illustrates the "queerness" of globalized neoliberalism in more detail. He is described as a flamboyant gay author and powerful alpha male, who engages in sexual escapades which resonate with "cannibalistic" and racialized undertones, even though he is one of the few characters in the novel who does not actually eat other people. "There was a recurring Oriental theme to the banquet," Luke muses when reflecting on his sex life, "He sampled them all, a dim sum festival of sweet cocks and smooth asses and skinny bodies and beautiful fine-boned faces" (129). Luke is fascinated by exotic bodies and even derogatorily described as a "rice queen" (95), due to his preference for Asian men. "At one point he'd started coloring in a mental map that reflected his sexual history," Luke muses, "China, Korea, India, Thailand, Laos, Bali..." (129). Echoing the long history of slavery and colonialism which underpins his contemporary social world, Luke's sexual cannibalism of boys of Asian origins is a perpetuation of these dynamics. In order to satisfy his need to sexually consume exotic flesh, he constantly needs to transgress geographical and cultural boundaries and engage in a series of symbolic acts of cannibalistic dissolution. Acts of cannibalism, Maggie Kilgour asserts in *Cannibalism and the Colonial World*, "involves both the *establishing* of ultimate difference, the opposites of eater and eaten, and the *dissolution* of that difference, through the act of incorporation which identifies them, and makes the two one" (240). In *Exquisite Corpse* this process of dissolution takes on a physical form when Luke appears to literally adapt the bodily characteristics of his lovers, and acquires a darker skin. "[B]ecause he loved lying in a bath of subtropical sunlight on the roof of his apartment, his skin stayed darker than Tran's," Luke muses. "Even his pubic hair had lightened a shade; even his cock had acquired a healthy glow" (78). Later in the novel, Luke sharply criticizes mainstream neoliberal society's lack of care for HIV-positive people and exposes how its heteronormativity excludes people like himself from access to healthcare. However, his own dependence on sex and consumption means he maintains strong connections with its capitalist ethics of consumption and globalization.

Apart from framing Luke's sexual practices as the "cannibalistic" consumption of people, *Exquisite Corpse* also strengthens the connections between him and social conservatism. As a result of his active sex life, during which he continuously transgressed the boundaries between his own body and that of others, Luke's body has contracted HIV. Contrary to the covert references to HIV/AIDS in *Lost Souls* and *Fight Club*, *Exquisite Corpse* describes HIV/AIDS in very visual ways. HIV/AIDS comes to highlight moral and social contradictions through its physical impact on the bodies it violates. "A virus was such a stupid thing," Luke muses, "without meaning or purpose, yet as tenacious as life could be. How difficult was it to believe a parasite that looked like a badly molded golf ball could live in your blood and your lymph, *cannibalizing* the fragile helix strands of your RNA and DNA" (96, my emphasis). As his illness progresses, Luke's body gradually transforms into a "living dead" vessel (Mbembe 40) which dissolves the differences between life and death, and health and disease. "The muscle had melted off his sturdy frame until he was all painful edges and awkward bone-ends," the story describes, "One of the medicines he was taking made him horribly sensitive to sunlight, and his tan had been replaced by a pale gray like the color of an uncooked shrimp. His entire body felt jagged and pallid and pasty" (78). Just as the emergence of the HIV/AIDS epidemic led to a rise of queer activism in the novel's extra-textual context,⁶⁷ Luke becomes increasingly politically active as his illness progresses. He even starts to work as a talk show host for an illegal radio station, WHIV, which voices the concerns of people suffering from HIV/AIDS. However, Lush Rimbaud, the pseudonym he uses, is a parodic recalling of the name of real-life conservative talk show host Rush Limbaugh, who is known for his conservative, racist and anti-feminist opinions. Luke adopts Limbaugh's controversial presentation style, often displaying a similar form of misogyny and offensiveness. "Let's just hope the poor kid catches HIV sliding down your diseased cunt," he states in a discussion about a HIV-positive pregnant woman, "so your stupidity-riddled genes can die off as soon as possible" (194). Instead of offering an alternative to the harmful conservative rhetoric he appears to parody, Luke adopts its emphasis on individual responsibility, as well as its lack of empathy.

Luke's adoption of conservative ideas and presentation styles echoes the controversial extra-textual conceptualization of HIV/AIDS as a "punishment" for the "sin" of non-heterosexuality, thus perpetuating instead of contradicting the harmful effects of this belief. "The spectacle of AIDS operates as a public masque," Simon Watney asserts in "The Spectacle of AIDS", "in which we witness the corporal punishment of the 'homosexual

⁶⁷ See Shilts (1987) and Whiteside (2008).

body', identified as the enigmatic and indecent source of an incomprehensible, voluntary resistance to the unquestionable governance of marriage, parenthood, and property" (83). In *Exquisite Corpse*, Andrew in particular communicates the idea that his HIV-positive status is a logical consequence of his own actions and therefore his own responsibility. "[A]nyone who violates the sweet sanctity of a dead boy's ass cannot expect to get away scot-free" (11) he matter-of-factly concludes upon being told that he is HIV-positive. His attitude reflects what Robert Searles Walker describes as "a Gordian knot of self-doubt and denial" which severely hampered "[e]ffective action from within the nation's various gay communities, the communities most affected in these early years" (120). Andrew proceeds to read his HIV-positive status through a neoliberal lens by emphasizing the importance of "freedom of choice" (7). Following his diagnosis, he problematically suggests that physical problems can be overcome through sheer willpower. "I realized that I didn't *have* to bear it, you see," he mentions when reflecting on his imprisonment and subsequent escape, "I came to understand that I had a choice" (1). While the prison to which he is confined at the times of his diagnoses appears to severely limit his freedom of choice, Andrew asserts that it is up to him to decide whether he wants to stay in the same situation, conveniently ignoring the physical inescapability of his HIV-positive status. Because he believes in neoliberal ideals such as freedom of choice and individual responsibility, Andrew comes to act as both a queer character who subscribes to these ideals, and a representation of the neoliberal system which promotes them. Luke, in contrast, dissects the problematic implications of this moral stance, which profoundly affected the funding (or lack thereof) for research towards an effective treatment of the disease. "[R]esearch toward the cure of an epidemic goes unfunded because the people dying from it sucked too much *cock!!!*" (89) he angrily declares, showing that defensive morality played a crucial role in the decision to allocate limited funding to HIV/AIDS-research and -treatment. While free choice may be an important neoliberal ideal, Luke shows that the neoliberal system in practice promotes certain choices in favour of others, connecting deadly consequences to choices which do not conform to reproduction and do not appear to contribute to growth.

Through the character of Luke, however, *Exquisite Corpse* also undermines the conceptualization of HIV/AIDS as a "queer" disease. The novel frames the illness as – at least partially – developed as a result of the heteronormative emphasis on sexual reproduction. "Shandra, you dumb bitch," Luke exclaims while narrating a story about a HIV-positive woman accused of infecting several men while trying to get pregnant, "thanks for your wonderful addition to the human race. The world really needs another digestive

tract" (194). Not only does Luke show that HIV/AIDS is not a disease which only affects queer people, reflecting statements made by many HIV/AIDS researchers,⁶⁸ he also suggests that Shandra's infection of several men is a direct consequence of the heteronormative celebration of people he refers to as "breeders" (89). Luke's crude remarks resonate with contempt for what Lee Edelman defines as "reproductive futurism", a set of terms "that impose an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the public domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations" (2). Because heteronormative society uses reproduction as a central social organising principle, Edelman argues, anything which does not support or does not appear to support reproduction is automatically cast as anti-social and dangerous. Luke, however, shows that heteronormative society is never completely separate from the "queer negativity" (Edelman 6) it resists, and that queerness does not only exist as society's negative "other" but also as an illustration of its internal contradictions. "[She] said she exposed at least ten men to the AIDS virus without warning them," Luke summarizes. "Her reason: she desperately wanted a child before she died. Shandra McNeil is now five months pregnant" (194). The heteronormative imperative to reproduce can be deadly, Luke suggests, and the desire to produce new life can result in the destruction of that of others. Rather than existing as two separate cultures, queerness and heteronormativity exist in an interactive relationship.

Exquisite Corpse positions Luke as the quintessential embodiment of the close relationship between queerness and neoliberalism when it positions him as a person who asserts his normality by emphasizing his status as a tax payer. "Hey, Martyr," Luke calls out during his radio show, "guess why the governor of Mississippi refused state funding to AIDS research clinics! This is a good one. He said it was a behaviorally caused disease and normal tax payers shouldn't have to foot the bill. Why waste good American money on faggot germs?" (93). Luke positions himself as a "normal" citizen who conforms to the neoliberal imperative to pay taxes, echoing the concerns raised by gay activist Larry Kramer in "1,112 and Counting" in 1983. "Gay men pay taxes just like everyone else," Kramer argues, "NIH [National Institute of Health] money should be paying for our research just like everyone else's. We desperately need something from our government to save our lives, and we're not getting it." In *Exquisite Corpse*, Luke's anger regarding "normal tax payers" (93) moves beyond Kramer's argument of injustice and focuses on the belief that HIV-positive people

⁶⁸ See Walker (1991), Whiteside (2008), and Rowden (2009).

did not receive the care they paid taxes for. Luke thus becomes a disappointed consumer, rather than a social radical, who adapts the neoliberal focus on cost-effectiveness. “So I wrote to my legislators and said I wanted a refund of all my tax dollars that went toward research on birth defects, fertility drugs, miscarriage...” he announces, “anything related to the production of the healthy human fetus. I figured, since pregnancy is a *behaviorally caused condition* whose morality – or lack thereof – I deplore, I shouldn’t have to finance the disgusting problem of breeders” (93). While this rhetorical move does highlight the problematic morality underlying heteronormative decisions which informed the allocation of healthcare funding in the novel’s extra-textual context,⁶⁹ Luke proceeds to behave as a consumer who is not getting the customer service he feels he deserves. By depicting childbirth as a moral choice with which he disagrees, he conforms to the social discourse which has pushed him into his marginal social position, rather than proposing a radical solution to the inequality he appears to criticize. Queerness, the novel suggests through Luke, does not propose an alternative form of social organization but is ultimately caught up in the consumptive dynamics of the neoliberal system it appears to criticize.

4.2. Queer Evolution and Cannibalistic Dissolution: Creating Growth

After exploring the intersections between queerness and neoliberalism through its positioning of Luke as a queer capitalist consumer, *Exquisite Corpse* proceeds to actively read queerness as a metaphor for capitalist dynamics of consumption and production. Characters such as Andrew and Jay, who engage in horrific acts of rape, torture, necrophilia, and cannibalism, are not (only) framed as extreme examples of “queer negativity” (Edelman 6), but act as metaphoric representations of the transgressive dissolution on which neoliberal ideals such as “financial liberalization” (Rowden 66) rely. “I would take him into my bed and cradle his creamy smoothness all night,” Andrew mentions when narrating how he killed his victims, “For a day or two days or a week I wouldn’t feel alone” (3). Andrew’s desire for connection and continuity, and his use of sexualized murder and necrophilia to achieve this, reflect a function of sex acts Georges Bataille explores in *Eroticism*. Bataille puts particular emphasis on how eroticism helps people to overcome their discontinuous relationships with others. “We are discontinuous beings,” Bataille states, “individuals who perish in isolation in the midst of an incomprehensible adventure, but we yearn for our lost continuity” (15). Following Bataille, *Exquisite Corpse* reads sexual

⁶⁹ See Walker (1991), Whiteside (2008), and Rowden (2009).

intercourse as an erotic process that fulfils the desires of Andrew and his peers to be connected to their victims, linking this desire directly to the idealization of sexual reproduction by his heteronormative society, which obsessively adores reproductive women as “fertility goddess, pillar of blandness, ROLE MODEL” (99). *Exquisite Corpse* connects this sexually motivated desire for dissolution to neoliberal values such as growth and progress, distantly echoing the connection between the sexually reproductive family and neoliberal politics laid out in *Lost Souls*. Queer characters such as Andrew and Jay, who engage in murder, necrophilia and cannibalism, come to function as queer metaphors through which the consumptive ethics of their neoliberal society can be explored.

Exquisite Corpse's use of cannibalism to represent and interrogate the consumptive dynamics of capitalism reflects the wide variety of cannibalistic characters in cultural products from the 1980s and early 1990s. “Preoccupation with cannibals, I have suggested,” Crystal Bartolovich stresses in “Consumerism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Cannibalism”, “is one of the morbid symptoms of capitalist appetite in crisis” (243). Depictions of cannibals during this period range from the cannibal as an exotic and “primitive” character exploited by Western capitalists, as shown in films such as Ruggero Deodato’s *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980) and Umberto Lenzi’s *Cannibal Ferox* (1981), to the cannibal as a sophisticated white American phenomenon, as represented by Hannibal Lecter in Jonathan Demme’s *Silence of the Lambs* (1991). The cannibal thus becomes a figure which both exists at the margins of society, and simultaneously emerges in its centre, even evolving into the embodiment of neoliberal values such as competitiveness and consumption. *Cannibal Holocaust* and *Cannibal Ferox*, for example, suggest that their cannibalistic characters are motivated by the exploitative business practices of Western corporations, which have interfered with their traditional lifestyles. *Cannibal Holocaust* enforces this connection even further by urging the viewer to envision themselves as related to cannibals, and perhaps even consider their own cannibalistic urges. “Don’t turn away,” the trailer urges viewers, “Look at it! These are men, men like you!” *Exquisite Corpse* reflects the ambiguous depiction of the cannibal as a fluid character by depicting Jay simultaneously as a civilized heir of a business empire, and a “barbaric” consumer of human flesh. His position as a queer cannibal, who consumes people in order to satisfy his needs, turns him into a representation of his society’s reliance on “endless consumption of labour power by the capitalist” (Bartolovich 211).

Contrary to the colonial “myth” (Arens 19) of cannibalism as a practice restricted to “primitive” non-Western people, *Exquisite Corpse* develops (symbolic) cannibalism into a

central Western social process, prefiguring Maggie Kilgour's comment that "man-eating is a reality – it is civilization that is the myth" (259). The cannibalistic actions of Jay, who is the heir of a business empire, frame the capitalist treatment of workers as a form of symbolic cannibalism. Jay is described as a wealthy man who does not need to work and prefers to spend his days wandering around the French Quarter, engaging in transactional relationships with young queer men by paying them to pose naked for photographs. The novel emphasizes his nature as a white man who consumes non-white boys when it describes him as "a silver-white spectre awash in the waterlight of dawn, his naked flesh luminously pale" (75). This ghostly description of Jay, combined with extensive references to his love for gastronomy and other "civilized" pastimes, invokes associations with Hannibal Lecter, the "civilized" cannibal who dominates Jonathan Demme's *Silence of the Lambs* (1991). Descriptions of Lecter as a "monster" are echoed in *Exquisite Corpse* by depictions of Jay as an almost inhuman creature who completely loses his composure when he kills his victims. "His chest and abdomen were crisscrossed with dark spray patterns of blood," the novel describes Jay, "delicate as sea foam. His hair was stiff with it. His eyes were wide and wild, glittering" (75). As is the case with Lecter, Jay's cannibalistic acts involve his temporary transgression to the margins of civilization, transforming him into a creature which physically merges with the bodies he consumes. "He sank his teeth into flesh that had gone the consistency of firm pudding," the novel describes, "He ripped at the edges of the wound, pulling off strips of skin and meat, swallowing them whole, smearing his face with his own saliva and what little juice remained in this chill tissue" (146). Later on Lecter's infamous statement that "I ate his liver with some fava beans and a nice chianti" is invoked when Jay prepares a meal for Andrew and considers adding human flesh because "it could use a little more body. A little more meat" (178). Just like Lecter, who restores social order by helping police officer Clarice Starling to catch a serial killer, Jay dissolves the boundaries between the neoliberal mainstream and queer margins. He reconstructs himself as a "civilized" capitalist whose cannibalistic sexual encounters function as neoliberal acts of consumption.

Exquisite Corpse uses the cannibalistic actions of Jay and Andrew to describe the US as a capitalist country which thrives on consumption, the use of people as workers, and the symbolic cannibalization of their powers. The cannibalism Jay, Andrew's American lover, engages in, should be read as a symbolic representation of neoliberal consumption, rather than a radical departure from its mechanics. His actions foreshadow Chris Harman's statement that "capitalism . . . sucks people by the billions into labouring for it" (11) and

illustrate Harman's argument that "[i]t changes the whole pattern by which humanity lives, remoulding human nature itself. It gives a new character to old oppressions and throws up completely new ones" (11). "They kill murderers here, don't they?" Andrew asks Jay shortly after his arrival in the US. "Perhaps that's kindest. Yes, surely it is. What a merciful country" (161). Andrew describes the death penalty as a manifestation of American society's dependence on violent oppression and exploitation, and reads his own murderous practices as a continuation of this dependence. "Horror is the badge of humanity, worn proudly, self-righteously, and often falsely," he states, "How many of you have lingered over a rendering of my exploits or similar ones, lovingly detailed in its dismemberment, thinly veiled with moral indignation?" (161). Jay's pleasure in transforming the bodies of his victims into "a wet festival of scarlet" (104) is presented as an extreme consequence of his status as the heir of a powerful chemical empire, "ready to help usher south Louisiana into the atomic age" (33).

Throughout *Exquisite Corpse* cannibalism is explored as a capitalist strategy which commodifies people into useful physical objects. Cannibalism is not a horrific anomaly but a mechanism which acts as society's symbolic backbone. Because the US is a capitalist society, the novel suggests, it heavily relies on the use of people as commodified workers in order to produce and sustain economic growth. "Moralists will not even grant us a position in the human race, can only rationalize our existence by calling us monsters," Andrew argues, "But *monster* is a medical term, describing a freak too grossly deformed to belong anywhere but the grave. Murderers, skilled at belonging everywhere, *seed* the world" (67, my emphasis). Through Andrew, the novel argues that murderers are a representation of capitalism's need to use people as human capital, reflecting extra-textual criticism of capitalism as an exploitative system which creates social inequality. The notion of human capital, defined by Gary Becker simply as the "resources in people" (9), is explored by the story in an even more literal form through Jay's cannibalistic consumption of people. "It took me a long time to feel they were staying," Jay explains when telling Andrew about his first forays into the realm of cannibalism, "I'd eat their meat and it would become my meat and I'd be alone again. After a while, though, I started to feel them'" (177). Jay's ultimate aim is not just to use his victim's bodies to feed himself, but to actually merge them with his own and turning them into "flesh of his flesh, loving him from the inside" (115). The story thus highlights the powerful spiritual connotations of cannibalism by referring to the Bible, where Eve is described as "bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh" (Genesis 2:23). Jay's use of the phrase to describe his own cannibalistic acts reverts this supernatural

process of creation, turning cannibalism into a process through which consumed bodies can be overtaken and owned. By emphasizing Jay's use of people's bodies without considering their agency as individuals, the novel exaggerates extra-textual critiques of the notion of human capital, summarized in Margaret Blair's statement that "the expression and the idea it represents are demeaning because they reduce human experience to a type of commodity" (50).

Contrary to the common narrative of cannibalism as an act only practised by "the barbarian just beyond the gates" (Arens 184), *Exquisite Corpse* presents cannibalism as a symbolic phenomenon taking place in the heart of capitalist Western societies. The novel highlights the similarities between the exotic locations of films such as *Cannibal Holocaust* and *Cannibal Ferox*, which are both set deep in the rainforests of South America, and the Louisiana swamps in which much of its action takes place, thus contradicting the idea of cannibalism as an uncivilized, un-American activity. "The water had a slick look, iridescent with a thin film of crude oil," Andrew narrates when overlooking the Mississippi for the first time, "It humped and heaved and rolled as if in peristalsis, a long brown string of viscera endlessly churning. I was near its sphincter" (140). The use of organic terms to describe a major American river frames the American land as a place of consumption, digestion, and excretion, in the context of which Andrew's own murderous acts become a form of "natural" behaviour. The land is described, not only as a habitat of predators, but also as an entity which consumes people and objects. Johnnie, one of the minor characters of the story, shows awareness of the cannibalistic workings of his country shortly before he commits suicide. As a man of Cajun origins who has been raised in the swamps of Louisiana, Johnnie knows that the swamps consume and digest people and will therefore suck up his own corpse after his death. "You worried about *body disposal*, Soren?" he cynically asks the creator of the illegal radio station he works for, "City boy, don't you know they got big-ass *gators* in this swamp?" (204). The story frames the presence of alligators which will eat Johnnie's body after his death as a natural process of destruction. While Johnnie's HIV-positive status turns him into a social outcast and his body into toxic "waste", his death is still depicted as economically productive because his body will "feed" his land and its inhabitants. The novel presents the capitalist drive to growth as a "natural" phenomenon, depicting it as an evolution of natural processes at work in the American land.

Exquisite Corpse uses cannibalism as a symbol to explore how capitalism depends on the transgression and dissolution of geographical and cultural boundaries, and shows

how this relationship can be traced back throughout the history of the US. Jay's behaviour acts as a fictional contemporary extension of Louisiana's tradition of slavery, or as a nod to economic attitudes towards slavery as "a shift from an acceptance of slavery as a necessary evil in the early republic to the embrace of the institution as a positive good in the late antebellum period" (Ford 5). The novel reflects how slavery relied on the physical transgression of America's geographical boundaries, and interrogates the violent effects of these movements. Jay originates from a family with a deeply problematic history of exploitation and racism; one of his ancestors received the death penalty for the rape and murder of several young black boys (171). Jay keeps the dismembered bodies of his victims in "the former slave quarters that ran along the back of his property" (106) and thus continues his family's dependence on slavery and human exploitation in a more radical cannibalistic form. He describes in detail how he keeps the body of a young black man in a refrigerator in order to be able to consume it later on. "In his life his body had been the color of dark chocolate washed with a honey-gold patina," he narrates, "the spoils of a summer spent sleeping naked on Caribbean beaches" (145). Not all Jay's victims are black, but this lengthy and detailed description gives this particular victim a dramatic and significant emphasis. Jay proceeds to partially eat the man's body, an act which makes him feel "reborn" (147). "When he stepped out of the shower," he narrates afterwards, "Jay was at once calm and terribly excited. Both these emotions were overlaid with the thin veneer of dread that always accompanied him, like an acid trip with a jittery strychnine itch" (147). Cannibalism evolves into more than an incidental excess; it becomes a key consumptive mechanism which is the crucial basis for Jay's existence as a wealthy and civilized citizen. Immediately after meeting Tran, feeling unsettled by his strong desire for Luke's ex-lover, he engages in the extremely violent consumption and destruction of an earlier victim. Physical cannibalism comes to fulfil the same function for him as the symbolic cannibalism his slave-owning ancestors engaged in; it is not a horrific anti-social act but a constitutive consumptive mechanism which supports, rather than undermines, his superior social status.

The novel connects cannibalism directly to capitalist production by linking Jay's physical cannibalism to the destructive business practices of his family. Jay has inherited his fortune from his parents, who own a large and profitable chemical factory which generated its considerable profit at the cost of profound physical destruction. "At first his father's factory had been a boon to the impoverished area," the story narrates, "creating jobs for people who were too old or weak to make their living off the bounty of the swamp" (33).

The prosperity generated by the factory, however, depended on the symbolic cannibalism of the land and its inhabitants. "To the untrained eye, the swamp still teemed with life," Jay explains, "But the people who lived there could see it dying. Then they began dying too" (33). The factory and Jay's cannibalistic acts function as representations of what David McNally summarizes as "the dismemberment performed by capital as *destructively productive*" (139). The pollution caused by the factory actually decreases the freedom of the people living around it; it takes away their primary way of supporting themselves by destroying the animals which live in the swamp and making its inhabitants fully dependent on, and controlled by, the factory and its owners. While Jay's family destroyed the land in order to make themselves wealthy, Jay consumes his victims to make himself feel better. After feasting on his victim's bodies he leaves their remains in the swamp, again imitating and exaggerating the behaviour of his capitalist ancestors. "Now it was not even worthwhile to pay 'waste disposal experts' but more expedient to let the drums stack up in forgotten warehouses like these," Jay explains, "When a warehouse was full, there was always the swamp" (213). The cannibalistic business practices of Jay's family transform human existence in the direct environment of the factory, forcing people to conform to its mechanisms and using them to increase its own profits. Jay is thus caught in a capitalist cycle which forces him to continuously consume and expand his hunting grounds, in order to guarantee the continued existence of his family business and satisfy his own needs as a cannibalistic killer.

4.3. The Dissolved Body: HIV/AIDS, Excess and Globalization

Exquisite Corpse uses Jay as a queer metaphor to explore how capitalism depends on the symbolic cannibalisation of people, to sustain its need for consumption and its relentless desire for economic growth. The story proceeds to explore a more radical form of the transgressive dissolution which Jay's practices facilitate. By introducing Tran, a young man of Vietnamese origins who used to be Luke's lover and is now looking for a "sugar daddy", the novel explores the trans-national process of economic globalization as an extreme form of consumption. Tran's violent encounters with Jay, which culminates in his cannibalization by Jay and Andrew, emerge as extreme metaphorical representations of the transgressions which characterize globalization, as described by Joseph Stiglitz:

Fundamentally, it is the close integration of the countries and peoples of the world which has been brought about by the enormous reduction of costs of transportation and communication, and *the*

breaking down of artificial barriers to the flows of goods, services, capital, knowledge, and (to a lesser extent) people across borders” (9, my emphasis).

Exquisite Corpse explores the effects of globalization by employing Tran as a *homo sacer* figure, a “(sacred man), *who may be killed and yet not sacrificed*” (Agamben 8). Tran is reduced to “bare life” when he is cannibalized by Andrew and Jay in an attempt to satisfy their consumptive needs. Early in the story, he is described as someone who “lived in two worlds” (41), meaning that he moves freely between his religious Vietnamese family and the gay scene in the New Orleans French Quarter. “In English,” Tran reflects on the significance of his name, “the short sharp syllable suggested movement (transmission, transpose) and the crossing of boundaries (transcontinental, tranquilize, transvestite) both of which he liked” (39). After his father discovers that Tran is queer, he expels him from the family home, which inspires Tran to turn to Jay for financial security. “The problem is... nobody loves me now” (109) he summarizes, covertly proposing a transactional relationship in which he is paid by Jay in return for sex. From a body which transgresses geographical and social boundaries, the novel turns Tran into a body where boundaries are *being* transgressed in a sexual and cannibalistic manner. Tran’s name becomes an omen of his function as a “Tran-sgressive” metaphor.

Throughout *Exquisite Corpse*, globalization is described as a transgressive movement which dissolves geographical and social boundaries, but also controversially maintains and enhances unequal power relations between countries and social groups. Jay’s and Andrew’s cannibalisation of Tran is framed as an extreme form of consumption, inspired by Andrew’s capitalist desire to continuously expand his powers in order to facilitate his personal and economic growth. “We must have him,” Andrew clarifies his desire to consume Tran’s body, “And we *shall* have him” (184). Andrew’s desire to consume Tran’s exotic body culminates in a graphic scene in which Andrew and Jay rape, butcher and eat Tran while he is still alive. “Rabid jaws churning slippery tubes,” Tran describes shortly before he dies, “Stinking acids of digestion. Meat in Jay’s mouth, dangling, dripping. Arthur feeding from Jay’s mouth, their lips purpled with dark blood, their jaws chewing the stringy flesh in unison. His own dear flesh” (236). Brite’s decision to describe this highly significant moment in the story through the eyes of Tran, the victim, turns the scene into a critique of Andrew’s and Jay’s transactional cannibalistic practices. Not only does the narration from Tran’s viewpoint invite empathy and attribute him with a limited form of agency, it primarily shows the monstrosity of Andrew’s relentless engagement in cannibalistic consumption in order to satisfy his desire for personal growth and power over others. It contradicts Andrew’s sophisticated explanations of his beliefs by depicting him as

an uncontrolled creature who is ruled by his desire for human flesh. The scene, in which a non-white, non-American man is viciously consumed by two white Western men, functions as a powerful metaphor for the exploitative effects of globalization in the novel's extra-textual context. Many critics of globalization argue that the economic growth of the West depends on its relationship with the Third World, influencing and maintaining the economic differences between countries in an economically productive and metaphorically cannibalistic manner.⁷⁰ *Exquisite Corpse* exaggerates this sense of globalized inequality into a visceral cannibalistic practice in which exotic bodies are literally consumed by Westerners. From a seemingly progressive ideological structure, globalization becomes a horrific and destructive form of consumption.

Exquisite Corpse initially appears to depict globalization as a process which maintains rigid boundaries between social, national and ethnic identities. Early in the story, globalization is framed as a continuation of America's economic dependence on slavery, colonization and war, which relies on stable hierarchical relationships between white oppressors and non-white oppressed people. Through the relationship between Jay and Tran, the novel illustrates David Weil's claim that "the unequal distribution of income among countries is arguably the most important economic fact in the world today" (43). Jay and Tran appear as opposite ends of a strict racial spectrum, with Jay as the white American consumer on one side and Tran as the exotic consumed body on the other. Tran originates from a Vietnamese family which fled the country during the Vietnam War and has since built up a successful business in New Orleans. His presence in New Orleans is presented as a result of the Vietnam War, a violent American transgression of the geographical boundary between the US and Vietnam, and Tran vividly describes how this past has led to the establishment of Vietnamese communities within American society which are strictly segregated from the rest of the country. "The swampy green land surrounding these buildings," he describes when driving into his hometown close to New Orleans, "the ragged blue-gray cloud of mist, the slightly ramshackle aspect, and the Vietnamese characters on the signs suggested a tiny foreign village, but the whole thing was only twenty minutes away from downtown New Orleans" (40). In early parts of the novel Tran and his community are presented as exotic entities living alongside, rather than within, American society and are portrayed as symbols for the maintenance of social boundaries after the crossing of geographical boundaries. Their humble homes differ radically from Jay's house, "a baroque fantasy of draped velvet and satin tassels and dark

⁷⁰ See Stiglitz (2002), Harman (2009), and Rowden (2009).

carved teak, syrup-smooth hardwood floor covered with an enormous Chinese rug” (74). Tran and his family are placed in a subordinate position versus the “white mainstream” society represented by Jay, who is depicted as economically and socially superior to them.

However, by portraying Jay as emerging from a complex racialized background and Tran as originating from an Asian family which enjoys some economic success, *Exquisite Corpse* undermines the idea that globalization functioned as easily demarcated exploitation of one country by another, and suggests instead that “lumps of capital” are shaped and traded across increasingly fluid geographical and social boundaries. Immediately after describing Tran as an exotic creature who is set to be devoured by a white American man, the story proceeds to depict how the encounters between Tran and Jay highlight the multidimensional power relations which characterize the globalized neoliberal system they exist within. *Exquisite Corpse*, on one hand, complicates Tran’s status as an inferior outsider through his assertion that “I’m American” (165). Jay, on the other hand, is suggested to originate from “swamp trash” and to have “Cajun” blood (171), undermining his status as a white member of a slave-owning family with virtually unlimited economic powers. Jay and Tran exist in what Achille Mbembe refers to as “a patchwork of overlapping and incomplete rights to rule . . . in which different de facto juridical instances are geographically interwoven and plural allegiances, asymmetrical suzerainties, and enclaves abound” (31). By describing Tran’s family as enjoying a modest level of wealth – Tran describes them as “a bit richer than most others in the community” (41) – the novel nods to the extra-textual rise of “East Asian ‘tiger’ economies” (Harvey *Brief* 88) and complicates the notion of the US as the main economic superpower. From the novel’s description of the complex power relationship between a white American and a non-white Vietnamese man, a complicated image of globalized capital emerges. “The pattern was not one of capital flowing effortlessly over a homogenous worldwide landscape,” Harman argues in *Zombie Capitalism*, “It was ‘lumpy’, concentrated in some countries and regions, in a way that was not fully grasped by either the crude globalization view, by interpretations that stressed regional blocs, or by those who still spoke in terms of national economies” (263). *Exquisite Corpse* refuses to describe its characters in strictly defined hierarchical terms, pointing out instead how globalization led to the dissolution of distinct and clearly separated social groups and nation states during the 1990s.

The novel also points out the dangers associated with the relentless expansion globalized capitalism prescribes, by showing how the cannibalistic practices of Jay and his family have profound self-destructive consequences. Both of Jay’s parents die from the

consequences of brain tumours, leading Jay to describe his mother as “collapsing” and “rotting” from the cancer which has affected her brain like, as the novel crudely phrases it, “the fat on a particularly tender cut of beef” (31), just like his father a few years earlier. The novel describes cancer as a form of excessive growth gone awry,⁷¹ developing bodily illness into a marker of “the profound irrationality of a system that must perforce devour itself” (Phillips 185). As the story progresses, it increasingly uses images of illness as powerful omens of the impending collapse of Jay and the cannibalistic capitalist system he represents. Andrew and Jay lure Birdy, a young homeless man, into Jay’s home with the promise of being generously paid for his presence, creating a transactional setting with strong sexual undertones. However, upon sedating and cutting open Birdy, Andrew and Jay discover that “[w]e can’t eat this” (191). Birdy’s body is affected by a mysterious illness which has turned his body into “a sepulchre of disease” (191) full of “soapy-looking nodes and curls of tissue sprouting from the boy’s organs, from his very *meat*” (191). The cancerous growths which fill Birdy’s body turn it into a terrifying, dangerous object. “I felt like a starving man led to an exquisitely set table,” Andrew narrates, “titillated with luscious smells from the kitchen, then informed (just as the first steaming delicacy is set before him) that the cook has laced the banquet with weed killer” (192). The mentioning of weed killer suggests an acute ending of the potential for growth, suggesting that extreme consumption ultimately results in (self-)destruction.

By invading Jay’s home and life and bringing his potentially infected body close to Jay’s, Tran exposes Jay both to the concrete physical danger of HIV/AIDS, and to the idea that Jay’s neoliberal ethos of unlimited cannibalistic consumption may be contradicted by social practice. Early in the story, when Tran’s father discovers that Tran is queer, he immediately expels his son from the family home. “You don’t realize how sick you are,” he declares, “Sick in the brain. So intelligent, such potential – and yet you are doing everything wrong” (46). Tran is not only described as sick because of his potential HIV-positive status, but also because his father appears to regard queerness as a disease in itself. The novel adds an extra layer to the conceptualization of Tran as a dangerous “sepulchre of disease” by depicting him as a body which moves across ethnic boundaries, reflecting how many extra-textual critics observe the HIV/AIDS epidemic from a similar perspective.⁷² Tran

⁷¹ According to Arthur B. Pardee and Gary S. Stein, “[c]ancer starts as an abnormal cell which grows with time into a mass of cells, some of which can spread to other locations in the body (*metastize*) where they grow and upset normal bodily functions” (3-4).

⁷² While some histories of the HIV/AIDS epidemic mainly focus on its effect on American queer populations (Shilts, 1987), others point out the impact of the disease on non-Western countries, particularly sub-Saharan Africa (Garett, 1994).

becomes a multidimensional body and, through his involvement with Jay, begins to make visible how Jay's consumptive practices entail the potential of self-destruction. "[Jay] thought of pressing his lips to that hollow [of golden, hairless skin]," the story describes, "teasing it with his tongue, then sinking his teeth in and ripping until he tasted blood, rich steaming meat, the jellied essence of life. The urge flared in his belly, sucked at his innards, made his testicles crawl" (114). Jay also realizes, however, that his "urge" could put him in danger, not only because Tran is potentially HIV-positive, but also because consuming him would entail a social risk. "This was certainly the most dangerous guest he'd ever allowed in the house" (114) Jay muses, "He was a drug dealer, for Christ's sake, a well-known face in the Quarter, a New Orleans native with family here. Harming him would be sheer folly" (119). Jay's reliance on consumption and cannibalism brings him into contact with a disease which could end his ability to act as a globalized consumer. By connecting Jay to Tran, *Exquisite Corpse* positions HIV/AIDS as a devastating consequence of the transgressive consumption globalized consumerism prescribes.

The ever-increasing consumption globalization requires, *Exquisite Corpse* suggests, ultimately evolves into a (self-)destructive process which problematically undermines itself. At the same time globalized capitalism is presented as an inescapable system through the physical interactions between Luke and Jay. While Andrew and Jay try to eat Tran, Luke invades Jay's home and kills him in an enraged act of revenge. "Then the line widened into a lipless crimson chasm," Luke narrates after cutting Jay's jugular, "and a hot geyser of crimson blood bathed Luke's face, stinging his eyes and blinding him" (241). Jay becomes the victim of his own greed, and his own cannibalistic practices now turn against him, echoing Crystal Bartolovich's description of cannibalism as symbolizing "the simultaneous drive to endless consumption of labour power by the capitalist, and the *necessity of observing limits* to preserve production" (211, my emphasis). Because Jay consumes Tran, a body which should be "off-limits", he is turned from consumer into consumed body. Luke's murder of Jay also symbolizes the inescapability of Jay's cannibalistic consumptive practices, and forces Luke to admit that he still exists as a neoliberal subject, or a "fellow predator" (244). When a dying Jay spits Tran's meat into his face Luke "licked it away without thinking" (241), symbolically connecting himself to the cannibal who has eaten his lover. Luke "wondered just how far he was removed from a predator like [Andrew] Compton" (197), suggesting that he follows the same exploitative and consumptive ethics as Andrew and Jay. Earlier in the story he is confronted with the inconsistencies of his beliefs when he confronts a caller in his radio show, who points out that Luke can never

fully break free from the heteronormative system he appears to reject. "I hear you saying that those kids shouldn't exist because they are the product of 'breeders'," the caller states with reference to his own children, "By those standards, you and I shouldn't exist either" (198). Because Luke is a product of "breeders", the caller points out, he can never completely escape from the heteronormative system he holds responsible for his diseased body. In the end Luke decides to try and save Tran in an attempt to give their love one more chance. "In the past six months I've gotten angrier and I've gotten sicker," he reflects, "Now I feel like there's nothing left inside me but broken glass and rusty nails. I don't want to spread that shit anymore" (201). The scene in which Jay is killed by Luke ends with a sense of desperation, as Luke realizes he cannot escape from the violent consumptive ethics Jay subscribes to. Andrew survives and escapes, embarking on an even more radical exploration of the limits of the body.

4.4. Dissolving the Body: Moving Beyond Physicality

Exquisite Corpse uses the cannibalistic relationship between Tran and Jay, and its disastrous ending, to interrogate how Jay's capitalist ethics of consumption and expansion eventually conflict with the physical limits of the objects they depend on. Tran's body becomes an object which is not only cannibalized in a capitalist ritual of consumption, but also suggests that physical limits ultimately contradict the capitalist illusion of unlimited growth Jay's family appears to believe in, because its consumption is positioned as the direct cause of Jay's death. Jay's lover Andrew therefore explores a more radical form of transgressive dissolution, and tries to travel beyond the restrictions of physicality altogether, in order to turn himself into a corporate being with unlimited powers. Andrew's desire for trans-substantiality metaphorically reflects the "power shift away from production to the world of finance" (Harvey *Brief* 33) in the novel's extra-textual context, which involved a move away from the trade of physical objects towards a focus on immaterial products such as derivatives. Andrew similarly aims to negotiate, and eventually overthrow, the physical limits which restrict his ability to achieve unlimited growth, creating a sharp contrast between his disembodied self and the bodily objects which he used to restrict his ambitions. "I knew I was smarter than Jay," he states, "though he did not lack intelligence, his sphere of awareness was the narrowest I'd ever encountered. He was so keenly focused on his world of tortures and delicacies that he had trouble concentrating on anything outside that world" (185). Andrew envisions himself as a more globalized "cannibal" than

Jay, and positions himself as obsessed with immaterial power rather than the consumption of physical objects. His attempts to escape his own body in order to enhance his status as a “Nietzschean superman” (162) echo Nietzsche’s assertion that “[h]uman being is something that must be overcome” (5) and metaphorically explore the possibility of disembodied power. Jay’s death, however, functions as a powerful indication of the vulnerability disembodiment creates, suggesting that Andrew’s imagined state of unlimited power may only work temporarily.

Exquisite Corpse describes Andrew’s experiments with his own body in detail, positioning his negotiation of his own physical boundaries as a symbol for his beliefs in unlimited ideological expansion and power. Andrew’s relationship with his own body is deeply ambiguous, and throughout the story he attempts to control his bodily functions up to the point where he crosses the boundary between life and death. He repeatedly recounts how he brings his body into a catatonic, almost dead state in order to escape from what he describes as “a hateful prison of flesh” (7). “I was friend of the dead,” he reflects, “lover of the dead. And I was my own first friend and lover” (7). Andrew’s increasing separation of his cannibalistic identity as a capitalist consumer from his narrowly defined body echoes the increasingly abstract nature of capitalist practice in the novel’s extra-textual context. “In a capitalist society, both capital and labour have an abstract and *disembedded* quality,” James Fulcher argues, “since both are separated from specific economic activities and are therefore able in principle to move into any activity that suitably rewards them” (15). Andrew’s physical “disembeddedness” provides him with the opportunity to escape from the prison where he is held for murder, and return to his former lifestyle as a sexually motivated serial killer. His cannibalistic escapades, and their strong connection with his fluid physicality, appear to be influenced by other fictional cannibals, most specifically Hannibal Lecter in Demme’s *Silence of the Lambs*. Just like Lecter, Andrew is murderous yet extremely civilized, escapes from prison by pretending to be dead, and cultivates a fluid sense of physicality. The final scene of *Silence of the Lambs* depicts Lecter phoning Clarice, the police officer who has worked with him to catch a notorious serial killer. Lecter’s disembodied voice profoundly disrupts Clarice’s feeling of safety, and the virtual disappearance of his body becomes the basis for the terrifying power he exercises over her. In *Exquisite Corpse*, Andrew’s desire to escape from his “hateful prison of flesh” similarly illustrates how corporeal destruction becomes an important power mechanism, because it allows him to overcome the physical limitations which restrict his potential to act as a “Nietzschean superman” (162).

Andrew uses his HIV-positive status to escape from his body and eliminate the limits which restrict his freedom of movement, paving the way for his evolution into a neoliberal predator. He initially regards his HIV-positive status as a threat to his identity as a powerful capitalist consumer, but quickly proceeds to welcome his illness as a means to transform and transgress the limits of his physical body. He uses his illness to threaten others who could potentially prevent him from exercising his ideals. "Now forget that you may become ill," he tells himself when he is first diagnosed, "for you are not ill now, and remember only that this virus is what makes people afraid of you. Any time someone is afraid of you, you can use it to your advantage" (11). When he escapes from prison, Andrew uses his disease for a more radical project and tries to eliminate the physical limits which confined him in prison. "I advanced on him, scalpel in one hand, disease in the other" (20) he narrates when attacking a doctor, using his infected blood as a weapon. Contradicting the perspective of HIV/AIDS as a "gay plague" (Shilts 126) which predominantly affects non-reproductive "others", Andrew turns the disease into a capitalist power strategy which entails the growth of himself as a neoliberal "superhuman" through the destruction of his own body. He eventually manages to escape from prison by playing dead and leaving his body behind in an act of radical separation of his corporate spirit and physical body. "I was attached to *that thing* by an invisible tether, a fragile umbilical cord of ectoplasm and habit," he explains, "All times and all places seemed a constantly moving river, and while *the inert thing* lay on the shore of that river, I was immersed in its waters" (12, my emphasis). Andrew's decision to leave his body behind gives him a ghost-like freedom of movement, which overwhelms him when he reads about his own disappearance in a newspaper. "*What sick purpose could be served by stealing the corpse of a notorious...*," Andrew reads, before excitedly concluding that, "THEY STILL THOUGHT I WAS DEAD!" (70). The supposed "death" of Andrew's body allows him to literally move beyond the borders of the UK and escape to the US, where he continues and intensifies his visceral actions.

After Jay's death Andrew cannibalizes his body, symbolically moving beyond Jay's reliance on the consumption of physical bodies and creating space for his own development into a disembodied corporate power. He discusses Jay's corpse as a passive body, ready to be used to his own advantage. "And I had my time with him, this new Jay," he describes, "who did not and could not resist me, who never protested when I tore new holes in him, who minded not at all when I swallowed one of his testes like a raw oyster" (245). Andrew's decision to cannibalize Jay's body mirrors the function cannibalism has in

some tribal societies, where it is believed to allow people to assume characteristics of the bodies they consume. Daniel Korn et al distinguish between exo-cannibalism, which involves “one group or society killing and eating members of another group” (13) as a form of revenge, and endo-cannibalism, which “generally means the eating of your own dead, typically relatives or kin” (13) as a form of honouring the dead. Andrew eats Jay as a way to honour “the love of my life” (150) and develops Jay’s reliance on cannibalism into a transcendent act which allows him to transgress the limits of his own body. He eats a part of Jay’s leg tucked “between two slices of fresh bakery bread” (245) in order to nourish himself before undertaking a long trip away from New Orleans. “Adrift in the dark rocking silence, I listened to the workings of my body,” he describes, “My lungs pulled in air and pushed out poison; my stomach and intestines milled Jay down to his essence; my heart marked time. For thirty-three years I had lived in this prison alone” (246). The disappearance of Jay’s body and its merging with Andrew’s body becomes a crucial step on Andrew’s development into a “Nietzschean superman” (162). Andrew simultaneously eliminates a capitalist system he regards as “narrow” (185) and adopts its most important characteristics, particularly its reliance on consumption of physical objects in order to sustain abstract values such as freedom and progress.

Rather than engaging in power struggles enacted through physicality, as he is forced to do in the run up to Tran’s death, Andrew eventually chooses to discard his body altogether and move on to a new, mutated form of consciousness, which revolves around an entirely new conceptualization of the connection between body and mind, and physicality and ideology. His decision to consume Jay’s body in a symbolic act of ideological evolution is initially inspired by Jay’s assertion that he felt “reborn” (147) after devouring a man’s corpse. While Andrew’s account of his consumption of Jay still resonates with the desire to control Jay’s body, he also describes his act as a way to move beyond Jay’s dependence on physical consumption and obliterate the vulnerability which ultimately led to Jay’s downfall. “When I awoke,” he concludes, “he would be with me always, and all the world’s pleasures would be ours to revel in” (246), describing a desire to merge with Jay and combine their strengths. The concept of “merging” engages directly with extra-textual economic practices of the period, particularly the “merger mania” (Geisst 328) of the 1980s, during which financial corporations rapidly consumed others in order to enhance their market potential. Andrew, however, regards merging with Jay as merely the first step towards a much more radical form of capitalist redevelopment. “This time I was not corpse, but *larva*” (246, my emphasis) he proclaims, positioning himself as the embodiment of a

new form of capitalist consumption. At the end of the novel Andrew envisions himself as someone who has finally turned into an apex predator, or a predator which stands at the top of the food chain, and has the power to achieve unlimited growth and expansion. “I had spent my life feeling like a species of one,” he muses, “Monster, mutation, Nietzschean superman – I could perceive no difference” (162). While *Exquisite Corpse* does not describe the result of Andrew’s evolution, the story does suggest that this transgressive move enables him to experience the kind of unlimited freedom and indefinite power capitalism glorifies.

After criticizing Jay for his obsession with the cannibalization of physical bodies, and dismissing Luke as a mere “puerile” predator who is unable to follow him in his quest for transcendence, Andrew eventually tries to evolve into a “superhuman” who is no longer limited by the physical dimensions of his own body or the limits posed by other people’s bodies. He tries to leave behind his own “corporeality” and becomes a purely ideological or “corporate” being, unrestricted by the physical boundaries which earlier separated him from his victims and from Jay. Andrew both questions capitalism’s dependence on physical objects and bodies, and highlights how this dependence causes a tendency to transgress limits up to the point of self-destruction, symbolized through the scene in which he forces Jay to consume a human being which should be “off-limits”. Throughout the novel Andrew functions as a negotiator of boundaries who envisions a limitless form of growth with a virtually unrestricted potential for expansion and power. An important problem posed by this development, which is not discussed by Andrew and never depicted by the novel because it obliterates the result of Andrew’s transformation, is the continuing dependence of the corporate on objects and bodies. Even though Andrew is dissatisfied with the dependence of neoliberal ideals of freedom and consumption on physicality, he never answers the question whether corporate ideology can indeed exist without a physical basis, and what the consequences of this trans-substantial evolution would be. This paradox emerges because *Exquisite Corpse’s* understanding of the “superman” or “Übermensch” differs from Nietzsche’s. Rather than promoting a dualistic view of the relationship between body and mind, Nietzsche’s conceptualization of the “Übermensch” urges human beings to “remain faithful to the earth” (6). Nietzsche’s Übermensch arises in a world where “God died” (5) and immaterial spirits no longer exist. The tension Andrew’s misreading of this concept provokes forecasts that the separation of ideology and physicality he envisions may be an unattainable ideal. The problems which arise from the disjointed relationship between the corporate and corporeality are explored in more detail

in Bret Easton Ellis's novel *American Psycho*, where they are read against the background of neoliberalism through the setting in Wall Street, the epicentre of 1980s Reaganomic practices. Whereas Andrew is a metaphorical representation of the first cannibalistic foray into the loss of physicality, *American Psycho's* Patrick Bateman explores this phenomenon against the background of the centre of the American financial sector, and explores how a dissolution of the corporeal ultimately affects the "corporate".

Chapter 5. Fetishism, the Corporate and the Corporeal in *American Psycho*

Exquisite Corpse ends with Andrew's attempt to transgress the physical boundaries of his body in order to gain unlimited freedom and power. Bret Easton Ellis' novel *American Psycho* (1991) takes this idea further, exploring whether a purely ideological form of neoliberalism is feasible, and sets its interrogation in an environment which was crucial for the development of neoliberalism during the 1980s and 1990s. Whereas *Exquisite Corpse* depicts its characters in the "queer" environment of New Orleans, *American Psycho* positions its protagonist on Wall Street, New York City, at the heart of the American financial sector. The central concern of *American Psycho* is the increasing gap between the corporate ideology epitomized by the figure of the Wall Street trader, and the complex state of American society during the 1980s, which was dominated by the HIV/AIDS epidemic, increasing homelessness, and the effects of Reagan's welfare cuts.⁷³ The novel exaggerates this situation into a fictional universe, where the bodies of people disadvantaged by Reaganomic policies are literally violated by a Wall Street banker, nodding to the Marxist idea that "value is fundamentally about corporeality, about the labouring bodies without which the spectral and vampiric powers of capital cannot take flight" (McNally 134, my emphasis). *American Psycho* exaggerates the sense of crisis this contrast provokes through its detailed descriptions of the violent escapades of its main character. Patrick Bateman is a fictional version of successful Wall Street "supermen" such as Ivan Boesky who, as the 1980s evolved into the 1990s, were increasingly regarded with suspicion. "Greed is all right, by the way," Boesky stated in a lecture in 1986, "I want you to know that. I think greed is healthy. You can be greedy and still feel good about yourself" (qtd. in Green). Boesky's speech is imitated almost literally by Gordon Gekko, the fictional businessman from Oliver Stone's film *Wall Street* (1987). "[G]reed. . ." Gekko argues, "is good. Greed is right. Greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit." Gordon Gekko's downfall at the end of *Wall Street* appears to foreshadow Ivan Boesky's conviction for insider trading in 1989, which epitomized the moral bankruptcy of the financial system Boesky and other "master[s] of the universe" (Steele Gordon 293) represented. The 1980s transformed the American financial sector into one which depended on junk bonds, program trading, and interest rate swaps, a

⁷³ See Chafe (2001) for an overview of how social inequality was increased by Reagan's policies during the 1980s.

development which brought economic growth but also led to economic vulnerability, as financial practices diverted from the trade in physical products.⁷⁴ *American Psycho* explores the impact of this transformation, using its detailed depictions of gruesome physical violence to interrogate the effects of corporate policies on the American social practice.

The novel, published at the beginning of the 1990s, explores how neoliberalism's increasing reliance on immaterial trade practices made the system vulnerable to crisis, because its practitioners tended to ignore its continuing relationship with physical objects and people. The story facilitates its interrogation by focusing on the constant transgressions which shaped this evolving financial system, looking at the various crossings of the boundaries between the corporate, or the set of neoliberal ideologies which inspired financial practice, and the corporeal, or "labouring bodies" with which the system interacted for sustenance and development. The novel's narrative universe is an exaggerated version of fictional Wall Street representations found in many cultural products of the time, most notably Oliver Stone's *Wall Street* (1987) and Tom Wolfe's novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987). *Wall Street*, *Bonfire* and *American Psycho* all signify neoliberal ideological concepts – freedom, progress and financial success – through material objects, and display a fetishistic relationship between ideology and the objects it needs to represent itself and function properly. However, the three stories also undermine this mechanism by pointing to neoliberalism's vulnerability and inherent potential to collapse in crisis, which is caused mainly by its tendency to lose sight of the physical aspects which support the wealth and wellbeing it promises. In *Bonfire*, Sherman's downfall is not only set in motion when he hits a young black man with his car, but also by his subsequent attempts to obscure his actions. Towards the end of *Wall Street*, protagonist Bud Fox is bothered by Gekko's decision to sell off the assets of Blue Star, an airline Bud's father works for, leaving the entire staff unemployed. The clash between Bud and his father, who criticizes him for being an accomplice of Gekko, highlights an aspect of neoliberalism which Sherman, Gekko and Patrick Bateman all tend to ignore: the actual human costs of their actions and the potentially devastating effect of their business practices. Ironically, Gordon Gekko even mentions this problem of artificiality and lack of accountability in his "greed is good" speech, when he declares that: "Teldar Paper has 33 different vice presidents, each earning over 200,000 dollars a year. Now I've spent the last two months analyzing what all these guys do, and I still can't figure it out." *American Psycho* thus emerged in conjunction with other fictional texts which critically interrogated the workings of the "greed is good"

⁷⁴ See Geisst (1997) for a detailed overview of the changes affecting the American financial sector during the 1980s, and the consequences for Wall Street and the American economy.

ethos, and which contrast the glamorous lifestyle of characters such as Gekko with the dire existence of people in less fortunate circumstances.

Crisis, fictional renderings of 1980s Wall Street culture suggest, is therefore not a merely economic phenomenon but also a result of the complex relationship between the corporate financial system and its incarnation as social practice. This comment is very much applicable to Patrick Bateman and his peers, who are all vice presidents with equally unclear job descriptions. “But look what happened to Gekko...” (372) one character mentions in *American Psycho*, referring to Gordon Gekko’s downfall and suggesting that he and Patrick Bateman are somehow part of the same narrative universe. *American Psycho*’s constant alternations between fact and fiction highlight how the idealized conceptualization of Wall Street came to overrule issues affecting the society the financial sector existed within. Because of the omnipresence of larger-than-life “masters of the universe” and their “greed is good” ethos, social problems such as homelessness were routinely overlooked and ignored. *American Psycho* illustrates this issue in particular detail through its recurring references to homeless people, whom the main characters of the story usually ignore or dehumanize in order to use them as a form of entertainment. When confronted with a homeless man who asks him for money, Patrick’s friend Timothy Price asks him “if he takes American Express” (7). Patrick’s vicious murder of the same homeless man,⁷⁵ which occurs halfway through the story, functions as the first indication of the instability of this social hierarchy; for the first time a murder leaves Patrick feeling “tired” (127), rather than powerful and in control. Even though *American Psycho* can be interpreted as a novel which superficially glamorizes the capitalist system it describes, Patrick’s vicious killing of a “bum” (123) lays bare its aggressive undercurrent, and suggests that this reliance on violence demonstrates that the system is inherently unstable.

Unlike *Wall Street* and *Bonfire*, *American Psycho* does not merely replicate the Wall Street culture it describes, but exaggerates it, turning destructive violence into a metaphor for the aggressive trade practices of the financial culture it reflects. Just like the Palahniuk and Brite novels discussed in earlier chapters, the story employs bodies as metaphorical spaces to describe and explore ideologies and their enactment. More extensively and articulately than *Exquisite Corpse*, the novel explores the complex contrast between, on one hand, neoliberalism’s reliance on deregulation and the negotiation of physical limits and, on the other hand, its fundamental dependence on physical objects and labour. The

⁷⁵ The novel does not explicitly mention that this homeless man and the man Patrick kills are the same person, but both are described as “wearing some sort of weird, tacky, filthy green jumpsuit, unshaven, dirty hair greased back” (7).

story represents this contrast through Patrick Bateman, a successful Wall Street businessman who, as the novel progresses, engages in increasingly vile and frequent acts of murder and torture. These actions result from his fear of losing his own identity, caused by his desire to “fit in” and adapt to the neoliberal ideal of the Wall Street lifestyle. Patrick is repeatedly suggested to originate from a wealthy family and thus does not need to work,⁷⁶ but is desperate to present himself as a “self-made” businessman. His frequent inability to construct a coherent corporate identity leads to increasingly violent engagements with living bodies and corpses. More than any other character discussed in previous chapters, Patrick uses the body as a site of exploration and control, attempting to control it to restore the social order he is used to. His murderous interactions with people, which reduce them to dehumanized “products” which he employs to support and develop his identity as a Wall Street trader, show how neoliberal ideology depends on the fetishistic use of objects, and highlights the violent undercurrent of this dependency. The severe legal and personal problems Patrick ultimately faces expose how the financial system he subscribes to is fundamentally vulnerable, as a result of its simultaneous destruction of bodies, and its obscuring of this process. Patrick’s actions, and the identity collapse they cause, show that crisis is an inevitable, and even inherent, feature of this system.

Through its detailed descriptions of Patrick’s acts of bodily violation, *American Psycho* turns Patrick into a metaphorical representation of the disregard of his corporate system for the corporeal effects it provokes. As “April Fools”, the title of the novel’s first chapter suggests, he functions as an “april fool”, or a figure through which the artificiality of Wall Street culture can be interrogated, along with the problematic consequences this artificiality creates. “I detach her spinal cord,” Patrick narrates during one of his most violent excesses much later in the novel, “and decide to Federal Express the thing without cleaning it, wrapped in tissue, under a different name, to Leona Helmsley” (331). “Leona Helmsley” is a reference to a real-life real estate trader, nicknamed the Queen of Mean, who became known as one of the personifications of the 1980s “greed is good” ethos, and came to embody the cruel disregard of social inequality this aggressive emphasis on economic competitiveness encouraged. “We don’t pay taxes,” Helmsley allegedly told her housekeeper, “Only the little people pay taxes” (qtd. in “Queen”). Apart from exaggerating Helmsley’s disrespect for “the little people” into physical torture, thus highlighting the cruelty underlying competitive capitalism, *American Psycho*’s reference to Leona Helmsley

⁷⁶ Several characters remark that Patrick’s identity as a self-made Wall Street trader is an illusion. This point of critique reaches its peak in Bethany’s assertion that: “If you’re so uptight about work, why don’t you just quit? You don’t have to work” (228).

also points out neoliberalism's constructed nature. Not only has Helmsley later denied making her notorious statement, the nickname "Queen of Mean" and the reference in *American Psycho* also make her into an almost fictional character which appears to exist in the same narrative universe as Patrick. By combining references to extra-textual figureheads of Wall Street culture with images of extreme violence, the novel shows how Wall Street came to function as a hyperreal ideological image, which obscured the social impact of its aggressive ethics of greed.

Patrick's assertion that "I simply am not there" (362) enforces the novel's Baudrillardian critique that Wall Street culture in the 1980s functioned as a hyperreal space, or as "models of a real without origin or reality" (*Simulacra* 1). "There is an idea of a Patrick Bateman," Patrick declares towards the end of the novel, "some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity" (362). By making this statement, Patrick admits that "myself is fabricated" (362) and that he exists as a horrific corporate performance rather than as an actual individual. He emerges as a perfect example of the yuppie as someone who "enjoyed creature comforts . . . flocked to health spas, wore designer clothes made of natural fibres, jogged, and put a high value on 'looking good'" (Schaller 75). Patrick never fully succeeds in his performance of a Wall Street yuppie and his representation of its accompanying values, such as financial success and professional competitiveness, because his attempts to represent corporate ideology frequently clash with the social practice. During a dining party he surprises his friends with a lengthy political speech, in which he provides a detailed overview of the economic policies of the Reagan government which facilitated the Wall Street culture he embodies:

But economically we're still a mess. We have to find a way to hold down the inflation rate and reduce the deficit. We also need to provide training and jobs for the unemployed as well as protect existing American jobs from unfair foreign imports. We have to make America the leader in new technology. At the same time we need to promote economic growth and business expansion and hold the line against federal income taxes and hold down interest rates while promoting opportunities for small businesses and controlling mergers and big corporate takeovers. (15)

Patrick's perfectly constructed speech is met with "total silence" and "bemused disbelief" (15) by his fellow dinner guests, because it evokes a combination of paradoxes. First of all, it is unclear whether Patrick is being serious, or whether he is (perhaps unknowingly) satirizing the neoliberal discourse he expresses. Furthermore, his entire lifestyle contradicts the ideological points he makes in his speech, and after this party it will only evolve further away from the optimistic picture he paints. Most importantly, however, his speech highlights the internal contradictions of neoliberal thought and its problematic relationship with social practice. It never draws on the actual measures needed to create the society he

proposes, let alone the feasibility of simultaneously creating growth and “protect American jobs from unfair foreign imports”. Finally, his speech emphasizes the corporate and artificial nature the values he expresses, because it endlessly repeats its central points in a way which seems devoid of genuine passion and belief in the political action it proposes.

American Psycho depicts the disregard of Wall Street corporate culture for the problems affecting society at large through Patrick Bateman’s confrontation with radical physicality, particularly by portraying his interaction with HIV/AIDS. In sharp contrast to the transgressive novels discussed in previous chapters, in which the characters are aware of HIV/AIDS but choose to ignore it (*Fight Club*), where HIV/AIDS is simply left undiscussed (*Lost Souls*), or where it is a realistic danger to corporate integrity and physical stability (*Exquisite Corpse*), *American Psycho* depicts HIV/AIDS as an illness which appears to be ignored on purpose and with purpose. In line with the extra-textual context of the novel, in which HIV/AIDS was initially ignored or seen as a problem which “hadn’t spread into the general population yet” (Bauer qtd. in Grover), Patrick and his peers usually respond to references to the illness with ignorance, indifference, or a combination of the two. “Guys just cannot get it,” one of his friends states at some point. “Well, not white guys,” another replies (33). This statement does not only reflect the false belief that Patrick and his peers cannot contract HIV/AIDS, but also displays a lack of concern with those who are actually affected by the disease. Just as Gordon Gekko is not interested in the effect of his actions on the employees of Blue Star, Patrick and his friends are not interested in the fate of people who do not conform to neoliberal ethics of consumption like themselves. “What are all these t-shirts I’ve been seeing?” Patrick’s girlfriend Evelyn asks him towards the end of the novel. “All over the city? Have you seen them? Silence Equals Death? Are people having problems with their conditioner or something?” (318). Patrick angrily corrects her by stating that they actually say “Science Equals Death,” not realizing or refusing to realize that the t-shirts are part of the “Silence Equals Death” awareness campaign initiated by AIDS activist group ACT UP.⁷⁷ Evelyn’s initial interpretation of the slogan as a capitalist complaint, and Patrick’s subsequent attempt to silence her, ironically reflect the message the slogan aims to spread: that society’s silence about HIV/AIDS can have deadly consequences for those who are affected. The novel does not disclose whether dialogues such as this one originate from indifference, ignorance and/or a tasteless sense of humour, but it does use HIV/AIDS to indicate the corporate lack of care for those who do not fit in with its values.

⁷⁷ See Andriote (1999).

Apart from discussing HIV/AIDS as a physical social problem, the novel also explores how it functions as a symbol of the sense of crisis which increasingly pervaded the neoliberal society the story describes. Early in the novel Evelyn's HIV-positive friend Stash is presented as a "harmless" artist who presents no threat to Patrick's carefully constructed lifestyle. Patrick is able to easily dismiss him as inferior by focusing on Stash's physical characteristics. "He's lumpy and pale and has a bad cropped haircut and is at least ten pounds overweight;" he concludes, "there's no muscle tone beneath the black t-shirt" (15). At this early point in the story, a HIV-positive person is not regarded as a threat by Patrick because he perceives Stash as one of the "little people", who is completely separate from his own persona. As the story progresses and Patrick's lifestyle is threatened by his own mental instability, however, he becomes aware of the danger presented by the people he earlier dismissed as different but harmless. The attempts of his colleague Luis to seduce him, for example, turn from a comical form of harassment to a source of genuine fear. While Patrick usually deals with people who frighten him by murdering them, Luis' flirtations leave him physically incapable of violence. "I *can't* do it," Patrick explains, "my hands *won't* tighten, and my arms, still stretched out, look ludicrous and useless in their fixed position" (153). "You're *sick*" (282) he tells Luis as an explanation for his disgusted response to Luis's flirtations and declarations of love. Luis's sexuality becomes a potential threat to Patrick's persona due to its (faulty) connection with HIV/AIDS in popular discourse, and its potential to destroy Patrick's life by destroying his body. Luis' potential bodily illness also undermines Patrick's beliefs because it shows that Patrick's belief that "[g]uys just cannot get it . . . Well, not white guys" (33) is incorrect and that the boundaries he draws between the corporate and the corporeal are not as rigid as he would like them to be.

Apart from functioning as a physical danger, which appears to be threatening Patrick as the novel progresses, HIV/AIDS is also used in *American Psycho* to symbolize a more abstract form of crisis. The illness functions as an introduction to the story's central theme: the corporate crisis which neoliberalism's disregard of social issues provokes. Towards the end of the story HIV/AIDS has approached Patrick up to the point where it has started to threaten his friends. Some of Patrick's friends suspect that HIV/AIDS is the reason for the sudden disappearance of Timothy Price, Patrick's best friend. "You don't think," Patrick's girlfriend Evelyn asks, "- and now she looks around the restaurant before leaning in, whispering - 'AIDS?'" (116). Price himself remains elusive about his reasons behind his dramatic disappearance, which involved him walking into a tunnel at a night

club, while shouting at his friends that “I...am...*leaving!*” (58). Though Price’s HIV-positive status is never confirmed, the mere suggestion that he is ill appears to have alienated him from his friends and their world when he returns, and his personality seems to have undergone an irrevocable change. In the novel’s final scene Price comments critically on a TV-broadcast of Ronald Reagan responding to the Iran-Contra affair. “I don’t believe it,” Price muses, “He look so... *normal*. He seems so... out of it. So... *undangerous*. . . . He presents himself as a harmless old codger. But inside...” (381-2). Contrary to Patrick and his friends Price, “to whom something really eerie had obviously happened” (382), now appears to be able to see through the surface ideology of Reagan’s politics and comment on the artificiality of Reagan’s image. Price has a mysterious smudge on his forehead, which could be an indication that he is indeed HIV-positive,⁷⁸ and his rejection of neoliberalism and Reaganomics seems to be directly related to his damaged physical state. Contrary to Patrick and his other friends, whose healthy bodies conform to the neoliberal ideal of “looking good” (Schaller 75), Price shows that the impact of bodily illnesses cannot be ignored and might even threaten the stability of their lifestyles.

⁷⁸ One of the symptoms of HIV/AIDS is the development of Kaposi’s sarcoma, a type of skin tumour which is often one of the first visible indications of the disease (Adler et al 71).

5.1. Using Objects: Commodity Fetishism and the Corporeal

American Psycho suggests that the idealized image of the Wall Street trader as a person who achieves personal wellbeing and professional success through capitalist competitiveness exists in a fetishistic relationship with people, bodies, and objects. Patrick can only maintain himself as a successful Wall Street businessman by engaging in vicious acts of torture, rape and murder, in a grotesque exaggeration of the competitive trade practices his social environment prescribes. The ancient roots of this fetishistic obsession with objects can be found in Karl Marx's analysis of capitalism, more specifically in his definition and analysis of a process which he defines as commodity fetishism. In *Capital*, Marx defines commodity fetishism as follows:

In that [religious] world the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. This I call the Fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities. (77)

Marx uses the concept of fetishism to analyse the relationships between people and objects under capitalism, which evolve from being based on material characteristics to primarily being attached to their socio-economic value. During this process commodities are turned into beings which function independently from the humans which produced them, an evolution which obscures their material origins and turns them into "living" objects with powers of their own. In addition to reflecting Marxist interpretations of fetishism, *American Psycho* also borrows from Freud's definition of the concept, who describes fetishism as a sexual obsession with a certain type of object or a type of objectification. Freud specifically connects sexual fetishism with the fear of castration and defines the fetish as a "token of triumph" (353), or a way to control fears and perceived threats. "For though no doubt a fetish is recognized by its adherents as an abnormality," he argues, "it is seldom felt by [fetishists] as the symptom of an ailment accompanied by suffering. Usually they are quite satisfied with it, or even praise the way in which it eases their erotic life" (351). Fetishism, Freud shows, can be interpreted as a sexual perversity which fulfils a pleasurable personal function and acts as a way to exercise control. Reflecting this theoretical background, *American Psycho* discusses fetishism to unpack the interactive relationship between corporate ideals and bodies, in which the latter are used to develop and represent the former.

American Psycho describes the fetishistic use of objects in an exaggerated way which highlights the artificiality of the characteristics attached to objects, and the artificiality of that attachment itself. Timothy Price, for example, arises as a quintessential commodity fetishist in the novel's first chapter, where his confidence sharply contrasts with his persona after his disappearance. Price, "the only interesting person I know" (21) according to Patrick, is seen through Patrick's eyes and represents a successful Wall Street businessman on his way to a dinner party. In line with the novel's overall style, the chapter describes Price's possessions at length, meticulously listing brand names and characteristics of the goods that surround him. "He continues talking as he opens his new Tumi attaché case he bought at D.F. Sanders," Patrick narrates, "He places the Walkman in the case alongside a Panasonic wallet-size cordless portable Easa phone (he used to own the NEC 9000 Porta portable)" (4). Through this detailed description of his attaché case and portable phone, Price is immediately positioned as a successful yuppie. The description of the exact brand and type of his possessions, furthermore, suggests that he must be extremely wealthy in order to afford them. His ownership of a mobile phone, in an era where those were a relatively new invention and extremely expensive, is a particularly clear indication of his social status. Price is not only making lots of money, he also knows how to spend it on cutting-edge technology. Mobile phones and attaché cases become more than mere objects; they are turned into social signifiers which enhance and communicate Price's status. The description of Price based on the objects he carries with him does not only turn him into an idealized representation of a Wall Street trader whose professional success has earned him his expensive possessions, it also highlights how consumer culture is a fetishistic phenomenon which loads objects with social meanings.

In *American Psycho*, objects are turned into fetishes which are imbued with the "magical" power to enforce and transform the identity of the person engaging with them. A fetish object allows Patrick to exercise his power and fight his fears because it "can be held, seen, smelled, even heard if it is shaken" and because "most importantly it can be *manipulated* at the will of the fetishist" (Kaplan 5, my emphasis). Patrick's frantic shopping sprees, which he undertakes whenever he experiences nervous breakdowns, illustrate how his corporate coherence depends on his fetishistic interaction with products which support his ideals. "Some kind of existential chasm opens before me while I'm browsing in Bloomingdale's and causes me to first locate a phone and check my messages," he narrates, "then, near tears, after taking three Halcion . . . I head towards the Clinique counter where with my platinum American Express card I buy six tubes of shaving cream"

(172). Shaving cream is a beauty product which has the material potential to improve Patrick's body and make his skin look smooth and clean. In addition to its corporeal function, the product is attributed with the power to straighten out his corporate image, making him look in control of his life. Patrick does not only regard the shaving cream as a skincare product, but describes it as a magical potion which has the power to restore his position as a powerful participant in the aggressive trade mechanics of Wall Street, particularly when bought in excessive quantities. This fetishistic use of a commercial product satirizes the advertising language which is also used by Clinique on its website. "Follow the routine and great things can happen," it claims,⁷⁹ stressing the potential of its products to function not only as skincare but as opening up new possibilities for life. By buying an excessive amount of the product, Patrick tries to amplify this potential and uses it to overcome a temporary identity crisis by improving the appearance of his body. At least at this point in the story, his strategy seems to succeed, and the effect of shopping appears to be even stronger than actual medication. Immediately after buying the cream he flirts "nervously" (172) with the sales assistants and feels guilty about how he treated his girlfriend Evelyn earlier. By the end of the chapter he is once more able to describe himself in familiar terms. "I'm wearing a cashmere topcoat," he narrates, "a double-breasted plaid wool and alpaca sport coat, pleated wool trousers, patterned silk tie, all by Valentino Couture, and leather lace-ups by Allen-Edmonds" (172). However, the story suggests that Patrick's transgressive reliance on objects is actually responsible for the existential panic he frequently experiences. "A Xanax fails to ward off the panic," Patrick states before approaching the Clinique counter, "Saks intensifies it" (170). Fetishism is only able to create a fragile equilibrium, and constantly needs to be repeated in order to remain effective.

Patrick and his peers therefore extend their fetishistic activities to people, whom they objectify and dehumanize, in order to use them as fetish objects through which they define themselves as a successful businesspeople. Timothy Price, for example, defines his social status in contrast to the homeless people who roam the streets of Manhattan. "That's the twenty-fourth one I've seen today," he mentions when seeing a homeless man, "I've kept count" (4). Rather than identifying the man as a fellow human being, Price describes him as an inferior object which contradicts his own values. His violent dismissal of disadvantaged "others" is an exaggerated representation of the aggressive rhetoric of the Reagan government against these groups, which culminated in statements such as Reagan's conclusion that many homeless people were "'retarded' people who had

⁷⁹ See "Why Clinique".

voluntarily left institutions that would have cared for them" (Cannon 9). Price's question whether a homeless man takes American Express (7) further illustrates the disregard of the actual social circumstances – including high unemployment figures and benefit cuts – which contributed to inequality in the novel's extra-textual context. Rhetorical attacks on so-called welfare queens, or women abusing the welfare system, climaxed in Reagan's criticism of Linda Taylor, a woman accused of welfare fraud, as someone who "has eighty names, thirty addresses, twelve Social Security cards and is collecting veteran's benefits on four non-existing deceased husbands" (qtd. in *New York Times*). *American Psycho* ultimately turns these verbal attacks into physical violence, describing how Patrick murders a homeless man, transgressing the boundaries separating their bodies to reconstruct the hierarchical relationship which offsets him against the "have-nots".

Apart from depending on the violent destruction of bodies, a process which enforces the distinction between his own corporate perfection and the disadvantaged status of his victims, Patrick also transforms living human beings into fetishistic objects with whom he interacts to create the sense of control his corporate persona requires. Sex functions as a fetishistic strategy through which he defines himself as a dominant, masculine, successful businessman, a construction which is particularly visible in his encounter with two women, Christie and Sabrina. Because both women are prostitutes, their sexual relation to Patrick is defined in strictly economic terms, a rhetorical move which nods to the connection between money and femininity created by the image of the "welfare queen". Rather than functioning as individuals with specific personalities, the two prostitutes serve as objects which offer Patrick the corporate dream of dominant masculinity through his transactional relationship with two submissive women. He picks them carefully, based on the characteristics he wants them to represent, and stresses that one of them needs to be blond: "I can't stress blond enough" (163). Both women are expected to convey a sense of purity and cleanliness and take part in a carefully orchestrated performance of dominant masculine sexuality. One of the prostitutes, Christie, is a streetwalker who has been lured into Patrick's apartment by the promise of earning an exceptionally large sum of money. After their arrival, Patrick tells her to wash herself and dresses her in "a Dior lace and charmeuse teddy" (166) in order to turn her into a wealthy-looking young woman who matches the social status he wants to communicate. In order to have sex with Christie, he first needs to obscure her origins and transform her appearance, making her into a fetish object which is able to fulfil his needs. In order to

function as fetish objects the two women first need to be “prepared” and “transformed”, a task Patrick takes extremely seriously.

Patrick’s encounter with the prostitutes illustrates how his transgressive corporeal interactions ultimately serve to support his corporate persona. Throughout the chapter he concentrates on the *perception* of the sexual acts he engages in, rather than the physical effects they provoke. The sex scene which follows Patrick’s preparations consists of detailed descriptions of sexual acts, focusing on looks and visibility in a pornographic fashion. Patrick positions himself as the gazing male who controls the behaviour of the women he observes, and casts himself as the centre of power. “And though she could be faking it,” he comments on Sabrina’s orgasm, “I like the way it *looks* so I don’t slap her or anything” (167, my emphasis). Patrick is not interested in the physical aspects of Sabrina’s sexual enjoyment because he prefers to concentrate on the way the scene looks and what her behaviour represents, namely his masculine ability to sexually please her. In a truly pornographic fashion he describes how he brings Christie “to yet another climax within a matter of minutes” (168), quickly followed by “yet another orgasm” (168). His pornographic emphasis on Christie’s looks and her repeated orgasms is not only unrealistic – the orgasms seem to occur more frequently than is possible given the timespan – but it also overlooks the fact that she is a prostitute and is very likely to fake her excitement. While Patrick in his description of Sabrina mentions that faking is not a problem for him, since “I like the way it looks” (167), it does mean that the economic reality of his encounter with two professional sex workers is obscured by his focus on their superficial representation of a pornographic dream. Through the contrast to Christie and Sabrina, Patrick positions himself as a powerful man who dominates them through his ability to offer endless sexual pleasure, by positioning them and forcing them to adapt a specific “look”, and by describing the thus created situation in a superficial manner which does not address the financial transactions and bodily functions which make his corporate construction possible. Rather than as a perversion which is confined to Patrick as an individual, his fetishist use of women is connected to his social status and allows him to become the kind of man he wants to be: a representative of neoliberal Wall Street wealth and glamour.

Towards the end of the chapter, Patrick reveals the ultimate goal of his sexual fetishism. By reducing human beings to inanimate objects he is able to fully control them and use them for his own good, mimicking how the corporate emphasis on success and power in the story’s context relies on violence, dehumanization, and objectification. After a

lengthy description of the sexual acts he and the prostitutes engage in, Patrick decides that he is not finished yet. “[I] explain in a hoarse whisper: ‘We’re not through yet...’” he narrates, “An hour later I will impatiently lead them to the door, both of them dressed and sobbing, bleeding but well-paid” (169). Patrick’s assertion that the women are “bleeding but well paid” indicates a connection the novel envisions between violence and neoliberal ideology: violence is permitted, and even necessary, as long as its financial aspect is taken care of, or as long as it brings economic growth. Patrick envisions severe physical damage as a price well-paid for a significant sum of money, ignoring the deeply problematic consequences this approach has on a human and empathic level. At this point in the story, the explicit description of the extreme violence which has probably occurred in the meantime is obscured, leaving a mere suggestion that horrible corporeal acts have taken place outside the reader’s view. Patrick also allows the women to leave his apartment while still alive, in contrast to a later chapter where he murders and dissects them. This relatively early section of the story therefore merely scratches the surface of the corporate system it proceeds to dissect during its later chapters. At this point Patrick is still able to eliminate the potential dangers arising from his interactions with corporeality by using violence; later chapters reveal how his reliance on the destruction of objects and bodies endangers the stability of his corporate persona.

5.2. The Dangers of the Corporeal: Corporate Vulnerability

As *American Psycho* progresses, extreme violence increasingly becomes a desperate strategy to negotiate the crisis which threatens the stability of Patrick’s yuppie persona, instead of a fetishistic action which is undertaken in order to achieve an ideological goal. Patrick’s corporate persona as an “aggressive employee” (Partnoy 35) becomes increasingly unstable because the objects it depends on gradually escape from his control. He tries to stop this process through increasingly violent means, and eventually even tries to eat the flesh of one of his victims. “Maggots already writhe across the human sausage,” he describes, “the drool pouring from my lips dribbles over them, and still I can’t tell if I’m cooking any of this correctly” (332-3). The description of rotting flesh suggests that Patrick’s resort to cannibalism, an extreme form of the consumption his corporate identity promotes, is no longer an act of control but an *attempt* at control in a situation which rapidly evolves into a profound crisis. As a result of Patrick’s actions, bodies become useless heaps of flesh, instead of “useful” fetish objects. “[T]he thing moves effortlessly on

newfound energy,” Patrick narrates after inserting a rat into a woman’s vagina, “racing up the tube until half of its body disappears, and then after a minute – its rat body shaking while it feeds – all of it vanishes, except for the tail, and I yank the Habitrail tube out of the girl, trapping the rodent” (316). By transgressively inserting a “thing” into another “thing” Patrick desperately tries to regain fetishistic control over physical objects by endlessly repeating the corporate “Pierce & Pierce” ethics of the company he works for.⁸⁰ His increasing aggression and competitiveness, however, only reflect and emphasize the “increasing complexity, loss of control, and lack of regulation” (Partnoy 34) that characterized the American financial sector during the late 1980s. Reflecting the many episodes of crisis which occurred during his period, including the 1987 savings and loans crisis, Patrick shows how corporate competitiveness and aggression is ultimately unproductive. “I can already tell that it’s going to be a characteristically *useless*, senseless death,” he tiredly concludes, “but then I’m used to the horror” (316, my emphasis). The commodity fetishism Patrick and his extra-textual peers engage in is described by the novel as a dangerous system which has the potential to undermine the stability of the neoliberal lifestyle it supports.

Just like the financial system *American Psycho* reflects, which became increasingly unstable due to its diminishing relationship with corporeality, Patrick gradually loses control over his own corporate persona. Fuelled by the competitiveness of his corporate environment, Patrick murders his colleague Paul Owen, in order to expand his own business by acquiring the mysterious Fischer account Owen manages. He does not try to transform Owen’s body to use it as a fetish object, but utterly destroys it by covering it in lime, erasing the limitations to his own economic power Owen represents. In order to avoid suspicion about Owen’s disappearance Patrick changes Owen’s voicemail, posing as Owen and pretending that he has gone to London on a business trip. For a long time this strategy appears successful, until his lawyer tells Patrick that Owen has indeed been seen in London and that he has even had dinner with him. The lawyer’s assertion that “I...had...dinner...with Paul Owen...twice...in London...*just ten days ago*” (373) confuses Patrick to the point of panic. Even though he has managed to murder Owen’s body, Owen’s corporate spirit appears to be leading an uncontrollable life of its own. Throughout the novel Patrick and his colleagues are constantly mistaken for each other, which possibly accounts for the lawyer’s perceived encounter with Owen, but Patrick is unable to confirm that he did kill Owen, because his body no longer exists. This uncontrollability of the

⁸⁰ The name “Pierce & Pierce” is a nod to Tom Wolfe’s novel *Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987), in which the main character works for a firm of the same name.

corporate spirit, disconnected from its bodily basis, reflects how financial culture similarly evolved in the novel's context, as it increasingly moved away from the trade of physical goods to financial products such as derivatives, "sophisticated financial instruments that derive their value from the value of something else" (Fulcher 10). The "general financial excess" (Geisst 328) this change provoked is reflected by Patrick's anxiety following Owen's murder. The murder can even be read as a form of symbolic suicide; because the two men look similar and are constantly mistaken for each other, Patrick does not only appear to destroy someone else's physical basis but also his own.

Patrick's loss of control is intensified by his need to turn himself into a corporate signifier and make himself a subject of public scrutiny. Turning himself into a fetish object occasionally functions as a successful corporate strategy for Patrick, but it also means that he cannot always direct the gaze of others, thus losing control over the perception of his persona. Patrick idolizes several extra-textual businesspeople such as Ivan Boesky, Michael Milken, Leona Helmsley, and particularly Donald Trump, and makes an effort to turn his own body into a representation of the corporate success they embody. He subjects his body to a rigorous diet, beauty routine and exercise regime in order to achieve the corporate perfection which comes with the yuppie ideal of "looking good" (Schaller 75). In order for this strategy to work, his body needs to be seen, and he spends much of his time encouraging people to look at him. "I want Helga to check my body out," he explains while flexing his muscles in front of his beautician, "notice my chest, see how fucking *buff* my abdominals have gotten since the last time I was here, even though she's much older than I am" (110). Patrick's obsession with his looks implies that, in order to maintain his Wall Street persona, he needs to make himself into a fetish object which can be observed by others. His exhibitionist actions mirror and exaggerate those of his extra-textual peers, who similarly made themselves visible in order to communicate and enhance the competitive business ethics they subscribed to. Strategies ranged from the publication of memoirs such as Donald Trump (*The Art of the Deal*, 1987) and Ivan Boesky (*Merger Mania*, 1985), to the frequent appearance of Leona Helmsley in the TV commercials of her own business empire, and the construction of the first Trump Tower in 1983. Patrick shows that these strategies do not always work, and can even be a cause of embarrassment. "My eyes are closed so it looks casual," he continues his account of his encounter with his beautician, "as if the muscles are acting on their own accord and I can't help it. But Helga drapes the smock gently across my heaving chest and buttons it up, pretending to ignore the undulations beneath the tan, clean skin" (111). Helga refuses to look at his body, instead covering it

before giving him a facial, a manicure and a pedicure. Even though Patrick frequently invites people to look at how his body displays the ideals of success and wealth he subscribes to, he is usually unable to actively direct the gaze of others.

Helga's covering up of Patrick's body highlights an additional danger of Patrick's fetishization of his own body: its function as a corporate sign which gradually eradicates its bodily basis, making it harder for him to control the objects his identity relies on. "I check myself in the mirror before the gym," he narrates, "and, dissatisfied, go back to my briefcase for some mousse to slick my hair back and then I use a moisturizer and, for a small blemish I notice under my upper lip, a dab of Clinique Touch-Stick" (65). The Clinique Touch Stick is an anti-blemish product which claims to make blemishes and other bodily flaws disappear. Patrick's excessive use of the product, which fits in with his general tendency to use beauty products in extreme amounts, suggests that his fetishistic obsession runs the risk of making his body disappear, as happened to Owen's. Because Patrick no longer controls his own body, it becomes increasingly difficult for him to control other bodies, objects, and commodities. The novel builds from Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism in its assertion that Patrick's reliance on commodities is one the main threats to the stability of his capitalist lifestyle. "Commodities are things," Marx argues in *Capital*, "and therefore lack the power to resist man. If they are unwilling, he can use force; in other words, he can take possession of them" (178). *American Psycho*, however, shows that commodities also acquire a power of their own because they are charged with corporate meanings. The novel creates a narrative universe where objects become powerful, start leading lives of their own, and even begin to dominate their human fetishized counterparts. Early in the novel Patrick is struck by objects appearing in strange places, such as "a Burberry scarf and matching coat with a whale embroidered on it (something a little kid might wear) and it's covered with what looks like dried chocolate syrup crisscrossed over the front" (29) showing up in his spotless apartment. Towards the end of the novel Patrick is disturbed by "a park bench that followed me for six blocks last Monday evening and it too spoke to me" (380). These experiences can be read as the products of a delirious mind, but they also metaphorically represent Patrick's slipping dominance over objects and the impending ideological crisis it implies. *Fight Club's* statement that "the things you used to own, now they own you" (44) acquires a more sinister meaning here, as *American Psycho* suggests that commodity fetishism causes a gradual shift in the power balance between object and objectifier.

Eventually the novel suggests that objects acquire power over their former objectifiers, further exposing the vulnerability and inherent instability of the financial system Patrick represents. Patrick's apparent control and competitiveness are fundamentally undermined when the novel reveals that he is in fact controlled by a highly significant object, namely his automated teller (ATM). From a mere object which supplies Patrick with the power to buy objects to represent and enhance his wealthy lifestyle, the ATM becomes a dominant social power in itself. "Ellis further disaggregates finance," Leigh La Berge argues in her analysis of the novel, "by turning the ATM, one of the most widely profiled and anxiety-provoking personal financial devices popularized in the 1980s, into a narrative device" (286). "I'm having a sort of hard time paying attention because my automated teller has started speaking to me" (380) Patrick confesses towards the end of the novel, switching the power balance between himself and the ATM in favour of the machine. La Berge interprets the ATM as a "teller" or an alternative dominant voice within the novel, and indeed Patrick's ATM eventually starts sending messages to him which read, among others, "Cause a terrible scene at Sotheby's" and "Kill the President" (380). From an object which supplied Patrick with power in the form of money, the ATM evolves into an object which undermines Patrick's mental stability. Not only does it become an indication of Patrick's vulnerable mental state, it also actively contributes to the erosion of his economic and social power. The novel's description of the evolution of objects from social tools into subjects with a life of their own, however metaphorically, suggests that the fetishism which has been supporting Patrick's identity is deeply problematic. His power is actually an illusion, and in reality he is dominated by the objects he needs in order to function.

While Patrick's violent destruction of bodies initially enforces his power, and while the fetishistic attribution of "magical" powers to objects appears to benefit his social position, both processes are revealed to imply an inherent threat of crisis. His transgression of the limits which separate his corporate identity from the bodies and objects it is based on, culminating in the gruesome torture and murder of people, is part of a complex network of power relations which gradually evolves into a situation where he is the observed object, rather than the observer. Patrick's exhibitionism, represented by his need to use his own body as a fetish object, puts him in a panoptic situation, which "reverses the principle of the dungeon; or rather of its three functions- to enclose, to deprive of light and to hide – it preserves only the first and eliminates the other two. Full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected" (Foucault *Discipline*

200). By making himself visible Patrick invites others to look at him, and this observation, as Foucault illustrates, is a form of control which Patrick now lacks. This powerful form of observation, which is caused by corporate exhibitionism, mimics the state of Wall Street culture in the early 1990s, when many of its icons found themselves in deep trouble. Ivan Boesky, one of the first to voice the “greed is good” ethos⁸¹, was arrested for insider trading in 1986 and sentenced to three-and-a-half years in prison, plus a \$100-million dollar fine.⁸² Boesky’s conviction led to the arrest of several other traders, including Michael Milken, who made a fortune selling junk bonds, was accused of fraud and insider trading, and became “the most hated man in America” (Geisst 358). From “masters of the universe” Wall Street personalities increasingly came to be seen as “barbarians, predators, even thieves” (Partnoy 7). Patrick similarly becomes the subject of critical scrutiny and is frequently ridiculed for his relentless belief in the powers of finance. “Not Donald Trump *again*,” Patrick’s girlfriend exclaims while they are having dinner, “Oh god. Is that why you were acting like such a buffoon? This obsession has got to end!” (186). Just like the image of the Wall Street trader and the aggressive capitalist practices actual traders engaged in, Patrick becomes entangled in a panoptic situation where he is observed rather than observer, losing his (perceived) dominance and invincible power.

Initially, the observations Patrick is subjected to do not appear to threaten him substantially, but the symbolic and superficial nature of the legal representatives he interacts with does act as a mirror which shows him his own emptiness and moral bankruptcy. Long after Paul Owen’s disappearance, Patrick is visited by Donald Kimball, a private detective hired by Owen’s girlfriend. Kimball’s appearance initially frightens Patrick, as it indicates that his murderous acts might have been discovered and that his lifestyle might be at risk. “I wave in the detective,” he narrates, “who is surprisingly young, maybe my age, wearing a linen Armani suit not unlike mine, though his is slightly dishevelled in a hip way, which worries me” (256-7). Kimball’s “worrying” appearance signifies his ability to threaten Patrick’s lifestyle to make his behaviour public, which could lead to Patrick’s potential prosecution and imprisonment. However, Kimball tells Patrick that “I was just hired” (264), suggesting that rather than conducting a genuine investigation, he is merely going through the motions. His approach is reflected in his questioning of Patrick, which supplies Patrick with useful information but does not give Kimball any clues in return. Rather than actually looking beyond Patrick’s ideological façade, Kimball allows it to persist. This encounter reflects the mechanics of the trials of Wall Street icons in the novel’s

⁸¹ See Green (1986).

⁸² See Geisst (1997) for a more detailed overview of Boesky’s trial.

context, who frequently received lighter sentences than expected. Ivan Boesky, for example, served only half of his prison sentence and was allowed to release profits from his business before his indictments. "Wall Streeters suspected that [attorney] Giuliani harboured larger political ambitions," Charles Geisst summarizes in *Wall Street: A History*, "... the treatment was viewed in that light" (357). In *American Psycho*, Patrick similarly escapes legal punishment, but the encounter with Kimball does confront him with the potential threats the law poses to his actions, and shows that his powers may be limited and endangered.

Kimball's depiction as a hyperreal representation of the law, rather than an actual enactor of it, combined with the similarities between his appearance and Patrick's, discloses the vacuum which underlies the surface of Patrick's corporate persona. Just before Kimball enters his office, Patrick fakes being in the middle of a telephone conversation to create the impression of being at work. However, to his embarrassment Patrick notices that Kimball "averts his eyes from the three copies of *Sports Illustrated* that lie open atop my desk, covering it, along with the Walkman" (259). The objects, which used to define Patrick as a man who is on top of trends and can afford to spend money on the newest technology, take on a different meaning under the gaze of the detective. Suddenly they become inappropriate markers of corporate superficiality and indicate that Patrick does not actually work, a fact which he continuously tries to obscure. The stability of his identity is thus undermined, albeit temporarily. Eventually Kimball poses no real threat and turns out to be of the same kind as Patrick. Interested in surface rather than substance, he allows Patrick to continue his fetishistic objectifying violence. By confronting Patrick, however, he has made Patrick aware that a world beyond his view exists and that Patrick is subjected to laws he cannot control. Moreover, he indicates that Paul Owen's disappearance may have consequences Patrick is as yet unaware of. "One day someone's walking around, going to work, *alive*, and then. . . ." Kimball muses, "People just...disappear" (265). The suggestion that people like Paul Owen and Patrick himself "just disappear", possibly as a result of their own superficiality, terrifies Patrick because it makes him realize that he may be facing a fate similar to Owen's. Kimball functions as a terrifying mirror, which reminds Patrick of the potential consequence of his expansive use of the Clinique Touch Sticks and more extreme forms of corporeal destruction: his power over objects is gradually disappearing. Similarly, Patrick's extra-textual peers gradually lost their status as "masters" as the 1980s drew to an end, and they came to be seen as representations of corporate cruelty and greed rather than positive role models.

American Psycho evokes a more acute type of fear when introducing Bethany, Patrick's ex-girlfriend, who has become a successful lawyer after their relationship ended. Her identity as a lawyer and ex-girlfriend turns her into a character who is able to look beyond Patrick's identity as a corporate representation and analyse the human being hidden underneath. When Patrick meets Bethany for lunch he meets a former fetish object, a person he once subjected to violence in an attempt to consolidate his identity. "My rages at Harvard were less violent than the ones now," he explains, "and it's useless to hope that my disgust will vanish – there is just *no way*" (232). Bethany is able to expose the violence which underlies Patrick's neoliberal beliefs, and as a consequence she becomes a grave threat to Patrick's mental stability. In addition, she now works for Milbank Tweed (227), an extra-textual prestigious law firm with strong financial links, which gives her the potential to legally overrule Patrick. The reference to an actual firm creates a powerful connection to the social background against which the novel was conceived, in which the financial sector increasingly came under legal scrutiny. "The go-go 1980s led prosecutors to clamp down hard on securities fraud," Frank Partnoy summarizes in *Infectious Greed*, "indicting dozens of financial-market participants, nearly 100 in January 1989 alone" (5). *American Psycho* reflects this development by describing how Patrick gradually realizes that Bethany has a similar power to "clamp down" on him, and shows how this awareness causes the power balance which exists between them to gradually shift towards Bethany's side. While Patrick's behaviour becomes increasingly erratic and uncontrolled, Bethany remains calm and in control. Patrick's familiar coping strategies – talking down to the waiter, discussing music, and flirting – no longer appear to work. Instead Bethany points out the ridiculous nature of his behaviour, ultimately asking him: "What's *wrong?*" (227). From a helpless fetish object she turns into a critical observer who assesses Patrick's mental health and has the power to declare him inferior to herself. From a dominant character who uses someone else's body to maintain his corporate persona, Patrick is turned into a human being who is scrutinized by a successful lawyer.

Through the character of Bethany, a glimpse is offered of different values and a different notion of success, while Patrick's corporate values are interrogated and problematized. Just like Marla in *Fight Club*, Bethany does not only function as a representation of femininity in contrast to which Patrick defines his own powerful masculinity, her gender is also used to question the power strategies Patrick employs. Contrary to Kimball, a man who is just as vacant as Patrick, the story's descriptions of Bethany's personality turn her into a human being with some form of substance. She is in a

relationship and considers marriage and motherhood in a substantial way, which differs significantly from the viewpoint of Patrick's current girlfriend Evelyn, who is mostly attracted to the *idea* of marriage because "[w]eddings are so romantic" (119). Bethany is about to get married to the chef of Dorsia, the restaurant where Patrick has unsuccessfully been trying to get reservations throughout the story. While Patrick is obsessed with the *idea* Dorsia represents, Bethany is interested in its actual owner as a human being. Through Bethany the novel "defetishizes by way of re-embodiment" (McNally 135) and undermines Patrick's emphasis on commodity fetishism. Bethany's connection to Dorsia's owner overpowers Patrick's corporate attachment to the restaurant as a site which enhances and communicates his social status. This realization enrages him, particularly because Bethany also painfully reminds him of their past relationship, evoking disturbing images of bodily violence which contest the superficial success of Patrick's current relationship with Evelyn. "I'm suddenly angry," he muses, "remembering the lunch at Cambridge, at Quarters, where Bethany, her arm in a sling, a faint bruise above her cheek, ended it all, then, just as suddenly" (202-3). After contesting the man who physically abused her, Bethany finally shifts the power balance in her favour when she remarks that: "If you're so uptight about work, why don't you just quit? You don't have to work" (228). By revealing Patrick's persona as a businessman as mere fiction, aware as she is that his family's wealth could support him indefinitely, Bethany removes the basic foundation underneath Patrick's lifestyle. Suddenly the former fetish object makes the fetishist useless and obsolete, turning him into an empty shell and observed object rather than an executor of power.

In a desperate attempt to regain his control over Bethany and, consequently, his own corporate persona, Patrick transgresses the boundary between his corporate identity and her body by subjecting her to extreme violence. Initially he lures her into his apartment in order to impress her with his fetishistic possessions, which include a "Durgin Gorham tea set" which "cost me three and a half thousand dollars" (234). Bethany, however, immediately focuses on the expensive painting which dominates the living room. "I'm pretty sure it's hung upside down" (235) she comments, offering the final blow to Patrick's battered persona. Patrick responds by raping, torturing and murdering her, refetishizing her body and reclaiming her critical gaze. From an independent woman, Bethany becomes one of Patrick's many victims. He starts by literally fixing her body in place with a nail gun, restricting her ability to move independently, and proceeds by reducing her to mere meat by calling her "you fucking cunt" (236). Focusing on her genitals, Patrick turns Bethany into a feminine object which he can manipulate just like the prostitutes he killed earlier, and

which he can use to exercise his own masculine dominance. He enhances this process by “nailing” Bethany down, an act which can be interpreted as a horrific literalization of sexual innuendo, and forces her to see him once more as a powerful man who is completely in control of himself and her body. “Look at this!” (237) he shouts triumphantly, aggressively employing her gaze to reinstate himself as an idealized image of power. Nevertheless, his strategy ultimately fails to fully re-establish his position as a powerful man who is fully in control of women’s bodies. “I Mace her again,” he concludes the chapter, “and then I try to fuck her in the mouth once more but I can’t come so I stop” (237). Rather than a violent reestablishment of his power, his murder of Bethany becomes part of a string of events which lead to Patrick’s full collapse. His desire to control is revealed to be self-destructive and causes his identity to lapse into a deep crisis.

5.3. Transgressive Crisis: Merging the Corporate and the Corporeal

When Patrick becomes the subject of critical observation by Kimball and Bethany, his earlier disregard and destruction of bodies and objects is met with limits which severely restrict his ability to establish his corporate identity. The deeply disturbing descriptions of Patrick’s increasingly gruesome dismemberment and murder of his victims begin to breathe a sense of desperation, and represent the anxiety provoked by his realization that his lifestyle is in crisis, rather than the triumphant atmosphere they carried earlier in the story. Patrick’s violent transformations of bodies, and his intense attempts to use them to re-establish the former stability of his corporate identity, are an extreme metaphor for the controversial business practices of his extra-textual equivalents, such as Ivan Boesky and Michael Milken. “Milken’s biggest crime, certainly, was hubris,” John Steele Gordon concludes in his analysis of Milken’s conviction for insider trading in 1989. “He was convinced that he was capable of carrying off any deal that he put his hand to, and he underestimated his enemies. Milken came to ruin as a financier because he lacked J.P. Morgan’s sense of limits and the strength of the forces arrayed against him” (293). In *American Psycho*, Patrick Bateman displays a similar lack of a sense of limits, and for a long time continues to believe that his corporate power is indefinite. While he is torturing Bethany to death, he becomes overexcited by his own actions and encourages her to scream, urging her that: “No one cares. No one will help you” (236). Even though Patrick’s increasingly frequent and extreme acts of violence can be read as transgressive establishments of power, which reinforce his corporate status through the fetishization of

bodies, they also indicate that Patrick is at risk of losing sight of the limits he is constantly crossing, thus blurring the boundaries between the corporate and the corporeal. Towards the end of the novel, Patrick faces a deep personal and corporate crisis which mimics the downfall of many of his extra-textual peers. Just like Wall Street traders such as Milken, tried and convicted because they went too far in the exercise of their “greed is good” ethics, Patrick collapses and faces the consequences of his horrible deeds.

The novel partially departs from its context when it moves towards a more abstract exploration of crisis as the logical consequence of constant violent transgression. The story frequently describes the anxiety caused by the impending collapse of Patrick’s identity through the term “nameless dread”, borrowing a psychoanalytical expression developed by Wilfred Bion.⁸³ Patrick frequently experiences a nameless dread when he feels unable to distinguish between the corporate and the corporeal, and loses control over the bodies and objects he uses to create his identity. “I notice her lack of carnality,” Patrick concludes when looking at his girlfriend Evelyn, “and for the first time it taunts me. Before, it was what attracted me to Evelyn. Now its absence upsets me, seems sinister, fills me with a nameless dread” (321). Even though Patrick describes himself as initially attracted by emptiness, artificiality becomes his main source of fear as the novel progresses. One of the first instances where Patrick uses the term nameless dread occurs when he reads a newspaper article about a mysterious new breed of animals which has been found in Harlem and is “now making [its] way steadily toward midtown” (110). Even though the article claims that the animal is a hoax, Patrick muses that: “As usual, this fails to soothe my fear, and it fills me with a nameless dread that someone out there has wasted the energy and time to think this up” (110). Patrick describes himself as “exhausted” (111) after reading the article for two reasons. First of all, he is irritated by the multiple layers of truth, which are created in a media landscape where fake photos are printed and then discussed in newspapers, making authenticity a virtually meaningless concept. At the same time, he is worried by the article’s content, even though it is probably a hoax, as it describes the invasion of Manhattan by creatures which originate from Harlem and which are therefore associated with blackness and poverty. Read in conjunction with Patrick’s contempt regarding the homeless and other people who do not fit in with his ideological beliefs, the creatures metaphorically represent his fear of otherness, its contamination of his world, and the resulting collapse of his lifestyle. Nameless dread, in this context, signifies both

⁸³ In the *Edinburgh Encyclopedia of Psychoanalysis*, nameless dread is defined as: “A feeling of anxiety or fear stripped of such meaning as it has. . . . The explosive psychotic fear and the sub-thalamic fears could also be dreads without a name or meaning” (Tabak de Bianchedi).

Patrick's horror of artificiality but also highlights the threat it poses to his own persona. While defining his identity as corporate rather than corporeal helps him to construct the lifestyle of a successful Wall Street trader, it also threatens the very essence of Patrick's personality. Patrick's fears that his identity will be damaged or dissolved suggest that the creation of a corporate identity without a stable physical basis is becoming increasingly problematic as the novel progresses towards its climax.

The novel exaggerates this fear up to a point where Patrick appears to experience a psychotic state, in which his violent transgressions have made the corporate and the corporeal virtually impossible to distinguish. Patrick's Wall Street persona appears to collapse almost completely, leaving him in a state of deep crisis and terror. The climax of this dissolution is reached when Jean, Patrick's secretary, declares that she is in love with him. Despite Patrick's early introduction of her as "[m]y secretary, Jean, who is in love with me and who I will probably end up marrying" (61), her actual declaration of her intentions scares and unsettles him. While she lists her reasons for liking him, including her superficial perceptions that "you're sweet . . . you're mysterious . . . and you're...considerate" (363) Patrick constantly switches between tired attempts to converse with her on a human level and lengthy reflections on the artificiality of his persona. "...where there was nature and earth, life and water, I saw a desert landscape that was unending," he describes, "resembling some sort of crater, so devoid of reason and light and spirit that the mind could not grasp it on any sort of conscious level and if you came close the mind would reel backward, unable to take it in" (360). A similarly horrific image can be found at the end of the chapter, where Patrick describes how "in the southern deserts of Sudan the heat rises in airless waves, thousands upon thousands of men, women, children, roam throughout the vast bushland, desperately seeking food" (365). Beneath his civilized lifestyle Patrick envisions a horrific form of suffering which is fundamentally unchangeable. "This was what I could understand," he explains, "this was how I lived my life, what I constructed my movement around, how I dealt with the tangible" (360). Patrick describes his own engagement with corporeality as one which is completely devoid of empathy, and appears to believe that only cruelty can potentially create some sense of reality. Physicality and substance, he states, are eventually meaningless as "surface, surface, surface was all that anyone found meaning in" (361). In these descriptions Patrick paints a picture of civilization as a phenomenon which is fundamentally concerned with surface and which, while built on labouring bodies, objects and suffering, is unwilling to acknowledge its own physical basis. Patrick's own extreme violence and utter indifference towards other people are horrific

consequences of this form of social organization. These sections of the novel appear to offer a brief glimpse of the “reality” behind Patrick’s surface. However, his tired conclusion that “[s]ometimes . . . the lines separating appearance – what you see –and reality – what you don’t – become, well, blurred” (363) suggests that Patrick himself is unable to distinguish between the two.

The novel itself brings Patrick’s transgressions of the boundaries between the corporate and the corporeal to a climax in a chapter called “Chase, Manhattan”, where Patrick’s identity as a human being and Patrick’s manifestation as a corporate representation violently clash. His confrontations with Kimball and Bethany have left Patrick destabilized, and in “Chase, Manhattan” his collapse appears to be almost complete, up to the point where he loses his individuality altogether. The string of events described in the chapter is initiated by Patrick’s murder of a street musician while a police patrol car is driving by. During his earlier murders, Patrick has always managed to stay out of the public eye, and this scene is the first where he is confronted with the powers of the law. Just like his extra-textual peers, which were increasingly scrutinized as the 1980s drew to an end,⁸⁴ Patrick has taken one risk too many and is subjected to legal observation and, potentially, punishment. The scene quickly explodes into an orgy of violence during which Patrick kills multiple people and destroys various cars. While he initially positions himself as chasing his victims, it becomes increasingly clear that Patrick is actually the one who is being chased by the police. “I shot a saxophonist? a *saxophonist*? who was probably a *mime* too? for that I get *this*?” (336)⁸⁵ Patrick angrily muses, unable to believe that he, as a privileged person, will be punished for what he perceives to be a minor offence. As he tries to escape from his chasers his familiar habitat of Wall Street becomes a hostile environment, turning from a safe haven to a nightmarish jungle where all buildings look alike and safety is nowhere to be found. “Dumbstruck with confusion he rushes into the lobby of what he thinks is his building,” Patrick describes, “but something seems wrong, what is it? *you moved*. . . and he’s gotten the buildings mixed up” (337). For the first time Patrick is thoroughly confronted with a lack of safety and with the power of the law, concepts which used to be alien to him. Even though he used to perceive himself as an invincible “master of the universe” and regarded other people as “prey” (334) he is now turned into prey himself. From a perfect ideological representation Patrick is made into a human being which can be put on trial. He is no longer an invincible ideological metaphor

⁸⁴ See Geisst (1997) and Steele Gordon (1999).

⁸⁵ In this scene, the story gradually begins to obliterate capitals, a stylistic move which communicates Patrick’s increasing anxiety and has therefore been maintained in the quotations.

but a banker gone mad in an extreme sense, who is susceptible to legal and social punishment. From a corporate chaser, Patrick becomes a corporeal chased being.

While the scene humanizes Patrick, robbing him of his perceived invincibility and turning him into a vulnerable man who can be “chased” through his own former hunting grounds, it simultaneously develops him into a corporate cipher devoid of individual agency. Read in this light, the chase of Patrick through the Wall Street district is no longer the chase of a single murderous banker, but the chase of an entire financial system. “Chase, Manhattan” refers to Patrick’s chase through Manhattan but can also be identified as a reference to the Chase Manhattan Bank, a well-known investment bank during the 1980s which later became part of JPMorgan Chase. Furthermore, it can be interpreted as a reference to Bethany’s unsuccessful legal scrutiny of Patrick, as Milbank Tweed, the law firm she worked for, is based in the skyscraper formerly known as One Chase Manhattan Plaza in New York City, just around the corner of Wall Street.⁸⁶ During the chase Patrick appears to lose his individual personality and starts to refer to himself in the third person, contrary to the rest of the book which is consistently written in first person. “*I lose control entirely,*” Patrick narrates, “the cab swerves into a Korean deli, next to a karaoke restaurant called Lotus Blossom I’ve been to with Japanese clients, the cab rolling over fruit stands, smashing through a wall of glass, the body of a cashier thudding across the hood, *Patrick tries to put the car in reverse but nothing happens*” (335, my emphasis). Patrick’s loss of control over the situation results in a loss of control over his own personhood. He no longer functions as an individual but as an ideological cipher among other ciphers, a development forecast throughout the novel, which describes Patrick and his colleagues as looking identical and being easily interchangeable. Patrick’s quest to turn himself into a powerful corporate creature through the destruction of his own and other people’s bodies turns him into a corporate symbol who has no existence beyond his representational status. By chasing Patrick, *American Psycho* chases the aggressive capitalist system he embodies, and shows how it is ultimately unsustainable because it is bound to engage in risky behaviour which will cause the system to collapse.

The ending of “Chase, Manhattan”, however, also mimics its social context, where the high profile court cases against people such as Ivan Boesky received much media attention, but ultimately did not lead to the abolition of the neoliberal economic system. *American Psycho* shows crisis to be temporary, and suggests that a new equilibrium between the corporate and the corporeal is eventually reached, reflecting the neoliberal

⁸⁶ The building’s name was changed to 28 Liberty in 2015.

belief that “equilibrium is a natural state” because “markets will clear and the most optimal choices will be made by all actors” (Rowden 73). Patrick eventually escapes from the police by hiding in his office and observing the chase which is still ongoing outside his windows, now without a subject to be chased. In the familiar environment of his office Patrick becomes, once again, lord and master of the world he knows well, and starts to refer to himself in the first person again. “...nodding toward Gus, *our* night watchman, signing in,” he describes with relief, “heading up in the elevator, higher, toward the darkness of *his* floor, calm is eventually restored, safe in the anonymity of *my* new office” (338, my emphasis). The confrontation with an observing power superior to his own, however, leaves him frightened and confused. He decides to confess his actions and create some kind of absolution by leaving a message for his lawyer on his voicemail. “I decide to make public what has been, until now, my private dementia,” Patrick announces, quickly followed by his confession that: “Uh, I’m a pretty sick guy” (338). Later developments in the novel, however, suggest that he is ultimately too small and insignificant to change the ideological system of which he is part. His lawyer does not believe his confession and regards it as a joke, and Patrick is never punished for his actions. Just like his extra-textual peers, who frequently received lower sentences in return for their indictment of fellow traders,⁸⁷ Patrick’s corporate identity as a neoliberal agent of power is reinstalled and left unquestioned.

While this development communicates the indifference of the neoliberal system regarding the fate of its individual representatives, it also questions Patrick’s own reliability. During the second half of the novel Patrick’s narration becomes increasingly unreliable, making it impossible to decide whether he is indeed a vicious serial killer, or a psychotic man overwhelmed by his hallucinations. “[T]he sun, a planet on fire,” he narrates at the end of the “Chase, Manhattan” sequence, “gradually rises over Manhattan, another sunrise, and soon the night turns into day so fast it’s like some kind of optical illusion...” (339). He manages to regain his composure, moving on to an elaborate review of the music of Huey Lewis and the News. This review, however, while similar in style to the others which occasionally interrupt the narrative, contains some elements which betray the confused state of its author. It describes Huey Lewis music as music which, “if you turn it up really loud, can give you a fucking big headache and maybe even make you feel a little sick, though it might sound different on an album or a cassette though I wouldn’t know anything

⁸⁷ Boesky and Milken both negotiated deals which significantly reduced the time they spent in prison (Geisst 357). Both were banned for life from working in securities trade, but retained most of their capital.

about that. Anyway it set off something wicked in me that lasted for days” (345). While the novel obscures whether this review is indeed written by Patrick, the review does convey the confused state Patrick is in after the nightmarish chase through the Wall Street district. Because the chase turns him into a corporate metaphor rather than a human individual, Patrick is left with an existential fear and a deep sense of the fragility of his personality, which suggests that his system of beliefs has been permanently damaged by the crisis it has faced. Instead of disclosing the exact nature of these changes, however, *American Psycho* proceeds to reinstall the elaborate corporate surface which Patrick earlier created through his fetishistic reliance on commodities.

5.4. Reinventing Neoliberalism: Crisis and Revitalization

While incidents such as “Chase, Manhattan” and Patrick’s increasingly violent acts of torture suggest that Patrick and the neoliberal financial system he represents are about to collapse, *American Psycho* ultimately shows these forms of crisis to be temporary. In the novel’s extra-textual context, the multiple crises faced by the financial sector during the 1980s did not result in the abolition of the neoliberal ideologies which fuelled its practices. In contrast, they re-emerged during the 1990s in the form of the Washington Consensus which defined “[t]he US and UK models of neoliberalism . . . as the answer to global problems” (Harvey *Brief* 93). *American Psycho* illustrates the connection between crisis and the re-installment of contested ideologies in “Taxi Driver”, a chapter in which Patrick is “held captive in the cab as it hurtles toward a destination which only the cab driver, who is obviously deranged, knows” (377). Patrick tries to take control over the situation by reducing the driver to an object, “a mass of clogged pores, ingrown hairs” (375), using the same strategy Timothy Price employs when he is confronted with a homeless man. Patrick’s method does not work, however, because the driver observes him in return and refuses to be objectified. “There’s a long, scary pause while he stares at me in the rearview mirror and the grim smile fades,” Patrick narrates with horror, “His face is blank. He says, ‘I know. Man, I know who you are,’ and he’s nodding, his mouth drawn tight” (376). From an ordinary means of transport, the taxi transforms into a moving Foucauldian panopticon which takes Patrick away from Wall Street, towards a deserted parking area. In a reversal of the scenes where Patrick engages in elaborate shopping sprees in order to acquire more commodities to consolidate his corporate identity, the taxi driver confiscates Patrick’s Rolex and Ray-Ban sunglasses. “You’re the guy who kill Solly” (376) the driver asserts,

identifying Patrick as the murderer of one of his colleagues in “Chase, Manhattan”. Contrary to Patrick’s belief that “no one cares” (236), his actions will not go unpunished, as the driver’s colleagues have taken justice in their own hands and have been hunting for his killer ever since. Abdullah, the taxi driver, appears to be transformed into an agent of justice who declares a businessman, his financial system, and his neoliberal beliefs dead.

The sense of trial and justice created in “Taxi Driver” resembles Project Mayhem’s threat of a magistrate with castration in *Fight Club*, where a physical threat is used by a group of social outcasts to dominate an important authority figure. The encounter between Patrick and Abdullah in *American Psycho* appears to explore the same situation from the opposite perspective, showing that Patrick has created a powerful enemy by refusing to acknowledge the power and humanity of people he perceives as insignificant. Tyler Durden’s statement about the power of workers and their repression by the rich seems entirely applicable to Patrick’s situation. “Remember this,” Tyler states, “The people you’re trying to step on, we’re everyone you depend on. . . . We control every part of your life. We are the middle children of history, raised by television to believe that someday we’ll be millionaires and movie stars and rock stars, but we won’t. And we’re just learning this fact” (166). Tyler describes how magistrates are actually dependent on and observed by the people they regard as inferior, and stresses that social power is fluid and vulnerable to crisis. In a similar display of a worker judging his former superior, Abdullah’s removal of Patrick’s expensive possessions takes on the meaning of a symbolic trial where Patrick is punished for his crimes by humiliation. By taking away Patrick’s tokens of social success Abdullah damages his appearance, making it almost impossible for him to maintain his corporate persona. Abdullah does not only seem to punish an individual Wall Street trader, but also questions and undermines the power of his entire financial system.

Similar to *Fight Club*’s Project Mayhem, however, which turns out to be a movement which redefines rather than rejects neoliberal values, Abdullah adopts rather than refuses the power of money which supports Patrick’s lifestyle. Instead of turning Patrick over to the police, he merely confiscates his expensive possessions, thus underwriting the idea that financial gain outweighs the harmful effects of physical violence. Abdullah’s removal of Patrick’s neoliberal fetish objects is an act of capitalist cannibalization which allows Abdullah to assume Patrick’s identity, rather than destroy his corporate framework, thus perpetuating its reliance on transgressive violence and the production of social inequality. Abdullah’s actions do not function as a moment of catharsis or resolution, but instead illustrate that Patrick cannot escape from a world which he

described earlier as “a living hell” (333). When Patrick tells him that “you are a dead man” (379), Abdullah sarcastically remarks that “you’re a yuppie scumbag. Which is worse?” (379), implying that being Patrick is worse than dead. After taking his possessions he allows Patrick to walk away almost unharmed, leaving Patrick to muse that “I just want to . . . keep the game going” (379). The next, final chapter of the novel suggests that he has managed to do so, when he looks at “my new gold Rolex that insurance paid for” (382). Despite the threats Abdullah posed to Patrick’s existence, their encounter is merely a short glitch in the capitalist mechanics which determine their lives. Abdullah’s removal of Patrick’s possessions can even be read as a continuation of Patrick’s ethics of greed; instead of stopping Patrick’s actions, Abdullah is merely co-opting the consumptive methods Patrick has long been familiar with.

Patrick’s increasingly frequent and violent transgressions into the realm of the corporeal, which he undertakes in order to develop and sustain his corporate identity as a Wall Street trader with virtually unlimited financial and social power, appear to cause his identity to collapse into crisis. Instead of using his collapse to argue that neoliberalism is a system which will eventually self-destruct, however, *American Psycho* conceptualizes crisis as a regenerative mechanism which enforces rather than terminates the dynamics of greed and recklessness which caused it. The final chapter of the novel paints a familiar scene in which Patrick finds himself in a bar, discussing dinner reservations with a group of friends, which includes Timothy Price. Price has recently returned after an absence which lasted through most of the story, and which possibly occurred as a result of a physical illness or because “[r]umor has it that he was in rehab” (382). His friends do not appear to be pleased to see him, and his critical comments on Reagan and the Iran-Contra scandal – “How can he lie like that? How can he pull that *shit*?” (381) – fail to affect anyone or anything. Patrick himself displays a similar lack of progress or change in one of his final speeches about his own personality. “But even after admitting this,” he explains, “. . . and coming face-to-face with these truths, there is no catharsis. . . . There has been no reason for me to tell you any of this. This confession has meant *nothing*...” (362). Rather than breaking free from the system which put him through mental and physical trouble and envisioning an alternative, Patrick once more becomes obsessed with buying into the lifestyle which he earlier appeared to reject. Patrick’s crisis, and the crisis of the financial system he represents, are presented as temporary aberrations or forms of reincarnation rather than moments of total destruction. Even though *American Psycho* exposes, satirizes and criticizes neoliberalism’s mechanics, it does not aim to utterly destroy them or envision

an alternative. Instead, Patrick concludes that: “This is not an exit” (384). In line with the novel’s conclusion, neoliberal ideology did not disappear after the 1980s and, while it can be said to have changed in shape during the 1990s and beyond, it continued to dominate American politics and society.

6. “This Is Not an Exit”: The (Non) Death of Transgression

Ellis’ statement that “[t]his is not an exit” (384), which concludes *American Psycho*, suggests that the transgressions of Patrick Bateman and his peers do not lead to a destruction of the neoliberal economic system of which they are part, but instead redevelop its ideas and ultimately maintain the existing social order. Transgressive fiction does not propose or directly enable radical social change, but reflects how transgression in its extra-textual context reimagines and perpetuates ideologies such as the neoliberal emphasis on consumption, competition, and commodity fetishism. This description of transgressive fiction as fiction which depicts a cyclical process of redevelopment rather than social radicalism is also reflected by Chuck Palahniuk’s statement in *Postcards*, in which he claims that transgressive fiction is “dead in the water” after 9/11. Palahniuk appears to suggest that 9/11 meant the end of transgressive fiction as an influential literary genre, because the extreme physical violence which occurred in its extra-textual context made fictional depictions of violence obsolete and inappropriate. However, his fiction also communicates the idea that the “death” of transgressive fiction is an inherent aspect of its cyclical nature, and that it may re-emerge in a different form.

Palahniuk’s novel *Survivor* (1999), for example, prefigures the changing status of transgressive fiction as the decade reached its conclusion. The novel tells the story of Tender Branson, member of a doomsday cult, who decides to hijack a plane in order to escape from the US, where he has become a mainstream religious icon. The pages of *Survivor* are numbered in reverse order, enforcing the urgency of Tender’s monologue as he searches for a way to escape from the plane and the social system in which he has become imprisoned. The novel ends in midsentence, leaving it up to the reader to decide whether Tender dies or survives. The presumed death of Tender seemingly symbolizes the death of transgressive fiction Palahniuk would later discuss explicitly in *Postcards*. A brief analysis of the social discourse emerging after 9/11 indeed suggests that the destruction of the World Trade Center resulted in the end of a period in which transgression was a major element of American socio-political dynamics. Rigid boundaries were apparently reinstalled, leading to a strictly defined and clearly demarcated vision of what it meant to be American. The proliferation of expressions such as “The War on Terror” and “The Axis of Evil”, which promoted a strictly divided worldview, and threatening statements such as President George W. Bush’s announcement that “either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists” (“Address”) suggests that post-9/11 American society functioned as a

severely restricted environment in which transgression and transgressive fiction no longer fulfilled a major social function.

However, *Survivor* undermines this idea, and suggests that the apparent demise of transgression as a central social mechanism was not a sign of its obsolescence, but merely a step in its adaption to a changing social environment. The novel never explicitly describes Tender's death, and Palahniuk has even suggested that Tender survives the plane crash and lives happily ever after with his girlfriend.⁸⁸ The supposed death of transgressive fiction is equally complicated, and the same goes for the shape of the transgressive movements which shaped the social background against which the genre evolved after 9/11. While seemingly (re)creating rigid geographical and cultural boundaries between "the West and the rest", the War on Terror involved continuous transgressive movements of bodies back and forth across the borders of the US, culminating in events such as the invasion of Iraq and the establishment of Guantanamo Bay. Crucially, these transgressive movements were motivated by, as well as acted to preserve, the neoliberal ideologies which gained widespread currency during the Reagan era. "When all of the other reasons for engaging in a pre-emptive war against Iraq were proven wanting," David Harvey summarizes, "the president appealed to the idea that the freedom conferred on Iraq was in and of itself an adequate justification for the war" (*Brief 6*). That this "freedom" took on the now familiar shape of economic freedom of trade, complete with its problematic practical implications, is made explicit in non-fiction accounts such as John Perkins' *Confessions of an Economic Hitman*, which describes how Perkins became part of an active campaign to "encourage world leaders to become part of a vast network that promotes U.S. commercial interests" (xi). A wide range of transgressive movements, a brief look at these post-9/11 socio-political developments suggests, emerged in order to reinforce the stability of the US as a "neoliberal state" (Harvey *Brief 64*).

Palahniuk's oeuvre reflects this changing form and status of transgression in its extra-textual context. In *Postcards* he argues that post-9/11 fictional social commentary needs to be "charming and seductive and really entertaining", describing science fiction and horror as particularly good examples of this type of socially engaged fiction. The evolution of his work during the 2000s and early 2010s reflects this statement; *Damned* (2011) and its sequel *Doomed* (2013) are sophisticated pastiches of young adult literature,

⁸⁸ On his website Palahniuk later posted a statement explaining the ending of *Survivor* in the following way: "What really happened at the end of *Survivor*? I believed that Tender doesn't die" ("Chuck Explains"). Palahniuk states that he believes Tender escapes from the plane and lives happily ever after with his girlfriend, Fertility, and that Tender's confession is a testimony intended to convince society of his innocence.

horror and science fiction. However, it would be problematic to suggest that Palahniuk completely parted with the visceral physical subject matter he explored in *Fight Club*. “Guts”, for example, the story he read during the conference at which *Postcards* was filmed, is a gruesome tale of masturbation gone wrong. Other stories Palahniuk released after 9/11, such as *Rant* (2007) and *Snuff* (2008), contain graphic descriptions of murder, mutilation, sex, infection and other physical violations which are arguably more provocative than anything described in *Fight Club*. Palahniuk’s evolving oeuvre suggests that transgressive fiction evolved rather than disappeared after 9/11 and that it reflects the ongoing transgressive processes taking place in its extra-textual context. *Pygmy*, for example, describes how a young terrorist moves from a non-specified Asian country to the US in order to start “Operation Havoc” (1). This thematic perspective does not only reimagine earlier aspects of Palahniuk’s fiction, such as *Fight Club*’s Project Mayhem, it also traces how terrorism emerges as an act of transgression in the society the novel satirizes. A similar pattern arises in novels such as *Rant*, which takes into account the effects of technology on physicality and capitalism, employing elements of science fiction and horror in order to paint a dystopian world in which people are controlled by technology which dictates their buying habits. For all these reasons, Palahniuk’s statement that transgressive fiction is “dead in the water” forms a useful starting point for a concluding consideration of the evolution of transgressive fiction in pre-millennial America, as well as providing opportunities for an speculative look beyond the boundaries of this present study.

6.1. From Safety Valve to Social Mechanism: The Transgressive Cycle

This project set out to make four contributions: a reevaluation of transgression as a critical concept; an exploration of transgression in American society during the 1980s and 1990s and its dynamic relationship with transgressive fiction produced during the period; a connection of different theoretical strands to arrive at an interdisciplinary conceptual framework to explore this relationship; and a reading of three transgressive writers whose work had not yet been analysed together in depth. A key finding which has arisen from this framework is a better understanding of transgression as a cyclical mechanism that redevelops central social ideologies. Instead of as a process which disrupts and destroys social order, transgression emerged as a series of processes which recreate ideologies by moving beyond their limits. This understanding departed from existing definitions of transgressive fiction as a radical art form which provides a new type of agency to a “community of others – transgressors” (Scholder and Silverberg xvi), or as a “safety valve”

through which people can express their feelings of frustration and anger without actually changing their social circumstances.⁸⁹ Instead, transgressive fiction has been explored as a type of fiction which highlights transgressive processes in its extra-textual context, more specifically the consolidation of neoliberalism during the Reagan era, and provides opportunities for its critical interrogation and dissection.

The first aspect of transgression, which emerged in particular in the exploration of *Fight Club*, is the move beyond ideological and physical boundaries, fuelled by an apparent desire to escape from a restrictive environment which, in *Fight Club*'s case, prevents men from exercising their masculinity and freedom. Some commentators view this tendency as a form of teenage angst or rebelliousness "for its own sake", and therefore dismiss it as "a cheap gimmick" (Bayles 16). However, accepting this drive towards escapism helps us to understand the context in which transgressive fiction such as *Fight Club* emerged, and the analysis in chapter two has shown how this desire functions as a metaphorical recreation of the neoliberal emphasis on freedom as a key ideological construct. The desire of characters such as *Fight Club*'s narrator, but also of characters such as *Lost Souls*' Nothing or *Exquisite Corpse*'s Andrew, to eliminate the restrictions which stop them from developing into the type of person they envision themselves to be, is motivated by the neoliberal idealization of freedom as "the source and condition of most moral values" (Hayek 6). Hayek's assertion that "if these values are to regain power, a comprehensive restatement and revindication are urgently needed" (3) is reflected in scenes such as *Fight Club*'s establishment of Project Mayhem, a grassroots movement which is quickly revealed to depend on capitalist mechanics of production of trade. Rather than a radically different social model, *Fight Club* eventually arrives at a social vision which is eerily similar to Marx's criticism of capitalism as "social metabolism" (*Capital* 198). The novel dissects and complicates the ideological explorations of freedom as a central social value by neoliberal theorists, such as Friedrich von Hayek and Milton Friedman, and uses the mutilated body of its protagonist to illustrate the discrepancy between theory and practice.

Apart from showing how transgressive fiction highlights how boundaries are being crossed in its extra-textual context, the analysis of several novels has also shown how this process frequently results in the reproduction of the limits transgressive processes superficially appear to abolish. As *Fight Club* suggests, and *Lost Souls* explores in more detail, the reproduction of restrictions and limits functioned as a key constitutive element of the consolidation of neoliberalism as a dominant social ideology. This does not only

⁸⁹ See Silverblatt (1993) and Tauchert (2008).

complicate the ideological emphasis on freedom as an important and attainable state for the whole of society, but also reflects how the establishment of Reaganomics was closely intertwined with conservative ideological configurations, such as the nuclear family. Even though Nothing's departure from his adoptive family and his search for his vampire family initially appears to be inspired by the rebellious spirit of "the ghosts of all the decades of middle-class American children afraid of complacency and stagnation" (29), the novel ultimately reveals that it is motivated by Nothing's desire for a "strange boisterous family" (71) which is characterized by a strict sense of hierarchy. *Lost Souls* envisions this model of the nuclear family as a site of sexual reproduction and control as a direct basis for economic production, describing Nothing as "a sugar-candy confection of a baby" (10), or a product of the destructive relationship between his vampiric father and human mother. By developing the severely restricted family into a basis for economic development, *Lost Souls* shows how this ideal similarly enabled the growth of Reaganomics in its extra-textual context. Just as social conservatism was one of the driving factors behind the popularity of Reagan and his policies, *Lost Souls* shows how the limits of the family ideal facilitate rather than prevent economic expansion.

While novels such as *Lost Souls* represent how transgressions into the realm of the physical often reproduce the rigid ideological boundaries they appear to contradict, dissolution remains a key element of this reproductive mechanism. Novels such as *Exquisite Corpse* explore how neoliberalism dissolved geographical and cultural boundaries as it evolved into the 1990s by devising a globalized form of capitalism. Within the novel, this development takes the shape of the cannibalization of Tran by Jay and Andrew, a horrific illustration of Marx's depiction of capitalism as "the metabolism between man and nature" (*Capital* 133). The novel also hints at a more abstract form of transgressive dissolution which facilitated the expansion of capitalism beyond the familiar mechanics of trade in its extra-textual context, and develops Andrew into a symbolic consideration of the possibility of non-physical trade. Apart from using corporeal images of cancer and HIV/AIDS to suggest that this strategy is not without risk, the novel also adds a useful critical nuance to the treatment of queerness in both other works of transgressive fiction and its extra-textual context. While some regard queerness as a basis for a radical politics,⁹⁰ *Exquisite Corpse* shows how queerness is commodified and turned into a tradeable product, and thus not wholly separate from the neoliberal ideals contested by queer characters such as *Lost*

⁹⁰ See Califia (1994) and Bersani (1995).

Souls' Ghost. A more complex view of transgression thus arises, which provides a nuanced view of the multidimensional society in which novels such as *Exquisite Corpse* emerged.

Finally, the explorations in the previous chapters revealed that crisis functions as a key constitutive element of transgression and transgressive fiction, rather than as an alarming anomaly. In *American Psycho* crisis is a moment of personal and social anxiety which leads to a profound disruption of the protagonist's sense of himself as a successful yuppie. As the analysis of the novel has shown, Patrick's personal crises are fictional reflections of the crises which affected Wall Street, his natural environment, during the 1980s. However, the novel does not envision these crisis as endpoints, despite their disturbing nature, and prefers to read them as temporary disruptions of an otherwise continued financial and political system. Similarly, the financial disasters to which the novel covertly or overtly refers, such as the 1987 savings and loans crisis and the conviction of several neoliberal figureheads in the late 1980s, should not be read as proof that neoliberalism has lost its currency as a key ideological and financial system. While the continuing importance of neoliberal values such as freedom and competitiveness throughout the 1990s illustrates this point, Ellis' uncanny statement that "this is not an exit" (384) firmly asserts it in fictional form. A view of transgression as a cyclical process of ideological emerges from these readings that contradicts the notion of transgression as "mere" shock, rebelliousness, or a Bakhtin-esque, carnivalesque safety valve.

6.2. The Mind-Body Problem: Connecting Ideology and Physicality

Transgressive fiction produced close to the ending of the twentieth century frequently focused on the transgression of the boundary between ideology and physicality. From the murderous "Buffalo Bill" in *Silence of the Lambs*, who dissects female bodies to construct his own feminine identity, to the protagonists of *Natural Born Killers*, who set out on a killing spree to escape from their abusive families, violated bodies often featured as physical spaces where ideological conflicts are played out. This focus was inspired by the social background against which this type of fiction came into being. On one hand neoliberal values such as economic freedom, competitiveness and privatization were enacted through policies which eliminated existing restrictions, such as economic deregulation and "a well-publicized attack on . . . safety rules that had developed since the late 1960s" (Ehrman 91). Despite this strong focus on the elimination of limits, neoliberalism as an ideological system still revolved around capitalist practices of trade, which are fundamentally based on "the labouring bodies without which the spectral and

vampiric powers of capital cannot take flight” (McNally 134). On the other hand, Reagan’s promise of unrestricted economic progress contrasted sharply with the physical impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The affected bodies of patients did not only contradict the idea that all physical limits can eventually be overcome, but also sharply highlighted existing inequalities in American society, such as the heteronormative bias of Reagan’s optimistic vision of the future. Transgressive fiction tightens the connection between these two seemingly separate social phenomena and depicts violated, mutilated, and diseased bodies as direct consequences of, or as metaphors for, the mechanics of Reaganomic practice.

This critical function of transgressive fiction can be understood through biopolitical theories such as Agamben’s concept of the “homo sacer”, which connects “bare life” to political life (9). The specifics of this connection in a neoliberal context can be traced all the way back to Marx’s analysis of capitalism as a materialist system. “The circulation of commodities is the starting-point of capital,” Marx argues in *Capital*, “The production of commodities and their circulation in its developed form, namely trade, form the historic presuppositions under which capital arises” (247). Stories such as *Fight Club* explore this mechanism in fictional form, expanding it into a narrative universe where bodies function directly and unmediated as the basis for wealth and profit. The soap factory, from which Project Mayhem generates its income, emerges as a key example of a capitalist institution which transforms the labour power of its employees into a product that can be traded and sold. The novel emphasizes this process further by positioning the factory as a machine which directly consumes its workers’ bodies, using their corpses as both fertilizer and fat resource. The factory becomes a horrific illustration of Marx’s description of capitalism as a form of “social metabolism” (198). Transgressive fiction also shows how institutes of physical interaction, such as the soap factory, facilitate the transformation of physical objects into ideological vehicles. In *American Psycho*, for example, products do not only generate profit, but acquire a more important function as fetishized commodities. Patrick Bateman’s shopping sprees are moments of identity creation where the purchase of shaving cream or handmade suits create, communicate and perpetuate his image as a successful Wall Street trader. Soap thus also acquires a symbolic function in *Fight Club* as a product which “cleans” away “dirty secrets”. Transgressive fiction shows that even though Reaganomic policies, such as the financial deregulation and tax breaks of 1981, revolve around the elimination of limits, the system’s continuing dependence on physical labour and trade creates a permanent state of tension with this focus on ideological expansion.

Transgressive fiction further explores this tension through images of diseased and mutilated bodies, frequently referring to HIV/AIDS in explicit terms. Just as the HIV/AIDS epidemic functioned as a powerful contrast to the optimistic ideological visions of Reagan in its extra-textual context, examples of transgressive fiction such as *Exquisite Corpse* show how these ideas differ markedly from social practice. Characters such as Luke aggressively argue against the heteronormativity which influenced the lack of response to the epidemic, and Luke's rhetoric is amplified by the novel's detailed descriptions of his body as "all painful edges and awkward bone-ends . . . [his skin] a pale gray like the color of an uncooked shrimp" (78). The transformation of Luke's anger into horrific depictions of queer violence can also be found in other examples of transgressive fiction of the period, such as Dennis Cooper's *Frisk* (1991) and Samuel R. Delany's *Hogg* (1995).⁹¹ Together, these stories paint a bleak picture of a sharply divided society where prejudice and inequality take the shape of deeply disturbing physical violence. However, many works of transgressive fiction also reflect the complexity of their social background, which was characterized by debates about issues such as the closure of bathhouses in an attempt to stop the HIV/AIDS epidemic from spreading, and the aggressive reactions from within queer communities this proposal provoked.⁹² *Exquisite Corpse* even positions its queer protagonists as metaphorical representations of neoliberal practices of consumption, thus blurring the boundaries between the two. Instead of straightforwardly criticizing issues such as the problematic response of the Reagan government to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and dissecting the physical effects of neoliberal ethics of trade, transgressive fiction also uses violated bodies as sites where multidimensional transgressive interactions between ideology and physicality can be mapped, interrogated, and explored in detail.

6.3. Hard Bodies: The Role of Gender and Sexuality

In many works of transgressive fiction, gender and sexuality are explored as key axes of inequality where social and physical boundaries are constantly drawn and transgressed. Examples range from the obsessive descriptions of Tyler Durden's naked body in *Fight Club* to the deeply disturbing acts of sexual violence which occur in Samuel R. Delany's *Hogg*. A

⁹¹ *Hogg* was written in 1969 but not published until 1995 due to its explicit depictions of paedophilia, rape, and necrophilia. The emergence of transgressive fictions such as the ones discussed in this thesis, but also the work of authors such as Dennis Cooper, created a literary environment which actively enabled *Hogg's* eventual publication. This environment contextualized *Hogg's* controversial content as a fictional exploration of extra-textual issues, particularly pre-Stonewall homophobia.

⁹² See Shilts (1987) and Andriote (1999) for detailed overviews of this debate.

major cause of this narrative focus is the omnipresence of “hard bodies” in 1980s America as ideological vehicles. “Such bodies assist in the confirmation of this mastery by themselves refusing to be ‘messy’ or ‘confusing’,” Susan Jeffords argues, “by having hard edges, determinate lines of action, and clear boundaries for their own decision-making” (*Hard Bodies* 27). Transgressive fictions such as *Fight Club* strongly rely on this type of body; *Fight Club*’s narrator describes his imaginary friend Tyler Durden as “naked and sweating, gritty with sand, his hair wet and stringy, hanging in his face” (32). Tyler emerges as an archetypal “Wild Man,” a character similar to popular fictional characters such as Sylvester Stallone’s Rambo. The Rambo-esque man’s hard body is not merely an aspect of his external appearance but an embodiment of his identity as “a rearticulation of masculine strength and power” (Jeffords 13). Transgressive fictions, however, interrogate the issues emerging from this focus on the idealized masculine hard body by depicting it as an unattainable ideal which excludes old and diseased men, such as the narrator’s friend Bob who “has sweating tits that hang enormous, the way we think of God’s as big” (16). Stories such as *American Psycho* portray the consequences of the hard body ideal in even more dramatic terms, by suggesting that the constant acts of physical mutilation and transformation it requires cause bodies to “disappear” (265). Gender and sexuality, arise as important yet destructive social constructs, which are explored and criticized at length in many transgressive texts which emerged during the 1980s and 1990s.

Transgressive fiction creates space for a more complex understanding of gender which nuances the rigid gender conceptualizations which underlie the “hard body” ideal. The effects of the emphasis on the masculine “hard body” are depicted by many transgressive texts as deeply problematic. *Lost Souls*, for example, positions the aggressive masculinity of characters such as Zillah as a direct cause of the horrific deaths of Jessie and Ann, which turns their bodies into nothing but genitals, a “poor torn [vaginal] passage . . . Ruined now, bloody” (10). This hostile treatment of women reflects the extra-textual backlashes against feminism which occurred during the 1980s and 1990s, and which culminated in occurrences such as the “crisis of masculinity” and the “men’s movement”. While texts such as *Fight Club* initially appear to confirm the powerful rhetoric of arguments such as Robert Bly’s *Iron John*, many works of transgressive fiction critically interrogate the strict conceptualization of gender which underlies the idea of masculinity as being turned into a “soft body” (Bly 2) which is “life-preserving but not exactly life-giving” (Bly 2). In *Fight Club*, the powerful image of Tyler Durden is disrupted by the emergence of Marla Singer, a woman who refuses to act as his feminine antagonist and instead develops

herself into a “sofa issue” that cannot be “handled” (44). Because of his love for Marla, and the critical questions she persistently asks him, the novel’s narrator finally realizes that Tyler is a hallucination, and comes to see the harmful effects of Tyler’s reliance on violence and discipline. He eventually realizes how Tyler’s masculinity functions as an image which both enables and obscures the exploitative mechanics of Project Mayhem, and draws strong connections between neoliberal ethics of trade and a conceptualization of masculinity as based in powerful hard bodies.

Transgressive fiction “queers” gender and disrupts the heteronormativity of the hard body ideal, opening up possibilities for a more fluid understanding of gender and sexuality. This focus is strongly influenced by the emergence of queer theory and queer activism in its social context, which increasingly became a space where gender and sexuality existed as fluid concepts rather than bases for rigid social separation. Fictional characters such as Ghost in *Lost Souls*, who is depicted as non-sexual and androgynous, function as embodiments of this development. Apart from functioning as a person of complex gender and sexuality, Ghost is also strongly connected to the religious and capitalist ideologies which try to marginalize him. He is described as a “holy” (147) figure with the ability to redeem tormented characters such as Nothing, without adapting the violent patriarchal beliefs of figures such as Zillah. He also resolutely rejects capitalist ethics of trade, preferring to exist in a non-competitive and non-money driven way, and posing an alternative to the “vampiric” exploitative lifestyle Nothing and his family indulge in. While transgressive fiction frequently reflects the problematic conceptualizations of gender and sexuality which existed in its social context, it also creates space for their critical dissection, and even occasionally appears to envision alternative forms of social organization. While *Lost Souls* suggests that its utopian vision of a non-capitalist and non-heteronormative society may not be practically viable, presenting “vampiric” families as never-ending phenomena, it does invite the reader to critically consider the “hard body” and the ideological values it represents, opening up possibilities for the consideration of alternatives.

6.4. Moving beyond Boundaries: Areas for Future Research

This thesis focused specifically on three American transgressive authors who published their major works during the 1990s, a focus which invites a concluding consideration of areas for further research. A first concern is the evolution of transgressive fiction beyond the medium of literary fiction. The analyses in the previous chapters already suggested that

transgressive fiction can be expanded to include film, a consideration which is also evoked by the film adaptations of *Fight Club* (1999) and *American Psycho* (2000). Ellis appears to follow this path by focusing increasingly on film as a screenwriter, director, actor and producer of, among other works, *The Canyons* (2013). Palahniuk has produced a steady stream of novels after the success of *Fight Club*, and is currently working on a sequel to the novel in graphic form. While Brite has announced that “I’m basically retired (for now)”⁹³ he still occasionally engages with his audience through his online journal. Brite’s turn to the World Wide Web in particular invites the question to what extent the internet has affected transgressive fiction after the 1990s. Further research may consider how the rapid expansion of the online world has affected the reception and discussion of existing transgressive texts through sites such as Goodreads, which provide readers with unprecedented opportunities to share their ideas and reflections with each other. Palahniuk’s own website (chuckpalahniuk.net) has evolved into a lively community where his new and existing works are shared, discussed, and promoted by his own readership. In addition, further research may explore to what extent transgression is still a literary phenomenon, and may expand its focus to texts which emerge specifically in an online context. Much research has already been done on hypertext and other aspects of online storytelling,⁹⁴ but there is still space for an exploration of the form, discussion and treatment of transgression and the impact of, for example, social media.

The influence of neoliberalism on transgressive fiction of the 1980s and 1990s invites a different perspective, which consists of a more detailed exploration of the development of “fictions of finance” (Knight 2) after the turn of the twenty-first century. 9/11 hailed the start of the downward spiral of the American economy into an economic recession, which became even worse when the effects of the 2007 and 2008 financial crisis began to impact upon American society beyond the financial sector. “Once again, as happened during the HIV/AIDS pandemic that surged during the Reagan administration,” David Harvey concludes, “the ultimate human and financial cost to society of not heeding clear warning signs because of collective lack of concern for, and prejudice against, those first in the firing line was to be incalculable” (*Enigma* 1). While the effects of the crisis have

⁹³ After producing the *Liquor* novels in the late 1990s and early 2000s – a literary cycle which maintained Brite’s affection for New Orleans culture but dispersed with the more gruesome elements of his earlier work – Brite announced in 2010 that “I’m basically retired (for now)” in a post on his personal blog, citing his increasing detachment from his own work as a major reason for his retirement as an author.

⁹⁴ See Murray (1997) and Ryan (2001).

been studied from historical, economic and political perspectives,⁹⁵ the question remains as to what extent contemporary fiction reflects the changing shape of neoliberalism, and whether transgressive fiction and neoliberalism still exist in a relationship as they did during the 1990s. Texts such as *Union Atlantic* (2011) by Adam Haslett explore the causes of the financial crisis in fictional form, echoing the emphasis on greed and competitiveness of texts such as *American Psycho*. *Union Atlantic* tells the story of Doug, an ambitious banker, whose failing efforts to build himself a mansion co-occur with his downfall as a successful banker. While his complicated sexual relationship with a teenage boy resonates with the queer sexual themes novels such as *American Psycho* are permeated with, the story is radically different in shape. It almost completely omits the stylistic experimentation of Ellis and many of his peers, reads like a much more “traditional” narrative, and invites the question whether its form should be read as an indication of the changing shape of transgression in its extra-textual context. While transgressive fiction of the 1980s and 1990s is closely intertwined with its context, more recent texts appear to concretize this relationship in a different manner, and research in this area would extend the understanding of the critical function of earlier transgressive fiction to the current state of globalized capitalism.

Brite, Palahniuk and Ellis focus predominantly on gender and sexuality as axes of inequality and pay less attention to race and ethnicity. Descriptions of non-white or non-American characters are often fairly stereotypical and rarely consider the complexity and importance of ethnicity in an American context. *Exquisite Corpse*'s Tran, for example, is described as human “dim sum” (129), an exotic body that can readily be consumed, and while the novel briefly considers his statement that “I’m American” (165), it never studies the consequences of this statement in detail. Much research has already been done on fiction produced by authors of African-American, Native American, or otherwise non-white origins.⁹⁶ Further research could study these texts more explicitly as transgressive texts, interrogate what kind of transgressive processes occurring in their extra-textual context they reflect, and what kind of stylistic and metaphorical devices they use to do so. Moreover, the present study focused on transgressive fiction in a specifically American context, whereas further research could export the transgressive perspective beyond the boundaries of the US. Authors such as the Japanese Ryu Murakami explore themes which appear to be similar to the ones described by Brite, Palahniuk and Ellis, but are set in a radically different environment. Murakami’s *In the Miso Soup* (1997), for example, narrates

⁹⁵ See Krugman (2009), Harman (2010), and Roubini and Mihm (2011).

⁹⁶ See Lincoln (1983) and Graham (2004).

the horrific acts of an American serial killer in Kabuki-Cho, Tokyo's Red Light district, seen through the eyes of local tour guide Kenji. *In the Miso Soup* explicitly invites the reader to reconsider the connection between America and transgression, and shows how different cultures discuss transgression in different forms. In line with transgression's characterization as constantly shifting, changing, and moving across boundaries, much like the ebbs and flows of global capital and globalization, a consideration of transgression as a transnational phenomenon would usefully complement this study's focus on America as a fluid ideological construction.

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