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## Invisible Monsters: Chuck Palahniuk's Transgressive Look at a Hyperrealized Society


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***INVISIBLE MONSTERS: CHUCK PALAHNIUK'S TRANSGRESSIVE LOOK  
AT A HYPERREALIZED SOCIETY***

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Jordan Trevarthen

May 2023

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English

Missouri State University, May 2023

Master of Arts

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**ABSTRACT**

By critically analyzing Chuck Palahniuk's *Invisible Monsters*, I was able to conclude that the transgressive portrayal of hyperrealized consumerism warranted a close examination into the value American society places on an individual's ability to replace authenticity for consumer obedience. Palahniuk's dangerous representation of the body throughout the novel serves to highlight numerous ways in which a consumer transgresses against their own physical and mental well-being to achieve happiness constructed by capitalistic agendas. By using French theorist Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality in connection with gender, disability, and feminist theory and ecocriticism, I attempt to deconstruct the neoliberal ideology to which each character in the novel is bound and offer a critical opinion on the fictionalization of the trans community as a hallmark of both escapism and the epitome of consumer fetishism.

**KEYWORDS:** transgressive fiction, hyperreality, neoliberalism, transgender, ecocriticism, postmodern, consumerism, disability, gender, toxic consciousness

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A Master's Thesis  
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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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Likewise, my committee members have contributed critical feedback and shaped this thesis to the level that it is today. To their diligence, I am indebted. I take each member's contribution to heart. I thank them all.

I dedicate this thesis to my husband, who is and has been a vital part of my success at Missouri State University. Cheers to many long nights of wandering, a distinct purpose has been found.

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## INTRODUCTION

Special effects can go a long way to heighten a mood, and it's not as if this is a real house. What's burning down is a recreation of a period revival house patterned after a copy of a copy of a copy of a mock-Tudor big manor house.

It's a hundred generations removed from anything original, but the truth is aren't we all?

- Chuck Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*

When readers enter Chuck Palahniuk's *Invisible Monsters*, they are entering narrative chaos. Dramatic, self-indulgent characters interact, each adamantly claiming they are the one and only protagonist—this is their story, and the other characters are just there to witness it. Each character is uniquely unoriginal in their desires but demands the reader's attention through their actions and the illicit ways they deal with or justify their circumstances. Stylistically, the narrator takes the reader on a nonlinear timeline through the events that unfold to explain her traumatic disfigurement. Through the characters' dangerous actions and lack of empathy for one another, it becomes clear each character only considers their own perception of self and uses the others for their own personal satisfaction and gain. *Invisible Monsters* offers a problematic representation of gender and bodily integrity in a postmodern society that nonetheless offers a surprisingly deep look into the shallowness of a world controlled by neoliberal ideology. As a text that heavily criticizes the influence consumerism has on an individual's psyche, *Invisible Monsters*, despite its questionable portrayal of the trans body and identity, gives a worthy critique of postmodern societal distress caused by the reduction of identity to the arrays of branded commodities.

At first *Invisible Monsters* seems to be primarily focused on the self-centered former model, Shannon McFarland, whose career ended with a shot gun blast to the face while she was



driving down the interstate. As the novel opens, readers learn that the gunshot has ripped off part of Shannon's jaw, leaving portions of her esophagus exposed. Alive but gruesomely disfigured, Shannon is left to navigate a world where she can no longer talk or rely on her beauty. Deprived of the two signifying systems she most relied upon in the past, Shannon must relearn her role in society. The nurse overseeing her recovery refuses to show Shannon the photos the police took when she first came to the emergency room and subsequently has had all the mirrors removed from the room and bathroom. It is here, in the opening pages of the book, that Shannon realizes her role in the world has gone from being front-and-center to part of the background.

The reader quickly discovers that Shannon is merely one of the four main characters in *Invisible Monsters*: Shannon McFarland, Brandy Alexander, Evie Cottrell, and Manus Kelly. Each character performs identity through various degrees of narcissism, preventing them from anything but superficial connections and limiting their capacity to see how their actions affect others. While Shannon is the only narrator, the dialogue makes obvious that the characters are each trapped within their own version of reality. Palahniuk takes this trope of self-centeredness and builds a world where the characters are completely dependent on their social identities. In keeping with his reputation as the author of texts such as *Fight Club* and *Choke*, Palahniuk builds each character's persona as reacting to stereotypical social standards and depicts their addiction to fulfilling their desires with either consumer goods, drugs, or plastic surgeries. By demonstrating the dangers of neoliberalism's core belief in the productivity of a competitive capitalist market, Palahniuk's characters exude a shallow existence with deep angst brooding underneath it.

Shannon and her posse spend their collective time attempting to fulfill their desires using manipulation and narrowly thought-out schemes to con unsuspecting victims; furthermore,

replacing their identities like accessories, which while amusing in the moment of the con, comes to metonymically represent the book's larger message about the failures of self-love, self-acceptance, and personal growth in a world driven by consumerism. The characters, never moving forward in growth or maturity, are stumped in their quest to satisfy desire because they misplace self-acceptance amidst a shallow consumerist world. They each fail in any quest for lasting personal satisfaction as they locate that quest in the simple satisfaction of consumer desires, creating a repetitive pattern of insufficiency.

To expose the superficial realities his characters live in, Palahniuk creates an absurdist, sometimes nihilistic, plot that intentionally unsettles the reader. Shannon's life has been a commitment to superficial relationships and consumerism. As a model she is literally employed to sustain consumerist desire and as a person she has failed to develop meaningful connections with those closest to her. Her best friend, Evelyn "Evie" Cottrell, blatantly uses their friendship to satisfy her own emotional insecurities. Her boyfriend, Manus Kelly, finds comfort and safety in their heterosexual relationship but leads an ulterior life as a gay man. A doormat to her own life, Shannon is unable to recognize who she is without relying on her physical appearance and the shallow affections of Manus and Evie.

Since with her damaged face Shannon cannot physically form clear words, her actual spoken dialogue is minimal and, when she does speak, it sounds to others like gibberish; with this technique, Palahniuk calls specific attention to her inner dialogue, making her intrinsic identity more valuable than the extrinsic, juxtaposing the superficial relationships she has with her friends. Shannon is a marginalized character put into a protagonist role as she observes Brandy and Manus conning their way into mansions to steal prescription drugs.

Palahniuk's chaotic, non-linear narrative is structured, however, to bring a revelation to the protagonist, Shannon. Formally, Palahniuk achieves this by using flashbacks that transgress traditional fictional forms and lead to Shannon's eventual realization that her identity is that of an "invisible monster," created by capitalism and detached from any sort of authentic or natural humanity. After being taken through all of Shannon's flashbacks, the reader ends the book at the beginning. As the reader learns that Brandy has been shot by Evie at her wedding because of a misguided scheme, they are finally provided with enough insight to understand Shannon's quest. Shannon reveals to Brandy that she was the one who shot herself in the face to escape her own narcissism; she thought destroying what she most loved and depended on would be the only way she could truly live a real life. While recognizing the risk she took in achieving a new life, Shannon says, "I wanted the everyday reassurance of being mutilated...I was tired of staying a lower life form just because of my looks. Trading on them. Cheating. Never getting anything real accomplished, but getting the attention and recognition anyway" (286).

The length she feels she must go to in order to escape the addiction of a hyperrealized world does not stop at the gunshot blow to the face. Palahniuk's book functions as an experiment to discover if it is possible to live authentically in a consumer-driven society. Shannon's illicit act of self-mutilation anchors the novel in the subgenre of transgressive fiction and highlights the potential impact of consumerism society on human identity. In an attempt to answer if this experiment is successful, this thesis will provide an overview of the postmodern rupture and the role of transgressive fiction in a consumer-driven society, analyze the problematic use of transgender identity as an escape from consumer performance, and identify Shannon's environment as a consumerist apocalyptic metaphor for a toxic consciousness. By looking at the numerous ways Palahniuk is responding to his own society through the creation of this novel, it

becomes clear that *Invisible Monsters* grapples with the notion that hyperrealism has penetrated the consumer body and consciousness in such a way that may be inextricable from the postmodern human condition.

## CHAPTER ONE: POSTMODERN RUPTURE AND HYPERREALITY

Transgressional fiction saw a rise in western popularity as theorists such as Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault, and Roland Barthes were establishing commentary on society post World War II; these theorists, building upon work by George Bataille, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, and others within the Surrealism and Structuralist movements of the late 19th century, highlighted the anxieties and uncertainty surrounding the impact of capitalism on the individual psyche. Baudrillard announced in several of his writings that a “postmodern rupture” was occurring, where society had officially entered a new epoch of simulation. In *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, published in 1981 and followed by *Simulacra and Simulation* in 1983, he argued that social reproduction was replacing production as the organizing form of society. According to Douglass Kellner, whose book studies Baudrillard’s various theories, these two works articulate a thorough understanding of the complexities on which he focused his writing. Baudrillard concluded that labor in the second half of the twentieth century was no longer primarily a force of production but “is itself a ‘sign amongst many’... a sign of social position, way of life, and mode of servitude” (Kellner 10).

While the proliferation of signifying systems might seem to have the potential to liberate society from class systems, it actually works to further establish neoliberally fueled capitalism and the individual’s need to participate in consumer culture, all the while maintaining social class. These shifts in society reflect the individual’s place in society as a fluid signifier dependent on accumulation of consumer desires, images, and codes. Furthermore, with this postmodern society, identity becomes intertwined with the ability to consume. Garen Torikian’s article, “Against a Perpetuating Fiction: Disentangling Art from Hyperreality” argues that when

identities become constructed by “the appropriation of images, codes and models” we witness an implosion of values traditionally discerned by modern society (Torikian). This implosion of values is what allows neoliberalism to continually flourish.

What Baudrillard called “hyperreality” was originally a concept that artists employed to consciously distinguish the real from the fake, but it soon became not only indeterminate from reality but, to many, preferable. Baudrillard extends this idea of hyperreality, built upon Jacques Lacan’s 1950’s analysis of signifiers and “the real,” suggesting that not only do we favor the copy culture, but that it has now also become impossible to distinguish a line between a copy and original—our culture has replaced any originality with the simulacrum of reality, and the result of this substitution has left a society heavily dependent on stimuli and unsatisfied with unmediated reality. Furthermore, as western society integrates multimedia production features into daily life, hyperreality has become harder and harder to distinguish. Hyperreality has evolved from being a high-stakes radical theory to an integral part of our functioning society.

In our postmodern world, hyperreality has penetrated all aspects of life, including art, politics, economy, and sexuality. As artists inevitably participate in consumer society and therefore consumerist/capitalist ideology, hyperreality always invades their attempts at presenting any sort of reality. Baudrillard’s focus on Andy Warhol’s replication of consumer goods for their aesthetic value is an excellent example of the penetration of hyperrealism. Contemporary artists such as Warhol have famously blurred the lines between consumerism and art, and in so doing, they have fueled society’s desire for the copy. It is the penetration of images, signs, and codes with which our society functions that has created a world where art is everywhere, but art can never be original, and it can never be uninfluenced. Baudrillard’s *Symbolic Exchange* explores the dual relation with an object, not a relationship between subject-

object but a relationship between the object and logic, to see if the object surpasses the original measurement of its purpose within the context of its value (64). Contemporary art, functioning as an object, provides the viewer with a layered sense of production value by existing as critique of established subject-object expressions, causing a rupture in the values of modern society, and also calling attention to itself as a commodity.

Proliferating signifiers, evolving away from any original signified, create a consumer culture dependent on deriving satisfaction and fulfillment through simulation. One prominent example of modern culture's use of signification is explored in Mark Rubinfeld and Joe L. Kincheloe's essay "The Sign of the Burger: McDonald's and the Culture of Power." Rubinfeld and Kincheleo, exploring American culture's reliance on signifiers as power, demonstrate how the golden arches of McDonald's restaurants signify a world full of promised identical products. While few may argue McDonald's place and product are superior examples of quality, it is hard to deny the golden arches have efficiently positioned themselves as a powerful signifier of western identity and pleasure. The McDonald's brand has carefully crafted an identity of fast-paced convenience and uniformity that represents American culture on a global scale. This reproduced idea of American culture has allowed consumers around the globe to partake in what they perceive as a part of American identity. It is within this repeated success directly driven by the consumer that the elements of hyperrealism are born.

While a fast-food chain is far from high art, there are clear connections between the marketing of symbols and the expression found through artwork. Because hyperreality has overtaken key aspects to our identity as a consumer, it would follow that our identity as a consumer overtakes aspects of our expression. French artist Guy Debord led the Situationist movement, a movement characterized by Marxist and surrealist perspective on art and politics in

the 1950's and 1960's, is quoted in "Against a Perpetuating Fiction: Disentangling Art from Hyperreality" saying it is "the consumer who becomes a part of the commodification...people are dazzled by the myriad of available products, lured into accepting these images, and 'consume a world fabricated by others rather than producing one of their own'" (qtd. in Torikian 102). In the Situationist's world everything is a spectacle, an abstraction where the signifier is more determinate than the signified, and the consumer of the image becomes a participant in the signification process. The consumer is absorbed into the commodification so that the image and the audience co-produce the "spectacle," the abstract system that values the appearance of the commodity more than its usefulness. Palahniuk mimics this world and illustrates the consequences of postmodern rupture in *Invisible Monsters*.

According to Baudrillard, hyperreality relies on the assumption that the "real" exists. This assumption is precisely what allows hyperreality to become the favorable version: the improved real. The consumer makes a conscious decision to dismiss the real when considering a hyperrealized illusion on the premise the hyperreal is more satisfyingly real than any natural thing could ever be. The existence of transgressional fiction within literature aligns with any contemporary artist's attempt at creating expressions of their time. Like the famous Warhol pieces, *Invisible Monsters* is a reaction to the commodification of art by existing as a self-conscious spectacle of commodification. As readers consume the book itself, we participate in its playful and disruptive messages. Whereas Warhol provides an 'improved real' that feeds the consumer, though, Palahniuk uses art to engage in a transgressive dialogue with the consumer.

Palahniuk seems to say that the world has succumbed to hyperreality, that there is no possibility for originality while living within the normalcy of American culture. This notion



appears overtly in the story when the protagonist first interacts with the character Brandy.

Brandy gives Shannon advice to cope with her newly disfigured face:

You're not responsible for how you feel or what you say or how you act or anything you do. It's all out of your hands...The same way a computer disk isn't responsible for what's recorded on it, that's how we are. You're about as free to act as a programmed computer. You're about as one-of-a-kind as a dollar bill (Palahniuk 218).

Brandy's insistence on their inability to be original bluntly describes the superficial nature of their world. If *Invisible Monsters* exists as a piece of art in this world (or the parallel world of the reader), Shannon's disfigured face becomes the transgression against its normalizing ideology.

By exploring the impacts of hyperreality on Palahniuk's society while he was writing *Invisible Monsters*, we can see how transgressional fiction provides characters resolution in a chaotic narrative and how readers can derive meaning that becomes applicable to their lives, potentially starting a conversation about the future. This essay argues that *Invisible Monsters* is a postmodern fiction compiled of dangerously drawn characters to exasperate real life anxieties experienced by Palahniuk and other members of western society. Unsettling as it may be, *Invisible Monsters* functions to awaken society's consciousness by rupturing the definition of identity as it relates to complacent participation in consumerism.

## **Transgressive Fiction**

Michel Foucault's 1963 essay "A Preface to Transgression" establishes a methodological origin for the concept of transgression in literature, and he positions George Bataille's work as an example to build from. Bataille's phrase "symbolic exchange" describes his idea of a "general

economy” where “expenditure, waste, sacrifice, and destruction were claimed to be more fundamental to human life than economies of production and utility” (Kellner 7). Bataille states that individuals who want to be sovereign, free from capitalistic agendas, should pursue a general economy of expenditure, giving, sacrifice, and destruction to escape existing imperatives of utility (Kellner). Bataille and Jean Baudrillard both assume one truth: humans are made to live in excess and to gain pleasure from excess. The complication to this truth is that capitalist imperatives of labor and utility by implication are “unnatural” and go against human nature. Within this contradiction, consumer culture and human desire part ways, creating a strain on the individual’s psyche. The feelings of confinement or dissatisfaction within our identities are the result of human nature and our culturally engrained responses to satisfy natural urges within the unnaturalness of capitalist imperatives.

The concept of hyperreality Baudrillard introduces in his work is relevant to the westernized society Palahniuk lives in, where technological advancements and capitalism are interacting at all-time highs with the consumer. According to Palahniuk, the moment when he decided to use this style of writing was during a fiction writer’s workshop with Tom Spanbauer, best known as the minimalist guru and founder of the Dangerous Writing School. As part of Spanbauer’s Dangerous Writing workshop, Palahniuk learned how to incorporate uncomfortable personal experiences with minimalist prose. While attending the workshop Palahniuk wrote his first novel. Because the novel was never submitted for publishing, so many of the scenes he ended up recycling into *Fight Club* and “Manifesto,” which would later become *Invisible Monsters*. Palahniuk intended his debut work to be *Invisible Monsters*, but it was continuously rejected by publishers for being too dark and disturbing. Palahniuk caught his break with *Fight Club* when it was picked up by publishers W.W. Norton in 1996. *Fight Club* was selected for the

big screen by 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox. With this recognition, *Invisible Monsters* was given another chance and finally published in 1999.

Palahniuk uses transgressional fiction to explore the connection between identity and reality. This subgenre of fiction, coined by literary critic Michael Silverblatt in 1993, builds characters who feel confined by the norms and expectations of society and who use unusual and/or illicit ways to break free of those confines. Silverblatt explains that “violation at its core: violation of norms, of humanistic enterprise, of the body” and adds that the “underlying idea of transgressive thinking (as derived by Foucault) is that knowledge is no longer to be found through the oppositions of dialectical reasoning...instead, knowledge is found at the limits of experience” (Silverblatt). Because the characters rebel against the basic norms of society, protagonists may seem mentally ill, anti-social or nihilistic. Extensively focused on abnormal psychology and taboo subject matters such as drugs, sex, violence, incest, pedophilia, and crime, the genre is prone to shock the reader (Hoey 27).

The basic components of transgressive fiction are not new to the literary scene. Most transgressive fiction, perhaps most notably Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho* and J.G. Ballard’s *Crash*, deal with self-identity, inner-peace, or personal freedoms; they are “unbound by usual restrictions of taste and literacy convention” so while the themes these narratives explore are popularized in most literary genres, how the protagonists pursue the means to better themselves or their surroundings are what establish this genre as a separate class of fiction (Dangerous Writing). Most transgressive writers incorporate minimalist prose, short sentences, and simplistic style that allow complex and chaotic plots to form and guide the reader through the narrative. Evidence of transgressional fiction can be found among writers in as early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but the 20<sup>th</sup> century evidences the largest concentrated number of writers in this

subgenre. This increase in writers during the 20<sup>th</sup> century corresponds to the increase in social anxieties associated with a postmodern culture. Early transgressional works include Russian Fyodor Dostoyevsky's existentialist novel *Crime and Punishment*, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, along with other early 20<sup>th</sup> century writers, Kathy Acker, Anthony Burgess, and Vladimir Nabokov, all which appeal to the artistic avant-garde by establishing their own aesthetic values (Mookerjee). Douglass Coupland's *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* was published in 1991 as a novel creating "modern fables of love and death among the cosmetic surgery parlors and cocktail bars of Palm Springs as well as disturbingly funny tales of nuclear waste, historical overdosing, and mall culture" (Macmillan). *Generation X* uses these allegories to explore the complex relation of self to consumer addictions. These same allegories appear in Palahniuk's writing almost a decade later. Palahniuk, however, is not content to just explore the complex relationships; he uses *Invisible Monsters* to transgress against this relationship.

### ***Invisible Monsters* as a Transgressive Novel**

In the opening scene of *Invisible Monsters*, readers are instantly submerged in a chaotic scene where Evie's mansion is on fire and the four main characters are still inside. Evie is arguing over who ruined whose life first and Brandy has been "shotgunned" to the chest and is bleeding out. Shannon introduces herself to her readers as an openly narcissistic character who despite being in such an emotionally vulnerable state, is unable to grasp the seriousness of the situation. She declares:

What I tell myself is the gush of red pumping out of Brandy's bullet hole is less like blood than it's some sociopolitical tool. The thing about being cloned from all those shampoo commercials, well, that goes for me and Brandy Alexander, too. Shotgunning anybody in this room would be the moral equivalent of killing a car,

a vacuum cleaner, a Barbie doll. Erasing a computer disk. Burning a book. Probably that goes for killing anybody in the world. We're all such products (Palahniuk 12).

Shannon's use of trivial products that are considered by the consumer to be built with planned obsolescence shows the reader the connection she sees between identity and the signifiers that hold power over the individual. By equating Brandy's blood to a sociopolitical tool—something that is unnatural and symbolic—Shannon positions Brandy as a commodity. Shannon's positioning of Brandy reveals how desensitized she has become to reality and from seeing beyond their product identity. Palahniuk's use of minimalist prose adds to Shannon's superficial understanding of Brandy's bleeding; because she equates Brandy's life to products using few adjectives and brief phrases, she reveals how detached she has become to reality.

The appeal of Palahniuk's work is the minimalist prose used to propel fast moving scenes and flashbacks. Douglas Keesey's analysis in *Understanding Chuck Palahniuk* offers a valuable diagnosis of intent behind Palahniuk's writing style and techniques. Keesey demonstrates how his characters often report "in the present tense using concrete sensory detail, while overt statements about their motives or feelings tend to be avoided" (7). Another narrative feature he avoids is the use of omniscient third person; Palahniuk will often structure his prose like an oral storytelling so that "the reader [can] decide what the relationship is" among the text and message (7). While he does allow space for moral ambiguity in the conclusion of his novel, it is worth emphasizing Palahniuk "is not just interested in attacking existing institutions; he also wants to explore possibilities for improved social arrangements" (10). An early influence on Palahniuk was cultural anthropologist Victor Turner. Turner described society as "a structured, differentiated, and often hierarchical system of politico-legal-economic positions with many types of evaluation, separating men in terms of 'more' of 'less'" but when society undergoes

substantial change, it “becomes an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated comitatus, community, or even communion of equal individuals” (qtd. in Keesey 11). It is during times of immense social change, usually a result of forced cultural awakenings and disaster, that individuals have the opportunity to experience freedom and equality. Palahniuk positions his novel in such a time, where the protagonist is experiencing a forced cultural awakening due to her disfigurement. Palahniuk openly acknowledges, “Almost all my books depict the kind of social experiments that Victor Turner described in his work...people experimenting with different identities and social models in a short-term way...in a hope that they can...break through to something authentic” (qtd. in Keesey 11).

When interviewed on his inspirations for *Invisible Monsters*, Palahniuk mentioned his desire to reverse the classic Cinderella story. Wherein the original protagonist gains the attention of society by rising out of the ashes and donning a beautiful gown, his protagonist gains power by losing her beauty. This reversal of a traditionally loved social commentary suggests that true power lies within being independent of “society’s superficial judgements of their physical attractiveness or fine attire” (Keesey 28). As social beauty is linked to an individual’s ability to appropriately consume, this backwards Cinderella motif attempts to answer what is left of an individual’s identity if they have no desire to perform beauty. Not overwhelmingly clear to the reader is Shannon’s ability to escape from the trap of beauty; while she has successfully disfigured her body, she is now at risk of being placed in the opposite trap, defined as “ugly” and solidifying society’s understanding of beauty. Brandy reinforces this entrapment by telling Shannon, “If you can find any way out of our culture, that’s a trap too. Just wanting to get out of the trap reinforces the trap” (220). Indeed, Shannon struggles to escape the labels placed on her.

Palahniuk's portrayal of internalized oppression explores how difficult it can be for an individual to escape their own negative thoughts of social attitudes and beliefs. While she endures the road trip as a disfigured mute, Shannon's inner dialogue reveals a psyche which is still very much contingent on beauty and consumerism. Kessey describes Shannon with echoes of the Foucauldian panopticon, particularly "the notion that societal norms are enforced not only by actual police but also by our own internalization of these norms, like the beauty trap, which makes it difficult to even imagine a way out of them" (29). Much of Shannon's inner dialogue is delivered to the reader in quick parroting clichés that mimic her former lifestyle as a model. "Give me joy. Give me love. Give me fun. Flash" (47) echoes the constant language of a photographer that reduces Shannon's identity to a commodity. Since Shannon's identity has always been influenced by social demand, her disfigurement proves to be only a step in her quest to achieve separation from the neoliberal consumer culture she has subscribed to. According to McRuer's *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, neoliberalism encourages a culture of individualism, self-reliance, and competition, which tends to prioritize able-bodied norms and exclude people who cannot or do not fit these norms (77-102). As a disabled protagonist, Shannon's disability is an assertion of independence and agency outside of the neoliberal consumer culture she lives in. The violent means that Shannon uses to establish control over her psyche underscores the importance of challenging ableist assumptions.

Palahniuk uses transgressive fiction to offer a dramatized fictional look at western societal values, individual expectations of self, and how society chooses to fulfill desire. The characters in *Invisible Monsters* all work to lead the reader into the realization that we all have habits and desires specifically designed through neoliberalism to never provide sustained satisfaction. These habits and desires are revealed in the novel through the abuse of prescription

medications, sexual deviance, repentance, and mutilation. “Even if I overcompensate, nobody will ever want me. Oh, love me, love me, love me, love me, love me, love me, love me, love me. I’ll be anybody you want me to be,” says Shannon, quickly retreating to the unsustainable affections of Manus and forgetting all attempts to separate herself from what she should recognize as toxic (105). Each character has their own addiction, but they all repeatedly race to the next version of simulation, greedily wanting more and never stopping to fully question their antics. The toxic relationship Shannon holds with her self and others transitions into the physical aspects of her identity and how she perceives other bodies. Palahniuk addresses social desire by bringing the body to the forefront of his transgressive novel.



## CHAPTER TWO: THE BODY AS AN ESCAPE FROM SOCIAL TRAPS

Of course, much of the toxic interdependence in the novel is situated on transgendered and performatively gendered bodies. Palahniuk is not content with the assigning of neoliberal ideology onto characters' physical bodies with beauty standards, drug dependence, and other commodity fetishisms, so he pushes the narrative further by situating his absurdist theme on gendered bodies. Though tremendous progress has been made in cultural attitudes toward transgender and gender nonbinary people since the publication of the book, *Invisible Monsters* uses gender nonconformity to illustrate a cautionary tale of consumerism. As Palahniuk indicates, gender identity has become irrevocably intertwined with consumer products. Not a documentary (or even especially sensitive) account of transgender identity, *Invisible Monsters* uses the idea of gender fluidity and nonconformity to establish a break in what Palahniuk believes is wrong in American culture. By looking at the characters' physical bodies within the novel as statements of cultural influence and an extension of consumerism, this essay analyzes Palahniuk's problematic manipulation of bodies, heteronormative functionality, and social structures as a way to challenge consumerism.

Most of the plot of *Invisible Monsters* follows Brandy, Shannon, and Manus as they road-trip from city to city across the United States. As they travel, they create new identities that allow them to defraud their way into high dollar real estate listings by pretending to be potential buyers, where they steal prescription medications to both consume and sell for quick cash. The self-proclaimed queen supreme, Brandy, always picks their identities, complete with backstories and characteristics. Shannon expresses her complex relationship with her identity quest by saying, "Some days, I hate it when Brandy changes our lives without warning. Sometimes, twice

in one day, you have to live up to a new identity. A new name. New relationships. Handicaps. It's hard to remember who I started this road trip being" (64). Even though Shannon feels, at times, that the quest she is on is not her own, she most identifies herself as a connection or extension of the other characters and therefore is compelled to carry on with the road trip mission. Despite her selfishness, Shannon cannot live without the support of Brandy, Manus, and Evie. It does not matter if that connection is vicious, slighted, or belittling—she cannot allow herself to part ways with these people who have become toxically integral to her identity.

### **Gendered/Transgender Identity as a Consumer Performance**

False confidence is rampant among the characters, both inside the immediate action of the plot and in numerous flashbacks. Evie Cottrell, though not on the road trip, plays an important role in Shannon's psyche as the ex-best friend who has cheated with her fiancé. Although the women in the novel continually tout their superiority over each other, each one has massive insecurities they are dealing with. Even though Shannon knows that Evie and Manus had an affair, she does not remove them from her life. Instead of using the affair as a reason for Shannon's insecurities or heartache, Palahniuk incorporates it to show the reader the women's "false confidence" and competitiveness as participators in their superficial friendship. It is never explicitly stated how Evie feels, since we are only given Shannon's point of view, but Shannon's recollection of Evie implies that Evie's insecurities and self-stigmatizations are just as dominant, if not more dominant than Shannon's, and the cause of her extreme susceptibility to consumerism. In one flashback, Evie and Shannon go to a furniture store after modeling school and spend hours "living" on the furniture displays. Evie tells Shannon she's more comfortable in the furniture store displays than her own house because there are people around to witness her

beauty she says, "...I hate how I don't feel real enough unless people are watching...I don't hang around Brumbach's for privacy" (Palahniuk 69). This excerpt not only seems to illustrate Evie's insecurities, but it demonstrates to the reader how the characters believe their lives are meant as a production for society. Using modeling as a sort of exaggeration on feminine performances develops questionable assumptions on how gender performs in society.

This production of Evie at the furniture store represents a compilation of the images, codes, and signs Baudrillard says make up our hyperreality. The comfort Evie feels as a mannequin in a furniture display exaggerates western society's emphasis on how neoliberal reality works. The *Invisible Monsters* themes ask the reader to consider if no one's there to witness you or read you as a signifier of value and worth, do you have any? Palahniuk's fictional world plays into this social insecurity and questions whether it is human nature to desire to be seen by others or whether it is a consumer culture that requires us to be seen in a specific way. To just exist would not be enough for Evie because she must exist in such a way that distinguishes her from others and elevates her value as a commodity, a living signifier of consumer value.

When transgressive fiction expresses disapproval or anxiety over a sociocultural ideology, violence is the most common trope. *Invisible Monsters* has a fair share of violent acts, but the dominant transgressional action is the aggressive portrayal of the alternatively gendered body. Interestingly, the three female characters are using their bodies as a consumer construct while simultaneously offering different types of womanhood. Palahniuk explores society's complicated relationship with gender by using different standards of femininity and developing a narrative of social deviance. Furthermore, Palahniuk explores whether subverting the rigid standard of consumerist femininity that perpetuates superficial, hyperrealistic identity would

allow individuals to escape it. Shannon is the only heteronormative character in the novel; by being assigned female at birth, her cisgendered body has allowed for a directly targeted lifestyle of consumer products and achievable standards of beauty. Evie and Brandy are both depicted as alternatively gendered women who morph their bodies into the hyperreal by surgically altering appearances inside and out. However, Evie and Brandy have entirely different motivating factors for altering their perceived gender.

Because these characters have different motivations for their gender performance, Evie's identity as a transwoman is not revealed until the end of the novel. Shannon never recognizes Evie as a transwoman until Evie's mother says, "Evan wanted to be a world-famous fashion model, he told us. He started calling himself Evie, and I canceled my subscription to *Vogue* the next day. I felt it had done enough damage to my family" (269). As the revelation sends Shannon and Manus reeling, the reader is quickly plunged into Shannon's psyche, "Evie was a man. And I saw her implant scars. Evie was a man. And I saw her naked in fitting rooms...Flash. Give me anything in this whole fucking world that is exactly what it looks like" (269). Distraught by her inability to perceive reality, Shannon connects Evie's physical body to the con life she has created and feels anxious by how realistic Evie appears. Although Shannon does not project prejudice onto Evie's body, the fact that the body is an unknown fabrication of gender causes her to recognize the falsehoods surrounding her idea of reality. Refusing to dive deeper into Evie's genetically born gender, Shannon quickly interrupts her train of thought by focusing on the "invitation [she] stole" and gets the reader back into the dialogue between Evie's mother and Brandy (269).

Shannon's response to Evan/Evie—her shock, anger, and repetitious inner dialogue "Evie was a man"—appear problematic for trans identity and trans rights. Although Palahniuk is

not likely commenting on real transgender people, he is using Evie's flawlessly altered body as a "prosthetic" to illustrate how deeply connected her physical and mental being is to consumerism. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's *Narrative Prosthesis: Disabilities and the Dependency of Discourse*, describes how the use of "prosthetic" literary symbolism brings attention to how disability, or what they call a "disruption" to social expectations of "normality," is typically used as a benchmark around which normative features can reaffirm their power. One of the only positive resolutions for disability in cultural narratives is to be "restored" by cure. Furthermore, the insistence of the body to be normative situates an impossible task on the individual because no single body can ever achieve full social normative beauty (7). Even more than Shannon, Evie is tied to the social standard of femininity as she was able to erase any trace of real by adapting to every aspect of hyperrealized womanhood, physically and aesthetically. While Shannon might have a genetic advantage over Evie, they both buy their way into a signifying status and operate within society as equal examples of beauty and consumer-based views of acceptance.

It is within the interactions other characters have with Evie that it becomes apparent she, unlike Shannon, does not desire to escape hyperrealism and finds comfort in continuously becoming a product for consumption. This is a dangerous representation of trans identity because Palahniuk seems to suggest that members of the trans community may be asserting this identity for the sole purpose of becoming accepted by a superficial consumerist society. Like Mitchell and Snyder, I argue that this use of deviation from the norm as a prosthetic or narrative device can reinforce negative rhetoric and contribute to the marginalization of disabled people, who are often denied the opportunity to speak for themselves (5). The creative take on gender as a commodity works well for shock value in the novel but a present-day reading recognizes the

novel as an erasure of authentic non normative life that further stigmatizes the LGBTQ2+ community as a hallmark for societal desperation.

*Invisible Monsters* operates parallel to Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* because both make the claim gender is a culturally constructed representation of the body (1-34). Butler argues "one way of understanding this relation" between gender and culture is by recognizing "gender is the repeated stylization of the body" (33). By arguing gender is not a natural or fixed category, but rather an act regulated and enforced by social norms, Butler shows gender as an illusion to a "natural" connection of biological sex and gender (33). By understanding gender as a cultural act rather than a natural classification, Butler begins the work of imagining possibilities of expanding identity past prescriptive gender categories. Shannon herself was an extension of neoliberal ideology before her accident; as a working model, she was paid to create a hyperreal world that supersedes the natural.

As a model in the fashion industry, Shannon financially and mentally supported herself through images and consumption. Her job was to make disposable items, the season's latest fashion trends, appeal to the consumer. Unlike Shannon who creates images to appeal to the consumer, Palahniuk uses Evie's body as a literal representation of a commodity: "Evie really is Evelyn Cottrell, Inc. ...She's traded publicly now. Everybody's favorite write off" (123). Incorporating a body achieves the neoliberal goal of complete consumer emergence. Without the ability to see into Evie's subconscious, the reader must rely on the dialogue provided and Shannon's perception of her to understand how transgender is the ultimate consumer performance, according to Palahniuk.

Most times it was an embarrassment going to modeling look-see auditions with Evie. Sure, I'd get work, but then the art director or the stylist would start

screaming at Evie that, no, in his expert opinion she was not a perfect size six. Most times, some assistant stylist had to wrestle Evie out the door. Evie would be screaming back over shoulder about how I shouldn't let them treat me like a piece of meat. I should just walk out (Palahniuk 124).

Shannon thus insists to the reader that Evie is *less than* Shannon in all aspects. While they both attend the same modeling school, Shannon minimizes Evie's ability to be a model by commenting that "Evie dragged down the curve" (68). According to Shannon, if the beauty standard is set low, then Evie would be an acceptable example of beauty. Clearly the relationship between the two is built on the premise of inequality. As the characters use one another for their own amusement and boost of ego, it becomes impossible for them to accurately perceive each other's ability to manipulate. Because Evie and Shannon both rank themselves according to their ability to successfully participate in consumerism, they are actively marking the value of their identity according to their product fetishism. Furthermore, because the reader is limited to Shannon's point of view, it is not clearly confirmed who best represents the socially ideal standard of beauty. Shannon's descriptions of Evie are more aligned with Shannon's fragile ego and less a critique of Evie's ability to "pass" as a woman. Ultimately, as Baudrillard, Marx, Foucault and others have concluded, this type of social system has achieved sustainability because the consumer has willfully forsaken their identity for social signification.

*Invisible Monsters* repeatedly forces its reader to recognize the barrenness of hyperreality by highlighting trivial moments over the real, raw, and emotional moments. Throughout the novel, whenever a pinnacle moment occurs, Shannon shuts down any opportunity for authenticity. As she discovers that "some nights, Brandy says, her father used to creep into her room while she was asleep" her immediate reaction is, "I don't want to hear this...I smooth my veils over my ears. *Thank you for not sharing*" and she leaves the moment, immediately

switching to thoughts about “the ball gown...on Brandy’s shoulders...larger than life and fairy tale impossible” (246-7). Another particularly significant moment in the novel is when the reader discovers that the character Brandy is the current identity of Shannon’s brother, Shane, whom she believed to have died of AIDS. For most narratives, this would be a shocking revelation furthered by discussion and relevance to build a backstory describing why Brandy, who used to be Shane McFarland, is now in Shannon’s life as a transgender woman. Instead, Palahniuk, playing on his characters' narcissism, does not offer the reader any revelation in the novel. Shannon quickly discusses the revelation and focuses the narrative back on her story about the dress Brandy is trying on.

As Shannon embarks on different tasks with Brandy, she slowly delivers the reader Brandy’s backstory in bits and pieces, as if Brandy’s story is of equal importance to the various commodities they are experiencing. As Shannon drives a stolen Fiat Spider with Manus stowed in the trunk, she goes on to tell the reader about Brandy’s life before her. Brandy lived in a hotel room with three drag queens, the Rhea sisters, who love and dote on her and pay for all her transformation surgeries. As a sort of catalog of failures that were surgically corrected, Die Rhea explains to Shannon,

She had her scalp advanced three centimeters to give her the right hairline. We paid for her brow shave to get rid of the bone ridge above her eyes that the Miss Male used to have. We paid for her jaw contouring and her forehead feminization...every time she came home from the hospital with her forehead broken and realigned or her Adam’s apple shaved down to a ladylike nothing, who do you think took care of her for those two years? (Palahniuk 177-8)

Brandy’s aggressive surgical plan disrupts the notion of female passivity and submission and isn’t a statement connected to her bodily autonomy but rather an aggressive plan to



challenge structures of social power. Ironically, Brandy's role throughout the novel is what C.J. Mackenzie-Craig refers to as a "feminized aggressor" in her article "Performa Punch: Subverting the Female Aggressor Trope." The entire plot of the novel would not move forward without Brandy's constant antics and schemes. There would be no revelation for Shannon without Brandy's subversive force that not only disrupts traditional female gender roles but promotes female agency and autonomy. Furthermore, Mackenzie-Craig argues that "instead of seeking to exert dominance over others, feminist aggressors often use their aggression as a means of resisting and challenging the systemic oppressions that women face" (16). Flippant and bold, Brandy, not Shannon, drives the plot and is revealed at the end of the novel to have intentionally orchestrated the dramatic reunion with Shannon. Adding to the dangerous representation of trans identity, Brandy's attitude and demeanor already subvert the traditionally quiet and submissive female traits but because the reader can meet Brandy at a turning point in her transgender journey, there are distinctive differences to be analyzed between her and Evie.

Pivotal to the plot and understanding of Brandy's character, Brandy reveals to Shannon she became a woman because "it's just the biggest mistake I can think to make. It's stupid and destructive, and anybody you ask will tell you I'm wrong. That's why I have to go through with it...Because we're so trained to live the right way...the better chance I'll have to break out and live a real life" (258). She recognizes the connection consumerism has on her body and mind and determines the only way to escape from the cycle is to do something inerasably opposite of what society asks. Setting up a foil to Evie's character, Brandy continues explaining that "a sexual reassignment surgery is a miracle for some people, but if you don't want one, it's the ultimate form of self-mutilation" (258). The reassignment surgery was the only conceivable way for Brandy to escape what society expected of her.

Positioning her reasoning that undergoing gender reassignment is a way to transgress consumer culture, Brandy is not a comment on transgenderism as a negative aspect, but as an aggressive attempt at subverting desire and femininity defined by neoliberal ideology. Brandy's body, Evie's body, and Shannon's body can all be read as allegories on consumerism, and each offers a unique take on gender identity's role in neoliberalism. The danger in fictionalizing Butler's theory is that Palahniuk suggests trans identity is always a consumerist performance. In this way, there is little room to authentically represent those who are marginalized and often victimized by society. Palahniuk may further damage an identity which already struggles to be recognized as a qualification of real.

Accepting Butler's theory, I argue the social construct of the three female characters in *Invisible Monsters* can all be interpreted as varying levels of performance within their perceived reality. While Evie's character seems to embrace consumerism and is satisfied by her reality, Brandy and Shannon are both attempting to rebel their consumer status by disfiguring their bodies. Brandy recognizes this performance as a construct, exclaiming:

It's because we're so trapped in our culture, in the being of being human on this planet with the brains we have, and same two arms and two legs everybody has. We're so trapped that any way we could imagine to escape would be just another part of the trap. Anything we want, we're trained to want... 'I'm not straight, and I'm not gay...I'm not bisexual. I want out of the labels. I don't want my whole life crammed into a single word. A story. I want to find something else, unknowable, some place to be that's not on the map. A real adventure (Palahniuk 259-261).

Juxtaposing Brandy and Shannon as socially constructed representations of biological sex and gender presents two characters transgressively attempting to escape their neoliberal identities but who are trapped in their own hyperreal worlds. Brandy's gender reassignment and Shannon's

self-inflicted gunshot wound to her face operate with visceral demonstration to the lengths some will go to try to escape consumerism, and in Brandy's case, escape performing all together.

The way they perceive each other is representative of what Baudrillard classifies as an "organiz[ation] around simulation and the play of images and signs" where those signifiers become the organizing form "of a new social order where simulation rules" and are thus representative of social status and a marker of our own identity (Kellner 10). In terms of the three representations of women in this novel, the social order *is* the ruling commodification of self, and the ability to transform beyond the signifier is a critical component of successfully performing in society. Looking at social status and identity as intertwined within the postmodern definition of the consumer, the characters in *Invisible Monsters* are an artistic commentary on society and an exaggerated example in how to distinguish the real from the hyperreal.

### **Disability as a Transgression Against Normalcy**

It is not without added difficulty that a character in a transgressive novel can escape that which confines them. Palahniuk's ability to demonstrate character depth is found in the aftermath of their mutilation. Shannon's disfigurement is a central aspect of the entire novel. The readers witness her life prior to the escape through flashbacks, it is never long before she reminds them of her new face. Shannon recounts the experience of first going to the hospital, but it is not until the end of the novel that she confesses she shot herself. It takes the revelation of Evie's ultimate game of betrayal, that the entire road trip was a scheme to get Brandy close to her sister, before she admits she voluntarily mutilated what society defined her as.

As mentioned earlier, Palahniuk describes the *Invisible Monsters* plot as a twisted Cinderella story; Shannon, being Cinderella, is searching for liberation from her current life.

Like the traditional narrative, *Invisible Monsters* utilizes a fairy godmother, prince charming, and evil family members. This postmodern retelling of Cinderella is complete with a sprinkle of neoliberal fairy dust and the illusion of liberation. Early into the novel, Shannon describes her gruesome encounter with a shot gun and subsequent stay in the hospital: “Birds ate my face” is what she hopes to tell anyone who asks (32). The issue with her dark humored lie is that nobody asks her what happened, until she meets Brandy. Cinderella is aided by animals in her quest for liberation. It is arguable Shannon’s insistence of the birds eating her face is a violent ode to this particular aspect of the traditional story. The image of birds eating her face is a crucial turning point for Shannon’s fairytale because in her mind, they mutilate her body and set her on path for her liberation. Unlike in the traditional version of Cinderella where the birds help to beautify Cinderella, in Palahniuk’s version the birds destroy Cinderella’s beauty. It is this crucial difference that clearly identifies the novel as transgressive fiction.

Using the disabled body as a narrative prop, Palahniuk explicitly alludes to the allegories present in the already twisted Cinderella story. During a photoshoot, Evie references a “remak[ing] of *Cinderella*, only instead of the little birds and animals making her a dress, they do cosmetic surgery” (243). The character’s fascination with this specific fairytale highlights the romanticization of altering identity and self. Mitchell and Snyder’s *Narrative Prosthesis* may anchor a reading of the novel wherein disability is used as a prosthetic relation between characterization and politicalized destabilization. This “opportunistic metaphorical device” is the dominant means of escaping hyperrealized consumerism (47). Palahniuk uses body disfigurement in all three of the feminized characters as a dangerous trope for societal liberation.

Mitchell and Snyder argue disability as a “representational split between body and mind/text has been entrenched...throughout history...” (49). As the perception of “disability shifts

from one epoch to another, and sometimes within decades and years...the disabled body has consistently held a 'privileged' position with respect to thematic variations on the mind/body split" (49). Thus, the disabled body becomes a commodity outside the normalcy of society. Mitchell and Snyder show copious examples of disability in literature as examples of how writers have used disability as a prop to distinguish a character from the norm (*Narrative Prosthesis*). Palahniuk does not differ from these examples.

### **Medicalization of the Natural Body**

Cosmetic surgery has risen dramatically in the last century and is due largely to capitalism and social pressures. Originally, cosmetic procedures were established after World War I in response to the large number of soldiers who became disfigured from battle, but as decades passed the cosmetic industry refocused to accommodate new cultural standards in beauty and self-improvement (Rogers). As American culture becomes popularized through media, a desire to alter our bodies to fit hyperrealized standards of beauty increases. Palahniuk wrote *Invisible Monsters* during a peak of the cosmetic industry and as capitalism normalized cosmetic surgery. Elective surgery, according to Kathryn Morgan in her article "Women and the Knife," could no longer be defined as "the domain of the sleazy, the suspicious, the secretly deviant, or the pathologically narcissist" (28). Morgan argues that cosmetic surgery entails the ultimate envelopment of the lived temporal reality of the human subject by technologically altering appearances that then are regarded as 'real'" and therefore posits an argument for biological art. This artform has begun to invade the politicized female and to present, has successfully established itself as a westernized normalcy (28). Just as the fairy godmother has the

power to transform Cinderella for upward mobility, cosmetic surgery in *Invisible Monsters* has the power to liberate characters.

In her article, Morgan establishes a useful application of Foucault's analysis of "the diffusion of power in order to understand forms of power that are potentially more personally invasive than are more obvious, publicly identifiable aspects of power" (34). Foucault's "Docile Bodies" argues three features of disciplinary power: scale, object, and modality of control. He states, "the outcome of disciplinary power is the docile body, a body 'that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved'" (qtd. in Morgan 35). *Invisible Monsters* highlights the ways in which neoliberal ideology is infiltrating women's and trans bodies by creating a "machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down, and rearranges it" (35). The power then remains with the cosmetic surgeons; they can explore, break down, and rearrange the body and ultimately society's normalization of it.

Palahniuk does not create disfigurement as a spectacle for society. His spectacle is in each character's mind. In Rosemarie Garland-Thompson's article "Transgender and Disabled: Theorizing a Material Connection," there is a connection drawn between the two as an "embodied experience" rooted in the body and society. Garland-Thompson maintains transgender and disabled people share a similar social status because their bodies are labeled as different from a narrowly defined norm. Both groups are subject to various forms of discrimination and marginalization, both are often targets of medical scrutiny and intervention, and both must navigate a world that is built on the assumption of a cis gender, nondisabled body (Garland-Thompson). In this intersection, there is often a medicalization associated with the two and it is important to connect Palahniuk's representation of body alterations with medical procedures.

Brandy is the self-proclaimed “queen supreme” in the novel; she is the fairy god mother who has the power to transform and knowledge to guide Shannon (Cinderella). Throughout the novel Brandy’s dialogue is spent giving advice to Shannon and showing her how to exist in society without a voice. Brandy’s advice falls parallel to the traditional fairy god mother because she sees Shannon as a project; because Shannon is newly disfigured, Brandy must recreate Shannon as an improved version of her former self. As she considers Shannon to be her own responsibility when they leave for their road trip, nearly every interaction Brandy has with her is an example of a nurturing custodian, albeit, in a twisted and nonconforming way. Brandy as a fairy god mother in *Invisible Monsters* is less about making dreams come true and more about trying to show Shannon she can be the one who controls her own destiny.

Brandy undergoes a series of medical treatments, surgeries, and sessions with a speech therapist to transform into a woman. She has altered her physical body and voice so that she can operate in society as a woman. By focusing on the medical aspect as it relates to the disfigurement of a body, Palahniuk illustrates the body is both a source of identity and a site of oppression and marginalization. Garland-Thompson shows that disability is often subject to medicalization for means of control or to pathologize the disabled, while medicalization for trans people is often used to provide hormone therapy and/or gender-affirming surgeries (39). Looking at the medicalization of identity, Garland-Thompson explains how the “surgical” body is refigured to fit into social norms and thus, the “natural” body becomes pathological, an important distinction for trans people. For Brandy, medicalization provides an opportunity to find her identity.

Connecting the cosmetic industry (medical and nonsurgical) to Morgan’s example of biological art and bio machinery is an excellent way to analyze Palahniuk’s use of trans identity.

The liberation from consumerist hyperreality that Palahniuk's characters seek throughout *Invisible Monsters* mirrors the proposed liberation consumers seek through the cosmetic industry. Cosmetic liberation is a socially constructed desire that, in a neoliberal society, only works to enforce ideas of normalcy and complacency. Palahniuk's use of body disfigurement in *Invisible Monsters* seems to seek liberation through surgical interventions that claim control over gender identity to highlight the social construction of gender and the "invisible monsters" of consumer capitalism in the medical industry. However, in a modern reading, I cannot conclude Palahniuk successfully makes the argument without placing harm and unnecessary blame on the trans community. This type of representation may be bad for the trans community overall because the way it fictionalizes the consumerist body as trans could set back social understanding, kindness, and decade's worth of progress to positively affirm the trans community as well as disabled peoples. Prosthetically pathologizing the trans body also perpetuates the idea that trans people need to conform to binary gender norms to be accepted in society and contributes to the marginalization of trans people. Unfortunately, *Invisible Monsters* "enforces normalcy," in Lennard Davis' phrase, by prosthetically pathologizing the trans body to make a point about consumerism.

Throughout the novel there is an interesting connection between consumerism and each character's desire to mutilate their own body. Shannon's self-mutilation is not clearly defined as an act of defiance against consumerism like Brandy until the end; it is a suspicious decision by Palahniuk to have the only heteronormative character's revelation mirror Brandy's altered gender goal. It leaves the reader to question what type of body mutilation is "better" for escaping consumerism. If you read *Invisible Monsters* with a possible positive outlook on escaping a hyperrealized identity, it is unclear if Shannon or Brandy is the answer. Brandy is aware of her



role in society from the beginning until the end and she is clear in her attempt to remove herself from the trappings of society. Shannon struggles with this dilemma throughout the entire plot and then comes to her revelation by admitting to her intentional disfigurement and then giving her material identity, all her credit cards, social security card, and driver's license, to Brandy. If Brandy continues her life with Shannon's identity, she runs the risk of becoming reabsorbed by society. Shannon may reach her escape but leaves the reader to question if mutilation could only be an acceptable route by also removing the material identity.

The dangerous aspect in writing fictionalized versions of extreme cultural representation is that Palahniuk is delivering complicated messages of moral ambiguity that may or may not be received as he intended. *Invisible Monsters*' genius is that the story and the characters have the capacity to haunt the reader's psyche for weeks and years to come. It has been a well-received novel by fans and has inspired Palahniuk to continue to write Shannon's story in a "remix" as well as a potential Hollywood adaptation in the works. I fear that although the novel provides a powerful and effective critique of consumerism, it may also dangerously misrepresent the trans community and disabled peoples.

Palahniuk provides minimalist prose to offer a quick reading synopsis of what it means to live your life focused on what Sherry Turkle refers to as "reality by proxy" (170). He seeks to caution readers to consider what will happen to their *self* if they continue to focus their life on the consumption of signifiers and codes of a transient simulacrum of reality, to never witness the real. This awareness Brandy provides to Shannon and the reader reflects social anxieties in Palahniuk's society about entering an epoch of simulation and the overwhelming disregard for experiencing the real. It is yet to be seen if Palahniuk's "dangerous writing" will stand against or inspire a society embedded within capitalism.

### CHAPTER THREE: A CONSUMERIST APOCALYPSE

*Invisible Monsters* provides a twisted and dark look into an apocalyptic future of consumerism and the devaluation of identity and place. As discussed above, characters see themselves as commodities—mutable and eventually disposable—and struggle to find authentic value in a world of hyperreal superficiality. Such struggle takes place on the literal physical body—its beauty, its sexuality, its gender identity, and its ability. In addition, Palahniuk’s perverse look into the natural world is met by the protagonist’s inner dialogue of disgust and disconnection from natural life. Using deliberately minimalist prose and repetitive phrases, Palahniuk creates a narrative that mimics a shallow and uninterested dialogue. The superficial and self-centered consciousness of the narrator reveals the damage being inflicted on her identity by neoliberal consumerism. Stylistically representing the intrinsic void constructed by the hyperreal, Palahniuk’s repetitious phrase “product of a product of a product” becomes a prominent theme (218). Baudrillard points out that this signification results in a manufacturing of reality that the conscious refuses to distinguish (3). Hyperreality becomes a form of escapism from the natural world preferable to reality because it improves upon the natural world and thus provides a more satisfactory experience, even if the experience is short-lived. Rooted in neoliberal ideology, hyperreality can only grow and continue to stimulate positive emotions if a society agrees to continue to consume. As *Invisible Monsters* points out, a person’s constant need to participate in consumerist society facilitates their addiction to production and the subsequent annihilation of their traditional conceptions of self. By constantly shaping new identities to feed their product addictions, the characters of *Invisible Monsters* go so far into the hyperreal that they no longer recognize their personhood outside of a consumer identity.

## Consumer Apocalypse

*Invisible Monsters* demonstrates how product consumption has penetrated the human psyche and altered how we, as a society, perceive the value of our ecosystem and the value in connecting to the natural world. If something exists in the natural world without consumer purpose it is deemed waste. Shannon's choppy, disaffected interior monologue describes life on the road: "Jump to all the wonders of nature blurring past us, rabbits, squirrels, plunging waterfalls. That's the worst of it. Gophers digging subterranean dens underground. Birds nesting in nests" (Palahniuk 83). Shannon's description of "waste" is her perceived uselessness of the natural world. Because nature exists without the desire for improvement, it is a wasted opportunity. If something cannot be consumed and/or improved upon, it has no purpose in society. If the subversion of waste is natural life, or the redundancy and apparent pointlessness in existing as a natural being, it follows that *Invisible Monsters* is a consumerist apocalypse.

The creative genius of Palahniuk's apocalyptic environment is that it is not an environment void of natural resources. *Invisible Monsters* is set in an ecosystem thriving with life and preservation; animals are free in the wild, various springs and rivers flow throughout rugged terrain. Palahniuk's apocalypse is a world in which nature serves no purpose; being real is of no value. People have become manufactured products whose worth is defined by their market value. Traditionally, a world in an apocalyptic state is one where consumers have demolished any potential for earth to recover from human greed. Because *Invisible Monsters* operates in a healthy ecological environment, the apocalypse is not the literal death of earth but the death of its appeal. This world exists as a manufactured reality, what Baudrillard calls the hyperreal, an enhanced aesthetic, where the imaginary is preferential to the real and superficial

trumps natural. The real becomes boring and simulation becomes a means of escapism. This escapism is Palahniuk's apocalypse. Humans do not destroy earth; they get bored with it.

Buell's essay "Environmental Apocalypticism" contends that fictionalized toxic environments reveal the social anxieties of the time in which the literary work was written. Interestingly, apocalyptic themes have been popularized in American culture for over three centuries but originated in Christian theology's belief that the world must end in a "divinely ordained catastrophe" (286). It was not until the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries that "the sense of the United States as a unique, unprecedented sociopolitical experiment conducted to opposite mood swings of national fantasy...that ensured the diffusion and persistence of eschatological thinking" (297). American millennialism, according to Buell, needs finality to permanently solve conflict and crisis. Ideology based on apocalyptic narratives makes possible the environment destruction we permit, even until the imminent annihilation of the world. That is, since we believe it is normal or natural or inevitable for the world to end in a catastrophe, we do not change our lives to keep the world sustainable. Buell argues, the "totalization of phenomena in terms of concepts like biotic community and ecosystem is readily adaptable to apocalyptic ends" by those who understand ominous fate lies within "ecological interdependence" (302). This interdependence is not apocalyptic in the sense of literary fiction, rather, it is a very real occurrence happening every day on the product lines of the nation. It appears from his work that Palahniuk understands there is nothing fictional about the ways in which consumerism has been led in the direction of institutional best interests rather than the community (Buell 304). The community, for Palahniuk, extended by ecological interdependence, is suffering in plain sight but is made invisible by neoliberal agendas.

*Invisible Monsters* provides a cautionary tale of postapocalyptic consumerism; Shannon, Brandy, Evie, and Manus serve as object lessons in the fight between nature and product. Brandy is depicted as not authentically “trans” but pathologically self-destructive by undergoing every cosmetic procedure available to alter her physical body. It is this quest for alteration that leads her to Shannon and Manus. While Brandy has copious opportunities for dialogue throughout the novel, it is Shannon’s description of her that seems to dominate the reader’s view of her identity. Despite the supporting characters’ best efforts to create their own image, Shannon’s perception of others never allows readers to see them as they apparently intend.

Shannon first meets Brandy in the speech therapist’s office, and she recalls “the queen of everything good and kind is wearing this sleeveless Versace kind of tank dress with this season’s overwhelming feel of despair and corrupt resignation. Body conscious yet humiliated” (57). Shannon is immediately drawn to the designer label dress Brandy is wearing as a signifier of identity and matches the signifier to the “season” in which fashion expresses emotion, not Brandy. She goes on to commodify Brandy’s body by acknowledging “Brandy is so attractive you could chop her head off and put it on blue velvet in the window at Tiffany’s and somebody would buy it for a million dollars” (57). Shannon sees that Brandy is a commodity, even in death, and gestures that others would pay top dollar to add her to their collection of products. Like a diamond, Brandy’s body is a raw good, ready to be refined for consumer use. The additional absurdity in Shannon’s observations is that she believes she is casting Brandy in a light that uplifts and successfully marks her as a successful signifier. The act of commodification, for Shannon, is the ultimate goal—a promise of success and satisfaction. When Shannon refers to Brandy’s “plumbago lips” she is not referring to her natural beauty; instead, she is referring to a beauty created on a production line, sold at store, available for purchase.

Brandy's constant theft of designer clothing, jewelry, and make up, all examples of her extreme commodity fetishism, is routinely paired with her addiction to prescription pills. It is unclear, perhaps irrelevant, in the novel when Brandy becomes addicted to the pills, but it is with a fervent desire that she consumes them. At every point in the novel, Shannon notes Brandy's consumption of medication. The addiction to pain killers is a metaphorical device designed to call attention to how Brandy attempts to dull the pain from her own toxic consciousness. When she notices Shannon's questionable glance at her stockpile of Vicodin she says, "It's the Marilyn Monroe school of medicine where enough of any drug will cure any disease" (61). As if trying to create a poetic justification for her addiction, Brandy aligns herself with the ultimate icon of female beauty. Marilyn's beauty far surpassed her time, setting a standard for women to buy into—a standard that arguably led to Marilyn Monroe's death. Brandy sees the Marilyn Monroe school of medicine as a way to continue her body altering quest and to push her into a toxic consciousness, a hyperreality.

Because Brandy's only alteration left is gender reassignment, she is forced by the surgeon to wait a year to prove she is absolutely committed to her transition and complete her journey to total erasure of a natural genetic identity. This is when Brandy and Shannon decide to go on a road trip across the American Midwest in search of Brandy's brother.

Jump to us driving away with the Fiat Spider just piled with luggage. Imagine desperate refugees from Beverly Hills with seventeen pieces of matched luggage migrating cross-country to start a new life in the Okie Midwest. Everything very elegant and tasteful, one of those epic Joad family vacations, only backwards. Leaving a trail of cast-off accessories, shoes and gloves and chokers and hats to lighten their load so's they can cross the Rocky Mountains, that would be us. (Palahniuk 180)

The image Shannon paints of the three of them works well in that it identifies their objective. In her imaginative vision, they are not without their signifying products, matching luggage, and disposable commodities. Shannon recognizes the dispensable attributes of the items she could not leave behind but does not worry about the depth to which they represent who she is. Palahniuk incorporates the *Grapes of Wrath* reference to hint further at Shannon's disconnection with the real world. The Joads that she refers to are never actually on a family vacation. They are escaping the economic hardship of life in the Midwest they endured as a direct result of industrialization (Steinbeck). This flagrant disregard to the hardship depicted in perhaps the most famous American literary example of economic struggle and pain separates Shannon from raw human emotion and prevents her from connecting to anything tangible or natural, revealing her toxic consciousness.

### **Toxic Consciousness**

By acutely exploring the environmental outlook within *Invisible Monsters* using literary ecology theory, also referred to as ecocriticism, we can see the over-arching themes of anti-neoliberal consumerism and purposeful identity narrative. The protagonist's view of the natural world is pivotal to the reader because it reflects the disconnect that has occurred between nature and how humans perceive their role and impact within nature. The central theme of *Invisible Monsters* is not ecological decline; however, the consumerist themes highlight the character's world, often describing the grotesque neoliberal influence on western society, so it seems natural that this influence has penetrated western society's ecosystem. Perhaps for the first time since mass production rose, and as Cynthia Deitering explores in her article "Toxic Consciousness," the 1980s consumer was made aware of the link between identity and trash. Deitering marks the

1980s as a cultural shift in which “a culture defined by its production” shifts to a “culture defined by its waste” and dedicates research to how this connection to waste appears in literature post 1980 (196).

The idea of a “toxic consciousness” in the most rudimentary definition, articulates an individual’s anxiety about pollution of their environment; what makes this term applicable to *Invisible Monsters* and other fictional texts produced in the same era, is the exploration of the pollution as an extension of one’s own identity. Because neoliberalism has engrained in the individual an unbreakable connection to commodity products, once that product becomes waste, waste becomes identity. Palahniuk is interested in the conscious impact products have on how we identify ourselves; by bringing the landscape into the protagonist’s inner dialogue, it becomes clear how society has shifted the way it views the natural world. He explores commodity fetishism created by mass production and the impact it has on identity through use of form, writing style, dialogue, and character desire.

Written in the early 1990s, Palahniuk witnessed America and countries around the world enduring severe environmental impacts as a direct result of consumer gain. One of the most infamous environmental disasters during this time was the nuclear meltdown at 3 Mile Island. March 28, 1978 was a moment in history where the world watched helplessly while a nuclear reactor partially melted into the Pennsylvania ecosystem. Quickly sparking mass outrage and protest, this incident outlined the commercial industry’s footprint in the natural world and the direct effect capitalism has on the body. Deitering notes that it is the ‘80s when the “fundamental shift in historical consciousness” occurs “for at some point during the Reagan-Bush decade, something happened, some boundary was crossed beyond which Americans perceived themselves differently in relation to the natural world and the ecosystems of the American



Empire"(197). In the aftermath of the 3 Mile Island disaster, academics in various fields began to look at sustainability efforts and the effect our production and consumption has on nature. This disaster furthered progress in alternative energy sources and increased government's role in the fight to sustain our ecosystems but, importantly, prompted individuals to reflect on their role in consumption and the potential negative impact they were making.

It is through Shannon's inner dialogue that readers are given a glimpse at how she positions herself to nature. Her dialogue provides glimpses into her past life but when she comes close to a revelation, she shuts down. Refusing to dig deeper into her past traumas, Shannon instead finds reasons for living a disposable life. Even with the intimate interiority of her voice, readers see an individual who is too afraid to address her stigmatized perception of herself. By turning to her identity located within a commodity product, Shannon not only refuses to address real life problems, but she also deepens the connection to the hyperreal making the natural world appear useless. Sitting in the backseat of their car, Shannon describes the world around her:

A few minutes of scenery go by behind glass. Just some towering mountains, old dead volcanoes, mostly the kind of stuff you find outside. Those timeless natural nature themes. Raw materials at their rawest. Unrefined. Unimproved rivers. Poorly maintained mountains. Filth. Plants growing in dirt. Weather...Ancient aboriginal petroglyphs and junk are just whizzing past...Standing on the gravel shoulder are some moose or whatnot just trudging along on all four feet.  
(Palahniuk 80-81)

This environment she sees and describes is a mockery of the present environment of the American west. Shannon's commentary on the natural world is limited by her inability to find value in untouched, unrefined nature. The use of oxymoronic language adds a level of sarcastic criticism to what the natural world does. What would typically be romanticized is uninteresting to Shannon. Shannon uses generic, empty words, such as "stuff" and "junk" and "whatnot" to

describe natural formations. She can find no reason for existence when she looks out from the window of the automobile because she sees nature existing outside of consumerism as useless and redundant. Ironically, the absurdist themes Palahniuk is most known for are not present in the description of his character's environment; instead, he opts to describe and create his character's environment in a mimic of the real-life version of America, with no use of exaggeration or surrealism. This juxtaposition of the natural world with Shannon's commentary highlights the shift in cultural connection explored in Deitering's article. However, Palahniuk does not create a toxic environment; he creates a toxic identity. Shannon's thoughts reveal a perversion of the traditional romanticism of nature in literature and serve as a warning of western society's deliberate erasure of its environment for capital gain.

The early 19<sup>th</sup> century thrust the culture and landscape of America forward in unprecedented ways. Anxieties of this push have been recorded and explored in American literature, like *Walden*, eventually marking the break into the postmodern realm in the 1970's. Traditional romanticism of nature in literature endorsed the preservation of the actual environment and urged readers to acknowledge the connection between nature and culture. In *Walden*, Thoreau presents values opposite of neoliberal consumerism stating, "most of the luxuries and many of the so-called comforts of life are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind" (79). Juxtaposing *Invisible Monsters*, *Walden* dives deep into the natural world and provides a vivid description of the environment and uses the identity quest to promote the values of solace and simplicity. Thoreau uses nature writing to accentuate the symbiotic relationship between humans and nature while Palahniuk exaggerates the lack of connection in his postmodern world. By exaggerating the lack of connection, Palahniuk

illustrates a world free of natural desire and the existence of an environment unattached to mankind.

Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's anthology, *The Ecocriticism Reader*, provides the first wave of literary ecology in academic study. A relatively new school of thought in academia, ecocriticism is sometimes vague in defining its approach. In an incredible survey of the field, Glotfelty notes this vagueness and attempts to separate and predict the course of future studies. Nirmal Selvamony concurs and adds, "ecocritics do not agree on what constitutes the basic principle in ecocriticism, whether it is bios, or nature or environment or place or earth or land. Since there is no consensus, there is no common definition" (qtd. In Buell 2011). The unsure nature of the field mimics the continuous anxiety centered around conservation and the social ambiguity for environmental action exacerbated by neoliberal ideology. With a lack of specific framework to approach the text, an intersectional approach becomes incredibly valuable.

Greg Garrard's *Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* highlights the various approaches that may be enhanced by the addition of literary ecology. Gender, disability, feminist, and queer studies, already intersectional, may further benefit from analyzing the landscape and environment within texts as another site of sociocultural identity formation. Using both literary ecology and neoliberal studies, the following quote from *Invisible Monsters* can be unpacked revealing what Deitering calls "toxic consciousness."

It helps to know you're not any more responsible for how you look than a car is...You're a product just as much. A product of a product of a product. The people who design cars, they're products. Your parents are products. Their parents were products. Your teachers, products. The minister in your church, another product...Sometimes your best way to deal with this shit, she says, is to not hold yourself as such a precious little prize...you can't escape the world...You are about as free to act as a programmed computer. You're about as one-of-a-kind as a dollar bill. (Palahniuk 218)

Palahniuk equates humans with products explicitly throughout the novel, not just in the above quote. Using the repetitive phrase “a product of a product of a product” heightens the readers awareness of the quantities of mass production and points to the generalization, and inevitable lack of quality, society is being reduced to. The recognition of oneself as a disposable product, by seeing how being is interchangeable in a world where all products are disposable, creates resignation—a coping mechanism so that we can continue to exist in a hyperreal world.

Deitering explores the impact on one’s identity once it has been connected to a product, and ultimately a product resulting in waste. In her textual example *White Noise*, she analyzes a father figure who lives in a culture defined by its waste and references a point in which he finds himself digging through his family’s trash. She concludes that “fathoming his family’s garbage...Gladney might fathom not only the consciousness of capitalism, but also the individual identities of his wife and children” (198). By finding an identity in an individual’s specific selection of commodity products and then recognizing the identity follows as that commodity product *becomes* waste, it reasons that each time someone throws out garbage, they are throwing out a piece of their identity. When Brandy tells Shannon, “You are about as free to act as a programmed computer,” she is telling her that they have been created by an artificial system reliant upon consumer algorithms concerned only with the perpetuation of financial gain. Once the financial gain has been made, the initial concern for the consumer disappears and eventually, as the life cycle of a product goes, the system renders that specific commodity useless and it ends up in the waste. This awareness the consumer now has between their *self* and waste is what Deitering calls “toxic consciousness” and what Palahniuk explores in his commentary on nature in *Invisible Monsters*.

The idea of a disposable life has been a theme of postmodern literature over the last half century. However, disposability had not previously been a predominant theme connected to individual identity until the series of consequential environmental catastrophes occurred in the 1980s. As mass production created more emphasis on quantity over quality, the definition and value placed on disposability became warped. The assembly line streamlined the creation of disposable, replicable products. This formula carried over into all aspects of consumerism because it meant more capital gain. Now products are designed to be disposable and consumers are encouraged to buy more frequently to replace them, thus, a cycle of constant consumption has emerged. This cycle of constant consumption affects the way consumers perceive the value of goods; when products are cheaply made and disposable, consumers are less likely to value them and may not see the need to invest in higher quality, longer-lasting products. This, in turn, reinforces the cycle of consumption and contributes to environmental issues, such as resource depletion and pollution. Neoliberalist ideology is fed by a constant renewal of the product/identity connection. By engaging with social trends and strategically marketing products as an extension of self, the market has provided a hyperreality where nature is less and less applicable to our identity.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINAL THOUGHTS

It remains to be seen whether art or any other previously established social order will disentangle from capitalism caused by the implosion of postmodernism, but the hope Palahniuk provides is that we are not doomed as a society to exist in hyperreality forever. If society can “disentangle art from hyperreality...we can begin to reorient ourselves” and consciously make the effort to find fulfillment in the real of our world (Torikian 109). There are still choices we must make as individuals and as consumers for what we want to responsibly consume moving forward. Yes, the 20<sup>th</sup> century society Palahniuk writes in is dominated by versions of reality far removed from anything real. What he and numerous postmodern theorists and scholars seem to have in common is the acknowledgment of hyperreality’s detriment to society.

Palahniuk’s book functions as an experiment to discover if it is possible to live authentically in a consumer-driven society. Shannon’s revelation at the end of the novel attempts to answer this question when she finally admits to herself and the reader that she shot herself in the face because she wanted “to be saved by chaos. To see if [she] could cope, [she] wanted to force [her]self to grow again. To explode [her] comfort zone” (286). Her deliberate disfigurement was the first step in saving her authenticity, but she admits she panicked and “let everyone think the wrong things” as she carried on complacently throughout the road trip (287). *Invisible Monsters* concludes with a glimpse at Shannon’s potential for a natural, consumer-free life when she offers up her consumer identity to Brandy at the end of the novel. Brandy, having just been shot by Evie, is in the hospital recovering when Shannon decides to gift Brandy all her credit cards, driver's license, and social security card.

With this act ending her narrative, she justifies her actions saying, “I’m giving you my life to prove to myself I can, I really can love somebody. Even when I’m not getting paid, I can give love and happiness and charm...just as an act of will...” (Palahniuk 295). Beginning at the end and ending at a new beginning, *Invisible Monsters* asks the reader to consider the value in creating an identity tied to the ability to consume, and if once that identity is created, if it would be possible to undo it. This act of giving represents Shannon’s first *real* attempt at leaving the hyperreal world. Even though throughout the entire narrative the reader is aware of Shannon’s disfigurement and her struggles defining her new identity, it is not until this moment that Shannon does break free of herself. Despite her successful self-mutilation, she found herself still participating in the same hyperreal world she had been trying to escape.

Since Shannon is the only cisgendered character in the novel, it also brings the reader to question whether or not Brandy will succeed in escaping a consumerist hyperreality by accepting Shannon’s material identity. If becoming a trans woman is not a feasible solution to escape, the reader must then further determine the implications this portrayal has on the trans community. If only Shannon experiences true liberation at the end of the novel, what message is Palahniuk sending his readers? Because the novel ends without closure in this aspect, there is no way to answer whether there is a preferred escape route or if Brandy failed in her quest. It may be that failure—in any aspect—is enough to begin transgressing out of cultural normativity.

Jack Halberstam’s *Queer Art of Failure* is a critical look at the value of failure in contemporary culture as a means of resistance against normative expectations of society (2011). What Halberstam calls “failure” ultimately becomes a “queering” of normative culture and a means for escape—something Evie, Brandy, Shannon, and Manus all, to some level of exertion, explore in *Invisible Monsters*. Halberstam looks to how embracing failure, like Palahniuk’s

illustration of transgressive actions, allows individuals to resist conforming to dominant power structures of their society. By looking at protagonists who challenge the conventional ideas of success in American culture, Halberstam connects instances of non-conformity to achievement defined as “queer” and, perhaps more importantly, pinpoints literary works that favor self-expression and identity quests through dominant cultural traditions. Shannon found disfigurement alone was not enough, so she had to leave all connections to her identity behind. Palahniuk’s shock value in *Invisible Monsters* serves as a wakeup call to any individual who questions what society values above all else.

Palahniuk blames neoliberalism influences which have infiltrated and devalued western society’s most traditional connection between identity and nature. While I do believe further research is needed and more analysis of thematically relevant texts would be useful in providing further theories to consider, the exploration into Palahniuk’s work has highlighted the overarching themes of commodity fetishism and toxic consciousness. *Invisible Monsters* proves to be an apocalyptic narrative calling attention to an enemy we might not recognize within ourselves. The question Palahniuk poses to readers bears resemblance to the questions posed by poststructural theorists who ask us to reconsider that which we consider normal or natural. The biggest take away from transgressive fiction is to question our truths and to know what reality we are living in and what consequences we face to maintain our society and identity. The frustration that postmodernism brings to the forefront of discourse is not with the questions it imposes on individuals; the frustration is a result of consumerism and identity having become one. Palahniuk uses transgressive fiction to enlighten readers and engage in sociopolitical questions theorists such as Baudrillard have no answer to. The social implications of hyperrealism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century have further been complicated by the advancement of technology and continually blurred



lines of identity and consumerism. Palahniuk is early in his prognosis, but this essay concludes there is hope for those who question the truth behind desire. Ironically, there is hope in postmodern skepticism and analysis of society.

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