The Sadomasochist in the Closet: White Masculinity and the Culture of Victimization

We don't like what is going on now, and we do know we don't have any future. As social power decreases faster and faster, state power increases faster and faster. And we see ourselves, if you will pardon the expression, as the new niggers (Tom Metzger, leader of White Aryan Resistance: qtd. in Ezekiel 72)

“deviant” masculinities . . . represent a tacit challenge not only to conventional male subjectivity, but to the whole of our “world” (Silverman 1)

Much to the chagrin of U.S. pundits and politicians, the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah federal building in Oklahoma City turned out to be the result not of fervid Libyan or Iraqi terrorists, but of true-blue, all-American patriots. The arrests of Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols on charges of planting a homemade explosive device that killed one hundred sixty-eight people (on the second anniversary of the siege of the Branch Davidians at Waco) threw a lurid spotlight on the so-called Patriot movement, a loose alliance of right-wing, anti-federalist, religious and constitutional fundamentalists. According to observers, the movement may number as many as five million followers and ranges from the almost respectable John Birch Society to the armed militias now found in all fifty states, from the extreme Christian evangelical right to avowed white supremacist and anti-Semitic groups like the White Aryan Resistance, the Ku Klux Klan, and the Southern White Knights. Despite their sometimes contradictory social and political agendas, these groups invariably deplore the sprawling, corporatist state as well as federal restrictions (especially gun control and affirmative action) on what they claim to be inalienable rights. Most are populated overwhelmingly by differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies 8.2 (1996)
white, heterosexual, working- and lower-middle-class men who believe themselves to be the victims of the scant economic and social progress made in the U.S. over the past thirty years by African Americans, women, and other racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities. Trading places, rhetorically at least, with the people they loath, they imagine themselves (through a kind of psychic prestidigitation) the new persecuted majority, or in the words of one zealot, “the new niggers” (qtd. in Ezekiel 72).

While Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols are awaiting trial, the U.S. press teems with stories about the so-called white male backlash (see, for example, Gates; Goldstein; and Janofsky). Although the Patriot movement is perhaps the most glaring example, others abound. Affirmative action is under fire both locally and nationally on many fronts, from the misnamed California Civil Rights Initiative to the Clinton White House (see Schrag). Patrick Buchanan garners electoral victories and credibility in the media by his appeal to racists and disaffected anti-federalists. Immigrants, both legal and illegal, are often harassed and beaten (see de Uriarte). Welfare is being decimated. Assorted conspiracy theorists, anti-tax protesters, and apocalyptic millennialists hole up in Idaho, Montana, or Texas awaiting either the end of the world or the FBI. And although these different phenomena are not routinely considered by the press to be symptoms of the white male backlash, I believe they all represent an attempt on the part of white men to recoup the perceived losses of the past twenty years. For despite the fact that “white male paranoia,” as Newsweek puts it (Gates 48), has been widely reported only since 1993, the anxieties that underlie it first became manifest, I am arguing, in the mid-1970s in reaction to five discrete events: the reemergence of the feminist movement; the limited success of the civil rights movement in redressing historical inequities through affirmative action legislation; the rise of the lesbian and gay rights movements; the loss of the Vietnam War; and perhaps most important, the end of the post-World War II economic boom and a resultant and steady decline in the income of white working- and lower-middle-class men.

But the white male backlash signifies more than white supremacy, antifeminism, homophobia, and potentially catastrophic social legislation. It is also linked, I would like to suggest, to a new, white masculine fantasmatic that coalesced in the mid-1970s in order to facilitate an adjustment to changed material circumstances, by encouraging the white male subject’s simultaneous embrace and disavowal of the role of victim.² Widely disseminated in U.S. culture, this fantasmatic takes
Chuck Yaeger (Sam Shepard) in *The Right Stuff* (1983), Rambo (Sylvester Stallone) in *Rambo* (1985), and D-Fens (Michael Douglas) in *Falling Down* (1993) as its preferred icons and Robert Bly’s *Iron John* (1990) as its bible. Unlike the “the ‘capable,’ ‘competent,’ ‘go-getting’ male” of the postwar domestic revival, the new white male as victim takes up a feminized positionality (Zelditch 339). No longer the sole breadwinner in most households (‘aludi 84), he is obliged, on the one hand, to be more responsive both economically and emotionally to an increasingly fluid family dynamic. On the other hand, this very occupational and emotional instability simultaneously inspires him—if only in his fantasies—to enact a hypermasculinized heroism, as if in compensation for his perpetually misplaced virility. Relentlessly performing this contradiction, the white male as victim flirts recklessly with disaster, putting himself through the most trying ordeals, torturing himself to prove his masculinity, and so becomes the paradigm of that peculiar condition Freud designates as reflexive sadomasochism.

For Freud, masochism remained the most enigmatic and elusive of the so-called perversions, the one, he suggests in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), that most defies a “satisfactory explanation” (25). Trying further to unravel the mystery of masochism in “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes” (1915), he observes that “a primary masochism . . . seems not to be met with” and he argues instead that masochism represents a “reversal” of sadism (and the transformation of an active into a passive aim): “sadism turned round upon the subject’s own ego.”5 But because this turning round is a “process,” it includes an intermediate (or reflexive) stage in which the “object” of sadistic violence “is given up and replaced” not by an “extraneous person,” but “by the subject’s self.” Unlike sadism or masochism proper, reflexive sadomasochism has the effect of splitting the subject’s ego between a sadistic half and a masochistic half. So the reflexive sadomasochist, rather than humiliate and master others, turns this impulse back upon him—or herself: “the desire to torture has turned into self-torture and self-punishment” (127–28). As Kaja Silverman points out, the reflexive sadomasochist differs from the so-called feminine masochist because of a “dual indentificatory relation” to the sadomasochistic fantasy (327). Both aggressor and victim, active and passive, masculinized and feminized, the reflexive sadomasochist always plays both roles, using the reflexive position simultaneously to eroticize and disavow both domination and submission. This dual identification, I believe, precisely describes the psychic process of the
white male as victim, who relentlessly takes up a series of opposed positionalities. And it is reflexive sadomasochism, I believe, that forms the “structuring action” of the new white male fantasmatic, producing the man whose violent instincts are turned not only against others, but also against the self (Laplanche and Pontalis 317). This is the figure whose likenesses populate the Patriot movement and who, since the mid-1970s, has come to dominate mass and (in a more veiled way) elite cultural representations in the U.S. He is the fractured hero, making a spectacle of himself, driven to distraction, and pleasurably tortured by his multiple selves, the one who, like a character from Sam Shepard’s Mad Dog Blues (1972), “has a sadomasochist hid in his closet” (257).

As I Do to You, So Do I to Me

Sylvester Stallone’s Rambo trilogy (First Blood [1982], Rambo: First Blood Part II [1985], and Rambo III [1988], all co-written by Stallone and based on characters from David Morrell’s 1972 novel, First Blood) has arguably become the emblem of U.S. neo-imperialist violence. But all three films figure masculinity not as an unconflicted and pure phallicism, but as a contradictory, mysterious, and even strangely feminine business, representing the male subject as being constantly under siege not just from enemies without but, even more ominously, from the enemy within. The three films attempt, by replaying the Vietnam War, to reclaim the victimized white male as hero. John J. Rambo is a former Green Beret and Congressional Medal of Honor winner who in First Blood, mistaken for a leftover hippie, is arrested by a small town police chief only to escape from jail and blockade himself in the forest. Battered, bloody, and practicing a kind of makeshift guerrilla warfare, he maims most of the local police force and the National Guard sent out after him (the fact that he refrains from actually killing anyone only demonstrates his extraordinary prowess). In the final sequence, confronted by his former Green Beret commander, Trautman (Richard Crenna), he gives a tearful, self-pitying speech and surrenders himself to the authorities. The sequel takes Rambo to Vietnam, where he performs a top-secret mission searching for prisoners of war allegedly held captive. Parachuted into the jungle and assisted by a Eurasian woman, Co (Debra Paget), he locates a small cadre but is betrayed by a U.S. government thug named Murdock (Charles Napier). After being captured and brutally tortured by a sadistic Soviet commander, and after the death of Co, he single-handedly fights his way
back to the base camp in Thailand with all the Pows, slaughtering scores of Vietnamese and Soviet soldiers along the way, only to corner the cowardly Murdock and contemptuously spare his life. *Rambo III* takes Rambo from a Buddhist monastery in Thailand (to which he has retreated after the carnage of *Rambo*) to the mountains of Afghanistan where he joins the mujahideen, rescues Trautman from another sadistic Soviet commander, and slaughters hundreds of Soviet troops.

Like the partisans of the Patriot movement, Rambo is imagined to be the victim of treacherous American authorities. Like them, he shares a compulsion to venture forth on solitary and dangerous enterprises and to display a courage that sometimes slides over into a suicidal recklessness. Like them, he moves in almost exclusively male company (Co is the only even moderately substantial female role in all three films), and he holds most dear his compatriots who fought in Vietnam and were abandoned by a callous and ungrateful government. Yet the Rambo fantasies also reveal features of the white male fantasmatik that are routinely disavowed by his real-life brethren. Both luxuriating in and refusing his victimage, Rambo uses his body as his primary weapon and repeatedly betrays a desire to be tortured so as to prove his heroic ability to withstand physical pain. At the same time, the hypermasculinized Rambo of all three films is consistently transformed into a spectacle to be consumed.

In all three films, however, the process of making Rambo a spectacle produces intriguing side-effects. On the one hand, his enormous strength, self-confidence, and resilience clearly mark him as a phallic male, as the one, indeed the only one, in the trilogy who "has" the phallus. On the other hand, his masculinity and his muscles are so constantly and extravagantly on parade that he simultaneously undergoes what can only be described as a feminization. David Denby notes in his review of *Rambo* that "the camera seems to have developed a peculiar, not to say pathological, interest in Sylvester Stallone’s body"—an interest that is coded as "pathological" because in Hollywood narrative cinema it is associated with the female, not the male, body (72). As Laura Mulvey famously points out, the cinematic apparatus (along with a masculinized spectatorial gaze) "play[s] on [the audience’s] voyeuristic phantasy" by turning a woman into "an objectified other," an object of scopophiliac desire (9). What makes *Rambo* so "peculiar" (if not to say queer), is that Stallone’s perpetually oiled body is subject to precisely the same objectification. Just before Rambo is to leave for Vietnam, the camera catches him in preparation for his mission. The scene begins with a shot
of his tanned and rippling right shoulder that is filmed in such extreme close-up that the flesh seems more cinematic hallucination than recognizable musculature. The camera then slowly tracks down his bulging bicep and forearm to his hand and comes to rest on his knife, his lethal weapon, which is submitted to an almost microscopic scrutiny. What is remarkable about this sequence and, indeed, about Rambo’s repeated spectacularization of Stallone’s body, is that it insistently figures Rambo—and his knife—as a fetish object, as “a perfect product,” to quote Mulvey, “whose body, stylised and fragmented by close-ups, is . . . the recipient of the spectator’s look” (14). Rambo is not only the one who “has” the phallus, he is also the one who “is” the phallus, the one whose body, under electric shock torture in Rambo, is subject to precisely the rhythm of tumescence and detumescence that characterizes a phallic economy. Taking up both a masculine and feminine positionality, Rambo becomes, in the words of Barbara Creed, “an anthropomorphised phallus, a phallus with muscles,” a “simulacrum of an exaggerated masculinity” (65). His rippling flesh thereby attests to the fact that at least this white male as victim is constructed as a spectacularized object of desire, and that during the 1980s the “white male body,” as Susan Jeffords notes, “became increasingly a vehicle of display—of musculature, of beauty, of physical feats, and of a gritty toughness” (“Can Masculinity” 245).

The dual positioning of Rambo (as both hypermasculine and feminized, as both “having” and “being” the phallus) seems to me to be crucial to understanding the fantasies of the white male as victim. Rambo is not simply the passive object of the spectator’s gaze but the producer of a near fatal gaze (especially in Rambo), his deep, droopy brown eyes always alert, omniscient, watching, whether through the jungle foliage or the floorboards of a Vietnamese hut. Moreover, like the new masculine ideal, he is allied with both “nature” and “culture.” In Rambo (in a clearly racist conceptualization) he is said to be “of Indian-German descent.” On the one hand, he is constructed as being both instinctual and autochthonous, literally of the earth (one of the most extraordinary moments in Rambo occurs when he magically materializes out of the mud, as though out of the earth itself, to kill a Soviet soldier). And in the three films he seems to be more “Indian” than “German,” more animal than human, a creature relying on reflexes and brute strength far more than intellect. Furthermore, both his retreat into the forest and expedition to Vietnam are clearly coded as a move back to an ostensibly primeval state whose alignment with “nature” is inevitably underscored by his discarding of
clothing. On the other hand, his “German”—which is to say, Aryan—half makes him cunning and ingenious, uniquely capable of taking what lies at hand and turning it into a deadly weapon. Moreover, it distinguishes him racially from the Vietnamese and the Afghans, in contrast to whom he seems a luminous giant on an imperialistic spree. A high-tech simulacrum of Tom Metzger’s White Aryan Resister, he is simultaneously an Aryan and a “new nigger.”

Yet what is perhaps most striking about John J. (“what you choose to call hell, he calls home”) Rambo is his rigorous submission to a sadomasochistic economy of desire. His simultaneous identifications with the masculine and the feminine, with “nature” and “culture,” ensure that he will always be at war with himself. “You’re always going to be tearing away at yourself until you come to terms with what you are,” Trautman warns him in Rambo III. In First Blood, in particular, Rambo (“a man who’s been trained to ignore pain”) brings disaster upon himself by refusing to hearken to the law, or rather, by willfully setting himself up as an alternative authority (much like the armed militias, the Montana Freemen, or David Koresh and the Branch Davidians), motivated not by heroic principles but a belated sense of grief over his dead comrades. “You did everything to make this private war happen,” Trautman rebukes him in the final scene. Furthermore, in all three films Rambo undergoes an extraordinary sequence of ordeals. He is stripped, tortured, beaten, bombed, shot at, electrocuted, overrun with rats, and suspended in pig shit. In First Blood, he sutures his own wounded arm while in Rambo III he plucks an enemy projectile from his side and cauterizes the wound with gunpowder. These ordeals, I would argue, must be seen as being self-willed, as being the product of his need to prove his masculinity the only way he can, by allowing his sadistic, masculinized half to decimate his masochistic, feminized flesh. And intriguingly, Rambo’s ordeals are echoed by Stallone’s own masochistic proclivities. According to a Newsweek profile, Stallone has developed a real hankering for pain: “If I don’t break a few ribs,’ he says [of his film fighting], ‘I think it’s bad luck.’” And when shaving, he “refuses to use shaving cream, or even water, preferring, he says with a laugh, to gross out my girlfriend . . . by coming downstairs every morning looking like someone used my face for a dart board.” Even his muscles function as a signifier of pain, of an arduous five-hour daily workout which “sometimes brings his body fat to such dangerously low levels that ‘I’m so woozy, I can’t remember my own phone number’” (Leerhsen 62) So both the star Stallone and the charac-
ter Rambo prove the efficacy of reflexive sadomasochism as a libidinal logic that produces a heroic male subject who proves his toughness by subjugating and battering a feminized other that has mysteriously taken up residence within the self. Silverman emphasizes that “because it does not,” unlike other kinds of masochism, “demand the renunciation of activity,” reflexive sadomasochism “is ideally suited for negotiating the contradictions inherent in masculinity. The male subject can indulge his appetite for pain without at the same time calling into question . . . his virility” (526).4

Stallone’s extraordinarily successful film career has been built on two principles: his taste for spectacles, which, according to Newsweek, “biannually transform . . . a body beautiful into a human blood blister,” and his ability to produce successful serial fictions (Leerhsen 62). For despite the fact that Rocky (especially in the first three films) and Rambo have very different antagonists and that Rocky ends up rich and famous (unlike the more demonstratively victimized Rambo), both sets of films rely on the same libidinal logic. It seems especially apt that reflexive sadomasochism has proven the perfect engine for Stallone’s Rocky and Rambo series in that the sadomasochistic scenario will allow no resolution—only sequels—since the battle with the self by definition can never be resolved. (Furthermore, given the Rambo trilogy’s eschewal of a heterosexualized teleology, marriage never appears as an option.) Because masculinity is figured in his films not as a presence but a lack, he must continually restage his castration, challenging himself anew, since it is only in the instant of triumph that he can become (narcissistically) fully present to himself. His heroically scarred body thereby serves, ironically, as a reminder that he doesn’t finally “have” the phallus and that his desire can only be fulfilled through a sadomasochistic reiteration that commemorates ad infinitum both his limitless desire for pain and his perpetual victory over pain. At the same time, and more disturbingly, the obsessively sadomasochistic bent of Stallone’s Rambo is linked inextricably to his reactionary politics (so deeply appreciated by the Reaganite right during the 80s and the partisans of the Patriot movement who, like Rambo, feel betrayed by the federal government).5 By aiming destruction not only at others but also at the self, by becoming a self-righteous near martyr, Rambo gains moral authority and turns his own imperialistic violence into what passes, in some quarters at least, for justice. Theodor Reik provides an elegant distillation of the brutal (and brutalizing) logic of reflexive sadomasochism: “As I do to you, so do I to me” (177).6
Even more suggestively, the Rambo series attests to an inextricable link in the white male fantasmatic between the spectacularized male subject and the masochistic economy of desire. For within a homophobic culture, the spectacle of the male body is a perilous and anxiety-producing commodity, all too easily coded as homoerotic. _First Blood_ and _Rambo_ attempt to disavow the homoeroticism implicit in Rambo’s status as an object of the masculinized gaze by using his masochism, his insistent self-production as a victim of torture, to deflect male spectatorial desire. As Jeffords notes, “the chief mechanism in mainstream cinema for deferring eroticism in the heterosexual male body is through [sic] establishing that body as an object of violence, so that erotic desire can be displaced as sadomasochism” (_Remasculinization_ 13). Any delight that the male spectator might derive from watching Rambo’s rippling flesh is mitigated by the fact that that same flesh is insistently brutalized and turned into a spectacle of pain which the spectator might be expected, if not to avert his eyes from, at least to wince at. And _Rambo_ is by no means unique. In the proliferation of films during the 1980s in which men are figured as objects of scopophilic desire (from the Rambo, _Lethal Weapon_, and _Terminator_ series to _The Right Stuff_), sadomasochism functions to facilitate the male spectator’s disavowal of a homoerotic investment. But does this disavowal work? Does the spectacle of the male body in pain actually foreclose desire? Are not sadomasochism and homoeroticism always mutually imbricated in a patriarchal culture that cannot accept the truth (to which both the Rambo trilogy and the Patriot movement so obviously attest) that its investment in male homosociality is far stronger than its investment in the heterosexual bond? And cannot pain also be understood as the inevitable price of looking, the price a man must pay for desiring another man? In this context, it seems appropriate that John J. Rambo’s name should echo that of his homonymic forebear, Arthur (_A Season in Hell_) Rimbaud. 8

_The Right Stuff_

Pressing psychoanalysis into service for a historical project, I want now to examine the social, political, and economic struggles that I believe have determined the structure of the post-60s white male fantasmatic. For reflexive sadomasochism—the linchpin, I am arguing, to a new American masculinity—is far more than an idiosyncratic fantasy that Stallone cultivated on his way to stardom. Freud well understood that
both fantasy and desire are social productions. Yet many neo-Freudians, despite their attempts to historicize the construction of gender, end up inadvertently dematerializing the social. In her work on masculinity, for example, Silverman elaborates an Althusserian ideological critique inflected by psychoanalysis. To that end, she introduces the concept of “the dominant fiction” as a historical construction and notes that “exemplary’ male subjectivity cannot be thought apart from ideology” (15). But the unremittingly universalizing tendencies of psychoanalysis—at least as she uses it—and her disdain for “economic determinism” make it impossible for her to speculate on causality, to sustain an analysis of modes of production, or to offer a systematic periodization (26). Thus, for example, her analysis of the deployment of racial categories in the work of T. E. Lawrence is based far more on details of Lawrence’s biography than on the structure and history of British imperialism. Similarly, her concept of “historical trauma” (based on Freud’s notion of “war trauma”), used to explicate the crisis of post-World War II masculinity, disallows consideration of the material causes of this crisis (55–56). She does not make note, for example, of the massive shifts in the employment of women following the war, or the development of consumer capitalism, or the rapid expansion of the professional managerial class. Rather than illuminate the complex workings of social process, “historical trauma” becomes a substitute for an analysis of unprecedented social and economic redistributions.

I am trying to take a different route and explain, as Abigail Solomon-Godeau puts it, “the circumstances and determinations that at different historical moments promote one fantasy of masculinity over another” (74). Because I understand psychoanalysis as both the science of fantasy and a tool for reading culture (and am particularly concerned with questions of determination and periodization), I will now consider why Rambo, aka the white male as victim, has become such an overbearing cultural figure since the mid-1970s and to specify the social and economic initiatives to which I believe he is reacting.

Let me begin this analysis by noting that during the early 1970s, normative gender roles were widely reported, by liberals and conservatives alike, to be in crisis (see, for example, Fasteau; Gilder; and Leonard). Traditional masculinities were shaken by the continuing debacle in Vietnam and were under attack by feminists and gay and lesbian liberationists. “[O]ur sexuality is so confused,” George Gilder complained, “our masculinity so uncertain” (6). On the one hand, for a
liberal like Marc Feigen Fasteau, Vietnam became an index of masculine crisis that reveals the bankruptcy of the “cult of toughness.” In his view, both the war itself and the “search for ‘peace with honor’” were “shaped and governed by the same tired, dangerous, arbitrary, and ‘masculine’ first principles . . .” (180). Gilder, on the other hand, an avowed antifeminist, blamed the “women’s movement” for sabotaging masculinity by “weakening” the “institutions of male socialization” and “making them optional, bisexual, androgynous” (6). He argued, moreover, that homosexuality (which he imagines to be a form of both sexual deviance and gender deviance) is an index of “sexual frustration” and “a form of erotic suicide” that threatens the very foundations of culture (5). And while their concepts of social crisis and their proposed remedies may have differed radically, both liberal and conservative analysts of masculinity devoted a great deal of energy to examining the impact of feminism, gay liberation, and Vietnam on gender roles. In doing so, however, both almost completely ignored two issues that, I believe, have proven the most crucial for producing the new, white male fantasmatic: the 1973–74 worldwide recession that effectively put an end to the postwar economic boom, and the struggle by African Americans for social and economic justice. It is upon these last two issues that I want to focus.

As has been widely acknowledged, civil rights legislation of the 1960s marked a significant blow to institutionalized racism by outlawing discrimination in employment, labor unions, and all places of public accommodation, strengthening voting rights, and demanding that school desegregation proceed with “all deliberate speed” (Chafe 154). And during the 1960s, African Americans did make some real gains. Black enrollment in colleges doubled during the decade and the “proportion of black families earning more than $10,000 a year (in constant dollars) leaped from 13 percent in 1960 to 31 percent in 1971” (Chafe 458). But legislation alone has been unable to transmute the long and violent history of racism and economic inequality in the U.S. Between 1970 and 1993, the median income of white households increased by 3.4 percent while that of black households by only .8 percent. And in 1993, the median income of black households still represented only 59 percent of that of white households (United States 469).

The remarkable increase in prosperity of white households relative to black ones, and of men relative to women (among full-time workers in 1993, women earned sixty-six cents for every dollar earned by men) has by no means prevented white men from identifying themselves
as the victims of the slender and precarious gains made by these groups (United States 479). As the economy contracted during the mid-1970s and unemployment rates rose for both whites and blacks, the white response to the progress of black Americans began to shift. The landmark case was the lawsuit that Allan Bakke, an ex-Marine and Vietnam veteran, brought in 1974 against the University of California for twice denying him admission to its medical school at Davis. Insisting that the University’s quota system for racial minorities violated his constitutional rights, Bakke styled himself a victim of discrimination. Four years later the Supreme Court, in an equivocal ruling that in some respects has proven more significant symbolically than for its practical effects, supported his claim, striking down quotas while upholding the principle of affirmative action. Liberals decried the decision. In his dissent, Thurgood Marshall pointed to an ignominious history of oppression, insisting that the “experience of Negroes in America is not merely the history of slavery alone, but also that a whole people were marked inferior by the law. And that mark has endured” (“How the Justices” 10). Jesse Jackson called it a “devastating blow to our civil rights struggle” and saw it—prophetically—as “consistent with the country’s shift to the right, a shift in mood from redemption to punishment” (“Bakke Wins” 15).

Yet the Bakke decision was so widely debated and publicized (it made the covers of both Time and Newsweek) in part because it served as a sign of the emergence of a backlash against civil rights and affirmative action during a period of economic retrenchment, a sign of the desire for the “punishment” of African Americans for having purportedly compromised the white standard of living. Conservatives applauded the blow to what they—in an audacious attempt to equate the grievances of white males with the legacies of slavery—called “reverse racism” which, Robert Allen points out, “attempts to make racial minorities scapegoats for the problems that have been fostered by the inherent social irresponsibility of the corporations and banks that dominate” the U.S. economy (9). Turning a blind eye to history (and anticipating the total amnesia that would characterize contemporary conservative discourse), one writer arrogantly blamed “minority fetishism” for a decline in American competitiveness and “law enforcement,” for the decay of the cities, and the deterioration of the public school system (Phillips 15). Yet as Allen emphasizes, these accusations end up blaming those who historically have been the victims of racist violence and ignore the “institutional racism” that is maintained by the “‘normal’ operation of the institutional and capitalist market mechanisms” (11).
The severe recession of the mid-1970s and the end of the post-World War II economic boom had dire consequences for the U.S. Not only did they stall the move toward social justice, but they also produced a backlash against feminism, affirmative action, and lesbian and gay civil rights. Moreover, they became imbricated with a sense of profound anxiety over the loss of the Vietnam War, and more generally over the United States' role as an imperial power. These signal changes, I am arguing, have produced a wholesale reconfiguration of white American masculinity, a reconfiguration that has proven a protracted and complex process. For just as the Vietnam War divided the country politically, so did it initially produce two competing versions of masculinity. During the 60s and early 70s, normative white male identity continued to be organized around occupational stability and fatherhood. A man's primary responsibility was to the family he administered, a family that would contain the hazards of sexuality and ensure the proper domestication of potentially rebellious offspring. Among this same group of men, however, a very different collection of fantasies held sway, with masculinity defined precisely by the tension between the sober post-Word War II norms and an extravagant fantasmatic. The extroverted, masculine heroics of John Wayne (whose movie, *The Green Berets* [1968], was one of the few films about Vietnam made during the war) continued to stoke the white masculine imagination. The real man was supposed to be independent, adventurous, morally upright and, like Wayne, wholly predictable, a “figure whose meaning seems absolutely fixed” (Tasker 234). And the normative white male subject, despite being seated behind a desk—or rather, because of that fact—imagined himself imperially at the frontier, or on a battlefield, struggling against clearly defined enemies, dedicated to a noble mission.

At the same time that normative masculinity was being reasserted by older white men, however, among younger protesters of the Vietnam War, “macho” was becoming virtually “a dirty word,” as an article in *Newsweek* put it (Ansen and Ames 39). It is among precisely this group, loosely allied with the counterculture, that a new concept of masculinity began to take hold. (Not that the counterculture significantly challenged the prevailing binary logic of gender. For all the talk of “sexual liberation,” men were still firmly linked to rationality, adventure, and the public sphere, women to emotionality and domesticity.) After the fall of Saigon, in the wake of African independence, as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund came to replace military might and subtle coercion supplanted brute force (Jameson 184), a new masculinity began
to take shape in the U.S. that was no longer contingent either upon the production of enemies out there or upon nakedly imperialistic forays abroad. Having a new set of cultural conflicts to negotiate, it became more independent, more pliable, more apparently responsive to the demands of local populations and to the challenges posed by various rebellions (like the feminist insurgency). Yet at the same time, as the last vestiges of precapitalist society were being penetrated by market forces, as the “older village structures and precapitalist forms of agriculture” in the Third World were being “systematically destroyed” (Jameson 185), as “nature” was being sacrificed to “culture,” European-American men were becoming increasingly domesticated and bureaucratized. For the professional, managerial, and technical sectors of the U.S. labor force had expanded so quickly that by the early 1970s the U.S. had become “the only country to employ more people in services than in the production of tangible goods” (Starr 80). Under these circumstances, it became all the more urgent that the masculine fantasmatic be reconstructed to bear the unmistakable traces of a robust, independent, and entrepreneurial masculinity. The new fantasmatic of the late 1970s, 80s, and 90s features not the gallant commander leading his regiment to glory for traditional American (that is, imperialistic) principles but the lone guerrilla, making his way through the dark jungle, picking off enemy soldiers, on a dangerous and mysterious mission; or the test pilot described by Tom Wolfe, peering compulsively into the abyss:

the idea here . . . seemed to be that a man should have the ability to go up in a hurtling piece of machinery and put his hide on the line and then have the moxie, the reflexes, the experience, the coolness, to pull it back in the last yawning moment—and then go up again the next day, and the next day, and every next day, even if the series should prove infinite . . . (24)

No matter what pain he might experience, or what morbid medical condition he might develop from his Icarus-like exploits, “he shows not the slightest concern . . . that the condition might be permanent and affect him in whatever life awaits him outside the arena of the right stuff” (28). He learns to master his frail body, to make it submit absolutely and repeatedly to the cruelty of his will. Not only does reflexive sadomasochism provide the ideal mechanism to turn this new hero’s pain into pleasure, but it also allows him to adjust to the exigencies of living in a (post)feminist and post-Bakke culture. It authorizes him to be both wild
and domestic, to cultivate a “feminine” part of the self (or at least to endure his feminized flesh) and at the same to subjugate it violently, and to take on the roles simultaneously of casualty of feminism and affirmative action and of humanitarian. It allows him to play the part of victim and yet be a man.

Among recent cultural productions that map this new male subjectivity, none is more revealing than Robert Bly’s best-selling manifesto, Iron John. For what is perhaps most remarkable about Bly’s rhetoric of “the deep masculine” is its stress on a primordial and untouchable inwardness, its ability to produce a pure and fantasmatc virility that will accord with polite social norms while leaving unsullied “the Wild Man” within (8). Moreover, Bly seems oblivious to the deeply racist cast of his theory of masculinity. For despite the participation of a few African-American men in the men’s movement (see Shewey), Bly’s “mythopoetics” remains firmly rooted in imperialistic fantasies. Perhaps the most revealing moment in Iron John, in regard to both the racialization of “the Wild Man” and his masochistic proclivities, is the narrative of an African initiation ritual (Bly describes this as “[o]ne of the best stories [he’s] heard”) in which a boy, after having fasted for three days, sits in a circle with a group of older men. “One of the older men takes up a knife, opens a vein in his own arm, and lets a little of his blood flow into a gourd or bowl.” And so on around the circle, “When the bowl arrives at the young man, he is invited to take” a drink. Bly comments that in this way the boy not only learns to take “nourishment” from men, “he also learns that the knife can be used for many purposes besides wounding others” (15). In other words, he learns that the knife can always be turned against the self and that the act of self-mutilation is the purest and most absolute expression of virility. And fortuitously, this writing of masculinity upon the male body does not require willing partners. Give the man a weapon, let him slice up his own flesh, let him prove himself a warrior. And all the better that this lesson should be taught the white American male by African bodies, by black bodies who, in Bly’s imperialist fantasy, approximate “the deep masculine” far more effectively than the white Western subject, marooned as he is in a feminized culture. And yet, does not this desire to be the other, to appropriate his cultural apparatus, at the same time betray a barely concealed terror of the other? Does not this narrative, and the masochistic logic that drives it, represent the last, desperate stand of the embattled white male imagining himself “the new nigger,” now grown enraged and paranoid at seeing his power challenged not only by
women, but also by those dark-skinned others, whether in the Third World or America's inner cities?

As constructed in the work of Stallone and Bly, the white male as victim may take a curious route to pleasure, but he has not seen his economic and political authority significantly decline. One recent survey compares the racial and sexual composition of senior corporate executives between 1979 and 1989. It finds that in those ten years the proportion of African Americans had increased from .2 to .6 percent, of Latinos from .1 to .4 percent, and of women from .5 to 3 percent of the total (Cose 54). Yet many white American men now consider themselves an oppressed group, the victims of discrimination, intolerance and "reverse racism." "The white male," one protests, "is the most persecuted person in the United States" (Gates 51). For its part, the mainstream press has remained tellingly ambivalent on the subjects of the white male as victim and "reverse racism," both critiquing and disseminating these mythologies. On the one hand, it sometimes appears eager to debunk the claim that "the white male [is] truly an endangered species" or an oppressed class (Gates 49). On the other hand, it has, especially since the 1994 election, made white male victimage a major political issue, reporting characteristically that "[s]ome of the white male pique is no doubt justified" insofar as "some white men surely have seen minorities and women of lesser competence pass them by" (Cose 54). Only after the Oklahoma City bombing did the press even begin to consider that there might be a relationship between the mythology of the white male as victim and the growth of the paramilitary right (see Kifner, for example).

Most important, the press has significantly underreported the massive upward redistribution of wealth in the U.S. since the late 1970s. Senior corporate executives do not swell the ranks of the White Aryan Resistance, but they remain overwhelmingly white and male. Working- and lower-middle-class white men, on the other hand, the ones most involved with the Patriot movement, have seen their incomes stagnate or fall over the past twenty years (despite the slight overall rise in income of white households). The transition from an industrial to a service economy has proven far more painful than the prophets of technology, mass consumerism, and the "free" market expected (Faludi 65–70). During the 1970s, spiraling inflation, soaring oil prices, and rising unemployment put an end to the post-World War II boom. During the next decade, as Faludi points out, "the 'traditional' man's real wages shrank dramatically (a 22 percent free-fall in households where white men were the sole
differences

Yet these wages were being channeled from working-class white men not to African Americans but to the very rich (who are overwhelmingly white). Moreover, the largest peacetime military build-up in history, as well as changes in the tax structure, have had a far greater impact on the decline in male earning power than the entrance of women into formerly masculine professions (Bradsher D4; Faludi 65). Economic inequality has been increasing since the 1970s, and by 1995 the U.S. had become “the most economically stratified of industrial nations” in which the wealthiest one percent of households “owns nearly 40 percent of the nation’s wealth” (Bradsher A1, D4). Those households in the bottom three-fifths have seen their incomes steadily decline. As Chip Berlet and Matthew Lyons emphasize, however, “the Patriot movement diverts attention away from actual systems of power by the use of scapegoating and by reducing complex reasons for social and economic conditions to simple formulaic conspiracies” (24).

Coincidental with the ascendency of the white male as victim has been both the rise of poststructuralism in the U.S. academy and the embrace by many poststructuralist theorists of the idea that the disintegration of the liberal humanist subject offers radically subversive possibilities. Several contemporary theorists of sexuality, in developing this thesis, regard male masochism, in particular, as posing an irresistible threat to the imaginary coherence of the unitary subject. Silverman sees masochism (because it betrays the “phallic standard”) as one of several “deviant’ masculinities” that “represent a tacit challenge not only to conventional male subjectivity, but to the whole of our ‘world’” (1). And although she recognizes that the reflexive position can all too easily operate “at the behest of a terrifying psychic imperialism,” she argues forcefully that these dissident masculinities “call sexual difference into question, and beyond that ‘reality’ itself” (328, 1). Leo Bersani, meanwhile, in The Freudian Body insists rather notoriously that sexuality (which for him is “ontologically grounded in masochism”) is inherently destabilizing and “intolerable to the structured self.” And although Bersani later qualified these claims in Homos, he argues in the earlier work that sexual excitement inevitably produces radical possibilities by “shattering” and disturbing the desiring subject (38-39).

While I agree with Silverman and Bersani that male sadomasochism splits the male subject (or rather, reveals the rift that is always already constitutive of subjectivity), I do not agree that reflexive sadomasochism, at least as it circulates in contemporary U.S. culture, offers a
radical challenge to the “structured self,” let alone to “the whole of our ‘world.’” Rather, I see the insistent bifurcation of the male subject as a way (contradictorily) of preserving and even consolidating his imaginary coherence. In an essay analyzing the “vital function” of “masochistic activities” within “the narcissistic sector of the personality,” Robert Stolorow argues that both masochism and sadism often function “to repair . . . damaged self-representation” (441, 446). Rather than endangering the coherence of the subject, they prove particularly useful in times of psychic—and, I would like to add, social and economic—crisis because they can operate “to restore and maintain the structural cohesiveness, temporal stability and positive affective colouring of a precarious or crumbling self-representation” (441). Reflexive sadomasochism, in particular, with its self-contained, narcissistic system of gratification, would seem particularly adept at reconstructing an independent, autonomous, masculine subject and “re-establishing a sense of existing as a bounded entity, a cohesive self” (445). For does not the reflexive sadomasochist’s illusory autonomy make him an ingenious revision of the voluntarist subject—self-contained, individualistic, and beholden to no one? Furthermore, as Rambo makes clear, spectacularization and feminization by no means demand phallic divestiture.

In his encyclopedic account of masochism, Reik notes that masochism does not always require the repudiation of power or will. Drawing on Freud’s observation that “[a] sadist is always at the same time a masochist” (Three Essays 25), he emphasizes both the fluidity of these positions and the instability of the sadomasochistic contract. Rather than completely renouncing power, the masochist gains a certain authority by proving that he or she can take whatever is being dished out. Thus, “by a peculiar detour,” he or she “attempts to maintain his [sic] ego, to enforce his will. . . . The lambskin he wears hides a wolf.” Like the “yielding” of Rambo or Falling Down’s D-Fens, the masochist’s “yielding includes defiance,” and “his submissiveness[,] opposition” (156). Judith Butler, pointedly responding to Silverman, speculates: “I would question whether the strategies of male masochism and ‘feminization’ . . . couldn’t also be construed as a subtle strategy of the phallus, a ruse of power—that’s to say that ‘divestiture’ could be a strategy of phallic self-aggrandizement” (Kotz 88). And, as Paul Smith notes, the narrativization of male masochism in cultural texts represents a “way for the male subject to temporarily . . . subvert the phallic law” while “guaranteeing” that he remain “the origin of the production of meanings” (91). If one accepts these arguments,
then the work of Silverman and Bersani takes on a rather different cultural significance. For the insistent substitution by these theorists of psychoanalysis for history, which renders them incapable of analyzing the material forces that have foregrounded the masochistic white male subject at this particular historical moment, must itself be read historically. In their work, that incapacity is coupled with scant attention to the fact that their exemplary masochistic male subjects are almost always (demonstratively or implicitly) white. Yet they consider neither the history of white masculinity (in the U.S. or elsewhere) nor the fact that its meaning has changed radically since the 1960s. I suggest that their admittedly ambivalent celebration of male masochism represents as much a symptom as it does a critique of the increasing naturalization in U.S. culture of narratives and images of the white male as victim. It demonstrates that theory is as subject to the exigencies of history as the texts it purports to decode.

In comparison with Silverman and Bersani, most American cultural productions since the mid-1970s have far less ambivalently championed the new white males who happen to be sadomasochists, the men who proclaim themselves victims while simultaneously menacing—or blowing away—somebody else. Iron John and the Rambo trilogy are filled with images of self-torture used to consolidate the sense that the white American male knows how to take it like a man. Like the Russian-roulette-addicted Nick (Christopher Walken) in The Deer Hunter (1978), or the suicidal Martin Riggs (Mel Gibson) in Lethal Weapon (1987), these heroes remonstrate against a culture made uneasy by traditional machismo by proclaiming themselves victims, by turning violence upon themselves and so demonstrating their implacable toughness, their ability to savor their self-inflicted wounds. Of all these celluloid heroes, perhaps the most emblematic is Michael Douglas, who regressed from countercultural paragon—the collegiate, idealistic liberal in The Streets of San Francisco (1972–77) and producer of the antinuclear film, The China Syndrome (1979)—to the persecuted, molested, and belligerent victims of Fatal Attraction (1987), Falling Down (1993), Basic Instinct (1992), and Disclosure (1994). As I. Hoberman notes, “Douglas’s stardom depends on his capacity to project simultaneous strength and weakness. He is the victim as hero—a bellicose masochist, aggressive yet powerless, totally domineering while battered by forces beyond his control . . .” (32–33). As is obvious from the conduct of all of these put-upon warriors, a penchant for pain by no means rules out the possibility of turning
violence against others, especially women or feminized and racialized others, who happen to get in the way.\textsuperscript{17}

Most ominously, recent events, from the Oklahoma City bombing to renewed attacks on affirmative action, have demonstrated the unpredictability and potentially dire consequences of this newly hegemonic masculinity. For the partisans of the White Aryan Resistance or the Michigan Militia embody not a qualitatively different kind of masculinity from that enacted in the films of Stallone and Douglas, but an enterprising, malignant—and since Oklahoma City, suddenly demonized—variation upon it. Consider, for example, the all-too-real Timothy McVeigh whose masculinity, like that of his fictional brethren, is radically unstable. Described by one of his former Army buddies as being "so gullible, so vulnerable, . . . so unbalanced about being tough," he is the same volatile figure who is remembered by a gun collector as being a "polite" and friendly guy who "doesn't interrupt" and yet obsessively speeds while clenching his phallic signifier: "He drove like a wild man," the gun collector said. 'He never drove under the speed limit; he drove over it. And he always carried that big pistol" (Kifner A18–19). Or consider Pat Buchanan, whose autobiography, peppered with innumerable accounts of bloody fistfights in school, exults in his ability to withstand abusive treatment from his tyrannical father (much given to the use of "the 'strap'"") and friends and enemies alike: "To show emotion and feeling was considered an unmanly thing to do; we were to be stoic about pain" (25, 75). For all these would-be saviors of the white race, reflexive sadomasochism is profoundly imbricated with their deeply conflicted sense of masculinity. Yet even as this masculinity is endlessly examined and dissected in the press and in mass culture, its underlying logic is rarely acknowledged. Concealed under a veneer of righteous indignation, willfulness, anger, grief, or guilt, and repudiated by the would-be heroic male subject, reflexive sadomasochism has become the primary libidinal logic of the white male as victim. And in that sense, to the extent that it remains an open secret—seen and yet not seen, decisive and yet disavowed—it may be said to occupy a closet, a site of repression, a private space that is at the same time pivotal for the production of public practices and subjects. Rambo is hardly the only hero with "a sadomasochist hid in his closet." Perhaps it's time now to "out" these other heroes, to "out" Sylvester Stallone, Timothy McVeigh, and the culture they instantiate, and to admit that what these white men \textit{really} want, what gives them the greatest thrill, is pain.
Notes

1 For good critical overviews of the Patriot movement, see Berlet and Lyons and McLemee.

2 I borrow the term "fantasmatic" from Laplanche and Pontalis who define "a phantasmatic" as a "structuring action" for "the subject's life." This should not be conceived of merely as a thematic—not even as one characterized by distinctly specific traits for each subject—for it has its own dynamic, in that the fantasy structures seek to express themselves to find a way into consciousness and action, and they are constantly drawing in new material" (517). I am using it here, however, to emphasize not the idiosyncratic but the social character of the fantasmatique because I believe that the latter is determined less by a subject's "specific traits" than by the conscious and unconscious structuring mechanisms of social life (i.e., history). I could have used the word ideology since it, unlike fantasmatique, is usually understood as being rooted not in individual but in collective fantasies. And following Althusser, I understand ideology not only as a totalizing structure, but more important, as a psychic configuration. As Žižek explains: "Ideology is not a dreamlike illusion that we build to escape unsupportable reality; in its basic dimension it is a fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our 'reality' itself—a 'illusion' which structures our effective, real social relations and thereby masks some unsupportable, real, impossible kernel."

3 Freud later changes his position on the question of a primary masochism. After theorizing the death drive in Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920), Freud argues that masochism in fact results from a portion of the death drive that is not displaced outwards, but "remains within the organism and is 'bound' there libidinally" ("Economic" 194). This forms the basis for what in "The Economic Problem in Masochism" (1924) he calls an "original erotogenic masochism," a lust for pain, which, Freud asserts, underlies all the other forms of masochism and, being a primary mechanism, does not represent (as he suggests in earlier essays) a derivation of sadism (194).

4 For Freud (and Silverman), feminine masochism, in particular, renders the subject passive and infantilized: "the masochist wants to be treated like a little, helpless, dependent child . . . " ("Economic Problem" 193).

5 For an example of neoconservative support, see Gremer's appreciative review of First Blood.

6 Developing Freud's theory of instinctual reversal and reflexive sadomasochism, Reik uses this sentence to describe the "intermediate phase which marks the
frontier between sadism and masochism" (172).

7 I would amend Jeffords, however, by suggesting that sadomasochism represents not a displacement of eroticism but the working out of an underlying structure of desire. For Jeffords's position differs from Mulvey's (and mine), by seeming to regard sadomasochism as a displacement of desire rather than as a libidinal logic in its own right. Mulvey, on the other hand, argues that the masculinized gaze is by definition both sadistic and desiring.

8 It is hard to believe that David Morrell, in naming his protagonist, was completely unaware of the patterns of desire and abjection produced in Rimbaud's poetry. For an examination of Rimbaud's sadomasochistic predispositions (as well as his homosexual relationship with Verlaine), see Schmidt.

9 For an analysis of this change, see Scott.

10 As the economy contracted in the 1970s and some white, heterosexual men (like George Gilder) found themselves unexpectedly disadvantaged, they tended to blame those groups which they believed were making social and economic progress at their expense. As has been widely pointed out, however, the very slight progress of these groups had little impact on the fortunes of white men (see Faludi; Gates; and Scott).

11 See May for a particularly good analysis of Cold War domesticity.

12 For a detailed account of this masculinity, see Savran 33–42.

13 For an especially stinging critique of the gender politics of the New Left and the counterculture, see Morgan.

14 One early 70s commentator writes: "the man of the future will be a hunter, an adventurer, a researcher—not a cog in a social machine" (Leonard 146).

15 For an excellent critique of the men's movement, see Connell.

16 Just as the new white masculinity that emerged during the 1970s represents a reactionary development of the more "feminine" countercultural masculinities of the 1960s (Roszak 74), so does poststructuralism to some extent represent a retrenchment on the part of the left in the wake of the collapse of mass-movement politics and the anticolonialist struggles for national liberation. Accordingly, I agree with Aijaz Ahmad that "dominant strands within . . . 'theory,' as it has unfolded after the movements of the 1960s were essentially over, have been mobilized to domesticate, in institutional ways, the very forms of political dissent which those movements had sought to foreground, to displace an activist culture with a textual culture, . . . and to reformulate in a postmodernist direction questions which had previously been associated with a broadly Marxist politics" (1). As examples of these "dominant strands," see Belsey; Deleuze and Guattari; Dolan; and Laclau and Mouffe.

17 For an analysis that focuses on the production of white masculinity in recent film and its relationship to the civil rights struggle, see Jeffords, *Hard Bodies*.
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