This thesis analyzes the characters and performances of John Travolta throughout the 1990s and examines how the actor's celebrity persona comments on the shifting meanings of masculinity that emerged in a post-Reagan cultural landscape. A critical analysis of President Clinton's multiple identities—in terms of gender, class, and race—demonstrates that his popularity in the 1990s resulted from his ability to continue Reagan's "hard-body" masculine national identity while seemingly responding to its more radical aspects. The paper examines how Travolta's own complex identity contributes to the emergent "sensitive patriarch" model for American masculinity that allows contradictory attitudes and identities to coexist. Starting with his iconic turn in 1977's *Saturday Night Fever*, a diachronic analysis of Travolta's film career shows that his ability to convey femininity, blackness, and working-class experience alongside more normative signifiers of white middle-class masculinity explains why he failed to satisfy the "hard-body" aesthetic of the 1980s, yet reemerged as a valued Hollywood commodity after neoconservative social concerns began emphasizing family values and white male responsibility in the 1990s. A study of the roles that Travolta played in the 1990s demonstrates that he, like Clinton, represented the white male body's potential to act as the benevolent patriarchal figure in a culture increasingly cognizant of its diversity, while justifying the continued cultural dominance of white middle-class males. While Travolta's film persona has remained relatively stable over time, as demonstrated by recurring mannerisms and frequent appearances in dancing scenes, his image in the 1990s appears to prescribe normative roles for men, whether he is
playing oppressed fathers, outrageously depraved villains, or slick criminals. Memories of Travolta's star image in the 1970s and his benevolent public appearances, such as those on The Oprah Winfrey Show, help reinforce the perception that values and identities of celebrities are "real," even if they are inherently contradictory. This thesis calls for more critical evaluations of celebrity personae, arguing that Travolta's film performances demonstrate how "hard-body" conservatism (either in politics or mediated images) adapts and endures over time, even when certain public figures appear to challenge traditional masculinity and long-established cultural hegemony.
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INTRODUCTION

On January 21, 1998, the Washington Post ran a front-page story that detailed an alleged affair between then-President Bill Clinton and a White House intern named Monica Lewinsky, and reported that he had become the object of scrutiny in an investigation of perjury conducted by Kenneth Starr (Clinton, My Life 373). At the time, Lewinsky was only the latest in a parade of women whose sexual histories mysteriously intertwined with the president's. After accusations of sexual impropriety from Paula Jones and Gennifer Flowers, the impression of Bill Clinton as a charming and incorrigible womanizer had already permeated the American public imagination.

Into a copper pot of public opinion that had almost reached the point of boiling over came another ingredient only two months after the Lewinsky story broke. The film adaptation of Primary Colors (a novel written by political reporter Joe Klein, who was originally identified as "anonymous") came to movie screens ("Travolta, Thompson and Bates" 1). The film's central character is Jack Stanton, a Southern governor whose empathy for minorities and the working class, manipulative approach to the media, fondness for calorie-rich desserts, and lust for women are unmistakably based on famous (and infamous) Clintonian traits. After Tom Hanks had to back out of the project, director Mike Nichols offered the role to his second choice, John Travolta (Andrews 316).

In Primary Colors, Stanton is performed in a manner that suitably captures both Clinton's quiet-spoken affability and his cutthroat ambition, and Travolta's casting consequently marks a unique merging of similar political and pop culture masculinities. Even in middle age, Clinton and Travolta are posited in the media as objects of female desire—Clinton through recurring accusations of sexual indiscretion, and Travolta through evocations of a time in which he
enjoyed heartthrob status among his fellow baby boomers. Moreover, both Clinton and Travolta embody the masculine version of the American Dream: emerging from humble beginnings—Clinton from a single-parent home in Hope, Arkansas, and Travolta from the suburb of Englewood, New Jersey—to earn success and take their places as patriarchs of nuclear families.

Yet this patriarchal ideal is compromised in both men by actions and representations which threaten to undermine their value as responsible white male breadwinners. Clinton's extramarital affairs and aggressive foreign policy caused his image of idealized fatherhood to rupture by the end of his tenure, while Travolta's penchant for choosing villainous roles—often in hyper-violent action pictures—manages to destabilize his public persona as one of Hollywood's most bankable charmers. By combining the performance style and public image of John Travolta with the multiple and conflicting gendered meanings of a then-sitting president, Primary Colors makes visible the most prominent crises in 1990s American masculinity: namely, the problem of assimilating the trope of the benevolent, industrious father to the privileged male "hard"-ness that emerged after Jimmy Carter's presidency, and negotiating new spaces of empowerment for white middle-class males in a nation which increasingly placed credence on consumption and multiculturalism.

Re-Imagining the White Male Patriarch of the 1990s

In her book Hard Bodies, Susan Jeffords examines popular Hollywood representations of masculinity and posits them as part of the "Reagan Revolution" in the 1980s. Upon analyzing films such as First Blood and Die Hard, Jeffords finds remarkable "correspondences between the public and popular images of 'Ronald Reagan' and the action-adventure Hollywood films that portrayed many of the same narratives of heroism, success, achievement, toughness, strength,
and 'good old Americanness'' which dominated the collective imagination of the country during
the decade (15). In short, Reagan came to represent the "national body" of the 80s by
participating in and partially overseeing a cultural shift in ideology that looked toward "muscular
physiques, violent actions, and individual determination" as the constituent characteristics for
heroic leadership. This cultural shift not only explains Reagan's popularity during this time
period, but also accounts for the box office success of action films such as Lethal Weapon and
Top Gun, which frequently featured male protagonists who experience some level of resurgent
masculine power (21).

Yet Reagan's legacy seemed compromised by the masculinity promoted by his successor,
George H.W. Bush. According to Jeffords, Bush's promise of a "kinder, gentler nation" entailed
a continuing "struggle throughout his presidency to straddle the images of himself as a man who
'cares' about people and as a tough commander-in-chief" (95). If Reagan represented the iconic
figure in America's Republican "family," Bush was less convincing as a leader who could
combine traditional family values with unrelenting protectiveness regarding national interests.
As the Christian Coalition and other members of the "family values" wing of the Republican
party felt increasingly alienated by their representative in the executive branch, Bush adopted a
more tempered version of masculinity in order to prove that he could successfully remedy the
perceived insensitivities of Reagan conservatism (101). While Jeffords observes in 1994 that
"Bill Clinton's relative youth, his partnership with Al Gore, his forthright discussions of marital
infidelity, his acknowledgment of his opposition to the Vietnam War, and his open reliance on
Hillary Clinton's advice and insight define a different kind of masculine image in the White
House," (23) George H.W. Bush's Democrat successor helped recuperate white male "hard-
body" hegemony in his own unique ways.
For example, Clinton was portrayed—whether by his own choice or by that of his campaign managers—as a sympathetic antidote to Reagan's "hard-body" conservative policies. This required depicting Clinton as an individual who truly embodied the American Dream: starting life in the humble surroundings of Hope, Arkansas, and then progressing upward to achieve impressive college credentials and hold a political office. Yet it is this very same persona which straddles working-class and upper-middle-class identities that has become emblematic of the ways in which 1990s media negotiated the relationship between maleness and class concerns. In his analysis of popular culture representations of masculinity during Clinton's presidency, Brenton J. Malin finds that films and television series which featured major working-class characters also incorporated an implicit privileging of middle-class sensibilities. Thus, even as impoverished drifter Jack Dawson emerges as the protagonist of the decade's biggest blockbuster, *Titanic*, he is also separated from the ship's other lower-class passengers by his worldly curiosity and considerable artistic talent (Malin 85). Similarly, Clinton could evoke working-class masculine norms by emphasizing his childhood as an ordinary boy in Hope, Arkansas, while also demonstrating a fulfillment of middle-class sensibilities through his Ivy League-trained law career. This contrasts considerably to popular depictions of class during the 1980s. While Ronald Reagan exploited his extensive Hollywood connections to imbue the White House with a sense of glamour and lavishness characteristic of an increasingly consumerist nation, Americans were commonly exposed to the upper-middle-class lifestyle through television, courtesy of families like the Huxtables from *The Cosby Show* and the Keatons from *Family Ties* (71-72). In the 90s, a preference for values typically associated with the middle-class remained, but had to exist alongside an increasing valorization of rugged working-class individuality.
Similarly, Clinton's public image offered new ways of conceiving race relations amidst the crises of 90s masculinity. During the Lewinsky scandal, author Toni Morrison went so far as to describe Clinton as the nation's first black President—even "blacker than any actual black person who could ever be elected in our children's lifetime." The President's modest origins, fascination with media culture, and fixation on fast-food dining, Morrison contended, made him naturally affinitive to the real world experience of a majority of black males ("Talk of the Town," qtd. in Malin 97). With a saxophone-playing Arkansas native in the White House, African Americans felt comfortable expressing a sense of what Wendy Somerson describes as "racial kinship" with the President. The Lewinsky scandal and Kenneth Starr's subsequent investigation further delineated the unprecedented equaling of national leader and constituents which emerged during Clinton's tenure. As Somerson has argued, Starr's probing of the president's sexual history helped Clinton's image transform "from a position of disembodiment as the figurehead of the nation to a position of embodiment as a spectacle of public intimacy." The potential for African-Americans to identify with this leader in crisis is compounded by "the long history in the United States of positioning black male bodies as sexual sites for public inspection" (Somerson 223). By sexualizing his public image, the Starr report assisted in the ongoing demythologizing of the Clinton presidency, and in doing so, yielded a unique attachment between an objectified head-of-state and his historically objectified constituents.

Yet Clinton's perceived "blackness" did not necessarily result in any significant challenge to white male hegemony in the 1990s. Just as his class-coded image allowed middle-class values to persevere, albeit alongside an increased privileging of working-class signifiers, the affinity between Clinton and black Americans essentially maintained the customary allocation of cultural power with regard to race relations. While commentators like Toni Morrison can point to
Clinton’s image as proof that race is a social construct, the president's "black" character ironically contained the possibility of creating a new role for "whiteness" as a transcendent identity, somehow representative of all humankind. If white Bill Clinton can so easily assume the identity of a black American, is it not conceivable that all white men have the potential to bridge social barriers and erase the turbulence of America's racial history? Malin confronts several prominent male characters from the 90s, ranging from Martin Riggs (Mel Gibson) in the *Lethal Weapon* franchise to Fox Mulder (David Duchovny) from the sci-fi television drama *The X-Files*, to show how white men were frequently called upon to represent a human universality that paradoxically rose above oppressive white power. Such figures embodied either transcendent middle-class values or a striking identification with the "other," thereby presenting a "rescued whiteness" that represented spiritual and physical ideals, devoid of the repressive power typically associated with white hegemony (Malin 132).

As Somerson indicates, Clinton employed a similar discourse of transcendent generality through whiteness which overlooked the historical foundation of white cultural power. By insisting that "we were a nation of ideas, not of race or place" (Clinton, "Remarks," qtd. in Somerson 223), the President attempted to address American racism by evoking the ideals of the founding fathers, which were themselves often used to support racist policies.

Instead of considering how white male privilege and violence function to shape history, he reclaimed a positive interracial history on a personal level and a corresponding positive constitutional history on the national level. As opposed to suggesting that the foundation of democracy in the United States relies on white male supremacy, he suggested that constitutional ideals are achievable through even greater abstraction. (Somerson 223-24)
As Clinton emerged as the figurehead of what Somerson calls "transnational liberalism" (referring to the neoliberal political ideology of global deregulation and privatization), white men could disregard challenges from feminist and queer activists by personally accepting the fetishized role of "white male citizen-subject incorporating national, racial, and cultural difference into his history by constructing an interracial global family heritage" (225). Clinton, then, has to perform the role of patriarch in this newly conceived sociopolitical world order. As his neoliberal image is legitimized by signifiers of blackness and lower-class origins, white male power effectively dodges the questions of the critical models that pose the most significant challenge to its ideological stronghold.

Further problematizing the new Presidential image of the 1990s was Clinton's considerable appeal to female voters. Following his first election, Gloria Steinem made reference to Clinton as the nation's first "woman" President. His willingness to marry a woman who was his professional equal, the lack of exposure to male privilege during his childhood, his initial refusals to engage in war, and his "listening" abilities, Steinem contended, all allowed Clinton a unique perspective from which to empathize with the American female experience. The Christian Science Monitor also published an analysis of Clinton's "touchy-feely" personal style that, upon comparison to the masculine models of his predecessors, gave the office a feminization it had never previously experienced (Castonguay 278).

Yet with such a departure from traditional gendered understandings of American leadership came multiple inconsistencies and anxieties demonstrated by Clinton's foreign policy decisions. As James Castonguay has argued, Clinton felt the pressure to compensate for values and images he brought to the Presidency which might be traditionally perceived as signs of weakness or failure. By blurring socially constructed divisions of gender, race, and class, the
idea of "Bill Clinton" was transformed into "a highly contested site of cultural negotiation and identification." While feminists like Steinem viewed his election as a welcome precedent for first-lady empowerment and greater attention to the concerns of female constituents, conservative opponents viewed the challenges that Clinton posed to traditional presidential masculinity as opportunities to question his suitability for the office. Such pressures from conservative white males, Castonguay contends, can contribute to our understanding of Clinton's second-term military aggression. The image of a Vietnam draft-dodger who supported homosexual inclusion in the armed forces had to be partially recuperated by bombings in Baghdad and Kosovo. Thusly, "Clinton's continued acts of violence and the continued killing of Iraqi civilians can be viewed as a response to historical anxieties that resulted from gender, racial, and class politics in the 1990s—a regeneration of the president's image through hypermasculine militarism, violence, and death" (278-80).

Furthermore, it must be noted that when considering Clinton's masculinity, gentleness and power are not mutually exclusive concepts. While Clinton was clearly a consumer of popular culture (as opposed to Reagan, who was wholly a producer and perpetuator of mediated masculine norms), he typically made consumptive choices that expressed a deep appreciation for traditional male virtues. Clearly enamored with celebrities (Barbra Streisand, Liza Minelli, and Sharon Stone all met with him during his Presidency, some of them staying overnight at the White House) (Walker 14), Clinton reserves special favor for films and figures which embody strength, individualism, and bravery. In an interview with film critic Roger Ebert, he singled out the western High Noon (Fred Zinnemann, 1952) as his favorite film (Miller). Depicting an aging sheriff who is reluctantly brought back into active service when a villainous gunslinger comes to town, High Noon celebrates male leadership marked by a strong sense of duty and a willingness
to sacrifice for the greater good. Rather than retire with his new bride, the sheriff feels it is his responsibility (and his responsibility alone) to rid the town of this imminent threat. Moreover, the hero is portrayed by Gary Cooper, who by that time had achieved star status through his portrayals of robust, plain-spoken patriarchal characters. Thus, Clinton simultaneously adopted the feminized role of consumer, while asserting that traditional masculine representations still continue to influence his approach to his role as president.

This distinctly "masculine" political worldview seems to conflict with Clinton's supposed divergence from Reagan-era gender constructions. Yet Gary Cooper (aged 51 in 1952, and certainly lacking the musculature of Sylvester Stallone or Arnold Schwarzenegger) represented a more conflicted masculine figure—one whose ultimate goal was to settle down into domestic, easyful life with his new bride. Clinton, too, embodied the values that placed family atop the cultural hierarchy, yet allowed for rigidity and toughness when circumstances necessitated such measures. This was hardly a new conception of the American male—indeed, this domesticated male image can be seen as a part of a generalized move toward national and fictive narratives which placed increasing emphasis on fatherhood as a model for social, economic, and political initiatives. Susan Jeffords argues that masculine representations in the late 80s and early 90s suggest that American culture was undergoing "a reevaluation of that [Reagan] hard body, not for a return to the Carter soft body but for a re-articulation of masculine strength and power through internal, personal, and family-oriented values." This emergent "sensitive man image," however, exists alongside the persistent hard body emphasis on strength and determination in constituting "overlapping components of the Reagan Revolution" (Jeffords, Hard Bodies 13). Through his image as a leader who was "softened" by a fatherly concern for women and minorities and whose masculinity is recuperated by expressing an appreciation for mythical male
qualities, Bill Clinton became the most visible site onto which these "overlapping components" were projected.

Dancing Back from Obscurity

Two years after Clinton's first election, one of Hollywood's most astonishing celebrity comeback stories commenced. While casting his second film, up-and-coming director Quentin Tarantino made an unconventional choice for his leading man. While budget restrictions might have limited the number of high-profile stars available to him, Tarantino surprised many by making John Travolta his first choice to play the lead role of Vincent Vega (Andrews 227). While Travolta had enjoyed considerable success in the late 70s, usually typecast as an obtuse heartthrob, his film career in the 80s fizzled with ill-advised attempts to recapture his romantic leading-man status. The actor enjoyed some increased marketability with the Look Who's Talking franchise in the late 80s, but this association with family-friendly comedies only made his appearance in Tarantino's stylistic, hyper-violent film even more baffling. Yet this casting choice was hailed by many as inspired and instrumental in Pulp Fiction's phenomenal box office success. As the image of the American presidency seemed to be overhauled by a former Arkansas governor, Tarantino seemed to be revitalizing the once-stale star image of a former cultural icon.

It was part of Tarantino's inspired casting decision, however, to maintain the familiar Travolta star image and use it for his own purposes. Rather than reinvent "John Travolta" for a 90s audience that was increasingly open to postmodern narratives, the familiar Travolta performance style (and in many ways the familiar "Travolta role") remained relatively unchanged from the shape it took during the period in which the actor enjoyed his earlier success. Pulp Fiction helped redefine cinematic slickness and hip-ness in terms of narrative,
dialogue, *and* image, and the meanings of Travolta's star image in the late 70s and early 80s made a crucial contribution to Tarantino's innovative mise-en-scène.

Aside from the obvious Clinton-Travolta connection represented in the film *Primary Colors*, the gendered meanings of both president and film star point to the same cultural recuperations of hard-body nationhood that emerged in the public imaginary during the 1990s. The accessibility of Bill Clinton in relation to his constituents (as signaled by the release of a film during his tenure in office chronicling his first presidential campaign) and the sensitivity that characterized his public image both existed in stark contrast to the masculine fortitude embodied by Ronald Reagan throughout the 80s. Yet John Travolta's return to Hollywood stardom in the mid-90s is not necessarily indicative of mediated opposition to the hard-bodied representations of the 80s; instead, Travolta's star image—mostly defined in late-70s blockbusters—offered viewers a version of white masculinity complicated by qualities such as apparent self-consciousness, traces of a working-class background, and affiliations with racial and ethnic minority groups. Even as these characteristics (which also apply to the public image of Bill Clinton) could be interpreted as constitutive of "softened" gender meanings for men, they also exist alongside features which continue to offer Travolta's star image overtones of traditional masculinity—for instance, the protective attitude toward patriarchal roles his characters frequently possess, not to mention their desire for signifiers of American middle-class life. That these characters are portrayed by John Travolta only helps reinforce their impact on audience members. In his analysis of star performances, Richard Dyer argues that celebrities frequently offer rare opportunities for the embodiment of inherently conflicting traits. While the characters they play in films demonstrate contradictory meanings pertaining to gender, class, or race, their public images allow these qualities to exist alongside one another without seeming
impossible. For example, Dyer uses the star personae of Lana Turner and Marilyn Monroe to show that Hollywood reinforced the notion that women had to be both sexual and innocent. "This was possible through the specific chains of meaning in the images of those two stars," Dyer claims, "and partly through...the fact of their real existence as individuals in the world, so that the disunity created by attaching opposing qualities to their images was none the less rendered a unity simply by virtue of the fact that each was only one person" (Stars 26).

The Travolta of an earlier generation—particularly the Travolta who came to Hollywood prominence as working-class disco wunderkind Tony Manero in 1977's Saturday Night Fever—represented the "one person" who could best embody white "blackness" before anyone outside of Arkansas had heard of Bill Clinton. This same youthful star (whose image was also feminized by the same film through his character's frequent preening in front of a mirror and his carefully-chosen nightclub wardrobe) experienced a career slump in a 1980s Hollywood marketplace that viewed the muscled spectacles of Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger as valued commodities in a nation that seemed eager to fortify itself against the perceived "softness" of the Jimmy Carter years (Jeffords, Hard Bodies 24). As Reagan's hard-body nation expanded to incorporate gentler forms of patriarchal control during the presidency of George H.W. Bush, Hollywood found a new space for Travolta's working class aesthetic as the unexpectedly ideal father in the Look Who's Talking films. Yet Pulp Fiction introduced the world to a somewhat (though not altogether) new Travolta role, even as the actor's performance style remained remarkably consistent with the charming inarticulateness that shaped his earlier film work. Whereas the most remarkable offense committed by a Travolta character in the 70s and 80s was Bud's slapping of his girlfriend in Urban Cowboy, Tarantino now required the actor to call upon his reserves of amiability and charisma to play an affable protagonist who was also a hit man.
This departure from his previous romantic leading roles is not just the reinvigoration of a familiar star image by a nostalgic film auteur. The facts that *Pulp Fiction* became one of the decade's most surprising box office sensations and that Travolta's subsequent role selections seemed heavily influenced by his popularity as the charming criminal Vincent Vega indicate that this reinvented Travolta spoke to American moviegoers whose perceptions of masculinity were undergoing multiple challenges and crises. These same moviegoers are also largely responsible for approving Bill Clinton as the nation's symbolic fatherly leader in the 1990s, and it is my contention that both president and movie star came to embody the potential for white middle-class men to remain atop the cultural hierarchy by *performing* the constructed nature of racial, class, and gendered perceptions in America. During this decade, one could look to either politics or popular culture in order to conclude that the white male body remained the justifiable authority figure with regard to Americans who had become increasingly aware of the diversity in their own ranks.

It is the purpose of this paper to investigate the ways in which John Travolta's mid-90s recuperation of "star" status paralleled with the unprecedented accessibility (and, amongst feminist and minority constituents, popularity) of then-President Bill Clinton. Specifically, my intention is to identify the shifting meanings of white masculinity that account for *both* John Travolta's resurgent value as a Hollywood commodity amongst mainstream moviegoers and two successful Clinton presidential campaigns. By examining how Travolta's performance style and star image were called upon to embody Hollywood's interpretation of the prevailing sense of 90s white male disempowerment (as in *Mad City* and *Phenomenon*), to mediate the emerging cultural awareness of the contingency of race (as in *Pulp Fiction* and *White Man's Burden*), and to create an action star profile that could prescribe patriarchal heterosexuality for men (as in
I contend that Travolta's film work represents the same persistent recuperations of white middle-class hard-body hegemony as those personified by Bill Clinton.

In chapter one, I examine the roles chosen by John Travolta in the 1990s in order to determine the meanings that can be derived from Hollywood representations of masculinity that appeared after George H.W. Bush's tenure. What emerges is a privileging of patriarchal strength which exists primarily to exalt the heteronormative nuclear family—a multiplicity of gendered meanings which also characterize, for example, Clinton's use of preemptive strikes in order to secure world order defined by American policymakers. Chapter two discusses the ways in which Travolta's post-*Pulp Fiction* acting style allows the actor to portray either a sympathetic protagonist whose trials and tribulations allow the character to take on qualities that transcend sexual, racial, and class difference while validating white male hegemony, or villains whose uncanny theatricalities exist to prescribe the traditional values demonstrated by the more normative costarring roles. While Bill Clinton's performance in media coverage allowed viewers to label him the first "black" and the first "woman" president, he, too, perpetuated the privileging of the white male body as the site of cross-cultural, cross-gender, and interclass appreciation.
CHAPTER I. HARD BODIES, SOFT SOULS

Trimming the 'Hairy Beast' in a Post-Reagan Nation

Out of the 1960s—the era of civil rights, feminism, and war protests—emerged several vociferous challenges to America's enduring cultural leadership. As women, ethnic minorities, and homosexuals questioned the assumptions implicit in white male hegemony, the boundaries that were once so prominent between traditional masculinity and femininity continued to blur at a remarkable rate. With rigid gender definitions under attack from socially active citizens outside the dominant cultural group, the meanings of masculinity would undergo substantial transformations in the 1970s.

One need not look any further than Travolta's first major cinematic triumph in order to attain a generalized understanding of the popular representations of masculinity made available to young male film stars of the late 1970s. In Saturday Night Fever (John Badham, 1977), Travolta became an international sensation playing Tony Manero, a recent high-school graduate who transcends his paint store day job at a local night club where he earns celebrity status as the neighborhood's premier disco dancer. The film presents Tony as a physical manifestation of the constructed nature of race, class, and gender: while Tony is a sexually-experienced object of female desire, he also exhibits multiple vain practices, preening in front of a mirror and expressing considerable concern over the condition of his wardrobe; while viewing himself and his friends in opposition to the local Hispanic gang, he also represents a level of "coolness" usually associated for racial others (at one point, Tony's friend comments that he looks as "sharp as you can look without turning into a nigger or a spic"); and while embodying working-class masculinity through economic restrictions and hostile verbal and physical behavior, he also represents middle-class aspirations, hoping to move out of his modest New York neighborhood.
Under the aegis of Ronald Reagan, however, the 1980s saw a retrenchment of national values steeped in the traditional masculine rhetoric that accounted for past cultural archetypes ranging from Daniel Boone to John Wayne. As Susan Faludi argues, Reagan's previous career as a Hollywood film actor helped provide Americans with a new leader who could evoke mythical manly virtues after the country's disastrous involvement in the Vietnam War. "More than a fanciful retelling of military history," Faludi suggests, "Reagan's was a full-blown remake of postwar masculine history. He believed in the promise made to the era's young men: submit to the new corporate-management and national-security powers, fight the enemies they designate on the frontiers they choose, and they will make a man of you" (360). This national man-making project was made manifest in 80s culture, from foreign policy decisions right down to Hollywood male-empowerment cinema.

As described by Jeffords, the 1980s introduced American filmgoers to male figures who evoked "a cohesive image of national strengths, accomplishments, and possibilities" (Hard Bodies 62)—in other words, men who could solve cinematic conflict through leadership, muscle, ingenuity, resourcefulness, and reliance on assertive "male" traits. Upon closer inspection, it should not be surprising that John Travolta's star image, as it came to be defined in the 1970s, lacked the hard edges needed to thrive in such a cultural context. While Sylvester Stallone, Bruce Willis, and Arnold Schwarzenegger solidified their respective star statuses in the 1980s, Travolta's public persona—established to a great extent by the roles he played in the 1970s—prevented him from recapturing the success he earned before Americans found themselves fully invested in the national "hardening" represented by Reagan's presidency and various action stars' box office supremacy.

This evolution from the privileging of youthful "coolness" in the 70s to the hard-body
aesthetic of the 80s can be mapped when one compares the Tony Manero of *Saturday Night Fever* to the Tony Manero presented in the 1983 sequel *Staying Alive*. Directed by none other than 80s hard-body icon Sylvester Stallone, *Staying Alive* imagines Tony as a struggling Broadway hoofer whose new chiseled physique is put on full display with glistening body oil and an extended dance finale in which Travolta performs sans shirt. During press conferences early in the film's production Stallone declared his intentions to "see this fat boy get into great shape and then feature it as a highlight of the film." He forced Travolta to adopt a strict exercise regimen, while also monitoring the actor's diet and requiring him to wax and tan his newly sculpted body (Andrews 141-42). Whereas Tony Manero gazed upon himself in his bedroom mirror in *Saturday Night Fever*, moviegoers were expected to be the primary Travolta-gazers in *Staying Alive*, as suggested by Stallone's showcasing of Travolta's muscles and multiple close-ups on the actor's crotch. Having once served as a site for disparate, contesting meanings of identity, Travolta's body was transformed into a spectacle of male power and solidity in a new cultural context during the following decade.

Yet *Staying Alive* failed to reintroduce audiences to the empathy they experienced with the Tony Manero of the previous film. Indeed, Travolta failed multiple times in the 80s to assist moviegoers in re-imagining his body as a hard-edged representation of unchallenged white male authority. Soon after *Staying Alive* came *Perfect* (James Bridges, 1985), a romantic drama about a *Rolling Stone* reporter (Travolta) who decides to write a piece on how fitness gymnasiums are increasingly viewed as the singles bars of the 1980s. As the reporter falls for an aerobics instructor (played by Jamie Lee Curtis) while interviewing the lovelorn clients of a Los Angeles gym, the film collapses into what critic Nigel Andrews calls "a Reaganite movie with tabloid trimmings. Gaining thrills from ogling bodies in gymnastic motion, it also features neck-
cricking glances towards a bygone, virtuous golden age" by invoking Ralph Waldo Emerson when describing gyms as sites for individual self-reliance and personal betterment (160). The film's quick box office extinction proved yet again that Travolta's image was still riddled with far too many complexities for Hollywood to utilize it as a symbol for masculine Republicanism.

As Reagan's second presidential term ended, however, hard-edged masculinity no longer seemed conducive to America's new conception of itself as the world's lone benevolent superpower. Yet some observers felt that the 1980s did not effectively address the supposed weaknesses of males who participated in the social reform initiatives of the previous decades. Released in 1990, Robert Bly used his best-selling book Iron John to advocate a return to the "Wild Man" who existed inside all males—even those who had been socialized to adopt a more sensitive approach to human interaction. Lamenting the "soft" men whom he frequently encountered, Bly observes that they had learned to be receptive, but receptivity wasn't enough to carry their marriages through troubled times. In every relationship something fierce is needed once in a while: both the man and the woman need to have it. But at the point when it was needed, often the young man came up short. He was nurturing, but something else was required—for his relationship and for his life. (Bly 14)

Drawing upon the centuries-old fairy tale "Iron John," about a large hairy man discovered at the bottom of a pond, Bly's solution to the generalized "softness" seen in American society is for every man to engage in a "bucketing-out process" that will eventually allow them to discover the "large, primitive being covered with hair down to his feet…lying at the bottom of his psyche" (6). The popularity of Iron John suggests that more than simply undergoing a tenderization of Reagan's hard body construction, conceptions of 1990s masculinity were still deeply influenced
by fears of male inadequacy tied to a cultural landscape that had been altered by feminism, civil rights, and the lingering qualms surrounding the Vietnam War.

Moreover, Susan Jeffords argues that Reagan-era individualism still held great appeal for those who felt America's economic superiority had come under significant attack from other industrialized nations. George H.W. Bush's Presidential campaign in 1988 demonstrated that conservatives felt the need to diversify the Republican male image in order to appeal to voters who found solace in Reagan's leadership, yet felt left behind by his social policies.

The Republican ticket for 1988 revealed the divisions between...elements of the right, as Bush campaigned on his experience as vice-president, as former CIA chief, as former U.S. ambassador, and as personal friend of foreign leaders, and Dan Quayle campaigned on his defense of family values and moral principles. This evidence of a splintering of the conservative movement was supported by other divisions, particularly the "gender gap," as Republican women began to become more vocal about their support of choice on abortion and women's rights in the work place. But with the economy declining, the national debt skyrocketing, and the reasons for many military expenses disappearing, the Reagan emphasis on family seemed to provide the only secure legacy of the Reagan ideology. At the same time, it provided a popular and facile site for retaining a sense of American superiority in the face of Japanese and European economic competition.

(Jeffords, Hard Bodies 141)

This combination of social benevolence and defensive toughness that emerged from Reagan's tenure entered the Oval Office with the public image and policymaking of Bill Clinton. At the same time, it should not be surprising that John Travolta's career experienced an upswing as Americans increasingly required that masculinity include the benevolence and protectiveness
needed for ideal "father" figures. Such cultural expectations were mirrored throughout the decade by the roles which John Travolta performed on the big screen.

In short, the hard-body imaginary of masculine individualism continued to influence national notions of identity by seemingly compensating for perceived weaknesses in previous hard-bodied manifestations. As Jeffords indicates, national hard-bodied masculinities "have shown their resiliency as models because they appear to critique, at times even reject, their earlier versions, only to renarrate them in ways more complex and more intimately woven into the fabric of American culture" (193). My central concern in this chapter is not how John Travolta specifically discovered these roles, or why played them the way he did (this will be addressed in the following chapter); instead, by using John Travolta as a specific example, I hope to show how the roles made available to marketable Hollywood stars in the 1990s reflect a recuperated privileging of the white male body as the overseeing patriarchal figure in an increasingly race-, gender-, and class-conscious America. Celebrity roles and performances offer crucial commentary on how conflicting identities are prescribed to the public because even inherently conflicting qualities can be embodied by what Michael Quinn has described as "the illusion of authenticity that a celebrity can bring to a role's performance that outweighs both historical precedent and topicality in persuading a doubtful public to accept dramatic representation as a real thing" (157). Hollywood films (and the "star" characters presented to mass audiences) constitute a series of images that reveal how specific "American" identities are constructed in certain time periods. By examining popular texts from Hollywood, we can view how Americans were confronted with a variety of masculine identities and were subsequently encouraged to integrate those identities into their understandings of nationhood (Jeffords, Hard Bodies 6). Just as Bill Clinton embodied the potential for the white, middle-class male to
empathize with the concerns of America's traditionally marginalized populations, the Travolta characters of the 1990s allowed viewers to envision the white male body as the repository for national anxieties regarding class, race, and gender, even as the virtues that this same body prescribed were frequently inconsistent and unstable.

From the representations discussed below come conceptions of nationhood that reflect Bill Clinton's particular masculine approach to the presidency. While conveying empathy for the traditionally disenfranchised, his policies still reflect the nationalism and militarism that have always been featured within the enduring hard-body American imaginary. Rather than using this chapter to argue that masculine narratives somehow signaled a 90s revolution in mediated representations of men, I instead hope to analyze a particular series of images (those involving a single celebrity actor) and discuss how these cultural artifacts address the specific anxieties and desires that characterized the American experience throughout the decade. While I acknowledge that many Travolta images (and certainly many non-Travolta images) in the 90s might provide alternative narratives to the one I describe, I only wish to use this discussion to make visible real cultural problems with regard to gendered national narratives in particular, and the constructed nature of masculinity in general. In short, my aim is to encourage more critical thought with regard to the "John Travolta" celebrity/ideal (and all other celebrity personae), while raising the possibility that such ideals can have real consequences for the culture that receives and interprets them.

Who's Your Daddy?: Travolta as National Father

After a string of failures, Travolta found himself cast in Look Who's Talking (Amy Heckerling, 1989), a comedy which centers on a single mother's search for a father for her infant son, after the son's biological father (Albert) returns to his wife. Travolta plays the cab driver
(James) who hurriedly rushes the mother to the hospital while she is in labor. *Look Who's Talking* utilizes previous conceptions of Travolta's masculinity in order to prescribe the role of the father within the nuclear household. What had once been considered incongruous (Tony Manero's dual status as narcissist and object of female desire) and even objectionable (his inability to convince audiences that he, too, belonged in the parade of 80s hard bodies), now seemed like an attractive social solution. Travolta's embodiment of traditional masculine norms and charismatic sensitivity to the experiences of women, children, and families in general allows him to become the archetype for white, middle-class patriarchal authority throughout the *Look Who's Talking* franchise.

The primary conflict of the first *Look Who's Talking* film is clearly outlined as the single mother (Mollie) watches her newborn son Mikey through the glass of the maternity ward window. Lamenting the abandonment of the boy's father, Mollie makes Mikey a promise that underscores the precedence put upon two-parent families in the late 1980s. "I don't want you to be upset," she tells him, "because I'm going to find you a daddy. And this time I'm going to be smart about it. I'm not gonna fall for some handsome guy just because I'm in love with him. You're the only thing that matters to me and I'm gonna go out there and get you the best daddy there is." Here, the interests of the mother and the compatibility of the two parents are subsumed in relation to the happiness of the child which, in this scenario, is equated with the presence of one female and one male parent.

Mollie's initial search for a father proves disappointing. In one sequence, she is seen on two consecutive dates; during the first, the man complains about his food at the restaurant, causing Mollie to imagine him chastising little Mikey for a bad grade on an algebra test. Her next date complains to a waiter about spotty silverware, which precedes another fantasy scene in
which this same man yells at Mikey for unkempt dresser drawers. These two men fail to embody the American patriarchal ideal, as they have been feminized by fastidious concerns such as school work and cleanliness.

Part of *Look Who's Talking*'s working theory is that men who truly deserve to be considered "fathers" are few and far between. Child-rearing is considered serious business, and the search for the perfect patriarch is not one that should be approached lightly. When Mollie asks her friend what kind of man she would "want to stick around and raise your child," her friend replies rhetorically, "Are there men who do that?" Indeed, James is initially posited as a man whose ignorance of all matters pertaining to child-rearing prevent him from becoming a viable candidate as Mikey's father. After Mikey's birth, James finds his way to Mollie's apartment, only to light a cigarette near Mikey and consequently receive Mollie's wrath. When Mollie lectures James about Dr. Spock's proper parenting techniques, James turns to Mikey and states he "can't believe she's getting that upset about a Vulcan." With James' responsibility in doubt, even Mikey's biological father (who left Mollie during her pregnancy to stay with his wife) seems like a more realistic choice. As James asks Mollie if she truly loves Albert, she claims that "it doesn't really make any difference because the only thing that matters to me is who's best for Mikey. And Albert is successful and responsible and he's real good to his other kids." Again, the interests of the mother are entirely subsumed with respect to father and son.

Yet what qualifies James as Mikey's worthy father are his ability to bond with the son in question and to assertively take his place as the patriarchal head of the family. At one point, he virulently quizzes Albert on Mikey's interests: "When was he born? What's his favorite cereal? Cheerios. What's his favorite stuffed animal?…How many diapers does he go through a day? Six. Who's his favorite rock star? Michael Jackson. Don't you think a father should know some
of these things?" At the same time, James' conception of family values seems to favor pre-
feminist attitudes toward wives and mothers. For example, James manages to sabotage one of
Mollie's dates by informing the suitor that "Mollie's a tough girl" and hates when men try to open
doors for her. The man fails to pay for their meal or open doors for her, much to Mollie's
disappointment. The dating scene frequently cuts to James dancing, hugging, and performing for
Mikey, all scored to the bouncy "Walking on Sunshine." The comparison is clear: the date
cannot possibly entertain a child or assert male authority in the family, while James has a clearer
understanding of how a man should cater to a woman and communicate with a child.

Even as the 90s progressed, Hollywood imagined Travolta as a perfect representative of
sensitive, yet authoritative patriarchy. In Phenomenon (Jon Turteltaub, 1996), he portrays
George Malley, a small-town, working-class man who is zapped by a strange light on the night
of his thirty-seventh birthday. After this incident, he experiences a profound hunger for
knowledge, along with telekinetic powers that complicate his relationship to the community in
general and the object of his affection (Lace, played by Kyra Sedgwick) in particular. Early in
the film, George is portrayed as a rural everyman, congenial with others and resourceful with
regard to physical tasks. "If it's a car, I can fix it. If it's in the garden, I can probably grow it," he
informs his friend in an early scene. Even his interactions with the single-mother Lace are
characterized by demonstrations of manly wherewithal. "I'd love to get my hands on your
carburetor," George tells her while looking at the engine of her old truck. The film suggests that
after the light-from-the-sky incident, George's life contains enough self-reliant ingenuity and
closeness with nature to make him a modern-day Thoreau. In one montage, he is shown
inventing things, dancing with his dog, reading voraciously, and shoveling dirt in his garden.
George comes to embody the ideal masculine characteristics of the 90s: a fun-loving charmer,
with clear physical competency.

Moreover, Phenomenon suggests that these male virtues offer George something much more crucial than knowledge and prize-winning vegetables—namely, candidacy for fatherhood. Despite Lace's guarded attitude toward her children, George eventually proves himself to be worthy of breadwinner status. He earns both children's approval by demonstrating his humorous nature, rather than any responsible "male" qualities (the son's critical facade is broken after George makes a joke about Lace's cooking). After George uses his telekinesis to save a migrant boy's life, the children plead with their mother to give him a chance as a potential father figure. "Why do you hate him?" asks the son, after reminding her of George's virtuous act and informing her how fun he is to be around. Lace, however, proves more difficult to persuade than her children. "I don't like surprises and I don't like complications," she informs George, after he expresses how impressed he is with her children. Even as they argue on his behalf, the children receive Lace's cautious warnings. He might be virtuous and amusing, but he also "thinks he saw a UFO and he thinks he can predict earthquakes. There may be a warning here." As soon as these words are uttered, the earthquake George had predicted earlier in the afternoon begins to shake the house. The mother's intuition is proved to be inadequate in determining the worthiness of a potential father and, by extension, the best decisions for her family.

Ultimately, though, Lace sees the error of her ways. George demonstrates a remarkable appreciation for heterosexual couple-hood after his encounter with the strange light in the sky. He sets up the migrant boy's single mother with his own bachelor friend, realizing that the home of the latter was in desperate need of "a woman's touch." He uses his own need to be understood as a way of bonding with the plight of a single mother. "I want to talk to the people, Lace. I don't want them to be scared of me or frightened," he informs her upon explaining his decision to
address the patrons of the local library fair in person. His personal sense of alienation allows Lace to empathize with him, as she describes her own experience with social rejection to her children: "You remember when daddy left, how people treated us differently?" Here, the grave wound of single motherhood is healed by a man who fully understands the need to exert jocularity and compassion with the children, alongside authoritativeness and sensitivity with women. As the patrons of the library fair tease George for having read Lady Chatterly's Lover, he explains his choice of literature in terms that only those fully invested in nuclear family heteronormativity can fully appreciate: "That's the kind of book for anyone who wants to understand a woman's heart and mind. I read it twice."

Perhaps the most conspicuous example of Travolta portraying the ideal masculine solution to threats against the nuclear family is his role in the thriller Domestic Disturbance (Harold Becker, 2001). The film focuses on the remarriage of a boy's divorced mother to a man with a mysterious past and dubious intentions toward the family. After the boy (Danny) witnesses his stepfather (Rick) commit a murder, his biological father (Frank, played by Travolta) has to choose whether or not to believe his son's version of events (a prospect complicated by the boy's frequent disciplinary problems) or to assume that the stepfather is simply a victim of the boy's vengeful imagination.

From this premise alone, Domestic Disturbance supports common neoconservative assumptions about nontraditional, or disrupted families (Whitehead 190-91). Early scenes suggest that the boy's truancy is linked to both his parents' divorce and his mother's remarriage. "Danny said he wouldn't play," his mother observes, explaining his refusal to participate in a basketball game: "He saw Rick in the stands." The mother is portrayed as the parent who has failed Danny, whereas Frank becomes the parent who sacrificed for the greater good of his child.
After Danny asks him for an explanation for the divorce, Frank responds, "I didn't think I was doing you any favors by sticking around," indicating that his decision was entirely influenced by his child's well-being (later, Frank is seen drinking in a bar, while his secretary offers a stern warning: "This is how you lost Danny the first time"). Conversely, the mother fails to honor her implicit duties toward her son even as she acknowledges the importance of her maternal role. At her wedding to Rick, she reassures her son that even though "I have three great men in my life," Danny will always be the most important. Yet once she discovers that she is pregnant with Rick's baby, the film suggests that Danny is justified in his turbulent reaction upon hearing the news. "I feel like I'm betraying him or something," she informs Rick. As Danny witnesses Rick murder his former racketeering partner, he overhears information which the film posits as a crime almost as heinous as manslaughter. Recounting his version of events to the police, Danny claims that Rick "said he loved the baby and he hated me."

As Frank positions himself as the custodian of the remaining nuclear family order that was disrupted by divorce, his mission in the film is to correct the dangerous situation established by his ex-wife. To this end, he engages in renegade tactics, yet always self-polices his behavior. As he tries to remove Danny from the school playground to ensure that the boy will not return to Rick's home, he punches another father who tries to stop him. After getting Danny in the car, he instructs his son to "put your seatbelt on," thereby reestablishing a sense of ethical order. "You know what I've just done?" he asks Danny. "It's called kidnapping." Even as he employs violent vigilante tactics, he still expresses a sense of responsibility toward the moral education of his son. Moreover, he attempts to compensate for the poor judgments made by his ex-wife. Before Danny's custody hearing, Frank talks to his son on the phone. "Listen up," he instructs Danny, "no matter what the judge decides today, I want you to remember your mother loves you."
While Frank's "crimes" are made to preserve the original nuclear family order, Rick's most heinous crime in *Domestic Disturbance* is his insistence on continually putting Danny in danger, whereas his wife's safety is a lesser concern. Late in the film, Frank confronts Rick with a final threat: "You touch so much as one hair on my son's head, and I swear, as God as my witness, that'll be the last thing you do in this world." This scene is followed by Rick's desperate attempt to take Danny hostage until he can safely flee town. Rick's choice to beat and tie up the son—rather than the mother—underscores the film's assertion that his greatest vice is his willingness to constantly endanger the child. Ultimately, father and son combine to eliminate the threat to their family: as Rick smashes Frank's head through a car window, the latter sees his son in the backseat, giving him renewed energy in the climactic fight. As Frank gets Rick on the defensive, Danny then rams Rick into an electrical box, electrocuting and killing him. In the final scene, the mother apologizes to Frank, who in turn reinforces his role as the guardian of family morality by expressing his regret over her miscarriage. Even the police apologize to Frank for not having believed him and Danny about Rick committing murder. "Just say sorry to him," Frank commands the officer, gesturing toward Danny. Thus, the primary conflict is resolved—the victimization of the child ends as the misguided mother learns her error in failing to be vigilant when reintroducing a patriarchal figure to the family, while Frank reasserts his worth as the righteous father figure by forcefully acting on his own sense of justice.

When Gloria Steinem characterizes Clinton's public persona as representative of America's first "woman" president, national meanings of gender certainly appear to be undergoing a significant transition. Masculinity (and its mediated representations) no longer required the hard-edged toughness that dominated films and television in the 1980s, and an actor whose gendered image embodied the shifting identities of the post-Vietnam, post-Civil Rights,
and post-Second Wave Feminism 1970s subsequently experienced a striking increase in gainful employment. Charming and attractive to women on one hand, physically competent and assertive on the other, Travolta was rediscovered by Hollywood in order to embody the new cultural manifestation of hard-body nationhood that simultaneously answered Bly's call for modern-day Iron Johns and satisfied neoconservative clamoring for greater attention with regard to family values. John Travolta could be re-imagined as the ideal 90s patriarch for the same reasons that Bill Clinton could be endorsed by prominent feminists like Steinem: even as their actions/policies reflect a Reaganesque firmness, their outward compassion fulfilled a national longing for new responsive white male fathers.

**White-Collar Dreams and Travolta's Working Stiffs**

In his book *American Masculinity Under Clinton*, Brenton J. Malin argues that the masculine identities that can be gleaned from Bill Clinton's presidency offer multiple conflicting notions of class. Specifically, the media imagined Clinton throughout the 1990s as someone whose lower-class affiliations proved both advantageous and detrimental to his overall populist appeal. While his 1992 campaign made much of his humble Hope, Arkansas upbringing by a single mother—allowing for "Clinton's association with lower-class experience, distancing him from the cold world of real (that is, bureaucratic, heartless, moneyed) politics"—this very same character came rife with notions of excessiveness and indulgence for which lower-class Americans are often ridiculed. "Clinton's 'working-class experience,'" Malin argues, "demonstrated a conflicted character…Clinton depicted variously as a man of the people and an excessive consumer of powdered pastries" (63-64). While the tendency to disapprove of tastes outside middle-class norms appears to be an extension of Reagan masculinity, 90s media representations frequently presented these sensibilities couched by an ostensible valorization of
blue-collar Americans. According to Malin, texts which at first seem to challenge the assumptions of middle class hegemony ultimately "endow their working-class images with middle-class cultural capital, holding working-class manhood at arm's length even as they celebrate its 'new male potentials'" (65).

Throughout the decade, several of John Travolta's characterizations demonstrate this paradoxical attitude with regard to class and masculinity. On the one hand, Travolta protagonists frequently lack the economic capital that was so valued in Reagan's America. At the same time, their worth as men is recuperated by demonstrating either an appreciation for or an ability to replicate middle-class norms. In *Look Who's Talking Too* (Amy Heckerling, 1990), Travolta's two primary crises—namely, having Mollie undermine his authority in the household and lacking high wages from his job as a taxi driver and part-time flight instructor—seem inextricably linked. Mollie's mother expresses her doubts about James' economic prospects by making reference to Mollie's brother. "Stuart has a degree in accounting, which is like money in the bank," while James is "a slob, he's belligerent. He has the learning capacity of an illiterate immigrant." At the same time, James begins to voice his concerns about Mollie "babying" young Mikey. When Mollie refuses to let Mikey watch a video that James selected for him, James begins to argue that his manhood has been undermined by Mollie's actions: "You're cutting my nuts off right in front of him. How can I be a good dad?...You're thinking that you make more money, so you can make the decisions...Why don't you just put me in a fucking dress?" In this scene, class anxieties are directly associated with James' sense of being emasculated. By virtue of living with a woman who makes more money, his authority within the family seems threatened.

Later, Mollie's mother informs her that she may have a possible job connection for
James. Mollie's response suggests her own understanding of the correlation between class status and appeased masculinity: "If James had a job that he really loved and he could make money, that would be great for us!" Even after James secures this job as a commercial pilot, he still feels discouraged with regard to Mollie's superior economic standing. He initially refuses to speak with the job contact, arguing that he could not possibly live a life that was controlled by Mollie's mother. During an argument with Mollie about having her brother live with them, he insists that he has a say in deciding who stays in their apartment since he pays half of the rent. Mollie asserts her position by reminding him that she pays "all the utilities." It is this statement that finally sends James storming out of the apartment, promising not to return. After insisting that he had finally become Mollie's equal in terms of breadwinning, her disagreement on this point reinforces James' fears that his manhood will always be threatened when he is in her presence.

Even as James disapproves of Mollie's maternal doting over Mikey and Julie, the film still portrays him as the rightful father to the children. In order to give James the necessary middle-class capital to remain the film's patriarchal protagonist, the screenplay introduces Mollie's brother Stuart to offset any possible concerns over James' parenting skills or financial qualifications. An out-of-work drifter, Stuart comes to stay with Mollie and occasionally babysits Mikey and Julie. His unorthodox approach to parenting and job hunting ultimately helps Mollie (and the audience) discover James' worth as a father. James admonishes Stuart for keeping a gun in the apartment, and informs Mollie that he does not "want that maniac around the kids." When asked about his job prospects, Stuart responds that he has an interview with a "liberal-type organization...I don't know, the American Foundation of Cry Babies." This is countered by James' disapproval of Stuart's "fascist point of view," positioning the former within middle-class neoliberal morality.
The two primary differences between Stuart and James are the recognition of middle-
class mores and the exhibition of "manly" force. While Stuart lacks the sufficient domestic 
sensibility to know that guns should not be kept near children and possesses an ethnocentric 
attitude that keeps him from a profitable accounting position with Mitsubishi ("I hate these damn 
Asians—they're buying up this whole damn country!")), James' childlike antics are clearly 
preferred by Mikey and Julie, yet they never demonstrate any incompetence in terms of 
parenting (unlike, say, Stuart's decision to serve Diet Coke to the children). Moreover, the 
resolution of the climactic scene—which involves a burglar breaking into the apartment while 
Stuart is babysitting—further underscores James' superior qualities in terms of fatherhood. 
James' flight is cancelled due to weather, while the unemployed Stuart is feminized by his role as 
babysitter. Upon confronting the burglar, Stuart attempts to compensate for this feminization by 
running after the intruder with his gun. However, he fails to overtake the burglar, and a fire 
starts in the kitchen during his absence from the apartment. James arrives (after expressing 
horror at Mollie for letting Stuart watch the children) to both deliver a knock-out punch to the 
burglar and extinguish the flames in the apartment. This conclusion helps recuperate James'
standing as the deserving patriarch: his job (contrasted by Stuart's unemployment) and his 
physical prowess prove to Mollie and moviegoers that James is capable of embodying American 
middle-class norms of masculinity.

In Domestic Disturbance, two different "father" characters help promote a similar 
privileging of male virtue and physicality through class differences. The stepfather, Rick, is 
wealthy and corrupt, while the legitimate father (Frank, played by Travolta) is working-class and 
upstanding. Yet this simple disparity overlooks the ways in which Frank's professional 
craftsmanship distances him from traditional connotations of working-class experience. Frank is
a boatbuilder, and while he is certainly not wealthy, he still exhibits a level of skill and artistry typically reserved for the educated and worldly. Early in the film, his secretary scolds him for selling one of his products at a low price, to which he responds by informing her of his "theory of noble failure." This nobility is underscored in a scene in which Frank informs his son that boat-building is a craft four-generations-old in his family. While explaining the process of varnishing to his son, he laments the fact that few buyers want wooden boats anymore. As a man whose passion and livelihood center on a craft from a bygone era, Frank possesses a sophistication that allows the character to transcend working-class existence.

In Mad City (Costa-Gavras, 1997), Travolta portrays Sam Bailey, a security guard who is fired after the state makes budget cuts for the museum where he had been employed. He returns to the museum with a rifle in order to force the curator to offer his job back, but ultimately has to take a group of students hostage after accidentally shooting the other security guard on duty. An investigative reporter who happened to be filing a report on the museum's budget woes is trapped in the men's room during the shooting, and eventually becomes Sam's confidant as he broadcasts the security guard's story to the world. The film includes several scenes that feature various groups convening outside the museum in support of Sam, protesting that the security guard had come to represent all those disenfranchised by heartless politics and business. Often speaking in an indeterminate accent and possessing a childlike innocence when interacting with his young hostages, Sam shares the financial hardships and educational deficiency typically associated with the working-class. While speaking to the reporter (Max), Sam seems perfectly aware of where he resides on the socioeconomic scale. In a private conversation with the reporter, he reveals that he went into the Air Force after high school, because his family had no money to send him to college. "The results aren't in yet, but it appears I ain't too bright," he concludes.
Yet Max (who reveals that he, too, could not attend college for financial reasons) recognizes Sam's true motivation for his actions—namely, anxiety over not being able to provide for his family—and realizes that this issue will allow many television viewers to empathize with the plight of a man described by Max as "just an ordinary guy who's popped his top." Beginning a televised interview with Sam, Max begins with a summary of the security guard's life which emphasizes both his humble existence and his middle-class aspirations: "Your name is Sam Bailey and you're a loving husband and a devoted father of two. You've got a mortgage, car payments, medical bills, food bills, electricity bills, gas bills, clothing bills, oh, and by the way, you're fired." During the interview, Sam reveals that his most substantial fear is the possibility of living a life far removed from the American middle-class ideal. "I used to complain about my paycheck, but when I didn't get it no more, I realized that little piece of paper was the only thing holding my life together," he informs Max and the television audience. "I see these families living in a box. I see my family living in that box and I just went crazy." The film then features a montage of visibly affected television viewers—including nuclear families in their living rooms and adults at that familiar center of lower-middle-class entertainment: the bowling alley. And as though Sam's class anxiety was not already a testament to the validity of middle-class hegemony, his claim that he and his family are churchgoers receives a hushed response from one of the captive children: "I go to church too...with my family." Sam's story enraptures the film's television audience for the same reasons his story is expected to involve moviegoers—the spectator will admire his desire for his family to participate in middle-class normativity, and find his frustrated attempt to realize this ideal inherently compelling.

As the film suggests that all of America comes to view Sam as a representative of working-class life, Mad City's portrayal of working-class masculinity becomes fraught with
confusion and condescension. On the one hand, Sam can be read as the angry working everyman, pushed to his limit and lashing out at an unresponsive authoritative bureaucracy. However, the filmmakers apparently realize that this characterization could effectively undermine audience sympathy for Sam. Thusly, even as he wields a rifle and holds children captive, he also exhibits an oddly childlike sensibility which not only gives him an appealing innocence, but also ties him to familial norms. The script repeatedly reminds us that Sam truly means no harm. "I can't take more than I earn," he claims, when the idea of compensation arises, because he simply "came here to get my job back." Yet through Sam's conduct inside the museum, the film portrays working-class masculinity as an experience characterized by impulsive behavior and outright infantilism. Sam is frequently shown playing with the children, blowing bubbles, telling stories, and offering them snacks. His interactions with his wife not only underscore his childlike nature, but indicate that Sam's class anxiety might be closely related to emasculation at home. After Max asks Sam if he would like to contact his wife, Sam seems surprisingly unenthused, claiming "she'll just yell at me." When Max finally reaches Sam's wife, she informs the reporter that "Sam is a good man, but you just have to keep him pointed in the right direction." Realizing that Sam was frightened over his wife's possible reaction upon hearing the news of his termination, Max asks her if she felt "that's a sign of a good marriage…It seems that at times that you treat him like a child." When his wife finally comes to the museum, she gives Sam commands over a loudspeaker that evoke a mother reprimanding her son: "Sam, I don't want any more argument. I want you to come out now…Listen to me, you've got to stop this nonsense…" Sam's lack of financial stability and his wife's authoritative demeanor are both interrelated symptoms of the Bailey family's distance from the nuclear family ideal.
As Brenton J. Malin argues, *Phenomenon*'s depiction of a working-class man wooing a single mother of two actually helps preserve "the Reaganomic middle-class legacy of the '80s" (92). Beginning the film as a lowly mechanic and eventually experiencing an insatiable intellectual curiosity, George Malley comes to embody "a sense of working-class capital" that is "ultimately supplemented with quality of middle-class cosmopolitanism and cultural capital that seeks to balance out this lower-class 'experience.'" *Phenomenon*, then, is among a number of mainstream films in the 90s that envision their male leads as characters who "colonize working-class masculinity in multiple ways, offering up a sort of working-class 'noble savagery,' while simultaneously trying to rescue him from his savagery" (79). Trying to express his new capacity for understanding information, he musingly tells a friend to "think about it—what you always wanted to know about and learn." In short, George is posing a question to working men in general, asking them to imagine an aptitude and sophistication beyond anything they were socialized to pursue.

On the one hand, George's post-zapping life stands in stark contrast to the other inhabitants of his rural hometown. After he "feels" compression waves and correctly predicts an earthquake, he desperately informs the seismologist who visits him that "I really need to talk to people like you," indicating a lack of professional intellectualism in his everyday life. Later in the film, after George discovers that a brain tumor has been stimulating his brain activity, his friend, Doc Brunder, defends him at a local bar where the patrons argue whether or not George was ever a true genius. The only reason they make these claims, Doc argues, is "so you can sleep better tonight...so you can prove that the world is flat." Even George sees himself as an exception to the generalized working man experience. "I'll tell you what I think I am," he tells his doctor. "I'm what everybody *can* be...Anybody can get here. I'm the possibility, alright."
the same time, the film ensures that George's idyllic image is constructed through repeated references to mythical working-class semiology. In one montage soon after the light-in-the-sky incident, George is shown using his new mental capacity to invent new gardening contraptions and reading multiple books, as well as dancing with his dog, and performing manual labors like shoveling dirt. Another scene at the local bar features a frustrated George voicing his dismay over the disjuncture between his new abilities and his previous unassuming life. He tells the patrons that he is "full of ideas" that he "can't deliver." "It's a goddamn mistake, that's what it is. It was supposed to happen to someone smart. But it didn't—it happened to me: George friggin' Malley!"

The film, then, simultaneously valorizes the rustic experience commonly associated with the working-class and places a premium on the values and ingenuity of the middle-class which were so overtly exalted in the previous decade. As Malin indicates, *Phenomenon* ends with Lace offering George love and sympathy, ultimately allowing him to move in with her and the children, forming the nuclear family so valorized in neoconservative ideology. *Phenomenon* is really the narrative of a man discovering his worth as a father figure, as the film ends with George's death in bed with his new "wife" and in the same household with his new "children." George Malley's story is one that affirms that "middle-class abilities and sensibilities are buried deep inside every contemporary male. Those who harness them, it seems, are heroic…Like the self-made man of American history, these working-class men are self-made (or failed) dads—their middle-class sensibilities direct reflections of their earnestness in harnessing their own potentials" (91-92).

James, Frank, Sam, and George all experience the complexities of class-laden meaning which the public commonly associate with Bill Clinton's public persona. From a single-parent
family in a small Southern town, displaying an appetite for cheap and greasy foods, Clinton has access to the cultural reverence paid to working-class origins by Americans disenchanted with Reagan-era upper-middle-class extravagance. At the same time, Clinton's upward mobility—signified by an Ivy League education and lucrative law career—reaffirm "American Dream" mythology, as his emergence from humble beginnings eventually led to the realization of common middle-class ideals (e.g. child-rearing and public service). In the 90s, John Travolta's popularity also resulted from his ability to negotiate these conflicting national notions of class. Whether longing for membership to middle-class normativity or transcending working-class experience through artistic or intellectual endeavors, Travolta could capture the essence of the new 90s hard-body, surrounding himself with the gallantry of working-class myths while reinforcing American faith in self-reliance and self-improvement.

Travolta's No-Thing-Ness: White Fatherhood in Multicultural America

Perceptions of Bill Clinton as the first "black" president, such as those expressed by Toni Morrison, infer an emergent privileging of the white male body as the site onto which anxieties in a multicultural America can be projected and resolved. If Clinton can "perform" blackness through his language, background, and eating habits, then white men everywhere can lead the way to racial and ethnic appreciation and understanding. I argue that it is this emergent identity for white males that makes John Travolta such an intriguing case study for 90s representations of masculinity. As discussed above, Travolta embodied a coolness, slickness, and stylishness as a young star in the 70s that was compared to a "nigger" or a "spic" in Saturday Night Fever. Whereas such racial evaluations seemed irrelevant during the 80s—the nadir of his career—it is important to note that Travolta's return to popularity coincided with the sudden popular fascination with Quentin Tarantino's cinema. Filled with popular culture references, "black"
slang, vintage fashions, and gaudy visuals, the Tarantino mise-en-scène itself overturns any lingering notions of racial essentialism.

Yet in many post-*Pulp Fiction* Travolta films, the protagonist possesses certain magnanimous qualities which recuperate white male hegemonic power in a narrative landscape populated by members of multiple racial and ethnic backgrounds. As Richard Dyer argues, whites have, over the course of history, sought to achieve a particular type of purity replicated by their skin color. These attempts to equate race with essential virtue reflect a move toward "the idea of whiteness as transcendence, dissolution into pure spirit and no-thing-ness" which ultimately translates to "the representative human, the subject without properties" (Dyer, *White* 80). When films portray white males as "the representative human," these characters stake their claim as the rightful overseers—indeed, the patriarchs—of America's collective multicultural family.

Some narratives promote white transcendence in subtler ways than others. In *Phenomenon*, for example, George Malley oversees multicultural harmony in Hollywood's version of small-town America. Once his intellectual curiosity has been stimulated he quickly learns Spanish and Portuguese in order to communicate with his boss and a dying man, respectively. He uses his telekinesis to rescue a sick Portuguese migrant boy in a vast orchard, literally experiencing the boy's pains and thereby expressing a physical kinship to a disadvantaged ethnic minority. Moreover, he convinces his black friend to hire the boy's single mother as a housekeeper, which leads to a romantic relationship, thanks in no small part to George's intervention. By using his new mental powers, George oversees a blurring of racial boundaries, helping recuperate heterosexual bonds and middle-class nuclear family norms.

Issues of race are far more prominent in *Primary Colors* (Mike Nichols, 1998), as
Travolta's Jack Stanton campaigns for the presidency on the Democratic ticket. While sharing obvious overtones with the 1992 presidential campaign of Bill Clinton (right down to Stanton's hair color and style, body, voice, and carnal insatiability), the plot of the film hinges mainly on the ethical turmoil experienced by Henry, the black grandson of a famous civil rights leader who is being courted to join the Stanton campaign team. Henry has to determine whether or not Stanton's social liberalism and capacity for empathy are enough to outweigh his unbridled dishonesty and ambition. From the early scenes, Stanton makes quite an impression. Informing Henry of how much his grandfather was admired, Stanton informs him that he "hitchhiked to Washington to hear him speak." Shortly after, the candidate visits an alternative learning center, where he hears the story of a black man who failed to graduate high school because of poor academic performance. With tears in his eyes, Stanton begins his story about his Uncle Charlie who received a medal of honor in the war, but lacked the courage to admit to his own illiteracy.

Even after Henry meets the real Uncle Charlie and finds out that the story was a complete lie, he still finds merit in the message of Stanton's campaign. Speaking to Stanton's wife, he confesses that he "was always curious about how it would be to work with someone who actually cared." Even if his candidate's publicly displayed empathy is little more than smoke and mirrors, Henry remains undeterred. "I want to believe it," he admits. "I want to be a part of history."

Arguing with his girlfriend—a reporter for *The Black Advocate* who feels "Stanton wants to use the grandson of a civil rights leader...as a vote getter"—Henry once again rises to his candidate's defense. "I can tell the difference between a man who believes what I believe and lies about it to get elected and a man who just doesn't give a fuck, and I'll take the liar."

The ability of a white male to truly represent the concerns of a historically disenfranchised group, then, is an actual plot point of *Primary Colors*. Even as Jack Stanton's
road to the presidency is paved with a series of moral compromises—mainly, his willingness to use his chief rival's secret homosexual past to coerce him out of the race—Henry realizes that Stanton represents an affinity with blackness that has never before reached the White House. At the end of the film, Stanton invokes the memory of the mastermind of the Emancipation Proclamation to prove that he is all Henry wants him to be, despite his underhanded politicking:

This is the price you pay to lead. You don't think Abraham Lincoln was a whore before he was a president? He had to tell his little stories and smile his shit-eating back country grin. And he did it just so he would one day have the opportunity to stand in front of the nation and appeal to the better angels of our nature. And that's where the bullshit stops. That's what it's all about, so we have the opportunity to make the most of it—to do it the right way...In the end who can do this better than me? Think about it. Is there anyone else out there with a chance to win this election who'd do more for the people than I would? Who'd even think about the folks I care about?

The final shot of the film reinforces the transcendent Stanton image. The camera focuses on a handshake between Henry and Stanton, panning up to Henry's approving grin as he mouths the words "Mr. President." The pan continues upward to the American flag, suggesting that Henry's endorsement of Stanton translates into a compromise that will ensure tidier racial relations under a new administration.

In *Mad City*, Sam the security guard displays the same empathy for racial and ethnic minorities as Jack Stanton, as he describes a Native American exhibit to the children he has taken hostage. He exalts the Indian chief ("Big John") as a "good boss" who "knows how to take care of his people" (as opposed to Sam's former employer). What follows is Sam's succinct version of Native American history that suggests parallels between the Indians and the white
middle-class-aspiring men who find themselves oppressed by unfeeling corporate interests. "Now the white man came along and he wanted to take the land away from the Indians, okay? So he killed all of Big John's people. He killed his friends. Kaboom! Kaboom! He killed his family. Kaboom! Kaboom!"

At the conclusion of Sam's story, a S.W.A.T. team descends onto the museum ceiling, shooting at Sam and hitting Big John's statue. The same establishment which forced Big John from his people, then, represents the modern day victimizers of a potentially transcendent white male body. Moreover, the makers of Mad City fervently contend that Sam is not part of this establishment. One activist outside the museum suggests that the standoff represents a chance to achieve "what was denied at Ruby Ridge and Waco." To this spokesperson, Sam is a working man "put out of work by racial quotas." Hearing this, Sam becomes concerned about the way some groups are interpreting his acts. "I gotta get back on TV and say I'm not prejudiced," he anxiously tells Max.

After he accidentally shoots his former black coworker, Cliff, reporters begin to suggest that race may have played a role in Sam's angry backlash. While being questioned regarding Sam's possible motives, Cliff's wife informs a black journalist that "Cliff and Sam were friends. Cliff didn't blame Sam for what happened. At least I don't think he did." While his wife seems somewhat uncertain, later scenes imply that Cliff still supports his friend. As Sam appears on television informing the country that he "just want[s] everybody to forget about it and let me go home," Cliff is shown listening intently in his hospital bed, putting a hand on his wife's head. During his own television interview, Cliff asserts that he remains certain that Sam did not mean to hurt him.

Ultimately, public support for Sam's plight dwindles due in part to a smear campaign that implies that he possesses a cynical awareness of how to manipulate the irrepresibly politically-
correct media. After Sam is convinced to release two of his young hostages, Max suggests that he should make his choice strategically in order to win the support of certain viewing demographics. "You shot a black guy," Max reminds him. "If you release a black kid, it's harder to play the race card against you." Max's network rival then airs a piece that includes an audio recording of this exchange in order to subvert the favorable portrait Max has created for Sam on television. Sam's image, then, is equated with America's supposedly desultory muticulturalist project: even if the media cannot convince viewers he is racist, it can at least accuse him of manipulating the disingenuous side of identity politics to his advantage. Either way, race is presented in the film as an issue that has been politicized to the point of victimizing unassuming white men like Sam. By portraying race as such a culturally sensitive topic, the film seems be asking a question that rhetorically invokes the capacity for the 90s working white male to compensate for historical racial and ethnic tensions: How can cultural institutions like the media consider white men racist when they are equally conscious of and just as susceptible to the oppression brought on by disembodied "white" power? In this sense, white men recapture the same cultural capital that has fueled the social movements from racially-, sexually-, and class-marginalized American citizens.

The film *White Man's Burden* (Desmond Nakano, 1995) actually imagines a world in which whites hold exclusive rights to such claims of oppression. The film's reversed version of race relations posits blacks alone atop the social order (inhabiting mansions, owning businesses, policing urban streets, etc.) with whites exclusively populating the ranks of the disenfranchised (manual laborers, prostitutes, gang members, etc.). Travolta portrays Louis Pinnock, a factory employee who is fired from his job after eyeing his boss's nude wife while running an errand at his house. Louis then takes his boss (Thad) hostage in order secure compensation for his lost
wages. Over the course of the film, Louis and other whites embody characteristics traditionally attributed to the marginalized: violent tendencies, swearing, verbal slang, and appetites for fast-food, among others.

If viewers were to only view race according to the polemics of *White Man's Burden*, American racial tensions would seem to be a conspicuously masculine issue. Louis and his boss represent the extremities of racial experience, while their wives offer more tempered attitudes. For example, while Louis speaks in an urbanized accent (what essentialists might deem "black" speech), his wife does not. As Thad suggests that white children are undisciplined because none of them have legitimate fathers at home, his wife admonishes him for his apparent insensitivity. For the most part, the fantasy world of *White Man's Burden* transforms racial tension into a *masculine* anxiety, in which breadwinners engage in a cultural contest for the family's private benefit. What unites Louis and his boss is their mutual concern for their children. Thad first shows signs of sympathy with his kidnapper after Louis claims that he has always supported and loved his son, no matter the social and economic hardships involved. "Let me tell you something," he informs Thad, "when it comes to my family, if you upset them or embarrass me in front of them, I don't put up with nothing." Thad's response is to inform Louis that he simply wants "to give you the money and go home to my family too." In addition, he expresses sorrow over hardly ever seeing the children from his first marriage.

Yet the characters' sense of family values contains a distinctly patriarchal worldview. At one point, Louis expresses his disappointment over his wife getting a job to help support the family. An earlier scene compounds this sense of failure, as his mother-in-law angrily declares what a disgrace it is when a man "can't take care of his own shit," as she refuses to let him move in with her along with his wife and children. The true tragedy of racism, the film argues, is its
capacity to handcuff minority males with regard to the active pursuit of their family's betterment.

Regardless of the film's politics, its intended audience is clearly the (presumably) white real-world audience represented by Thad's insular lifestyle. The project of White Man's Burden, then, seems to be the mass awakening of privileged white moviegoers, beckoning them to recognize their heteronormative, patriarchal similarities with minorities, and to then organize a harmonious multicultural society accordingly. Based on the film's final scene, the true victims of racism are minority male children who are affected by the indifference of the dominant group and the desperation of their emasculated fathers. After Louis is shot by police, Thad visits his home to offer money to Louis' wife. "How much do you think would be enough?" she asks bitterly. The last shot of the film is Louis' young son, watching Thad drive back to his gated mansion.

White Man's Burden was released in 1995, the year preceding Bill Clinton's second presidential campaign. Here was a film that not only professed the ability for white men to oversee America's multiculturalist project, but also went further by actively prescribing this role to its privileged viewers. In the White House sat a man whose ability to blur traditional boundaries between whiteness and blackness apparently satisfied the neoliberal clamor for nationalism alongside acknowledged diversity. Just as Jack Stanton eventually earned Henry's admiration and endorsement in Primary Colors, Bill Clinton could be envisioned as the nation's rightful empathetic voice for the disenfranchised, even if his identity varied little from any other president in terms of race, gender, or socioeconomic status.

For John Travolta, the shifting narratives of hard-body nationhood helped initiate a revival of his Hollywood image—an accumulation of multiple contrasting identities which had been defined almost twenty years earlier. Few actors seemed to simultaneously embody the
outward sensitivity and the needed physical wherewithal of the gentler American patriarchs of the 90s. He was also asked to evoke working-class hardiness on the one hand, while displaying signs of middle-class sophistication on the other. Moreover, the multiplicity of racial meanings Travolta possessed in the 70s was revived in order to prove the capacity of the white male body to understand, appreciate, and lead the ethnically diverse American cultural landscape. That these conflicting identities are portrayed by a celebrity with an easily identifiable public image encourages viewers to interpret Travolta's masculinities as having a real-world applicability that transcends the relative impermanence of non-celebrity performance (Quinn 157).

But what specifically did John Travolta lend to these roles that made him such a desirable male icon in the 90s? While these characters themselves represent masculine crises and anxieties in post-Reagan, family-conscious America, Travolta's performance style offered specific commentary on the divergent masculinities which somehow captured the national imagination as neoconservatism continued to evolve. The following chapter will examine the crises of 90s masculinity as performance, both by John Travolta in Hollywood films and by Bill Clinton as the dominant political figure of the decade. What these performances reveal about the shifting nature of American masculinities will help identify the ways in which public and mediated images reflect the construction of national values and identities.
CHAPTER II. THESE CHARMING MEN
Performing Masculinity in Clinton's America

As argued in the previous chapter, John Travolta's career in post-Reagan Hollywood can be used to examine the ways in which white middle-class masculinity assimilated to the increasing cultural precedence placed upon family values while retaining the hard edges promoted by neoconservatives throughout the 1980s, thereby recuperating hegemony for the traditionally empowered dominant group. The actor whose problematized gender, racial, and class identity offered little to hard-body representations during Reagan's presidency now ably embodied the conflicting expectations of men and the shifts in America's hard-body imaginary in a new patriarchal national order. As Hope, Arkansas native Bill Clinton stepped into the White House—his mediated image as the nation's first "black" and "female" president in toe—John Travolta offered American moviegoers a similar representative of white male potentiality within a culture that now believed that the child possesses as much cultural significance as the father.

Still, the specific gendered, racial, and class meanings that Travolta brought (and continues to bring) to American film from the Clinton era and beyond remain unexamined. How, exactly, does Travolta "perform" the role of the new sensitive, yet commanding patriarchs of the 90s? How do middle-class values continue to reemerge, even when Travolta "plays" the prototypical put-upon working man? How does Travolta's "performed" blackness help re-imagine 90s white masculinity as the dominant identity in America's ongoing trials with multiculturalism? Moreover, in what ways can John Travolta's performed masculinities be compared to Bill Clinton's "performance" as America's white, upper-middle-class patriarch, and what might these comparisons reveal about national constructions of gender in the 1990s?

For the purposes of this chapter, I will first analyze the Clinton presidency in terms of
performance; in short, if Clinton's presidency signals an unprecedented conspicuousness in the constructed nature of presidential images, as argued by Trevor and Shawn J. Perry-Giles (2), I am interested in the ways in which this mediated construction has been "performed" by Bill Clinton's physicality, actions, policymaking, etc. In addition, I argue that the performance of masculinity was transformed into much more of a public spectacle in the 1990s than in previous decades—a change caused by the increased emphasis on public opinion in a culture in which even the leader of the free world could identify himself as a consumer of mediated images.

Next, I will analyze Travolta's performance style and how it has evolved from the actor's breakthrough performance in 1977's *Saturday Night Fever* to his established "career" in the present day. In order to better characterize the ways in which his particular acting method has been used to comment on popular conceptions of masculinity over time, I will focus on how multiple films incorporate Travolta's dancing into their respective narratives and mise-en-scènes. Finally, I would like to delineate the common tropes with regard to the characters played by John Travolta in his 1990s filmography. Travolta's film work in the 1990s presents viewers with a variety of images which show multiple masculine identities and how they measure up to idealized notions of patriarchal behavior. In one category, Travolta's roles prescribe paternal roles to American families. While these characters (from films such as *Look Who's Talking*, *White Man's Burden*, *Phenomenon*, and *Mad City*) might be conspicuously flawed in some way, they eventually emerge as the narratives' sufficiently decent, loving, and stalwart role models for children. On the opposite end of the spectrum are the roles in which Travolta plays the role that represents the challenge for the protagonist (as in *Broken Arrow*, *Face/Off*, and *Battlefield Earth*), but also offsets the values and standards promoted by the protagonist's actions and beliefs. Finally, there are Travolta's charming crooks (as seen in *Pulp Fiction* and *Get Shorty*)
who emerge as protagonists with humor and charisma, despite the violence and indecency in which they might be involved. For each character type, Travolta adopts similar gestures, expressions, and line readings which all contribute to further prescriptions of normative white middle-class masculine behavior. The latter two categories represent character types that emerged in Travolta's oeuvre relatively recently (in the 90s), and the actor's theatricality and slickness in these roles only further contribute to his films' prescribed normativity.

Dueling Dualities: The Problematic Clinton Identity

In their book Constructing Clinton, Trevor and Shawn J. Parry-Giles discuss the continuing subjugation of the American president's identity to the meanings constructed for political leaders in the media. "We cannot ignore the profound changes under way in U.S. politics as a consequence of postmodernity," they warn. "As American presidents become increasingly hyperreal products of mass media images, the means of understanding and assessing presidential politics must likewise adjust." The popular conception of the president, then, is subject to whatever mediated images are repeated and then ingrained in public memory. "Bill Clinton," as the American public knows him, is little more than the sum of actions, speeches, and images that the actual man provides for an attentive media audience. In the 90s, "for the vast majority of U.S. voters and citizens, there was no 'real' Bill Clinton, only a postmodern 'Bill Clinton.' While there was a physical human being who had materiality as Bill Clinton, that person was only meaningful for the larger culture because of the images that defined him and that he and his surrogates manipulated" (Parry-Giles 5).

Yet even with this warning in mind, the meanings of "Bill Clinton," as determined by his constituents, are forever complicated by the images of the president with which Americans found themselves confronted. The president himself (Bill Clinton, in the flesh) is as much a consumer
of this hyperreality as any other citizen; in fact, Clinton's mediated image posits the president in just these terms. As Stella Bruzzi argues, Bill Clinton's tenure effectively demythologized the presidency to an unprecedented extent. "We have entered into a knowing and highly cynical relationship with the images of political leaders," she observes, "colluding in their falsity and acknowledging that the severance between individual and ideal is complete" (Bruzzi 19). In other words, an increasingly media-savvy populace can recognize Clinton's participation in postmodern culture as a symbol of unprecedented presidential accessibility. Accordingly, the film *Primary Colors* features multiple scenes in which the Clintonesque Jack Stanton clearly manipulates the media in order to improve his public image (including a shot of his wife hurriedly releasing her hand from her husband's after a television broadcast ends).

Yet what appears in *Primary Colors* is, in itself, the result of the postmodern mediation of Bill Clinton's identity. In short, if John Travolta-as-Jack Stanton spends his evenings munching on donuts at a local Krispy Kreme, this duplicates the popular conception of Bill Clinton as a man who stops by McDonald's during his morning jog. Even if Travolta's performance in *Primary Colors* can be considered mere imitation, his gestures, voice, and expressions—combined with Jack Stanton's acknowledged need to manipulate the media—reveal the performed nature of Bill Clinton's identity. Commonly perceived to be a more sensitive masculine figure than most of predecessors, Clinton's persona comes with a host of behaviors which reinforce his "I feel your pain" image: one of these gestures is the loosely-clenched fist, with thumb upturned and resting against the forefinger, pumped to punctuate every softly spoken word. Not only does Travolta replicate this gesture in *Primary Colors*, it is also a common feature during comedian Darrell Hammond's impressions of Clinton on *Saturday Night Live*. Thus, the "Clinton fist" becomes part of the presidential performance; once the media fixates on
this gesture, anyone who attempts to "perform Bill Clinton" must adopt it in order to convey the president's particular brand of masculine performance.

In *Constructing Clinton*, Trevor and Shawn J. Parry-Giles discuss five primary dualities in Bill Clinton's image, and how these tensions are performed within the mediated images of the president. First, the Clinton presidential campaign in 1992 posited the Arkansas governor as a man whose virtues and personality simultaneously evoked an idealized past and a progressive future. While placing precedence on his personal history in the campaign video *The Man from Hope*, Clinton's campaign team also promoted their candidate as the antidote to present social and economic hardships by using Fleetwood Mac's "Don't Stop Thinking About Tomorrow" (a then-fifteen-year-old song which itself bridges the past and future, with its ability to capitalize on baby-boomer nostalgia and its own future-oriented title) as their anthem (Parry-Giles 6).

Moreover, Clinton's predecessors were also incorporated into this process of image-making: as footage from *The Man from Hope* featured a youthful Clinton shaking hands with John F. Kennedy, the 1992 campaign team clearly sought to equate their candidate with the handsome, heroic idol, in stark contrast to those leaders who came after Kennedy (primarily Richard Nixon) to corrupt the mythologized office of the American presidency (Bruzzi18).

Next, Trevor and Shawn J. Parry-Giles find dualities in Bill Clinton's gender representation, arguing that his rhetoric style "displayed characteristics of a 'feminine style'; it was generally infused with personal examples and was inductive in its reasoning structure, was stylized, and worked to promote a sense of identification with the audience. Simultaneously, though, Clinton's rhetoric was also specific in its masculinity, usually relying on topics and commonplaces of masculine derivation" (6-7). The *Christian Science Monitor* also commented on Clinton's "Feminine Mystique," arguing that "it's not just because Bill Clinton stands for
'women's issues'…that he's being credited with feminizing the presidency. It's also a matter of style—a listening, empathetic, some would say 'touchy-feely' approach that appeals to many women voters" (Kiefer, qtd. in Castonguay 278). Here was a new masculine image for the 90s: a man whose "conservative consensus politics" (Bruzzi 18) came couched in soft tones, whimsical grins, and loose body comportment.

Further complicating the meanings of Clinton's masculine identity was the third duality of warrior and peacemaker. On the one hand, he voiced his support for peace initiatives in the Middle East and Northern Ireland, while becoming the object of Republican criticism with regard to his allegedly inadequate credentials for the role of Commander-in-Chief. His public image as a man who retreated to England during Vietnam and whose foreign policies were often muddled and confused added to the belief that he was not qualified to oversee American military engagement. At the same time, he often utilized war terminology and analogies to justify his decisions, and rarely hesitated to use American forces to impose policies or pressure other nations to make changes desirable to American initiatives. Furthermore, the 1992 film that documented the Clinton campaign was titled The War Room, thereby defining Clinton's bid for the White House in military terms (Parry-Giles 7-8).

Next, dualities involving race continually surfaced throughout Clinton's presidency. The world came to associate him with international civil rights efforts, and his own speechwriters knew that racial issues were often his strongest talking points with voters. Moreover, his reelection in 1996 led to a Race Initiative, as outlined in his second inaugural address: "The divide of race has been America's constant curse…We cannot, we will not, succumb to the dark impulses that lurk in the far regions of the soul everywhere. We shall overcome them" ("Inaugural Address," qtd. in Parry-Giles 8). Yet his stance on issues such as Affirmative Action
proved to be divisive amongst his minority supporters, and he eventually distanced himself from 
the progressive racial politics of Jesse Jackson and Lani Guinier (Parry-Giles 9). Even his much-
publicized appearance on The Arsenio Hall Show came rife with tensions in racial meaning. 
While attempting to embody "coolness" and "slickness" with a jazzy saxophone performance in 
order to court younger, marginalized voters, he chose to play "Heartbreak Hotel," a song 
commonly associated with Elvis Presley, a white man whose career was based on his ability to 
co-opt black sounds and styles. Such a song selection further underscores Clinton's ability to 
appeal to multiple voting demographics; while capturing the attention of urban youths on a late-
night show hosted by an African-American comedian, he also capitalizes on his white 
contemporaries' nostalgic fondness for 50s rock and roll culture. In this case, multiple dualities 
(whiteness/blackness, past/future) are performed in a single televised image, conveying the 
transcendent potentialities of Clinton's mediated identity.

Finally, Bill Clinton possessed multiple identities which simultaneously suggest both a 
public and private character. While his family life, campaign strategizing, and personal history 
were on full display in the documentaries The Man from Hope and The War Room, he also 
participated (along with those closest to him) in "the politics of personal destruction," a 
philosophy which asserted that certain personal and scandalous affairs should be kept private and 
had no bearing on the president's worth as a politician and leader. As Trevor and Shawn J. 
Parry-Giles argue,

Clinton revealed himself to the larger public, crafting an image that was highly palatable 
and electable. Because [these intimate revelations] were so scripted, however, their 
verisimilitude was suspect, perpetuating an impression of Clinton as overly 'political' and 
planned. The need to offer a 'real' portrait of the intimate Bill Clinton gave rise to
Primary Colors, manifesting an 'authentic' rhetoric of image and insight. (10)

In other words, the clearly scripted public Clinton persona—complete with feminine "touchy-feely-ness," empathy with racial and ethnic minorities, concern for war-torn and terrorized regions of the world, and reverence for (and desire to replicate) the politically nostalgic past—was performed through speeches, actions, decisions, interviews, and documentaries for American voters who required a new masculine icon suitable to the cultural "softening" of the Reagan hard-body which the nation was then undergoing.

Yet the 90s required more complicated masculine images than the "softer" side of the publicly performed "Bill Clinton" that won the 1992 presidential election. While challenges to traditional masculinity coalesced during the social movements of the 1960s, the 90s introduced several conflicting perspectives which helped establish a gender "crisis" with respect to cultural expectations placed upon American males. As Robert Bly's Iron John captured the imagination of its male readership with its call to make contact with the "large, primitive being covered with hair down to his feet" who resides in "every modern male" (6), American newspapers and magazines printed essays discussing "The Prejudice Against Men" and "The Trouble with Male Bashing." On the other hand, voices from academia began championing alternative methodologies in conceiving gender. From R.W. Connell and Lynne Segal celebrating men who embrace the advantages of tackling traditionally feminine cultural practices, to Judith Butler and Richard Dyer underscoring the quality of naturalized, "unmarked" citizenship and humanity that has been historically reserved for masculinity, scholars made the discussion and valorization of possible threats to masculine authority a crucial academic project (Malin 8-9). In short, masculinity was undergoing a "crisis," during which the traditionally dominant group experienced both subversion at the intellectual level from feminist and queer theorists, and
reinforcement from writers who envisioned such challenges as part of a mass cultural victimization of white middle-class males.

Any male figure who was truly iconic of conceptions of gender in the 90s, then, had to contain inherently conflicting masculinities. I contend that the dualities outlined above, while problematic upon close examination, actually contributed to the popularity of Bill Clinton in post-Reagan America. While his publicly performed identity appealed to those who held vested interests in openness toward women and minorities, America's capacity for peacemaking, and a forward-thinking progressivism, Clinton could also appease other voting demographics with masculine war rhetoric, indifference toward race initiatives, and nostalgia for the "simpler" life of JFK's America. While Henry recognizes Jack Stanton's public image as little more than a savvy media construction in Primary Colors, he concludes that his candidate represents his own interests, despite the clear distortions and contradictions that comprise Stanton's private and public images. Similarly, Americans on any side of the gender conflicts of the 1990s could find in Bill Clinton the embodiment of desirable masculine virtue. By engaging in the hyperreal performance of contradicting masculine crises, Clinton's image could potentially satisfy everyone on the ideological spectrum, from Gloria Steinem to Iron John himself.

The Reluctant Championship Twister: Tony Manero Dances into a New Decade

In Pulp Fiction (1994), hit man Vincent Vega (Travolta) is asked to give a fun-filled evening to his boss's wife, Mia (Uma Thurman). During their dinner at a 50s-themed restaurant, the master of ceremonies announces the "world famous Jack Rabbit Slims' Twist Contest," which captures Mia's curiosity. A nervous Vincent at first refuses her request to dance, but after Mia reminds him of his promise to his boss, Vincent relents. What follows is a sequence that acts as a primer for vintage rock and roll dance moves, as Mia and Vincent twist their way to the
championship trophy.

More than just signifying Vincent's increased interest in his boss's wife, this scene also represents a series of shifting cultural meanings for John Travolta's performance style. Here was the Tony Manero of *Saturday Night Fever*—only older, wider, and shaggier—thrown into a new social and historical context in which dance (and indeed, the entire star persona of John Travolta) remained a reflection of moviegoers' identities and anxieties. As I argue, what makes John Travolta such an intriguing case study for shifting masculinities in post-Reagan America can be summarized in three points: first, the longevity of his career allows us to observe the relationship between his performance style and his cultural significance over a long period of time; second, his roller-coaster career encourages us to identify the various reasons for his popularity (or lack thereof) in certain time periods; and third, his performance style—largely unchanged from the 70s through the 90s—allows for less speculative commentary on the utilitarian nature of his screen presence—in short, it is logical to assume that directors decide to incorporate a clearly defined "Travolta" acting style into their films for specific reasons, and thusly, we can more accurately describe what Travolta means for popular culture in general and Hollywood in particular during specific cultural moments.

In his book *Stars*, Richard Dyer finds that the popularity of certain film actors can be at least partially explained by the commentary these stars bring to national conceptions of identity. Expanding on earlier analyses of Will Rogers and Shirley Temple, Dyer concludes that "stars embody social values that are to some degree in crisis" (25), thus confirming the notion of the star's image being related to contradictions in ideology—whether within the dominant ideology, or between it and other subordinated/revolutionary ideologies. The relation may be one of displacement…, or of the suppression of one half of the
contradiction and the foregrounding of the other..., or else it may be that the star effects a 'magic' reconciliation of the apparently incompatible terms. (26)

Thus, popular figures such as Travolta can potentially become sites onto which ideological tensions are concealed or resolved. Just as the performance of "Bill Clinton" on the public stage reveals and subsequently quells the anxieties of racial, gender, and class dualities, the casting of John Travolta in specific roles allows the actor to offer his own performance style in the service of similar projects of "magical" ideological reconciliation.

Yet it is not my intent to define what Travolta's star persona means for American culture as a whole; while his acting methods have remained relatively unchanged from the period when Tony Manero strutted onto the dance floor, Travolta's performance style has been used differently during different periods of various ideological conflicts. In order to better grasp how the meanings of Travolta's masculinities have changed over time, I turn to Dennis Bingham's diachronic analysis of the film career of Jack Nicholson. While Bingham suggests that Nicholson's early work in Hollywood offered male viewers "an oddly parodic and ironic experience of self in a time period—the 1970s—marked by trouble for masculinism" (107), he concludes that the actor's performance style had been "so thoroughly...Cuisinarted by Hollywood's concern not to disturb the status quo that the mild radicalism that produced Nicholson's stardom now appears monstrous" (159). Upon mapping Travolta's career—from the late-70s discos of Saturday Night Fever to the charismatic hit men, cartoonish villains, and pathetic simpletons of the 90s—spectators can find a similar co-optation of an actor's image in service of continued, uncontested hegemony.

As Susan Jeffords argues in Hard Bodies, the late 1970s were characterized politically by a president who seemed "to have turned 'feminine' in midstream"; by showing indecisiveness
over foreign policy with regard to military defense against the Soviet Union and resolution of the Iran hostage crisis, Jimmy Carter came to represent a problematic "softening" of the American male. As Robert Bly observes in Iron John, the 1970s introduced America to "a phenomenon that we might call the 'soft male" (2). This new model of masculinity was blamed on women politically strengthened by Second-Wave Feminism from the prior decade.

The strong or life-giving women who graduated from the sixties, so to speak, or who have inherited an older spirit, played an important part in producing this life-preserving, but not life-giving, man…Young men for various reasons wanted their harder women, and women began to desire softer men. It seemed like a nice arrangement for a while, but we've lived with it long enough now to see that it isn't working out. (3)

Under this paradigm, young American men were left helpless and rudderless by a culture that valued "life-preserving" males as opposed to strong-willed, hard-edged father figures. It would not be difficult to imagine Bly believing Travolta's acting style to be emblematic of this mass cultural softening of masculinity. Here was the actor who conveyed Tony Manero's quiet rapture as he preened in front of a mirror and posed on a dance floor, and who expresses his vulnerability with respect to a domineering mother by subtly turning his head away from his parents at the dinner table after they accuse him of not revealing the whereabouts of his brother. This is the same performer who imbues Grease's car-obsessed thug Danny Zucko with puppy-eyed longing for the pristine Sandra Dee. Even in Grease's most overt displays of hyper-masculine comradeship (such as Danny and Kenickie's brief embrace that is compensated by an abrupt separation and hurried hair-combing sessions), Travolta's whimsical grins and throw-away chuckles are enough to prove Danny's susceptibility to Sandra's graceful charms.

Even as the typical Travolta characters gained tougher exteriors in the 1980s, Travolta's
screen presence continued to complicate meanings of masculinity. In *Urban Cowboy* (James Bridges, 1980), Travolta's character (Bud) tries to emulate "real" cowboys by participating in mechanical bull competitions at a local bar. While he pays careful attention to his Western attire and shaves his beard once he arrives in the city, he still adopts traditional views with regard to male-female relationships. His wife Sissy, for example, agrees to marry Bud even after he has slapped her in the face and wrestled with her in mud. Moreover, Bud repeatedly argues that women should perform domestic labors, rather than compete in bull riding by extolling his love for "a woman's touch around the house."

In terms of the gendered polemics of *Urban Cowboy*, the film's most important relationship is that between Bud and his chief rival in both bull riding and contending for Sissy's love. Wes, Sissy argues, is a "real cowboy," a taciturn loner recently released from prison. As played by Scott Glenn, he is the angular, narrow-faced, quietly assured antithesis to John Travolta's wide-eyed, rounded, frustrated Bud. Nowhere is the difference more apparent than during the climactic sequence, in which Wes and Bud engage in an intense stare-off before the bull riding competition. While Glenn stoically stiffens his lip in a glare that accentuates the folds in his long, rough-skinned face, Travolta's fleshed-out features seem feminine by comparison, especially when punctuated by his bright blue eyes. Even if Bud is equally as capable of violent and misogynist acts as Wes, he at least demonstrates the capacity for contrition, a quality underscored by Travolta's persona and physicality of compromised masculinity. When Bud offers his ultimate testament of love to Sissy late in the film, the character's assured words combine with Travolta's unsteady demeanor to effectively emphasize the character's "feminized" difference from the unrepentant Wes. "I'm hardheaded and I'm prideful," he declares, moving his head embarrassedly, "and I want to apologize clear back to when I hit you the first time. I
love you, Sissy." In only a small number of line readings, Travolta captures the awkwardness with which the hard-body re-masculinization of the 80s confronted the sons of "soft" fathers from the previous decade.

In order to better characterize the ways in which Hollywood has employed Travolta's star image over the past three decades, one famous aspect of the actor's repertoire might offer an intriguing starting point for analysis. From *Saturday Night Fever* on, Travolta's dancing has been as distinguishing a characteristic as his dimpled chin or offhanded grin. Yet over time, the actor's dance performance has taken on new meanings as his physique and Hollywood's masculine representations have transformed. In *Saturday Night Fever*, Travolta brings a level of confidence and grace to the role of Tony Manero that offers the character an air of privileged cultural capital: even if Manero is young, directionless, and working-class, Travolta's performed slickness makes the character an aesthetic and charismatic spectacle. The famous opening sequence introduces audiences to the Travolta strut—an assured, rhythmic gait that separates the actor from all the other pedestrians, even as he is holding a decidedly unglamorous paint can. Even the act of preparing for an evening on the dance floor becomes ritualistic, as Travolta employs purse-lipped seriousness and an erect head position as he puts on a necklace and combs his hair. As the film contrasts the extravagant dance club with dreary New Jersey working-class life, Travolta represents the rare individual whose dress, demeanor, and self-comportment combine to transcend the mundane reality around him.

The character, as written, is not far removed from the supporting characters in terms of language and intelligence. Yet the white members of the community believe Tony represents their most convincing claim on "cool"; as African-Americans are considered the epitome of style, Tony acts as a mediator of black style and white physicality. Travolta's dancing style is
clearly different from other white dancers in the film: arriving at a rehearsal studio, Tony spies
the manager performing erratic disco movements to "Disco Duck," while Travolta exhibits
polished precision as he practices with his dance partner Stephanie. This same mastery is on
display at the disco, where a dancing Travolta—posture straight, back squared, shoulders erect,
pivoting laterally at the waist—is repeatedly surrounded by dozens of clapping, delighted (white)
dancers who would not dare to attempt to replicate such graceful moves.

The only other amateur dancers who can compare to Tony and his partner are a black
couple and Hispanic couple who compete during the climactic competition. Even as these
couples prove themselves to be equally deserving of the title, the hometown crowd cheers for
Tony and his white partner. Adopting a thick New Jersey accent, Travolta places Tony Manero
firmly within the ranks of the white working-class, even if his dancing and clothing borrow from
the trendier minority styles. Even as he performs blackness and the desire for upward social
mobility, Travolta's vocal performance always reminds the characters in the film (and Saturday
Night Fever's audience) that Tony Manero is still a white male at his core. Yet Travolta's precise
dance moves, calculated strut, and reverent rituals in front of his bedroom mirror bring the
character a "feminine" attention to detail and appearance.

In Grease (Randal Klesier, 1978), Travolta again has to convince audiences that his
character's dancing sets him apart from the other white youths featured in the film. During the
lengthy dance contest sequence, Danny clearly outperforms the other members of the T-Bird
gang, and Travolta's jubilant concentration suggests that his willingness to dance with Cha Cha
(rather than Sandy) is more of an expedient choice rather than a snub of the latter. Despite the
film's attempt to portray Danny as a testosterone-fueled Neanderthal for much of its running
time, Travolta's presence always suggests Danny's feminized otherness throughout Grease. The
drag race sequence features several cuts between Travolta and the arch-nemesis of Danny's gang—a pockmarked man in sunglasses. Travolta's appearance is whiter and softer by comparison; thus, even when Danny removes his letterman sweater to join the leather-clad Sandra in the climactic "We Come Together" number, he remains feminized by his more agreeable countenance and his assured dance moves.

As Travolta's career moved into the 1980s, the dance floor still emerged as a site on which masculine anxieties could be made apparent by the actor's particular performance style. Throughout the decade, Travolta's performances demonstrated obvious inadequacies in response to harder masculine representations. Most noticeably, Staying Alive proved the actor's inability to embody the hard-body worldview so evident in the film work of contemporaries Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Bruce Willis, among others. While director Sylvester Stallone clearly desires to re-imagine Tony Manero as a conspicuously muscular and athletic masculine figure in the world of dance (right down to the Rambo-style black headband Tony frequently wears in the film), Travolta's screen presence repeatedly creates tension with such hard-bodied aspirations. Even as the director of the stage show in which Tony is cast promotes him to the leading role, arguing that "what you have is anger and a certain kind of intensity" that will make the show work, Travolta himself undermines such an image with his performance, as Tony is just as likely to be seen grinning and flirting as he is grimacing and glaring. During the climactic performance of "Satan's Alley," Tony is scratched by the show's haughty female lead, leading to a shot of Travolta looking in the mirror and smiling at the blood running down his cheek. Yet this scene echoes the images from Saturday Night Fever in which Tony's fascination with mirrors contains a feminized narcissism, and indeed, Travolta's grin suggests that Tony's appreciation of his scar might be as much a result of aesthetic value to the show as much as his
status as a dancing Casanova, worthy of the leading lady's jealousy. Moreover, the final sequence features Travolta confidently strolling down Broadway after he informs his love interest that all he wants to do is "strut" after his triumphant starring debut. While Stallone's camerawork emphasizes the manliness of Travolta's broad shoulders, posterior, and crotch, Travolta's self-conscious "strut" and his impish grin recall the earlier film's more complex version of masculinity.

As Travolta's filmed dancing career underwent a revival in the *Look Who's Talking* franchise, the movements offered new meanings for American masculinity. Rather than providing alternative masculinities to traditional conceptions of gender and race (as in *Saturday Night Fever*), Travolta's musicality served a prescriptive purpose in the genre of family comedy. Even the *Saturday Night Fever* anthem ("Staying Alive") is revived for comedic effect. As the camera follows Mikey being strolled down the sidewalk while flirting with passing infant girls, the Bee Gees song plays on the soundtrack, tempering the sexuality of Tony Manero by having a baby enact the film's version of male seduction. In the first sequel, Travolta engages in further musical co-optation by joyously singing and dancing to the lyrics "my girl likes to potty all the time" (replacing "party" with "potty," from the Eddie Murphy recording) and "you've gotta fight for your right to potty," thereby bringing 80s youth culture into the fold of the family-friendly 90s. Yet Travolta's big dancing scene comes later in the film at "baby gym," in which he twists and high-fives with the children to Elvis Presley's "All Shook Up." Travolta leads the children in a dancing line over a toy bridge, then onto a trampoline, then toward a toy hammer that Mikey uses to pound him in the head. After Travolta recovers from his pretend concussion, a dolly shot follows the actor dancing up a slide, rhythmically ascending a staircase, sliding down a pole, then embracing Mikey. In short, Travolta's performed "coolness" is effectively commissioned to
portray the family-friendly "big kid" suitable for patriarchal duties.

By the time Vincent Vega reaches the dance floor, *Pulp Fiction* has already established for the viewer a crime underworld in which hit men exude the style and charisma usually reserved for those outside the dominant group. Just as Tony Manero would have to be a "nigger or spic" to be any cooler in *Saturday Night Fever*, Vincent has already immersed himself in a multiracial culture of universal slickness. He dresses exactly like his black partner, Julius, and his black boss refers to him as "my nigga." After agreeing to "take care of" his boss's white wife, Mia, with a night on the town, the couple arrive at Jack Rabbit Slims, a 50s diner which relives white "cool" culture from that decade. All the waiters are dressed as white iconic figures (Buddy Holly, Marilyn Monroe, Jane Mansfield, etc.), and the meals are named after white entertainers (Douglas Sirk steak, Martin and Lewis milkshake, etc.). Mia even addresses Vincent's fondness for the great bastion of white rock and roll to convince him that the diner is worth his time: "an Elvis man should love it." By the time Mia and Vincent rise from their vintage-car-booth to win the restaurant's twist contest to Chuck Berry's "You Never Can Tell," they have helped recuperate the 50s as the zenith of white coolness, with the black culture on which it was based rendered invisible. The camera pans back and forth between the two actors, both with lips pursed in intensity, Thurman glaring intently on Travolta, Travolta occasionally glancing seductively at Thurman. Travolta's dances in this sequence reflect a baby-boomer nostalgia for the decade: from the twist to the Batman (extending the forefinger and middle finger in the "number two" formation while moving the hand across the face), Travolta embodies the decades-old white co-optation of black styles and music revived within the walls of the Jack Rabbit Slims diner.

This sequence offers Travolta's mediated image the same multiple meanings that *The
Arsenio Hall Show contributed to that of Bill Clinton. As Clinton showed himself to be capable of performing blackness and whiteness simultaneously through his version of "Heartbreak Hotel," he also demonstrated his "coolness" to both young fans of Arsenio Hall's variety show and those old enough to remember the time period when the song he performed was a hit on the radio. Travolta's dance to "You Never Can Tell" contains similarly layered cultural meanings: while performed by a white body in a restaurant primarily inhabited by whites, his dancing recalls a decade when white "coolness" was defined by co-optations of black social practices; at the same time, this scene engenders nostalgia for two time periods—the 50s, which serve as the theme for both the restaurant and the dance, and the 70s, which forever linked John Travolta with cinematic dancing as a result of the popularity of Saturday Night Fever and Grease (Carlson 111)—while making 50s nostalgia "cool" in itself for the film's audience. In short, Pulp Fiction's Travolta-twist effectively incorporates idealizations of the past into the film's redefinition of postmodern "cool" or "slickness," allowing viewers young and old, black and white, to find their individual satisfactions in Travolta's performance.

In Michael (Nora Ephron, 1996), Travolta plays the eponymous archangel who engages in one final heavenly task on earth before having to hang up his wings for good. During his travels with tabloid reporter Frank and "angel expert" Dorothy, Michael proves himself irresistible to women—ironic, since his flabby physique and uncouth behavior fail to reflect typical notions of male attractiveness. Yet he is able to use his heavenly powers to replicate any woman's deepest pleasures (for example, he smells like caramel to some women, cotton candy to others), and thus becomes an unlikely object of feminine desire. In a bar, he wanders away from his company and begins dancing to Aretha Franklin's "Chain of Fools," as women begin to surround him and join him in a choreographed routine. Travolta raises his arms, as though
dancing in praise, flailing his body across the dance floor, seemingly unencumbered by his
trench coat and angel wings. "Follow me, ladies, follow me," he commands, leading all of the
bar's (thin and attractive) female denizens in a sexualized line dance. Travolta plays the dance
sequence with both joyousness and solemnity, as though his charismatic seduction was a product
of business-like preparation. This display of white male confidence and soulfulness recuperates
sexual attractiveness for the most mundane looking white men.

Jack Stanton's campaign shimmy in Primary Colors conveys the irony behind these
recuperations of white male cultural capital. Attending a Thanksgiving celebration, Stanton and
his wife deliver and offbeat, hand-clapping shuffle, underscoring the cultural distance between
Stanton and the constituents to whom he hopes to appeal. Despite his closeness to the African-
Americans helping his campaign effort, Travolta's dancing gives the lie to the politician's
performed identification with racial minorities. Yet the film's outcome suggests that Stanton is a
compromise worth making, as he represents the only electable voice for the traditionally
disadvantaged and disenfranchised. Just as Bill Clinton could claim the role of new American
patriarch by embodying conflicting identities with regard to class, gender, sexuality, militarism,
and race, John Travolta's evolution from youthful, "slick" disco dancer to overweight,
uncoordinated, white middle-aged male reveals the ways in which the American hard-body
imaginary has shifted in order to maintain the superior cultural capital of the traditionally
dominant group.

From the 70s white male mastery of "cool," to the compromised hard edges of 80s
masculinity, onward to 90s recuperations of white male hegemony, Travolta's status as
Hollywood's cinematic dancer demonstrates the relationship between national conceptions of
gender and the ways in which celebrity personae are utilized to comment on and satisfy audience
expectations. As white men were presumed to be the justifiable national patriarchs in post-Reagan America, Travolta danced his way back into the country's collective imagination, "performing"—with a differently shaped body, but also with all the familiar Travolta showmanship—the ability of white males to appeal to the needs and desires of women and minorities, thereby validating their position atop the cultural hierarchy.

Getting by on Charm: Travolta and Hollywood Man-Making

As described above, Travolta's film work in the 90s can be divided into three primary character types, each of them containing recurring Travolta mannerisms which contribute to the narrative's implicit prescriptive attitudes with regard to white masculinity: the sympathetic protagonists with their earnest line readings, charming demeanors, and quiet tones; the colorful antagonists, with their theatrical gestures, exaggerated narcissism, and intense scowls; and the charismatic criminals who somehow emerge as their respective films' heroes by way of charismatic grins, subdued chuckles, and frequently remarkable comportment in times of crisis. This range of character types contrasts with earlier film work in which Travolta almost exclusively portrayed heroic or romantic leading men. These changes in the Travolta screen persona—rather than offering alternatives and challenges to the status quo—demonstrate how even a variety of masculine representations can, through the celebrity image of the actor embodying them, contribute to the same prescriptive normativity that acts to maintain the power of the dominant group.

Whereas Travolta provided an intriguing mixture of masculine posturing and unbridled vanity in *Saturday Night Fever*, this same combination of manliness and charisma has been called upon to reinstate what Dennis Bingham calls the "benign hierarchy" in which "women and minorities are given lip service but still remain in their assigned slots, and institutions retain a
facile morality—moral goodness is a given." Bingham observes that Jack Nicholson's career trajectory illustrates "the epitome of mainstream co-optation, a Hollywood conformity that sometimes makes even the studio era…pale in comparison" (158-59). While I would hesitate to characterize Travolta's late-70s film career as even mildly "radical" (as Bingham describes Nicholson in the same decade), it did provide a glimpse of "soft" masculinity which could be remolded in the 90s as the new model for sensitive, yet stalwart patriarchy.

Inscribed in Travolta's protagonists are values and aspirations which contribute to the image of the white male as the rightful patriarch in a multicultural consumerist society. For example, an early scene in Primary Colors features Travolta, sitting in a dignified posture, right hand at his belly, listening intently to a group of disadvantaged students telling their personal stories. Travolta's performance is sympathy personified: he wipes away tears, he touches the students on the shoulder, and he hugs them as a group. But while his own story about his uncle's illiteracy is later revealed to be false—suggesting that the visit with the students was little more than a crucial campaign photo opportunity—the film's ending suggests that Jack Stanton's interest in the racially marginalized is not disingenuous. If this conclusion seems even remotely believable to audiences, this is in no small part attributable to Travolta's performance. When highly emotional, Travolta's Stanton frequently shouts in an impassioned Southern squeal (for example, while admonishing Henry, he accuses his aid of making him look like an "amah-tah," rather than "amateur"). In a later scene, Stanton discusses his sense of solidarity with a Krispy Kreme Donuts worker. While reflecting on the employee behind the counter to Henry, Travolta squints with great concentration, rubbing his mouth with his left hand, as though the worker's plight has taken over all of his faculties. His pep talk to Henry after the revelation that he might have fathered an illegitimate child with a young black girl is punctuated by intense eye contact
and a well-timed lean-in toward the listener. In short, the film takes Stanton's genuine concern for the disenfranchised as a given (despite scenes which problematize such an assumption), and Travolta aids this project by performing solidarity with minorities and the working-class.

In *Face/Off* (John Woo, 1997), Travolta portrays Sean Archer, an FBI agent obsessed with apprehending the terrorist who killed his young son. After the terrorist, Castor Troy (Nicolas Cage), is injured and goes into a coma, Sean decides to exchange faces with him in order to persuade Castor's imprisoned brother to reveal the whereabouts of a bomb he placed somewhere in Los Angeles. Castor, however, awakes to find his face missing and forces the surgeon to give him Sean's face, eventually allowing him to reunite with his brother and plan Sean's demise, while living the unassuming life of an FBI agent and suburban husband. *Face/Off* provides Travolta with the rare opportunity to portray both the protagonist, with his prescriptive values and patriarchal model, and the villain, whose theatrically-performed insanity only exacerbates the normalcy of the hero. Travolta-as-Sean is assured, resolute, and resourceful in his attempt to remedy the injury to his nuclear family that occurred with his son's murder. Upset with his team's casual attitude in pursuing Castor at the beginning of the film, Travolta-as-Sean informs them, "We'll take a break when the case breaks," adding emphasis on the first "break" to underscore his disdain for their perceived laziness. After his most recent attempt to capture Castor ends in the latter's coma, his fellow agents applaud his entry into the central office the next day. In a tone which conveys anger over his coworkers' tactlessness and sadness over his deceased friends, Travolta takes the champagne bottle they offer him and begins listing all the officers who died while trying to apprehend Castor. Just as his own family was affected by Castor's actions, the loss of his FBI family causes similar emotional strife. Even as Sean's marriage is clearly damaged by the son's murder, Travolta-as-Sean becomes a new man by the
film's end. With his face replaced, he embraces his wife and daughter, and asks them to welcome Adam (Castor's orphaned son) to the family. As Sean's wife informs her daughter to "show Adam his new room," the nuclear family is restored, and Travolta allows a relieved smile to return to Sean's face.

Following Castor's face/off procedure, Travolta (now playing Castor) calls upon gestures and line readings that exacerbate the character's distance from accepted masculine behavior, particularly his distorted approach to family dynamics. Upon meeting Sean with his new face, he informs his rival that "I've got a government job to abuse and lonely wife to fuck"—the latter four words whispered by Travolta to emphasize the impact of marital infidelity. Upon arriving at his new home, Travolta-as-Castor observes his surroundings with the utmost resignation: "Look at this place—I'm in hell. I may never get a hard-on again." The sexual objectification of Sean's wife and daughter are played with a performed coolness: after his "wife" exits the room, he comments in a sly whisper, "Eve, I hate to see you go, but I love to watch you leave," gazing at her posterior, with his head tilted slyly. Speaking to his "daughter" while she stands in front of him in her underwear, Travolta leans in seductively, informing her that "you'll be seeing some changes around here." Even Castor's attempts at being a suitable suburban dad seem obscene—he is able to commit adultery with Sean's sexually-repressed wife by charming her like her real husband never could. He also physically assaults his "daughter"s attempted rapist, coolly informing her that she should use "protection" in the future, in the form of a knife stabbed into her date's thigh. After Castor's unconventional approach to family relationships has been underscored by his peculiarly close relationship to his brother, his final act with Sean's daughter is to lick her face in front of her real father. The slow and deliberate method Travolta uses when performing such actions makes Castor's depravity a spectacle from which the audience is
expected to turn away in horror.

The values that seem to be negated by John Travolta's antagonists are ironically reinforced by the audience's familiarity with past Travolta performances. In other words, the viewers' collective knowledge of previous Travolta protagonists will ultimately affect their readings of more recent villainous roles. In his analysis of career performances in the theater, Marvin Carlson remarks that even "in the case of actors who give particular attention to creating a very different character for every play in which they appear, the memory of their previous performances, especially if these are effective ones, will inevitably remain as a part of the theatrical institution" (111). Similarly, audiences familiar with John Travolta, the Charming Heartthrob, will find themselves susceptible to the effects of what Carlson calls "ghosting"—the inevitable presence of previous characters in a certain actor's oeuvre which might influence reception of more recent performances (113). Thusly, Travolta's new willingness to take villainous roles in the 90s did not eliminate the multiple identities the actor created for himself as his star persona was being shaped in the wake of Saturday Night Fever. In this sense, Travolta-as-Castor Troy becomes an obviously performed identity—audiences cannot completely re-imagine the actor as a psychotic terrorist when the memories of Danny Zucko, Tony Manero, and other relatively innocent Travolta creations still exist.

Travolta's appearances as cinematic villains, then, become all the more ironic, allowing the characters to transform into radical caricatures, rather than embodiments of any "real" alternatives to the normativity of the heroes. Broken Arrow (John Woo, 1996), for example, introduced moviegoers to this new Travolta character type to which none of them had previously been exposed. Travolta plays Vic "Deak" Deakins, a veteran pilot who has been passed over for promotion repeatedly, yet remains physically dominant over younger colleagues, as
demonstrated by the boxing match that plays during the opening credits. Travolta imbues Deak with the presence of the Almighty. He emerges in the desert, after sabotaging a test flight in order to steal a nuclear weapon, walking in slow motion, grimly peering through sunglasses and puffing on a cigarette. He delivers his lines with the utmost calm; his quiet readings contrast sharply with those of his accomplice Pritchett (Bob Gunton). As Deak explains his plan to Pritchett, Travolta uses his body as though he were playing a Shakespearian king: back arched, overly demonstrative with his arms and hands, peering around with his chin pointed up and outward. He ironically congratulates the film's hero ("Outstanding, Hale, that's the spirit!") in a faux haughty accent. Travolta's characterization literally reaches cartoonish proportions when he seems to impersonate Mr. Burns from the animated series The Simpsons by offering his cronies a villainous "Eh-xcellent."

In contrast, costar Christian Slater's more naturalistic acting style lends his character an overtone of prescriptive normativity. During the climactic fight sequence between Hale and Deak, Travolta stands behind the phallic-shaped nuclear bomb, his waist against the weapon's base. This scene underscores the distorted hypermasculinity of Travolta's character, whereas Hale reinforces heteronormativity through his romance with his sidekick, female park ranger Terry Carmichael. Even if Deak beats Hale in the boxing match featured in the first scene, Hale's masculinity is stabilized after he discovers $20 (the amount he lost in his bet with Deak after the boxing match) in the weeds following Deak's death in the train explosion. Whereas Travolta seems to be standing outside his character, commenting on the inhuman warping of male power and sexuality he represents, Slater's naturalistic style underscores the hero's exemplary ordinariness with regard to gender.

In the third category of common Travolta character types of the 90s are two performances
which rely on the patented Travolta slickness to offer charisma to typically unattractive roles. Chili Palmer—the loan shark in *Get Shorty* (Barry Sonnenfeld, 1995)—and Vincent Vega—one of the featured hit men in *Pulp Fiction*—emerge as unexpectedly likeable Travolta creations—even as audience members might feel compelled to wince at their actions—as a result of a performance style that evokes the charm of earlier famous Travolta characters. Chili may have a disreputable profession, but Travolta lends the character such an offhanded air of confidence that he cannot help but emerge as the hero in a film populated by crooks and incompetent businessmen. Introducing himself to film producer Harry Zimm, he remains calm and collected, even after he has broken into Harry's house. Travolta's voice remains in a constantly hushed volume, never hurried or forced, while the other characters frequently appear nervous and agitated. When Chili announces "I'm the one telling you how it is," Travolta's soothing, all-knowing tone helps convince the viewer that Chili is a protagonist worth following.

The underworld of *Get Shorty* is multiracial and perhaps more equal-opportunity than most real world settings, yet Travolta emerges as the epitome of cool within the film's mise-en-scène. Frequently seen strolling with rhythmic jazz music playing on the soundtrack, Travolta proves himself capable of physically dominating his fellow thugs, while also possessing the style-capital needed to poke fun at an African-American rival's "pretty little costume." In even the most precarious situations, the Travolta smile remains intact, suggesting that Tony Manero has resurfaced in the 90s even cooler than the ethnic and racial minorities who epitomized style in the days of *Saturday Night Fever*.

While Vincent Vega might not exist on the same pedestal-of-cool as Chili Palmer (as made evident by his questionable intellect and ridiculous outfit in the film's final sequence), the film posits the hit man as the charming postmodern product of American consumer culture.
Travolta adopts a speech pattern that is more slang-reliant than that of his black costar, Samuel L. Jackson, yet in his hands, the most mundane situations become topics of intense philosophical inquiry. Debating how he should respond to the affections of his boss's wife, Travolta's Vincent looks at his own reflected image and observes that "this is a moral test of oneself," while mustering his most didactic tone. As Vincent and Julius discuss the dirtiness of various animals at a diner, Travolta makes his statements as though he were lecturing a roomful of graduate students, gesturing with his silverware and arguing while chewing the last bite of his pork chops. Even if the final sequence (in which Travolta strips down to reveal a pasty-white, enlarged stomach only to put on a T-shirt and wildly-patterned shorts) proves that Vincent is little more than a degenerate slob, in Travolta's hands he becomes an exceedingly charming one, "cool" if not for his style then for his self-satisfaction with his own obliviousness.

The John Travolta performance style, as re-imagined in the 90s, helped negotiate a role for the white male body that contained all of the cultural capital which came with middle-class values, working-class experience, newly "softened" patriarchy, empathy with racial minorities, and even claims on postmodern coolness. While these multiple identities seem to differ from previous masculine models, we must remember that part of Travolta's enduring popularity as a Hollywood leading man is his ability to embody several conflicting qualities at once. Even the 90s Travolta sociopath seems "softened" by virtue of the actor's presence: the threats these villains represent to the normative identities and values of the protagonists seem ridiculous to audiences who recognize the implausibility of a Danny Zucko or a Tony Manero exhibiting such traits. Similarly, the audience can much more easily accept Primary Colors' Jack Stanton as the true custodian of a liberal, multicultural America when the character is portrayed by an actor who can so easily incorporate gendered, racial, and class "otherness" into his performance style.
In this sense, the Travolta projected onto movie screens is not far removed from the mediated Bill Clinton who convincingly won two presidential elections in the 1990s. Packaging himself as the man who would return the nation to its glorified past while leading it to a future of unprecedented promise and prosperity; who could provide the entire nation with an ideal family model by inviting cameras into his living room, while potentially committing perjury to protect the intimate details of his family life; who could "feel" the concerns of pacifists, women, and minorities, while maintaining American militarism and white male hegemony, Clinton's emergence as the new political patriarch of the 90s is the result his ability to seemingly respond to the perceived deficiencies in Reagan's (and then George H.W. Bush's) hard-body legacy. Yet just like Travolta's 90s screen persona, the alternative he offered his constituents had less to do with providing real challenges to American hegemony than with adapting the enduring hard-body national imaginary to the call for more diversified (if also more contradictory) masculine images in response to changing neoconservative social concerns.
CONCLUSION

Oprah's Favorite Movie Star

What makes images such as those brought to movie screens by John Travolta so imperative in understanding national identity is the impact that celebrity public personae add to these mediated representations. Travolta's characters can never be fully severed from the actor's biographical information, as understood by mass audiences. The ways in which "John Travolta" ultimately becomes a signifier of multiple meanings beyond the movie theater will continually influence audience reception of his characters and performances. Part of the actor's charisma results from not only his film work, but also the ways in which the man himself condenses and negotiates the tensions of contemporary American ideology. Thus, it is crucial to understand how John Travolta the "star" is situated within popular culture and society as a whole, in addition to how his screened persona responds to specific crises of identity (Dyer, Stars 31).

Upon viewing a Travolta film, audience members bring with them certain notions of the actor's off-screen persona, and these preconceived ideas inevitably affect interpretations of all Travolta characters. As described above, the popularity of Travolta's previous film roles ensures that the memory of these characters will continually shape audience expectations and responses with regard to his mediated image. Yet adding to the "ghosting" of his past successes is Travolta's "performance" as a celebrity whose personality, behaviors, and values are constantly broadcast to the public under the glaring Hollywood spotlight. With each new Travolta film come layers of mediated packaging that supposedly offer mass audiences a glimpse of the "real" man behind the latest hero, villain, or slick charmer. These regular reminders of John Travolta as a real citizen contribute a host of additional meanings to the masculine representations on the big screen.
In order to analyze these complications of audience reception in greater detail, I would like to examine the ways in which specific Travolta films have been promoted according to the actor's "real" off-screen existence. At no time do Travolta's personal life and cinematic characters become so closely intertwined than during his frequent appearances on The Oprah Winfrey Show. Chatting with Oprah on a couch, responding to filmed montages about his family life, and occasionally interacting with adoring audience members, Travolta's permanence as a real person frequently takes precedence over his performed characters during his promotional tours. In this forum, any tensions and contradictions that might emerge in his films dissolve in the presence of an affable, contemplative family man. For each character type, his interviews on The Oprah Winfrey Show substantially normalize the filmed Travolta performance in question in distinct ways.

With each Travolta appearance, Winfrey exalts her guest as the apex of Hollywood slickness. Before his first interview with Winfrey (while promoting Michael in November of 1996), the host refers to him in the opening voice-over as the "embodiment of cool" and the "definition of sex appeal" ("John Travolta," 1996, 1). This precedes a discussion of a film in which the actor appears visibly overweight, lascivious, and unkempt, yet charms the vast majority of the female cast members. With Winfrey's assistance, Travolta, in turn, charms the show's female audience members. "You know, everybody says about you you're such a nice guy, you're cuddly, you're fun, you're silly," Winfrey observes, indicating her approval of Travolta's relatively sensitive masculine image (2). Yet not all interviews contain such a limited interpretation of the actor's gendered persona. For instance, during Travolta's 2001 visit to the show (in promotion of Domestic Disturbance), Winfrey discusses his love for his son and newborn daughter and his willingness to participate in marriage counseling with wife Kelly
Preston. While such details contribute to Travolta's sensitive patriarchal image, the episode begins with Winfrey informing her viewers that the actor has been "working out and looking good" ("John Travolta," 2001, 1), suggesting that his new physique conforms to traditional male hard-bodied expectations. In 2003, Preston appears in a prerecorded excerpt in which she tells Oprah that "My husband is sexy, no matter what, whether he's got a bigger body or this smaller, tighter, hotter body…He loves the way he looks in clothes or out of clothes…but his stamina is better. It's all good" ("Oprah Works Out with John Travolta" 9). Travolta's body, then, is still privileged when softened by some extra girth, thanks to his familial sensibilities, yet a preference still exists for the masculine hardness typically associated with male attractiveness.

Travolta's public appearances also rely on past mediated images of the actor. Just as the twist contest in Pulp Fiction evokes the youthful disco strut of Tony Manero in Saturday Night Fever, references to Travolta's dancing on The Oprah Winfrey Show help reinforce his image as Hollywood's sensitive and "cool" patriarchal figure. After Winfrey reminds her audience that Travolta is "still dancing his way into our hearts" as a cinematic icon ("John Travolta," 1996, 2), Travolta replicates the dancing sequence in Michael by teaching the host a few moves onstage. "I know we love them—every time we get to see you move on the dance floor, it's like, 'Oh, he's going to move again," Winfrey observes fondly (9). At the end of the Michael episode, Travolta is asked if he would rather dance to the music from Saturday Night Fever or "Chain of Fools" (the dance music from Michael). After Travolta concludes that "we've got to go with the promo…That's the more appropriate thing to do," he again demonstrates the dance moves from Michael to the audience (24). Travolta's performance on this episode establishes his identity as someone who can evoke nostalgia for the past and coolness in the present, while also demonstrating that the white male body is capable of a rhythmic and stylized response to black
soul music. In this instance, Travolta's dancing serves to equate the "real" John Travolta with the identities of the characters he has portrayed in the past.

Yet Travolta's appearances on The Oprah Winfrey Show sometimes signal a separation between man and character that shows Travolta's normalizing effects on the narratives in which he is involved. For example, when Travolta was interviewed while promoting the film Basic in 2003, Winfrey muses in voice-over: "But we're not sure who Tom Hardy [Travolta's character] really is. Is he a good guy or a bad guy, and can he be trusted?" Rather than address the specifics of this "action-packed thriller" ("Oprah Works Out with John Travolta" 2), the episode instead concentrates on portraying the actor as a beloved family man. As Winfrey works out with Travolta, she informs him that "you can tell you're a good dad" (7) while fawning over his "hot body" (5). Moreover, Travolta is asked about the twenty-fifth-anniversary Grease reunion later in the episode, leading to a singing and dancing session with the host, thereby reminding the (primarily female) audience of a kinder and gentler Travolta. The presumed disparity between the content of Basic and the film-going trends of Winfrey's audience is negotiated as the host instructs her viewers to "take your boyfriends to see it" (11-12). Another Travolta suspense thriller (The General's Daughter) received similar treatment in 1999. In the context of The Oprah Winfrey Show, a Hollywood film about the seedy details surrounding the murder of a young woman becomes a "date movie" ("John Travolta," 1999, 7) and generates animated testimonials from female audience members who try to explain their responses to the film (one viewer informs the actor that "if anything were ever to happen to me I would want you to investigate it," while another says she appreciated the film because "it was emotions, I think") (4). These public Travolta appearances effectively sell Hollywood action films and thrillers to female audience members who share Winfrey's fondness for the actor's wholesome, yet occasionally hardened,
persona. Instead of fixating on the more violent and sensational aspects of these narratives, women are asked to give themselves over the "the emotions" involved, or—in the case of Basic—simply take their boyfriends along to enjoy the story while the women themselves bask in the memory of the "ghosted" Travolta persona which still dominates the media's coverage of the actor.

While promoting Primary Colors, however, more emphasis was placed on Travolta's ability to camouflage his own characteristics while constructing a character that has similarities to real people. Attempting to explain that his performance as Jack Stanton is more than a simple impression of Bill Clinton, Travolta informs Winfrey that he tried to "create a presidential character…that had Clintonesque overtones…and Billy Carter overtones and JFK overtones…and also an original character at various times that I had to invent them" ("Travolta, Thompson and Bates" 2). At the end of the show, he even demonstrates how he consciously sabotaged his familiar film persona, going "off the rhythm and between the rhythm," in order to create a political leader who lacked dancing abilities (21). Yet on an episode three years later, Travolta reveals that his primary intention was to mimic Clinton's behaviors and speech. Recalling a recent meeting with the former president, he indicates that the accuracy of the imitation had become a source of pride: "I watched him for the first 20 minutes. All I could think of was, 'God, I was good in Primary Colors'" ("John Travolta," 2001, 19). Originally describing the film as "a fable," he argues that his hope is that "everyone goes away with…two renewed faiths, in people and in politics" ("Travolta, Thompson and Bates" 20). His performed Clinton, then, is intended to "renew faiths" rather than encourage more critical thought about the dualities of presidential images. This comment essentially joins the closing shot of the film in suggesting that contradictory identities like those embodied by Jack Stanton are ultimately beneficial to the
nation at large.

Travolta's appearances on The Oprah Winfrey Show help recuperate the sensitive, yet assertive patriarchal image for the 1990s. The values and characteristics of the actor's protagonists are reinforced by the promotion of Travolta as a loving husband and caring father, who can also harden his body in the gym and transform himself into a convincing action star. His more hypermasculine performances are welcomed by female audience members who seem comforted by the "real" John Travolta's identity as a protective heterosexual father. That even his post-90s films (including Domestic Disturbance, Basic, and Ladder 49) come packaged with this mediated Travolta persona proves that the cultural privileging of white middle-class norms continues to shift hard-body nationhood toward images of masculinity that simultaneously demonstrate increased sensitivity and sustained defensiveness toward the nuclear family unit.

Celebrating Hard-Body Normativity in the Twenty-First Century

One of Travolta's most recent appearances on The Oprah Winfrey Show was in promotion of the 2004 film Ladder 49 (Jay Russell, 2004), about the maturation of a rookie firefighter and the sense of brotherhood he experiences with his colleagues. The film depicts firemen as well-trained, yet fun-loving professionals, constantly in peril whenever they make their way to the site of a fire. While all the men exhibit the familiar characteristics of traditional heterosexual masculinity (when one rookie jokingly tells the others that he is gay, they stare at one another in shock and silent horror), the film suggests that even such obvious displays of toughness come with significant vulnerability, as the lead character (Jack) ultimately dies on duty. Yet even the "softening" of these characters includes certain traits that recall white middle-class masculine norms that were firmly entrenched in the American imaginary even before the hard-body 80s. While Jack is a family man, doting on his young children, he also has a stay-at-
home wife whose honor he vehemently protects in a bar fight. Additionally, Travolta's character forcefully commands the squad, yet is capable of reading Jack's children "Beauty and the Beast" at bedtime.

The masculine heroism portrayed in *Ladder 49* implies that the (exclusively) male firefighters featured in the film exhibit qualities that validate white male hegemony. While there is a black firefighter in the film, most rescue scenes are reserved for the white characters. Most notably, Jack saves a young black girl from a burning apartment complex, and eventually receives an award for heroism, presented to him by the girl he saved. This scene contributes to *Ladder 49*'s implicit argument that white heterosexual males should be considered the rightful protectors of women and racial minorities.

On *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, Travolta's segments suggest that the making of *Ladder 49* was an act of heroism in itself. The actors and filmmakers, Travolta claims, all sacrificed in their own way in order to make "something that was for the bigger picture." It was "kind of an egoless movie," paying necessary tribute to definitive American heroism ("John Travolta & Real Life Heroes" 6-7). In one prerecorded segment, Travolta meets with real firefighters Kenny Ward and Phil Byrd who saved the life of their fellow fireman Dino Mahaffey. In addition to receiving the Medal of Honor on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, their reward is a flight to Chicago (piloted by Travolta himself) and an invitation to Hollywood: the cast members of *Ladder 49*, Travolta announces, "want to invite you to the premiere of *Ladder 49* and bring your wives" (14). Here, Travolta becomes the hero himself, using every aspect of his celebrity persona (including his pilot's license) to provide the just rewards for male virtue. As the grateful firefighters accept Travolta's offer, the actor is posited as generosity personified. Combined with his quietly authoritative role in the film, Travolta remains the embodiment of righteous and
sensitive patriarchy as Hollywood enters the twenty-first century.

Because they are reinforced through the actor's public performances in forums such as The Oprah Winfrey Show, Travolta's masculine meanings seem firmly entrenched in the collective American consciousness. It is impossible to predict how the enduring hard-body national identity will change over the course of the next few decades, or how Travolta's star persona will be used by filmmakers to respond to shifts in ideology. Yet Travolta's fluctuating popularity during a career that has spanned more than three decades demonstrates just how resilient and adaptable the hard-body imaginary remains. When weaknesses in this masculine model are identified (such as Jimmy Carter's "soft" leadership or Ronald Reagan's indifference toward social problems), mediated images simply offer new versions of the hard-body which seemingly compensate for specific problems. Out of the Reagan era grew a national desire for more attentive, moderate masculine models who could still exhibit the forcefulness necessary to defend the American family. Bill Clinton's presidency and John Travolta's career resurgence did not occur because of the clear alternatives they presented with regard to hard-body nationhood; instead, they occurred because the men involved were able to embody the inherently contradictory characteristics that neoconservative ideological groups sought in American masculinity.

It must be noted that the continuation of hard-body nationhood primarily serves those who also viewed Ronald Reagan as the antidote to the threats against white male hegemony in the 60s and 70s. We cannot assume that the national character as a whole has changed just because images of masculinity have been somewhat altered. While John Travolta might appear to offer a physical and emotional alternative to the muscular, assertive action stars of the 1980s, his filmed performances either contribute to the ongoing invocation of traditional patriarchal
values or provide exaggerated glimpses of the depraved hypermasculinity that supposedly emerges when family values are wholly ignored. In this way, the white heterosexual male body continues to dominate Hollywood narratives, shepherding the weak and disenfranchised toward a multicultural harmony that maintains the power of the dominant group, while seemingly countering the aggressive individualist models set forth by Ronald Reagan and other cultural icons in the 1980s.

In the same manner, Bill Clinton also upheld hard-body nationhood, while appearing to soften images of the American male in the 1990s. This manifests itself in multiple ways, from Clinton's portrayal of himself as someone who wants to "slug" those who personally offend him (My Life 75, 385) to decisions that continue American unilateralist policies with regard to the rest of the world. Despite Clinton's firm stances on such issues as social security, school prayer, and abortion, he also demonstrated a level of conservatism that matched (and sometimes exceeded) his Republican predecessors. By rescinding welfare benefits and approving tax cuts for big business, Clinton oversaw the continuation of Reagan-era fiscal policies that encouraged every American to strengthen his or her personal earning power and then engage in the recurring Capitalist struggles of economic survival (Aronowitz 122). In terms of foreign policy, Clinton's early pledges of peace gave way to the nationalism and militarism which, according to Susan Jeffords, reflect "the desperation of an aging superpower that is reluctant, under a conservative framework, to relinquish its international status and influence and may…be willing to punish harshly those who insist it do so" (Hard Bodies 193). Instead of promoting post-Communist peace initiatives, the Clinton administration and a conservative Congress adopted world policing powers, leading to preemptive military strikes against Iraq, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Sudan (Castonguay 291). Yet the ways in which Clinton's mediated images seem to "soften" such
actions—how his presumed empathy with the socially marginalized and his declarations of peacemaking can silence his more progressive critics—effectively disguise the persistence of hard-bodied attitudes toward disenfranchised citizens and politically weak nations. While Clinton's compromised conservatism clearly could not satisfy the Congressional right-wing faction that voted to impeach him in the wake of the Lewinsky scandal (Aronowitz 122-23), the similarities between Clinton and Reagan's respective approaches to the project of preserving America's status with regard to global economics and military power outnumber the differences.

I offer John Travolta's image and performance style as a case study that demonstrates how hard-body nationhood can be adjusted to adapt to changing social contexts. The traditionally empowered cultural group responsible for social and fiscal conservatism remains the unquestioned and indispensable voice of authority when the white heterosexual male body can be so easily interpreted as the sensitive, yet commanding patriarchal image in relation to an ethnically and economically diverse population. Moreover, the continuation of hard-body nationhood relies on the presence of "actual" men who embody the sometimes contradicting qualities and values that seem to ameliorate pressing social issues. This should be a particularly distressing concern in an age when public personae are created by entertainment news shows, magazines, and other media that insist on the average-ness and accessibility of cultural icons. After all, how can one consider the complex masculine meanings represented by John Travolta's film work in the 1990s to be problematic and incongruous when the "real" John Travolta also performs these various identities publicly on television and in interviews?

Once, at a White House dinner, a delighted Bill Clinton asked guest John Travolta to do an impression of him. Though Travolta declined, this moment brought together a president who, more than any before him, identified as a consumer of popular culture and an actor whose iconic
status allowed him to seem as socially significant as his host to an increasingly celebrity-obsessed American populace (Bruzzi 16). Yet more than sharing unhealthy eating habits, expanding waistlines, and baby-boomer adoration, Clinton and Travolta also contributed to the same stabilization of a 90s hard-body identity that can only cause disunity and volatility when put into practice. While this new 90s male—sensitive, yet also authoritative; empathetic toward minorities, yet also paternal toward them; possessing working-class wherewithal, yet also middle-class sophistication—remains a real world impossibility, the performances of John Travolta and Bill Clinton, when projected onto a big screen or telecast on a small one, only add to the cultural idealization of such a model. Those outside the hegemonic group and, indeed, many non-Americans throughout the world might ultimately share a sensation similar to that experienced by Chili Palmer's victims in Get Shorty: everyone is surprised by the punch, because nobody sees the fist coming when the assailant is all slickness, manners, and charm.
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