Gender, according to Judith Butler, “is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Gender Trouble 33). During the second half of the twentieth century, this “rigid regulatory frame” was transformed and destabilized from within its own bounds as white heterosexual man’s position of authority was contested. Although the concept of “hegemonic masculinity” has historically been seen as the stronghold of gender, ritualistically reproducing itself as the bastion of heteronormativity, it has come increasingly under attack, becoming a “historically mobile relation” (Connell 77). In other words, what it means to “be a man” has given way to fragmentary, incoherent and contradictory expressions that attest to a contemporary crisis in masculinity. Shedding its perceived seamlessness and impermeability, masculinity, as Coward notes, is “no longer a position from which to judge others but a puzzling condition in its own right” (94).

The emasculation of men, due in part to what Faludi identifies as the development of “ornamental culture,” has left them devoid of any “meaningful social purpose” (Stiffed 35, 598). Unsurprisingly, men in some quarters were quick to target what they saw as the defining factor in the unsettling of their position and to attribute the blame to one of the most important social forces that changed the status quo of twentieth-century society: feminism. Overexposed to “strong and angry women,” these men complained that they had been pushed from their patriarchal pedestal into taking up “a female view” and turning into “stereotypical sissies” and “yoghurt eaters” (Faludi, Backlash 339–41).
Soon conglomerating into a recognizable “men’s movement,” “the New Age masculinist community,” they believed that they had been forced into a dialogue with their own masculinity and as a result now had to confront the possibility that they had “awakened their feminine principle only to be consumed by it. They had gone ‘soft’” (341). The response to this supposed softness, spearheaded by Robert Bly – the “New, New Man” – in the 1980s and early 1990s, saw the Iron John movement claim the hearts, heads and dollars of many mainstream Americans. Although, according to Bly, it was not a counterattack on the women’s movement, merely an attempt to reawaken men to “the deep masculine,” feminists located Bly’s “wild-man” retreats as part of an ongoing backlash against feminism orchestrated by the New Right.2

In this essay, I intend to problematize these “backlash” scenarios through a consideration of the gender relationships in two twentieth-century urban Gothic tales: *Falling Down* (1992), and *Fight Club* (1999), based on Chuck Palahniuk’s 1996 bestseller. By introducing and exploring the category of the “postfeminist man,” I argue that the crisis in masculinity witnessed in these films reflects the complex negotiation of man’s position within contemporary society. Although both *Falling Down* and *Fight Club* are saturated with aggressive violence, I maintain that it is the display of male anxiety, dissatisfaction and inefficacy that is the key to unlocking male identity in each film. As I contend, the postfeminist man is not the signifier of the re-masculinization of contemporary culture – a straightforward rejection of second-wave feminism that can easily be identified as part of the backlash – but, in contrast, an unstable and troubled subject position that is doubly encoded, as the sadistic forces of patriarchal violence are no longer turned solely against women.

For men, the re-scripting of the “rigid regulatory frame” of gender during the second half of the twentieth century has left them in conflicting subject positions. Within this context, I argue that the symbol historically associated with masculinity – the phallus – has become a ghostly form for men. This is, in part, the result of the severance of phallus from penis – through a kind of critical fellatio (using Butler’s idea of “performativity as citationality” [*Bodies* 21]) that takes hold of the signifier and resignifies the phallus. The phallus’s new mobility has left men haunted by the loss of its exclusively male signifying potential. In turn, the undermining of the essentialist nature of masculinity has left male identity unmoored and vulnerable.

So, if the phallus is a “transferable phantasm” (*Bodies* 86), I aim to repatriate and repudiate it, simultaneously re-erecting it for male use