Heroic Identifications:
Or, “You Can Love Me Too – I am so Like the State”
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Abstract

"Heroic Identifications" examines the American public's willingness to affirm expansions of state power they supposedly protest. It argues that in the post-9/11 era, Americans who legitimated violent and impinging state actions may have done so as an expression of their own individual power. Legitimation stemmed from individual identifications with state power, as if state action was an extension of individual action and an expression of individual freedom. Violent unilateralism modeled an autonomy denied to individuals who are shaped both by daily experiences of unfreedom in a neoliberal era, and by the expectations of individual mastery generated within the terms of liberal individualism. Figurations of individualism thus set the conditions for the expansion of state power through a fantasy that this power could be an extension of each individual's own. Engaging Sigmund Freud's work on identification, this essay examines how individuals could identify with state action in an effort to experience freedom. It concludes that support for post-9/11 state power reflected a disheartening form of contemporary political subject whose quest to experience freedom is obstructed by the very methods it draws upon in its efforts.

This essay examines a key paradox that has beset post-9/11 politics: In the name of freedom and liberty, many Americans legitimated violence, coercion and surveillance over others as well as themselves, and circumscribed their own already restricted access to political power. These expansions in state power often worked at the very expense of the civic participation of the people who authorized them. Seemingly willing to support their own unfreedom, a majority of Americans sanctioned institutions such as the Department of Homeland Security, policies such as the Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Terrorists and The USA PATRIOT Act, and juridical processes such as indefinite detention. This paradox continues to confound contemporary politics. It is usually explained in one of two ways: either through the argument that Americans who supported these actions were manipulated by the machinations of their governing elite, or that a desire for security engulfed the desire for freedom during a time of shock and fear. Instead of following either of these arguments, this essay aims to preserve the paradoxical nature of post-9/11 legitimation. It argues that the support of domestic surveillance, war, the willing curtailment of civil liberties, the criminalization of dissent, and other violent, invasive, exclusionary forms of governmental power in the post-9/11 moment may have reflected not only a desire for security, the naiveté of the US population, or the pleasures of vengeance. It also reflected a misdirected attempt to challenge conditions of unfreedom. The legitimation of state violence aimed to rehabilitate individual freedom in an era that challenges freedom at every turn.

Americans who supported expansive state action may have done so as an expression of their own individual power, as an attempt to experience individual mastery over lived experiences of social powerlessness. This occurred as post-9/11 political subjects identified with dramatic and violent forms of state power. For a "post-9/11 American political subject" – a subject who supported, even relished, intensifications of dramatic and violent state power – the expression of state action may have seemed to be an extension of one's very own action. The legitimation of state power was a consequence of identification with it, in which the power symbolized by the state became an internalized ideal for this type of American political subject. For political subjects who are shaped by liberal individualism's heroic expectations of mastery, yet who experience dependence, exploitation, constraint, and fear on a regular basis, the strength demonstrated by bold state actions was a model. Liberal individualism, as it takes shape in America, posits freedom to be the absence of barriers for individual action; it is a type of personal sovereignty defined by unrestricted options and the capacity to overcome obstruction. This desire for freedom often translates into a desire for mastery over the external environment, as only full control over the external world can guarantee the absence of constraint. While state power is often considered a barrier or imposition to individual freedom, on 9/11 individualism revealed its conviviality with state power. Unilateral and dramatic state power demonstrated a type of power that political subjects did not have but desired to possess. By dramatic and bold expressions of state action, I mean actions that are both visually spectacular and widely expansive. In foreign policy, this encompasses unilateral military and political actions such as war, declarations of empire, and prominent
demonstrations of state sovereignty. In domestic policy, this includes large and often overt expansions in state penetration, surveillance, and the centralization plus dissemination of regulatory and monitoring capabilities. On my reading, support for these forms of state action were partly motivated by a desire for sovereignty, one that is equated with freedom by the norms of individualism. Identification interpreted state violence as a way of undoing late modern and neoliberal experiences of powerlessness, specifically for those people shaped by individualism’s expectations of freedom. Figurations of individualism actually set the conditions for the expansion of state power through the fantasy that this power is an extension of each individual’s own.

By examining the possibility that legitimation was a byproduct of identification with violent state action, this essay provides a different answer to the paradox of post-9/11 politics. It argues that the authorizations of brutal and regulatory forms of power in the post-9/11 moment reflected a misdirected struggle against contemporary forms of unfreedom. A desire to be free from the effects of exclusionary power manifested as an identification with state power, and paradoxically enabled intensifications in the national security state, further militarization of foreign policy, and a deepening criminalization of dissent. To be sure, freedom was not the only desire motivating the legitimation of state power after 9/11; fear, righteousness, and vengeance existed alongside the desire for freedom. But these other desires have gained much more scholarly attention at the expense of the study of freedom, and have overshadowed the ways that a contingent desire for freedom coexists with and even underwrites them.

To argue that a desire for freedom develops into an identification with state power is not to rely on biological interpretations of desire, invoke orthodox Marxist assumptions about the ubiquity of the yearning for emancipation, or recur to common liberal assumptions about the ontology of a sovereign subject. The argument is more modest and arises out of a historically and culturally specific reading of contemporary politics, in which the frustrations of political powerlessness operate on national subjects already constituted by certain expectations of individual autonomy and democratic citizenship, and in which powerlessness spectacularly came to the forefront of national attention on 9/11. The events that occurred on 9/11 dispelled fantasies of American global mastery and state/bodily impermeability. Identification with state action produced new fantasies of mastery in response, which once more obscured conditions of interdependence and vulnerability for both states and individuals. It envisioned a heroic mastery over the world performed by state action and yet also experienced by the individual. This desire for mastery developed partly out of particular liberal norms that value freedom as personal sovereignty and self-making autonomy. It eventually displaced the site of satisfaction for this desire from individual to state action. In other words, the historical moment of post-9/11 nationwide shock and violence contributed to the formation of a type of subjectivity that, while rooted in more longstanding experiences of late modern powerlessness, is relatively new. It nurtured a desire to resist conditions of vulnerability and subjection revealed by and displaced onto the 9/11 events, yet this resistance took the form of identification with and legitimation of intrusive forms of state power. A desire for individual freedom developed into a legitimation of expansive authority over individuals.

Sigmund Freud’s concept of identification articulates how identification with state power could be a mechanism by which a desire for freedom legitimates what it opposes. In the rest of this essay, I engage Freud’s analysis of identification in order to open the possibility that individuals after 9/11 could identify with state action, because the state served as a model for heroic mastery and sovereignty denied to individuals in the daily experiences of contemporary life. I conclude by arguing that the legitimation of intensified state power was the effect of a contemporary political subject that does not reflexively desire unfreedom, but whose challenge to unfreedom is obstructed by the very methods it drew upon in its effort.

"Look, You Can Love Me Too – I am So Like The State”

The psychic process of identification may seem an odd place to begin examining how individuals could legitimate powers that diminish their own capacities as political agents, but identification is, at least for Freud, the very point where the individual intersects with the political. Identification mediates the relationship between the self and others; it is the process by which the political and social world shapes individuals at the same that that it is
a way for individuals to attempt control over that world. Identification turns individuals into subjects through their engagement with what is outside of themselves, and produces not one stable or permanent subject but a series of subjectivizing identifications throughout one's life that continually adapt to changes in the social world. It is no coincidence that Freud's most extended writings on identification come in Group Psychology and Analysis of the Ego, his examination of group formation and behavior. Identification would seem to be the very point from which to begin taking the measure of the work of political legitimation, the process by which individuals sustain, acquiesce to, and influence political power. On Diana Fuss' reading, there can be no politics without identification; she argues, "identification is not only how we accede to power, but it is how we learn submission."³⁷

For Freud, the process of identification begins out of an experience of losing something or someone that one has loved. This lost object can be a person, an abstract concept such as an ideal, or one's country. Identification is a way of managing this loss, and it requires relinquishing one's earlier desire to have what was loved and is now gone. In identification, individuals abandon a prior aim to possess their love object and adjust to more limited aims: not to have the loved one, or to be the loved one, but to be like the loved one that is gone.⁸ Identification is triggered when the individual realizes that it cannot have its loved one but still feels attached to what it loves, so it modifies its desire: it becomes like the one it had loved, and thus the individual preserves its attachment internally. Identification is the "endeavor to mold a person's own ego after the fashion of the one taken as a model."⁹ In identification, one substitutes oneself, part of one's ego, for the lost object. Freud explains, "If one has lost a love object, the most obvious reaction is to identify with it, to replace it from within, as it were, by identification."¹⁰ Identification becomes a substitute for an original tie with something desired.

In identification, an unattainable external love object becomes an internal ideal upon which to pattern the self. Part of the ego molds itself into the object of desire in order to satisfy other desiring parts of the self. Freud argues, "When the ego assumes the features of the object, it is forcing itself, so to speak, upon the id as a love-object and is trying to make good the id's loss by saying 'Look, you can love me too – I am so like the object.'"¹¹ Identification is the nexus of the self and the social, and marks a process whereby the individual internalizes something in the world (indeed it is shaped by its relations with the external world) at the very moment it turns away from the world in an attempt to satisfy its own needs. Identification can be seen as a coping mechanism that constitutes subjectivity by its attempt to manage loss, an attempt to satisfy one's own desires when they are not satisfied by others.¹² It thus involves a reckoning with loss, but also with difference. As one becomes aware of loss, one becomes aware of the difference between what one is and who one wants to be. It marks a process in which the subject individuates itself from something else. Identification is how the self grapples with its own identity through its relationship to others, and it works by idealizing and modeling part of itself as another.

Freud's theory of the mechanisms of identification contributes to my reading of the development of a post-9/11 subjectivity that authorized violent state power. As in all identifications, the identification with state power would arise out of an awareness of loss – a knowledge of the impossibility of having something loved – and function as a mechanism in order to be like that which one cannot have. For this type of post-9/11 subject, the impossible loved one is, I offer, an ideal of power as sovereign, an ideal of freedom as the absence of impediments for individual self-making. These ideals have been "lost" by power's increasingly pervasive operations in late modern life. While I will argue that this loss might always exist for those shaped by expectations of heroic autonomy, it is also historically and materially configured, and it was brought to the forefront of national consciousness on 9/11. Understanding the reasons behind the identification with state power first entails stepping back from the immediacy of 9/11 to examine the historical moment and political discourses that embed it.

The post-9/11 desire for mastery derives from the juxtaposition between a desire for freedom and generalized conditions of political powerlessness in contemporary life. It stems from the ways in which formally free individuals are not only materially constrained by multiple and interweaving modes of social power, but are shaped by contemporary global crises such as empire, occupation, and imperialism across broad international populations;
from the broadening control of the state and economy over aspects of social life previously ascribed to the “private” realm, such as education, child-rearing, and welfare; from neoliberal capital, terrorism, ethnic wars, racism, sexism, entrenched and broadening levels of poverty, environmental destruction, security privatization, and resource scarcity. Under these conditions, citizens are excluded from national politics and made into consumers rather than active players in the operations of collective decision-making; multinational corporate powers promote vast levels of exploitation while evading accountability and visibility; jobs and families are uprooted, severed, and micromanaged as a politics of fear pervades work and home life; systems of support from state, family, and community structures are financially broken and systematically destroyed; the nexus of capitalism and state governance pushes the goals of efficiency, subjugation, and flexibility to organize the terms of collective governance and individual citizenship at the expense of notions of justice, freedom, or the good; mediated information exposes various horrors and subjugations from around the world, yet at the same time insists that nothing can be done to change them; no viable political collectivity offers significant societal-wide change, as significant change does not seem probable.

Under these conditions, individuals seem unable to experience freedom or effect change in the world. They are conditioned by the impinging effects of global capital and global interdependence, as well as the inability to master or singularly control the powers that generate them. Affecting individuals to significantly varying degrees depending upon their locations within structures of power and privilege, these conditions also shape ordinary and lived experiences of powerlessness across populations. Experiences of powerlessness are not only frightening but also confusing, as their causes are often difficult to discern. The modes of power that produce them are often nonagentic and spatially unlocatable – global yet micropolitical, impinging yet intangible, faceless yet moving, and replicating with alacrity. They create a widespread and constant sense of precariousness and constraint that is not so much explicitly expressed as experienced as nagging, unarticulated affects of impotence, anxiety, constriction, and anger. Identification with the state aims to address these experiences by heroically overcoming them.

Identification with state action is also, in part, an effect of a specific type of liberal individualism that valorizes expectations of mastery over and autonomy from the social world. American political subjects, often shaped by individualism’s expectations of individual sovereignty and self-determinism, struggle with the continual process of power’s regulatory capacity as well as lived experiences of dependence. Both demonstrate their failure to live up to individualism’s ideal image: to be, in Etienne Balibar’s words, the “subject without subjection,” to be self-reliant, to master power, to pull oneself up by one’s bootstraps, to actively and unilaterally determine the course of one’s existence.13 Awash in the tenets of liberal individualism, freedom here means autonomy from others and from power, and is experienced through a type of self-determinism that implies the capacity to control historical and political uncertainty. It is understood to be both the lived experience of mastery and the absence of power over the self. Interdependence of any sort is considered unfreedom, so that freedom is sustained through an aggressive stance toward other individuals, nations, and even nature.14 To subjects who want yet are unable to live up to this model of agency, bold and unilateral state actions can seem to be one place where a strong autonomy is still possible. State action seems to harbor the possibility of unrestrained power over the contingencies of the world, where the ability to control others and the world still gains credence.

Analyzing the post-9/11 moment of intense state support and patriotic loyalty, Wendy Brown has similarly posited that citizens identified with the nation-state.15 Brown is concerned with how individuals both idealized the desired object of the nation-state and identified with each other based on the collectively shared experience of idealization. The patriotic fervor in post-9/11 politics was a product of citizens who were together in love with something none of them could singularly possess. She writes that in group idealization, “We are bound to one another through our collective experience of being in love with the same object,” which joins the nation together partly through the strength the nation expresses: “the attachment achieved through idealization is likely to glory in the power of the nation, a power expressed in state action.”16 After 9/11, idealization produced a patriotism that both stifled dissent and uncritically celebrated state power. The question that remains from this
analysis is why the nation became idealized at the moment of a terrorist attack. What it is about 9/11 that creates the desire to love the nation-state? What is satisfied, exactly, when the nation-state becomes a desired object in the wake of the terrorist attack? What makes the nation-state an unattainable object? My answer to these questions does not reside in the sublimated pleasures satisfied by group bonds (which may seem the most obvious suggestion) but about the specific forms of power that idealization satisfied at the moment it arose: the individualized desire for omnipotence. The state is the weighted site of identification after 9/11 because it seems to possess the power that individuals desire to possess for themselves, especially after a shocking event in which contingency is highlighted and the possibility for mastery seems threatened or impossible.

Identification with the state, I am arguing, was an individualized experience that aimed to cast off lived experiences of heteronomy by identifying with that which most prominently holds the promise of mastery: a subjugator, an enforcer, the sovereign Hero. Various modes of state action were read as the performance of a singular self-emancipating autonomy. Combined, they seem to congeal into a great act that could re-assert mastery, the ultimate expression of what William Connolly calls ontological narcissism: the belief that one has innate capacity to master contingency and domesticate the world, and is inherently sovereign, beholden to no power but one’s own. Identification with state expansion thus posits that the subject can be like what it now idealizes: “Look, you can love me too – I am so like the state.”

**Individual Identification with the State After 9/11**

After 9/11, state identification happens once the terrorist events reveal, in a spectacular way, the fiction of state power as autonomous and sovereign. As Jodi Dean argues, it is a moment that entails “the specific horror of destruction of the social link, the symbolic pact promising security and holding society together.” The terrorist attacks punctured the fantasy of invulnerable state and individual boundaries that had, for much of the later 20th century, shaped both American foreign policy and the norms of liberal individualism. The events of 9/11 forced an acknowledgement of the nation’s vulnerability to others, of the impossibility of state invincibility or sovereignty, of the triteness of an End of History narrative that proclaimed the historic mastery of an American-led neoliberal state militarism over all other political norms, desires, and institutions. The ability of a violent yet tiny group of individuals to work outside, underneath, and through state forms, to be elusive and unaccountable, undermined the standard narrative of heroic American power.

Identification with the state aimed to shore up the weakened belief in the American state as global master. Identification only occurs with an object that is lost or dead, that does not or cannot exist in practice. Identification aims to reanimate what has been lost within the self. Identification with state power, therefore, aims to revive not only the promise that individuals can heroically overcome heteronomy but also the promise that the state has the ability to do this too. This is why a rugged, self-reliant individualism can be so enamored of violent state action and support a militant patriotism. These seemingly contradictory ideas share an intertwined fantasy of mastery over external events. In the contemporary moment, when individuals’ ability to experience autonomy is constantly thwarted and inhibited, unilateral state power seems to be the one place where a robust autonomy might still be displayed, and identification links that display to one’s own experience. The body of a triumphant George W. Bush in 2003, situated beneath the banner “Mission Accomplished” after the supposed end of combat operations in Iraq, was an exemplar for the individual stand-in for American power. His intentional swagger on top of the air force carrier aimed to revive the fantasy that an individual can be as sovereign as a war-winning state. Bush personified in individualized, bodily form the self-determinism, even omnipotence, of American mastery. Clad in military uniform, Bush merged the individual and the state into the presidential body, which, as Michael Rogin would remind us, is often figured to be both ordinary and heroic, at once mortal and institutional. The broader identification with state action personified and unified the fragmented conditions of state power into a heroic savior, condensed the myriad possible responses to the events of 9/11 into an idealization of militaristic state action, and legitimated warfare as a morally requisite action for gaining freedom.

This reading puts post-9/11 unilateralism in a new light: it is an attempt to prove that
American sovereignty is still possible. The legitimation of unilateral action contains a plea to prevent the twilight of state sovereignty that has already occurred, and that was demonstrated by the 9/11 events. The exercise of state power thus functions doubly as the lost object of identification, in both literal and figurative forms. Literally, the identifying subject realizes it has “lost” what it desired: mastery of, or domination over, the exercise of a key form of political power that governs itself. Figuratively, the state stands in symbolically for a certain type of power that the subject has “lost”: a power that is self-determining and unbound, and that is embodied in visible and spectacular articulations of state sovereignty. Identification with sovereign state action aims to (re)claim lost power by overcoming the sense of powerlessness saturating contemporary political subjectivity, performing a spectacular experience of ontological narcissism.

For the post-9/11 political subject, terrorism became the identifiable cause of thwarted sovereignty. Conquering it would restore the freedom of the subject. The deeper complications of contemporary power and agency were, I offer, displaced onto the 9/11 attacks as the singular source of constraint. Defeating terrorism could thus allow the subject to reverse its experiences of powerlessness through a triumphant act of self-emancipation. The war on terror became an attempt to gain control over powers that control the self, to break off one’s shackles of heteronomy. The vital importance of the “Shock and Awe” military campaign in Iraq, for instance, was that its shock and awe was aimed as much at American viewers as at the Iraqi military. The media coverage of the bombing of Baghdad was crucial to the production of legitimation through identification; the visual proof of overwhelming power cemented state identification. Live video of bombing campaigns and detailed descriptions of military firepower did not merely reflect a national obsession with military equipment but an intense desire to see the moment of power’s impact, to understand and verify the massive forcefulness of state action. I’ll address the misrepresentation that these military targets “caused” American powerlessness later in the essay. For now, I am arguing that by delimiting 9/11 as a singular and clear moment of thwarted freedom, identification held out the promise of a bound field to fight against unfreedom, to resist 9/11’s exposure of more extensive and longstanding forms of powerlessness.

Identification with state action created an equivalence between the state and the individual, which worked in part because the state continues to be the primary source of accountable public power. Even in a deterritorialized era of globalization – as multinational regulatory bodies and neoliberal corporate power might seem to make state capacities increasingly irrelevant to the flow of people, goods, and power – the state remains the discursive locus of power, the conferrant of rights and political recognition in public life. Paul Passavant refers to this as the “strong neoliberal state” in order to highlight how contemporary neoliberal governmentality contributes to, rather than weakens, state expansion and regulatory power in the twenty-first century. Brown similarly argues that the state continues to be the primary source of political power, and as political power. This is certainly not to say that state functions are the only source of political power, but that they are the primary ones that are formally accountable and publicly verifiable. State functions are aggregated as a key nodal point for political identity, knowledge, power and influence. They seem to embody and employ instruments of protection and strength – military power, juridical authority, legal legitimacy – that wield power visibly and on a large scale. Within political life, the state is the most obvious symbol of autonomous power.

Identification with state power is also enabled because the categories that define individual agency also often shape American interpretations of state agency. The state is figured as a singular, self-reliant individual, its actions an expression of a sovereign subject. Various governmental agencies and actions are discursively consolidated into a unilateral, personified force that conquers its external enemies and services the domestic population. Combined, they signify the type of power recognized and understood within the possessive individualism of mainstream liberal discourses: an autonomous power that is self-governing, and that is ontologically capable of self-emancipation in situations of duress or heteronomy. In the later 20th century, the discourse of individualism has increasingly described and personified American state power. As Sheldon Wolin and Michael Rogin have suggested, the post-isolationist, global superpower reconfiguration of America after WWII drew in part from individualism’s norms for mastery and power. Historians Steven...
Ambrose and Gary Wills argue that during the Cold War it seemed to many political officials, and eventually the public, that as long as America married a nationwide self-reliance to political and military might, it could control world events; for many policymakers and citizens, world problems would only exist if America couldn’t muster the will it needed to solve its problems effectively. The norms of American individualism thus seemed to shape the possibilities for various modes of state power. Individualism was nationalized in the political discourses that postulated that international politics could be controlled and molded to America’s needs. Failure to do so demonstrated only a lack of desire, not lack of capacity. Individualism narrated political crisis by categorizing America qua individual; it articulated a personified notion of state action and state capacity through the concept of the heroic, self-reliant individual.

Identification with state action relies not only on the mimetic constitution of self and state but also on America’s democratic promise that individuals author the state, as electoral accountability and the people-as-the-origin-of-political-power claim enable the fantasy that state action can be one’s own. Identification with the state relies upon the formal structure of America’s representative democracy, which promises that state power originates in its citizens. It is as longstanding as America’s founding moments – what Alexander Hamilton referred to as the constitutional premise that the people are the “fountain” of all political power. State power is, uneasily, both an extension of the civic self and source of potential domination. The American state is seen to be created by laws formally authorized by all, electorally accountable to the people, steered toward their vision of the good life, and an expression of the might of the nation. It is also a likely tyrant that citizens are wary of, that threatens their freedom at every turn, yet one that they tame and steer through electoral accountability and civic participation. It produces what Murray Edelman once diagnosed as the continuous slippage in referents to the state as both “us” and “them.” Foreign policy provides the arena for demonstrating autonomous state power vis-à-vis other entities, and the democratic, state-as-civic-self model of governance yokes the individual to state power’s operations.

In other words, liberal individualism has not been necessarily opposed to the state but has also mapped on to, and directed, the very notion of state agency. Individualism leads to the state, not only to a distrust of state power but also to its uncritical support. America’s historically recent iterations of national individualism are therefore not exclusively anti-statist, as the trope of individualism generally is; in many ways, it is a heroic, self-making individualism realized most fully at the state level. It paves the way for how the national identifications arising out of 9/11 involved identifying not only with other fellow-Americans or with a larger sense of patriotic nationhood, but also with the very governing mechanisms of the federal state.

The individual identification with state power was, of course, experienced only as a vicarious form of heroism. The immediate source of blame for 9/11 was already dead (the hijackers); or hidden (bin Laden); or a complicated configuration of foreign affairs too convoluted to be singularly defined or bound as a national entity. Yet blame was categorized in tidy and monological terms – through singular causes (terrorists); national boundaries (Afghanistan, then Iraq); and moral binaries (America versus the Axis of Evil). Identification draws from the impulse to overcome what has caused individuals to “lose” their freedom, a loss, I have been suggesting, that is perhaps constitutive of this contemporary political subject. Because the target for the hero’s display of mastery – terrorism – was not the only cause of powerlessness, nor were efforts to personify its tactical nature successful, the experience of constraint remained unchallenged and even intensified. Surely this is why the killing of Osama bin Laden did not provide any real sense of national relief to a population continually beset by glaring examples of their own political unfreedom and economic powerlessness, daily experiences that have nothing to do with terrorism – from the housing crisis and endless political corruption scandals to massive levels of unemployment and the Citizens United decision. Throughout the last decade, the expectation was that the killing of bin Laden would finally satisfy the long-delayed gratification of the “Mission Accomplished” triumphalism over terror. Yet aside from the few students whose late-night cheers at the White House on the night of bin Laden’s death saturated media coverage and stood in for American sentiment writ large, there has been no substantial nationwide, long-term sense of satisfaction or freedom out of that moment. Lived experiences of political and economic
helplessness overcame any sense of heroism or mastery seemingly generated out of his death.

In a nation in which the might of the global superpower is continually weakened by transnational flows and geopolitical shifts, and in which the reigning value of individualism suffers crippling blows, identification with state action aims to restore the fantasy of unbound freedom to both the individual and the state. It attempts to sustain the moribund promise of individualism by imagining its revivification at the state level, so that unilateral sovereign state power could be imagined as an extension of each American citizen’s sovereignty. Yet heroism as state action creates only a vicarious way of experiencing individualism. It highlights the paradox that the recuperation of individual mastery entailed the legitimation of policies that engender individual surveillance, the abrogation of civil liberties, increased regulation, and brutal violence. The “solution” for recapturing freedom becomes state and corporate organized War on Terror. In legitimating policies and powers that explicitly target the American citizens employing them to challenge their unfreedom, identification entrenches the experiences of powerlessness it was employed to relieve, inflicting greater unfreedom upon the subject as well as greater violence throughout the global order. This post-9/11 political subject who sanctions state power does not so much desire its own subjection as unintentionally re-route its desire for freedom into a deeper condition of dependence and constraint.

Omnipotence through Interdependence

Although the post-9/11 identification with state power is based primarily, on my reading, in a desire for individual freedom rather than group loyalty, it is part of the virulent patriotism that arose in the wake of the 9/11 events. Steven Johnston describes this patriotism as a form of narcissism. Patriotic narcissism posits the national subject at the center of the world order, while demanding continuous national self-congratulation for its violent actions toward those both inside and outside national boundaries. He names it a “self-excusing narcissism” in which professions of goodness translate into a vigilant enmity whereby “the world remains at America’s disposal.” The post-9/11 identification with state power draws from the same narcissistic desire Johnston diagnoses, while radically individualizing it. According to Freud, identification brokers a loss not only over the specific object one has desired, but also a more primal loss originating in narcissism. In Freud’s work on narcissism, the primal loss that initiates all identifications is the experience of omnipotence felt by infants in their earliest development. Freud understands the infant to experience a state of primary narcissism, in which it assumes mastery over a world undifferentiated from itself, in which its needs are gratified instantly, its body auto-satisfying. This experience erodes rapidly once the infant gains a sense of its own dependence and vulnerability, but the desire for primary narcissism remains. For Freud, the work of identification in general is an attempt to recreate a psychic state of narcissistic omnipotence, a mastery over the external world through the capacity for self-satisfaction. Setting up the lost object as an ideal within the self is a way to recapture mastery out of the feeling of loss: “That which he projects ahead of him as is ideal is merely his substitute for the lost narcissism of his childhood – the time when he was his own ideal.” As Johnston notes, this process involves fantasizing away one’s condition of dependence on others. It is repeated throughout the individual’s life in all forms of identification. In post-9/11 identification with state power, when the very ideal of sovereignty is the lost object, identification occurs not only with a particular ideal of individual mastery but with the crux of idealization itself: the desire for omnipotence. When sovereignty is the aim of primary narcissism as well as the identification with state power, the longing for it can only be compounded. Identification with the state becomes that much more intense and intransigent.

While Freud reads primary narcissism as a universal formation of human development, I would interpret his diagnosis as a culturally-specific reading of human behavior, one conditioned by the Euro-American late-modern era in which he writes. Freud sees the desire for omnipotence as transhistorical, even biological. Yet he seems to make observations and assumptions that are either tied to their particular moment or read into it, fed by a specific historicity in which mastery is naturalized as the thwarted aim of human behavior. Perhaps Freud’s analysis of primary omnipotence is an effect of the desire for mastery grounded in a late modern liberalism. While I do not want to claim that Freud is squarely situated within the terms of liberal individualism (he is not), I instead want to
suggest that primary narcissism is akin to a historical configuration of ontological narcissism that posits mastery as the ground and aim of individual desire. The perpetual sense of lost power, one that can be regained through acts of self-emancipation, structures each of their operations.

The form of political subjectivity based on identification with state power aims to generate experiences of power out of conditions of dependence. It aims to soothe the “loss” of autonomy by identifying with what it cannot be, and justifies vengeance against the “cause” of its loss. Identification with state power challenges constraint by actively fighting what it deems its cause – terrorism – and re-asserting the capacity for mastery. What is so paradoxical about this situation is that the process of identification is itself a profoundly relational and interdependent process. It involves the formation of the self through one’s encounters with others and the social world. Identification is the formation of the ego through its relations with others. It is the very basis of sociality, as Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, Judith Butler, Kaja Silverman, Jacques Lacan and other psychoanalytic thinkers contend.33 Identifying with a figure of sovereignty is therefore a form of identification that that works by denying the very process of self-formation. Identification with the state as a sovereign power is a profound act of disavowal, disavowing not only the relational constitution of subject but the very workings of identification itself.

Perhaps, then, the hidden crux of state identification is the act of disavowal. For Freud, all forms of identification express a desire for mastery over the world.34 Yet the process of identification also describes the constitution of the subject through its relations with others; the subject is formed as the ego takes on the characteristics of its external love objects. Identification is the satisfaction of mastery through relationality. It is the desire for unconstrained action expressed within conditions of interdependence. In this way, identification with state power dramatizes at the same time desires particular to post-9/11 political life and a more longstanding and deeply problematic disavowal of human interdependence in the late-modern era, one that is perhaps, in part, the effect of a widespread liberal individualist definition of human agency that equates mastery and limitlessness with what it means to be free.

The Desire for Freedom

I want to conclude by questioning if it is possible to see, in state identification, something more than false consciousness – an individual blind to its subjection by oppressive power, or more than an individual that actively desires its subjection? For anything, the process of state identification presupposes acknowledgment of the experience of powerlessness, as well as the limits of individualism, of the losses and failures that it demands from subjects who gain value solely though their mastery over power. Through identification with state power, the subject must first recognize the “loss” of autonomous mastery, the failure to self-make, to control contingency, to experience unrestrained action, and to mold the politics that governs its existence. To identify with what it wants to be like, the subject must first differentiate the state ideal from itself. It must posit that while the self wants to be like the state, the self exists as separate from it and does not have the power it signifies.

Freud’s varied theories of identification all insist that the loss of the love object must be acknowledged, in some way and by some part of the self, for identification to commence. The process of identification can only happen after a subject gains awareness of a difference between the subject and its ideal, as identification arises to help mitigate the pain of this awareness. Identification presupposes knowledge, however nascent, of what it is not and does not possess. In this case, it must recognize the death of the possibility of mastery (if it ever existed). This includes reckoning with the dramatic impingements of contemporary forms of power that include though are certainly not limited to those developed by the state. It also includes reckoning with the failure or unattainability of achieving the norms of liberal individualism. Some part of self must acknowledge that the model of individual freedom as a form of unconstrained action no longer serves the self in a meaningful way. For Freud and the psychoanalytic tradition that comes after him, the nature of this acknowledgement and the specific part of the psyche that acknowledges this loss remains murky. The form that acknowledgment takes is ultimately left unanswered.35 What remains clear, however, is that in identification the loss is registered and expressed, even if it is subsequently denied, displaced, or repressed: the loss is experienced by the “bodily ego” even if it is not
Moreover, the desire for identification is derived from the desire to challenge conditions that cause experiences of constraint. Identification is a way for a subject to resist the loss of mastery in an ingenious way: reinstating a facsimile of the lost ideal inside the self. The initial awareness of one’s inability to be an sovereign subject illuminates not only how identification is animated by the subject’s nascent realization of its own situated and interdependent experiences, but by its desire to challenge them. Identification highlights the subject’s awareness of the difference between what one is and what one wanted to be, between heteronomy and autonomy. It highlights the subjects’ desire to resist power and experience a type of freedom – one defined primarily as unbound and masterful action.

The identification with mastery is then, at its outset, an attempt to challenge the loss sense of autonomy, the feeling of regulation and exclusion, to recapture the capacity for freedom. Animated by the loss of what it desires but cannot have, state identification idealizes what the subject “should have been” – sovereign, self-making – and what it now desires to be “like.” Once state power is differentiated from the self, it is then set up internally as an ideal. Through the subject that salves its loss by imagining itself like state power, identification operates to fortify the very terms of American liberal individualism that contribute to loss: insisting that subjects can master contingency, and can exercise heroic overcoming of their dependence. Perhaps because of its very unattainability, the ideal of ontological narcissism always produces loss as its effect. It creates a bind in which the type of freedom that individualism recognizes as desirable is always already unattainable.

The subject’s initial awareness of a discrepancy between oneself and one’s ideal leads not to broader recognition of why this discrepancy exists, or perhaps to a revaluation of the object it desires, but instead to its re-idealization in new form. Post-9/11 identification with the state thus illustrates subjects’ incipient awareness that the possibility for sovereignty is not possible, that the capacity for heroic mastery over self and the world is fictive. However it restates the lost object as an internal ideal and subsequently represses this recognition, while embedding the operations of impinging and regulatory power ever deeper into subjects. It refuges awareness of power’s expansions back into the terms of individual heroism, and deflates the possibility for a more productive critical engagement. It actually hinders the fight against forms of power that sustain domination, unfreedom, and war.

After 9/11, a de-cathexis with the state did eventually happen, but only after the slow realization that the “Mission Accomplished” of the War on Terror did not actually accomplish its mission, and after the Abu Ghraib images were uncovered. The Abu Ghraib images had a profound effect on the identification with state power. This was due, of course, to the affective horror they produced in revealing acts of torture and cruelty. Yet part of their horror, too, was their revelation of the squalidness of military power: the images uncovered a form of state violence normally shielded from public view. They did not depict smart bombs targeting a hidden enemy outpost, or a cutting-edge air force jet shooting faceless evildoers from above. Instead, they revealed the small, individualized, even routinized aspects of violence, suffering, and death in war. They countered the antiseptic images of “shock and awe” with the literal and metaphoric filth of bodily torture, demanding an acknowledgment of the misery and cruelty that the pursuit of unbound mastery can inflict on other humans, the distinct lack of strength required to overpower and harm another person in situations of domination. The pictures directly countered the claims of American military justice as clear, or American strength as based on superior moral and technological capacity. In degrading the pursuit of mastery, they showed the personal and daily mundanities of brutality behind the curtain of smart bomb coverage. The slow failure of “Mission Accomplished,” combined with the immediacy of the Abu Ghraib revelations, weakened the idealization of American state mastery, and re-exposed larger experiences of global interdependence and individual constraint.

The weakening of state identification, however, could have taken different forms, and the desire for freedom could have been expressed in many alternative ways. What possibilities could have arisen from reconceiving freedom outside of heroic autonomy? If the motive for identification with state power is, at its core, the desire for freedom, then subjects might capitalize on their nebulous experiences of unfreedom to question more deeply what contributes to their production. They might use these experiences as an initial starting point.
to interrogate the complexities of the present, or to question a model of freedom that leaves these complexities unintelligible. How could a more critical engagement with the specific, frightening, and exploitative forms of contemporary politics work to challenge them? Could it examine the ways one can be, at once, both subject to oppressive power and the legitimator of widespread violence?

Attempts to challenge experiences of unfreedom would seem more effective if instead, as a first step, they work to examine the precise forms of power that contribute to experiences of unfreedom, and aim to scrutinize geopolitical realignments. They might develop collective practices of freedom that are undergirded by acknowledgements of interdependence, practices that take account of differentiated forms of exploitation, violence, and social vulnerability. Peter Fitzpatrick argues that the post-9/11 moment requires reconceiving freedom to entail responsibility for others as a necessary precondition.\(^\text{39}\) A more critical engagement in this vein might begin by drawing upon the animating impulses of individualism – resisting dominating power upon the self – yet refigure its legitimating function by sustaining recognition that, as Sharon Krause notes, freedom does not entail sovereignty even as it demands individual and collective accountability for political life.\(^\text{40}\) This recognition opens the space for new modes of political agency that are more collective and interdependent in their work to challenge material and structural experiences of unfreedom. It can enable tools for pushing more resourcefully against encumbrances of power, instead of rehabilitating the lost, dead object of individual mastery. As Judith Butler, Jill Bennett and many other feminist thinkers have suggested, by acknowledging lived conditions of interdependence in a post-9/11 era, challenges to structural unfreedom might draw more deeply upon the resources of collective life for establishing conditions of social justice, freedom, and human equality, using interdependence as a source of strength that works with collective resources rather than against them.\(^\text{41}\) This might also assist the crucial work of distinguishing foundational social interdependence from the increasing binds of regulatory, violent, and governmentizing powers.

Other possibilities include sustaining the acknowledgement that loss engenders: that the object of desire is gone, that one’s ideal is no longer tenable and perhaps was never viable. For Freud, this involves a mourning process that concludes by rerouting desire to a new, more tenable, more live object. This process is not clearly delineable or fully predictable; the desire to contain contingency and garner complete knowledge of the future is itself a derivation of ontological narcissism, of the desire for mastery, its satisfaction clearly impossible. The rerouting of desire can never be predicted in advance – and this is part of its necessary danger. Yet static predetermined ideas of freedom are also insufficient to develop its practice. Freedom entails not just a static or binary condition, in which one is or is not free, or in which the settled terms of freedom’s experience are laid out in advance of its pursuit. Part of the practice of freedom is a keen responsiveness to the specific experiences of constraint and regulation one wishes to change.

While post-9/11 political subjects who legitimated war and increases in the national security state were partly motivated by a desire to resist the intense and rapidly intensifying regulations of power, it remains to be seen whether those desires could be transformed into a more productive challenge that responds to the specific conditions they aim to change, or whether they can nourish new conceptions of agency and freedom outside those that sustain the damages and unfreedom of current politics. Only by actively grappling with the impossibility of mastery, and the reckoning with power’s complex operations in contemporary life, might political subjects collectively engage with the political powerlessness, constraining norms, and structural unfreedoms that shape contemporary experience. This experience includes the 9/11 events but certainly is not limited to them, and it includes reckoning with ways subjects are imbricated or complicit in the exploitation and powerlessness of others. The predicament of the post-9/11 political subject is that in order to maintain the claim that sovereignty is possible, it transforms its desire to resist impinging power into a legitimation of what it resists. The predicament is thus not a subject that remains blind to its experiences, or even reflexively desires subjection, but a subject whose impulse for resistance is refigured by the very methods it draws upon in its effort. By way of desiring opposition to contemporary power, post-9/11 subjects end up authorizing one of its most imposing forms, repudiating the possibility for a more rigorous critique of their conditions, perpetuating their burdens, and justifying violence and war.
I conclude by suggesting that even in one of the more unliberatory moments in recent political life – when political subjects did not just acquiesce to but actively supported policies that sanctioned large-scale violence and murder, that overtly contributed to their own regulation and surveillance, and that explicitly diminished venues for dissent, possibilities for political participation, and pursuits of justice – we might observe political subjects’ desire to challenge conditions of unfreedom and to undo experiences of oppression and exclusion that they otherwise seem so willing to uphold. To make this suggestion is not to offer an optimistic reading of a horrifying moment in political life or to justify the complicity of American citizens who acquiesced to and actively sanctioned violent, inhumane, or oppressive policies – quite the contrary. But it is to tell a different and overlooked story, about a contemporary political subject that does not necessarily desire unfreedom, but whose resistance to unfreedom is thwarted by the very mechanisms it adopts in its struggle.

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Notes
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2. In this account the Bush Administration deceived Americans into supporting its programs, and it harbors responsibility for the effects of post-9/11 policy. This answer “solves” the paradox by interpreting popular support as a product of manipulation rather than informed consent, erasing the discomfiting implications of a citizenry that authorizes its own unfreedom. It reassures citizens that they bear no responsibility because they were deceived, while it furthers the pervasive distrust of the people as easy marks of political leaders. See Thomas Frank, What’s the Matter With Kansas: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America (New York: Metropolitan, 2004); Michael Ignatieff, “Getting Iraq Wrong,” New York Times Magazine, August 5, 2007; Thomas Ricks, Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq (New York: Penguin, 2006); and popular magazine and newspaper articles by Thomas Friedman and George Packer, including Friedman’s “Restoring Our Honor,” New York Times, May 6, 2004; and Packer’s “The Political War,” New Yorker, September 27, 2004.

3. In this account Americans, often cowed by the responsibilities that real freedom entails, were by and large willing to sacrifice the formal trappings of freedom for the promise of national security. It also suggests that the effort to challenge these policies seemed irrelevant from their positions of relative safety and material comfort. See Slavoj Žižek, Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle (New York: Verso, 2004); Sheldon Wolin, Democracy Inc.: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); and Timothy Kaufman-Osborn’s excellent “We Are All Torturers Now: Accountability and the Campaign of Homogenization,” Theory & Event 11:2 (2008).

4. For instance, Gallup polls taken between 2001 and 2004 following the 9/11 attacks show “an extraordinary increase in the faith and confidence that Americans have in their federal government” such that over 68% have a “high” level of trust in government, levels not seen for 40 years; 63–70% of Americans said that they are “extremely proud” to be an American, a rise of 30% over the same polling question asked before the 9/11 attacks; support for the War in Afghanistan leveled at 80–92% of the US population; 89–75% of the US population had a “very favorable” view of the military throughout this time and more confidence in the military than in any other societal institution; between 53–64% of Americans favored military action in Iraq to remove Saddam Hussein from power. See http://www.gallup.com/poll/4984/Trust-Government-Increases-Sharply-Wake-Terrorist-Attacks.aspx; http://www.gallup.com/poll/17451/Post911-Patriotism-Remains-Steadfast.aspx; http://www.gallup.com/poll/4966/Public-Overwhelmingly-Backs-Bush-Attacks-Afghanistan.aspx; and the collection of polls at gallup.com from 2001–2004 on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

5. In polls taken between 2001–2004, nearly four in five (78%) Americans stated that they are willing to give up freedoms to gain security; 72% supported and approved the creation of the Department of Homeland Security; 64–69% of Americans stated that the USA PATRIOT Act doesn’t go far enough in restricting civil liberties or gets it exactly right. See http://www.gallup.com/poll/6196/Which-Freedoms-Will-Americans-Trade-Security.aspx; http://www.gallup.com/poll/4966/Public-Overwhelmingly-Backs-Bush-Attacks-Afghanistan.aspx; and the collection of polls at gallup.com from 2001–2004 on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

34. In Fuss’s words, “identification operates for the subject as the primary means for gaining control over the objects outside itself; identification is a form of mastery modeled directly on the nutritional instinct [incorporation as destruction and mastery].” Fuss, *Identification Papers*, 35.
35. The question as to the nature of this acknowledgement, of how the loss is acknowledged, remains a contentious topic in psychoanalytic literature. The acknowledgement of loss occurs in unconscious to a certain degree; it centers in the ego, and involves the ego’s attempt to broker loss by convincing the id that the ego itself is a substitute for the object the id still desires. Yet loss can also function at a conscious level, as Freud seems to explain when marking the difference between mourning and melancholia. Mourning occurs when the desire for the lost object transforms into identification with it through a conscious working through of loss. Melancholia, by contrast, is a refusal to recognize loss, a process in which the loss remains disavowed. Part of the problem is that Freud provides different configurations of identification in different texts, and thus exactly how this acknowledgement happens remains unclear. Yet what remains constant is his insistence that some form of acknowledgement of loss and difference must predicate the process of identification.
38. Another source of confusion is the distinction Freud continually draws between desire and identification – between wanting to “have” and to “be” a love object, distinctions that, as Diana Fuss demonstrates, are constantly blurred. Identification with the state – wanting to be “like” the state – seems to operate as both something one wants to be – autonomous/master – and also what one wants to have – control over the powers that govern one’s existence. I follow Fuss in refusing to tidy those muddy distinctions: the distinction between wanting to “be” autonomous and to “have” or possess control over what is autonomous is very slippery, and, I would suggest, are both part of the desire for mastery. See Fuss, *Identification Papers*.