

Introduction: Students and the Future of Popular Culture Studies

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A musician blessed with one of the best singing voices of the 20th century once sang: “I believe the children are our future / Teach them well and let them lead the way / Show them all the beauty they possess inside / Give them a sense of pride to make it easier” (Houston). Whitney Houston, of course, sang of children in general, but the central idea of calling upon adults to act as worthy mentors applies to our work in this issue. At a time when teenagers lead climate change activism, only to receive scorn from the adults who should instead mentor them, popular culture scholars should re-examine the relationship between student-mentor, and consider what they are doing to achieve the dual task of supporting students while recognizing when the students have surpassed them, and supporting this advancement.

Scholars from a variety of disciplines work in popular culture studies, but programs dedicated to the field remain rare. Young scholars may therefore have a hard time locating these mentors. To that end, I asked for more established scholars to provide their advice via the Twitter hashtag #PopCultureAdvice. Several scholars responded with suggestions for what they felt any young popular culture studies scholar should consider when entering the field.

Samantha Close, an Assistant Professor of Communication at DePaul University, provided this advice: “Twitter is a good place to be for fan studies! Follow and engage with scholars whose work you like or who are talking about your stuff. I’d also say: go to the business meetings at conferences. They’re a great place to meet people doing your stuff & usually networking is built-in.”

Brian Cogan, an Associate Professor of Communications at Molloy College, made this suggestion: “I’d tell [young scholars] that just because something is popular does not mean it’s not worthy of serious theoretical analysis. Many things that are seen as important later are dismissed as trivial at the time. Pop culture scholars study not only artifacts but the ways in which we make sense of the world and who we are and where we are going.”

Aliza Steurer, an Assistant Professor of Mathematics at Dominican University, offered the following guidance: “Trends tend to get recycled, but with some updates. For example, the hippie clothing trend in the mid-90s and the 80s clothing trend in the 2010s. (I’m not that trendy, so these examples might be a bit off.) I would recommend that young scholars look for patterns in the trends and develop possible reasons for those patterns.”

Ian Wolf, a Professor of English at Louisburg College, had this advice: “Don’t shoehorn yourself into some specialty; instead, follow the thread of your curiosity as it weaves through your studies and scholarship. Also, prepare to teach well. It doesn’t happen by accident, and pedagogy can be incredibly empowering!”

Hannah C. Gunderman, a cultural geographer and postdoctoral research associate at the University of Tennessee, recommended: “My #PopCultureAdvice that I wish I had gotten when I was a younger #popculture scholar: your work is valid and valuable! People may question the rigor of pop culture studies but keep moving forward. It’s so important to have this research out there. You are doing awesome work!”

Elise Vist, a Ph.D. candidate in English Language and Literature at the University of Waterloo, said: “Read scholars of color and queer scholars first! The ‘foundational’ stuff will always be there—and will probably be explained and critiqued in their work better than you’ll do in your head. Save yourself the work of unlearning!”

Sarah Stanley, a Ph.D. candidate in English at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas, recommended: “Study what you love. The point of popular cultures studies is to talk about the things that make you feel. That’s important. If someone tells you something isn’t important enough to write about, then it’s most important that you write about it.”

My own personal advice: “I would tell the students to be interdisciplinary and multimethodological in their pop culture studies so that even if they do not go on in academia, they can still apply those skills and knowledgebases in a wide array of professional, personal, critical and creative contexts.”

Of course, one of the most important ways to mentor young scholars is by helping them strengthen their academic writing. While scholars are exploring more forms of academic communication today, being able to write a clear, concise, accurate, and intriguing paper remains the foundation for research and scholarship. Elizabeth Wardle reminds all of us that students are learners, and their struggles with writing are less about them and more about how we construct the conditions

under which they learn to write. If we want students to learn how to write as an academic, then we all need to help them learn how to do that and not assume that simply completing an introductory composition course prepares them for that task. Add to that this journal's desire for writing that is approachable to a general audience, which requires a different approach to academic writing, and it becomes clear that part of our editorial staff's job as mentors is to guide students in their academic writing.

To support such young scholars, I decided to organize a Student Showcase: a one-time special edition of the *Popular Culture Studies Journal* that would highlight work by up-and-coming undergraduate and graduate students. We solicited papers from around the world and ended up receiving over 50 papers, with over 40 of them going out for review. Once we saw how many applications we received, we realized the desire young scholars had to be heard, and to provide a place that considers their work seriously without requiring it to meet the same criteria applied to established scholars. Thus, we decided what was to be a one-time showcase would become a standard feature in the journal, with this showcase as the inaugural edition.

The students in this inaugural student showcase present a variety of perspectives on a range of topics and provide ample evidence that they can perform the scholarly tasks set upon them by their professors and mentors. Taylor Katz compares historical records to the white savior narrative of *Free State of Jones*. Bradley J. Dixon considers how social media have led to the formation of a "parafictional persona," especially in modern comedies. Brady Simenson also considers the current state of celebrity today, by analyzing an early celebrity: Oscar Wilde. Safiyya Hosein, meanwhile, analyzes the portrayal of Kamala Khan in *Ms. Marvel* to understand modern representations of Muslim women. Lizzie Martin uses the novel *The Association of Small Bombs* to understand post-9/11 rhetoric in the United States. Sarah F. Price considers the potentials and pitfalls in the representation of a transgender character in The CW's, especially regarding sociocultural messages about women's body image. Anis Rahman also discusses a superhero—the first-ever Bangladeshi superhero—by presenting Shabash as a transcultural, transnational, and transcreated character. Kathleen W. Taylor Kollman analyzes the television series *Travelers* to reveal how it reflects exploitative labor practices, and Shadia Siliman examines how *Scandal* and *House of Cards* represent victimhood and sexual violence. Steven Proudfoot considers a new theoretical approach to understanding experiencing negative emotions while playing video games, and Christopher J. Olson discusses the various theoretical

lenses through which one might analyze the digital archive/streaming service by *NWR.com*.

In all, this collection presents eleven students doing original work and contributing to our understanding of popular culture around the world. Along with their articles, the regular submissions from established academics suggest new venues for popular culture studies as well as analyses of important texts in different social and historical contexts. Graeme John Wilson analyzes how the Netflix series *Dear White People* represents Black identity. Allan W. Austin deconstructs the messages of gender and race in the Fleischer Studio Superman cartoons produced during World War II. Emily Sauter and Kevin Sauter analyze the rhetoric of *House Hunters International* while Joshua Sopiartz considers the relationship between father figures and masculinity in boxing films. Thomas Fahy compares the play *Bugs* to *The X-Files* to consider how they both reveal the link between conspiracy theories and poverty. Bill Clough analyzes the novel *House of Leaves* to understand the relationship between anti-intellectualism and scholarly parodies. Finally, Beth Emily Richards uses her autoethnography of Elvis impersonators to understand fan activity and fan performance. Contained in this collection are articles that examine understudied texts and contexts, presenting new perspectives on why studying popular culture is important for understanding our world and each other.

Both the upcoming scholars and the more established academics who contributed to this journal suggest new ways of studying the world around us, of understanding the tentative distinction between reality and fiction, and interrogating the power dynamics that operate in our world.

Finally, I return to another popular culture text—one near and dear to my own heart—in considering what Jedi Master Yoda said to Jedi Master Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*: “Luke, we are what they grow beyond. That is the true burden of all masters.” Mentors, heed the wizened one’s words: prepare students for leadership, and embrace the joy that comes when they fulfill this role.

Works Cited

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