

# THE POPULAR CULTURE STUDIES JOURNAL

# STUDENT SHOWCASE

## SHOWCASE FEATURES

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Around The Association of Small Bombs

SEXUAL VIOLENCE  
and sympathy  
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SEXISM AND RACISM IN

FLEISCHER  
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CARTOONS

FAN LABOR AND  
ELVIS IMPERSONATORS



BLACK IDENTITY IN  
DEAR WHITE PEOPLE

Edited by: CarrieLynn D. Reinhard

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# Introduction: Students and the Future of Popular Culture Studies

CARRIELYNN D. REINHARD

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.

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# The White Knight of Jones County: American Monomyth and White Savior Narratives in *Free State of Jones*

TAYLOR KATZ

When examining a Hollywood film, it is no surprise to encounter complex tales of shifting loyalties, shocking betrayals, violent acts of murder and vengeance, and taboo relationships. What is perhaps more surprising is to find a historical basis for all of these elements. Such is the case in Gary Ross's 2016 film *Free State of Jones*, which stars Matthew McConaughey as Confederate deserter Newton Knight as he fights a war-within-a-war against the Confederacy in the waning days of the Civil War and subsequently builds a life in a mixed-race community during the Reconstruction Era.

This essay argues that *Free State of Jones* uses the American monomyth and the white savior narrative to construct a heroic version of Knight's story, averting the typical, problematically simplistic conclusions to such narratives in favor of a message about cooperating against systematic oppression. Though the film centers on Knight's agency as mythic white hero, the film foregrounds the heroic actions of black heroes, particularly in the characters of Rachel Knight (Gugu Mbatha-Raw) and Moses Washington (Mahershala Ali). Yet while Newton Knight disavows and critiques his own whiteness, the film still demonstrates the pervasiveness of whiteness and its ability to reconfigure itself. This essay begins with a discussion of the context and scholarship surrounding the film *Free State of Jones* before drawing attention to issues of public memory raised by historical films. It then provides theoretical background pertaining to whiteness, the white savior narrative, and the American monomyth before analyzing how *Free State of Jones* conforms to, but also subverts elements of, the storytelling patterns it uses.

Taylor Katz is a second year Ph.D. student in the Rhetorical Leadership program at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and he holds a Master's degree in communication from Abilene Christian University. His work centers on the intersection of storytelling, culture, and mythology in the context of film. He is passionate about revealing the connections between concepts embedded in communication artifacts and their impact on cultural life and values. He can be reached at [thkatz@uwm.edu](mailto:thkatz@uwm.edu).

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In lieu of a fairytale conclusion to a heroic myth, *Free State of Jones* conveys to audiences the brutal realities of the Reconstruction South. Because these storytelling patterns are deeply entrenched in American popular culture and influence audience attitudes towards democracy and identification with others, this analysis discusses the ramifications of the film's subversive storytelling for American civil society.

### Context for *Free State of Jones*

First, it is necessary to provide context for Newton Knight's story. The publications available on the topic of Knight and Jones County contest the historical narrative. Historian Rudy Leverett concludes that there was no true organized government in Jones county, but that loosely-organized bands of deserters held a reign of terror over Jones County residents, looting from and killing any who opposed them (118). Leverett explains that Knight's actions against Confederate agents and resources were likely disingenuous gestures aimed at earning a pro-Union reputation. He claims that Knight sought to "contrive a calculated political defense" for civilian-targeted activities earlier in the war (119). Leverett asserts that while a "Republic of Jones" did exist in Jones County, it existed primarily in the form of a local legend rather than an organized government. Leverett's conclusions stand in stark contrast to the principled, conscientious version of Knight portrayed in *Free State of Jones* who fights first to protect his community against Confederate officers' abusive plundering of civilians through "Tax-in-Kind" policy and later to oppose racial injustice. Leverett casts Knight as little more than a deserter, looter, and political opportunist who manipulated circumstances for self-gain and survival rather than an idealist fighting for convictions about property rights, slavery, or racism.

In perhaps the most detailed book on Knight to date, Victoria Bynum provides scholarly evidence for a more nuanced interpretation of Knight's life. This counter-narrative to Leverett subsequently formed the basis for Ross's film. Bynum suggests Leverett's ancestral connection to a Confederate major Amos McLemore as the potential source of a bias against Knight. Bynum also suggests that one of Leverett's sources, Knight's descendent Ethel Knight, was concerned with the racial purity of her family and influenced by the Lost Cause, leading to a bias on her part against Knight that subsequently influenced Leverett's work. Bynum argues that Leverett "ignor(ed) altogether the involvement of women and slaves" and "cast the struggle as a contest between law-abiding and law-breaking males"

(25-103). “With the civilian population erased altogether, Confederate soldiers appeared as God-fearing, hardworking, loyal citizens” in Leverett’s writing (Bynum 97). Bynum further explains that Lost Cause ideology has co-opted Knight’s memory when “the fact is, Newt left no record of his personal views on either racial equality or racial identity,” making it possible for others to later use his story to “promote, deter, blame, inspire, include, or censure whatever personal bias we want to project onto him” (194).

In addition to complicating an understanding of Knight’s motives, Bynum also muddles the narrative of his romantic relationships. Bynum points to photographic evidence that suggests Knight’s intimate relationship with his first wife Serena, a white woman, continued during his relationship with common-law wife Rachel, a black former slave (94). In addition to the children he had with Serena and Rachel, evidence suggests that he fathered children with Georgeanne Knight, Rachel Knight’s daughter by another man (Bynum 159). The film portrays Newton Knight’s relationships with Serena and Rachel, but it omits the relationship with Georgeanne entirely. Bynum explains that “the instituting of racial segregation and the rewriting of the Civil War as a ‘lost cause’ to preserve states’ rights contributed to the image of Newt Knight as a man guilty of both miscegenation and treason” (159). Knight’s interracial relationships were taboo among his contemporaries and later scandalized descendants like Ethel Knight.

Bynum’s scholarship likewise explicates Knight’s friendships as portrayed in the film. Bynum explains that the character of escaped slave Moses is fictional, along with Knight’s friendship with him, though she indicates that Moses’ narrative, including his lynching, is a historically realistic portrayal of a black experience in Jones County during the era (Ural 102-3). The membership of Moses and other men of color in the Knight Company and Knight’s participation in the Union League are also fictional elements of the film (Ural 103). Understanding how films about the past influence audiences is important for unpacking the effect of these fictional elements.

## Memory in Historical Films

Though audience members are cognizant of inaccuracies, historical films present emotionally compelling narratives that shape audiences’ affective relationships with the past. According to Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, Americans engage with films about the past to experience entertainment and an affective connection

to other eras through contextual elements of setting like clothes, cultural practices, or technology used (100-1). The affective nature of this relationship with the medium presents the potential for cultural consequences.

Ekaterina Haskins identifies several consequences that result from engagement with popular forms of memory such as films. Haskins examines the consequences of commemoration for democratic citizenship, explaining that both elite and nonelite members of society produce meaningful forms of popular memory. For Haskins, memory practices serve “not only as tools of ideological domination or political self-assertion, but also as rhetorical invocations of identity that can expand or limit our civic horizon as well as induce or discourage identification with various others” (4). Popularized texts such as films “speak the language of popular culture” to gain the attention of popular audiences (5). Haskins’ identification of the power of popularized memory texts on audiences’ civic horizons also parallels concerns this essay will discuss over the American monomyth and spectator democracy.

Given previous attempts to connect Newton Knight’s story to the Lost Cause, *Free State of Jones*’s commemorative choices have important implications for audiences today. Given Lost Cause influences on the memory of Knight, the film could disseminate a version of Knight’s narrative that counters those memories to a mass audience. As discussed in more depth in the next section, “(white savior) films are not simply about how we remember the past. They affect how we interpret the present” (Madison 141). And if, as Haskins argues, audiences’ civic horizons and identification with others are at stake, then this interpretation of the present bears examination.

The film’s commemorative choices are especially pertinent for the Knight descendants who continue to live in Jones County to this day. Knight’s descendants fall into three groups: the typically pro-Confederacy “White Knights” who descended from Knight and Serena, the “Black Knights” who trace their ancestry to Knight’s cousin Dan and one of his slaves, and the “White Negroes” who descended from Knight and Rachel as well as Knight and Georgeanne (Grant 66-7). Racial tension marks relationships between members of these groups. Some descendants remember Knight with pride, while others remember him as Ethel Knight did: as a traitor to the Confederacy (Grant 66). As the text on Knight most likely to reach a popular audience, *Free State of Jones* serves as Hollywood endorsement of a popularized view of Knight that will affect how his descendants and their various views on Knight are perceived by the world. Drawing out *Free State of Jones*’s messages requires an understanding of the nature of whiteness.

## Whiteness and the White Savior Narrative

The concept of whiteness is elusive and difficult to clearly define. Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek describe “White” as an “invisible” and “relatively uncharted territory” that “affects the everyday fabric of our lives but resists, sometimes violently, any extensive characterization that would allow for the mapping of its contours” (291). In a seminal work drawing attention to stereotypical portrayals of Asian individuals in the film *Showdown in Little Tokyo* (1991), Nakayama explains that white heterosexual masculinity is the cornerstone of many Hollywood action and martial arts films from the early 1990s that feature a white hero who enters into Asian-American or Asian cultural spaces and emerges victorious in conflict (“Show/down Time” 164). These white protagonists build relationships with Asian sidekicks and love interests, whom Nakayama identifies respectively with the Western genre tropes of a Native American sidekick in the style of “Tonto” and a Native American sexual conquest. Nakayama concludes by explaining that white heterosexual masculinity musters whatever resources are needed to claim a universal space, leading to a re-centering of whiteness in media culture that uses race as well as “other forms of difference to construct hierarchical relations” (“Show/down Time” 162-3).

Hierarchical relations are at the heart of the issue of whiteness. Nakayama further argues that people of color have long understood the hierarchical nature of whiteness and have adapted their behavior to survive in white-dominated societies (“Review and Criticism” 364-5). He specifies that whiteness is not merely a function of race, but that it is perpetuated through other social functions of sexuality, class, location, and nationality that reinforce a dominating system. Differences of class are evident, for example, in J. David Thomas’s analysis of Jeff Foxworthy’s humor. Thomas argues that Foxworthy’s humor constructs a “redneck identity as degenerate and primitive” that insulates mainstream whiteness and white supremacy against the intra-racial threat caused by a poor rural white underclass that “challenge(s) cherished notions of American individualism and meritocracy” (12). Whiteness also continually adapts by creating hierarchies in emergent contexts. For example, Nakayama analyzes racist responses to the creation of Barack Obama’s presidential Twitter account, identifying them as signs of a disturbing shift in whiteness due to the rise of interactivity online, further evidence

that whiteness is dynamic and reconfigures itself to maintain a strategic position. (“What’s Next” 68-72).

As already seen, whiteness perpetuates itself through media such as film. This is particularly true of films in what Kelly J. Madison calls the “anti-racist-white-savior” genre, hereafter simplified as “white savior” (405). Madison points to a “legitimation crisis” faced by white supremacy in the latter part of the twentieth century due to civil rights activism, and argues that films such as *Cry Freedom* (1987) and *Amistad* (1997) released in the years that followed answered this crisis with narratives that limited the agency of African and African-American characters by constructing seemingly “anti-racist” narratives that actually perpetuate racism by highlighting white agency and heroism (Madison 405). These narratives follow a general pattern in which a white hero vicariously experiences racism through contact with a black individual, develops an anti-racist consciousness, suffers and sacrifices at the hands of white racists to further the interests of black people, and prevails despite this suffering. These narratives “construct a revisionist narrative of equality in which the ‘black children’ could not have made it without the aid of the ‘white father’” (Madison 413). The white savior genre continues to warrant critical examination, particularly with the ongoing presence in American popular culture of films like *Green Book* (2018) that explore white experiences of racism against African-Americans. Another example can be found in Jeffrey L. Bineham’s criticism of *The Blind Side* (2009) for indirectly perpetuating systematic racism in the United States. Bineham explains that racism, in the guise of postracism, allows society to believe that it offers equal opportunity to all individuals and therefore that all failures are due to inability or a lack of initiative. Building Madison’s work, Bineham argues that *The Blind Side* “provides important symbolic resources for privileged audiences: the opportunity to identify with the hero and thereby to ignore responsibility for systemic injustices” (233).

Bineham’s criticism exemplifies the connection Madison makes between collective memory and the white savior genre. Madison explains, based upon Zelizer’s work, that shared constructions of the past form a “usable” collective memory that forces of domination with social, cultural, and economic power use to constrain remembrance and forgetting (400). White savior narratives create usable memories for white audiences in which white individuals have done enough to help black individuals, an example of how whiteness’s “dynamic nature is part of how it maintains its strategic position” (“What’s Next” 72). As Madison explains, these narratives “construct collective memories that contribute to the masking of white

supremacy in the history of global capitalist domination and in the material and cultural structure of the U.S.” (415). The white savior narrative is one example of how films perpetuate whiteness, but whiteness also perpetuates itself through other narrative patterns.

## The American Monomyth in Film

In *The American Monomyth*, Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence propose that a distinctly American version of Joseph Campbell’s monomyth characterizes innumerable American popular culture artifacts. Such narratives conform to the following pattern:

A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil: normal institutions fail to contend with this threat: a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task: aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisaical condition: the superhero then recedes into obscurity. (Jewett and Lawrence xx)

The authors explain that the American monomyth, emerging from “Judeo-Christian redemption dramas that have arisen on American soil,” tells the story of “the supersaviors in pop culture” who “function as replacements for the Christ figure, whose credibility was eroded by scientific rationalism” (xx). Neil Gerlach further explains, “In this mythic narrative, helpless communities are redeemed by a Christ figure who is never integrated into the community, but leaves at the end, remaining the perpetual outsider. He or she has an unchanging moral perfection and a strong capability for action while the community is changeable and must be saved through the violent heroic action” (1033). Another recurring theme is sexual renunciation. The hero “must renounce previous sexual ties for the sake of his trials” (Jewett and Lawrence 12).

The 2002 follow-up to their 1977 work, Lawrence and Jewett further elucidate their American monomyth in *The Myth of the American Superhero*, this time placing more emphasis on the social consequences of the myth’s prevalence in American culture. American monomythic narratives cast heroes as the protectors of “Eden,” communities frequently taking the form of “the rustic world of small farms and plantations” though the authors explain that such portrayals frequently overlook the realities of crop failure, depression, murder, pressures for social

conformity, and any number of other social problems that can and do occur in such communities (Lawrence and Jewett 22-3). Because the savior of the American monomythic narrative is the only one who can save this idealized community from the threat of an external evil, the normal institutions of society are rendered useless. This casts everyday citizens as members of a “spectator democracy” in which citizens are helpless to resolve social ills and must instead encourage and rely upon a violent vigilante figure to take action (Lawrence and Jewett, 29-30). Evil is the final key theme of the American monomyth, and one that typically has racial ramifications. Racial Others such as Native Americans are frequently identified as a “savage,” alien threat to civilized communities (Jewett and Lawrence 85). Furthermore, the American monomyth perpetuates a problematic tendency to encourage warfare and violence towards the racial or religious Other whom the story simplistically categorizes as evil (Lawrence and Jewett 16-7).

Many other theoretical perspectives, especially intersectional perspectives on gender and race or on violence and racism, would have much to say regarding *Free State of Jones*. However, the American monomythic perspective is uniquely useful in that it sensitizes a reading of film to narrative elements that audiences routinely encounter in their experiences of American popular culture and cinema. One need look no further than the latest superhero, science-fiction, or fantasy epic to see echoes, if not whole-cloth representations, of the American monomyth. In fact, many of the very same figures that Lawrence and Jewett identify in their 1977 formulation of the American monomyth, including Superman, Captain America, Spider-Man, and Captain Kirk, remain champions of the box office even decades later. The enduring nature of this myth is enough to call for scholarly attention, but that call becomes more urgent considering the American monomyth’s racial implications and connections to whiteness.

An overlap in American monomyth literature and whiteness literature comes into focus in David L. Sutton and J. Emmett Winn’s work. They apply Nakayama’s critique of whiteness to POW/MIA films that also conform to the pattern of American monomythic narratives. A racialized evil, the failure of institutions, and a self-sacrificing but violent white superhero are all American monomythic themes present in films such as *Rambo: First Blood, Part II* (1985), *Uncommon Valor* (1983), and *Missing in Action* (1984) that portray the rescue of American soldiers from Vietnam prison camps (Sutton and Winn 25-30). Sutton and Winn identify a pattern of violence against Asians, who are demonized as a racial Other to show the white American protagonist’s heroism, which parallels the pattern identified in

Nakayama's criticism of *Showdown in Little Tokyo*. These films, then, provide mythic resolution to audiences' unresolved feelings about the Vietnam War, providing a heroic conclusion to a perceived problem (Sutton and Winn 30).

The overlapping racial elements of these two narrative patterns provide a precedent for dual identification of *Free State of Jones* as an American monomyth and as a white savior narrative. Both narrative patterns are present in the film, and both theoretical lenses serve here to focus on different aspects of the film's racial rhetoric and portrayal of whiteness. Furthermore, such an examination allows for consideration of the racial ramifications of the ongoing presence of these narrative patterns in American popular culture.

### The American Monomyth in *Free State of Jones*

Several traits mark Newton Knight as the principled, Christlike hero of the American monomyth. Knight is economically humble and racially progressive, describing himself as someone who "don't own no slaves," and who is unwilling to die defending the ability of rich plantation owners to make money on cotton (Ross 00:40:41-00:40:45). Knight's attitudes are further seen when he helps Rachel learn to read and sleeps in the camp of runaway slaves even after white deserters also camp out in the swamp. Knight later upholds anti-hierarchical ideals, telling his followers "if you can walk on two legs, you're a man. It's as simple as that" (Ross 01:35:25-01:35:30).

Elements of Knight's character more specifically reinforce an identification as a Christlike hero figure. Knight has a massive toolkit of heroic skills as healer, guerilla warrior, blacksmith, and wilderness survivalist that he demonstrates while hiding in the swamps and during his campaign against the Confederacy, but he also demonstrates the gentler capacities to read and quote from scripture and to deliver eloquent orations. His faith motivates his racial attitude, as he reasserts his friend Moses's statement that "you cannot own a child of God" to his followers (Ross 01:19:25-01:19:28). Knight's eloquence and faith are further evident in his eulogy for Moses, describing him as a "man who had so many reasons to be full of hate, yet he never was, and that, Lord, is one of your greatest miracles" (Ross 02:01:56-02:02:10).

Contrary to the typical image of a gentle and serene Christ, but in exact alignment with the violent redeemers of the American monomyth, Knight is both master and advocate of violence for redemptive purposes. Knight teaches young

girls how to hold and fire shotguns to protect their farm from taxation. When the Confederate taxation officer balks at the children, Knight backs up the threat of violence with deadly seriousness, explaining “all they gotta do is go like that,” while wiggling his finger. He continues, “last time I checked, the gun don’t care who’s pulling the trigger” (Ross 00:27:42-00:27:52). When Knight learns of the plantation owner’s sexual assault upon Rachel, he single-handedly raids the plantation and destroys a shipment of cotton in revenge.

Knight’s violence continues throughout the film. After several of Knight’s company, including young boys, surrender to the Confederates and are subsequently executed, Knight stages a violent surprise attack in the guise of a funeral where the grieving mothers and widows conceal firearms under their black coats and the caskets contain armed men rather than corpses. Knight demonstrates a mastery of firearms by wounding the Confederate Colonel Hood (Thomas Francis Murphy) with precision shots. He demonstrates physical strength by chasing Hood into the church and strangling him with a belt. Knight and his army then run the Confederates out of Ellisville, the Jones County seat, with tactics like firing improvised shrapnel from a cannon. Knight stands with other American monomythic heroes by affirming violence as the appropriate means for the protection and redemption of the community.

At first glance the film would seem to contradict the theme of sexual renunciation, but the theme is nevertheless present to the extent possible for a figure who is historically documented to be a biological father. Following the pattern American monomythic heroes who give up love or sexual relationships to pursue a heroic quest, Knight’s heroism separates him from his wife Serena. When defending another family’s farm outs him as a deserter and forces him to flee to the swamp, Serena turns away from him saying “I can’t do this anymore, Newt, I can’t” (Ross 00:29:02-00:29:07). Eventually she and their young son abandon the family farm, only to later return to live in a separate house on Knight and Rachel’s property. Contrary to Bynum’s evidence, the film’s portrayal of this arrangement implies Knight’s ongoing faithfulness to Rachel rather than a polygamous relationship (Bynum 154-9). The film also omits Georgeanne entirely. The sexual nature of Knight’s relationship with Rachel is implied in the film only by the birth of their son rather than portrayed overtly through romantic scenes. In this manner, *Free State of Jones* selectively presents and omits historical facts in a way that makes Knight’s story conform more closely to the narrative pattern of the American

monomyth. These decisions also avoid portraying Knight as polygamous, which may serve to make Knight's character more palatable for a popular audience.

While *Free State of Jones* initially portrays Jones County as an Edenic southern farmland under threat of Confederate abuse of the Tax-in-Kind policy, the film ultimately leaves this Eden unrestored. It is not the war but rather the Confederacy's taxation practices that shatter the community's peace. This failure of the typical protective institutions of society calls the hero to action. Indeed, the institutions themselves threaten Jones County residents. As expected of American monomythic tales, Knight's actions do bring a form of restoration to the community he defends. The raid on the corn farm provides a glimpse of the lost Eden as men, women, and children enjoy the communal work of picking, shucking, and hauling away corn.

The failure of institutions is evident in the Confederacy's abuse of its own citizens, but other elements of the film also portray this theme. Despite Knight's success resisting the Confederacy, the specter of racism and Andrew Johnson's lenient Reconstruction policies haunt Eden through the final act of the film, demonstrating an unresolved failure of institutions. Knight must purchase his friend Moses's son after he is kidnapped by the plantation owner James Eakins (Joe Chrest) under the pretense of an "apprenticeship." The issue is settled in a trial conducted by Lieutenant Barbour (Bill Tangradi), a Confederate officer who Knight previously opposed. Moses himself is eventually lynched for his involvement with registering freedmen to vote. Despite Knight's heroic election day efforts to ensure that more than a dozen of Moses's registrants could cast their Republican votes, on-screen text informs the audience that only two Republican votes were counted in the election. A typical American monomythic narrative would show that the hero successfully fulfilled a redemptive purpose for his community. The film portrays redemptive action, but the redemption itself is at best incomplete.

The evil presented in *Free State of Jones* is comprised of both racial and economic components. Many former slaves join Knight's rebellion, and Knight's actions against Eakins are motivated by his abuse of Rachel: both obvious racial components of the conflict. But Knight's friend Jasper (Christopher Berry) objects to the "Twenty Negro Law" not because of its racism, but because it makes their military service a "poor man's fight in a rich man's war" (Ross 00:05:15-00:05:17). This policy allows soldiers from plantation-owning families to go home while poor Confederate citizens such as Knight are compelled to fight and, like Knight's young relative Daniel, to die. Though this essay addresses subversions of particular

monomythic themes in a following section, the narrative elements identified here demonstrate that *Free State of Jones* conforms to the overall pattern of the American monomyth by presenting Knight's narrative as a heroic quest for the redemption of an Edenic community threatened by evil. Additionally, the film also generally conforms to the white savior narrative while subverting particular themes of this narrative pattern as well.

### White Savior Narrative in *Free State of Jones*

The four steps of the white savior film identified by Madison are present in *Free State of Jones*. The first step is a vicarious experience of racism through contact with a black individual. The Twenty Negro Law unevenly distributes the responsibility of fighting the war on poor citizens like Knight, but a more personal experience of vicarious racism begins through his contact with Rachel. Rachel receives a pass from her owner to heal Knight and Serena's sick son. Rachel shows deference to Knight and offers to perform the task of drawing water for the sick child, but Knight does the work instead so that she can focus on her patient. After she saves his son, Knight gives her a golden chain as a reward and earnestly thanks her. His expression then changes as he remembers that the person who saved his son's life must be given a pass to return to her owner. Slavery's effect on his life and interactions form Knight's first step in the white savior narrative.

The second step is the development of a radical anti-racist consciousness. Knight begins to develop a bond with the escaped slaves hiding with him in the swamps, but his anti-racist attitude is enflamed when he learns of Eakins' sexual assault on Rachel. This motivates vengeful burning of Eakins' cotton. While the destruction of property is itself an act of revenge, this more specifically constitutes an anti-racist act given Knight's earlier identification of cotton as the economic motivator for the injustices of the Twenty Negro Law.

For the third step, Knight suffers and sacrifices at the hands of racists to further the interests of black individuals. Following the war, Knight and Rachel choose to settle on inhospitable land in Soso, Mississippi to escape racist attitudes in other parts of Jones County. Chester (Lawrence Turner), an Ellisville resident who later lynches Moses, sarcastically asks "cap'n Newt" if it is just a "bunch o'n\*\*\*\*rs" living in Soso (Ross 01:42:09–01:42:14). Knight's relationship with Rachel and his accepting attitude have caused him to be ostracized as a "n\*\*\*\*r" by the white residents of the county he once led. Furthermore, Knight is harmed financially by

racist institutions. When Moses decides to rescue his son from “apprenticeship” at Eakins’ plantation, Knight intervenes to prevent Moses from being killed in the attempt. Knight is only successful in freeing Moses’s son by sacrificing financially to purchase the “apprenticeship” from Eakins.

In the fourth step, the white hero suffers greatly but prevails over racism in the end. Poignant suffering occurs for Knight when Moses is lynched for registering freedmen to vote. Knight discovers and weeps beneath Moses’s hanged and mutilated body. Knight becomes motivated to help the freedmen vote. He and two white friends march with the freedmen to the courthouse to demand ballots. The film ends thereafter with text and photographs explaining that Knight and Rachel lived out their lives on the farm that he deeded to her because they could not legally marry. This concludes the white savior narrative: Knight experiences vicarious racism, develops a radical anti-racist consciousness, suffers at the hands of racists, and ultimately prevails despite great suffering.

### Subverting the Narratives

While this analysis shows how *Free State of Jones* conforms to the narrative patterns of the American monomyth and the white savior film, there are several elements of the film that subvert or complicate the problematic aspects of these patterns. Madison identifies a masking of white supremacy and Lawrence and Jewett point to the spectator democracy and the encouragement of violence against a racial other as consequences of these patterns. *Free State of Jones*’s narrative avoids these problems in several ways.

First, the film avoids problematic American monomythic themes that valorize violence, especially violence toward racial others, as a conclusive means of redemption. The failure of institutions, typically a mere prompt for the hero’s vigilantism, is instead the evil that Newton Knight ultimately fails to overcome. Though Knight is successful in addressing taxation, he cannot resolve the failure of the post-war government to protect its citizens. Neither does Knight’s heroism shield Rachel and himself from discriminatory attitudes after the war, and he is not there to save Moses from lynching. Despite his best efforts, Knight also has no solution for disenfranchisement. The audience is left with a Lost Cause-countering message about the persistently oppressive and violently racist Reconstruction-era South.

Atypical to American monomythic narratives, *Free State of Jones* portrays evil not in the form of a savage racial Other, but rather as a system of oppressive economic and racial policies and structures in the Confederate South. This system is enforced and embodied in the collaborative interactions among the Confederate-loyal characters of Hood, Barbour, and Eakins. Barbour is responsible for the overzealous taxation impoverishing Jones County residents during the war, and Hood is the officer to whom Barbour reports. Eakins is responsible for sexually assaulting Rachel. He collaborates with Hood regarding Knight's raids during the war and is later seen benefitting from "apprenticeship" practices that amount to slavery due to Barbour's appointment as a local judge in line with Johnson's lenient post-war policies towards Confederates. These relationships illustrate the interconnected structures of military, economic, and judicial power that perpetuated postbellum injustice.

The portrayal of evil as systematic racial and economic oppression rather than a simplistically-defined racial Other facilitates for audiences a nuanced understanding of racial injustice in the Civil War and Reconstruction eras. *Free State of Jones* seeks to provide no mythic resolution to an unresolved social issue the way Vietnam P.O.W. films of the 1980's did. Instead, it drives home to audiences with intercut flash-forward scenes of the 1948 Davis Knight miscegenation trial that the issues Knight faced in his time would continue well beyond his era and even plague his descendants.

Additionally, the film's treatment of American monomythic themes avoids the problem of the spectator democracy. Most American monomyths portray a hero who can redeem the community through action, suggesting to audiences that they should stand by and wait for such a hero rather than participating in a democratic solution. *Free State of Jones* certainly portrays a hero of this type, but it subverts the problem of the spectator democracy in important ways. First, the diverse community of Knight's company consists of free people, slaves, and freedmen, including men, women, and children all working together for the redemption of the community. Second, Knight's leadership and capacity for violence undoubtedly suggest the role of mythic redeemer, but even the ultimately incomplete redemption of Jones County would be impossible without the aid of his companions. Third, the film subverts the spectator democracy by making the disenfranchisement of black citizens the final major conflict of the film, a barrier caused by an evil system of injustice that the hero cannot overcome despite best efforts. In fact, the audience is

left to understand that the only apparent solution for such an issue would be a democratic one: a large-scale change of racial attitudes.

*Free State of Jones* subverts problematic elements of the white savior narrative that mask white supremacy with Knight's confrontation and disavowal of whiteness. Adopting and elaborating upon Moses's racial ideology, Knight reframes what it means to be a "n\*\*\*\*r." After a white deserter uses the slur against Moses, Moses replies "how you ain't?" (Ross 01:04:16–01:04:18). Knight enters the conversation, explaining to the deserter that willingness to fight and die for the Confederacy and its economic oppression is what really makes someone a "n\*\*\*\*r," while as a slave Moses was forced to work for them against his will. Thus, Knight reframes "n\*\*\*\*r" as a hierarchical term rather than a racial one, identifying the core difference functioning at the heart of whiteness. Knight's rhetoric suggests that it is what one does willingly that makes them subservient. Knight adheres to this ideology when he responds to Chester's remarks by saying "ain't no n\*\*\*\*rs up there [in Soso] at all" (Ross 01:42:22–01:42:29). While it might be possible to construe his response as either problematic colorblindness or an attempt at deception, Knight's previous rhetoric and his identification of the hierarchical nature of the racist term suggests that his answer to Chester is an assertion that the residents of Soso are living their lives freely rather than in submission to a hierarchical system of oppression.

*Free State of Jones* also subverts the paternalistic white savior narrative with realistic and empowering, albeit fictional, portrayals of contemporaneous black experiences. Knight provides aid in the form of reading and shooting lessons for Rachel and removing Moses's iron collar, but this is far from sufficient to demonstrate that either would not have "made it without the aid" (Madison 413) of Knight. Rachel was a competent physician and navigator of the swamps and took the initiative in learning to read by secretly observing her owner's children all before Knight entered her life. Similarly, Moses persisted in escape attempts and ultimately succeeded despite the hindrance of the iron collar, all before meeting Knight. In fact, Moses' insights plant the seeds of Knight's racial rhetoric. While Knight betters Rachel's and Moses's lives, it can hardly be said that he is their 'white father.' Their relationships are built on mutual respect and assistance, values which the film seems to desire to instill in its audience.

Though elements of the film described above avert racially problematic aspects of the American monomyth and the white savior narrative, *Free State of Jones* does exhibit subtle forms of hierarchy that demonstrate whiteness's pervasive nature.

In addition to the clear gender hierarchy evident in Knight's policy of "if you can walk on two legs, you're a man," hierarchy also remains in Knight's leadership of Knight's Company. Knight dictates the actions of the group throughout the film. When his company takes Ellisville, Knight has first choice of the lavish rooms in the city's hotel. The hierarchical nature of Knight's relationship with the company is at times paralleled by hierarchy in his relationship with Moses despite their friendship. Knight intervenes in the tense exchange between Moses and the deserter, apparently feeling the need to explain Moses's statements on Moses's behalf.

Another hierarchy emerges in an examination of the characters' forms suffering. While Knight sacrifices marriage and home for his rebellion and suffers the loss of his friend Moses, it is worth noting that the film's black characters suffer bodily to an extent that Knight does not. Rachel suffers through sexual assault, Moses's son suffers forced labor and enslavement, and Moses himself suffers a gruesome death. These hierarchical elements of the film bear critical consideration against the film's messages of cooperation and equality. They demonstrate the ways in which whiteness subtly, persistently re-centers the heterosexual white male even in narratives which critique whiteness.

## Conclusion

In summary, this essay argues that *Free State of Jones* uses the American monomyth and the white savior narrative to construct a heroic version of Newton Knight's story that averts some of the problematic outcomes of these narrative patterns in favor of a message about cooperating against systematic oppression. Audiences do not expect films to provide historically accurate portrayals of the past, but they do use such films to have an affective experience with it. This affective experience can in turn influence audience perceptions of democracy and their identification with others in civil society. Thus, while *Free State of Jones* omits elements of Knight's life and invents others, these factual liberties might be overlooked in the film's process of popularizing Knight's story for mass audiences. In this process the film counters Lost Cause memories, upholds the heroism of the black resisters of oppression, and identifies and condemns structures of economics, racial ideology, and Confederate and Reconstruction policies that constituted oppression in the 1860's and beyond.

*Free State of Jones* also provides an example of how typically problematic narrative patterns, the American monomyth and the white savior narrative, might be modified or subverted to tell stories that reach popular audiences with racially progressive and historically realistic, if not entirely historically accurate, narratives of oppression and resistance that influence audiences' affective relationship with the past. However, scholars must continue to turn a critical eye to the continued presence of the American monomyth and the white savior narrative in American popular culture. This is particularly true given the enduring presence of the American monomyth in popular film culture and the racial implications of both narrative patterns. Elements of *Free State of Jones* illustrate the pervasiveness of whiteness's hierarchical nature, demonstrating the need to continually critique ever-evolving forms of whiteness in film. Despite this need, *Free State of Jones* does offer hope. Rather than upholding the American monomyth's violence against the racial other or the white savior narrative's white paternalism, *Free State of Jones* alters these narrative patterns to valorize cooperation against systems of oppression and uphold the dignity of every "child of God."

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## “Give Me the Seth Rogen Laugh”: *This Is the End* and Parafictional Persona

BRADLEY J. DIXON

In the opening scene of *This Is the End* (2013), Seth Rogen walks through an airport concourse to pick up his old friend, Jay Baruchel, who has just flown in from Canada for a short stay in Los Angeles. After they meet, share a hug, and walk through the airport to begin what Rogen has planned to be “the best weekend ever,” a paparazzo ambushes the pair with a video camera and a spotlight:

PAPARAZZO: Hey Seth Rogen, how’s it going man? So, you, like, always play the same guy in every movie. When are you going to do some real acting, man?

ROGEN: OK, thank you...

PAPARAZZO: Give me something, give me the Seth Rogen laugh.

*Rogen gives his signature throaty laugh.*

PAPARAZZO: Seth Rogen, everybody. (Goldberg and Rogen 00:01:40–00:01:55)

From the very first scene, *This Is the End* wants its audience to know one thing: Rogen and Baruchel are playing themselves. In the film, as in life, the two actors were childhood friends in Canada, came up in television comedy together in the early 2000s, and moved to Los Angeles shortly after finding fame. Baruchel disliked the decadent Hollywood lifestyle and moved back to the comparatively less glamorous life of a working actor in Canada, while Rogen stayed in Los Angeles and became one of the most recognizable faces in comedy. The opening scenes of *This Is the End* show the pair reconnecting for the first time in over a year.

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They spend their first day together in L.A. getting high, eating snacks and playing video games, before Rogen suggests they go to a party at the Hollywood Hills mansion belonging to his *Pineapple Express* co-star James Franco. Baruchel is reluctant, but Rogen convinces him to go and the pair soon find themselves in the middle of a wild Hollywood party, bursting with celebrities from the film, television and music industries including Jonah Hill, Craig Robinson, Rihanna, Michael Cera, Emma Watson and Kevin Hart. Just as the party hits its peak, however, things turn apocalyptic and a Biblical rapture befalls the earth, with partygoers elevated skyward through beams of blue light as the ground cracks open beneath their feet. Most of the party's celebrity attendees fall into the fiery hell, their impure Hollywood lifestyles disqualifying them from being saved. Six people—the film's main cast—remain holed up in the mansion fighting for survival: Rogen, Baruchel, Robinson, Franco, Hill, and Danny McBride, with each of the six actors playing themselves.

This paper will apply the theory of “parafictional persona” (Warren 56) to *This Is the End*, positioning its ensemble cast as a key example of an increasingly common occurrence: actors and performers playing themselves in fictional media. It will survey the history of personalization in comedy media to chart how the practice of performers appearing in character while using their own real name coincides with the rise of social media technology and the new media ecology. By analyzing *This Is the End* and its cast of comedian-performers, I will demonstrate how the interplay of real and fictional in parafictional media texts cause such texts to appear more recognizably a part of the real world of the audience. I will also demonstrate how the same parafictional interplay can be intentionally subverted and exploited by savvy performers for comedic or narrative effect.

### Parafictional Persona and the Comedian Comedy

With a cast that includes so many established comic actors and comedians, *This Is the End* belongs to the filmic tradition of “comedian comedy,” in which lead roles are played by performers who have previously achieved a level of fame or recognition as a comedian before moving into film roles (Seidman 2). In such films, the extrafictional elements of the star's persona as a comedian, their on-stage comedy material, and their public image as a celebrity, all invade the fictional universe of the film to influence the audience's affective interaction with the star's character.

*This Is the End* goes one step further than other comedian comedies, however, by having almost every member of its cast appear in character using their real name, resulting in a narrative world that is a complex tapestry of real, almost-real, and fictional elements. The film’s stars do not actually play themselves, of course, but instead perform *versions* of themselves. By performing under their real name, they engage in the conscious act of blurring the boundary between character and actor, resulting in the creation of a “parafictional persona.” Kate Warren introduced the concept of the parafictional persona in 2016 to explain the growing contemporary phenomenon of artists and performers playing fictionalized versions of themselves. Carrie Lambert-Beatty theorized about the “parafictional” in literature, in which fictional stories have “one foot in the field of the real” (Warren 54). Building on this theorization, Warren notes that such performers consciously cultivate a version of themselves for use in media which is different to their recognizable self, but which relies on the audience’s recognition and knowledge of their persona and history as a performer to inform their relationship (56). By appropriating their own real name—“that basic distinguisher of individuality”—such performers, including those in *This Is the End*, engage in a highly self-conscious form of identity creation.

The practice has a long history in television, going back at least as far as the Showtime sitcom *It’s Garry Shandling’s Show* (1986-1990): a self-referential, fourth-wall-demolishing program in which comedian Garry Shandling plays a partly fictionalized version of himself. Shandling’s character is always aware that he is in a television show, and the fictional Shandling is closely modelled on the real one, including many references to details of the real Garry Shandling’s life. Even the fictional apartment set on which the show was filmed is modelled on the Sherman Oaks apartment the comedian lived in at the time (Jean and Reiss). *It’s Garry Shandling’s Show* was soon followed by the NBC sitcom *Seinfeld* (1989-1998), in which professional stand-up comedian Jerry Seinfeld played professional stand-up comedian Jerry Seinfeld, with many details from the real Seinfeld’s life reflected in the fictional world of the show. The fictional Seinfeld lived on the Upper West Side of New York City, just like the real one, and often performed stand-up comedy at New York clubs like Catch a Rising Star and the Comedy Store, where the real Jerry Seinfeld got his start as a comedian (Rea). He even occasionally performed on *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson*, a show on which Seinfeld regularly appeared in the 1980s (IMDb). In *Seinfeld*’s fourth season, in a dizzying example of layered metatextuality, the show featured a storyline depicting the creation of a sitcom based on the life of the fictional Jerry Seinfeld called *Jerry*, in

which the comedian played himself, and which made reference to plotlines from earlier seasons of *Seinfeld* (David and Seinfeld).

Today, a panoply of performers have appeared as themselves in television or cinema, including *Seinfeld* co-creator Larry David's *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000-present), Joaquin Phoenix in the mockumentary *I'm Still Here* (2010), Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon in *The Trip* (2010-2017) series, and most recently Keanu Reeves in *Always Be My Maybe* (2019). The practice has found particular utility in comedy, as in the fake reality "talk show" *Between Two Ferns with Zach Galifianakis* (2008-2019), in which the belligerent host asks famous people rude or uncomfortable questions about their careers and personal lives (Aukerman and Porter). It is rare, however, that a film or television show features a parafictional universe as detailed or as comprehensively self-referential as that in *This Is the End*.

## Persona and the Building of the Public Self

*This Is the End* was released to cinemas in 2013, the same year Twitter went public by listing on the New York Stock Exchange and was valued at over \$30 billion (BBC News). While at first these two facts might seem unrelated, in many ways *This Is the End* could only have been made in a world in which a social network like Twitter—bringing together world leaders, mega-star celebrities and the general public on the same platform—had become so ubiquitous. The development of the parafictional persona can be considered as part of a wider shift in practices of identity construction that has its roots in the transition away from old media, which Twitter and other social media platforms had a large part in bringing to bear.

In 2014, after the rise of such social media, P. David Marshall identified a need to account for the effects of new media paradigms and technological changes on practices of identity construction, or personalization. The rise of reality television, the proliferation of social media and a vastly more democratized media ecology has changed the mechanism of personalization, both for celebrities and non-celebrities. Through the latter half of the 20th century our image of celebrities became more well-rounded, with the general public having access to more of their favorite celebrities' personal lives through gossip magazines, talk shows, and eventually websites like TMZ. At the same time, more and more "regular" people became household names not for their achievements or artistic ability, but by appearing in reality television or on news media as themselves. In this new, socially-networked media paradigm, identity is constructed in public and people present different

personas in different contexts (Marshall 160). Marshall uses the term “presentational media” to encapsulate the new media regime in which the boundary between private and public is eroded and people (or corporations, or entities) “present” different personas depending on context. The presentational media regime operates in conjunction with the old media regime, which Marshall terms “representational media,” but has not completely replaced it. Marshall proposed the introduction of persona studies to investigate this phenomenon and identified three factors to explain the shift of personalization from a private process to a public one (154).

The first reason for the shift is the changing shape of labor in the new millennium. According to Marshall, the decline of unionization and shift to a knowledge economy has led to fundamental shifts in the make-up of the labor market. The “gig economy,” in which service industry workers move from project to project rather than spending long stretches of time with a single employer, has disconnected workers from collective organization and a sense of belonging to any single company (154). In this environment it is incumbent upon workers to sell themselves to prospective employers by building a public profile that reflects their personality and abilities as a worker. In other words, they have to create a work persona.

This process described by Marshall has long been standard in the arts and comedy sectors, because it is standard for artists and comedians to work under their own name and, over the course of a career, attempt to build a unique profile for themselves. Comedians, as artists, have already been practicing some kind of presentational form of labor personalization for generations, ever since what comedy historian Kliph Nesteroff called “stand-up’s great change” in the 1950s (358). This period saw the emergence of personalities like Lenny Bruce, Mort Sahl and Jonathan Winters, coffeehouse comedians who weaved personal anecdotes and life experiences into their material, and in the process killed off the era of the “tuxedo comedian”—anonymous, jacket-wearing vaudevillians who recited rapid-fire gags and one-liners. After the great change, comedians began to sell records and concert tickets on the strength of their names, a practice which has continued to grow to the point where, today, practically all comedians wield (and manipulate) their public persona/s for the purpose of building a large public following for their comedy. Robinson and McBride, the two members of *This Is the End*’s main cast who most squarely fit into the traditional definition of a stand-up comedian, have both cultivated their comic persona throughout their decades-long careers, not only

through their on-stage material but also through fictional film and television performances, media interviews and talk show appearances in which they are easily recognizable as themselves. By the time an audience sees them in a film like *This Is the End*, much of the work of creating and maintaining a comedic persona to engage with has already been done.

The second reason Marshall identifies for the shift in personalization is the reorganization of society brought on by social media. In the presentational media paradigm, people create and enact an individual self online which may or may not be an accurate representation of their 'real' self. This simulacrum exists online in and amongst countless others, all interacting with each other, sharing information and links, and organizing into communities around particular values, interests or preferences. Marshall calls these communities "micropublics" (161), and people can belong to a theoretically infinite number of them, each with an associated persona that may or may not share similarities with any of their other personas. In the new media paradigm, social media users are engaged in a constant and ongoing process of creating and modifying a series of personas with which to engage in the various micropublics they inhabit. Kim Barbour et al. describe the persona as "an everyday performance, where the purpose of the presentation of self is to convince the audience [...] that the performance is genuine and authentic." The goal, for celebrities and non-celebrities alike, is that the persona they project will be accepted as a true reflection of the 'real' person behind it, whether it bears any actual relation.

Rogen offers a salient example of the construction of presentational persona in new media, because he is a prolific tweeter and prominent social media personality with over eight million followers on Twitter and six million on Instagram, all of them privy to the everyday happenings of the actor's life and what interests him. When fans read Rogen's joke about smoking weed at the White House or hear his signature throaty laugh in his Instagram videos, it contributes to their sense of who the "real" Rogen is both as a person and as a comedy performer. When Rogen is in character in a film and laughs with the same laugh they have heard in Instagram videos or on television talk shows, the fan recognizes it as part of the "real" Rogen. It contributes to the sense that Rogen's public and fictional personas are one and the same, and his fictional persona is, to use Barbour et al.'s phrase, a "genuine and authentic" presentation of Seth Rogen.

The third and final explanation for the change in personalization is a change in the affective relationship between celebrity and audience. Affect makes sense of the connection between celebrity and audience, and "affective power" is the

capacity of a celebrity to embody emotional investment for a fan. Micropublics and social media communities are “affect clusters”—shared spaces in which affective connections are made and felt, embedded in social network technology, with the online self at the core (Marshall 158). Rogan’s fans, for instance, form a micropublic around (and with) him, in which they build a lasting affective connection—an affective connection that operates not just in the social media environment, but which can also feed back into the fan’s reception of Rogan’s stand-up comedy, media appearances and film and television work. When those fans see Rogan in character they do not want him to shed any vestige of his true self and completely become his character; quite the opposite. For the Seth Rogan fan, part of the joy of seeing him in a film is access to his real-life persona: his very “Seth Rogan-ness.”

Celebrities, in the new media landscape, are no longer rarefied “heavenly bodies,” to borrow the term Richard Dyer used to describe stars in his 1986 book. Now, they are readily visible and easily accessible, and celebrity itself is no longer a virtually unattainable dream. The same process which has fundamentally changed the way people operate in public and online has also changed the nature of celebrity and stardom, and comedian-performers are well positioned to take full advantage of this new media regime and its implications for performance. This affective connection between performer and audience can be effectively exploited by comedians using the parafictional persona.

### Exploiting the Public Self in Fiction

As opposed to the theorization of the comedian comedy, in which the transfer of extrafictional information is one-directional (i.e. information about the star’s comedy persona from outside the fictive world of the film travels into it), the parafictional persona is a discursive negotiation between real and fictional. The function of this negotiation in *This Is the End* is twofold: first, the appearance of a recognizable actor using their real name and acting in a recognizable manner enhances the believability of the fictional world of the film, helping to bring it closer in line with the real world of the audience; and second, fictional elements and their unity or disunity with the audience’s understanding of the real world can be used as the basis for comedy.

The use of the actors’ real names is just one way in which *This Is the End*’s fictive world is imbued with believability. Much of the humor in the film comes

from repeated reference to the real-life professional careers and personal lives of its many recognizable actors. The airport paparazzo who accuses Rogen of playing the same character in all his films is paraphrasing a common critique of Rogen's history as an actor, in which his giggling stoner persona takes over the characterization of whatever fictional role he plays. When Rogen and Baruchel arrive at Franco's party, the guests are grouped together in ways that reflect how they might actually mingle in real life: Jason Segel and Kevin Hart, who appeared together in the Judd Apatow pilot *North Hollywood* in the early 2000s and have been friends ever since, are always seen on screen talking to each other, while Martin Starr and David Krumholtz, real-life best friends, also appear together (Barone). Franco fans would notice several pieces of comically strange art on the walls of his mansion and recognize that the real James Franco has dabbled in avant-garde art himself (Saltz). When Rogen's planned "best weekend ever" turns apocalyptic, leaving only the film's six main characters alive, tension arises between Hill and the rest of the group stemming from the fact that Hill began his career alongside them in comedies like *Superbad* (2007) and *Knocked Up* (2007) before switching to serious dramatic roles and becoming a two-time Oscar-nominated actor. Hill, for his part, plays into his own persona as a famous actor by beginning a prayer with "Dear God...It's me, Jonah Hill, from *Moneyball*" (Goldberg and Rogen 01:06:10-01:06:20).

Each of these jokes and references relies on the audience's working knowledge of the history and public persona of the performer or performers involved, adding a layer of recognition on top of the joke's basic comedic effect. As Melanie Piper points out, references like these "can serve to locate the diegesis within our recognizable world," which enhances the effect of authenticity of the film world (125). At one point, Robinson points out that the group, who are all actors and therefore "soft as baby shit," are completely ill-prepared to survive an apocalyptic event. Sure enough, their status as millionaire Hollywood stars has insulated them from the "real" world, and their attempts to overcome the apocalyptic situation are continually hampered by selfishness, petty bickering and a general inability to deal with problems requiring hard work or diplomacy. Thus, the film uses the real-life personas of its cast to add authenticity to the narrative.

On the other end of the spectrum, some parafictional personas more directly attempt to undermine or contradict the comedian-performer's public persona; indeed, much of *This Is the End*'s comedy comes from conscious or exaggerated differences from the comedian's real lives. In interviews, Rogen has said that he

and co-writer/co-director Evan Goldberg wanted to cast some actors who would play into the audience’s expectation of them as performers, and some who would play against it (Atkinson). While Rogan, Baruchel, and Robinson play characters generally close to their real-life personas in demeanor, Franco, McBride, and Hill to varying levels play exaggerated caricatures of their own. Many of the jokes at Hill’s expense revolve around Hill effecting an overly conscientious and kind personality, even though the rest of the group believes that Hill considers himself better and more famous than them. Occasionally a crack appears in the façade, leading to a glimpse of the “real” Jonah Hill—that is to say, the parafictional one: “A huge earthquake happens, who do they rescue first? Actors,” he says. “They’ll get Clooney, Sandra Bullock, me...if there’s room you guys will come” (Goldberg and Rogan 00:24:39-00:24:49). Franco and McBride both play up their arrogant or boorish tendencies, playing their roles as stars with massively outsized egos. In an interview, Franco stated that his character was written as the host of the party because, of all the primary cast, he was “the easiest to classify as the Hollywood guy with a big mansion,” even though in real life he lives in a small apartment in New York City (Kendrick).

The most memorable example of this, however, involves one of the film’s supporting cast. The real-life Michael Cera, whom Rogan calls “the sweetest guy ever,” began his career playing a series of awkward, innocent teenaged characters in films and television shows like *Superbad* and *Arrested Development* (2003-2019) (Barone). Cera appears as a guest at Franco’s party early in the film, and in contrast to his awkwardly nerdy public persona, his character recklessly takes copious amounts of hard drugs, swears loudly and frequently at friends and strangers, and treats women with utter disrespect. Mindy Kaling, appearing in a short cameo appearance against her own public persona as a sweet and likeable actress, describes Cera lustfully as “pale, 100 pounds, hairless, probably has a huge cock, coked out of his mind” and declares that “if I don’t fuck Michael Cera tonight, I’m going to blow my brains out” (Goldberg and Rogan 00:08:04-00:08:14). Later, Baruchel goes to the bathroom but finds it occupied by Cera having sex with two women while sipping on a juice box. Rather than being surprised or embarrassed, Cera casually stares at Baruchel and invites him to join them. The collision of the audience’s expectations and the (para)fictional reality of the film world can lead to shock or surprise on the part of the audience, as well as delight at the ridiculousness of the situations. In each of these examples the fictionalized self plays against the presentational self of the comedian-performer in one way or another, lending

uncertainty and unreliability to their persona and creating a web of interconnections, intertextuality and self-reflexivity for the audience to unpack.

## Conclusion

Warren suggests that parafictional personas interrupt the audience's ability to clearly differentiate between real and fictional, and involves a level of deliberate deception, "not necessarily with malicious intent, but certainly aimed at sowing levels of uncertainty or misrecognition within the viewer" (57). In *This Is the End*, the audience is deceived for a very specific reason other than for humor: the realism of the characters is played against the incredible un-reality of the apocalypse that drives much of the plot. As the Hollywood Hills literally break apart and open a passageway to hell, unleashing massive fire-breathing demons and all manner of evil creatures upon the earth, the recognizability and realism of the relationships between its main characters give the film a narrative and emotional anchor that, to the audience, feels real.

The film takes narrative advantage of this disconnect: just as many of the comedian-performers play their characters against their own public persona, at the end of the film their fictive characters realize that they must resist their own fundamental nature as selfish, self-involved actors and sacrifice themselves for others in order to be saved in the rapture. Warren describes parafictions as "seductively dangerous because they threaten the truth status of their referents; constructing a fictionalized version of oneself allows for multiple levels of fiction and reality to co-exist, maintaining a sense of open-endedness and irresolvability" (56). This irresolvability presents opportunities for comedic exploitation, while also helping to sell the believability of the film's emotional core. This effect is particularly strong in a film like *This Is the End*, which was intentionally conceived to feature a complex, interwoven set of references to real life and deliberate, sometimes outrageous, falsehoods.

Scholarship has long identified a fundamental paradox at the heart of stardom and celebrity in popular culture: the paradox of appearance and illusion, real and fiction, ordinary and extraordinary all existing within a single being (Dyer 25). The concept of parafictional persona illustrates how this paradox has transmogrified in and because of new media paradigms and technologies. The comedian comedy is a genre in which parafictional personas are particularly effective in creating an affective tension between the real, parafictional and fictional facets of the

comedian-performer’s persona, upending entrenched practices of engagement between fan and comedian and creating new possibilities for the production of comedy. When an audience watches *This Is the End*, they are of course watching a film as fictional as any other mainstream Hollywood comedy; due to the narrative power of the parafictional persona, however, to the audience it feels like they are watching the real Seth Rogan, Jay Baruchel, James Franco, Craig Robinson, Jonah Hill, and Danny McBride: stars they have known and followed across multiple media platforms for many years.

The necessity for comedian-performers to operate as transmedia personalities has never been more pronounced. The most successful comedy stars, such as Kevin Hart, Will Ferrell, and Amy Schumer, are not merely comic actors but also cultural totems: their personas represent something more than just their status as actors. Persona has become so central to comedy that “comedian comedy,” first identified in the 1980s as a tradition or subgenre tangential to mainstream comedy media, could today describe almost all mainstream comedy: it is practically impossible for a viewer to watch a major comedian-performer in a film or television show and not have at least some level of working knowledge of that performer’s persona through other media.

At the same time, comedy is undergoing a phase in which many of the most popular media texts operate in formats that straddle the boundary between real and fictional. Mockumentary-style television has grown in prominence since the U.K. television series *The Office* (2001-2003) and its U.S. counterpart (2005-2013) brought the production style of documentary to the television sitcom, and this has been extended to fictionalized “reality”-based shows like *The Eric Andre Show* (2012-present) and *Nathan for You* (2013-2017), in which unwitting real people and celebrities are set up to interact with a fictional or fictionalized host. There has also been an explosion of comedy which is metatextual and either features extensive cameo appearances by celebrities (*The Larry Sanders Show* [1992-1998], *30 Rock* [2006-2013]) or makes thinly veiled references to real-life personalities, such as Adam Sandler playing a character closely based on himself in *Funny People* (2009). Clearly, it is becoming ever more difficult to cleanly separate the real from the unreal in comedy media and stardom. The parafictional persona offers a compelling framework to begin to understand those comedian-performers who deliberately blur the boundary between real and fictional.

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# The Picture of Marilyn Monroe: How Oscar Wilde Predicts the Frightening Afterlife of the Dead Celebrity Persona

BRADY SIMENSON

“Good artists exist simply in what they make, and consequently are perfectly  
uninteresting in what they are.”

—Lord Henry (Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 50)

Dead celebrities have been a growing cultural commodity for many years. Recent figures put the value of dead celebrity licensing and royalties at over \$2.25 billion annually (Kirsta). T-shirts, coffee mugs, and various other products still carry the faces of stars like Marilyn Monroe, Jim Morrison, and Kurt Cobain even decades after their deaths. Dead celebrity tours are offered all over Los Angeles and Elvis Presley’s Graceland brings in numerous visitors every day. As technology has developed, however, family estates and production companies have gained even more potential control over dead celebrity personas. No longer is this a mere issue of images, works, and names being used after death, but now the issue has expanded to an almost complete resurrection of the persona itself. Tupac Shakur can perform at Coachella in front of a live audience. Peter Cushing can reprise his *Star Wars: A New Hope* role from 1977 as Grand Moff Tarkin in 2016’s *Star Wars: Rogue One*, more than 20 years after Cushing’s death. Technology’s increasing ability to digitally resurrect and commodify dead celebrity personas has also inspired a growing academic interest in the subject. Researchers have often utilized the morbid, yet nonetheless useful, pun “delebs” to describe the celebrity persona as it is used after the death of the bodied individual (D’Rozario 486). Such researchers focus on a variety of topics related to the commodification and worship of dead celebrities including their frequent use in advertising, the obsessive collecting of

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dead celebrity memorabilia, fan control over dead celebrity legacies, and of course, the ethics of such dead celebrity control (Black; D’Rozario and Bryant; Newman et al; Petty and D’Rozario).

As useful and interesting such research is in understanding the contemporary and growing trend of dead celebrity usage in popular culture, it is important to acknowledge that control of the dead celebrity persona is far older than the modern computer technology that has brought the topic into the spotlight. Modern technology has simply provided the opportunity to resurrect and control the dead celebrity persona in a way that the public has wanted to do for as long as celebrity has existed. I do not seek to trace this trend to the origins of celebrity itself, as identifying such a point in time is perhaps a fool’s errand in and of itself, but I do seek to highlight how this conversation has existed significantly not only far before the technology of CGI and holograms, but even before the popularization of film itself. I will do this through a focus on the philosophies of Oscar Wilde and his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which I argue is a pioneering work in the history of discussing the celebrity persona after death.

While *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has been most often encountered in journals dedicated to Victorian Literature or the Gothic, in recent years more scholars have connected Wilde’s ideas in the novel to a variety of postmodern studies discussing simulation, images, and authorship, amongst many other subjects (Boyiopoulos; de Vries; Gomel). While I have no intentions to label Wilde as any sort of proto-postmodernist, I do seek to argue that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* makes startling predictions about the evolution of popular culture and the use of dead celebrity personas. *Wilde’s* novel is a predictor of our use of the dead celebrity persona in a similar way to how George Orwell’s *1984* is a predictor of the proliferation of a technological police state. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* highlights a cultural desire to immortalize and control the celebrity persona beyond the bodily death of the human being behind the image. While contemporary writers have studied modern technology’s ability to digitally resurrect dead celebrities such as Shakur at Coachella or Cushing in *Rogue One*, it is important to acknowledge and study that this cultural control and manipulation of the personas of dead celebrities has existed long before we possessed the technology to so literally do so. Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a startling example of such cultural desire for control over the dead celebrity persona, and the novel offers further proof of Wilde’s importance to dead celebrity studies. The most important example of such future control comes

from the woman behind one of popular culture's most iconic visages: Marilyn Monroe.

### Oscar Wilde's Own Immortal Persona

Laura Mulvey, the pioneering feminist film theorist, says that in Marilyn Monroe's prime she was "an ultimate signifier of sexuality [...] always more image than character; she personified a 'to-be-looked-at-ness' in which interiority would be, by and large, irrelevant" (207). Monroe's celebrity persona was a "highly evolved masquerade" of image and performance that was "frozen" and "immutable" (Mulvey 207). As Mulvey argues, Monroe was, and is, to most people in the world, experienced as a cultural image rather than as a bodied person, a being of surface rather than substance. At the height of her fame, however, the still living and breathing woman behind the façade grew frustrated with the lack of depth and diversity that her employer, Fox Studios, afforded her. Monroe yearned to move beyond her fetishized image. With her then husband, the writer Arthur Miller, and director John Huston, Monroe developed a character for the film *The Misfits* (1961) "on which she pinned so many hopes for her new image," an image that would evoke more of "a vulnerable persona" (Mulvey 208).

Monroe's first appearance in *The Misfits* is written as a bittersweet echo of her true self, a rare on-screen allusion to the woman behind the persona. In the film, Monroe's character sits in front of a mirror, and as Ana Salzberg describes the scene:

Captured in the luminosity of the looking glass, her visage wears all its famous beauty: simply, she wears the mask of Marilyn Monroe, movie star. As she turns away from the mirror to face the lens directly, however, the camera reveals a somewhat different figure in medium close-up: a woman with swelling under her eyes and lines around them, the strain on her face so diffused by the reflection now altogether apparent. (144)

Here can be seen a beautiful yet vulnerable human faced with the fear of mortality as she gazes on her own immortal, artistic persona, a dynamic that offers startling echoes of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Of Wilde's one and only novel, Elana Gomel says it "can be read as a prescient commentary on [...] [Wilde's] own posthumous transformation into a cultural icon.

The novel dramatizes the dangers of pursuing an ideal self to the exclusion of all the complexities and divisions of a living psyche. It shows what happens when the artistic ‘fiction of the self’ turns against the body” (Gomel 79). Since Wilde himself acknowledges Dorian Gray as “what he wanted to be,” and Basil Hallward as “who he actually is,” it is fair to see the portrait of Dorian, as it was painted by Hallward, as Wilde’s own artistic persona (Gomel 85). As Hallward even directly confesses, “I have put too much of myself into it” (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 6). Dorian identifies with his “ideal self,” presented in the painting, which is “both unified and incorporeal, free from the gross materiality of the body and the instability of the human psyche” (Gomel 80). The painting enraptures Dorian as it offers a perfect version of his persona that is free from his own body’s inevitable physical and moral decay. He wishes to literally become the persona, and “thus to achieve the immortality and immutability of the objet d’art” (Gomel 80). Unfortunately for Dorian, this is precisely what he achieves. He trades the ravages of physical and moral decay to the painting, and gives up his humanity in the process, and before his horrific end, realizes that it was his very soul that he “bartered away” (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 181).

Both Dorian Gray and Marilyn Monroe share this disturbing split between the bodied self and the creatively-crafted persona that enters the realm of artistic images, destined to long outlive the mortal, organic being hidden below the surface. Monroe, like many other dead celebrity icons, has only become more popular since her untimely demise, so much so that she remains a significant and lucrative cultural commodity. Monroe’s image is still an incredibly frequent presence on t-shirts, posters, drink glasses, and endless other forms of merchandise. While there is no way of knowing the cultural fate of Dorian’s portrait in the fictional realm of the novel itself, the final image we are left with is the portrait, “in all the wonder of his exquisite beauty,” surviving the “withered” and “wrinkled” body, evoking in the reader a sense of the artistic persona’s immortality (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 188).

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* makes an eerily accurate prediction that the world will come to prefer artistic personas over the bodied beings behind the performances, as will later happen with Monroe and even Wilde himself. This becomes increasingly true as our image culture evolves through film and social media, making the world privilege the persona more and more. Just as Monroe’s immortal persona has become vastly removed from her original self, so too has been the case for countless artists like James Dean or Elvis Presley, whose personas

become progressively more manipulated after death. The seed of this culture can be found in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as it involves the evolution of artistic persona in bodily life and after bodily death. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* not only predicts the immortal life of the artistic persona, but even more disturbingly, it predicts our modern romanticizing of dead artists.

Wilde was clearly aware of the necessary split between the bodied being and the incorporeal persona, between the artist and the art. In the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde states, “To reveal art and conceal the artist is art’s aim” (3). The great irony is that the world reacted to the story as a novelized sponsor of Wilde’s own aesthetic lifestyle, and the content of the story was even held up against Wilde when he was charged with gross indecency. During the trial, Wilde protested the idea that the *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was an autobiography, but later acknowledged privately to Max Beerbohm that the subject matter was indeed “taken directly from his life” (Gomel 87). Wilde’s artistic persona simply was and remains too powerful to conceal within his work. As Gomel says, “Far from concealing the artist, Wilde’s art has put him on permanent display. Hardly any other writer has been the subject of so many biographies, novels, films, and plays” (Gomel 79). Wilde’s persona has become as everlasting as Dorian himself, and at least in the same realm of immortality as Monroe and other iconic artists. They have all become symbols freed from the confines of bodies subject to physical and moral decay.

Of all these figures, the wonder of Dorian, of course, is that he inverts the dynamic between organic being and art by making his body the unblemished icon while the painting takes on the mortal vulnerabilities of the flesh. Wilde himself, like all other celebrity icons, suffered the fate of hiding his personal humanity away from prying eyes, as Dorian later does with the cursed portrait. Wilde’s art, which he wrote and lived, shows he was aware of this necessary split between eternally bodied man and the artistic, temporarily bodied, persona. Wilde was never interested in “constructing a static identity,” but, rather, he lived a series of “self-transformations that belie the notion of an essential or unchanging Oscar Wilde” (Dumortier 156). One crucial example would be his shifting his persona from a more Bohemian aloofness as an aesthete, to a more sophisticated and socially-engaged dandy. Thus, since Wilde himself privileged the constructed persona as his way to engage with the world, he was aware of how little use the public has for the “essential,” private truth of a person. An individual’s own mind is the only one to experience that truth, so the immortal persona, at least in the public perception,

achieves far more reality. In this sense, Gomel is incorrect to suggest that Wilde failed in “concealing the artist,” as Wilde’s persona is what was really put on trial for gross indecency, and his persona is what still lives on today. The “essential” Wilde, trapped in his mortal body, suffered the physical punishment of the persona’s trial, and the “essential,” bodied Wilde died not long after, to be still outlived by the persona today.

The horror that faces a celebrity persona after bodily death is that the public assumes total and immediate control over the persona now eternally free from bodily influence. The long-dead “essential” Wilde is no longer pulling the persona’s strings. While many in the world still experience him through his written work, his persona’s afterlife is mostly pictorial. The vast majority of people today do not experience Wilde’s persona through his writing, but rather through his “visual ubiquity,” including endless internet memes, merchandise, and book covers, “a commercial afterlife of images not unlike Monroe” (Dumortier 148). For those who experience Wilde in such a way, his lasting persona is even further removed from the original bodied man. The closest many contemporary people get to Wilde’s writing is through the ubiquity of his famous quotes, but even those are suspect as famous figures are misquoted frequently, Wilde himself being commonly and prominently among the misquoted.

While the above suggests that the thoughts and intentions of the bodied Wilde are of little consequence to those who only casually experience his persona today, many who study his life thoroughly are also far more interested in the persona than in the bodied man. Despite having a variety of visual representations throughout his life, and despite also having a variety of opinions that evolved throughout his career, there are still many biographers who “fit [Wilde] into moulds of their own making and, on discovering that he overlaps the edges in a tiresomely uncooperative way, have simply trimmed off the surplus” (Holland 4). Indeed, many biographers and scholars have the tendency to overrepresent images of Wilde from his aesthetic period, particularly his most famous 1882 photo session in the United States with Napoleon Sarony, which has greatly shaped Wilde’s contemporary persona. This aspect of Wilde’s persona was actually quite brief and privileging those images “constrains understanding, doing insufficient justice to Wilde’s complexities and variations over time” (Dumortier 148). The “essential” Wilde is thus ignored by many of today’s most qualified literary experts, and even those who seek a more complex, well-rounded concept of the bodied man, can never completely achieve that. The “essential,” interior being is lost forever, and

the best that even well-intentioned scholars can ever do is to craft personas that are as close to the original, bodied Wilde as can be managed.

### Wilde's Prophecy of the Immortal Persona of Sybil Vane

The posthumous crafting of the dead celebrity persona is crucial to the public obsession with these icons. Like Wilde, many other artists such as Monroe, Presley, or Shakur have died tragically only to be immortalized in our visual culture even by those who have little familiarity with their work but have better familiarity with their life stories as generally accepted in the zeitgeist. For example, many people know about the culturally accepted narrative of Monroe's affair with John F. Kennedy, or of her tragic death, even if they have not seen any of her films. The disembodied personas of icons like Monroe and Presley, and the cultural stories those personas signify are just as controlled and commercialized today as Wilde, if not more so. Those who lead the most fascinating lives, whose experiences tell the most interesting story, become cultural signifiers. They exist beyond death as symbols, their immortal personas imbued with innumerable levels of meaning from innumerable perspectives. Wilde's persona, as is the case with all the aforementioned celebrity icons, is now more of a communally-crafted story about his cultural legacy than anything else. As Gomel says, "The drama of Wilde's trials, incarceration, and premature death has all the elements of a good story, which somehow suggests its being scripted" (79). Eerily, Wilde seemed to be attuned to this fate of the artistic persona, and one need look no further than *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the crafting of Sibyl Vane's persona.

Sibyl is a stage actress at the local theatre. The profession makes her a clear fit for Wilde's concept of living an artistic persona while hiding away the "essential" being. Dorian falls madly in love with Sibyl while watching her perform. Dorian experiences these feelings for Sibyl before having even met her away from the stage. Her artistic persona is so powerful that Dorian falls in love with it rather than with the person behind it. Dorian says to love Sibyl is to "take my love out of poetry, and to find my wife in Shakespeare's plays [...] I have had the arms of Rosalind around me, and kissed Juliet on the mouth" (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 66). Because of Dorian's tendency to speak of Sibyl mostly in terms of her characters, Henry slyly asks him, "When is she Sibyl Vane?" (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 48). To this, Dorian's reply is a startlingly simple, "Never" (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 48). Her artistic persona is all that matters to Dorian from the

beginning, and she initially seems to be a perfect fit for him because she only seems to care about his persona as well.

Sibyl agrees to marry Dorian before even knowing his real name, knowing him only by the fictional persona, “Prince Charming” (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 59). Their love of this shared fiction positions the relationship itself as a mutual artistic persona, like lovers in a romantic play. They are both incredibly happy until the facade is broken, and Dorian is faced with the reality behind the performances. After Sibyl falls in love with Dorian, her onstage acting becomes “artificial” and “false,” horrifying Dorian and the rest of the audience (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 72). Sibyl herself is overjoyed with her terrible performance and tells Dorian, “before I knew you, acting was the one reality of my life. It was only in the theatre that I lived” (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 74). Essentially, Sibyl’s artistic persona was all that mattered to the world before someone came along who seemingly cared about the woman behind the facade. She goes on to tell Dorian that “painted scenes were my world [...] and I thought them real,” but he taught her to see “through the hollowness” (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 74). The world’s love of the artistic persona is indeed a hollow one. While Sibyl Vane’s artistic persona itself has a flesh and blood woman beneath the facade, the love Dorian has for her is one that denies the “essential” being at the core.

After Sibyl confesses that her love for Dorian is why she will never act well again, Dorian furiously spurns her. He tells her that she no longer produces any “effect,” and that he only loved her because she “realized the dreams of great poets and gave shape and substance to the shadows of art” (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 75). She is thus to him nothing but a defunct objet d'art, “shape and substance” manifesting art rather than her own, inconsequential being. As Dorian tells Sibyl, “Without your art you are nothing” (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 75). For him, the ultimate obsessed celebrity fan, the persona is simply more real than real.

Dorian’s rejection drives Sibyl to suicide on that same night. Dorian is initially devastated when he hears the news from Henry the next day, blaming himself for having murdered her. Henry, however, eventually convinces Dorian to see her death “from a proper artistic point of view” (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 94). Henry argues that Sibyl’s suicide “possesses artistic elements,” and that there is something “quite beautiful about her death” because it makes him “believe in the reality of [...] romance, passion, and love” (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 87-8). Sibyl’s suicide is a triumph of art, and Dorian is comforted knowing that it is “one of the great romantic tragedies of the age” (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 93). Her

life and death become the incredible story necessary to achieve her persona's immortality as a cultural signifier.

While her persona is elevated to such iconic heights, Henry makes it painfully clear how little the woman behind the persona mattered:

The girl never really lived, and so she has never really died. To you at least she was always a dream, a phantom that flitted through Shakespeare's plays and left them lovelier for its presence, a reed through which Shakespeare's music sounded richer and more full of joy. The moment she touched actual life, she marred it, and it marred her, and so she passed away. Mourn for Ophelia, if you like. Put ashes on your head because Cordelia was strangled. Cry out against Heaven because the daughter of Brabantio died. But don't waste your tears over Sibyl Vane. She was less real than they are. (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 89)

Wilde frames Sibyl, the bodied being, as "less real" than the "dream" or the "phantom" she became in the minds of those who experienced her artistic persona. This intangible essence of Sibyl is the entity that lived in the "sphere of art" and continues to do so after the death of the bodied being, who is not "real" enough to mourn. To underscore her artistic afterlife, Dorian asks Basil to do a drawing of Sibyl so that he can have more of her than just troubled memories. Sibyl reaches the level of iconicity for Dorian; her persona remains with him for the rest of his life.

### Wilde's Prophecy Fulfilled in the Immortal Persona of Marilyn Monroe

Sibyl's life story falls into the hands of her spectators, in this case Dorian and Henry. Dorian metaphorically takes possession of her image, an action, as has already been seen with the afterlife of Wilde's persona, that can control the immortal perception of the deceased artist. What happens here to Sibyl Vane, especially in the context of Wilde's celebrity persona throughout his life and cultural afterlife, offers an eerily accurate prediction of modern celebrity life and death. Linda Levitt, while writing about the commodification of stars and their deaths, argues that the images of dead celebrities "are valuable intellectual property" (67). Levitt stresses that after a celebrity dies, the media coverage often focuses on "what that person represents culturally and how audiences made

meaning of his or her career” (63). Monroe specifically has had her persona controlled and her life story debated intensely after her death, a suicide by poisoning that is remarkably like what happened to Sibyl Vane. Levitt says that Monroe’s “image is [...] repurposed to serve various ends. Monroe's narrative— abandoned by her parents, her difficult marriages, her shocking death— is used to represent the tragedy of stardom” (65). Before Monroe’s suicide, her difficult upbringing “legitimized the American Dream,” but after, “the narrative about Monroe had to open up to new meanings and interpretations” (Luksza 69). Today, she is not only seen as a victim of the Hollywood machine, but has also “come to represent a sexuality rooted in freedom and liberation rather than promiscuity and the male gaze. In these ways she becomes a simulacrum, as her personality recedes behind representation” (Levitt 65). Monroe is now a socially controlled image and narrative often produced by those with little interest for the “essential” being beneath. Her suicide, and Sybil Vane’s suicide, succeeded in killing their bodies, but changed their stories forever, propelling both forever into the “the sphere of art.”

The story of Monroe’s death is an indelible mark beneath the surface of the immortal persona. Mulvey says of Monroe:

The shock of her untimely death is now so much part of her mystique and her legacy that the artifice and cosmetic nature of her image seems to be already simultaneously defending against and prefiguring it. Furthermore, the closeup ‘Marilyns’ that Andy Warhol silk-screened as a tribute to her after her death in August 1962, are easily projected backwards on to Marilyn’s own closeup, fossilizing the emblematic Marilyn with connotations of death. In these works, he makes the mask of beauty and the death mask uncannily close, and the superimposition of the Warhol images onto the then-living Marilyn has a sense of deferred meaning, as though the pose prefigured the stillness of death. (208-9)

Mulvey’s idea here that knowledge of Monroe’s eventual death is tied inextricably to any experience of her living persona has echoes of Walter Benjamin’s “The Storyteller.” In his essay, Benjamin suggests the meaning of one’s life can only be revealed once death has been achieved. For example, “a man who died at thirty-five will appear to remembrance at every point in his life as a man who dies at the age of thirty-five,” just as Monroe in real life, and Sybil Vane in her fictional world,

will always appear to remembrance as women who met their own tragic fates (Benjamin 10). Benjamin also suggests that a story's protagonist is so significant because their death can provide us with a sense of "the meaning of life" (10). The vicarious experience of another's death through the art of the story, provides us with a taste of the unknowable, "this stranger's fate by virtue of the flame which consumes it yields us the warmth which we never draw from our own fate" (Benjamin 10). Vicarious experience is crucial to understanding our general interest in celebrities and has been investigated as one of the most important factors in celebrity obsession by many theorists (Basil; Fraser and Brown). Giving another life a final, narrative end provides it, at least in remembrance, an overall narrative meaning that everyone who is still living likes to imagine themselves eventually achieving.

As Mulvey suggests, Warhol immediately sought to imbue the life and death of Marilyn Monroe with a larger, existential meaning, doing so in an appropriately Wildean fashion. Warhol's "Marilyn Diptych" is a silkscreen painting featuring fifty seemingly identical images of Monroe with twenty-five on the left side in color and twenty-five on the right side in black and white. At closer inspection, however, the images are not identical, but rather, they show varying shades throughout the colored side and a ghostly distortion and fading effect throughout the black and white side. While appropriately Wildean, art is forever subject to a multitude of interpretations and perspectives, and the Marilyn Diptych seems to specifically represent that multiplicity itself with Monroe's persona as the subject. The side of color represents her multiple personas during life, while the monochrome side represents the continued Monroe personas, though blurred and distorted, that survive her bodily death.

According to Donald Kuspit, Warhol represents Monroe as "the vulgar version of the eternal feminine-and with that an all the more ineradicable part of collective consciousness and popular memory [...] She comes to represent the omnipotence of ephemeral public imagery" (46). Warhol frames Monroe as a social invention without substance and suggests that the artistically constructed nature of Monroe and all celebrities is the secret of their success. Celebrities so often self-destruct because they collapse under the pressure of keeping up with the persona. They lose all sense of self in the process. The idea represented by Warhol's Monroe echoes the fate of Dorian Gray and Sibyl Vane, both of whom destroy themselves because of the pressure of maintaining their immortal personas. Dorian, who comes to embody the artistic persona, stabs the portrait, which had become his human,

“essential” self, his “conscience,” as he says (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 187). Sybil, meanwhile, regrets not showing herself “more of an artist” (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 76). Confirming Dorian’s death as suicide, his body is what dies after the stabbing, “withered and wrinkled,” while the portrait reveals its immortality through its return to “exquisite youth and beauty” (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 188). Sybil’s persona lives on as well, becoming “a wonderful tragic figure sent on to the world’s stage” (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 90).

This is the world according to Wilde, as well as the world according to Warhol, whose work “suggests that all successful people are actors on a social stage [...] [and] that there is nothing behind the act: they are all inorganic facades, putting on a show for the audience, whose reality as living persons they are ultimately indifferent to” (Kuspit 44). Warhol commercialized Monroe and other celebrities after their deaths because he essentially saw them as “fixed immortal product[s]” (Kuspit 39). With Warhol’s celebrity paintings having become so iconic, and with celebrity personas living more and more after their bodily deaths, both Warhol and Wilde have been proven correct in their contentions. As a society, we appear to care more for the everlasting artistic persona than we do for the bodied beings at their core.

### Wilde’s Prophecies of the Immortal Persona Alive Today

The modern preference for the immortal icon is immediately apparent after the death of any celebrity. A celebrity’s death significantly elevates their stature and even increases the value of their products (Radford and Bloch 43). For some of these artists, those who reach the level of icon, the adoration for them continues indefinitely. The estate of Elvis Presley makes \$50 million a year off his persona (Radford and Bloch 45). Monroe’s grave brings in hundreds of visitors every day (Levitt 62). A celebrity’s death increases their sacred status, it creates a mythology around them, especially when they die unexpectedly. The tragedy of early death not only brings the same artistic quality to their lives as it does for Sybil Vane, but it also freezes the artistic persona in time, as we see most powerfully with Dorian himself. Dying at the height of his fame allows the artistic persona to be “immortalized in youth,” as has been the case with Monroe, James Dean, Jim Morrison, and countless others (Levitt 67). These personas will never age, their eternal youth and beauty cannot be marred by age and decay. These images are also free from the stigma of immorality. Companies are eager to own the rights to these

personas because “a potential by-product of the artist no longer being around anymore is that they can’t mess up their life and attract the kind of bad publicity that can sometimes destroy a career” (Neate). The eternal youth and freedom from the consequences of immorality is the soulless horror that Dorian eventually cannot stand to live.

While some today no doubt seek to shape the immortal artistic persona as a genuine dedication to artists whose work they admire, thereby elevating the artist’s cultural meaning, these cases are unfortunately too few (Kitch 176). As can even be sadly seen with those manipulating Wilde’s image for their own gain, the immortal persona today is all too often manipulated for selfish means, making the “essential” beings behind the facades more and more meaningless. These grim, soulless figures are paraded around shamelessly in advertisements like Monroe being used to sell Sunsilk or Cary Grant being used to sell Diet Coke (Hudak 383). Even more unnerving, perhaps, consider the literal hologram of the late Tupac Shakur performing at the Coachella music festival in 2012. These personas, far removed from the control of the original, bodied beings, are now subject to performing the whims of others, most often large corporations. While Kuspit, when discussing Warhol’s work, portrays artistic personas as “puppets on a social string,” Wilde would more likely cast them as “monstrous marionettes” (37) (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 156).

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as Dorian rides a hansom cab to an opium den, they pass a set of windows where can be seen “fantastic shadows” that move like “monstrous marionettes” and make “gestures like live things” (156). As Dorian sees nothing that gives these shapes a true, bodily identity, they are much more persona than human. The terms used to describe the personas are taken almost directly from one of Wilde’s previous poems. In “The Harlot’s House,” the narrator stands outside of a brothel with an unnamed woman as they watch “silhouetted skeletons” dancing in the windows “like wire-pulled automatons” (Wilde, “The Harlot’s House” 14-13). The figures eerily resemble humans, but something is clearly off as their “laughter echoed thin and shrill” and they only “try and sing” but somehow fail to do so properly (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 18, 21). These “clock-work puppet[s]” are described by the narrator as “the dead [...] dancing with the dead” (1 Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 9, 26). One of the “horrible Marionette[s]” even comes outside to smoke a cigarette “like a live thing (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 22-24). As in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, these beings are a soulless farce of humanity, Wilde’s language dehumanizes them and makes it seem like they only

mimic humanity. They are the same breed of hollow simulacrum that Monroe, Presley, Shakur, and so many other artists will eventually become. The windows of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and “The Harlot’s House” might as well be stages, television sets, cinema and iPhone screens. They are filled with the same images of the singing, laughing, and dancing dead.

These “monstrous marionettes” come to represent Wilde’s most startling manifestation of the persona, an empty, soulless form of being that is only a shadowy projection of humanity. Dorian looks at them and immediately hates them, feeling “a dull rage [...] in his heart” (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 156). Dorian hates these soulless personas, perhaps, because they reflect himself, just as he looks at the portrait before his suicide and hates that “mirror of his soul” for the same reason (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 187). There is a tragedy to Wilde’s recognition of this split between the bodied human and the artistic persona. Even though he personally admitted that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* reflected many elements of himself, he still denied its validity as an autobiography in his trials for gross indecency. He knew that his persona was what was really on trial because the public cared primarily about that and had little interest in the “essential” Wilde beneath. The trials were a play in their own right, a great tragic end for Wilde akin to the tragic end for Sibyl Vane or Marilyn Monroe. The theater of it is what really mattered. The public gazed upon Wilde’s trials with the same mixture of rapture and disgust that the narrator of “The Harlot’s House” or Dorian himself, might look upon ghastly personas dancing in a window. If Dorian then is indeed an aspect of Wilde, and we can read the novel, like Gomel says, “as a prescient commentary on [...] [Wilde’s] own posthumous transformation into a cultural icon,” it is here sadly apparent that in his own work, Wilde saw the reflection of a horrifying future for his eternal persona (Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* 79).

What Wilde wrote in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and how Wilde lived in his public life make the novel and himself well-suited to discussions of the dead celebrity persona in the history of popular culture. Like Dorian, Wilde has become the everlasting image while his true self was sacrificed to the wages of time and the loss of public face. Like Sybil Vane, Wilde and other future artists such as Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, and Kurt Cobain fell victim to the pressures of a public persona and now have said personas existing forever in the “sphere of art,” controlled and manipulated by those with little if any interest in the original, bodied beings. While *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a limited source when discussing the reification of the celebrity persona via hologram or CGI, discussions about

controlling the dead celebrity persona should not be restricted to the technological ability to do so. Understandably, before such technological ability existed, serious theoretical discussions on the topic of controlling the dead celebrity persona would be nearly nonexistent and only speculative in nature. With this in mind, speculative fiction itself becomes a worthwhile avenue of critical exploration for those seeking to form a greater historical perspective on cultural ideals concerning dead celebrity reification. In a similar way to how George Orwell's *1984* can be studied as a startling predictor of how future technology will increase a government's ability to enforce an omniscient police state, Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* can be studied as predicting our popular culture's ability to have an unending control of the dead celebrity persona.

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# The “Worlding” of the Muslim Superheroine: An Analysis of *Ms. Marvel’s* Kamala Khan

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Muslim women have been a source of speculation for Western audiences from time immemorial. At first eroticized in harem paintings, they later became the quintessential image of subservience: a weakling to be pitied and rescued from savage Brown men. Current depictions of Muslim women have ranged from the oppressed archetype in mainstream media with films such as *The Stoning of Soraya M* (2008) to comedic veiled characters in shows like *Little Mosque on the Prairie* (2012). One segment of media that has recently offered promising attempts for destabilizing their image has been comics and graphic novels which have published graphic memoirs that speak to the complexity of Muslim identity as well as superhero comics that offer a range of Muslim characters from a variety of cultures with different levels of religiosity.

This paper explores the emergence of the Muslim superheroine in comic books by analyzing the most developed Muslimah (Muslim female) superhero: the rebooted Ms. Marvel superhero, Kamala Khan, from the Marvel Comics *Ms. Marvel* series. The analysis illustrates how the reconfiguration of the Muslim female archetype through the “worlding” of the Muslim superhero continues to perpetuate an imperialist agenda for the Third World. This paper uses Gayatri Spivak’s “worlding” which examines the “othered” natives and the global South as defined through Eurocentric terms by imperialists and colonizers. By interrogating Kamala’s representation, I argue that her portrayal as a “moderate” Muslim superheroine with Western progressive values can have the effect of reinforcing

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imperialist desires for Muslim women. The paper begins by discussing several scholars’ assessment of modernity, or the Western assumption of what constitutes modern life, to examine stereotypes of Muslim women as “backward.” It then provides a literature review considering Ms. Marvel’s “othered” status. Finally, it engages with Spivak’s concept of worlding to analyze the ways in which Ms. Marvel can function for imperial purposes.

### Ms. Marvel: Kamala Khan

For several decades, Ms. Marvel was the blonde, blue-eyed Carol Danvers who most audiences now know as Captain Marvel from 2019’s superhero blockbusters, *Captain Marvel* and *Avengers: Endgame*. In 2014, Marvel Comics took a bold step forward by recasting the character as a Pakistani-American, Muslim teenager named Kamala Khan. This recasting was unprecedented since it was the first time Marvel embarked on an entire series starring a Muslim superhero as the main protagonist. Set in New Jersey, Kamala’s powers consist of polymorphing, which allows her to change in size from miniscule to gigantic as well as stretching her limbs to superhuman levels. She can also shapeshift, having done so to look like her predecessor when she first discovers her superpower (Issue #1). Finally, she can slowly self-heal. During this time, she must revert to her regular self and cannot transform again to Ms. Marvel until fully healed.

An interesting way to interpret her superpowers is to note them as symbolic of the changes a teenager goes through during puberty. For instance, the extremes in size that she experiences seem to symbolize the fluctuation in emotional changes which can range from grandiose levels of self-importance to diminishing levels of self-worth. The stretchiness of her limbs reflects the awkwardness in body changes. When Kamala is injured and self-heals, she ends up sleeping in and overeating, which can be the same traits one experiences when depressed— itself a form of injury itself. Much of the series shows her leading the life of an ordinary high schooler who writes fan fiction while navigating her friendships and school life. It also spotlights her relationship with her close-knit family which consists of her mother, father and brother. The series also showcases aspects of her ancestral Pakistani culture which includes attending the mosque as well as wedding ceremonies like *mehendis*. Ms. Marvel, then, appears to straddle the line between Westernized teenager and traditional Muslimah.

### Muslim Women and the Question of Modernity

When examining Kamala's construction, an examination of academic studies and interventions on Muslim women's subjectivity becomes a worthwhile place to start. Scholarly research has revealed a reconfigured individual in third world nationalist agendas, and Islamism. Most importantly, it has revealed a bias in conceptualizing modernity to fit European forms of progress. In *Crafting an Educated Housewife in Iran*, Afsaneh Najmabadi contemplates the place of women in modernity by referencing the educational regimes in Iran at the turn-of-the-twentieth century stating that "they were central to the production of the woman of modernity through particular regulatory and emancipatory impulses" (Najmabadi 91). While her essay examines the functions of Iranian motherhood and wifehood, her views can be applied to a remade Muslim female in popular culture in a post-9/11 setting. Considering that most portrayals of Muslim women depicted them as helpless and abused in pre-9/11 films like *Not Without My Daughter* (1991), a crime-fighting superhero makes a significant departure from such a stereotype. Najmabadi's observation of the discourses surrounding the scientization of motherhood in modernity contemplated whether the "process contained and frustrated the possible feminist potentials of women's awakening, or even that the scientization was a disciplinary and regulatory process that crafted a modern womanhood in contradistinction to a traditional one" (91).

One cannot help but see such a parallel in the characterization of Kamala Khan and thus the construction of the Muslimah superhero. When the reader is introduced to Kamala in the opening scenes of *Ms. Marvel: Issue #1*, she is juxtaposed against her hijab-wearing best friend, Nakia, who functions as the traditional female that stands in contrast next to the modern, denim-clad Kamala. Nakia wards off disparaging comments about her hijab from a blonde classmate who asks her "Nobody pressured you to start wearing it, right? Your father or somebody? Nobody's going to like honor kill you? I'm just concerned." (Wilson 2) The purpose of this dialogue is to reinforce Nakia's stringent traditional values. Thus, Nakia functions as the binary opposite that Kamala is pitted against in an effort to prove her modernity to the reader. Kamala is later placed in situations that spotlight the traditional aspects of her culture where she is either forced to choose between them or "American" values or to find a common ground.

Lila Abu-Lughod spoke about the cultural preoccupation with modernity in the introduction to her book, *Remaking Women*, stating that "Paul Rabinow has noted that it is impossible to define modernity; rather, what one must do is to track the

diverse ways the insistent claims to being modern are made. Certainly ‘being modern’ has been the dominant self-image of Europeans for almost two centuries” (7). The argument can extend to the American self-image as well, hinting to a Western hegemonic bias in the definition of modernity. Markers definitely can be attributed to the “insistent claims to being modern” in the *Ms. Marvel* series—some of it being directly linked to Kamala’s contestation with orthodox Islam. In Volume II (Issue #8), she stumbles upon a giant dog in one of her crime-fighting missions and brings it home, only to learn from her orthodox brother, who was described in Issue #1 as a “penniless mullah,” that owning a dog is not “pak” (pure) (Wilson). Such an observation is favored by many observant Muslims because of religious rules around “salat” (ritual prayer). Kamala contests this with her parents and a compromise is struck where she can keep her pet outdoors but not in the house—thus she negotiates a modern space as a dog-loving American living with Islamic mores. The comic also features other more modern markers as part of the plot—Kamala is not veiled outside the mosque; she eschews shalwaar kameezes in favour of jeans; she sneaks out to a party in Issue #1 and drinks orange-juice flavoured vodka; and she freely mixes with the opposite sex, even choosing her Italian-American male best friend as her crime-fighting aide (Wilson).

Throughout the series, Kamala occupies a third space: the uncharted territory of moderation where she is not only juxtaposed against the traditional Nakia but other all-American female characters as well. She is even compared to her predecessor, the original *Ms. Marvel*, who is the blonde and blue-eyed Carol Danvers. Blonde hair in particular seems to be the penultimate signifier for “all-American” and thus “non-immigrant” particularly after Kamala is transformed as a blonde when she first dons the *Ms. Marvel* costume. She is scantily clad and with white skin - a persona she feels uncomfortable in. While the hair and skin tone are obvious reasons why a woman of colour may feel uncomfortable personifying, it is curious to wonder why Kamala’s creators chose to make the American-born character appear self-conscious about baring her arms and legs in a superhero costume.

The representation of the modern Muslim woman in this alternative discourse forces the character to choose between being traditional like her headscarf-wearing best friend and her scantily-clad, blonde counterparts only to have her negotiate a third space as a “moderate” Muslim: an archetype of Muslim that was invented by the West according to Elora Shehabuddin in her essay *Gender and the Figure of the Moderate Muslim: Feminism in the Twenty-First Century* (Shehabuddin 103).

Therefore, she cannot be an absolute American where the implication is to be blonde and assumedly Christian nor can she be an absolute Muslim by orthodox standards. Kamala only reverts to looking like herself with brown skin and dark hair after she opts for a burkini as her choice of costume—a conservative choice of dress by American and even some Muslim standards—depicting her as the most wholesome-looking American superhero. Such a decision still forces the Muslimah superhero into the “Other” category where she is not exactly like her White, all-American predecessor but safely presents an alternative to the headscarf-wearing Muslim female who we are widely used to seeing in the media as being forced to veil and therefore oppressed.

### The Construction of *Ms. Marvel*: Normalcy vs. Intersectionality

This “Otherness” is best explored by examining the construction of Kamala’s classmates as well as her predecessor, Carol Danvers. The depiction of blonde whiteness in opposition to Kamala’s Muslim immigrant identity was noted by Shenila S. Khoja-Moolji and Alyssa D. Niccoloni in their article *Comics as Public Pedagogy: Reading Muslim Masculinities through Muslim Femininities*. After remarking on the opening scene of Issue #1 where Kamala’s blonde classmate interrogates Nakia’s choice to wear the hijab and after a reference to Starbucks and bacon is made, the authors remark on Kamala’s encoding to audiences by stating:

All these signs—from a BLT and blonde hair to the hijab—elaborate for the readers Kamala’s cultural specificity in relation to the white, blonde, blue-eyed, Starbucks- and alcohol-consuming, bacon-eating American, who is cast as the norm. Said differently, Islam and cultural practices (such as not eating pork, donning the hijab, and observing Muslim rituals) become the primary tropes in and through which Kamala becomes legible. (Khoja-Moolji and Niccolini 27)

The authors further comment on Kamala’s lamentation to the “golden-haired” Carol Danvers when she is anointed as the new “Ms. Marvel” by bemoaning her lack of normalcy in a clear reference to the hidden markers of Christianity being presented as the undisputed “normal” in the series (Khoja-Moolji and Niccolini 28). They surmise that Christianity is characterized by whiteness which appears as “secular” and “acultural” (Khoja-Moolji and Niccolini 28). While they credit more

of these hidden markers to statements made by Captain America about Kamala disobeying her religion, they more importantly point out the semiotics of the panel by noting its connection to Christian iconography stating, “Captain Marvel appears in celestial beauty to her, and the composition of Kamala’s body, along with her face with its closed eyes, are reminiscent of Jesus on the cross or of a Christian saint.” (Khoja-Moolji and Niccolini 29) The panel’s similarity to Christian iconography is also discussed by Sarah Gibbons in her article *‘I Don’t Exactly Have Quiet, Pretty Powers’: Flexibility and Alterity in Ms. Marvel* where she draws a direct connection to the stances and positions of Captain Marvel, Iron Man, and Captain America to Jesus, Elijah and Moses in Raphael’s iconic painting, *The Transfiguration* (Gibbons 455). It is interesting to note that both articles have connected the Muslim superhero to art and iconography that flourished in the colonial era. While Khoja-Moolji and Niccolini see the subversive implications of the connection between whiteness and normalcy in the text, it is important to note that Gibbons saw the text as a wholly intersectional contribution to popular culture which she discussed throughout her essay. She also connected the same panel to Muslim artistic contributions, stating:

The comic juxtaposes the Christian iconography, however, with text from Sufi poet Amir Khusro’s famous thirteenth-century poem ‘Sakal Bun Phool Rahi Sarson’ (‘The yellow mustard is blooming in every field’) as it recalls the Judeo-Christian underpinnings of the superhero genre while gesturing toward new possibilities for the introduction of a Muslim hero. (Gibbons 455)

What is interesting to note about Gibbons’s piece is her reference to the text’s examination of Sufi poetry. There is more than one reference to Sufi poetry—the second time being when Kamala quotes Rumi right before she takes on her first villain. The spotlighting of Sufi poetry is most likely a way Wilson closer connected her to South Asian expressions of Muslim identity which is a culture where Sufi poetry flourished.

Khoja-Moolji and Niccolini are not the only ones who have commented on Kamala’s legibility to audiences. In *Unveiling Marvels: Ms. Marvel and the Reception of the New Muslim Superheroine*, Miriam Kent conducted a media reception study of media response to Kamala Khan’s debut by noting the editorials that commended the text as assimilative as opposed to intersectional. It is important

to note that Kent saw the *Ms. Marvel* series in the same light as Gibbons which was as an intersectional contribution. In response to the critics' reception of the piece, Kent stated "examination of the critical reception of the book reveals a need for the character to be relatable to everyone (whoever "everyone" may be)" (Kent 525). She also discusses the media reviewers' pattern for commending the text as "assimilationist" instead of celebrating it as an intersectional piece.

However, despite the misgivings, *Ms. Marvel* still stands out as a beacon of cultural sensitivity in comparison to the dominant depictions of Muslims in popular culture when one examines the research. Scholarly analyses on Muslim representation in popular culture indicates a perpetuation of orientalist narratives in American media—particularly in film. In *Examining the Critical Role American Popular Film Continues to Play in Maintaining the Muslim Terrorist Image, Post 9/11*, Rubina Ramji conducted a brief genealogy of Muslim portrayal in American films from the early 1900s to the present concluding that "terrorism, specifically Muslim terrorism against America, pays big money at the box office, and so these themes and images continue to win out in the theatre" (17). In her essay, Ramji referred to the leading scholar in Muslim and Arab representation in popular culture, Jack Shaheen, by summarizing his constructions of Muslim women in American films "as silent, shapeless bundles under black garbs or as eroticized, enchantingly veiled belly dancers" (8).

The sentiment of the sexualized Muslim female was echoed by Kerem Bayraktaroglu in his article, *The Representation of Turkish women in James Bond Films* which emphasized orientalist images of Turkish women in Bond films. As it is with Arab representations in popular culture, Turkish representations are inevitably connected to Islam. When discussing the James Bond film, *Skyfall*, Bayraktaroglu stated that Bond "emancipates and sexually liberates his Turkish lover from the demands that her faith and culture place upon her." (9) He later discussed the construction of the sexualized image of the belly dancer which has been another image associated with Muslim women. Bayraktaroglu also discussed depictions of Muslim masculinities in American films in his article, *The Muslim Male Character Typology in American Cinema Post-9/11*. He referred to Shaheen's analyses which surmise that Muslims have been "locked in the Arab cycle of identification" which was a sentiment echoed by Ramji in her article as well (Bayraktaroglu 345). When discussing his "Muslim the Despot" construction, Bayraktaroglu refers to an epitomized character in this section by referring to his "tyrannical" treatment of the women in his family (355). Such a depiction

perpetuates the stereotype of Muslim men as oppressors of women which in turn reinforces the stereotype of Muslim women as oppressed.

From this standpoint, *Ms. Marvel* is a much-welcome text for its humanizing portrayal of Muslims despite its few shortcomings. For instance, the character is not sexualized at all through her costume or everyday clothes where she is often found in comfy jeans and t-shirt ensembles, thus indicating her tomboyish predisposition. There are no orientalist markers such as bellydancing as noted in the James Bond films. And where relationships with non-Muslim men are concerned, there is no sexual liberation either. Most curiously, one of her best friends is an Italian American, Bruno Carrelli, who later on develops feelings for her. He becomes somewhat of a sidekick to Kamala aiding her in her battles at random moments. Most importantly, the friendship between both characters is one of love with Bruno being one of the few who knows of Kamala’s true identity as Ms. Marvel. He is there when she first learns of her ability to self-heal after she is shot at his store trying to botch an attempted robbery. He later on helps her escape from an abandoned island not far from New York City.

### The “Worlding” of the Muslim Superheroine

Considering all these factors, Kamala’s unique space as a multifaceted American-Muslim superheroine starts to become clear. In *Scattered Hegemonies*, Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan encourage feminist readers to be attuned to the “ways in which various patriarchies collaborate and borrow from each other in order to reinforce specific practices that are oppressive to women” (24). It must be stated that the author of the *Ms. Marvel* series is an orthodox American-Muslim convert, G.Willow Wilson and the editor of the series is the Pakistani-American, Sana Amanat. In an interview with the *New Yorker*, Wilson acknowledged that they both recognized “the many lines along which the character could be criticized: traditional Muslims might want her to be more modest, and secular Muslims might want her to be less so. Some would be wary no matter what” (Tolentino). Additionally, it is worth noting that her intentions as well as Amanat was anything but malicious when creating the character and the series.

However, Marvel Comics own and distribute the series and, as the financial backers, they would have considerable control in the construction of the character. Marvel has often been undeniably patriarchal in its nature. Its CEO, Ike Perlmutter, was widely condemned for donating \$1 million dollars to Donald Trump’s

#trumpforvets charity foundation (Bowman). The donation drew ire in public opinion partly because of the then Republican presidential candidate's xenophobic attacks on Muslims. The company is also widely regarded as the creators of hyper-masculine, White male characters such as Captain America and Wolverine that have been depicted as soldiers or characters who work closely with the U.S. army to expand US interests in some of their storylines. Why then the exception with creating a character such as a Muslimah heroine which is far from the norm from what they are used to producing?

In *Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism*, when considering relationship between literature and imperialism, Spivak states:

In the study of the literatures of the European colonizing cultures of the great age of imperialism, we would produce a narrative, in literary history, of the "worlding" of what is now called "the Third World." To consider the Third World as distant cultures, exploited but with rich intact literary heritages waiting to be recovered, interpreted and curricularized in English translation fosters the emergence of "the third world" as a signifier that allows us to forget that "worlding," even as it expands the empire of the literary discipline. (Spivak 243)

According to Spivak, "worlding" is a narrative that depicts third world cultures that is developed through the lens of an imperialist agenda may provide the answer. In the post 9/11 media, a "clash of civilizations" argument between the West and Islam has featured prominently in political debates and popular culture. TV shows such as *24* and *Homeland* as well as countless movies such as *The Hurt Locker*, *Transformers*, *American Sniper* and *Fair Game* have sensationalized the argument to a fever pitch, repeatedly reinforcing definitions of "good Muslims" vs "bad Muslims." The one common trait that constitutes a good Muslim in contrast to a bad Muslim is a simple loyalty test: are they on the side of Americans or against them? There is virtually no attention paid to the complexity of hegemonies present in their individual cultures nor the complications of Western geo-politics in their region. Shehabuddin noted this in her analysis of the moderate Muslim persona when she defined the moderate Muslim as a Western invention whose construction is dependent on support for U.S. foreign policy in the Islamic world in a post 9/11 context (131). It was only a matter of time before the "woman question" factored

into this heightened attention of the Islamic world in popular culture. And this is where *Ms. Marvel* comes in.

Spivak’s essay develops the notion of “imperialism as a social mission” and at one point she refers to the German philosopher’s Immanuel Kant’s “categorical imperative” philosophy, otherwise known as a motivation for actions (247). In this case, the motivation for creating Ms. Marvel is yet another strategy in fulfilling an imperial social mission. Spivak states that “such a travesty in the case of the categorical imperative can justify the imperialist project by producing the following formula: *make* the heathen into a human so that he can be treated as an end in himself” (248). If we consider the Muslim “Other” as the heathen transformed into a powerful superhero, then a humanizing process occurs within the framework of an imperialist agenda. American superheroes have always been symbolized as a protector and fighter for American freedoms and Kamala Khan has not been any different. Throughout the series, she refers to herself as a regular “Jersey Girl” fighting to keep her city safe from crime much in the same way Batman protects Gotham city, thus fulfilling the objective of an all-American superhero.

Spivak also speaks at length of a “domesticated Other” whose primary purpose in Western literature is to consolidate an ‘imperialist Self’. She states that “no perspective critical of imperialism can turn the Other in a self, because the project of imperialism has always already refracted what might have been the absolutely Other into a domesticated Other that consolidates the Imperialist Self” (253). A reconfigured Muslim female is being developed here as an unveiled, crime-fighting Muslim woman who is not in need of being rescued from savage Brown men. Thus, Khan does not represent the “domesticated Other” but instead portrays the “imperialist Self” to the Western audience to which the series panders. Readers can feign a sense of cross-cultural inclusiveness and forget the racist “clash of civilizations” binary playing out in the media and Western politics for a brief time because they now have an assimilated, revamped Muslim woman acting in the capacity of an American hero—despite the fact that she is Othered by her costume and is consistently seen renegotiating a “moderate” space between her traditional South Asian sub-culture in America in favor of her highly coveted “modern” values. Kamala gets to question her imam on the authenticity of today’s Islam in a youth lecture by reminding him that the partition that separates the ladies’ side of the mosque from the men’s side never existed during the time of the Prophet Muhammad, thus illustrating her egalitarian, feminist values (Wilson). What a

considerable contrast this is from the long-suffering *Not Without My Daughter* construction or the hypersexualized harem paintings.

It appears, then, that Kamala does have to keep proving her modernity, a burden not shared with other female superheroes like Wonder Woman or Batgirl. What story, then, is she telling in the capacity of an “absolute Other”? After all, it is undisputed that Muslim women are commonly stereotyped as “oppressed” with media sensationalism around veils, female genital mutilation, and honor killings reaching to a fever pitch during the War on Terror. As is always the case with marginalized women, they are simply not seen in the same light as white women. Thus, answering this question requires decoding the purpose of the character. Kamala does not represent any real feminist advancement as a Muslim female living in America. Instead, the character becomes another feel-good, benevolent imperialist message for Western audiences to consume and enjoy, convincing themselves that they are inclusive and therefore special in comparison to the rest of the world.

Spivak states that “attempts to construct the “Third World Woman” as a signifier remind us that the hegemonic definition of literature is itself caught within the history of imperialism” (254). Thus, the New Jersey-based Kamala Khan is an American who also signifies as a “Third World Woman” because of her Muslim identity. The comparisons to her all-American classmates and predecessor at the very least illustrates her as something other than American. The purpose of the series as a breakthrough addition to popular culture because of its methods of exploring Muslim assimilation in America is simply another testament to a long history of incorporating the imperialist project in modern literature, an area where imperialism as a social mission can flourish in creative ways. While this was not the intent of the creators, the text can function in this way to readers. The inclusion of a Muslimah superheroine into the world of superheroes simply creates a new brand of a Muslim woman: the touchingly “moderate” kind that straddles a life between tradition and the ever-elusive definitions of modernity. But it also pigeon-holes the modern archetype of a Muslim woman as monolithic. Kamala is status-quo in many ways as a heterosexual, middle-class female and she can be defined as conservative by some standards considering her reluctance to show skin, her attendance to mosque and her willingness to negotiate cultural and religious mores with her parents and imam.

## Conclusion

Kamala’s representation to Western audiences can best be explained through the concept of the reconfigured individual that was previously analyzed in research on Muslim women’s subjectivity. As stated earlier, Muslim women were reconfigured in third world nationalist agendas at the turn of the century. Coupled with analyses on the Eurocentric definitions of modernity, one can begin to see how the character invites comparisons to her hijabi best friend, Nakia, as well as her predecessor, Carol Danvers. Keeping in mind Khoja-Moolji’s and Niccolini’s theoretical interventions on Christianity masked as secularism as being the hidden “normal” in the *Ms. Marvel* series as well as Spivak’s theoretical interventions on “worlding,” the possible ramifications of Kamala’s construction becomes clearer.

Thus, this introduction of a modern Muslim woman in Western popular culture is simply a reconfigured version of previous ones. This version of the Muslim woman incorporates religion in her life by choice but is also assimilated enough by American standards. Most importantly, however, is her place in popular culture in a post-9/11 world, where her story is incorporated into an imperialist social mission that argues for inclusion despite the open tensions between the West and the Islamic world. Such a story contributes a form of “worlding” about the Islamic world and Muslim women that allows the First World to continue to ignore the imperialist overtones of Western geo-politics in Muslim countries while praising ourselves for being an “all-inclusive” society.

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# “Grave and Growing Threats”: *The Association of Small Bombs* and the Persistence of Post-9/11 Narratives

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The intense fear and division experienced in the United States after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 frequently turned into enmity toward Muslims in the United States and worldwide. Though political leaders, including President George W. Bush, were careful to specify criticism toward violent extremists, differentiating them from Muslims more broadly, these messages of caution did not fully stem the tide of fear and hatred aimed at followers of Islam.

Negative narratives about Muslims remain relevant in United States political communication today, as President Donald J. Trump faces ongoing court battles to defend Executive Orders aimed at banning foreign nationals from predominantly Muslim countries from visiting the country (“Timeline of the Muslim Ban”). Certainly, negative trends in media treatment of Muslims predate September 11 (Hirji 34-6). However, political narratives from that era about Muslims and Muslim-majority nations as monolithic potential threats to the American way of life are unique and have persisted in U.S. media—again, in spite of efforts even on the part of the Bush administration to convey more nuanced narratives. The continued relevance of these kinds of stories in U.S. media and politics suggest that Bush-era messaging may have reached levels of saturation that mirror those of effective pre-persuasion, a type of communication that essentially constitutes a subtle evolution in the predominant stories are told about certain issues.

This paper aims to identify the lasting effects of post-9/11 rhetoric about Muslims through a narrow examination of U.S. media responses to a single counter-message published fifteen years later: the 2016 novel *The Association of Small Bombs* by Karan Mahajan. The paper begins with a review of the literature on the tenor of post-9/11 media tropes related to Muslims and terrorism, relating these tropes to the kinds of narrative pre-persuasion that are often identified as precursors

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to propaganda. After justifying responses to Mahajan’s novel as an informative case study in the resilience of this pre-persuasive communication environment, this paper analyzes critical media responses to the book to understand which elements of post-9/11 political narratives linking Muslims and violent extremists have been the most persistent. In so doing, this study provides a new look at the ways in which even consciously nuanced strategic communication can be reduced to and linger in the form of misleading pre-persuasive narratives, in this case creating and maintaining a climate in the United States that is permissive of anti-Muslim politics and policies. It also emphasizes the role that well-researched, carefully crafted fiction might play in bringing nuance to damaging political stereotypes.

### Prior Research on the Nature and Influence of Post-9/11 Media Narratives

Much has been written on prominent themes in mainstream U.S. media after September 11. In general, research has focused on narratives used in political communication and the news media to justify military action (Miller). Religious language, for example, was often invoked in government and media rhetoric: President Bush termed the September 11 attacks a “wake-up call to America” and the subsequent campaign against terrorism a “crusade” (Maddox 398-402). This language set up a clear, binary demarcation between good and evil that made distinct a culpable elsewhere from the victimized, resilient United States. This was echoed in media coverage of the War on Terror. U.S. media were generally found to be “on message” with the Bush administration in terms of justifying the war in Iraq through emphasizing fear and fury—emotions that tend to subvert critical engagement—as responses to terrorism (Bennett 20-39; Snow and Taylor 389-407). Even when challenged, the Bush administration effectively maintained broad public support for the war in Iraq. This success can be traced to a few key factors: cohesivity, control over the timing of public discourse, and emotional appeals that the administration knew the public would accept because of continued “intense national anxiety” (Western 110-1). These strategies convinced voters in the U.S. that the threat that President Bush called “grave and growing” was real, and that it could be effectively countered only through aggressive, anti-Muslim policies and military action (Western 111-3).

It is again important to note that President Bush and his administration made careful attempts to create a more nuanced narrative. For example, the President noted in remarks delivered to Congress that “The enemy of America is not our many Muslim friends; it is not our many Arab friends. Our enemy is a radical network of terrorists and every government that supports them” (Hilal). However, the overall message of the War on Terror was often largely interpreted as a war being waged against or in fear of Muslims or Islam, rather than extremists, and this

simplified narrative seems to have persisted in the national imagination.

### Stereotypes, Emotions, and Pre-Persuasion

A great deal of research has found that media depictions of minority groups affect audience perceptions and opinions of those groups (Greenberg et al. 333-51). This is true even in works of fiction. Though readers and viewers can generally distinguish between fact and fiction in individual works, “this becomes increasingly difficult if a variety of media come together to create a consistent picture” (Hirji 37). In fact, media analysts tend to agree that counteracting innate stereotypic thinking requires discipline and awareness, but often, audiences of both news and entertainment media “have neither the motivation nor the skills to challenge aspects of their own deeply engrained thought processes” (Henry and Tator 29). This emotional bypassing of complex message processing makes pre-persuasion easy to execute and maintain—even inadvertently—through consistent media messaging. Pre-persuasion involves establishing a favorable climate for future messaging through determining how an issue is defined and discussed, essentially simplifying the narrative around the issue.

From there, delivering a message that controls the emotions of a receptive audience follows more easily (Pratkanis and Aronson). Simplified narratives tied to both pre-existing prejudices and fear or other heightened emotions can be particularly difficult for both communicators and audiences to detect or counteract, making the post-9/11 media climate a setting conducive to pre-persuasion. Indeed, remnants of the rhetoric employed at the time continue to facilitate a climate permissive of political communication framing Islamic extremism as justification for military investments and intervention. Further, narratives of fear continue to make policies like President Trump’s travel ban aimed at Muslim-majority countries seem not only viable but necessary. This political permissibility relies on persistent, consistent messaging, regardless of intention.

### The Persistence of Post-9/11 Narratives in U.S. Entertainment Media

The persistence of several key themes employed in political responses to September 11 illustrates the efficacy of repetition in messaging. Many scholars have explored the tangle of patriotism and prejudice that emerged at the time, tracking it from news and political rhetoric into popular culture. Though U.S. culture has shifted considerably in the ensuing decade, creating space for media with more nuanced representations of diverse religious and cultural groups, the general media discourse around Islam has remained shallow and often biased (Westwell 815-34). Most evaluations of post-9/11 themes in entertainment media identify superficial transformation in terms of increased references to diversity in general and Islam

specifically, but highlight continued trends of negative discourse, particularly with respect to the themes of religious difference underpinning distinctions between good and evil (Castonguay 139-45; Hirji 33-47). The implicit justification for military action in these kinds of narratives is often made explicit, such as when Hollywood films reflected and affirmed the policies and anxieties of the Bush administration, stoking emotional justifications for increased defense capabilities and military interventions internationally (Shailo 72-87; Alford 144-56). Even in the realm of professional wrestling, where “normative—and punitive—relationships between [...] American and foreign have played out week by week for decades,” scholars have traced stereotypic imagery that supported the urgency and clear-cut morality of the War on Terror (Nevitt 321–2).

Though evaluations of U.S. media are useful in identifying pervasive, anti-Muslim messaging, exploring counter-messaging and responses to Islamophobic discourses can also be instructive in terms of illustrating the saturation of pre-persuasive rhetoric (Devadoss and Cromley 380-96). For example, decriers of Islamophobic rhetoric after September 11 were criticized for their “blame America first” attitudes in a backlash against counter-messaging put forth at the time (Silberstein). However, research on challenges to the Islamophobic narratives have often focused on the news media (Entman 415-32). With respect to fictional or entertainment media, some have traced the evolution of more nuanced representations of processes of radicalization and fundamentalism (Morrison 567-84). Given the pervasiveness of anti-Muslim messaging in fictional entertainment media, examining responses to counter-narratives in that realm is worthwhile as a way of understanding their efficacy.

### Research Methods: Evaluating the Efficacy of a Counter-Message

To capture both the nature of the book as a counter-message and the resilience of Islamophobic pre-persuasion in contemporary responses to it, this paper uses thematic content analysis to identify themes in reviews of *The Association of Small Bombs*. Mainstream media responses to the book highlight its prominent themes both as an independent piece of art and as a piece of carefully wrought counter-messaging in response to the emotional, overly simplified anti-Muslim narratives in U.S. media after September 11.

*Why The Association of Small Bombs*. The persistence of post-9/11 pre-persuasive rhetoric even in response to counter-messages embedded in entertainment media is evident in the critical response to *The Association of Small Bombs*, a decades-later exploration of religious and political tensions similar to—but also quite distinct from—those so heightened in 2001. Indian American author Karan Mahajan had been working on the book since 2008, making it a carefully composed response to narratives about Muslims and terrorism, separately and in

combination, by the time of its 2016 publication (Gardner). Though perhaps not the most overt literary response to September 11, the novel weaves together narratives of religious belief and nonbelief; the complexities of cultural, political, and social pressures worldwide; and their culmination in a terrorist act and its aftermath. It is because of this multifaceted exploration of violence and victimization that this novel, and the reactions it inspired, constitute an apt site for an exploration of the resilience of 9/11-era Islamophobic pre-persuasion and the most effective approaches to countering such lasting narratives.

*The Association of Small Bombs* opens in a marketplace in Delhi in 1996 with an explosion of a car bomb, then follow the stories of the survivors of the attack, the families of those killed, and the terrorists who organized the bombing. Initially an intimate exploration of family life and Hindu-Muslim relations in contemporary India, the novel follows its characters to the United States when one of the protagonists attends college in California just before September 11. Once there, he faces prejudice based on his race, class, and religion. He eventually aligns himself with an organization whose members become involved in terrorist activities, not as religious extremists but political activists frustrated by alienation and the inefficiency of peaceful protests (Mahajan). Throughout the novel, the characters engaged in networks and individual acts of terrorism are not pardoned, but humanized: they are inept, disillusioned, angry, and lost. Though the book itself is divided into distinct sections—each neatly titled “Blast,” “Victims,” “Terrorists,” etc.—the narrative and its characters resist categorization into the distinct classifications of religious difference or of good and evil initially advanced in post-9/11 media. Instead, the book outlines a much more complicated web of violence and political culpability.

*Selecting Media Responses.* Sampling of media responses to *The Association of Small Bombs* was conducted on Lexis Nexis, where a search for the title on Lexis Nexis Academic (now Nexis Uni) identified 59 articles published in U.S.-based newspapers (including undergraduate-run college newspapers), magazines, journals, web-based publications, and blogs between January 1, 2016 and March 1, 2019. Articles that were published both in print and online were only counted once. Articles were also excluded from the sample if they did not contain substantive discussion of the novel and its contents. Thus, articles about awards that the book won, those written by the author that only mentioned the book’s title in a biographical note, and those that only included the title on a list of recommended books were excluded. Articles that centered on interviews with the author were only included in the sample if they also included at least two sentences reviewing the book. This reduced the sample size to seventeen articles, all of which are listed in the works cited (Alessio 40; Anderson; Byrne; Ealy; Fallon; Hong; Kelley; “Kirkus Review”; Littwin; Maazel; Majumdar; McCreary; *Publishers Weekly*; Sacks; Schwartz 82; Shetty; Walker).

While this sample is small, it does represent a nationwide coverage of a literary novel. It also exemplifies publications of many different sizes and scopes from a number of different regions, including national publications. This broad sample of U.S. media responses to *The Association of Small Bombs* is therefore a good starting point in terms of the national reception of the novel. Of course, the reviewers whose responses to the book are captured here might not be representative of U.S. readers or residents more broadly. Different methodological approaches would be needed to understand the responses of the public. However, this sample does allow for hypothesis generation about reactions to counter-Islamophobic storytelling among those with an interest in narratives, who are likely to be more attentive to and critical of details others might overlook. This makes their responses an apt site for identifying nuanced responses to fictional messages that counter broader narratives.

*Thematic Content Analysis.* This study uses content analysis to identify themes in reactions to the novel that relate to themes in post-9/11 rhetoric about terrorism, Islam, and the intersection of politics and religion. The kind of thematic coding used herein involves a number of iterative steps (Braun and Clarke 77-101). First, initial codes capturing interesting features of reviews with respect to religion, politics, and morality were generated, largely using key words from the texts themselves. These codes were then sorted into three categories, which emerged as themes after the initial round of keyword coding. Each category relates to a quality of *The Association of Small Bombs* that was repeated as a theme in its reviews: the novel’s subversion of simple religious tropes, its efforts to humanize both the victims and perpetrators of violence, and its emphasis of the moral complexity of political life. Certainly, reviews had other common themes, particularly in terms of commentary on the novel as a work of fiction. However, these themes were set aside in this analysis, where the focus was specifically on reactions to the novel that contained echoes of or revisions to of the kinds of narratives that were prevalent in U.S. media after September 11.

This approach to content analysis is flexible, allowing for systematic analysis and detailed description of a dataset. While this is useful for a small sample size like this one, it also makes the study limited in scope. Further explorations of responses to other entertainment media that incorporate counter-messages to Islamophobic rhetoric would be necessary to get a sense of broader trends. Additionally, thematic coding reduces sample elements to their thematic components. This can flatten some of the discourse being examined by leaving out information related to the sources of particular ideas, discarding important topics that do not recur in the sample, and neglecting connections between some thematic elements.

Nonetheless, the level of detail this method allows makes it a constructive foray into generating hypotheses about the resilience and malleability of cultural narratives. Responses to *The Association of Small Bombs* illuminate the ways in

which pre-persuasive narratives can capture national imaginations, as well as how they might be made more constructively complicated by alternative stories in fictional media.

### Findings and Discussion: Responses to Nuance in Narrative

The three core themes related to post-9/11 narratives about religion and politics identified in the content review were all noted by critics as strengths of the novel, painting a compelling picture of the way that these narratives have both evolved and remained the same since 2001. While outright recognition of and often praise for these themes illustrates a willingness to move beyond simple, often Islamophobic storytelling about terrorism, their absences in these reviews is also of interest. Where reviewers did not laud certain aspects of the novel, it may be either because they were not considered noteworthy or because they were not considered strengths. The former would suggest that post-9/11 Islamophobia has waned such that its counter-messages are no longer notable; the latter would suggest that counter-messages still ring false. Further research on when and where such messages are compelling to U.S. audience is needed to tell the difference. However, even this sample is instructive in identifying the ways in which the novel was received as a response to Islamophobia, as well as what those responses say about prevailing narratives of terrorism and religion.

*Subverting Religious Stereotypes.* Five of the seventeen reviews of the book highlighted its subversion of religious stereotypes as one of its strengths (Kelley, Maazel, McCreary, Sacks, and Shetty). For example, one noted that Mahajan describes Hindu-Muslim relations in India “frankly without depicting either as particularly incorrect or evil” (McCreary). Another found his “take on what it means to be a practicing Muslim [...] sophisticated and nuanced” (Maazel). Still others described the novel as “the finest I’ve read at capturing the seduction and force of the murderous, annihilating illogic that increasingly consumes the globe” (Sacks) and “a radical and extended act of empathy” (Shetty).

Notably, some read this approach to more nuanced representations of religion with something akin to surprise: “None of the terrorists in the novel are radicalized Muslims. None of them murder in the misappropriated name of Allah. Instead, they are political activists” (Maazel). Further, one reviewer criticized elements of the novel related to its religious—and cultural—nuance, suggesting that readers might get bogged down in unfamiliar terms in the deep description of life, both religious and secular, in India in its earlier sections (Kelley).

Though the least common of the three identified, this theme suggests that more nuanced narratives about religious groups, while commended by some reviewers, are still noteworthy even in fictional U.S. media. In some cases, this aspect of the novel was seen as a surprising strength. Though praise for its nuance suggests that

some of the simplistic narratives about Islam that were so prevalent in the post-9/11 era have waned, that the religious and cultural specificity of the novel seemed surprising and even overwhelming to some reviewers suggests that this depth of inquiry into religions and cultures frequently dismissed as different and even dangerous in media discourse remains groundbreaking even decades later.

*Humanizing Victims and Perpetrators of Violence.* Most reviewers—twelve of the seventeen—explicitly recognized the novel’s capacity to humanize both the victims and perpetrators of violence as one of its unique strengths: Anderson, Byrne, Ealy, Fallon, Hong, Kelley, Littwin, Maazel, McCreary, Schwartz, Shetty, and Walker. Though the narration does not excuse involvement in orchestrating atrocities, it does outline something of an explanation for the way it often comes about for people who are often themselves victims of both manipulation and circumstance: “men corrupted by political inefficiency and injustice” (McCreary). Most reviewers held up this aspect of the novel as effective in terms of humanizing characters that are typically flattened in media representations, setting it apart from “popular sensationalist literature and films” that perpetuate anti-Muslim tropes (McCreary). One reviewer admired Mahajan’s “gutsy” narrative, which “(a) forces us to care about just another terrorist attack in a market in Delhi and (b) insists that we consider—and possibly even like—the people for whom terrorism exerts its appeal” (Maazel).

Another noted that Mahajan portrays characters “as angry, frustrated, obsessed, perhaps deluded— as killers but not as monsters” (Anderson). In general, the consensus among reviewers was that the novel is a “tour de force of psychological probing and empathy” (Ealy, “Terror Attack”). In interviews about the book, Mahajan notes that this process of humanizing characters readers might otherwise dismiss as one-dimensional was one of his goals. Notably, his goal seems to have been tracing the origins of terrorism to facilitate its prevention. In his words:

One of the key points that the novel is trying to get across is that we have to deglamorize terrorism and strip away the many layers of fear we attach to the word. And if you see people who are perpetrating these attacks as incompetent and fearful, then you at least have to see how this entire crisis of terrorism could be defused [...] I think the populace can live in less fear than it does, which would in turn make them less susceptible to all sorts of demagoguery. (Ealy, “Karan Mahajan”)

Mahajan’s objective in empathizing with the characters in his novel who become involved in or manipulated by terrorist organizations is not to condone their decisions but to explain them, with the goal of identifying ways to prevent the despondence that can drive such choices. In his view, overly simplified narratives about these organizations and their perceived connections with regions or religious

groups create fear, which gives way to policies and politics that perpetuate enmity. His novel is intended as an answer to that fear; the complicated tragedy he outlines is meant to broaden readers' views of injustice and violence, as well as their ability to imagine how to address both.

This aspect of the novel discomforted some reviewers.. One took issue with Mahajan's investigations of the internal lives of all of his characters as a question of craft, arguing that some moments of introspection by certain characters were hard to believe (Schwartz 82). Others found the novel's investment in both victims and perpetrators of violence "dissonant" and "unsettling" (Sacks; Byrne). This uneasiness with nuanced explorations of terrorism contains echoes of simplified, stereotypical post-9/11 narratives. That adding nuance to these stereotypical stories remains difficult even in fictional media points to their durability, but the novel's success also suggests that imaginative explorations like Mahajan's hold promise as new ways of understanding and addressing the root causes of violence.

*Emphasizing Moral Complexity.* Creating a more complex universe of political motivations and outcomes is the third aspect of the novel that was commonly identified as one of its strengths, with seven of the seventeen highlighting this aspect of the book (Alessio 40; "Kirkus Review"; Maazel; McCreary; Schwartz 82; Shetty; *Publishers Weekly*). The way in which the novel seems to argue that "there are no heroes here" was read as "subversive and refreshing" (Maazel). A brief review in *Publishers Weekly* spent considerable space on this aspect of the book: "Mahajan's talent is in conveying the sense that the world is gray, not black-and-white, and he accomplishes this by weaving together the evolving motives and passions of his characters so intricately that in the end we see each as culpable and human" (176). This theme is a crucial disruption of the kinds of media messaging that increased in prevalence after September 11, which centered on a narrative of a world where all actors are strictly either good or evil.

Interestingly, however, it was the moral complexity of the novel that was most commonly criticized among reviewers, with four—more than half of those who discussed this quality—describing the novel's commitment to a nuanced narrative in ways that highlighted reviewers' discomfort with this approach. Some felt *The Association of Small Bombs* was "too restless" and so "wearily complex" that it lacked a clear central purpose (Alessio 40; McCreary). Others felt the novel oversold "the point that radicalism makes for unlikely bedfellows" in what became a "screed against coherence" ("Kirkus Review"; Shetty). Interestingly, this aspect of the novel was criticized both for being both overly complicated and narratively heavy-handed. This suggests that some found the nuance the novel explores dizzying, while others found it self-evident.

Attitudes of both irritation and overwhelm in response to more nuanced storytelling illustrate the breadth of reactions made possible by patchy evolution in the prevailing narratives on an issue. That the central moral complexity of the novel

inspired somewhat mixed reviews suggests that one aspect of post-9/11 pre-persuasive narratives that persists in the U.S. consciousness is their moral simplicity. Discomfort in response to more complex political stories are echoed in debates around President Trump’s Muslim travel ban. The lack of ambiguity of post-9/11 political narratives may be their most persistent quality. However, that the nuanced explorations of these themes in *The Association of Small Bombs* inspired many positive responses suggests that thoughtful fictional media may hold promise in expanding our capacity to imagine terrorism and ways to prevent it.

## Conclusion

*The Association of Small Bombs* was named a finalist for the National Book Award in 2016, and the judges’ citation captures the elements that make it an illustrative example of counter-messaging in the face of propagandistic narratives about Muslims and terrorism: “Karan Mahajan explodes the notion that anything or anyone is truly mundane, perforates the border between perpetrator and victim, and cautions us that weapons have no masters” (*National Book Foundation*). The primary trends in U.S. responses to the novel—admiration for its efforts to disrupt religious stereotypes and humanize both victims and perpetrators of violence, and both praise for and discomfort with its complex view of political morality—highlight the ways in which post-9/11 narratives about terrorism remain salient. The persistence of simplistic, fear-based media messaging, even in spite of attempts by political leaders to add nuance to those stories, merits further study, as do the ways in which fictional and factual media interact to influence public opinion.

How to respond to atrocities with political stories that are both impassioned and accurate remains an urgent question today. The groundwork of Islamophobic narratives laid in the post- 9/11 era can be permissive of the kinds of anti-Muslim politics and policies that *The Association of Small Bombs* investigates as potential contributors to the appeal of extremism. Mahajan’s novel makes a still-timely argument for finding ways in our public speech to vehemently and unequivocally decry acts of violent extremism without vilifying people from religious, philosophical, and cultural backgrounds that are unrelated to those acts.

In *The Association of Small Bombs*, Mahajan not only subverts overly simplistic Islamophobic rhetoric, but also more accurately depicts violent extremism as a social and political concern. In his words, “Most modern-day terrorists have been middle-class individuals with degrees [...] It’s scary for us to imagine that someone who shares our sensibilities could turn to terror” (Majumdar). He describes his goal in the novel as one that involves inspiring a different kind of fear than that typically activated by political narratives about terrorism. *The Association of Small Bombs* inspires a fear of alienating others rather than a fear of the others themselves, and in this way, subverts the kind of pre-persuasive messaging that may make military

intervention or a blanket travel ban seem like the only solution to the threat of terrorism.

Ultimately, this novel and the reactions to it exemplify the potential fiction has to make complex narratives that become dangerous when oversimplified in stories told in politics or media. Though elements of some Islamophobic narratives from the post-9/11 era have persisted in the U.S. consciousness, maintaining a political climate that allows for anti-Muslim politics and policies, others have grown more nuanced. Reactions to *The Association of Small Bombs* suggest that fiction can be a space in which collective pain might be investigated and reimagined, deepening our knowledge of complicated issues and their potential solutions in the service of more just political life. A better understanding of what makes such efforts most effective could inform future attempts to prevent reductive narratives from capturing the public's imagination in harmful ways, and to instead advance stories that acknowledge the complexities of individual actors and the social, political, and spiritual worlds they inhabit.

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# Nia Nal the Super Girl: Transgender Representation and Body Image

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With the production of television series such as *Pose*, *Transparent*, *I am Jazz*, *I am Cait*, and *Orange is the New Black* in conjunction with current political discussion on transgender rights involving transgender military service and the bathroom bills, transgender and gender diverse (TGD) representations have become a vital issue within American culture. *Orange is the New Black* and *Pose* focus on subjects directly impacting the TGD communities today, while *I am Jazz* and *I am Cait* follow the stories of Jazz Jennings and Caitlyn Jenner navigating life as transgender women. These series, surprisingly diverse in their racial representations of transgender identity, open the door to transgender existence in hegemonic media. In their latest season, the CW television series *Supergirl* has introduced the newest superhero to join the crew: a transgender woman named Nia Nal, who is able to see the future through her dreams. This new addition to TGD representation simultaneously breaks through to new territories as well as reinforces the existing hegemonic image of TGD identity and the gender binary.

The influx of TGD characters has begun to assert an ideal transgender body upon the media-produced transgender narrative while furthering representation and acceptance of the existence of transgender people. Despite their innovative portrayals of these transgender characters, the effect of the combined representations creates a specific and narrow image of what it means to be transgender. As E.T. Booth explains: “As is the case with any marginalized group... an increase in media representation may be just as likely to further confuse the issue as to clarify it, particularly when the commercial interests controlling those

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representations are inclined to frame them in sensationalistic terms” (Booth 191). Because American popular culture represents so few of these characters, their portrayal is crucial as it produces the stereotypes that are then taken as truth in audiences that have no other interactions with them (*Black Feminist Thought*). Therefore, it is important to watch how these new and generally successful television series handle the diversity, or lack thereof, of TGD experience and identity.

Within the aforementioned series, the TGD characters offer a narrow view of TGD identity (Price et al.). They are exclusively male-to-female transgender, either already fully transitioned or working toward the presented ideal of fully transitioned. These characters largely identify along a strict gender binary and their outward appearance reflects this identification. What these representations therefore portray is a physical body image that falls in line with the body ideal of cisgender<sup>1</sup> women. While this image in and of itself is not all together negative, it has the capacity to further the gender binary and definition of female, and by extension transgender female, as a single particular image: that of hyper-effeminate, skinny, and hegemonically beautiful. Although “passing,”<sup>2</sup> is discussed in the FX series *Pose* as the end goal, these series already physically represent each of these characters represented as this passing image; only through the discussions of their transgender identities do the series communicate to the audience that they are not ciswomen. The most notable exception to this rule was the lead character in the series *Transparent*, previously played by Jeffrey Tambor, who also happens to be the only transgender character within these series that was not played by a transgender actor. What Tambor’s representation implies is that the physical appearance of that character is not representative of the “authentic” transgender identity in the same manner as those characters played by transgender actors.

In examining Nia Nal in *Supergirl*, played by transgender actress and activist Nicole Maines, this paper asks the questions of how this newest representation of TGD identity contributes to the media image of what it means to be a TGD person, what specific body image is developing as the “acceptable” transgender body, and how this representation reaffirms or deconstructs the gender binary ideals of the female and TGD body. In aiming to contribute to the limited rhetorical study of TGD representation, this paper calls for a recognition of how these current TGD

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<sup>1</sup> Cisgender refers to those who identify with the gender assigned at birth (Capuzza and Spencer).

<sup>2</sup> Passing is defined in this case as the ability to present as cisgender (Fritz and Gonzales 1192).

representations dictate the accepted TGD body image, and thereby what becomes the hegemonic definition of the “real” or “authentic” TGD body. Through the rhetorical analysis of Nia Nal’s character, this paper finds that hegemonic mediated definitions of feminine beauty are placed upon the transgender characters within these series, presenting the transgender-ideal as that of the cisfemale ideal. The actors themselves adhere to the hegemonic dictations of beauty through their physical depiction of the body image ideal, creating a sense of authenticity of identity behind the characters and into what becomes the culturally dominant definition of the TGD body. This repeated imagery not only reinforces the “authentic” TGD body, but furthermore underpins imagery of the culturally dictated “perfect” woman, emphasizing gendered roles of femininity onscreen and off.

### Media Construction and Body Image

Media and the consumption of popular television series are closely tied to the development of American society’s definitions of the ideal body and gender definition. Kimberly Bissell and Amy Rask assert that as a result of the distortion of body image, “the media are one of many potential variables related to increases in disordered eating[...] The media are often held partially responsible for young females’ desire to be extraordinarily thin because of the number of media messages promoting the ‘thin ideal’” (643). This understanding of media’s influence in the construction of hegemonic norms enforces a specific type of body as the ideal. Media thereby constructs the identification of the “normative” body, and what is not only accepted, but desirable within a given identity (S. Butler and Bissell 230). Judith Butler identifies gender as a performance of social construction (*Gender Trouble* 129). The culture constructed through media dictates the accepted performances of gender. Identities are placed in strict hegemonic definitions of male or female based on the representation and presentation of the physical self. John Sloop explains that “bodies are forced into male/female categories; once in these categories, they either need to properly perform [...] or the search is on for the causes of their ‘malfunction’” (182). This definition of the proper performance is exemplified through the physical body, and the enactment of gender representations.

Media thereby place TGD identification into classifications of either strictly male or female (often female with few exceptions), asserting a divisiveness

between the two. In doing so, the portrayals of these characters then represent the ideal body image not of the transgender body, but of the cisgender body it has been identified as. Michal Morgan, James Shanahan, and Nancy Signorelli explain that television “is the source of the most broadly shared images and messages in history. It is the mainstream of the common symbolic environment into which our children are born and in which we all live out our lives” (34). Television specifically is inherent in the social construction of the ideal image. Kevin Deluca, Ye Sun, and Jennifer Peeples further this idea of media prevalence to the construction of social existence: “media produce the public sphere and public screens as primal scenes of Being.” (147). The images within social media become emblematic of reality: “In our public discourse of images, images are important not because they represent reality but create it: they are the place where collective social action, individual identity and symbolic imagination meet—the nexus between culture and politics” (Hartley 3). In other words, through the creation of a singular image of TGD embodiment, these television series thereby construct the social hegemonic definition of the ideal TGD body.

Through the presentation of the body, embodiment becomes a demonstration of authenticity and identity representative of the actors as well as the characters they play. Butler asserts that “Embodiment is not thinkable without a relation to a norm or set of norms” (“Critically Queer” 28). What this means is that without the regulation and dictation of mediated images constructing the “norm,” no specified definition of the embodied exists. The physical bodies of the actors thereby become a measure of the culturally defined “authentic” transgender body, aligned within the gender binary and defined through gender-specific hegemonic regulations. Dwight Brooks and Lisa Hébert assert that “media are crucial in the construction and dissemination of gender ideologies and, thus, in gender socialization” (298). However, within the presentations at play, rather than restructuring concepts of gender through TGD representations, an ideal body image and narrative is placed upon the TGD in line with the ideal body image of the cisgender body. Susan Stryker explains:

...it is increasingly obvious that transgender phenomena are not limited to individuals who have ‘transgendered’ personal identities. Rather, they are signposts that point to many different kinds of bodies and subjects, and they can help us see how gender can function as part of a more extensive apparatus of social domination and control. Gender as a form of social

control is not limited to the control of bodies defined as ‘women’s bodies’, or the control of female reproductive capacities. Because genders are categories through which we recognize the personhood of others (as well as ourselves). (61)

The defined gender and gender representation of the TGD body must therefore align with the media constructed definition of the gender acceptable, in order to claim personhood. Furthermore, those who persist outside of these identifications have historically been dehumanized, seen as mentally deranged, unstable, and often dangerous (Cavalcante). Sloop expounds upon this defining of the “Other” or those outside of the mediated norm, as particular behaviors and personifications of identity are reinforced by media through the repetition of these trends across differing media. He explains that these representations of gender “ultimately provide a reifying crystallization of cultural expectations of gender normativity... [as they] focus on specific clothing choices and body movements as signifying masculinity” (174). Masculinity as well as femininity therefore reinforce upon the transgender representations within the series. The portrayals of these images, then, are presented within the cultural expectations of the gendered “ideal” body image.

Specifically, in relation to *Supergirl* and the other series represented within this paper, these characters are forced into the cisfemale ideal of beauty, reinforcing a theme of transgender as solely a desire to be fully female. This sole representation presents a false image of the transgender desired identity as either fully male or fully female. Niki Friz and Amy Gonzales state: “Trans bodies are often dichotomized as masculine or feminine, yet, as trans individuals transition to different gender identities, they may or may not want to be or be able to pass—to appear as their preferred gender—which is often determined by social or outside forces” (1192). Within these series, the idea of passing is presented as the ultimate goal, with a full gender transition as the only path to achieve this passing identity. The body image thereby presented is one of the passing female that the audience would likely not perceive as transgender without the explanations of the series themselves. In their 2017 review of transgender television characters, Jamie Capuzza and Leland Spencer explain that “all the lead and supporting transgender characters reinforced the gender binary and gender stability, identifying consistently with either masculinity or femininity” (225). Through the repetition of this specific transnormative identity within these series, the hegemonic understanding of transgender becomes further constricted through the gender

binary. These series present transgender characters as fully male or fully female, restricted within those cis-centered hegemonic ideals of beauty (Miller 127). Again, the one exception to this physical representation is that of *Transparent*, as moreover the only character of these series that is played by a cisgender white male. Therefore, authenticity of experience and representation is portrayed as that of passing through the transgender bodies of the actors playing these characters.

Body image and presentation of the gendered self are inherently tied to the transgender identity, as the performance of gender becomes that of the culturally defined male or female body. The physical presentation of self therefore becomes linked with the identification of gender and the associated body image. When self-presentation does not meet the perceived image of the “ideal self,” the individual is at risk of mental health disorders such as depression, low self-esteem, body dysmorphia, and anxiety (see Becker and Hamburg; Bissell and Rask; Rield, Camargo and Taylor; Harrison and Cantor; Lavine, Sweeney and Wagner). In comparison to the cisgender norm, the transgender community is at higher risk within this identification through the added pressures of marginalization and minority stress compiled with the pressures of passing within day to day life in order to minimize transphobic and anti-trans responses (see Budge, Andelson and Howard; House, Van Horn and Coppeans; Morris and Galupo; Testa, Habarth and Peta; Testa Michales and Bliss). According to Ezra R. Morris and M. Paz Galupo, “transgender individuals experience greater body dissatisfaction than their cisgender counterparts has been suggested by previous research, although it is unclear whether such body dissatisfaction is attributable to trans-specific experiences, such as gender dysphoria, or general factors such as weight concerns”(2). Within their 2019 study, Morris and Galupo found that those who identify as transgender have much lower self-esteem in relation to body image than their cisgender counterparts (8). In 2016, Brandon Velez, et al. conducted a study of body image and over-exercising habits in transgender men. They found that transgender men often “feel that their bodies fall short of the masculine ideal perpetuated by a sexist, heterosexist, and cissexist (i.e., privileging gender conformity and devaluing gender nonconformity) society” (498). Further research supports the claim that TGD people report higher levels of body dissonance and uneasiness and body image disturbances (see Bandini, Fisher and Castellini; Fisher, Castellini and Bandini; Velez, Breslow and Brewster; Vocks, Stahn and Loesner). Therefore, when looking at the development of what media and television present as the representative body of the transnormative, these representations further deny

those whose bodies do not mirror the specific image of the presented transgender ideal.

The mediated representations of the TGD body fall into the historic tropes of media regulations of female bodies through oversexualization, the “thin ideal,” and the hyper feminizing of these physical representations. These negative body images and dissonance are further exacerbated by mediated reinforcement of the ideal body and the sexualization of the “thin ideal”:

...internalization of SSA [sociocultural standards of attractiveness] leads to greater self-objectification, which manifests behaviorally through body surveillance, or persistent monitoring of how one’s body looks rather than how it feels, functions, or performs. Persistent body surveillance decreases body satisfaction and increases body shame because of the nigh-impossibility of meeting society’s rigid standards of attractiveness. Greater body dissatisfaction, in turn, promotes disordered eating and other negative mental health outcomes. (Velez, Breslow and Brester 498)

The sexual objectification of the transgender body, and the reinforcement of the feminized gender ideal, puts transgender people at higher risk of low self-esteem and body dysmorphia as their physical selves and identities do not match those presented on the screen. This disconnect between screen and reality has the potential to lead to eating disorders, self-mutilation and self-harm, and higher risks of suicidal ideation.

In examining the mediated image of the transgender identity, it is important to recognize and examine the ways in which these representations further enforce upon viewers the “thin ideal,” and traditional hegemonic definition of feminine beauty. Through the singular image and narrative of the ideal thin woman presented by the media, the feminine ideal of beauty has continued to decrease in waist size (Owen and Laurel-Seller 979). This specific body shape represents an unhealthy and unattainable size for most women, creating a sense of inadequacy and incompetence through an inability to achieve this particular image (Bissell and Rask 650). Thinness has become the “culturally conditioned” idea of perfection through these persistent images on public screens (Pipher 78). Brooks and Hébert explain that “feminine beauty [is] constrained to light skin, straight hair, thinness, relative youthfulness, and middle-class status” (300). Thinness, along with lighter skin, relative youthfulness, and overall passing figure of femininity become

emblematic of what it means to be a cisgender women, and, furthermore, of transwomen.

Through the rhetorical analysis of the new transgender character Nia Nal in *Supergirl*, this paper finds that these mediated definitions of feminine beauty are placed upon the transgender character. *Supergirl*, in relation to the previously aired transgender representations, presents the transgender-ideal as that of the cisfemale ideal. The actors themselves adhere to the ideals of beauty through their physical embodiment of the cis body image ideal, creating a sense of authenticity of identity behind the characters and of what becomes the hegemonic definition of the transgender body.

### Rhetorical Bodies: The Embodiment of Performance

As transgender representation continues to increase, the bodies of the transgender actors and characters themselves become sites of rhetoric through the discursive elements of authenticity and the embodied construction of social realities. Celeste Condit asserts that “the human body is a medium with specific properties that drive and shape discourse both in the moment and through time” (387). The body is in and of itself rhetorical when presented on public screens and television as it shapes the social identification of the normative body. Kevin DeLuca explains that, “Bodies are enmeshed in a turbulent stream of multiple and conflictual discourses that shape what they mean in particular contexts” (12). In defining bodies as rhetorical, the actors’ physical personifications of their characters move the character away from abstract into a lived experience. Within the contexts of media representation, the physical bodies within popular media exemplify the hegemonically constructed image of these bodies, and thereby what becomes defined as the acceptable othered body. In other words, as marginalized communities are represented on screens, these representations dictate the dominant understanding of the “correct” embodiment of these identities, especially for audiences that have not encountered these communities (*Black Sexual Politics*). Regarding TGD bodies, Capuzza and Spencer explain:

Examining both the quantity and quality of transgender television depictions is important because media construct, reinforce, and challenge existing social definitions of gender. Invisibility, stereotypical representation, and assimilation of transgender people in the media can

contribute to the public's lack of understanding or acceptance of this population [...] Additionally, these representations have the potential to influence how transgender people see themselves, which can exacerbate internalized transphobia. (215)

This means that the bodies represented onscreen become emblematic of what not only is constructed as the hegemonic ideal of TGD identity, but furthermore reinforce within the TGD community itself what is and is not beautiful. As stated above, body image is tied to the embodied representations onscreen, as these images become the cultural ideal.

These embodied characters not only effect TGD communities, but furthermore reinforce hegemonic dictations of the gender binary. Susan Stryker explains that the basis of transgender identity stems from the restrictions of societal gender norms and the strict gender binary, and thereby the issues restricting transgender identity are strongly linked with feminist movement goals of gender equality and freedom of the body. The embodiment of TGD body image is therefore further problematized through the ways in which it reinforces the gender binary on both TGD identity as well as within hegemonic culture as a whole. These gender restrictions dictate the bodies that are acceptable and unacceptable within the dominant social culture. Sim Butler and Kim Bissell explain, "the pressures to classify and order bodies, and therefore offer access, be it literal or symbolic, to some and not to others, highlight the struggles between social constructions and self-determination" (240). Gender identification and the embodiment of that gender thereby dictates who is accepted within the dominant culture and who is denied entry. Furthermore, through the representation and assertion of hegemonically denied and erased identities, the bodies themselves have the power to become a form of resistive rhetoric in breaking down social constructs of normative identities and representations, or further reinforcing those normative stereotypes and regulations. As Butler and Bissell explain, "hegemonic constructions create, through discourse, the arbitrary binaries of normal and abnormal [...]. As these constructed labels are based on abstractions, they are often justified, policed, and articulated within social discourse" (233).

Moving toward the performativity of the body, Michelle Holling and Bernadette Calafell state that the body and identity are tied to cultural performance. These cultural performances have the power to remake and deconstruct dominant restrictions on identity and thereby reconstruct the social norms: "Exemplifying the

performative elements of identity and the body, are cultural performances [...]. Cultural performances, thus, serve as a basis for personal and social identities” (61). However, when media representations restrict and narrowly focus these embodied performances, they can serve, rather, to reinforce preconceived notions and stereotypes of identities that exist outside of the dominant norm. The depicted body and associated identity become emblematic to the physical performance and representation of narrative, as they further construct what is perceived as culturally correct (Pérez and Goltz). This narrative of identity develops through the representations of these identities within the societal public screens, or public discourse as generated through media and screen culture (Deluca, Sun and Peeples). Furthermore, through the personal identities of the actors within these identities, the “performed or embodied narratives offer the ‘performance of possibilities’ as spaces that highlight the importance of a historical voice wedded to experience” (Holling and Calafell 61). The lived experiences of the actors themselves become married to the identity of the character, furthering an element of perceived authenticity in these representations as the embodied TGD normative.

Through the theoretical framing of bodies as resistive rhetoric in relation to media constructed body image, the bodies of Nia Nal in *Supergirl* and other transgender representations become sights of conflict working to both reinforce and resist hegemonic dictations of gender identity. The personification of the transgender superhero reasserts an otherness to the character herself outside of her transgender identity. She can embody a marginalized identity of supernatural in relation and direct correlation to her transgender identity. This othering allows discussions of marginalized identity both from the perspective of an intersectional TGD identity as she is able to discuss her superpower, alien heritage, and her gender identity as elements that stigmatize and separate her from the hegemonic norm. Through this character representation, Nal’s body becomes a sight of this same conflict within the definition of representation, as she is both a new and innovative character of TGD identity, while still playing into the physical embodiment of the hegemonic construct of female beauty and identity.

### Analysis: The Performativity of Female

Gender identity and performance are inherently tied to TGD representation. J. Butler explains that in regard to gender performance, performativity “is to be read not as self-expression or self-presentation, but as the unanticipated resignifiability

of highly invested terms” (“Critically Queer” 28). Performance in this instance is dictated by hegemonic culture and social constructs enforced upon the individual body as gender labels and expectations. These underlying hegemonic currents of signification manifest through the interpretations of gender and gendered identity. Through an analysis of Nia Nal’s gender performance and physical embodiment of the gender binary as representative of transgender authenticity of identity, two elements of her interactions emerge: Nal’s physical representation and image, and her identification as female. Through these categorizations of emergent gender identity, the tensions of positive deconstruction and negative hegemonic reinforcement of the gender binary develop. Throughout this series, Nal’s performance and interactions with other characters demonstrate the duality of representing an under-represented character within hegemonic constructs of acceptability. What this means is that Nal’s character falls into the hegemonic constructs of gender performance, specifically within the performativity of female. This construct reinforces dominant ideals of feminine beauty and the TGD identity throughout the series, imposing a specific body image and body ideal on both the identity of female, and the transgender and gender diverse.

In approaching this artifact, the first iterative gender categorization comes through the physical representation of Nal’s identity and image. Throughout the series, Nal is presented as purely feminine in dress, style, and body type. The first time the series introduces Nia Nal to viewers, she is wearing a green flowery dress, with high heels, long flowing brown hair, pink stylized makeup, and she is babbling to the main character Kara Zor-El, Nal’s new boss (“American Alien”). Immediately, the series sets the tone for Nal’s femininity, marking her as purely female in hyperfeminine style and through her identification and connection with Zor-El. At the end of their first meeting, Zor-El makes the comment of how scary it is to see her younger self so exactly emulated in Nal. Furthermore, Nal sets up her understanding and deep connection to personal presentation of self through fashion and clothing, stating “What we choose to wear tells a story about who we are. Whether you wear black and leather or pastels and silk, you’re creating an inner version of yourself whether you realize it or not” (“American Alien” 00:14:00-00:15:31). This statement harkens directly back to Butler’s constructions of performativity as the ways in which Nal chooses to present herself directly dictate how she would like to be perceived by her colleagues and plays into the cultural constructions of subversive gendered imagery.

While her decision to present as purely female is not in any way a negative, what becomes a negative are the ways in which this identification reinforces the hegemonic understanding of femininity as flowery, pink, and, more importantly, hyper thin and image obsessed. Nal as a character works toward presenting a strong and intelligent woman while falling into the tropes of femininity as thin, long-haired, and babbling. Her physical stature is presented by the series as smaller than that of her female co-stars, and the clothes, hairstyles, and makeup she wears demonstrate a stereotypically feminine figure of tiny waist and fuller (but not too full) hips and breasts. Nal herself, through a constant flow of flowered dresses and heels, demonstrates the iconic feminine figure in bright pink lipstick with a soft spot for the poor and downtrodden. Her female beauty is remarked upon by other characters throughout the series as she goes in and out of maybe dating one of the other alien characters, Brainy. What these visual cues and Nal's own assertion of the personal choices of self-presentation do is work towards erasing Nal's transgender identity and enforcing that of a cisgender pure female identity. Nal's body and how she chooses to represent herself become emblematic of the cisfemale identity and the ability to pass within this identification.

This flowered girly image is not a condemnation of hyper femininity; however, this image demonstrates how these series reinforce a specific gender performance as the authentic transgender identity and experience. In the first episode that Nal is introduced, her TGD identity is unknown and undiscussed within the series. In the second episode of season 4, "Fallout," Nal takes the time to inform her boss of her TGD identity to explain her passion for equal rights and justice for aliens (one of the main plot lines in the series). Her revelation of TGD identity to her boss is clearly not so much for the storyline of the episode, but rather for the sake of the audience to inform them that she is a transgender woman. What is left undisclosed in this specific conversation is that she herself comes from alien heritage. As the discussion with her boss centers on alien rights and alien identity, a disclosure of her alien identity rather than her transgender identity would have made more sense within the context. Instead, the series chose to take this moment and clue the audience in to the fact that Nal is transgender, allowing for a transgender representation that is "palatable" to a cisgender dominant audience, as she fits within the hegemonic constructs of what female should look like.

Nal's demonstration of image choice and physical embodiment of the "desired" gender harken back to the series *Pose*, as the main characters regularly comment upon the desirable figure as that which can pass "like a white woman" ("Pilot"

00:23:28-00:23:47). Similarly, teenager Jazz Jennings underwent weight loss in order to prepare for her bottom surgery. The imagery and narrative surrounding Jennings' weight loss center on finally feeling like her true self not in relation to the gender corrective surgery, but in hitting the target weight that she sees as the ideal (Jennings). The physical bodies of the characters in *Pose*, *Doubt*, *Sens8*, as well as Jazz Jennings and Caitlyn Jenner themselves, demonstrate an assertion of the ideal body image upon the TGD body. These representations and filmed experiences establish the TGD ideal as that of passing female in line with the thin ideal and the appropriate dress and presentation. What this does is constrict TGD identity to that of the unidentifiable TGD person. As long as a TGD person has the ability and desire to present as purely female, then he, she, or they will be accepted within the dominant culture. However, if they choose not to or are unable to physically present and portray themselves within these beauty ideals, then they are not in line with the "transnormative" and are further cast out and stigmatized.

Even as her super alter-ego, Dreamer, Nal's female imagery and physique is reinforced through the structuring of her costume and superhero disguise. This outfit specifically emphasizes the feminine lines of her breasts and hips, making them appear larger and more pronounced even than her dresses and heels. This imagery confirms to the audience that although she may be super, she is still a woman. Furthermore, Nal's superhero self falls into the forever trope of a female superhero who puts her hair down in order to fight the bad guys rather than pulling it back to keep it out of her way while fighting. As a result, Nal's long flowing hair becomes a part of her superhero identity, creating a halo around her shoulders, a cloud that moves with her even as she takes down the villains, all the while her pink lipstick is never out of place. Nal's image emulates and reinforces the identification of "real femininity" and gender performance, as she is made acceptable along the gender binary so that audiences can understand and accept her within the hegemonically structured series.

Nal's female identity marker, furthermore, plays a major role in her identity as both alien and transgender, as it frames the genesis for her powers. Nal's alien side of the family has the power of clairvoyance through dreaming that is passed from the mother to the "destined" daughter of each generation. Nal describes her relationship with her family as positive, as her family easily accepted her desire to transition to female from a young age. She explains: "I always knew that I was a girl. My parents were amazing. They always affirmed my authentic self and helped me transition young" ("Blood Memory" 00:8:40-00:9:30). Although her family

accepted and affirmed her identity as female, they still assumed that her mother's powers would pass to Nal's cis-sister, Maeve. When Nal reveals that she has already begun exhibiting clairvoyance in her dreams, her mother immediately apologizes for not considering her sooner saying: "Of course it's you. It had to be you...I'm sorry I was so blind" ("Blood Memory" 00:22:30-00:23:03). Nal's mother immediately accepts the completeness of Nal's female gender and role as daughter, taking responsibility for her lack of thought and understanding of the depths of Nal's identity as daughter and woman. Maeve on the other hand responds angrily and violently against Nal stating: "How did someone like you get the powers? They're supposed to be passed down from mother to daughter, so how did someone like you get them? You're not even a real woman" ("Blood Memory" 00:35:47-00:36:30). This exchange is the first time within the series that someone questions Nal's identity as female, however it is done so within a moment that completely and totally reinforces Nal's identity as daughter and woman as her destiny was always to inherit her mother's matrilineal powers.

Demonstrating Nal's powers through her identity of female reinforces her gender performance as that of the ideal female and allows the producers to dispel the notion that because Nal is transgender she is not a "real" woman. While this notion is positive and a beautiful acceptance of transgender women as authentically female, the lack of diversity in this representation further reinforces that no in-between or other way exists to identify as TGD. Nal's identity as purely female, in relation to the strictly female transgender women in the other series, reinforces the hegemonic understanding that there is either male or female and no in-between, oversimplifying both transgender identity as well as completely ignoring those who do not identify along the gender binary. Therefore, Nal's portrayal and performance of "pure womanhood" not only reinforces hegemonic dictations of femininity and transgender female identity, but furthermore erases and denies those that do not identify within these lines. By using her alien identity in order to assert her female identity, the series articulates Nal as above and outside of the human transgender identity, as she is accepted not only for her ability to pass as female, but as well for her ability to pass as pure human, another common theme within the series.

Although Nia Nal's character portrays her transgender identity through a hegemonic lens of the acceptable body, it is important to recognize that this series also attempts to place Nal in conversation with the larger cultural discussion of transgender identity and rights within the United States. In the same episode that Nal "comes out" about her powers to her family, the opening shot of Nal is in the

women's bathroom as she talks to her sister on the phone ("Blood Memory"). This image, as she works through getting home for a holiday, is a rejection of the denial of transgender rights and identity in mainstream American culture, as a direct reference to the Trump administration's mandate that people use the bathrooms of the gender identified on their birth certificate. In shooting a scene with Nal casually interacting with other women in the bathroom, this episode directly fights against conservative assertions that TGD people are deviant and dangerous and should not be allowed to use bathrooms outside of their birth certificate gender. Although Nal can present fully as woman without suspicion, this scene is a clear statement of why TGD people should be able to use the bathroom that aligns with their gender identity as she would be visually out of place in the men's bathroom.

However, even within this scene, the ideal gender representation is again reinforced through Nal's unquestionable right to use the women's bathroom, as she can pass completely as hegemonically constructed female. This scene specifically demonstrates how Nal's embodied representation of TGD identity becomes both a sight of resistance and a sight of conforming to hegemonically dictated norms of gender and gender identity. How Nal presents herself, how her identification of female is asserted, and the actual scenes in which the series places her simultaneously work against transphobic political rhetoric, while still placing her within the hegemonically constructed gender identity.

Outside of her family and co-workers, Nal's embodiment of the ideal and desirable TGD identity is reinforced through her roommate, Yvette. Yvette, by assumption, is another transgender woman; however, she does not fall within the same beauty standards of Nal. Rather, the series portrays Yvette as a caricature of a sassy, black, drag queen, with stylized hair and makeup and the continuous catchphrase of "This is my jam!" ("Menagerie" 00:18:30-00:19:20). Yvette is presented solely as a source for comic relief, a character to be laughed at and mocked, serving the purpose purely to make Nal seem more "normal" and "desirable" in the eyes of her friends and co-workers. Yvette, a large TGD woman of color, always happy with chocolate and making a sassy comment about beauty, sleep, or dancing, serves only to demonstrate the ways in which Nal is the ideal and she is not. She is not a character to be related to or even really noticed except in contrast to other characters, especially in order to make another character feel uncomfortable or out of place. Yvette, therefore, serves purely as a tool through which to construct Nal's hyper femininity and feminine ideal as more relatable and

by contrast the desired TGD identity, making those outside of Nal's identity a source of derision and contempt.

## Conclusion

*Supergirl* continuously affirms and reinforces Nal's femininity through both her physical personification of woman as well as through the elements and scenes that continually mark her as "authentically woman." While this character addresses a much-needed misconception and denial of transgender women as women in general, this also presents a transgender character through the lens of body performance within the "acceptable" different. Her characterization portrays the hegemonic ideal image of woman as hyper thin, long haired, and culturally beautiful as demonstrated through both her fashion choices as well as the assertion of her female identity and beauty by other characters.

This dictation of hegemonic constructions of female beauty places further pressure upon a community of people who are already at higher risk of mental health disorders such as body dysmorphia as well as minority stress disorders. As transgender activists and scholars Che Gossett, Eric Stanley, and Johanna Burton assert, "Fashion and imagery hold power, which is precisely why the state seeks to regulate and constrain such self-representations to this very day" (xvi). The representation of Nia Nal in conjunction with the other television media representations of TGD identity as female identified further marginalizes and stigmatizes those who do not identify with or can present their gender within the same performance of female and woman. This is important because these representations dictate that the only TGD identities that are deemed acceptable are those who can physically present themselves through the ideal body image of woman, further enforcing the gender binary and unrealistic body images for both cisgender women and TGD people.

Nal and other TGD characters portray a narrow vision of the diversity of TGD identity and the cultural marginalization and oppression associated with it. Through the physical enforcement of the hegemonically acceptable body upon the TGD representations currently present on network television, these series are making a statement of the types of bodies that are deemed worthy of acceptance and those that should continue to be cast out and ignored. By developing Nal as both a TGD character and an alien, the series *Supergirl* filters the issues that Nal faces as a result of her TGD identity through the lens of the alien identity, placing this discussion

further outside of the “real” or “normal.” Therefore, in discussing TGD rights and the difficulties facing these communities, this series denies the reality of their day to day oppression by refocusing the discussion on “alien rights” and “alien identity.” Furthermore, Nal’s TGD identity then becomes further removed from reality as it is inherently tied to both her alien identity and her superpowers. Thus, Nal’s TGD identity is placed in direct correspondence with her alien identity, further denying the realness of TGD identity and refocusing her body as purely female.

These findings are significant as these representations dictate the TGD “acceptable” identity, further stigmatizing and othering those who fall outside of this physical representation. This increased stigmatization increases risk of body dysmorphia, eating disorders and distorted body image, increasing the likelihood of suicidal ideation, and other mental health disorders associated with minority stress and discrimination of those who identify as TGD (see Bissell and Rask; Budge, Adelson and Howard; Field, Camargo and Taylor; Harrison and Cantor; Lavine, Sweeney and Wagner). Not only does this body image contribute to the development of the TGD hegemonically dictated ideal body image, but it further reinforces the gender binary and how gender identity is defined by the cisgender dominant culture.

These strict iterations of the gender binary not only affect those who identify as TGD, but also cisgender people, especially women, as they reinforce unhealthy imagery of the “thin ideal” and gender roles of the female as pink, long haired, and soft hearted. Nal’s association of “pure female” in conjunction with the portrayals of other transgender female characters in popular television series, reinforces stereotypes of femininity and the female gender role as these characters play into the soft-spoken, often flippant, babbling, and clothing obsessed image of the stereotypical woman. These images increase the likelihood of eating disorders and body dysmorphia in TGD people and ciswomen further bolstering the hegemonic declaration that to be a “real woman,” transgender or not, means to look like these characters. The physical representations and bodies of these characters act rhetorically to enforce the hegemonic image of the “perfect woman.” While the character of Nia Nal is not an inherently negative portrayal of TGD identity, the physical embodiment and body image of Nal in conjunction with other transgender female characters, creates a narrow image of what it means to be TGD and female in general.

This paper only begins to touch the tip of the iceberg in relation to TGD body image and the stress and health disorders related to body image. *Supergirl* accurately represents the pitfalls of representation of marginalized people as it offers both a breaking of the dominant norm as well as a reinforcement of hegemonic constructs upon marginalized identities. What this study does is identify a need for further work on the dangers of a transnormative body image in relation to mental health and access to affirming care for TGD communities.

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# Shabash, the First-ever Bangladeshi Superhero: Transnational, Transcultural and Transcreated

ANIS RAHMAN

“Comics are a medium employing three modes of expression:  
words, images, and sequence.”  
—Karin Kukkonen (43)

When I was growing up in Bangladesh in the 1990s, the images and sequences of superhero comics from the United States- gave me a hard time; I could not associate myself with the characters and the surroundings in which they operated. At that age, I understood the words written in the characters’ dialogue, but the images and action sequences were unrelatable to me. The incompatibility of the images and my life experiences subtly irked me, even at that young age. Now when I reflect on those feelings, Alan Lawson’s assertion regarding the disparity of images and experiences rings true in my case: “The inevitable recognition for the colonial, nurtured either personally or culturally on images of a distant and different place, was that there is a discrepancy between image and experience, between culture and context, between literature and life” (168). This cultural discrepancy informed a sense of distance I felt from the superheroes comics I liked reading. Looking back at that time of my childhood reminds me of Daniel Francis who regrets the absence of Canadian superheroes before the creation of Captain Canuck, because “in the universe I inhabited as a boy, there was no Canadian stars” (112). For me, in the comics universe I explored, there was no “Bangladeshi star.” Instead, a void existed in that realm of Bangladeshi popular culture. As much as I liked the superhero comics of Spider-Man, Superman, and others, I did look in vain for the scenes

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familiar to me. The absence of such familiar settings engendered a sense of dissonance in me.

In 2013, however, Shabash, the first-ever Bangladeshi comics superhero came into being. This superhero represented Bangladeshi cultural characteristics from his attire to lifestyle, suggesting he can potentially become a Bangladeshi national icon, similar to Superman's relationship with the United States. However, having said that, Bangladesh has a complex recent history: it used to be part of greater India under British imperialism and before partition, then part of Pakistan as a result of partition, and is now a sovereign and independent nation for nearly half a century. Thus, the notion of a "Bangladeshi nation" is a bit complicated. What makes it more complicated is the advent of globalization, internet, and social media, all of which set the notion of "nation" in constant flux.

Given this fluid national context in which Shabash arose, the terms that probably apply more to this nascent superhero's identity are transnational and transcultural. Therefore, looking at Shabash through these theoretical lenses seem more judicious. To describe "transnational" focus, scholar Shilpa Dave asserts, "A transnational focus destabilizes definitions of monolithic national identity and takes into account issues of empire, of multiculturalism, and of ethnic, racial, and class diversity" (115). Transnational, then exhibits traces of multiple cultures, races, ethnicities within the same entity. When it comes to "transcultural," Kathrina Bialoch and Sharif Bitar state, "The notion of transcultural work addresses both the inevitable hybridity of culture and its constant flux in a globalizing world" (102). Overlaps between these two terms are obvious as they themselves encapsulate the idea of overlapping traits of identities in the contemporary times.

Apart from these two theories, the theory of transcreation also applies. This article argues that the first-ever Bangladeshi comics superhero, Shabash, is transnational and transcultural, exhibiting traits that encompass multiple nations and cultures from his name to his lifestyle; in this way, Shabash is transcreated as his identifying characteristics reflect global superheroes, only here being reinvented in a local context. Before I venture fully into the analysis of Shabash's character and how he demonstrates traits of transnationality, transculturality, and transcreation, I want to shed some light into the historical context of comic culture in that part of the world since it would only help understand the contemporary development.

## Historical Background of Comics Tradition in Bangladesh

Long before the partition of Indian sub-continent in 1947, the traditional art of Pata-Chitra and Mashkari was popular in regions in and around Bengal. Across time, cultural satire has been retold via visual narratives and the more rudimentary, abstract versions of what is known contemporarily as “comics;” thus, comics have always been a part of literary and artistic history in Bengal (the region that includes Bangladesh and the West Bengal province of India). Some of these comics, collectively known as Amar Chitra Katha (ACK), acted “as an educational tool for the nation’s children” (Mehta and Mukherji 142). The beginning of comics in Bangladesh as an independent nation can be traced back to 1978 with the launch of a cartoon-based satirical magazine entitled as *Unmad*. Around the same time, Rafiqun Nabi, a Bangladeshi cartoonist, created the longest running cartoon character, Tokai, whose insight represents somewhat satirical portrayal of local popular culture and political affairs in the country that still entertains the local audience of comics (Harun). However, the superhero genre in Bangladeshi comics is one area not developed until very recently.

As I alluded earlier, when it comes to superheroes possessing super human strengths fighting villainous characters, Bangladeshi comics audience had to turn to US-based superheroes who, in Ryan Edwardson’s fitting words, “existed in American cities like New York—or, at best, an undefined or imaginary “Anywhere, USA” metropolis” (187). In absence of homegrown superheroes, the “exciting and spectacular” American superhero characters like Superman, Spider-Man or Batman provided for the “efficient and infectious entertainment” that the superhero comics genre delivers (Mazur and Danner 12). Also, another alternative for Bangladeshi superhero fans existed: Indian superheroes.

Among those Indian-Bangla comics books featuring a kind of “local” superhero characters, the most notable were Batul the Great and Chacha Chowdhury. The title characters of those comic books dealt with local problems like solving mysteries and fighting evil forces. Both those comics were, however, not fully local but rather somewhat regional as they were not based in the context of Bangladesh. Batul the Great, for example, was based on West Bengal, a province in India where people speak Bangla as their native language. I label these superhero characters “kind of” local because neither these characters nor the comics were set in Bangladesh. So, even though these Indian superheroes were easier to relate to when compared to the US-based ones, they were not homegrown, and they were, thus, still a bit distant. Importantly, when it comes to the realm of comics and superheroes, the dominant

cultures (US and Indian) were at the center stage as Bangladeshi comics were virtually non-existent then. However, the days when Bangladeshi superhero comics fans had to turn outside the country for the lack of local ones are finally over.

Shabash's name, costume, actions all function as highly rhetorical as in each one he represents Bangladesh, its culture and customs, even though some his characteristics, such as his superhuman ability to fly, is apparently borrowed from a veteran superhero like Superman. The creation of Shabash, then, is somewhat kairoitic and highly purposeful as any comics, for that matter, is as "children's comics are devised by the adults whose work is determined and justified by their idea of what a child is or should be. [...] so, it is the adult who produces the comics and the child who consumes them" (Dorfman and Mattelart 30). Therefore, the notion of imposing adults' ideals, and beliefs on the child is an innate aspect of the comics genre. I mean the comics and the superheroes in them that the adults create tend to be influenced by the kind of comics they were exposed to when they were kids. It, at least, appears to be the case for Shabash since his creator, Samir Asran Rahman explicitly mentions influence of Western comics during his childhood. Rahman, speaking at an event at a local university event states, "Since I was a kid, like when I was really young, I used to read all sorts of comics from Spider-Man to Asterix, Tintin, Archie, Calvin Rose everything." ("ULAB Seminar SAM," 00:00:04-00:00:14). It is notable that his "all sorts" of comics mention includes only Western comics. Likewise, there is no wonder that his creation, Shabash exhibits some characteristics from Western superheroes as I argue later. Seen in this light, comics in general and Shabash more specifically are not an entirely apolitical, fresh of the box creation. It is perhaps time to look at the nature of his creation more critically.

As already mentioned, Shabash's superhuman characteristics are extrapolated from the already existing Western superheroes that his creator grew up reading. However, Shabash, with his Western-based superhero characteristics retains local cultural traits. This mixture, or perhaps the meshed cultures that Shabash embodies, reminds me of Bhaba's remark: "It is indeed something like culture's 'in-between', bafflingly both alike and different" (30). Thus, Shabash seems to be situated in the intersections of Bangladeshi and non-Bangladeshi cultures. Given the complexities of Shabash's coming into being, the theory that perhaps applies to analyzing the character is "transcreation."

Transcreation reinvents of "the origin of a property" in a local context (Adesnik 12). Here, the properties of a superhero (e.g., superhuman strength, costume,

codename) become reinvented in a local context. Raminder Kaur offers more explanation in context of a transcreated Spider-Man for the Indian audience: “effectively the character is ‘transcreated’—that is, reinvented and repositioned in order to be more relevant for Indian audiences” (314). Shilpa Dave comments how Spider-Man India visually exhibits a local culture: “In Spider-Man India, Indian culture seemingly exerts a great influence on the development of the character Pavitr Prabhakar (the Indian version of Peter Parker), so much so that even the emblematic Spider-Man costume is revised to include an Indian dhoti in addition to the red and blue form-fitting body suit” (115). Likewise, Shabash also exhibits many local cultural traits from food habits to preferred sports, as I expand later on to reinforce his home-grown identity. While superhero began as “an American genre” Shabash resembles other superheroes who exhibit some traits of a transcreation, especially in that “reinvention” of the American genre for Bangladeshi audiences (Reinhard and Olson 3). The analysis below elucidates how Shabash, in his name, costume, actions, and even fandom rhetorically retains his local cultural traits as well as exhibiting characteristics from superheroes based in other nations. The result is a transnational, transcultural, and transcreated superhero.

### The Birth and Naming of Shabash

Usually, the term *shabash* refers to the compliment given to a person or entity when they achieve something of great magnitude. For example, if someone especially young does well in any curricular or extra-curricular activities, such as wins an award or does something heroic, then someone comparatively older than the achiever utters the word *Shabash* as an expression of exuberance. Therefore, the very context in which the word is used suggests the heroism with which Shabash is associated. Both denotatively and connotatively, the word *shabash* most closely translates to the English word bravo. More importantly, though, is the transcultural and transnational aspect of the word, as it is used in all three dominant languages in the South Asian region: Bangla, Hindi and Urdu.<sup>1</sup> The creator of the character, Samir Ahsan Rahman, seems to have given some serious thought into picking up

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<sup>1</sup> I do not have any academic source to support this claim. However, I know this from my own experiential knowledge about language use in that region.

this name for Bangladesh's first-ever superhero. The very name crosses into multiple nations and cultures and is thus transcultural and transnational.

Additionally, Shabash's costume is intriguing as it suggests his identity as a proud Bangladeshi superhero. The Bangladeshi flag features a red disc in a green background as the red symbolizes the blood shed during the war for independence and the green stands for the greenery in the country. Shabash, then, literally embodies the Bangladeshi flag. However, when noted closely, some nuances are evident. The color of his upper outfit is not quite the crimson red of the flag but more a lighter shade that sometimes looks yellow/orange-ish, at least in some places. Now, this color may suggest the ripeness of the mango that he draws his energy from. His costume also demonstrates some transcreation: like some classic US-based superheroes (Superman and Batman), Shabash wears a cape of yellow color. This cape, being an integral part of his superhero costume, clearly marks another similarity between Shabash and other cape-wearing US-based superheroes like Superman and Batman.

The center of his shirt is a sure reminder of the source of his superhero strength: a mango. A closer look at it reveals the nicely-curved atomic symbol which is a reminder that the mango is not a regular one, rather holds atomic energy. However, Shabash being laden with Bangladeshi cultural cues, the mango in his costume symbolizes more than that meets the eye: the cultural significance of the fruit in Bangladesh and neighboring nations and cultures. I will explain more on this trans-cultural significance later. For now, I argue wearing a chest emblem serves as a sign of transcreation. For example, prominent western superheroes like Superman, Spider-Man, Captain America all wear chest-emblem. Likewise, Shabash wears a chest-emblem of atomic mango, the source of his superpower

The character's transcreated nature continues into his secret identity. Superheroes usually have two identities, as Peter Coogan notes: "The identity element comprises the codename and the costume" (32). One identity is publicly known and the other one is known only to a select few or only to the hero himself. These identities usually are very separate from one another. This dual identity aspect for Shabash is obviously transcreated. Shabash's codename, as previously explained, compliments his costume and identity because it reflects transnationality and transcultural aspect of his character. His secret identity as a junior copywriter in a local advertising company is very close to those of veteran superheroes like Spider-Man and Superman both of whom worked in print media. His real name is Shahab Sharif which has a ring to his codename Shabash in it. The name of the

company where he works, “Loonybin Advertising Agency,” sounds as if it was transcreated from the Warner Bros’ Loony Tunes cartoons.

Shabash’s character shows more signs of transcreation featuring a sidekick, Kiron by name, whom he calls “kid.” Kiron motivates him to become a superhero since Shabash is a “reluctant” superhero. It probably will not be too far-fetched to see the shadow of Batman’s Robin in this “kid” character, at least theoretically even though the kid himself does not directly partake in Shabash’s adventures. However, he searches the internet for Shabash to give him information he needs in his adventures. Apart from features of transcreation, Shabash exhibits many transnational and transcultural characteristics.

### Culture-laden Character: Transcultural and Transnational

After discussing how Shabash and the series is transcreated in ways more than one, it is time to argue how Shabash exhibits local cultures and customs across neighboring nations like India and Pakistan. According to professor Julian Chambliss, in “the comic book genre, especially its most popular aspect, the superhero, uses visual cues to reduce individual characters into representations of cultural ideas” (149). Shabash’s uses the visual of a mango not only to represent the source of his power but also cultural norms regarding the fruit in the region which transcend geographical boundaries.

The image of the atomic mango, as mentioned above, signifies the local popularity of the fruit. Summer season in Bangladesh is known as “mango season.” Everybody loves to eat mangoes. They eat ripe sweet mangoes of various local kinds. There are *mango lacchi*, mango pickle and various food items based on the fruit. This fruit is so common in Bangladesh (also in India) that it has become synonymous with the word “common.” For example, the Bangla and Hindi word for mango is *aam*. Common people in Bangladesh usually are referred to *aam-jonota*, as *jonota* is the Bangla word for people. Therefore, common people in Bangladesh can be referred to as Mango-people or *aamjonota*. Mangoes’ popularity, and mango being used to mean “common,” also applies to the neighboring country India. In Hindi, the word for people is *adhmi*. The common people are called *aam-adhmi* in India. This way, the mango symbol in Shabash’s costume is symbolic on multiple levels. Also, the popularity of mangoes during summer season is the same for across all the nations: Bangladesh, India and

Pakistan. The theme of mango plays as a powerful visual cue to portray Bangladeshi culture as well as cultures and nations from the region in the series.

Seen from this angle, Shabash can also be viewed as the superhero of the common people or *aamjonota*. The problems he deals with in the series are often common Bangladeshi problems. Shabash's first ever issue features him fighting the cockroach king, Blatt. The rise of cockroach trouble especially during the summer season is a widely-known issue for Dhaka dwellers, especially in some parts (of the city) than others. The comics in its very first issue brings attention to a problem that happens in real time in Bangladesh especially during the longer summer months in the country. Likewise, the second issue, in a comedic way, highlights another local problem in Bangladesh: mosquito. The first part of this issue shows Shabash as fighting the genetically modified mosquito queen who came into being as a result of a failed experiment by the mad scientist Keramoti. Now interestingly, the name of the mad scientist is important here as Keramoti is not quite a regular name. Much like the name of the superhero on the spotlight here, this name alludes to something interesting. "Keramoti" refers to the "charismatic quality" of a person. In this case though, the scientist's charisma did not quite spark the right way. Rather, the word Keramoti is used sarcastically as the test of the scientist went wrong as portrayed in the issue. However, Shabash does not face his main foe in the first issue. It is in part two where Shabash actually faces off the mosquito queen in an epic battle. The details of these issues and the subsequent ones will not be discussed in greater length here within the scope of this paper for the sake of keeping the prospective readers' interest intact. Only the relevant details in the storyline will be discussed to discuss the local references in the comics issues.

The eighth issue, "Heatwave," features the title character in a battle with both Shabash and Kathal (Rahman). However, the issue cleverly hints at the rising temperature problem in the country. The problem runs much deeper than the comics cover though. Bangladesh is a country that will lose part of its land because of rising sea-level issue which is an aftermath of global warming. The issue can be interpreted as an allusion to the eminent disastrous problem Bangladesh is going to face soon. Series offers more than just references to local problems through its storylines. The series portrays other Bangladeshi, Indian, and Pakistani cultural references through the character of Shabash. Unlike other established superhero characters like Superman or Spider-Man who do not really share their food likings, Shabash is very open about his food choices and he is kind of foodie. Shabash, like the youth in the country, better yet, in the entire region in South Asia, loves Kacchi

Biryani, for example. He represents the food culture in transnational and transcultural perspective. He often frequents the restaurant Puran Dhaka in the capital city Dhaka that is famous for selling various Bangladeshi cuisine and attracts foodies in general. Shabash's superhero status does not refrain him from aligning himself with any other foodie. The aroma of mildly spicy *biryani* often allures him to Puran Dhaka where he binge-eats *biryani*, a South-Asian cuisine. Liking *biryani* is very common across the cultures and nations in the region and applies to India and Pakistan as much as it does for Bangladesh. When it comes to snack type food, he loves to eat *fuchka*, another well-loved food item among the locals. This snack, known as *panipuri* in India and Pakistan, is popular across nations and cultures in this region. Even in his food choices, then, Shabash's transnational and transcultural attributes are evident.

Along with explicit reference to the cuisine from the region, Shabash also makes references to local sports. In local and international news coverage newspapers, especially in the sports section, Bangladesh is often referred to as a "cricket-crazy" nation (Sidner). Quite in line with this local trend, issue 4 features Shabash's involvement in this sport. (Rahman "Shabash at Comic Con"). The issue demonstrates Shabash's appreciation for cricket, arguably the most popular game across South Asia. As a staunch fan of the sport, he actively and enthusiastically plays cricket matches with local boys. Also, the issue sheds light on local people's craze regarding another popular game, soccer, especially during the World Cup season. During this season, the rivalry between the supporters of Brazil and Argentina skyrockets and many transcultural things happen, such as having the flags of the Brazil or Argentina on the rooftops of supporter's houses. More importantly, these phenomena are commonplace events in neighboring countries like Pakistan and India as well. However, people's belligerent behavior towards opposing sides during this time worries Shabash. (Rahman "Shabash at Comic Con," 12). Thus, in bringing in sports reference, his own involvement and reflections about them and people behaviors regarding those sports, Shabash effectively represents another transnational and transcultural aspect of his character.

## Cultures Through Social Media

The mango-powered superhero is regular on social media which he uses to uphold local culture and customs. Shabash regularly updates his Facebook account with

his pictures, especially when he accomplishes something exceptional. For example, in bad weather conditions, he flies to the moon to confirm its appearance as religious festivals like Eid depends on its appearance. He takes a moon-selfie on occasion of sighting it and uploads this picture on social media. Further, he also takes to the social media to greet people on occasion of Eid, the biggest religious festivals for Muslims. He also greets his fellow countrymen on occasion of Bengali New Year on April 14th, which is known as Pahela Baishakh. Thus, Shabash upholds cultural events be it religious or national via social media.

Shabash fan art often appears on Mighty Punch Studio, the publisher's Facebook page. These pictures reflect the growing fandom surrounding the character. According to Jason Mittell, "one text can inspire fans to drill and spread." As illustrated previously, this superhero possesses enough intriguing transcultural, transnational, and transcreation features for the fans to "drill" and "spread." Frequently posted fan art of Shabash seem to denote that comics-lovers are not only "drilling" (i.e. digging the character) and but also sharing their appreciation to the first-ever Bangladeshi comics superhero. Currently 12,252 people follow Mighty Punch Studio's Facebook page which seems to be attributive of growing fandom regarding this local comics superhero dig the character (Mighty Punch Studio Facebook Page). Apparently, all the fan art and comments reviews are from local Bangladeshi followers. Bangladeshis seem to have begun to align themselves with this first-ever Bangladeshi superhero, as often seen in the publisher's Facebook page.

Bangladeshi people are usually very proud, aware of their national identity, and would protect it with last drop of their blood as the war of independence with Pakistan proved in 1971. The already existing sense of nationalism can be heightened more by "inventing" a superhero Bangladeshi. In the words of Ernest Gellner, nationalism "invents nations where they do not exist" (169). Even though Bangladesh is a small country, it has a large population of over 180 million people. For such a nation, keeping in touch with one another is daunting. For people who may never meet or know each other, they can, as Benedict Anderson puts it, still "live the image of their communion" through imagination (6). Comic books can certainly aid in building this community. In the words of Edwardson, "Comic books, as a visual medium, engage the act of imagination, in turn facilitating the mental construction of the nation and national identity" (185).

Seen in this light, this fandom shows a rising popular culture trend in Bangladesh based on a homegrown superhero. This fandom can become

profoundly meaningful because their allows today's youngsters a chance to align themselves with their native culture and potentially understand the transnational and transcultural nature of their country. In other words, the fandom enjoys the local, regional, and global in one character. The total number of active social media users in Bangladesh is 30.5 million (Jain). This sheer number of social media users that grows every day gives a glimpse of the prospect the Bangladeshi superhero comics character. Shabash resonates with the fans' personal experiences, as they relate to the world around them more than ever before through social media. Shabash, the transcultural and transnational superhero, thus epitomizes what Jeffrey Brown argues about comic fandom as "evidence of the complex and structured way in which avid participants of popular culture construct a meaningful sense of self" (13). This the sense of self constituted in the fans of Shabash, current and future, may be a broader, more pluralistic one since Shabash exhibits commonalities across cultures and nations.

## Conclusion

As stated, Shabash surfaced as the first-ever Bangladeshi superhero figure, coming after a gap in this domain for decades. The consequences of such long absence are not going to evaporate anytime soon. When it comes to aligning themselves with superheroes, Bangladeshi comics fans still associate themselves with mostly US-based superheroes like Superman or Spider-Man, perhaps due to the long absence of a homegrown superhero (Rahman "Shabash at Comic Con," 14). However, Shabash, or his emergence in the scene, has the definite potential to change the scenario. It might take time but maybe the day is not too far when Bangladeshi comics fans and pop culture enthusiasts will all recognize Shabash. Chances are he can even go so far as to be a part of Bangladesh's national identity.

Comics superheroes representing their respective countries is not a new phenomenon. For example, Captain America represents the United States and Captain Canuck does the same for Canada. Both characters also bear the flag of the respective countries in their costumes like Shabash does for Bangladesh. Shabash being a Bangladeshi superhero does all the things that a Bangladeshi typically likes doing. From sports to eating habits, Shabash taps into the ordinary experiences that any Bangladeshi young adult experiences. The universe that Shabash operates in is a familiar one and the activities he does are the ones every Bangladeshi does. For a Bangladeshi, it is easy to associate with Shabash and the things he does as

Bangladeshi superhero. However, what is most intriguing about the character's portrayal is how it not only applies to Bangladesh but also to the countries around it. Shabash's traits cross the geographical boundaries as it applies to Indian or a Pakistani youth as well. Shabash encapsulates cultural traits from more than one culture as the things he does applies across the South Asian cultures. This transcreated portrayal, then, can call into question his "authenticity" as 100% Bangladeshi superhero.

In the age of widespread internet access, social media usage, and globalization as a reflect of colonialism, on specific answer to this question does not exist. Many of Shabash's attributes, from his costume to source of superhero strength, seems to have been transcreated—the extent of which can be argued though. The mix of local references combined with various components from other cultures and nations may make Shabash, in Ethan Zuckerman's view, "an impure" character. However, as Jenkins et al. asserts, a certain "virtue" exists to such "impure" characters, "Though these texts are "impure," they nevertheless remain powerful vehicles of ideologies, traditions, and styles characteristic of a particular nation or region."(270) . With the local references and non-local influences, Shabash becomes an "empowering" character—not only for himself but for the audience as he resists "cultural isolation" and participates "in a larger transnational conversation" within the scope of the comic book universe (262).

His transnational and transcultural characteristics might seem "impure" to some but in fact represent his real strength. The Bangladeshi superhero exhibits super-strength in retaining a multiplicity of cultures and customs which is rare in superheroes. Just as a Bangladeshi superhero fan can identify with Shabash, an Indian or Pakistan fan can also relate with his traits. Now, the word *desi* literally means something or someone that is originally from the South Asian region. The word, then applies to Bangladesh, Pakistan and India: all three South-Asian countries have this transnational and transcultural allure. Shabash, with all his transnational and transcultural attributes, certainly has *desi* vibes.

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# “The Mission Comes First”: Representations and Expectations of Labor in *Travelers*

KATHLEEN W. TAYLOR KOLLMAN

The Netflix/Showcase Canadian television series *Travelers* (2016-2018) is a somewhat unique take on the traditional time travel narrative, one that highlights problems with worker exploitation. The characters in the series manifest conflicted feelings about the set of protocols to which they must adhere, and how the rules placed on them reify worker exploitation.<sup>1</sup> In particular, I will focus on the ways in which the show sets up higher emotional labor expectations for its female characters, predominantly Marcy Warton (MacKenzie Porter), the team’s medic. Marcy’s story arcs through seasons one, two, and three detail her ongoing neurological problems and lack of autonomy over her own body, providing an allegory of female worker exploitation.

This piece will draw on labor theories, Marxism, and feminist theories to explore whether the series advocates for more team cohesion in the form of greater adherence to mission protocols or a better sense of self through lessened restrictions and humane expectations of operative behavior. While I will define these terms in greater detail below, I first want to address the concept of “feminist theory” and “feminism” as used in this article. Many different ways exist to understand these terms. bell hooks defined “feminism” as “the struggle to end sexist oppression,” and Cathia Jenainati and Judy Groves augment this to include the idea that feminists fight “to dispel [...] myths about gender,” including the idea that gender is essential, biological, and comes with it prescribed roles to

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term “narrative” here in a general sense to discuss any fictional text regardless of medium. As applied to “traditional time travel narratives,” I would point to a useful infographic by Karl Tate “How Time Travel Works in Science Fiction (Infographic).”

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which people must adhere (ch. 4). Feminist theory turns these ideas into a set of lenses through which we can explore topics, and because feminism is not a monolithic, unchanging concept, its theory is plural, interdisciplinary, and layered. In this piece, for instance, I overlay feminism with Marxism, which is just one way to apply feminist theory and allow it to intersect with a theory related to labor, economics, and philosophy, and I will discuss this intersection in more detail shortly.

To return to *Travelers*, the series involves teams of operatives who send their consciousness back in time to the twenty-first century to correct things in history that led to a dystopian future. Dystopia as a concept in fiction is the depiction of a society—usually one set in a future at some distance from the era in which the piece is written—which has become incredibly damaged and detrimental to the health and well-being of humanity (“Dystopias”). This damage might be environmental, political, or some combination thereof, as of a world damaged by nuclear war. Dystopian fiction has a long history in literature, television, film, and other media (“Dystopias”).

Though these recruits in *Travelers* embark upon their missions as willing volunteers, a series of protocols dictate the labor expectations of their new lives, the first of which is that, no matter what, “the mission comes first.” By expecting blind loyalty and constant adherence to the dictates of a world to which they will never be allowed to return, the travelers are held to a standard of labor that feels not so much like correcting the problems of a dystopian future but instead perpetuating them. In improving the lives of others, the team members no longer have full autonomy as individuated persons and, when they inevitably deviate in even small ways from the primacy of the mission, they are forced to lie and keep secrets about their personal lives.

In the next section, I proceed on this subject with a look at Marxist feminism as a possible theoretical lens through which to examine elements of women’s labor and specific subtypes relevant to *Travelers*.

## Marxism, Feminism, and Emotional Labor

Charles Lemert defines Marxism as a philosophy of “intellectual and political force,” focusing on workers (28). Karl Marx created the basic tenets in the 1800s, along with his occasional collaborator Friedrich Engels; these Western European philosophers whose works frequently criticized “bourgeois civilization,” “capital”

attempted to draw a clear connection “between labor and economic value” (Lemert 28). Engels’s work on the family serves as a “source for the outlines of a materialist feminism” (Lemert 28). Marx and Engels fundamentally argued against capitalism, stating that “the oppression of women began with the institution of private property,” and “[t]he end of common possession of the earth’s goods” resulted in “the heavy regulation of women’s sexuality so that there could be legitimate heirs to a father’s property” (Smith 15). These practices resulted in women’s behavior being regulated, “and their inequality began” (Smith 15). Marx and Engels advocated for a “return to a more communal or communist ownership by all people” that “would provide liberation,” and their “analysis influenced initial Women’s Studies debates and often it still does in China, India, and Latin America” (Smith 15).

People working in a variety of identity studies disciplines “analyze the responsibility of global capitalism in which there are extremely wealthy owners of factories, financial institutions, and land for women’s poverty, and they see the present-day flows of capital around the world as particularly oppressive to women” (Smith 15). Some of these scholars look at how “Marxist materialist concerns” can be applied to examine “the conditions under which women lived and worked” (Smith 15). According to Bonnie G. Smith:

In particular, [identity studies scholars] demanded that the conditions not just of work and production be considered important but the conditions of reproduction, including the birthing and raising of children. That the conditions of birthing and nurturing needed to be investigated as fundamental structures of life, just as work was, proved revolutionary in the university globally. Motherhood became a rich field for Women’s Studies scholarship because of Marxist theorists and their new concerns. (15)

However, even as Marxism can be applied to feminist scholarship and activism, people like Canadian radical feminist activist and writer Shulamith Firestone felt that Marx and Engels’ theories as stated “overlooked women’s exclusion from society,” and therefore it was important to overhaul Marxism for feminist purposes (Jenainati and Groves ch. 77). Thus, it was “important to integrate women into Marxist theory in a more up-to-date way,” as the way “Marx and Engels had described women’s condition under capitalism” in the nineteenth

century was no longer applicable to the twentieth (Smith 16).

[W]omen’s situation had changed drastically since then. Women’s strikes, their situation in the workforce, their political activism, and their poverty were thus crucial to an understanding of how to make society more just, and continue to be so. As some in Women’s Studies saw the field’s mission to study oppression, Marxist insights into the conditions of poor women came to underpin investigations that would become increasingly complex. (Smith 16)

Many feminists—not merely Marxist feminists—are concerned with the wage gap, which “historians have shown” has been “the same roughly 70 percent” gap “at least since the Middle Ages, when working women earned 70 percent of what men did for the same work” (Smith 53). The problem of labor exploitation (in the form of wages and equity) is necessarily recognized by classical Marxism per se: “that gender and class work together in ways that need study and understanding in order to right wrongs,” which is something that an intersectional feminist intervention into Marxism seeks to redress and encourage “a true understanding of women and class” (Smith 53).

One of the tenets of Marxist feminism is an emphasis on revealing and dismantling the emphasis capitalist economic systems place on the use of women’s free domestic labor to raise children who will then serve as members of a proletariat workforce. According to Jenainati and Groves, “For Marxist feminists, the division of labour and lack of support for working mothers defines women by their domestic responsibilities and excludes them from productive labour” (918). Shulamith Firestone advocated, in *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970), for “a biological revolution” (Jenainati and Groves ch. 69). Firestone wanted an egalitarian society enacted via a system in which “who possesses the womb” would no longer be significant, and family gender roles would be eradicated (Jenainati and Groves ch. 69). Firestone also encouraged women to “seize control over the means of reproduction in order to eliminate sex class discrimination,” which she saw as necessitating “wider access to contraception, sterilization and abortion” (Jenainati and Groves ch. 69).

Linda Carty's 2014 article, "A Genealogy of Marxist Feminism in Canada,"<sup>2</sup> discusses the fact that Canadian Marxist feminism makes a point to include and speak to issues specific to women of color, particularly First Nations women, and how their labor and exploitation is often ignored by both mainstream and academic feminism and Marxists who may not be explicitly feminist.<sup>3</sup> As Carty asserts, "the Canadian working class has always been raced" (180). She also states that it is antithetical to Marxist feminism to not integrate intersectionality since Kimberlé Crenshaw's original point about intersectionality was its relationship to labor, exploitation, and legal rights (181-2).<sup>4</sup>

Sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild pioneered the concept of emotional labor. Hochschild spoke with people in several industries that deal with the public, most notably flight attendants, and coined the term which today indicates work done in the service of managing others' experience of a situation. Such situations can range from medical care to customer service to education and safety. Hochschild's findings include the idea that those performing a high degree of emotional labor must hide their natural emotional responses to situations and perform for the benefit of the client, patient, or customer, creating stress and, often, burnout. Since Hochschild's work, many others have contributed to the scholarship on emotional labor (see Györfy et al, Edward et al, El-Alayi et al, Elliott, Santin and Kelly, Sloan, Sollie et al, and Tuna and Baykal). In each of these studies, there are several common factors. The studies find that work requiring emotional labor increases stress in workers. This increased work stress leads to burnout and often a complete departure from the field. Furthermore, the work is gendered. Jobs requiring a high degree of emotional labor are often part of the "pink collar proletariat" of careers with a high number of female workers in positions somewhere between blue- and white-collar employment and which are not as lucrative as white-collar, male-centric career fields with less emotional labor requirement. And while not all jobs adhere to the above—including doctors

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<sup>2</sup> Itself a response to Meg Luxton's article "Marxist Feminism and Anticapitalism: Reclaiming Our History, Reanimating Our Politics," which argues many of the same points but urges a greater focus on people of color, under the assumption that Canadian Marxist feminism has heretofore ignored that issue.

<sup>3</sup> Given that *Travelers* is a Canadian series, a specific look at Canadian Marxist feminism is warranted.

<sup>4</sup> For more on Marxist feminism and labor, see Kathi Weeks' *The Problem with Work* and Ros Hague's "Between the Waves: Currents in Contemporary Feminist Thought."

and professors—women in these fields were expected to perform more emotional labor than men.

Though he does not discuss it explicitly on its own, Paolo Virno hints at the idea of emotional labor in his discussion of social cooperation as a natural result of labor activity that directly produces an object being diminished in post-industrial economies. Virno describes this as a phenomenon even Marx foresaw: “[T]he tasks of a worker or of a clerk no longer involve the completion of a single particular assignment,” Virno writes, “but the changing and intensifying of social cooperation” (62). Virno goes on to describe the condition of material-less production involving a complex system of social hierarchies, interactions, and negotiations in order to justify itself, “solutions which ameliorate the organization of labor” (62). However, if labor must overcomplicate, expand, redefine, and rely on permutations of itself that require ever-increasing degrees of emotional expenditure, this raises the question of whether the particular labor practice or industry is ethical or justified in its continued existence at all. While these practices could describe minor industries whose existence may not be socially necessary, if describing more vital industries and services, perhaps a better system of social cooperation could be found.

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri discuss a related concept in *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, the idea of “affective labor.” This term, as they define it, spins off from Virno’s concept but gets more specific and describes “immaterial labor” that is not precisely performed via emotions per se, which, as they define it, “are mental phenomenon” but instead use “affects,” which “refer equally to body and mind” (Hardt and Negri 108). These affects “reveal the present state of life in the entire organization, expressing a certain state of the body along with a certain mode of thinking” (Hardt and Negri 108). To perfect affective labor, according to Hardt and Negri, is to do work “that produces or manipulates affects such as a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion,” and they go on to cite similar professions as Hochschild does (“legal assistants, flight attendants, and fast food workers”) as examples of this labor (108). They also point out that in countries with high economic standing, jobs that require affective labor often desire workers to have higher levels of education (108). Hardt and Negri argue, though, that despite this educational emphasis, industrial hegemony subordinates affective labor due to its immaterial “product” (109-10) as well as its similarity to “women’s work” (110). Furthermore, affective labor itself is directly feminized:

[W]hen affective labor becomes central to many productive tasks [...] it is still most often performed by women in subordinate positions. Indeed labor with a high affective component is generally feminized, given less authority, and paid less. Women employed as paralegals and nurses, for example, not only do the affective labor of constructing relationships with patients and clients and that of managing office dynamics, but they are also caregivers for their bosses, the lawyers and doctors, who are largely male. (Hardt and Negri 111)

Hardt and Negri assert that exploitative affective labor creates alienation for the worker and profits for those not directly performing the labor themselves (111, 150).

### *Travelers*: Premise and Ramifications for Labor Exploitation

*Travelers* is a Canadian television series that first premiered in the U.S. on Netflix in 2016. The show consists of three seasons thus far; as of this writing, a fourth has not yet been commissioned. The show (set in Seattle) is about a five-person team of time travelers sent from a dystopian future to the twenty-first century. The travelers arrive via the implantation of their consciousness into the body of a host who would otherwise die in the original history (usually via suicide, drug overdose, murder, or an accident). The five travelers the show focuses on have specific roles within the team and include a member designed as the leader (Grant MacLaren/Traveler 3468, played by Eric McCormack), the medic (the aforementioned Marcy Warton/Traveler 3569, played by MacKenzie Porter), the tactician (Carly Shannon/Traveler 3465, played by Nesta Cooper), the engineer (Trevor Holden/Traveler 0115, played by Jared Abrahamson), and the historian (Philip Pearson/Traveler 3326, played by Reilly Dolman). The team is given instructions from the Director, an AI computer programmed to adjust events in the past to help influence and heal problems suffered in the future, and they are not permitted to deviate from the Director's instructions or the program's protocols,<sup>5</sup> regardless of any negative effect to themselves or their team. Most of

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<sup>5</sup> 1) The mission comes first. 2) Never jeopardize your cover. Do not call each other by future names—"leave the future in the past." Do not use future knowledge for personal gain. 3) Don't take a life; don't save a life, unless otherwise directed. 4) Do not reproduce. 5) In the absence of

the show’s storylines deal with the team’s attempts to change historical events that the Director calculates will lead to the dystopian future. As the series progresses, plots deal more extensively with the traveler program overall, the attempts by warring factions to subvert the authority of the Director, and the personal toll that being a traveler takes on each member of the team.

The Director functions as both a revered political leader and religious deity, but one who is itself absent from the text, save in brief glimpses in the final season. The Director is reminiscent of the titular machine in E.M. Forster’s “The Machine Stops.” In that piece, a nebulous internet/AI prototype controls all of human society, which has been driven underground into voluntary isolation. When the Machine begins to cease proper function, said society breaks down into chaos. As in *Travelers*, there is a faction of individuals who attempt to resist the Machine, but humanity’s reliance on it may be insurmountable. Similarly, the travelers who continue to follow the Director’s objectives seem emotionally incapable of not doing so. To deviate from the Director’s instructions to them would perhaps sign their death warrant, even if its orders are arguably abusive or dismissive of the humanity of travelers.

Travelers’ work affects each team member in dramatically negative ways, from extreme stress and interpersonal relationship conflict to adverse medical and mental health effects.<sup>6</sup> The damaged affective state of each member of the central team may reveal that life in the future is indeed dystopian, lacks respect for individuals’ intrinsic worth, exploits labor, and induces and exacerbates mental health stressors. Of all the main characters, Marcy is given the most debilitating set of circumstances, and her storylines now constitute the primary focus of my work. While she is a doctor, men perform all her supervision, and her healthcare administration is much more in the fashion of that performed by nurses and emergency medical technicians. For most of the series, Marcy believes she was mistakenly given a host body whose mind had a developmental or neurological disability manifesting as perceived low intelligence and impaired verbal and

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direction, maintain your host’s life. 6) No inter-team/deep web communication except in extreme emergencies. 7) Protocol Omega: The Director will no longer be intervening in this timeline. Travelers may live out their days as they see fit.

<sup>6</sup> Grant experiences extreme marital stress throughout the series; Carly is in an ongoing custody battle with her host’s son’s abusive father; Trevor learns his host had been sexually assaulted and he later experiences brain damage from his consciousness being uploaded to so many hosts over the course of the program; and Philip’s host had a heroin addiction that he must physically overcome.

motor function. Due to problems with sustaining her mind within a disabled brain, Marcy begins to develop seizures and other life-threatening conditions that result in her attempts to perform tests and surgical procedures on herself. Ultimately, a traveler programmer is given the mission of re-uploading Marcy's mind into her host's body in a different way, which would avoid the damaged areas of the host's brain and would no longer endanger her life. This process, however, would overwrite the current mind of Traveler 3569—in effect, the current version of Marcy would be erased, and a new “previous save” of her would be uploaded in its place. Everything she had experienced in the intervening months spent in her host body would be lost to her. This prospect bothers her immensely, and Marcy seems to be on the precipice of turning the process down, preferring to die of the physical problems resulting from her host body than to be erased and rewritten, albeit with a different version of her mind.

Before Marcy can articulate her preference fully, she is rebooted (“Marcy”). Over the next few episodes, her teammates interact with her as usual, but some note that she seems less sensitive, less invested in the missions, and less connected to the rest of them. Her teammates can brief her on everything they had done together that Marcy had missed, but they cannot brief her on how those things affected her emotionally, privately, and personally. Thus, in essence, she is not entirely herself. Eventually, “Marcy 2.0” realizes this disconnect more and more and feels an emotional absence and distance from herself. She theorizes that simulating a near-death experience might allow her to physically re-connect to the memories lost to her.

Consequently, Marcy instigates a procedure that would bring her very close to death, a point during which a traveler might occasionally be able to capture the memories of their host body. This procedure is effective, giving Marcy not only her “version 1.0” memories but also some of her host body, which leads her to the realization that the host was not born with a clinical disability at all (“21C”). This original Marcy host had been a nurse who stumbled upon an illicit experiment program and, in order to keep her quiet, was subjected to a memory-erasing procedure resulting in the symptoms of developmental disability.

Aside from the medical necessity of Marcy's reboot, there is an emotional reason for her desire to recapture her memories. In her first “version,” Marcy had become romantically involved with David, a social worker who is unconnected to the traveler program. When Marcy is rebooted, this fledgling relationship stalls back into a mode of friendship and does not resume its romantic trajectory until

Marcy regains her lost memories. Season three culminates in David dying of radiation exposure after helping stop a nuclear detonation. Marcy, convinced that the Director would observe David’s heroics and provide advanced medical technology to save his life, clings to this hope until David dies. At that point, Marcy exhibits the effects of severe emotional trauma and seems to wish to resign the program. Unfortunately, a rogue traveler kidnaps her to retrieve data in her mental upload and, unwilling to have it compromised, Marcy shoots herself in the head. Her method of death is important to note here, both literally and symbolically, as it means no one will have access to her brain’s biological or electrical contents. Furthermore, this means of suicide echoes the severe physical and emotional stress that Marcy’s brain and consciousness have had to endure during the entire series. Though she dies a hero, to a certain extent, she was manifesting such extreme damage that it is difficult to know if she acted more out of grief and depression or desire to protect intellectual assets from an enemy (“Protocol Omega”). In the last few moments of the third season, Grant creates a new timeline in which Marcy’s host is never taken over by a traveler, and she and David experience a “meet cute” on a city bus. It is implied that this version of the characters will fall in love and avoid the deaths endured by their counterparts (“Protocol Omega”).

Despite her trajectory being effectively subjected to a reset button, there are still problematic elements to all of Marcy’s major storylines that are worthy of discussion. First, there are consent- and power-based issues in Marcy and David’s romantic relationship. Secondly, there are issues of bodily autonomy and consent in her reboot storyline. And, finally, there are multiple layers of ableist issues present in her host’s status as a woman with diminished intellectual capacity. By having this disability then be retroactively positioned as non-congenital and, like Traveler 3569’s reboot, caused by a technologically-based procedure to which informed consent was not provided constitutes a troubling trend in speculative fiction wherein formerly-disabled characters are “healed” somehow (see Batgirl in the DC comics and Hawkeye in the Marvel comics). The same program victimizes both host and traveler, and it is deeply telling that both are female members of the medical profession. The exploitation of women’s labor—especially women in helping professions, such as medicine, education, criminal justice, and service work—is a worrying trend, particularly in capitalist economies.

In terms of academic Marxism, Marxist feminism, and emotional labor, the

team in *Travelers* is exploited in several concrete ways, and this exploitation reveals that the series' brand of science fiction is not post- or anticapitalist. Dan Hassler-Forest, discussing postcapitalist speculative media, posits that one tenet of a postcapitalist theme is to open up binaries into more fluid interpretations and to honestly critique existing power structures—neither of which *Travelers* does, even in discussing the future (154). There is also no recognition in the series that humanity and nature are linked and therefore both deserve protection although we could argue that the travelers' inhabitation of new bodies and the existence of their essences as computer data is a form of posthumanist radical interpretation of humanity (Hassler-Forest 154). However, this interpretation still fails to protect them from very human stressors and still manages to enact exploitation.

This exploitation is enacted, first, by the very nature of the program. *Travelers* will never reap the benefits of their labor. They are perennially cut off from the future/their home time, and protocol 5 (assuming your host's life) means they are perpetually at work/on call. There is no rest or leisure time, not unless you are informed of your release from the program (the Omega protocol, revealed toward the end of season three). If a traveler is informed of an Omega protocol, they are deemed no longer essential to the program, but they are not retrieved; this is not the same as full autonomy, however, since they must still adhere to protocol 5 and live out their assumed identity.

It seems on the surface as if protocol 4—the mandate to not reproduce—is in a sense aligned with Marxist feminism asking for the distribution of reproductive labor to be removed from only the realm of women. However, its edict removes the option of choice for travelers of all genders and, once again, means they are unable to have a full personal life separate from their work.<sup>7</sup>

Emotional labor is performed by all travelers at all times, forcing them to maintain façades to such a degree that, when the non-travelers in their lives learn of their true identities, their covers are completely blown and they are unable to continue their missions, thereby jeopardizing their very existences. There is no opportunity to resign or change careers, however, which are available to real-life humans in emotionally demanding career paths. Even in the case of Protocol

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<sup>7</sup> As an example of this being problematic, Grant's host's wife Kat becomes pregnant. Because Kat had a previous traumatic miscarriage (and because he has fallen in love with her), Grant does not recommend an abortion, but he must keep the pregnancy secret from his team. Kat later has a miscarriage and, because she has learned of Grant's identity as a traveler, leaves him. The stress of the secrecy of the pregnancy is harmful to Grant, and he knows that, even as his team's leader, he is flagrantly disobeying one of the protocols.

Omega, declaring a traveler out of the program is an option available only to the Director (employer), not the traveler (worker). In essence, a worker can be fired but cannot resign.

While all of the members of the travelers team are being exploited, Marcy Warton’s exploitation is perhaps the most extensive. Serving as the team’s sole source of medical care, she is responsible for acting as a one-person field hospital unit, as well as the provider of more routine care, such as helping Philip’s drug addiction (“Travelers”), Grant’s near-deadly injuries suffered in the field (“Bishop” and “Kathryn”), and various team members’ exposure to an influenza-like disease (“Jenny”). She is also David’s primary source of medical care after his radiation exposure, until a medic from another team joins in to support (“David”). In season two, Marcy obtains a cover job as a hospital orderly, which means not only must she still provide medical care to her travelers team, but she must now also provide medical care as her host identity, adding two extra layers of performance skills to her emotional labor (“Jacob”). Furthermore, by having her original identity wiped and rebooted without full consent, and by being placed in a neurologically-compromised host to begin with, Marcy has had to battle what essentially manifests itself as a comorbid physical and mental illness with symptoms ranging from seizures to memory loss to lack of affect. That she has to perform procedures on her own body to ameliorate her condition is also telling and troubling; in real life, at least medical professionals tend to be able to receive medical care from other providers, but in Marcy’s case, she usually has to be her own physician.

The other team members do not fare well, either. Grant’s wife leaves him (“David”), Trevor’s consciousness is overwritten due to his brain disorder (“Trevor”), and although Philip recovers from his heroin addiction, he is at risk of cerebral overload due to the nature of historian duties (“Philip”). Ultimately, Grant goes back in time to September 11, 2001 to change a pivotal point in history, with the result that his entire team’s efforts during all three seasons of the show are reset.

## Comparative Texts and Conclusion

A similarity exists between *Travelers*’ labor exploitation and Ridley Scott’s *Alien*, in which a corporation and its associated computer directive have a secret protocol that deems its workers expendable. As Robert Torrey writes in his

examination of feminism in *Alien*, “this expenditure of the worker crew in the ‘production’ of the alien envisions the continuation into the future of capitalist exploitation of labor” (347). Hypothetically, a dystopian view of the future is still predicated on capitalism, which could be a means of criticizing that as a viable economic system.

Another comparative text can be seen in Kurt Vonnegut’s 1952 novel *Player Piano*. In *Four Futures: Life After Capitalism*, Peter Frase discusses the novel’s supposed utopian state as still perpetuating capitalistic exploitation. This similarity is true particularly insofar as “[t]he women in the book continue to perform unpaid caring and emotional labor that has always been expected of them,” a state that “Vonnegut seems not to care whether this is important or a source of meaning for them,” thereby perpetuating the idea that even in an idealized society, women’s feelings about their labor neither matters nor should deviate away from this realm of the emotional support of others (ch. 1).

Several other dystopian works discuss labor exploitation to varying degrees, from the children forced to kill each other for entertainment in Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* series to the oppressed female AI in *Blade Runner 2049* (dir. Denis Villeneuve, 2017). But due to *Travelers* being so directly entrenched in essentially an ensemble of workers carrying out specific tasks, it is uniquely suited to illustrate the consequences of systems willing to treat human beings as highly disposable.

It is possible that the entire point of labor exploitation in *Travelers* is to indicate that the future society, which the team seeks to prevent, is damaged and dystopian. Either it is damaged to the point of finding labor exploitation acceptable, or labor exploitation is the only feasible way to repair a society this damaged. Regardless, the outcome of extreme exploitation of traveler team members is the same: most of the team, by the end of season three, is either dead or experiencing extreme emotional trauma or medical crises. Perhaps the series is advocating for the heroic nature of self-exploitation in the name of service to one’s government, even if that service goes far beyond what could be considered humane. However, the reboot in the final episode of season three seems to beg for a happy resolution to characters who have been overtly exploited, which hints that this exploitation is indeed not ideal.

One labor issue that is not hypothesized in the future world of *Travelers*, but that is discussed widely in our current culture, is automation. Peter Frase discusses a potential post-capitalist society in which automation has the

possibility of indeed reducing labor needs, but this could be postulated as either having a positive or negative effect on how we perform and perceive labor:

Care work like nursing is predominantly performed by women and is not coincidentally undervalued and underpaid. So perhaps the danger is less that such work will be automated, but that it *won't*, and that an underpaid, feminized workforce will be all that's left of wage labor. (ch. 1, italics in original)

Again, one could argue that the apparent lack of automation in *Travelers* future timeline indicates its status as a dystopian society, but the advanced use of AI and time travel technology would argue otherwise. Thus, Frase's pessimistic prediction is applicable here, that all that's left of wage labor in this fictional future is that which expects a high degree of emotional labor and is unduly exploitative. In this way, the entire traveler team is feminized and undervalued, as high expectations are placed on their ability to sublimate their own needs above those of the team, the Director, and a future they will never enjoy. However, with Marcy in particular having two endings, neither of which coalesces into something like a happy resolution, she in particular remains even more exploited. Her suicide renders her a hero, but she is still dead; and in Grant's reboot that allows her host and David to live happily ever after, her consciousness presumably remains in a dystopian future. The series means viewers to read the reset ending as happy for her, but only because we see her physical form, not her actual self, which further indicates that women's safety is positioned primarily in the body, not the psyche. And it is the psyche that is more damaged by exploitative emotional labor.

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# Embracing the Bad Victim: Sexual Violence and Sympathy on Popular Television

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Sexual violence—the umbrella term under which rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment, and a variety of other forms of sexually-directed attack fall—has become an increasingly popular topic of discussion in the contemporary U.S.<sup>1</sup> According to a 2010 survey by the National Institute of Justice and the Department of Defense, nearly one in five women either has been raped, or experienced an attempted rape in her lifetime (Rabin). The ubiquity of sexual violence and discussions around it, particularly the #MeToo movement, have prompted the proliferation of the neologism rape culture. In a rape culture, the act of rape is normative and condoned behavior. The term originally formed during second-wave feminism and is now entering the public’s vocabulary (Herman 45; Jordan). As a result, depictions of sexual violence on U.S. fictional television programs have significantly increased over the past twenty years (Greenberg and Hofschire 100; Kahlor and Morrison).

It is difficult—not to mention reductive—to attempt to determine whether the increase in depictions have become generally more or less problematic over time. However, one particular pattern of depictions has carved a space out for itself on television: storylines in which rape is deployed to evoke sympathy for an unlikable female character. Within the past eight years, such popular series as *Sons of Anarchy*, *Orange is the New Black*, *Breaking Bad*, *Mad Men*, *Bates Motel*, *Private Practice*, *Game of Thrones*, and *The Walking Dead* have all relied on a rape, or an attempted rape, as a plot device for humanizing an unsympathetic female.

On the surface, the use of rape as a humanizing plot device might seem progressive or praiseworthy. These depictions ostensibly spread awareness of the

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<sup>1</sup> Sexual violence, as defined by the World Health Organization, is any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, or unwanted sexual comment or advance against a person’s sexuality using coercion; *rape* applies specifically to physically forced or otherwise coerced penetration of an individual (see Krug et al).

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problem of rape and point to an unlikable personality as a potential result of trauma, bringing attention to a negative consequence of rape for victims. Perhaps most importantly, they do not outwardly appear to victim-blame: to suggest that a victim is to blame for an act of sexual violence perpetrated against them.<sup>2</sup> These depictions seem to point to the vulnerability of anyone to the problem of sexual violence, and suggest that rape is to blame for the unlikable qualities of a female character, rather than the other way around.

This pattern, however—in which rape is deployed as a plot device to humanize an unlikable female character—points to a deeply problematic way in which sexual violence is understood and addressed in the U.S. cultural landscape. It reveals audiences' discomfort with unsympathetic female figures both on and off television, since their safety must be compromised to ensure their likability and, often, their access to power. It also affirms how many audience members have been trained to react to the issue of rape solely through the mechanism of sympathy. When this plot device is used, the status of “victim” cancels out all other qualities or characteristics that might contradict this sympathetic victimhood.<sup>3</sup>

This essay provides two case studies of this phenomenon, from the popular television shows *Scandal* and *House of Cards*. In both storylines, unlikable female political figures are attacked in plotlines intended to evoke audience sympathy. The case studies examine content from the shows, as well as reactions from audiences in blog posts, recaps, and opinion pieces, in order to demonstrate the effect of these plotlines on viewers' perceptions of these female characters.

Though they are not indicative of the entire landscape of rape culture on or off television, these plotlines provide examples of a very specific deployment of rape as a plot device, demonstrating one way in which rape is being used on television, and perhaps being understood in U.S. culture as a whole. These case studies support this essay's ultimate argument: that the referral to sympathy, enabled through the trope of the ‘helpless victim’, allows audiences to skirt the responsibility of scrutinizing rape culture, as well as the audience's own complicity. This invocation of sympathy encourages audiences to collapse the identity of victims of sexual violence both on and off screen, conflating their experiences with their personalities. In so doing, this trope reinforces a raced and gendered dichotomy between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ victims.

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<sup>2</sup> An example of victim-blaming would be the supposition that a woman deserves to be raped because of the clothes they were wearing when the attack took place. For examples of research that treats victim-blaming as a measure of how problematic depictions of rape are, see: Kahlor and Morrison, Britto et al.

<sup>3</sup> The choice between using the terms “victim” or “survivor” to describe those who have experienced sexual violence means ascribing a specific status of healing to that person (see Kelly et al.). This essay uses the term “victim,” because the shows and trope analyzed are specifically deploying victimhood and its accompanying narratives of trauma, silence, and helplessness.

## Literature Review: Depictions of Victimhood on U.S. Television

Both Sarah Projansky and Lisa Cuklanz have written on U.S. television's love affair with the "helpless victim," a trope which first appeared on television in the mid-1970s. The trope emerged as a reflection of the second-wave feminist shift towards socially validating and supporting, rather than blaming, victims of rape. The second wave feminist movement in the U.S. "moved the public conversation about rape from silence to exposure and political activism" (Freedman). "The anti-rape movement sponsored speak outs, hosted forums and distributed literature and fact sheets correcting the lies and the myths, desperately trying to shift blame to where it belonged: with the rapist" (Poskin). Feminist activists and scholars during this era lead rape reform efforts and pushed back on the victim-blaming underlying most depictions of female rape victims on television. The result of this reform was a formulaic representation of rape victims as vulnerable and helpless, requiring sympathy and careful treatment. Cuklanz explains that sympathy for, and legitimation of, the experiences of rape victims are the rape reform ideas to have found the greatest acceptance in the mainstream mass media (as opposed to more complex but less consistently appearing concerns, such as how rape trials are pursued (*Rape on Prime Time* 156)). This sympathy, Projansky and Cuklanz argue, has become the main vehicle for viewers' efforts to legitimate victims' experiences.

The stranger rape narrative lost some of its footing by the mid-1980s, replaced by storylines of date and acquaintance rape in the 1990s, and then by more complex victim portrayals moving into the new millennium. However, many victims on television remained uniformly deserving of one thing: viewers' sympathy. Projansky stipulates that the post-feminist cultural turn of the 1980s (which effectively dismissed the work of second-wave feminism, declaring gender equality to be achieved) has led to the recent re-emergence of tropes such as the helpless victim (95). In contrast, Cuklanz argues that the helpless victim never left our screens ("The Limitations of Mass Mediated Discourses on Rape" 379).

Real-life victims experience a range of reactions to sexual violence. Sexual violence provokes incredible trauma for some, and drastic changes in personality for others. Second-wave feminists whose activism inspired the construction of the helpless victim character intended to end victim-blaming, and recognize that victims have been wronged, rather than to contribute to a dehumanizing trope of helplessness. The purpose of this essay, in dismantling this mechanism of immediate and all-encompassing audience sympathy, is not to deny how the experience of being raped can affect a person. Instead, this essay seeks to highlight how sympathy, on its own, is not necessarily an appropriate or constructive response to the problem of sexual violence.

Projansky and Cuklanz agree that contemporary cultural texts, including television, still fail to tell stories of sexual violence that closely examine social context without also blaming the victim. Instead, many television scripts become so focused on taking a “politically correct” stance and not blaming the victim that they frame that person as unconditionally sympathetic. Cuklanz as well as Corrine C. Bertram and M. Sue Crowley explain that, when audiences are expected to provide only a sympathetic response to portrayals of rape victims, they avoid confronting the dominant social norms that maintain sexual violence. The “false comfort of concern” allows the audience to focus on an entirely emotional response (Cuklanz 101; Bertram and Crowley 64). This response, Cuklanz insists, effectively de-politicizes victimhood and the problem of rape culture (*Rape on Prime Time* 101).

Just as 1970s-era depictions of victims treated them primarily as “ciphers through which the trauma of rape [could] be indicated,” helpless victims are conflated with the attack of sexual violence perpetrated against them.<sup>4</sup> A rape reveals the utterly human vulnerability of a character, inviting a sympathetic response from viewers that makes that person supposedly more relatable. An unlikable character becomes likable in the wake of being raped, because she cannot be both a victim (deserving of sympathy) and a bad or irritating person (deserving of scorn). When the only way that audiences know to react to sexual violence is through concern and sympathy, victimhood cancels out all other traits (Bertram and Crowley 65). The character is also eternally a victim; on these television shows, the characters’ choices in the wake of being attacked can be (and typically are) attributed to trauma. The previous rape of an unlikable character, revealed through flashback or spoken description, can also be used to retroactively justify their previous behavior, no matter how terrible.

This essay argues that the trope of the helpless victim holds a presence in contemporary U.S. television. Not all victims of sexual violence on U.S. television are depicted as helpless or are made to seem helpless (and therefore likable) through the use of rape as a plot device. Rather, the helpless victim makes a covert appearance when characters who are not typically in need of viewers’ sympathy suddenly deserve nothing less after a reveal that they have been attacked. Female figures are already the default victims of sexual violence on television, and female characters often must be made more “likable” for audiences. “There has long been a plague of poorly developed female characters outfitted with symbols of likability—

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<sup>4</sup> When an individual is raped, whether on television or in real life, the incident is typically referred to as “her rape” or “his rape.” Similarly, the perpetrator is spoken of as “her rapist” or “his rapist.” Because this language reinforces the notion that the burden of an act of sexual violence lies with the victim, this essay instead uses phrases such as “the person who attacked her/him” or “the act of sexual violence perpetrated against her/him.” See Arcus for a problematization of the passive voice when discussing experiences of sexual violence.

good looks, one-liners, adorable flaws—instead of personalities” (Paskin). *Homeland* executive producer Meredith Stiehm says of the slow visual move away from every female character being likable, “the world wants women to be lady-like. It’s a slow evolution of not expecting the traditional niceties” (“TV’s New Leading Ladies”). While a steady growth of female antiheroes and powerful, unlikable female characters exist on television, a demand persists for these characters to be “lady-like.” Building on Projansky, Cuklanz, and Bertram and Crowley, this essay points to the increasing use of the trope to balance out the growing numbers of unlikable female characters with a deeper patriarchal demand for likable women on television.

The use of flashbacks to tell the story of a rape only reinforces the helplessness of the character historically, as viewers are expected to direct sympathy, instead of thoughtful critique, at the character’s behaviors from the time of the rape up until the present. In the two examples that follow—storylines from *Scandal* and *House of Cards*—an unlikable female character (as evidenced by both fan responses and the treatment of the character within the show) is revealed to have been raped in the past. These attacks are used by the shows to retroactively justify the characters’ unlikable behavior. The reason that the victim is currently unlikable lies in her previous attack, rather than in some alternate complexity within her character or background. The status of the character as a victim helps garner sympathy, framing her as more likable and more human.

This is not all that the storylines share in common. Both shows aired recently (within the past three years) and have been popular and critically lauded (Ostrow; Stanley). As such, they indicate at least some of the contemporary visual sensibilities of audiences in the U.S. Both show’s rape plotlines took place in a later season, making the episodes more recent (season three of *Scandal*, from 2013-2014, and season two of *House of Cards*, in 2013). In addition, the characters both are or become First Ladies, and are deeply involved in the power game of U.S. politics; they share several personality traits; and there are parallels in the attacks perpetrated against them.

The analyses of these storylines include reactions from audiences, particularly through blog posts, recaps, and opinion pieces. While not representative of the totality of viewers, these expressions help to paint a picture of how these plotlines are being understood and absorbed by at least some viewers, revealing the lessons being taught about sexual violence.

### Case Study One: Sympathy and Sexual Violence in *Scandal*

Few contemporary television characters have garnered the antipathy of viewers quite like First Lady Melody “Mellie” Grant (Bellamy Young) of *Scandal*. The power-hungry and politically savvy Mellie is well-known for her willingness to do

anything to keep her husband, President Fitzgerald “Fitz” Grant (Tony Goldwyn)—and eventually herself—in power. Employing a falsely sweet and hyperfeminized demeanor in public as she threatens and manipulates in private, Mellie is even willing to use her children as political instruments. In an attempt to keep her husband and the media on her side in season two, for example, a pregnant Mellie forces her obstetrician to induce her labor so that she will give birth to her child earlier than expected, despite the danger this poses to the child (“Truth or Consequences”).

Previous to the revelation of the attack she experienced, “Mellie-hating” was popular not only among Mellie’s fellow characters, but across the show’s fan base (Miranda-Wolff). Viewers acknowledged her as a “love to hate” character, a “Lady Macbeth” and a backstabbing “Stepford Wife” (Strecker; Fallon). Mellie has most often been demonized by viewers for standing in the way of the President’s affair with the show’s protagonist, Olivia Pope (Kerry Washington). She is often framed as frigid, both sexually and emotionally, as she repeatedly fails to connect with her husband. One blogger vividly described her as “the rigid bitch who wouldn’t let the cheating lovebirds have their fun” (Hannum).

Many fans’ tunes changed, however, when it was revealed through a series of flashbacks in the show’s third season that Mellie was raped by her father-in-law, Jerry (Barry Bostwick). The episode “Everything’s Coming Up Mellie” introduced a strikingly different Mellie from fifteen years earlier: a woman passionately in love with her husband and supportive of his political ambitions, appearing relaxed, and forgoing heavy makeup or ornament (a striking contrast to her doll-like, hyperfeminine appearance in the present). She is naïvely shocked by her husband and his father’s shouting match over politics. One day, after one of these fights ends and Fitz leaves them both behind at their house, Jerry drunkenly advances on Mellie, sitting down next to her and placing his hand on her thigh. Though she tells him to stop, he wrestles her, asking, “Do you really want me to stop?” (“Everything’s Coming Up Mellie” 00:25:30-00:25:38) She continues to fight back, shouting, but he holds her down, rips her dress, and rapes her.

The rape is emphasized as a turning point in Mellie’s personality, as she transforms overnight from an innocent and loving wife into a fledgling political animal. The morning after, she sits down at the breakfast table with Jerry and employs (it is implied, for the first time) her signature hyperfeminized and cutthroat persona. Mellie threatens to tell her husband about the attack if Jerry does not provide support for Fitz’s political campaign, and Jerry acquiesces (“Everything’s Coming Up Mellie”). The day before, Mellie was looking forward to a future of philanthropy and charity work. By the next morning, she seems willing to exploit anything—even a rape perpetrated against her—for power. The only event on which this change hinges, according to the show, is the rape.

In the ‘current day’ scenes that follow in the episode, Mellie presents as more vulnerable than the show has ever depicted her. In several moments, she even reverts back to the naïve Mellie of fifteen years ago. Toward the end of “Everything’s Coming Up Mellie,” for example, she is aggressively questioned by an interviewer about Fitz’s infidelities, and appears as shocked and paralyzed by the confrontation as she was during Jerry’s and Fitz’s flashback fights. Nine episodes earlier, Mellie was willing to expose those same infidelities on television, destroy his political career for her own gain (“A Woman Scorned”). That Mellie is oddly absent during this more recent, aggressive interview, as Fitz must swoop in to defend her. The episode implies that the rape is as present in her psyche as it is in the viewers’ minds, explaining her uncharacteristic helplessness.

By interspersing clips of the miserable, lonely Mellie of the present with flashbacks to the wide-eyed, innocent Mellie of the past, the show teaches viewers to see her likable past persona when looking at the unlikable present one. The episode thus teaches viewers that Mellie is, above all, a rape victim. Her framing as sympathetic and helpless is threaded through the rest of the season, as viewers are repeatedly reminded of the attack. In the wake of one of these reminders, the one person whom to whom she has disclosed, former flame Andrew (Jon Tenney), tells Mellie that “Someone needs to look out for you, be on your side” (“We Do Not Touch the First Ladies” 00:15:02-00:15:09) Mellie never before required protection. Only with the knowledge of the rape she experienced can Andrew’s sentiment make sense in the show’s universe.

Many fans praised the show’s use of the rape plotline to humanize Mellie (Stuart; Murphy). Some called on the larger fanbase to immediately stop hating her, revealing their belief that the treatment of victims of rape with anything but sympathy—regardless of that victim’s past—is unacceptable. Some marked the episode as a turning point in transitioning from “hating” to “loving” the character (Fallon; Strecker). Additionally, as many fans noticed, the reveal of the rape in a flashback implied that all of Mellie’s ruthless behavior in the fifteen years since were a direct result of the rape (Murphy; Stewart). One blogger forgave Mellie of her most reprehensible actions, explaining that she was just “trying her absolute best” (Murphy). “If you don’t like or at least have more sympathy for Mellie after last night,” one author wrote in a next-day recap of the episode, “you have no soul and kick puppies for sport” (Arceneaux). For those viewers, all of Mellie’s decisions—even the choice to put her unborn child in danger back in season two—are attributed to trauma, rather than to her conscious decision-making.<sup>5</sup>

## Case Study Two: Divergence from the Trope in *House of Cards*

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<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, many viewers expressed disappointment in the show’s use of a rape plotline to make Mellie more sympathetic (see Fallon; Stewart).

While Mellie and her husband are often at odds, the power couple of *House of Cards* are almost always conspiring. If there is any complement to underhanded political monster Frank Underwood, the show's protagonist, it is his equally ruthless wife Claire. Claire's occupation as the head of an environmental nonprofit organization has done little to stop her from earning the title of "ice queen" from fans (Stuever). Claire methodically destroys the reputations of those who interfere with her and Frank's scheme to propel Frank into the office of the presidency. Not even Frank is exempt from her backstabbing: when he privileges his career over Claire's without first consulting her, she secretly (and single-handedly) decimates a legislative vote he carefully brokered ("Chapter 9").

Just like Mellie, Claire is often compared to Lady Macbeth; unlike Mellie, Claire is singularly beloved by many viewers, celebrated as an unapologetically conniving female television character (Stanley). Thanks to *House of Cards*, viewers were gifted a "strong-willed, merciless female antihero" (Whitney). The characters around her express disgust at her cold-blooded persona. A former employee who is pregnant, Gillian (Sandrine Holt), is horrified by Claire's calm assurance that she will revoke Gillian's health insurance if she does not acquiesce to Claire's demands. "I'm willing to let your child wither and die inside you if that's what's required" Claire says ("Chapter 14" 00:31:10-00:31:25). "I'm sorry I ever met you," an ex-lover (Ben Daniels) tells Claire when she ruins his career and put his fiancé's family in danger to keep their past together a secret ("Chapter 22" 00:40:43-00:40:48).

Like Frank, Claire is nearly inhuman in her cunning; unlike Frank, the show makes periodic attempts at humanizing Claire. The most transparent of these plots is the season two reveal that she was raped. When she and Frank attend a military commissioning ceremony in the second episode of season two, Claire is visibly unsettled by the presence of one of the awardees, General Dalton McGinnis (Peter Bradbury). Frank finds Claire crying in the bathroom, and she reveals that McGinnis raped her when she and McGinnis were in college (a secret she has kept for nearly three decades ("Chapter 15")). Later in the episode, Claire tells Frank that McGinnis silenced her during the rape by stuffing a bed sheet in her mouth. Recalling her past self, she says, "Every time I think of her pinned down like that, I strangle her, Francis. So she doesn't strangle me. I have to. We have to" ("Chapter 15" 00:30:22-00:31:05). Claire has strangled herself into silence, secretly living as a helpless victim, unable to tell her story or confront McGinnis. Since the attack, the show suggests, Claire has killed her past self again and again, her trauma destroying her old persona and crafting a new, colder Claire.

In response to Frank's anger towards McGinnis on her behalf, she tells him, "You'll still feel the hate in the morning. You'll use it, but not on him" ("Chapter 15" 00:31:55-00:32:15). Claire has experienced this same hate, but has redirected it from McGinnis to others, explaining her chilly demeanor. Living with the rape

has filled her with a rage that she still carries. Many viewers framed the anger as having fueled Claire for her entire life following the rape, construing her trauma as eternally propelling her (Bishop; Stahler). As the episode “Chapter 15” demonstrates, however, Claire must hide this anger. One article consults a self-proclaimed expert on rape who implies that Claire’s emotionally subdued disposition in the episode is due to “the nature of trauma,” which “can mute the person’s emotions” (Goldstein). According to this logic, Claire’s trauma might even explain her overall muted demeanor since the beginning of the show.

Claire breaks away from the helpless victim trope, however, only two episodes later, when she takes control of McGinnis’ fate. During a live television interview (at which point Frank is the Vice President, making her the Second Lady), Claire reveals the rape. She retools the story, claiming a pregnancy as a result, which she claims to have terminated (“Chapter 17”). When Claire publicly names McGinnis, she sets in motion the destruction of his career, as well as the foundation for sexual assault reform legislation that she spearheads in the next episode. The series ultimately reveals that Claire pursues the legislation for the sake of Frank’s (and therefore, arguably her own) political career. Along the way, she meets Megan (Libby Woodbridge), a Marine who also steps forward to accuse McGinnis of rape (“Chapter 25”). When presented with the opportunity to abandon the bill for another project, though, Claire betrays her promise to support Megan by pushing the legislation, sending Megan into a depressive tailspin.

Claire is revealed to be vulnerable when we learn of McGinnis’ attack against her. But Claire knows that sharing that information in her live interview will garner sympathy from others; she knowingly exploits the helpless victim trope in the name of her own political gain. Other characters fall for Claire’s exploitation of the trope, as Frank gains political allies immediately after the interview. This, in addition to her discarding Megan—who represents her helpless past self, and with whom Claire ostensibly ‘should’ sympathize—suggests a deeper ruthlessness beyond a desire for retribution against McGinnis. Whether or not her ‘past self’ was ruthless, Claire is reinforced in these episodes as cruel to her core. Claire’s interview may have served to allow her a victim’s revenge, but she ultimately uses the disclosure for a mission unrelated to the rape, in the name of her desire for power.

Much like Mellie of *Scandal*, Claire uses the rape perpetrated against her for political leverage; unlike Mellie, the ruthlessness that is used to explain Claire’s leveraging of the rape is attributed to something in her personality separate from trauma. Claire’s response to the rape she experienced may not seem politically correct or ‘appropriate’ for a victim, but for that reason, she disrupts narrative tropes regarding sexual violence. With the discovery that she was raped, audiences are expected to react with sympathy, and to ignore Claire’s consistently cunning behavior by collapsing her into a helpless victim. Doing so comes back to bite the audience when Claire quickly returns to her cutthroat ways. Characters who bought

into Claire's one-dimensional victimhood are framed by the show as gullible and foolish, a reveal which reflects back on the audience members who made the same mistake. By twisting the trope, Claire's storyline demonstrates how sympathy functions as a barrier to understanding victims as complete people.

### The Problem of Victimhood

The one-dimensional portrait of victimhood presented by the helpless victim in the both of these storylines harkens back to that of the 'good victim'—the female who could not have possibly brought on an attack—as opposed to the sexually unapologetic or inadequately demure 'bad victim' (Corrigan 90). The helpless victim is another reiteration of the good victim. The stories of Mellie and Claire, and others like them, simply turn seemingly bad victims (that is, abrasive female characters) into good ones retroactively, facilitating audiences' sympathetic responses.

In twisting the trope of the helpless/good victim, Claire serves as a reminder of how it relies not only on sympathy, but also gender and race. Good female victims are not just appropriately blameless and helpless: they are also necessarily white. An intersectional lens reveals how the race of these women impacts how they are understood as victims, and how they are allowed to be perceived as victims by audiences. Intersectionality serves as a necessary analysis of, and attention to, the intersections of positionality factors (such as race, class, (dis)ability, nationality, and gender, among many others) in producing lived experience (Carbado 4; Carastathis 2).

A unique inevitability of sexual violence pervades the lives of women of color, making stories of sexual violence unexceptional in their lives in a way that they are not for white women (Projansky 6). "Rape culture targets all women," Janell Hobson explains, "but due to white supremacy, economic disparities and heterosexism, some women face the threat of violence more frequently." Hypersexualized depictions of women of color, which have projected the image of women of color as inherently sexually violable, "have functioned since the early 1400s" ("Black Women and Sexual Violence"). White women have the opportunity to be considered victims of sexual violence. As white women who are granted at least some integrity to be violated, Mellie and Claire are not coincidentally implicated in these humanizing plotlines—they are qualified for them.

Good female victims are also appropriately feminine, explaining why Mellie and Claire are both feminized so dramatically throughout these storylines (particularly compared to their usual depictions). Their femininity is ramped up to further contribute to their figures as victims (Stringer 153). These characters' equally flawed male counterparts are typically celebrated, rather than framed as requiring humanization (Paskin; Whitney). Even their "difficult" traits—to push

back and demand from others—are associated with masculinity. On these shows, to be made a victim is to be feminized, as rape culture links victimhood of sexual violence to femaleness and stereotypical weakness.

In a patriarchal society, the possession of, and desire for, power is associated with masculinity (Quinn 387). Mellie and Claire behave in ways that are stereotypically masculine enough to place them in competition with their powerful husbands. Mellie's hyperfeminine facade in the present is arguably a crafted cover for her more masculine character attributes. In the episodes in which Mellie and Claire are revealed to have been raped, though, they are feminized to the point of being meek, vulnerable, powerless, and even voided of an ambition for power.

Further, femininity is tied specifically to white womanness. Gender and race are inextricably intertwined in the valuation of feminine performance. proper feminine performance—perhaps even any demonstration of femaleness—has historically been attached to whiteness and deemed impossible for non-white female bodies. According to Patricia Hill Collins, “Black women, by definition, cannot achieve the idealized feminine ideal because the fact of Blackness excludes them” (199). Femininity is fundamentally not available for the female-bodied of color; that is what makes it femininity. Going back for centuries in the U.S., and persisting today, white women have been able to claim feminine purity and restraint on the backs of women of color (Calafell 114). White women are allotted the opportunity to be feminine.

It is no mistake that every single one of the media examples listed have used this trope—including *Orange is the New Black*, *Grey's Anatomy*, and *Sons of Anarchy*—deploys rape in to garner sympathy for a white female character. The person who can be attacked must fulfill this specific combination of race and gender. The white female figure teaches us who cannot be a good victim: not men, not masculine white women, and not women of color (even if they behave in a stereotypically feminine way), among many others. Through the lens of the patriarchy, men are too sexually dominant and strong, masculine women are too much like men, and women of color are too hypersexualized and indecent, to claim the status of victimhood (NOW). In white womanhood, itself the ideal form of womanhood, an individual is deemed pure and weak enough to be vulnerable to attack (Lugones 90).

The deployment of the helpless victim trope reinforces the gendered and raced dichotomy between the good and bad victim. However, Claire's storyline diverges where Mellie's adheres to the trope: Claire's “pure,” feminized, helpless past self allows viewers to understand her as deserving the claim to victimhood. At the same time, her cruelty even in the face of the opportunity to embrace her past self demonstrates that she may always (that is, before the attack) have been “difficult.” Claire's storyline places viewers in an uncomfortable space by implying that she was never really helpless, but still did not deserve to be attacked. This raises an

important question about the intersection of race and gender for the good victim: was Claire ever the quintessential “good” victim, or did her race and femininity, as they conspired to depict her as perpetually helpless, let audiences assume that she had to be?

Britto et al. remind us that audiences use what they see on television to socially construct their reality. Often, when viewers lack direct experience with an issue, they rely on media depictions to educate themselves on the issue (Britto et al. 39). They can encourage and reinforce rape myths among viewers and can even sway real life behaviors. Britto et al. provide an example from their study on how victims are depicted on the popular television series *Law & Order: SVU* (one of the most popular sources of information about sexual violence for the public). The authors report that *SVU* indulged the popular myth that a victim must have been physically injured if they were raped, by failing to portray rape in other contexts, such as spousal or acquaintance rape. “The lack of inclusion of rapes without severe injuries serves to negate their importance and may lead victims, offenders, jurors, and individuals working within the criminal justice system to similarly minimize rapes that do not involve injury” (Britto 51). “If they have little or no personal or sociological knowledge of sexual assault and abuse, this may entail referencing media images” that reinforce such myths (51). When individuals lack personal knowledge regarding sexual violence, they may refer to television depictions to guide their judgements around the issue, including those participating in the criminal justice system. Television depictions of sexual violence have real-world consequences.

The stories of Mellie and Claire demonstrate how sympathy can function as a barrier, rather than a catalyst, for appreciating the experience of sexual violence. Regardless of their differences, both depictions fail to show the variety of ways that victims can move on from an attack. For one, there is the insulting implication that female victims are likely to adopt abrasive personalities as a result of being attacked. These storylines also deny female victims the opportunity to be unlikable without their character flaws being attributed to a trauma. By encouraging viewers to conflate a figure who has been sexually assaulted with the crime perpetrated against them, the mechanism of the sympathetic response disallows women from having a personality—as conniving or malicious as it might be—separate from acts of sexual violence they experienced. When television shows use rape to make a female character more likable, they teach each of these lessons to the audience; and viewers may apply those lessons when judging real-life victims of sexual violence.

The use of this trope keeps rape culture in place, not only by excusing audiences from having to think about sexual violence as a structural problem, or one in which they might be complicit, but also by suggesting that there are good and bad victims. The trope also reinforces the myth that only feminine-presenting white women can be “real” victims. This excuses sexual violence against any other intersection of

identity and solidifies racialized and gendered stereotypes around sexual violence. It also delegitimizes experiences of rape in which the victim is not sufficiently “helpless.” Finally, viewers are left with the implication that rape is an appropriate “punishment” to make unlikable women more likable (no matter how indirect this correlation might seem through devices like flashbacks).

### Conclusion: Moving Beyond the “Good Victim”

The trope of the “good victim” should not be the sole female figure with the right to claim being attacked. Women deserve to be “difficult” without that quality having anything to do with an attack perpetrated against them. To be clear, bad victim does not just mean a person who is not a good victim—the non-white, non-feminine, non-helpless person—but particularly the worst victim. This could be the prostitute who is attacked when she is with a client, or the man who fears that his masculinity is compromised when he shares that he has been attacked by a woman. Because they are the farthest from the image of the “good victim” to which a patriarchal society is accustomed, they should be addressed as exemplary victims. The “bad victim” must be embraced in every sense and treated as a model for what it means to experience sexual violence. Instead of attempting to prove that all victims are “good victims,” the standard of the good victim must be eliminated altogether.<sup>6</sup>

The use of rape as a “plot device” to make viewers care about a character demonstrates exactly how problematic this cultural construction of sexual violence is. Rape is not an event that makes a person more interesting or complicated, and to treat it as such does a disservice to both television characters, and real people, who have experienced sexual violence. Victims of sexual violence require and deserve more than sympathy. They need to be understood as complex human beings who have indeed suffered a horrific crime against their person, but who are also multifaceted people with other experiences and unique personalities aside from traumas. Individuals are interesting outside of the violence they have experienced, and the same should be true of television characters.

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<sup>6</sup> This follows the recommendation of Sylvia Wynter, asking us to treat those farthest from power as exemplars for radical epistemologies (357).

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# Look at What You've Done: Exploring Narrative Displeasure in Video Games<sup>1</sup>

STEVEN PROUDFOOT

“Each time I saw them hurt, I shared their pain as if I was hurt myself. Even pains they pretended to feel I did feel. Hyper-empathy syndrome is a delusional disorder after all: there's no telepathy, no magic, no deep spiritual awareness.

There's just the neurochemically induced illusion that I feel the pain and pleasure that I see others experiencing.”

—Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Talents*

Anyone who has ever enjoyed a sad song when they were sad can understand that enjoying an experience does not always involve joy or any similarly positive emotions. Sometimes people want to be sad. This certainly isn't limited to music either. The existence of haunted houses, horror films, tragic plays, tear-jerker novels, and many other mediums and industries all rely on the idea that, sometimes, people want to experience negative emotions like fear and sadness.

Within that wide range of experiences that tend to induce negative emotions, a relatively unexplored type is the video games that often aim to make players feel (primarily) guilt or sadness with the diegetic implications of their gameplay actions. Even when these games force players to be complicit in questionable or even obviously morally bankrupt choices, they then present moments of slowed or halted gameplay that seem to accuse the player of wrongdoing in way that seems to say, "Look at what you've done!" Examples of this include *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012), and *SOMA* (2015). Each explore this same seemingly accusatory moment in different ways.

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<sup>1</sup> Contains heavy “spoilers” for *Spec Ops: The Line*, *SOMA*, and *Bioshock Infinite*.

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By building off of the caring and trusting aspects of BDSM power dynamics, I highlight a previously unconsidered submissive reading style in which negative emotions such as fear, guilt, and sadness can be enjoyed in a light and emotional sadomasochistic style without control by highlighting creator intent, fan reactions, and “Look at what you’ve done” narrative choices. In this essay, I discuss enjoying games that aim to make players experience such emotions and benefit from a sort of unspoken contract in which players submissively accept those emotions. Furthermore, this paper illustrates how these same games, by intentionally violating and subverting those unspoken expectations, ultimately highlight the presupposed presence of this submissive style of sadomasochistic narrative engagement.

### Enjoying Negativity

Before discussing each game and their particular ways of subjecting players to negative emotions, it is pertinent to discuss previous writings on enjoying negative emotions. In his 1985 article *Enjoying Negative Emotions in Fictions*, John Morreall offers that, not only in fictions but in real life, negative emotions are very much enjoyable as long as they are limited. He asserts that we need to be able to maintain control of the situation to enjoy it, otherwise an enjoyable fear may turn to an unenjoyable terror. Since we can control small amounts of negative emotions, we can “cultivate” small amounts of melancholy and enjoy focusing in on ourselves and what is important to us while sad (Morreall 100). We can even enjoy the embodied feeling of crying. Morreall mentions that we can enjoy small amounts of physical pain in real life, such as touching a small cut for the mild pain it produces. However, he draws a line at control, the line where the pain is great enough that we lose control of our body and we cannot stop it. He asserts that the fear we can run from can be enjoyable while the terror that makes us freeze and unable to move cannot be enjoyed. Since real emotions and sensations can get dangerously out of control, fictional worlds are a safe space to experience these emotions without consequence. Here, we can fear a killer or monster knowing that we are ultimately safe. Supposedly, even if we do feel out of control, we can just put down the book or look away.

By focusing on control as what allows pleasure, Morreall does not account for more than one type of viewer. Deriving pleasure from fictions that evoke emotions like sadness, fear, and guilt can depend on the feeling of control for many; however, alternative reading styles do not rely on control. For instance, pleasure can be

experienced in a trusting submissive style. Morreall comes close to acknowledging this when he mentions that one reason emotions do not become too strong to enjoy is that we know an author or other artist created this experience to be appreciated in some way. However, he still overemphasizes the importance of control: “Part of the artist’s job is to present that situation in such a way that we can stay in control while feeling negative emotions” (Morreall 101). Yet, one way of enjoying fear or sadness is not to trust that we will be able to feel we are in control but rather simply to trust that the situation will be overall enjoyable, even if any given sensation is not. Submitting, simply giving up control and passively trusting whoever is in control, can be enjoyable too.

To illustrate my point, it is helpful to think of another real-life example. If I am on a plane with turbulence, I am not in control of that situation in any way. I have no possible way to influence the flight. However, while I may feel some fear, I do not feel terrified despite not being in control. This is because I trust the pilot to perform his job of flying while I enjoy the ride. This is not to say that everyone on a plane would feel this way, but certainly some passengers would feel terrified. My point is this: while Morreall’s assertions highlight one popular way of enjoying what we might term “negative” emotions, another more submissive way of enjoying these emotions is also possible. Pleasure can be found in submitting control as much as it can be found in having control.

This submissive trust may even be as simple as trusting the person in control will ensure that we will ultimately be okay. If that trust is present, it is okay to take pleasure in not needing to be in control and simply being at the mercy of whatever intense emotions are presented. To better explore this idea, I draw a parallel between this more submissive enjoyment to the dynamics of BDSM (Bondage, Dominance, Sadism and Masochism) play and sadomasochistic dynamics more generally.

I do acknowledge that BDSM is often sexual, but it is important to note that neither sadomasochism nor BDSM play are inherently sexual. While the term BDSM may bring to mind sex-centric representations from popular media such as *Fifty Shades of Gray* (2015) or Rihanna’s *S&M* (2011), BDSM play is actually commonly used without involving sex. In *Ace of (BDSM) Clubs*, Lorca Sloan emphasizes “BDSM as practices that produce relationships by foregrounding, manipulating, and enacting scripts that delineate consent and power” (551). Sloan then proceeds to present the stories of many asexual (ace) identifying individuals who engage in BDSM practices as a healthy way to set boundaries and encourage

emotional bonding instead of engaging with it as a sexual kink. Since the safe execution of these practices involve so much trust, vulnerability, and accountability both on the part of the dominant partner (dom) and the submissive partner (sub), this necessarily becomes a space in which either participant can veto whatever they want before the experience begins (Sloan 554). With ace individuals, this typically entails establishing that no genital contact will be involved. Instead of enjoying the sexual sensations that BDSM is so strongly associated with, it is instead used to foster connections, trust, or the commonly reported closeness between participants after a scene (Jozifkova 5).

Even distanced from sex, it is critical to establish other norms of these dynamics. Even though inflicting pain can be seen as rough and careless, these roles (especially the dom) are often characterized by being caring or even nurturing. Some even strongly prefer to avoid the word pain as many may describe sensations as “strongly stimulating” instead of painful (Jozifkova 1). Inflicting pain or stimulation involves “warm up” in which lighter stimulation is presented before the harder and more intense hits so the more intense sensations aren't so rough and jarring (Alexander 126). BDSM play often involves a period of “aftercare” in which more tender and painless soothing behaviors take place to relax after the stronger stimulation (Alexander 126; Sloan 551). Additionally, these engagements involve a pre-established “safe word” that the sub can use to immediately stop the experience if needed. In a traditional BDSM dynamic, this small level of control is never given up. It is these traditions of safe and caring practice that make BDSM a space in which both participants can positively experience very strong emotions and sensations that are typically considered negative.

While it is these caring and boundary-setting practices that I want to draw attention to, I also want to emphasize that sadomasochistic dynamics do not have to involve actual BDSM practices. Lynn Chancer articulated the idea that sadomasochism is not restricted to the bedroom in her book *Sadomasochism in Everyday Life*. As her title echoes, she points out that sadomasochism can actually occur in the form of “a very particular but common social relationship based on power and powerlessness, domination and submission” (Chancer 3).<sup>2</sup> A sadomasochistic dynamic can be present without the formality or safety-net-like

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<sup>2</sup> While I believe the sadomasochistic dynamic as a type of dynamic involving dominant and submissive roles is incredibly useful, I do not believe that almost any power dynamic is sadomasochistic as she does. I use Chancer's idea of the sadomasochistic dynamic with a much smaller scope.

functions of BDSM. Utilizing these aspects of BDSM and sadomasochistic dynamics, I propose the aforementioned “submissive reading style” in which some readers may enjoy negative emotions linked to giving up control in a light and emotional sadomasochistic engagement style that mirrors some BDSM practices.

In the context of fiction, it is these boundary-setting, trust-intensive dynamics that are echoed between a reader (submissive role) and a writer of fiction (dominant role) who chooses to kill a character and presumably make the reader sad. Often that sadness we feel after a character dies will be justified or soothed by something akin to aftercare. For example, a death often accomplishes something narratively or may have been a sacrifice to let their friends live, etc. In a submissive reading style, an unspoken contract exists between the author and the reader very close to what Morreall proposed. However, instead of the contract involving a feeling of control over the experience, the contract highlights how the negative emotions will not be unenjoyable or too rough without warm-up sensations. At the least, it is assumed some form of aftercare will occur. Another assumption involves the ability to put down the book or stop engaging as a sort of “safe-word.” Boundaries can be found in the fact that, even if half of an entire cast of beloved characters is killed off, typically some form of warm-up of smaller negative sensations occurs before that more intense negative sensation, and subsequent narrative aftercare, such as a death accomplishing some purpose like saving others’ lives or instigating needed change.

While I believe it useful and productive to highlight the parallels of how aftercare, safe-words, and warm-up work in BDSM contexts and the analogous aspects of fiction I have highlighted here, I also want to emphasize that these are rough analogies and not meant as exact or literal comparisons. However, they nevertheless highlight and help create an understanding of a submissive reading style in which readers, viewers, or players allow an author to subject them to a series of negative emotional sensations. These parallels to warm-up hits, aftercare, and safe words provide consumers of such experiences a safety net that allows them to disengage if and when needed. This type of submissive sadomasochistic enjoyment can help explain why and how tragedies and other negative fictions are so commonly enjoyed.

The idea of a narrative contract that negotiates engagement with negative emotions is not necessarily unfounded. Ewan Kirkland notes that this idea is especially prevalent regarding survival horror video games in his essay “Storytelling in Survival Horror Videogames”:

Survival horror play entails a narrative contract between player and game-text. In exchange for channeling their interactive energies along the defined route, the game promises the player this pathway will produce an experience which is thrilling, exhilarating and terrifying in varying pleasurable and unpleasurable measures. (76)

While this is very close to the sadomasochistic narrative contract I explore, one notable caveat is that the dynamic I propose is not limited to survival horror games nor does it necessarily have to involve anything that seems pleasurable. However, the most interesting aspect of this unspoken contract is when the traditional boundaries and trust involved in this dynamic are violated by stories or games like those this essay will focus on. Exploring how these norms are subverted in turn helps illustrate the expectations that were broken.

### In Games<sup>3</sup>

Due to the dimension of interactivity and play involved in games that is not seen in other fictions, it is important to specify what sort of negative experiences I am focusing on. An obvious type of negative experience in games is gameplay failure. In his book *The Art of Failure*, Jesper Juul writes extensively on how and why we may enjoy failure in playing games. The emotions and experiences that are derived from failing in gameplay (i.e., being frustrated after the player-character is repeatedly killed) are not what I will be discussing here and are a different dimension of gameplay experience. Instead, I will be focusing on narrative choices that tend to invoke negative emotions from players due to scripted diegetic implications of the player's actions on the narrative world. While failing in gameplay is frustrating, it is often non-diegetic as the player can try again without impacting the game's story by doing so. However, when a character messes up within the narrative and the consequence happens permanently, this consequence

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<sup>3</sup> Notably, any discussion of narrative is complicated when video games are brought into focus. In an attempt to acknowledge the debate around narrative within video games without delving into it here, I'd like to clarify that my purpose here isn't to contribute to the discussion of if games are inherently narrative; rather, I only intend to highlight how a specific subset of narrative elements are utilized in certain games.

may invoke another set of negative emotions for totally different reasons than non-permanent gameplay failure would.

This, which I would call narrative consequence, is part of what Juul calls “fictional failure.” He defines fictional failure as a type of failure that “befalls the character(s) in the fictional game world” (25). However, he presents total fictional failure as a sort of oddity that players need to be deceived into participating in. This is due to the idea that the interactive experience of playing a game is more personal. In other words, since the player controls the player-character, they are performing the actions the player-character performs. The player-character’s actions are then the player’s actions and choices. Since the player is responsible for those actions, the diegetic consequences for the player-character’s actions are the player’s fault even if the player is forced to make those choices. Juul notes that this makes tragic game endings, where the player is responsible for suffering, awkward and would make a game that plays like the story of *Anna Karenina* in which “the protagonist undergoes many painful experiences, through concrete effort managing to make the protagonist commit suicide and knowing all along that this is the goal of the game” something that players wouldn’t want.

However, this account of “fictional failure” fails to consider differing player engagement styles in two ways. First, while Juul is right that there is no commercially successful *Anna Karenina*-type game that informs the player of the painful experiences and suicide up front, games like *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012) exist that use deception to push the player to commit atrocities and eventually kill the player-character after the deception is revealed. While that conceit is not included on any promotional materials for the game, many players who pick up the controller may already know the plot of the game and see through the deception from the start. For these players who have had the ending “spoiled” for them, this game is an *Anna Karenina* experience, yet they still actively choose to engage with the game to experience it.<sup>4</sup> Second, a player engagement style like the emotional sadomasochistic engagement I established earlier destabilizes this account of fictional failure. If a player can enjoy experiencing intense negative emotions like guilt and sadness, “fictional failure” is less of a deterrent and instead becomes a draw.

However, Juul’s account of fictional failure is useful because it not only specifies a sort of failure in which the player’s actions have diegetic consequences,

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<sup>4</sup> This is how I played the game, knowing I would be made to feel I was the monster in the end and have to kill myself. Yet, I enjoyed this game and especially the controversial ending.

but also because of its emphasis on the role of complicity. While I maintain that it is not a deterrent for an *Anna Karenina*-type game, complicity does indeed make the player feel bad for their actions with a combination of guilt and sadness in a way that mediums other than games cannot. It is this complicity, which is typically strengthened by the deception that is experienced by players who play without knowing anything about the game beforehand, that gives games like *Spec Ops: The Line* their emotional strength. In these moments when the deception is dropped and the game emphasizes the player's complicity and responsibility for the diegetic consequences of their actions that I call the "Look at what you've done!" moment. Even if the deception isn't effective, complicity is a necessary part of these moments. While this moment is often unsettling and an undeniably negative experience, it can still somehow be enjoyable and has earned several games a fair level of praise and fame.

### "Look at What You've Done!" Games

To better establish the "Look at what you've done!" moment (hereafter abbreviated as LWYD), it is necessary to look at instances of it. The LWYD games I will highlight here are *Spec Ops: The Line*, and *SOMA*.

*Spec Ops: The Line*. The first of my list, *Spec Ops: The Line*, uses LWYD moments to subvert the norms of First Person Shooter (FPS) games to communicate a moral message to its players. *Spec Ops: The Line* is a 2012 FPS game developed by Yager Development and published by 2k Games. The player, who leads a three-man team called Delta Force as Captain John Walker, is tasked with confirming the presence of survivors in a partially evacuated and ruined Dubai that is plagued by the worst sandstorms it has ever seen. Things quickly go downhill as Delta Force is attacked by the American 33<sup>rd</sup> battalion and have to fight their way through Dubai. The game almost immediately begins questioning the player's actions as Captain Walker's teammates Lugo and Adams voice their concerns with killing fellow American soldiers and eventually with killing civilians. However, when Delta Force finds the executed team of the commander of the 33<sup>rd</sup> battalion, it becomes clear that Commander Konrad and the 33<sup>rd</sup> have gone rogue and taken over Dubai. As the game progresses, the player is presented with progressively worse moral choices, including being forced to massacre not only enemy soldiers but also a group of 47 innocent civilians with the illegal chemical weapon white phosphorus and eventually destroying Dubai's water supply.

As Captain Walker, and the player by extension, commits a list of atrocities and war crimes, Walker becomes more easily agitated and on edge. Meanwhile, the player is presented with lines such as “this is your fault” in the loading screens. At the end, after Lugo is hanged by civilians and Adams dies in a last stand against the 33rd, Captain Walker reaches and confronts Konrad only to realize that Konrad has been dead the whole time. Through a series of flashbacks, the player is shown that a number of the previous scenes were overlaid with hallucinations that Walker created to help deal with the trauma of the horror he was facing and committing. It emphasizes that everything Captain Walker has done was actually his own fault and consequently the player’s fault. The game ends with “Konrad,” who turns out to be Walker’s reflection in a window, telling Walker to kill himself. Walker can shoot his own reflection and either continue to live in Dubai or go back to America, or he can shoot himself in the head.

In gaming communities, many players regard this game as excellent because of its narrative choices and subversion of FPS tropes. This game and its subversive plot have inspired many fan-created video essays and reviews on YouTube. Popular video game commentary video essay series and review videos such as *Zero Punctuation*, *Extra Credits*, *Errant Signal*, and more have created content about this game. These video essays have all made the point that *Spec Ops: The Line* has average or passable gameplay mechanics, one even going as far as calling it “unfun” to play.<sup>5</sup> Instead, they emphasize that the game is aware of the FPS norms that it uses and that it then points out what is wrong with those norms.

As FPS norms are so commonly brought up in the fan analysis and reactions to this game, it is important to understand what those norms are. In an essay titled “In Search of More Than Just ‘A few lines of snappy, expository dialog’” Zachary Holtzman and Christopher Varlack trace the shift of the narrative style of one of the most iconic and representative FPS game franchises, *Call of Duty*. Holtzman describes the early games of the franchise as games that tried to portray war in a relatively historically accurate manner that players could use to experience what World War II was like via simulation (80). However, in an attempt to set itself apart from other FPS war games of the time, *Call of Duty* began to focus on its mechanics and prioritized the feeling of the controls and playing the game over portraying

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<sup>5</sup> Spec Ops: The Line - II: What Does It Mean to be a Hero? - Extra Credits, <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=cJZlhcCA2lk>.

well-developed characters and historically accurate battles. With the fifth game in the series, *Call of Duty: World at War* (2008), a “one-man-army” mentality becomes more prevalent as the game rewards for the prestige that came from killing enemies alone rather than focusing on achievement as a result of teamwork (Holtzman 85, 89). A dehumanization of enemies into targets to shoot and gain points from was brought into center stage. This shift towards a dehumanizing killcount as objective is epitomized by the “Nazi Zombies” game mode in which the enemies are literally not human in addition to being Nazis, making them a faceless horde of inhuman evil targets to mow down without remorse. Over time, presenting the player with foreign and dehumanized enemy hordes to fight through became the norm for FPS games in general.

When fans praise *Spec Ops: The Line* for subverting norms, it is this tendency of dehumanizing the enemy and presenting the player as a hero who earns prestige via killcount that it refers to. A comment by YouTube user “Stralock Jenkins” seems to best capture the reaction of a player who this subversion has worked on,

For me, the most powerful line was when Conrad said "You did have a choice! You could have stopped!" All through the game, I felt terrible for killing all those people, but justified it as "Well, I can't beat this any other way. The game is forcing me to kill people." But when he said that, I realized that the thought of not playing a game where I butcher civilians never even crossed my mind. (Stralock)<sup>6</sup>

Based on an interview with the lead writer for the game, Walt Williams, this fan reaction seems very much in line with authorial intent.

Video games have for so long been like, “Look, war is when you go in and kill people who deserve to die, because they are destroying the things that you love—and have fun.” [...] We wanted them to think about why is it that I sit down and play a war game for fun. (“Official 2K UK”)

To make players question the normative behavior of why they will kill for fun, the game attempts to make the player feel bad for the actions of their gameplay using

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<sup>6</sup> This comment is on the video “Spec Ops: The Line - II: What Does It Mean to be a Hero? - Extra Credits” by YouTube channel Extra Credits.

a huge number of what I call the “Look at what you’ve done!” (LWYD) moments. Throughout the game, characters constantly question what the player is doing as they play, and the game culminates in the climatic suicidal encounter with Konrad.

Other than the ending chapter, the most iconic LWYD moment is after the player is forced to use the white phosphorus bombs to progress. The player uses a screen to target enemies to kill with the white phosphorus in a way reminiscent of *Call of Duty*’s iconic airstrike missions. That screen reduces human enemies to white blobs to be targeted and wiped out. After, the player is forced to walk slower than normal through the ruins of the area they just massacred (with the running mechanic disabled) as soldiers either lay dead or screaming as they die around them. Finally, the player is presented with the group of 47 dead and mummified civilians that they had mistaken for enemy soldiers. Lugo and Adams are openly outraged and blame the player-character for not stopping. The game seems to say to the player, not only the character they are controlling, “look at what you’re doing and what suffering you are causing by simply doing as you ‘have to.’” Clearly, this is supposed make players feel sad and guilty, especially as the end so pointedly emphasizes that the player could have simply stopped at any point.

*Spec Ops: The Line* is useful for understanding the role complicity plays in effective LWYD moments. Other games make similar narrative choices but do not actually have the player perform the actions they have to face the narrative consequences for. This point is best made by highlighting the main difference between the endings of *Spec Ops: The Line* and *Bioshock Infinite* (2013). The end of *Bioshock Infinite* presents the player with a very similar, but crucially different, conflict. The player character, Booker, is revealed to be an alternate-reality version of the main antagonist that is responsible for the horrible things that Booker had been fighting against, and in the end Booker is encouraged to commit suicide because of the diegetic implications of that fact. However, *Bioshock Infinite* accuses Booker of atrocious actions that the player-character has committed off-screen in the past of the narrative world, not for actions that the player has committed as they play. In other words, *Bioshock Infinite* does not make the player complicit in the atrocities that it accuses them of. The LWYD moments that I propose involve complicity that is derived from playing.

Additionally, the narrative choices that *Spec Ops: The Line* makes seem to imply an ideal player will abide by a sadomasochistic narrative contract. The player is seldom in actual control as the choices the game presents the player with do not actually impact how things play out. The only real choice the player can make that

will allow any control over the horrible events of the story is if they decide to stop playing. This is especially relevant when looking at the extremely limited level of control involved in the pivotal LWYD moments like the aforementioned white phosphorus scene. If the player is not willing to abide by the terms of the unspoken sadomasochistic contract and play submissively, the player may be more likely to not have an enjoyable experience. Sometimes a player may realize they have no choice in how the scene plays out and get frustrated by the lack of control. This is clear when looking at negative reviews and players complaining about these moments on forums. The following excerpt from the complaints of Giant Bomb forum user “Beaudacious” about the white phosphorus scene illustrate this:

The first thought that pops into my head is they're all prisoners, but I can't exit the control center until the tank is blown up. So I blow up the tank by aiming at the edge of the bridge on its front. [...] Then I go through the cut-scene and see all the refugees I killed. This orchestrated scene is suppose [sic] to impact me emotionally?

An article discussing the same moment on the website *PCGamer* echoes these ideas:

I tried not to hit them, but I was always going to. [...] the fact remains that I didn't kill those civilians—Yager forced that outcome. While the aftermath still makes me uncomfortable, the fact that I was aiming around the civilians absolves me of guilt as a player—and I'm not sure that was the intent. (Roberts)

In both cases, neither of these players were willing to play submissively and accept the experience as presented. As shown by negative reviews complaining about a lack of control and positive reviews praising the message the scene intended to send, the white phosphorus moment has an ideal player who is willing to submissively accept the negative emotions that the creators were trying to invoke. Accepting when the creators decide to dominate how the events play out seems to allow players to have a positive experience with the consequential negative emotions like guilt. This is not dissimilar to the way that the dynamics and expectations in a BDSM context, like a sub trusting the dom, can allow someone to experience intense emotions in a positive way. Naturally, if someone is not okay

with working within that comforting framework, they may be more likely to have a bad time.

Even when a player takes on a submissive role, is the player commands a safe-word-esque type control in the ability to pause the game or take a break, but such control is only temporary and does not impact the narrative world. While some aspects of this may be unintentional, *Spec Ops: The Line* also breaks the terms of a sadomasochistic narrative contract in a way that may make the moral message of the game more memorable. The intent to make the player think about the game and the negative emotions even when they put down the game violates the built in safe-word function of pausing or putting down the game. In this game, stopping playing is not a way to escape or control some of the emotions the writers intended to evoke. In another breach of the narrative contract, even though “good practice” with sadomasochism involves warm up and aftercare, most of the game consists of emotional warm up but then offers no metaphorical aftercare for the final emotional hit. Given, this is a largely an unspoken convention, but it may still be expected that there would something to help the player down from the intense emotion that it intends to subject them to. By going against this convention, it instead leaves the player to think about what they have done and the game more generally. This may explain the amount of fan discussion about the game, in which players talk about what they have done and why they did it serving as a sort of supplemental emotional aftercare.

Notably, it is these moments which intentionally that break these expectations that seem to stand out the most. The moments that intend to break the safe word function by making players think about the game even after they put down the controller and the moments that have nothing akin to aftercare are the most discussed moments of the game. Their subversion of that unspoken contract makes them stand out, and I contend that if these expectations didn’t first exist on some level then this game would not stand out like it does.

*SOMA*. While FPS norms were the primary reason for *Spec Ops: The Line* to use LWYD moments, this narrative choice also exists outside of the influence of those norms. In *SOMA* (2015), a survival horror game developed and published by Frictional Games, the player is Simon, a twenty-something male who was recently in a car crash that necessitates an experimental brain scan. When Simon closes his eyes for the brain scan, he wakes up in a mysteriously empty and foreboding environment devoid of other humans but full of broken machines overflowing with structure gel (an oily black substance). It is revealed that this is PATHOS-II, an

underwater research center scattered across a portion of the floor of the Atlantic Ocean nearly 100 years after the day of Simon's brain scan. Simon's brain scan was used as a prototype for artificial intelligence and a method of scanning human consciousness into a digitized copy of its human counterpart. While it is unclear that Simon is robotic when the player first awakens, it turns out that, as a default that comes with this AI software, a copy of Simon's consciousness was loaded into a diving suit in the ruins of PATHOS-II long after the world faced an extinction level disaster from the impact of an asteroid. With the help of Catherine, the digitized consciousness of one of the crew members of PATHOS-II, Simon sets out to find the ARK, which is essentially a massive hard drive that the human-version of Catherine had used to place the crew's digitized consciousnesses into a simulated Edenic world for the last remnants of humanity to live on in after they die.

Simon and Catherine aim to launch the ARK into space to ensure its safety. However, as they search for it and bring it to the launch zone, the WAU (the main antagonist) and its mutated and seemingly conscious machines get in your way. The WAU was a life-support and security system installed in PATHOS-II that has gone horribly awry. It was intended to keep humanity alive but turned out to have a flawed understanding of what it meant to be alive. That led it to sustain life in any crew member near death by incorporating machine elements and structure gel into their bodies to keep them alive even though this state of being caused pain and suffering. Additionally, it also created digital copies of the crew and uploaded them into various machines around PATHOS-II, which led to the corrupted machines that seem to be at least somewhat conscious, roaming the halls of and exteriors of PATHOS-II.

According to its website, *SOMA* is "an unsettling story about identity, consciousness, and what it means to be human" (SOMAGame "Info"). In a way similar to *Spec Ops: The Line*, it uses LWYD moments to prompt the player to think about the moral questions behind the gameplay and story presented. However, the way it delivers them is a bit different. Instead of being told that your actions are bad, the player is left to decide for themselves and is even often left with open-ended lose-lose choices that are so morally unclear that they have instigated many fan discussions.

While the three most prominent instances of LWYD are all clearly presented and remarked upon by both Simon and Catherine, a majority of the moments that the player is intended to question are a part of what Henry Jenkins calls the "embedded narrative" (126). As Ewan Kirkland notes, in the context of survival

horror games, this tends to involve not only the “narrative texts scattered throughout the game environment,” but also the sort of video game *mise-en-scène* of the broad composition of the survival horror game space that include visual and audio elements of implied storytelling (70). Almost immediately after Simon wakes up in PATHOS-II, he finds robots who think they’re human embedded in abject growths on the walls. Their presence is a completely skippable element of the game space. Even when the game does force players to interact with them, it’s often not commented on. Early on, to provide power to a door, Simon needs to pass through to progress, the player is forced to unplug one of these seemingly conscious robots and watch it scream as it loses power and fades into death. While the game doesn’t explicitly say it, this moment can easily be read as pointing to the narrative consequences of the player’s actions.

According to an interview with Aaron Clifford, an artist involved in the creation of *SOMA*’s environment, this sort of “horror” derived from player interaction with this environment seems to have been the intent:

We’ve tried to concentrate on making the horror more psychological and deep rooted, stuff that will stick with you when you put down the controller. So we’re not concentrating so much on “boo-scares” and stuff like that, but it’s more stuff that will, yeah you know, make you ask questions like the morality of your actions in the game and stuff. (“John Wolfe”)

While not as extensive as more infamous examples such as *Dark Souls* (2011), the game also offers the sort of embedded narrative that allows players to find and read/listen to journals to learn more about what has happened to the world and the crew so that the suffering that occurred has more meaning. This sort of embedded and optional narrative information in games has been the core of several “lore hunting” fan communities, such as the *Dark Souls* community, who have come together to present their found evidence and speculate on the “complete” narrative they suggest (Ball). Notably, even though the *SOMA* lore almost exclusively presents intentionally sad information, a community of fans have come together to “lore hunt” and create videos explaining hours of embedded content.<sup>7</sup> This could be seen as a way to counteract the “maze-like linearity” that is typical of survival horror stories (Kirkland 74) by offering players agency in the chance to explore and

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<sup>7</sup> One YouTube channel alone has a five part several-hour-long explanation of the “lore” of *SOMA*. <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=SItdkukIAU>.

even fill in gaps in the story rather than simply following the prescribed path. Without considering the idea of a sadomasochistic engagement though, this agency would not explain why players willingly subject themselves to more of a story that intends to make players melancholy at best.

The most prominent example of LWYD in *SOMA* is when Simon encounters the WAU. Near the end, Simon is in possession of corrupted structure gel that the player has the option to use to kill the WAU. This is the most discussed choice in the game, and fans argue both sides of this unpleasant situation. Reddit user "1-1is0" summarizes the pro-WAU side of this argument while pointing out that both outcomes are negative:

the meaning of the ending changes greatly because by killing WAU you have guaranteed that humanity will die and have also killed all the people WAU was keeping alive in a dreamlike state, and also killed all the backups WAU had stored. So in short by not killing WAU you are not a genocidal mass murderer, just a serial murderer. (1-1is0)

On the same discussion, Reddit user "gamefacevids" explains the anti-WAU side of this argument, "Killing the WAU will allow real life to evolve, once again, on the Earth. If you don't kill the WAU it will infect everything, forever". It is apparent that no matter which side players take to justify whatever actions they take, they tend to create and discuss justifications that conflict with the other side. Either way, the game intends to make you think about the diegetic implications of your choice to kill or spare the WAU. Either way, it urges you to look at what you've done and what you're about to do.

As discussed earlier in this essay, a similar sort of unspoken contract has been previously mentioned by theorists in reference to horror games. To reiterate what theorist Ewan Kirkland wrote, horror games often involve an unspoken contract in which, "In exchange for channeling their interactive energies along the defined route, the game promises the player this pathway will produce an experience ..." (76). Naturally, a player's enjoyment may be tied to whether they are willing to accept the terms of that contract.

However, realizing that in-game choices do not impact the way the plot unfolds is a popular may leave players feeling they had no power over the game. This is similar to the trend of *Spec Ops: The Line*'s negative reviews

in which players realize that no matter what they do, the negative events still happen. Looking at *SOMA* reviews, it becomes clear that players who are not willing to be submissive to what the creators have dictated are the ones that report having not enjoyed those moments. A representative example can be seen from Reddit user Kairah, who despite reporting otherwise enjoying *SOMA*, said, “Why even give us choices if they don't mean anything? I don't need completely plot-altering changes to be satisfied here, just something.” Players who are not willing to play submissively and accept the creator's choices tend to report not enjoying it. However, the surplus of positive reviews seems to indicate that many players were able to take advantage of a submissive playing style to enjoy the game.

Ultimately, *SOMA* shows these morally accusatory LWYD moments can be used to inspire fan discussion, lore-hunting, and continued engagement after playing the game. As artist Aaron Clifford stated, this was the intent of making narrative choices like this, to make situations “that will stick with you when you put down the controller” (“John Wolfe”).

## Conclusion

Even when abiding by a sadomasochistic narrative contract, all these games on some level benefit from going against the normative assumptions of the player. By using the complicity of play to make players look at what they are doing, the games can create the experiences that gave them their reputations. This type of experience fully intends to evoke emotions typically considered negative like guilt, sadness, or even fear. Whether a player can enjoy these experiences largely hinges on how they play and if they feel in control. For many, these experiences may be unenjoyable as the game takes away control and makes them play the role of the irredeemably bad and morally wrong. Some may enjoy this by simply trusting the creators of the experience and going along for the ride even when it seems negative by engaging in a sadomasochistic play style. However, even the expectations of the players within that sadomasochistic narrative contract are often betrayed as games attempt to make the player feel these emotions even after they pause or put down the game entirely. These games which betray the rules of even the sadomasochistic engagement stand out because they aim to make a player reconsider what they know about what they're doing.

Turning to an unlikely source may provide some insight into why these games are so beloved despite subjecting players to these experiences. In a 1971 article titled "That's Interesting," sociologist Murray Davis asserts that academic articles are deemed interesting and receive public attention when their theories "deny certain assumptions of their audience" (309). While games and academic articles are vastly different, this sort of perspective may be helpful. The games discussed here all go against and deny certain assumptions of their audience and end up provoking thought much more than a game that does not. This pattern goes beyond simply being interesting, but instead conceptually highlights how LWYD moments go against unspoken assumptions of gameplay and stand out for it. Even if the experience hurts the player emotionally, these games teach the player a lesson about war games, what it means to be human, or simply a fresh take on the morality of just doing what you're told to do.

In conclusion, looking at fan reactions, creator commentary, and narrative choices that use player complicity to create a "look at what you've done" moment to illicit negative emotions in an enjoyable way can help further an understanding of the variety of ways that players engage with the diegetic implications of play. While play styles that involve the player feeling in control or simply completely disregarding any story are well established, considering a previously unexplored light and emotional sadomasochistic play style without control can provide insight into the design and fan reception of games like *SOMA*, and *Spec Ops: The Line*.

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## Game and Filmography

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# “An Unadulterated Cultural Expressway for the Arts”: Exploring the Theoretical Possibilities of *byNWR.com*

CHRISTOPHER J. OLSON

Every film, regardless of its perceived merit, is worth being restored, saved, archived in the best fashion possible. Film is an innovation of the 20th century and, as such, a lot of our history over the last 100 years is captured on film. And the second even a little bit of it rots away, we are poorer for it.  
—Ben Solovey, “Restoring the Hands of Fate”

Starting in 2012, Danish director Nicolas Winding Refn set out to restore and preserve low-budget exploitation films produced at the margins or outside the confines of the Hollywood system (Rife). Since then, Refn—director of such cult films as *Pusher* (1996), *Drive* (2010), and *The Neon Demon* (2016)—has amassed a vast library of vintage film prints that includes previously lost or half-forgotten grindhouse flicks like *Night Tide* (1961, Curtis Harrington), *The Nest of the Cuckoo Birds* (1965, Bert Williams), and *Cottonpickin’ Chickenpickers* (1967, Larry E. Jackson). Refn wanted to preserve these films and make them available to the public. Thus, in 2017, he teamed with *Mubi.com* and the Harvard Film Archive to launch *byNWR.com*, a free streaming service designed to not only screen digital copies of the director’s large collection of vintage exploitation movies, but also serve as an exhaustive archive of both the films and the outsider subcultures surrounding each one. In Refn’s own words, rather than a straightforward streaming service like Netflix or Hulu, *byNWR* is intended as an “unadulterated cultural expressway for the arts” that exists primarily to “inspire the youth” (Bradshaw).

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In addition to restoring, preserving, and screening a curated selection (chosen by guest editors including best-selling author Bob Mehr, critic and programmer Kier La-Janisse, and the staff of the London-based film magazine *Little White Lies*) of Z-grade films rejected by Hollywood, byNWR also contains a variety of supplemental materials, including archival photographs, original artwork, and numerous longform essays about the people involved in making the films and the cultures that defined them and were in turn influenced by them. As film critic Keith Phipps observes, “the site’s editors clearly want visitors to get lost not just in the movies, but in the stories of the men and women who created them, the times and places that shaped them, and the worlds suggested by them.” ByNWR takes a deep dive into the cultures (or, perhaps more appropriately, subcultures) that revolve around the films chosen for inclusion to provide insight into their production, reception, and cultural legacies. In other words, as Phipps explains, byNWR seeks to resurrect and replicate such dead or dying subcultural institutions as “the obsessively focused zine, the Web 1.0-era online magazine, and the video-store clerk willing to recommend something truly unusual to jaded viewers who think they’ve seen it all.”

The site’s mission proves increasingly vital during the early years of the 21st century, especially given the current popular discourse regarding film preservation (or the lack thereof) in the digital age. For instance, in her *Vanity Fair* article, “The Film Snob’s Dilemma,” Elizabeth Donnelly argues that while the Internet has increased access to numerous films produced since the dawn of the cinematic medium, streaming platforms and their search algorithms nevertheless tend to focus on newer popular films rather than classic movies or smaller efforts made at the edges or beyond the boundaries of mainstream Hollywood. She observes that “bad, computer-led curation also means that tiny films by first-timers and others can easily disappear into the ether.” In addition, the current focus by streaming services on producing original in-house content leaves little room for archival efforts. According to Donnelly,

The stars of the current streaming ecosystem—Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Hulu—can also stymie film enthusiasts. Netflix, for example, seems to be too busy these days expanding its own in-house offerings [...] to provide much in the way of archival material; it’s expected to spend \$15 billion on original content in 2019 alone, even as it says farewell to some of its most-watched licensed content.

Donnelly’s argument echoes the fears of film critics such as Matt Zoller Seitz, who declared on Twitter that “one of the greatest tricks that streaming technology ever pulled was convincing the public that ‘everything’ would be available, and that physical media wouldn’t be necessary anymore.” Other users share Seitz’s concerns, noting that “the unspoken part of ‘once you put something on the internet, it’s there forever’ is that is only really certain if someone thinks they can make money off it. Everything else could get switched off at any time. Preservation is of zero interest to these people” (@NoChorus). It appears that at least some film fans worry that the appearance of more proprietary streaming means users may lose access to older films as studios place greater emphasis on the latest big-budget blockbusters or original series.

byNWR therefore stands as an important digital media object because it aims to preserve little-known exploitation flicks produced beyond Hollywood’s borders as well as highlight the subcultures that encompass those films. Perhaps more importantly, the site allows anyone with an Internet connection to access both the films and the supplemental materials free of charge. As such, byNWR presents a fascinating case study for media scholars. Currently, multiple ways exist to approach and analyze this text, all of which would yield different insights into both the site’s content and design aesthetic. The people behind byNWR preserve and screen obscure films in a way that recalls the efforts of boutique home video labels such as the Criterion Collection, providing numerous special features intended to help contextualize each film. The site also offers visitors the ability to link to essays, videos, photos, and other artifacts that are either directly or tangentially related to each film, organizing everything in themed volumes.

Thus, byNWR and the films housed there offer researchers several levels of multimedia texts for analysis, all of which can be examined through various theoretical or methodological lenses. This paper argues that byNWR’s complex multimodal structure requires an interdisciplinary approach that could include Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin’s concept of remediation (byNWR incorporates hypermediacy to store and screen each film, which themselves are remediated into a digital context), Jeffery Sconce’s ideas about paracinema (the films housed at byNWR demonstrate a counter-aesthetic and subcultural sensibilities), Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik’s theories regarding cult cinema (the films conform to their anatomy of cult films), John Guillory’s idea of cultural capital (both the films and the site itself offer a challenge to mainstream cinematic canons), and Mikhail

Bakhtin's concept of the carnival and carnivalesque (the films and the subcultures chosen for preservation invert conventional tastes and sensibilities). This paper seeks to offer some suggestions for how to potentially examine byNWR from a variety of theoretical standpoints, thus providing scholars with a potential approach for analyzing this site and other similar networked digital archives. The following section introduces byNWR and considers how it sits at the intersection of archives and streaming services. Following this is a discussion of the various theoretical and methodological lenses that could be applied when analyzing the site.

### “The Past Was Rarely This Scary”: byNWR as Digital Archive for Nontraditional Texts

As mentioned, byNWR positions itself as a digital archive dedicated to preserving cinematic history. However, the site also endeavors to generate an alternative history of cinema by focusing on outsider perspectives and amplifying marginalized voices that exist at the edges or outside of the mainstream canonical histories often taught in introduction to film courses. Thus, it becomes necessary to consider how archives distribute power or maintain existing structures. In his book *Archive Fever*, Jacques Derrida contends that archives function as extensions of memory, and that the act of preserving one memory often buries another (43). However, Derrida also claims that this act aids in modulating both the archive and the public memory of the past (56). Moreover, in their attempts to preserve the past, all archives are at once conservative and revolutionary. As Daniel Kieckhafer notes, the archive is “liberal in its general purpose as a repository, whose function is to serve (either society or some part thereof) and to extend the cultural patrimony” while its “conservative character derives from its need to maintain order, and the inherent necessity of caution and protection against outside forces, decay, and entropy.” All this becomes significant when considering that “leading institutions in fields like history, law, medicine, science, genealogy, and business” operate most archives and therefore define what constitutes “proper ‘archival’ materials” (Kieckhafer). Thus, such institutions can either reinforce existing sociocultural power structures and imbalances or challenge them depending on what materials they choose to include in the archive.

ByNWR performs a similar function because it seeks to preserve the past but does so in a way that challenges mainstream sensibilities and tastes. The site collects, restores, and preserves films informed primarily by outsider or

marginalized perspectives, as well as stories and other archival materials that offer vital insight into these subcultural ideologies. Phipps contends that byNWR ushers viewers into “dangerous, restless places where good taste finds no footing, and creativity draws blood” and allows them to “delve into film’s half-forgotten, disreputable past.” The site thus becomes a revolutionary archive in that it amplifies marginalized voices and challenges the established order exemplified by conventional ideas of cinematic history while also appearing to challenge ideas regarding what deserves to be included in the canon.

As an example of byNWR’s archival efforts, Volume 1: Regional Renegades centers on the exploitation movie *The Nest of the Cuckoo Birds*, an extremely low-budget film written, produced, directed by, and starring Bert Williams. Made in Florida, far outside the Hollywood system, the film was long thought lost, until Refn and the Harvard Film Archive stumbled upon a beat-up print in a collection salvaged from The Little Art Cinema in Rockport, Massachusetts (Coffey). In addition to the film, Volume 1 includes several essays, digital reproductions of some of Williams’ artwork, and a digitized collection of found photographs from around the time of the film’s release. The first essay, “Bert Williams: Stark Raving Drama,” describes the film’s production and profiles its creator. Following that is the “Art of Bert Williams,” a collection of Williams’ drawings and paintings made during the 1930s and 1940s. The next essay, “Discovering the Lost Cuckoo Bird Nest,” offers a comprehensive look at the discovery and subsequent restoration of the film. After this are several tangentially-related multimodal essays, including: “Naked I Take Your Money: The Relater” (which chronicles a sex worker’s on-the-job experiences); “Just Enough Stuff: The Saga of Margaret Doll Rod” (a profile of the trailblazing musician); “Family Man: Frankie Miller” (a profile of the country singer); “Loose on the Deuce: The Prince of Porn” (a profile of notorious pornographer Phil Prince); “Murder is my Beat: Florida” (a profile of singer and murderess Salwa Merrige-Abrams); and “Barbie and Me” (an examination of obsessive collectors of Barbie dolls). Rounding out the supplemental materials are “Charlie Beesley’s Discarded America,” a collection of found photographs, and “The Restorationists,” a short piece about the difficulty of restoring old films. These materials all serve to contextualize *Nest of the Cuckoo Birds*, because they preserve the subcultural attitudes and ideologies that both informed the film’s creation and were in turn informed by its content.

Yet byNWR is not an archive in the traditional sense, but rather something that exists at the intersection between a free streaming service and a digital archive that

exists entirely on the Internet. While the Harvard Film Archive houses and restores the physical films (either the original negatives or, more likely, existing prints), most byNWR users will likely never interact with these actual objects. Instead, they will access the content via the website, making it necessary to consider the site through the lens of existing research on digital archives. Cheryl Mason Bolick defines digital archives as collections of numerical data and digitized texts (i.e. images, videos, audio files, etc.) made available via the Internet. She argues that the creation of digital archives altered the act of doing historical research because they allowed historians wider access to historical documents and resources. According to Bolick, anyone with an Internet connection can access most digital archives free of charge (which brings up questions about who can afford to access these resources, but this issue remains beyond the scope of the current discussion). Bob Nicholson, meanwhile, observes that copyright concerns and other issues have prevented equal distribution of digital archives, particularly regarding media produced after the nineteenth century, but that historians have nonetheless “responded to the emergence of online archives with cautious enthusiasm” (61). Using newspapers and periodicals as his primary case studies, Nicholson considers the effect of digitization on research, noting that the contents of a digital archive undergo “a complex process of transformation” (64) that fundamentally alters how researchers interact with that material.

Both Bolick and Nicholson’s ideas apply to byNWR, a free streaming service that digitizes physical films and makes them readily available to both general audiences and media researchers. However, the site also actively challenges the mainstream cinematic canon and prevailing ideas regarding what makes a film worthy of preservation. In addition, it aims to keep outmoded traditions (such as zines and video store culture) alive while also shining a light on marginalized or forgotten subcultures. Thus, both byNWR and its content blur the lines between archive and streaming service, thus necessitating an interdisciplinary approach that draws on various lenses. The next section considers just some of theories that researchers can use when examining byNWR. This is not intended as a comprehensive list but rather a potential starting point for scholars who wish to consider the site, the films housed there, and the accompanying supplemental materials.

“Creativity Draws Blood”: Theoretical Approaches to byNWR

In an op-ed published by *The Guardian* on July 4th, 2018, Refn writes, “most of our culture comes to us via a small number of conglomerates whose sole purpose is the bottom line” rather than the promotion of “good, challenging art.” Here the director highlights the social hierarchy that deems mainstream Hollywood films that appeal to a wide audience and turn a hefty profit as more important than strange, cheaply-made movies that appeal to a small subset of cinephiles. According to Refn, byNWR challenges this cultural hegemony because it unearths bizarre exploitation movies and makes them readily available to users. As such, byNWR aims to overturn predominant sociocultural hierarchies by championing sleazy flicks that often challenge traditional notions of good taste, while dismissing more conventional fare such as that churned out by the Hollywood machine. The site archives films considered “bad” by mainstream filmgoing audiences and positions them as important cultural artifacts via the inclusion of comprehensive supplemental materials that place each film into its appropriate historical, social, and cultural context. ByNWR thereby inverts mainstream ideas regarding taste and success while also challenging more traditional cinematic archives that seek to preserve films deemed important by conventional cultural gatekeepers.

The films collected at byNWR all fall under the umbrella of exploitation cinema, a term that refers to movies that foreground “violence, sexual deviance, and cheapness” (Church 1). Due to their rebelliousness and/or aesthetic or moral depravity, exploitation films sometimes develop cult followings. According to Umberto Eco, cult films “must be loved, obviously,” but must also “provide a completely furnished world, so that its fans can quote characters and episodes as if they were part of the beliefs of a sect,” one “whose adepts recognize each other through a common competence” (68). Because most of the films archived at byNWR were either lost or forgotten, they cannot be considered true cult films (though some, like *The Nest of the Cuckoo Birds*, developed cult reputations precisely because of their status as “lost films”). Yet nearly all the films contain aspects of what Mathijs and Mendik refer to as the anatomy of cult film, including innovation, badness, transgression, genre, nostalgia, and gore (2-3). More importantly, perhaps, cult films and cult film viewers routinely position themselves in opposition to the mainstream, which is Refn’s mission statement for byNWR.

Given all this, the films housed at byNWR also demonstrate Sconce’s ideas regarding paracinema, which covers “such seeming disparate genres as ‘badfilm,’ splatter-punk, ‘mondo’ films, sword and sandal epics, Elvis flicks, government hygiene films, Japanese monster movies and beach party musicals” and more (101).

The films chosen for inclusion at byNWR represent a counter-cinematic canon that “[does] not easily admit the textual pleasures of more ‘commonplace’ audiences” and that also reinforces the idea that cinema “once held the promise of a revolutionary popular art form” (Sconce 108). Ultimately, paracinematic culture “celebrates excess” (Sconce 118). Excess serves as the defining feature of movies like *Orgy of the Dead* (1965, Stephen C. Apostolof) and *The Maidens of Fetish Street* (1966, Saul Resnick), and others housed at byNWR. The site therefore aligns with ideas about cult film and paracinema via its efforts to restore, preserve, and screen sleazy exploitation films that stand “at odds with the prevailing cultural mores, displaying a preference for strange topics and allegorical themes that rub against cultural sensitivities and resist dominant politics” (Mathijs and Mendik 11).

By archiving lost or forgotten exploitation films that contain content considered subversive, countercultural, or sleazy according to mainstream sensibilities, byNWR challenges conventional Hollywood traditions and the established cinematic canon. As such, the site hails an audience predisposed to such subversive spectacle. This appeal to bad taste or countercultural sensibilities once again aligns the films preserved and screened at byNWR with Sconce’s concept of paracinema, which he considers less a group of films and more of a reading protocol, one rooted in the culture of fanzines, film conventions, and memorabilia and embraced by an audience that seeks to challenge the status quo, thereby subverting conventional notions of good taste. Sconce’s ideas echo those that John Guillory puts forth in his book *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*. Guillory writes that mainstream canons often serve to reproduce the dominant social order “with all of its various inequities” (ix). He further argues that “canonical and noncanonical works are by definition mutually exclusive; they confront each other in an internally divided curriculum in the same way that hegemonic culture confronts nonhegemonic subcultures in the larger social order” (20). At the same time, however, Guillory notes that alternative canons often allow dominant cultures to further codify subcultural groups as “other,” thereby maintaining their opposition to the canonical or the mainstream.

Of course, Guillory also contends that the canon continuously changes “in response to the frictional relations between institutional and social reproduction,” but that “a discourse of the aesthetic” determines what is deemed worthy of canonization (59). According to Guillory, the discourse of the aesthetic serves to evaluate or judge cultural works and thereby mediate “the specific social values expressed within,” ensuring that only those works that exhibit adequate “aesthetic

value” become canonized and therefore preserved (270). Yet Guillory concedes that this idea of aesthetic value can also lead to the canonization of texts that contain non-mainstream or subversive values. For instance, a canonical text might include material deemed immoral by the mainstream, and that this presents a challenge for defenders of the canon. Ultimately, though, it is possible to find redeeming qualities in so-called disreputable works and thus use them in the classroom for the purposes of teaching, thereby rendering them canonical.

This idea extends to byNWR, which canonizes both seedy exploitation films and subcultural ideologies in the name of educating viewers and inspiring them to “reshape the future” (Phipps). Furthermore, ByNWR presents an alternative to traditional ideas of cultural history by unearthing stories of individuals who helped shape American culture in some way but were cast aside by history. For instance, byNWR features a longform essay on country music singer Frankie Miller, Jr., a former country music sensation who toured with George Jones but is now largely forgotten by all but the most dedicated fans. The site also includes a 3D video recording of Miller performing several of his songs in his living room, thereby archiving his music as well. Similarly, byNWR houses an extensive three-part essay about punk rocker Margaret Doll Rod, former lead singer of the Demolition Doll Rods and a formative figure in the underground riot grrrl feminist punk rock movement of the late 1990s. The essay chronicles her significant contributions both to that scene and the mainstreaming of queer culture and includes a 3D video recording of Doll Rod performing songs with her new band, Heartthrob Chassis.

Because byNWR restores and archives obscure exploitation films marked by transgressive content and historical objects that document subcultures and subcultural ideologies, the site also performs an act of carnivalesque subversion. As such, it becomes useful to consider the site through the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin’s ideas regarding carnival. Bakhtin argues that during carnival sociocultural norms are upended and inverted: fools become kings, rich becomes poor, good becomes evil, and vice versa (*Problems* 176). Bakhtin originated the idea of the carnival and the carnivalesque in his book *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* and then further developed it in *Rabelais and His World*. He relates the carnival to the Feast of Fools, a medieval festival during which participants overturn the social hierarchies of everyday life and celebrate traditionally marginalized or suppressed ideas and individuals. Yet Bakhtin considered liberation from all authority and sacred symbols an undesirable ideology (*Problems* 122, 160). Rather than an event that

advocates for anarchy, carnival extracts all participants from non-carnival life and any ideologies that manifest during the festival fail to exist outside of it.

In addition, byNWR aims to place each film within a specific historical and sociocultural context via the inclusion of extensive supplemental materials and historical ephemera. Thus, the methodology of remediation represents another lens through which to examine byNWR, which remediates several forms of old media—including film, photography, and music—into a new context. According to Bolter and Grusin, remediation refers to “the representation of one medium in another” (45). For Bolter and Grusin, media constantly comment on, reproduce, and replace each other, and as such new media always remediates old media (55). So, for example, a filmed adaptation of a book remediates the printed story, while a musician can then sample an audio clip from the film and insert it into a song. Bolter and Grusin contend that remediation defines new digital media, which constantly remediate prior media technologies such as television, radio, and print (45). However, Bolter and Grusin also note that remediation operates under a double logic, writing “Our culture wants both to multiply its media and to erase all traces of mediation: ideally, it wants to erase its media in the very act of multiplying them” (5). For instance, most websites offer some combination of text, graphics, and streaming video, and therefore operate “under the logic of hypermediacy,” a term that refers to a “style of visual representation whose goal is to remind the viewer of the medium” (Bolter & Grusin 273). The authors provide the example of “computer applications that present multiple media (text, graphics, animation, video) using a hypertextual organization” (273). The website therefore comes between the viewer and the meaning of the photographs and video. At the same time, however, viewers desire immediacy and must either ignore the presence of the medium and the act of mediation, or actively attempt to diminish the medium’s representational function.

Given its graphics-heavy design and wealth of multimodal content, byNWR exemplifies the concept of hypermedia, as the site includes a propensity of “prose, graphics, animations, videos, and sounds,” all key components of hypermedia (Bolter and Grusin 36). The site remediates old films, photographs, paintings, and other forms of older media into a new digital context, using hypertextual organization to archive each one and present them to audiences. Of course, it could be argued that the site merely transcodes these old media as per Lev Manovich’s ideas regarding the digitization of physical film, photographs, music, etc. Here, Manovich argues that new digital media represent a “blend of human and computer

meanings” because computing and media converge and combine inside the computer (63). Yet byNWR utilizes hypertextual organization to organize the films and link them to the special features, thereby placing each selection into a new context that allows viewers to watch the films and/or explore their production, reception, and sociocultural legacies. Moreover, the site also allows viewers to wallow in the mediation (i.e. dig through the vast number of supplemental features) or ignore it entirely (i.e. focus solely on watching the film itself). Thus, byNWR aligns more with remediation than transcoding.

Significantly, as Caitlin Elizabeth Mullen explains, “Remediation does not refer to a fundamental opposition to the mainstream so much as the desire of the individual to express themselves.” This notion also applies to byNWR, which, according to Refn at least, seeks to inspire others to express themselves creatively (Bradshaw). At the same time, however, the site preserves films and subcultures deemed disreputable by mainstream institutions and conventional notions of good taste. By highlighting which texts were selected for canonization and which were excluded and thus forgotten, byNWR reveals the tensions that result from the power imbalances between the conventional and the subcultural. The idea of subcultural ideologies thus becomes important when considering that byNWR explicitly positions itself in opposition to conventional tastes and sensibilities via the films selected for preservation and the supplemental features housed alongside them, most of which focus on outsiders or radicals (such as Williams, Doll Rod, Miller, Jr., and Prince). Therefore, the site not only functions as an important digital archive of marginalized texts and subcultures, it also offers up a fascinating commentary on the nature of the archive itself. ByNWR thereby functions as an important document for studying both film history and digital archives.

## Conclusion

As a media object, byNWR raises several questions, including: Why restore and preserve old, cheaply-made exploitation films that few people have even heard of much less seen? Why expend so much effort on collecting stories about largely forgotten character actors, minor punk rock singers, neglected country music stars, and infamous pornographers? What is the value of such an enterprise? More importantly, perhaps, how might a researcher approach byNWR from a theoretical perspective and thereby answer such questions? The answers to the first three questions remain beyond the scope of this paper as they require a much more

detailed and lengthy analysis, one that would likely benefit from comparing the site to other types of archives that also set out to collect and house outsider texts such as independently-produced video games or music. This paper hopefully laid the groundwork for answering the fourth question by suggesting an interdisciplinary approach for studying this multimodal networked digital archive.

ByNWR and other similar digital archival projects can house both primary texts and supplemental materials, contextualizing them in a way that highlights how subcultures and subcultural ideologies respond to, challenge, and sometimes subvert dominant ideologies. In the case of byNWR, utilizing traditional and emergent technologies highlights the dialectical tension of the traditional film canon, as originally preserved on celluloid, and the future potentials for that canon by acknowledging emerging film viewing technologies. ByNWR therefore demonstrates aspects of remediation and the carnivalesque, while also conforming to prevailing ideas regarding cult cinema and cultural capital.

Thus, when analyzing this site and its content, researchers would benefit from drawing on one or all the theoretical approaches discussed in this paper. For instance, considering the site's hypermediacy allows for an examination of how byNWR organizes and presents its primary texts (i.e. the films) and the supplemental historical documents that provide further information about those texts. It would also be useful to explore how the films conform to both Sconce's concept of paracinema and Mathijs and Mendik's ideas regarding cult movies and their relationship to more mainstream cinematic fare. This in turn could lead into a discussion of how the act of restoring and archiving these films serves to invert existing sociocultural hierarchies in a way that recalls Bakhtin's ideas regarding carnival and the Feast of Fools. In turn, these theories and methodologies contribute to a consideration of how this archive serves to generate an alternative canon that challenges the existing cinematic canon. Thus, the approaches outlined in this paper would provide a useful theoretical and methodological framework for analyzing byNWR, and an analysis that draws from each would likely prove comprehensive.

Other useful theoretical approaches could include Henry Jenkins' notion of convergence culture, given that byNWR represents a convergence of different media technologies (i.e. film, 3D video, MP3, text, etc.). In addition, researchers could look at the site's aesthetics, interactive design, and interface to examine how it presents content to viewers and whether the site is truly user friendly or if its graphics and interface simply serve as additional barriers between the audience and the content. It is also necessary to look at the films currently housed on the site, as

most were produced, directed, and/or written by white, heterosexual, cisgender males and therefore potentially reinforce patriarchal values. In addition, many of the films feature problematic material including rape, violence against women, and depictions of sex that cater specifically to the male gaze. Thus, researchers could apply Laura Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze and Judith Butler’s ideas regarding gender performativity when examining the site and its offerings.

Furthermore, useful insights may emerge from considering how byNWR and other archival sites preserve outsider artworks and whether their efforts constitute a subversive act or, as Derrida observes, merely reinforces existing power imbalances and sociocultural hierarchies. As such, comparing byNWR to other digital archival sites such as DOSBox, which preserves older games and thus challenges modern video game aesthetics and player expectations, may assist in understanding this process. Similarly, analyzing how queer video game archives create alternative archives that respond to heteronormative archives and thus heteronormative sociocultural ideologies may offer a useful contrast to byNWR’s own archival efforts.

Ultimately, byNWR serves as a rich text for considering how networked digital archives can either subvert or reinforce mainstream, hegemonic values, as well as how they alter the act of conducting historical research and studying film. The site becomes useful for popular culture studies because it allows researchers to consider subcultures that exist alongside of—or even in opposition to—mainstream popular culture, whether from a historical or contemporary perspective. Through its inclusion of films made outside or at the margins of Hollywood, as well as its wealth of supplemental materials, byNWR provides a voice to those who exist at the fringes of popular culture and whose attitudes and ideologies may run counter to the common sentiments of mainstream society but nevertheless remain worthy of remembering.

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## “They See a Caricature”: Expanding Media Representations of Black Identity in *Dear White People*

GRAEME JOHN WILSON

Throughout the history of American television, representation of the black community, particularly African Americans, has been problematic at best.<sup>1</sup> Early representations of the community on the small screen served to reinforce dominant stereotypes and power structures by portraying “black characters [as] happy-go-lucky social incompetents who knew their place and whose antics served to amuse and comfort culturally sanctioned notions of [...] white superiority” (Gray 75). Such caricatured portrayals only endured in subsequent decades, perpetuating regressive stereotypes (Punyanunt-Carter 241-2). Stereotypical characteristics of black Americans in popular media include, but are not limited to, criminality, ignorance, and materialism (Collins 161; Jackson 46; Punyanunt-Carter 243). A significant breakthrough for the community premiered in 1984 in the form of *The Cosby Show*, which is now regarded as a landmark text in black representation on television (Dates 306-8; Jones 182). *The Cosby Show*, a sitcom starring comedian Bill Cosby and centered on an affluent African American family in New York City, was acclaimed for breaking stereotypes through its portrayal of “a vast and previously unexplored territory of diversity within blackness—that is, upper-

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<sup>1</sup> The term black is used to “signif[y] all non-White minority populations,” including the African American and African Caribbean populations. Although “the term Black has a long service in social, political, and everyday life and in its use to denote African ancestry,” African American specifically describes “descendants of [African] persons brought to the Americas as slaves between the 17th and 19th century” (Agyemang et al. 1016).

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middle class life” (Gray 81).<sup>2</sup> *The Cosby Show* was a massive ratings success, although it was criticized by some scholars and social critics for failing to utilize its vast commercial platform to address themes of systemic racism, instead portraying a post-racial America in which racism is no longer a relevant societal concern (Jones 186; Sirota 190).<sup>3</sup>

A noticeable aspect of post-racism is that it allows “for a claim that those challenging racism themselves are ‘racist’ and that their racism is negatively affecting those who want to forget racism or who embrace color neutrality” (Ono 229). A notable example of this phenomenon occurred in February 2017, in response to the debut trailer of the Netflix original series *Dear White People*. Set at the predominantly white Winchester University, a fictitious Ivy League college, *Dear White People* follows the experiences of several black students as they struggle to affirm their identities in the face of social injustice and racial discrimination. The trailer was heavily downvoted on YouTube and lambasted on Twitter, with conservative commenters arguing the series was divisive and promoting racial conflict (Blistein; Sieczkowski). Ironically, such a vitriolic response only validates *Dear White People*’s core theme: that “America is not, nor has it ever been, a “post-racial society” (Bradley).

Portrayals in mass media serve as “an important source of information about African Americans [and] contribute to public perceptions of African Americans” (Punyanunt-Carter 241). Historically, many television series featuring black protagonists and ensembles have privileged white majority audiences, resulting from conscious choices made by producers and studio executives to increase their commercial viability (Gray 283). Such series often present “black Americans as a homogenous, undifferentiated mass, a monolith to which recursive racist

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<sup>2</sup> *The Cosby Show* is credited for paving the way for more authentic portrayals of African American culture on television, such as *In Living Color* (1990—1994) and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990-1996) (Jones 186). Unfortunately, such nuanced portrayals would not become standard for the community. While representation has steadily increased since the conclusion of *The Cosby Show*, African Americans have continued to be mostly “portrayed in stereotypical occupational roles, with negative personality characteristics, as low achievers and with positive stereotypes” (Punyanunt-Carter 242).

<sup>3</sup> The ultimate legacy of *The Cosby Show* has also been marred by the numerous sexual assault allegations levied against Cosby in the 2010s and his recent conviction, resulting in *The Cosby Show*’s near-complete removal from syndication. In 2015, *Ebony* famously featured “the cast of *The Cosby Show* [on its cover] with an overlay of broken glass, insinuating that the legacy of the show had been fractured” (Jones 191).

archetypes can be attached” (Lind 14). However, *Dear White People* became groundbreaking in that does not treat blackness as a monolith and instead portrays a multitude of black identities, some of which are in ideological conflict with each other. Main characters in *Dear White People*’s ensemble include Samantha “Sam” White, a biracial activist; Colandrea “Coco” Conners, a dark-skinned advocate of respectability politics; and Lionel Higgins, who struggles to reconcile his racial identity with his homosexuality. Each of these identities (i.e., Sam’s militant activist or Coco’s respectable public servant) is partially informed by pressures relating to dominant cultural expectations of blackness. Media is a contested site for racial identity, and popular television programs are capable of helping audiences reimagine race (Ford 266). Through application of critical race theory and narrative rhetorical criticism, this essay demonstrates just how *Dear White People*, through its triumvirate of lead characters, strives to expand construction of black identity in popular media and enhance audience understanding of the community. This goal is especially noteworthy and topical when considering ongoing sociopolitical trends in the American sociocultural sphere, specifically the mainstreaming and destigmatization of white supremacy under the presidency of Donald Trump.

### Rationale for Study

The creator and showrunner of *Dear White People* is Justin Simien, who adapted the series from his 2014 film of the same name. The film, which Simien raised funding for independently, was inspired by his experiences as a black student at Chapman University in California (Tully). Dismayed at the tendency for African Americans to be “lumped into one giant experience [onscreen],” Simien wanted *Dear White People* to convey that “there’s as many versions of being black as there are black people” (Meraji). Distributed by Lionsgate, *Dear White People* became a commercial success and received critical acclaim for its examination of modern race relations, black identity, and white privilege. Lionsgate subsequently approached Simien about adapting *Dear White People* for television, and later reached a deal with streaming service Netflix to distribute the series (Warren, “Justin Simien on Bringing”).

The inaugural season of *Dear White People* premiered in its entirety in April 2017, on the heels of the most divisive presidential election in recent memory. While the series continued the social commentary of the original film, it gained newfound significance after Donald Trump was sworn in as the 45<sup>th</sup> President of

the United States (Bradley). Trump was a controversial candidate due to his long-documented “history of making racist comments as a New York real-estate developer in the 1970s and ‘80s,” one infamous statement being that “laziness is a trait in blacks” (Leonhardt and Philbrick). Trump was also an especially prominent voice of birtherism, a conspiracy movement claiming Barack Obama, Trump’s immediate predecessor and the country’s first black president, was born in Kenya, and therefore not a natural-born citizen. Trump and other prominent birthers challenged Obama’s leadership “in racialized and racist ways even as their discourses attempted to mask racism under pretenses of [...] national integrity” (Pham 89).

During his presidential campaign, Trump continued to espouse racist rhetoric. He repeatedly exaggerated statistics of black crime and “cast[ed] heavily black American cities as dystopian war zones” (Leonhardt and Philbrick), pandering to stereotypes of black criminality that popular American media has long helped proliferate (Collins 161). Trump’s appeals to racism during the election boosted membership in white supremacist hate groups, with the Ku Klux Klan specifically attributing their increase in membership to Trump’s rhetoric (Sanchez 45). Furthermore, Trump was the favored candidate of the alt-right, an extremist white nationalist movement. By championing Trump as a figurehead for their cause, the alt-right received considerable media attention and mainstream exposure during the election (Kirchick 13-7; Ryan 36-40).<sup>4</sup>

Despite these and other controversies, 2016 would ultimately witness Trump’s victory in the presidential election. Despite the illusion of progressiveness produced by the efforts of previous civil rights movements and two-term presidency of Barack Obama, Trump’s election affirms that the proposed post-racial America many believed Obama’s election signified (Ono 228; Wing 45) never existed. Contrastingly, 2016 also witnessed what essayist and television critic Angelica Jade Bastién describes as “a new golden age for black television” due to an increased prominence of black-led series and black showrunners. This opinion is shared by writer Lisa Respers France, who observes that “the last time people were saying there was a ‘golden age of black television’ there was unrest over the civil rights of African-Americans,” likening the difficult social atmosphere of the 2010s to that of

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<sup>4</sup> Notably, many Twitter users who derided the *Dear White People* trailer identified as alt-right and claimed “that the show promote[d] racism and white genocide” (Katzowitz). As noted by Simien, the trailer simply features “a woman of color (politely) asking not to be mocked” (Blistein), thus affirming how contemporary the show’s themes of racism and white privilege truly are.

the 1960s. This comparison is not without merit, as race has emerged as a focal point of sociocultural discourse in Trump’s nascent presidency, with black-led television series increasingly discussing themes of black identity and racial discrimination.

The narrative of *Dear White People* especially embodies progressive racial politics and rebukes popular notions of post-racism. As Simien himself notes, the series occupies a very different sociopolitical landscape than the 2014 film, explaining that “The movie was written at a time of ‘post-racism’ [...] It was like, you know, we had ‘solved’ that problem already, because Barack [Obama] is in office. Now, obviously, I think that bubble has long since been popped” (Bradley). *Dear White People* is also unique in that it does not focus exclusively on external forms of racist action, instead demonstrating a broader and more complex understanding of racism by portraying the effects of internalized racism and colorism on the black community. Ultimately, *Dear White People* is a strong case study to examine the contested nature of race in Trump’s America and how it is negotiated in popular media texts.

## Framework and Methodology

To analyze the racial content of *Dear White People*, this essay employs critical race theory and queer theory for its theoretical framework. Scholars employ critical race theory to study race in relation to hegemonic power structures and social justice (Delgado and Stefancic 3; Wing 48). Although the theory was initially pioneered within the field of legal studies (Matsuda 1331), critical race theory can also be harnessed to identify “the ways in which race [is] constructed and represented in [...] American society as a whole” (Crenshaw xiii), popular media being an especially prominent preceptor of race. However, in order to examine LGBT representation in *Dear White People*, queer theory is also necessary for this project. Queer theory is employed by scholars to research alternate gender identities and challenge heteronormativity, which encompasses “the beliefs and practices that privilege heterosexuals and heterosexuality” in society (Jenkins and Lovaas 8).

For its method, this essay applies narrative rhetorical criticism to select scenes from all ten episodes of *Dear White People*’s inaugural season (each referred to as a “chapter” in the series’ overarching narrative). Narrative rhetorical criticism is a specific form of textual analysis, a variety of critical methodology used by scholars to separate “the primary, linguistic meaning of a text’s component parts [from] the

secondary, or textual meaning” (Altman 15). Textual analysis comprises several distinct methods, including rhetorical criticism, which scholars employ to identify the persuasive messages embedded in oral or visual communications. Within media studies, this article employs narrative rhetorical criticism specifically to identify the primary theme of a narrative, as well as the narrative elements that support this theme (Foss 326-7). Because “television and society mirror each other” (Flichy 75), narrative rhetorical criticism can be utilized to understand how popular television narratives reflect “the [current] state of culture” (Gronbeck and Sillars 212). Therefore, narrative rhetorical criticism is an appropriate means through which to theorize *Dear White People*’s portrayal of black identities, particularly during a period of destigmatized prejudice and racism following Trump’s election.

### Black Identity in *Dear White People*

*Sam*. In *Dear White People*, Sam is the creator and host of the eponymous college radio show, which is intended to educate white students about racism and microaggressions through satirical humor. Although the show is popular amongst Winchester’s student population, it is also controversial. In the series pilot, “Chapter I,” one caller tells Sam that “I find your show offensive and highly divisive. We need to come together at times like this [...] Race is a social construct” (00:05:36-00:05:46). This is an example of how post-racial discourse displaces racism by ignoring white privilege and suggesting that “if racism does exist, it is primarily, if not entirely, carried out by those opposing racism[,] thereby performing strategic racial moves that help to avoid and ignore racism’s past and present effects” (Ono 229). In response to this and similar accusations of racism, Sam asserts in that “[the] show is meant to articulate the feelings of a misrepresented group outside the majority.” Sam’s philosophy is best encapsulated by a speech she gives on air at the conclusion of “Chapter I,” expressing her outrage and indignation after a blackface party is thrown on campus:

My jokes don’t incarcerate your youth at an alarming rate or make it unsafe for you to walk around your own neighborhoods. But yours do. When you mock or belittle us, you enforce an existing system. Cops everywhere staring down the barrel of a gun at a black man don’t see a human being. They see a caricature. A thug [...] You don’t get to show up in a Halloween costume version of us and claim irony or ignorance. (00:29:27-00:30:11)

Besides hosting *Dear White People*, Sam also heads Winchester’s Black Student Union (BSU), a student advocacy organization similarly dedicated to combatting racist ideology on campus. However, Sam’s struggles and experiences with racial prejudice not only affect her externally, but internally as well. Internalized racism occurs when individuals from “socially stigmatized groups [...] accept and recycle negative messages regarding their aptitude, abilities, and societal place, which results in self-devaluation.” Internalized racism has been observed as a major obstacle to black collectivism, as it “undermines collaborative action for racial uplift” (Harper 338-9). In *Dear White People*, Sam’s internalized racism is a product of her biracial identity, which she worries invalidates her blackness. Such a phenomenon is not uncommon amongst biracial individuals, as American media and society often limit perceptions of race to monoracial constructions. Consequently, there exists prominent and “culturally accepted notion[s] that the interracial child must select the identity of one parent, usually the parent of color” (Wardle 53). Among biracial individuals, such notions provoke “tension between the two racial components of the self” (Cohn et al. 183).

Ethnic theorist William E. Cross Jr. pioneered an identity theory described as the “Negro-to-Black conversion experience” a model that has become prominent in scholarly literature to describe the acquisition of black identity (Cross Jr. 93; Hall 120). According to Cross, black individuals begin to question notions of race and social hierarchy after their earliest encounter with racial prejudice. They subsequently “immers[e] him or herself in the world of blackness,” denigrating white culture while idealizing black culture (107). However, such actions are externally defined and adversarial, “based more on opposition to white standards than on the affirmation of what it is to be black” (Cohn et al. 184). Cross’ model is also applicable to biracial individuals of black and white heritage, as studies indicate these individuals are more likely to claim black as identity nomenclature, especially in primarily white environments (Hall 121).

Sam is one such individual. Throughout the first season, *Dear White People* hints that Sam’s public militant persona is partly exaggerated to affirm her blackness to both herself and her peers on Winchester’s campus. It is observed that “racial identities are not [wholly] given at birth as immutable traits, but rather are partly performed [with] strategic actions that people take to work their racial identities” (Harris 60). Such actions are more noticeably common amongst biracial individuals, as their acceptance “by the black community is predicated on the

individual's adoption of the mores of that community and the exhibition of specific culturally related behaviors" (Harris et al. 221). Besides her parentage, Sam is also ashamed of her musical interests, listening to folk music in private but playing hip-hop in public, as to not contradict her black performativity. Most notably, Sam also hides relationship with Gabe, a white Winchester student, out of fear she will be ostracized by her black peers.

Although there is a considerable number of biracial actors and actresses working today, there have been few explicitly biracial characters in either film or television (Warn 191). Therefore, Sam's character is important for not only increased representation of biracial characters in mainstream media, but also for its authentic portrayal of biracialness. It is not uncommon for light-skinned or biracial individuals to face discrimination within African American communities, as darker skin is often regarded as more racially authentic (Brunsma and Rockquemore 33, 44). In *Dear White People*, Sam combats the feelings of inadequacy she experiences as a light-skinned biracial woman by performing an exaggerated version of blackness to prove her identity to her peers. Ironically, despite Sam's shame at her mixed heritage, biracial individuals generally enjoy higher social status than monoracial black Americans based on their lighter skin tones (Fryberg et al. 92). Sam's skin thus also allows her a greater degree of privilege than many of her black peers, including Coco. Although Sam yearns for darker skin color, darker skin is also "associated with more race-conscious views and higher levels of [...] discrimination" (Hunter 245), discrimination that Coco has experienced to a greater extent than Sam.

*Coco*. Because white Americans are afforded higher societal privilege than black Americans, light skinned or biracial individuals more easily obtain opportunities to "earn more money, complete more years of schooling, live in better neighborhoods, and marry higher-status people than darker-skinned people of the same race or ethnicity" (Hunter 237). This discrimination defines colorism, as "the process of discrimination that privileges light-skinned people of color over their dark-skinned counterparts" (237). Colorism is distinct from racism in that it is a biological prejudice based on skin tone, rather than a social prejudice based on racial identity, although "the hierarchy employed in colorism [...] is usually the same one that governs racism: light skin is prized over dark skin" (Harris 54). Although all African Americans experience racial discrimination, the frequency and severity of such discrimination is far higher amongst darker-skinned African Americans due to colorism. Similar to racism, colorism "consists of both overt and

covert actions, outright acts of discrimination and subtle cues of disfavor” (Hunter 241).

Like Sam, Coco’s first encounter with racial prejudice occurred early in her childhood. The cold open of “Chapter IV” includes a flashback to Coco’s elementary school days, where she and a group of girls are playing with dolls. Coco’s classmate tells her to “take the ugly one,” the sole black doll in the toy box. Another flashback to Coco’s freshman year of college reveals that during a Greek party where fraternity brothers asked sorority sisters on dates, Coco was the only woman not chosen, leaving her embarrassed and dejected. The series depicts both incidents as formative experiences regarding Coco’s understanding of both blackness and beauty. In the present-day narrative of “Chapter IV,” Coco angrily highlights Sam’s light-skinned privilege. Coco explains that, “People take one look at my skin, and they assume that I’m poor or uneducated or ratchet,” stereotypes that Coco points out Sam is not subjected to. Coco also tells Sam that the campus tolerates her aggressive and militant rhetoric because “you look more like them than I do,” allowing Sam a higher degree of social capital. To compensate for her own lack thereof, Coco attempts to dissociate from stereotypical views of black culture by conforming to politics of respectability.

Historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham is popularly credited with coining the term “respectability politics” and defining its basic parameters (Di Leonardo 358; Patton 725). As defined by Higginbotham, respectability politics “refers to efforts among African Americans to distance themselves from stereotypes and presumed inferiority by embodying a public image that garners respect” (Patton 725). Such an image can be culled by conforming to majority white expectations and values “by behaving in a so-called respectable manner, i.e., dressing, acting, speaking, and even protesting in certain acceptable ways” (Newman and Obasogie 541). Several prominent black celebrities, most notably Bill Cosby,<sup>5</sup> have endorsed respectability politics, with a common argument being that they combat popular racial stereotypes such as laziness and intellectual inferiority (Di Leonardo 359; Harris 35; Patton 730). However, a prominent criticism of respectability politics is that they cater to dominant white ideologies, rather than promoting acceptance of black community values. Higginbotham herself asserts that “respectability’s emphasis on individual behavior serve[s] inevitably to blame blacks for their victimization” (202).

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<sup>5</sup> Cosby’s endorsement of respectability politics was reflected in *The Cosby Show* during its run on television, and the series has been criticized for advocating an inauthentic version of blackness that white audiences could more comfortably accept (Collins 167; Jones 186, 189).

Respectability politics is a major focus of *Dear White People*, which contrasts Sam's complete rejection of respectability politics with Coco's adoption of them. While Sam is the head of the BSU, Coco is the treasurer of Winchester's Coalition of Racial Equality (CORE). In contrast to the BSU, CORE emphasizes political correctness and politics of respectability. Representing CORE, Coco attends elite fundraisers and appeals to Winchester's older, primarily white donors and alumni. To project an image this group will find respectable, Coco's speech is largely devoid of any African American slang. Coco also tailors her hair and makeup to match Anglo-American styles of beauty, as white beauty is the dominant aesthetic in the United States and idealized in media (Hunter 238). Ultimately, Coco's appearance and language amongst Winchester's donors is intended to reward her with access to privilege and career advancement, a strategy often employed by African Americans in white-majority fields: "When non-whites seek to succeed in white-dominated environments, they may disclaim interest in leisure activities associated with minority racialized groups, avow interest in leisure activities coded 'white,' [and] distance themselves from non-whites perceived as angry or political" (Harris 60).

Coco's boyfriend, Troy Fairbanks, similarly subscribes to respectability politics. Troy is the son of the college's dean, who views Sam's protests, as well as Sam herself, as immature and naïve. In contrast, Dean Fairbanks, who is grooming Troy for professional success in politics, pressures his son to project a more respectable identity. Coco, who is similarly pursuing a political career, specifically likens herself and Troy to a respectable power couple in the mold of the Obamas. Respectability politics noticeably experienced a boon in popular interest in the late 2000s following Obama's election as president, with Obama himself being recognized as employing language associated with respectability in his rhetoric (Harris 35).

In "Chapter I," Lionel learns that Sam and Coco used to be best friends before they had a falling out.<sup>6</sup> In many popular television series, fights between women protagonists are often derived from competing interest in a man. However, this is just one of many stereotypes that *Dear White People* overcomes. Instead, Sam and Coco's friendship fractures due to their ideological differences, with Sam viewing

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<sup>6</sup> Sam and Coco's friendship has already dissolved at the beginning of the series, but their falling out is depicted in a flashback in "Chapter IV."

Coco’s endorsement of respectability politics as a betrayal to their entire race. However, in “Chapter VI,” Coco explains her perspective at length:

I grew up on the South Side of Chicago. I’ve actually seen friends and family members shot. And every time it happens, I wish they had done something, anything to prevent it. Some of y’all in here with your liberal purity, wasting time deciding who’s black enough. Who cares if you’re woke or not if you’re dead? (00:05:31-00:05:57)

Unlike Sam, Coco was raised in the ghetto and lived in constant fear of gang violence. By appeasing whiteness through politics of respectability, Coco hopes to escape this environment and obtain a better life for herself. Therefore, her adoption of respectability politics is motivated entirely by self-preservation. Troy expresses similar sentiments in “Chapter VIII” when he admits in Lionel that his dad pressures him into maintaining a respectable identity “to protect me from all the bullshit he’s faced as a black man” (00:13:54-00:13:57). However, these goals are more difficult for Coco and Troy to fulfill than Sam due to their darker skin color, which more readily lends itself to dominant stereotypes of blackness, including laziness and lack of intelligence. As observed by Margaret Hunter, “people of color with dark skin tones continue to pay a price for their color, and the light skinned continue to benefit from their association with whiteness” (250).

Like Sam, Coco suffers from internalized racism. However, whereas Sam’s internalized racism is derived from her lighter skin and the fear the black community will never accept her, Coco’s is derived from her darker skin and the fear her professional goals will be hindered by stereotypes of blackness. Ironically, Sam and Coco envy each other’s skin color and the varying privilege they represent. This jealousy illustrates the complexity of black identity, both ethnically and ideologically, a significant progression from traditional representations of blackness in mainstream television. However, *Dear White People* also explores black identity from the perspective of black men, particularly one who struggles to reconcile his sexual identity with popular expectations of blackness.

*Lionel.* *Dear White People* introduces Lionel as Troy’s roommate. Lionel is a shy, introverted journalism major who writes about race relations on campus for *The Independent*, Winchester’s local newspaper. Like Sam, Lionel’s greatest fear is that Winchester’s black community will reject him. However, whereas Sam’s anxiety derives from her ethnic identity, Lionel’s is derived from his sexual

identity, as Lionel is gay, something that has historically been treated as incompatible with blackness.

In queer media studies, “sexual identities [...] cannot be divorced from issues of class and race” (Avila-Saavedra 7). Although homophobia is a common feature of heterosexist communities, researchers have observed that African American communities exhibit particularly high levels of prejudice towards homosexuality, a phenomenon largely attributed to the intersectionality of black LGBT identities (Battle and Buttarro Jr. 1, 4; Battle and Lemelle Jr. 4, 40; Capitano and Herek 95). Developed by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, intersectionality is a theory used to examine multidimensional social identities. Crenshaw, dissatisfied with the tendency of academics to “treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experiences and analysis” argued that when different identities overlap, they produce new, unique identities distinct from their individual components (139). Crenshaw also observed that in cases of intersectionality, individual prejudices, such as racism and homophobia, could act interrelatedly instead of separately. These specific prejudices have been observed operating in tandem to alienate and disenfranchise black LGBT individuals:

Within the black community, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people (LGBTs) are subjected to two unique and simultaneous forms of oppression—first as racial minorities and, second, as sexual minorities. The “same-sex relationship taboo” present in the larger society toward LGBTs also exists along racial lines, thus generating the idea that black homosexuality tarnishes the image of the overall community. (Battle and Buttarro Jr. 1)

Patricia Hill Collins echoes these sentiments, observing that “the homophobia in Black cultural nationalism seems linked to [beliefs] that maintaining a conservative gender ideology is essential for Black families, communities, and the Black nation as family” (111).

Hegemonic masculinity, pioneered by gender theorist R.W. Connell, is a sociological concept describing how masculinities are arranged into hierarchies within communities. According to hegemonic masculinity, specific masculine models are viewed as more socially legitimate or ideal than others. McConnell’s “idea of a hierarchy of masculinities grew directly out of [observing] homosexual men’s experience with violence and prejudice from straight men” (Connell and

Messerschmidt 831). Within heterosexist societies, homosexual masculinity is among the least respected masculine models. Because heterosexuality forms “the bedrock of hegemonic masculinity[,] a fundamental element of hegemonic masculinity, then, is that women exist as potential sexual objects for men while men are negated as sexual objects for men” (Donaldson 645). Because sexual relationships with women are idealized within hegemonic masculinity as markers of masculine validation homosexual attraction to other men is viewed as a deviant aberration that negates one’s masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 840). This idealization is especially true within the universe of black masculinity, as heterosexual promiscuity is “an important part of the depiction of black masculinity, [and] black men’s bodies remain highly sexualized within contemporary mass media. Images of black men often reduce them not only to bodies (the case of the athletes) but also to body parts, especially the penis” (Collins 161).

In many ways, Troy embodies a traditional hegemonic model of black masculinity. Several shots in “Chapter II” depict Lionel’s point-of-view as he watches Troy leave the shower or fantasizes about him naked, emphasizing Troy’s musculature and physical attractiveness. These scenes depict Lionel utilizing the male gaze as described by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey to engage in voyeurism and scopophilia (6). However, while the male gaze in traditional media fetishizes female bodies for male viewers, Lionel’s gaze functions from a viewpoint not fixed along traditional gender lines. “Chapter II” also emphasizes Troy’s sexual prowess. In the episode, Lionel repeatedly overhears Troy and Coco having sex, with Coco commenting on the large size of Troy’s penis. Unbeknownst to Coco, Troy is also pursuing an affair with the married Neika Hobbs, a professor of African American studies at Winchester, further demonstrating his sexual success. In contrast to Troy’s complete embodiment of hegemonic masculinity, Lionel is socially awkward, unmuscular, and a virgin.

As observed by Collins, “avowedly heterosexual African American men routinely deride gay black men, primarily through ridicule [...] or through outright homophobic comments” (172). Such prejudice is powerfully portrayed in “Chapter II” during flashbacks to Lionel’s freshman year at Winchester. Lionel visits a black-owned barbershop to cut his hair, only to leave dejected after overhearing one of the barbers announce “I don’t cut fags” (00:01:05-00:01:08). The barbershop is a recognized cultural space within African American society, meaning that it serves “as a register of cultural identity denoting but not delimiting bodies distinguished

by race, practices, and stylistics that signal cultural membership” (Alexander 106). In *Dear White People*, Lionel’s feelings of rejection from the barbershop symbolize his greater feelings of rejection from the black community. Collins observes that the black community’s pursuit of solidarity often results in “distinctive segments of Black civil society,” such as black LGBT individuals, “being routinely submerged for the alleged good of the group” (19). This increased “stigmatization of homosexuality [...] causes more ‘closeted’ behaviors and produces more stress among gay African American men” (Battle and Lemelle Jr. 40). Lionel is closeted until the conclusion of “Chapter II” when he finally comes out to Troy, explaining, “I’m gay. I don’t know why that’s so hard for me to say. I’ve always known” (00:25:51-00:26:21). Surprising Lionel, Troy wholeheartedly accepts his roommate’s sexual orientation and offers to cut Lionel’s hair himself. Although Troy’s character embodies several traditional notions of black masculinity, he also subverts others through his complete acceptance of black LGBT individuals. Troy’s cutting of Lionel’s hair not only cements their friendship but also symbolizes Lionel’s acceptance as a gay man within Winchester’s black community.

Although televisual representation of African Americans as a whole bears a mixed legacy, the African American LGBT community has been portrayed especially poorly. Juan Battle and Anthony Buttarro Jr. state “that [black] homophobic attitudes are [partially] reinforced by the masculine ideology” exhibited in popular media (7). A previously common caricature of black homosexuality in popular media was the “sissy,” described by Collins as “an effeminate and derogated black masculinity. Representations of gay African American men depict them as peripheral characters, often in comedic roles that border on ridicule [and] support the heterosexuality of other males” (171). In response to this and other stereotypical depictions of homosexuality in popular media, “a primary purpose of the critical application of queer theory has been to demonstrate how sexuality is culturally essentialized to inscribe heterosexuality as normal and all other sexualities as deviant” (Avila-Saavedra 6). In *Dear White People*, Lionel represents a complete rejection of the “sissy” archetype, instead embodying a more progressive media model of black LGBT masculinity, where homosexuality is not deviant but instead normalized and can coexist with blackness without either contradicting the other. In addition to Lionel, such normalization is represented through several other black LGBT characters in *Dear White People*’s ensemble, including Neika, who is bisexual, her wife Monique, and A.J., a gay bartender at Winchester, all of whom have already achieved the self-actualization

Lionel acquires over the course of the series. Ultimately, Lionel, along with Sam and Coco, represent more complex and nuanced depictions of blackness and black identity than have traditionally been portrayed in American television.

## Conclusion

As Lionel notes in “Chapter II,” “while endless depictions of white men in particular exist, there aren’t that many versions of [African Americans] in the culture. Culture has a powerful way of telling people what they can and can’t be. For people of color, the options are rather limited” (00:06:50-00:07:06). Although the number of African American actors working in television has noticeably increased compared to previous decades, most roles available to them continue to be rooted in historical stereotypes, and thus television audiences are resultantly much more inclined to make generalizations and negative assumptions towards the African American community as a whole (Punyanunt-Carter 241, 244; Ford 271).

Herman Gray observes that representations of African Americans in popular television are largely situated within existing “hierarchies of privilege and power,” thus conforming to hegemonic whiteness (10). Although black television producers such as Shonda Rhimes and Tyler Perry have been praised for increasing black representation on screen, some commentators have also criticized their various television series for neglecting issues of race and promoting inauthentic versions of blackness based on respectability politics, respectively (Joseph 315; Di Leonardo 361). In contrast, Justin Simien’s *Dear White People* is entirely concerned with race, the subject of which forms the fabric of the series.

Popular television is recognized for its capability to form or reform notions of race amongst audiences (Ford 266), and *Dear White People* deserves critical attention for its attempt to reform conceptions of blackness in the medium. Instead of treating the black community as a monolith, the three protagonists of *Dear White People*—Sam, Coco, and Lionel—each occupy unique black identities, and struggle to reconcile them with culturally accepted notions of blackness. When considering how Trump’s election as President of the United States has ushered in a resurgence of white power norms and destigmatized racial prejudice, *Dear White People* demonstrates significant cultural relevance. *Dear White People*’s triumvirate of protagonists not only subvert prominent stereotypes of blackness that Trump himself has espoused as president, but also represent a milestone in black televisual representation through asserting the complexity of black identity.

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# Fleischer Studio's Superman and a Darker Side of the "Good War"<sup>1</sup>

ALLAN W. AUSTIN

Harry Donenfeld must have felt like he was on the top of the world in 1941. After years of eking out a tenuous living on the margins of the pulp publishing industry, Donenfeld had stumbled across a gold mine in 1938 when he bought the rights to Superman for a paltry \$130. Not really understanding the Man of Steel's potential, Donenfeld worried right up to the publication of *Action Comics* that Superman would be a colossal flop, especially after seeing the cover—featuring the hero with a car raised over his head—and finding the presentation so “ridiculous” and “crazy” that “nobody would believe it” (Jones 123-4; Wright 9). The comic was a huge hit, nonetheless, and Donenfeld, swiftly alert to Superman's marketability, looked to exploit the Man of Steel's sudden popularity. The previously indifferent McClure Syndicate, for example, was now interested in a daily Superman newspaper comic strip, and Donenfeld also cut a deal with Fleischer Studios to make a serialized cartoon starring the superhero (Wright 12-4; Jones 142, 174).

Undoubtedly proud of his success and growing bank account, Donenfeld invited an old childhood friend, David Dubinsky, now a major player in the American Federation of Labor, to the first screening of the Superman cartoon series, which occurred not long before the United States joined World War II. The

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union man was unimpressed, bluntly remarking to a “glowing” Donenfeld, “It’s got no social significance” (Jones 158, 160-1). Here, however, Dubinsky missed the point. While the cartoons might have seemed childishly insignificant to him, they actually expose a more revealing view of the wartime United States than the labor leader either could acknowledge or perhaps understand.

Indeed, the war that would soon arrive at the United States’ doorstep raised hopes for some Americans but fears for others about the counterhegemonic possibilities of building a more egalitarian nation for women and people of color. Uncertain of what the future might be, Americans looked to any number of sources, including Superman, for guidance. As Marek Wasielewski has written, the Man of Steel is “intrinsically connected to the cultural and historical context in which he is imagined. Superman always embodies the specific moment of his (re)creation” (6). A rising symbol of “truth, justice, and the American Way” during the war, Superman’s cartoon adventures on the silver screen helped Americans cope with changes that seemed potentially far-reaching for women and nonwhites in American society. “It was,” as William Chafe has written, “a time of anxiety and fear. It was also a moment of possibility” (27, vii, 1-2).

In response to this crucial juncture in American history and the chance for meaningful reform it presented, Superman’s big-screen adventures reinforced a cultural hegemony based in white patriarchy, proposing traditional norms as the best solution. In this way, the Fleischer cartoons worked (like mass culture more generally does as well) to “mark the boundaries of permissible discourse” and thus shape “cultural definitions of race, ethnicity, and gender” in ways that justify “existing power relations” (Lears 569-70, 572). The cartoons, to put it more directly, wrapped themselves in an understanding of the “American Way” that looked backward instead of forward in urging that women remain subordinated to “real” men (if not Clark Kent) and that nonwhite Americans be associated with difference, inferiority, and threat, not inclusion.

## A “Good” War?

Scholars have written a good deal about Superman, but the seventeen cartoons produced by Fleischer (released between September 1941 and July 1943) have received relatively scant attention. This despite the fact that critics have heaped praise upon them. Leonard Maltin, for instance, believes the series to have been “among the best fantasy cartoons ever produced” (Maltin 122, 120). Gerard Jones

describes, perhaps somewhat breathlessly, Superman's silver-screen adventures as "the most stunning cartoon action ever on screen" (158). Leslie Cabarga likewise celebrates the cartoon, marking the series as "a significant event in the history of animation" (180). Such aesthetic and technological consideration, however, has not been matched by historical examination and close textual analysis. This study begins to remedy this lack, especially in an effort to redress popular, celebratory, and oversimplified misunderstandings of World War II as the "Good War."

It is, of course, not hard to understand why Americans have decided to remember the fighting in this way. The war, after all, stands as a defining event of the twentieth century, helping Americans finally conquer the Great Depression, pushing their nation to unprecedented global hegemony, and shaping the ways in which Americans defined themselves as well as their country. Postwar celebrations have thus tended to paint the war as both successful and moral, a conflict that brought both unity and affluence (Jeffries ix, 8-10; Takaki 3-4; Wynn 463). As a result, Americans generally remember WWII as their nation's "finest hour" (Wynn 463).

Such uncritical memories have considerable power in shaping how Americans understand the social consequences of World War II, allowing them to imagine it as a conflict that generated substantial and positive change for groups long marginalized in American history. For instance, many Americans choose to remember an unchallenged wartime liberation of women, embodied by the popularized notion of "Rosie the Riveter" and the various kinds of empowerment that seemingly came along with it. Similarly, Americans can look back on the war, via popular culture produced both during and after it, and remember integrated "All-American platoons," comparably fictionalized images that misleadingly suggest that people of color (and especially African Americans) achieved transformative changes—in the military, and also the work force and society—during WWII. If such misguided conceptions are taken too far, the war can be seen as establishing American predominance on the global stage and simultaneously crafting a broadly egalitarian society across lines of gender and race.

These positive memories obscure the significant resistance to such democratic reform on the part of many Americans. (Jeffries 4, 8-9, 11-2; Wynn 463, 470-8). The substantial changes encouraged by the war, in fact, inevitably raised questions about a nation (as well as a world) that seemed almost totally transformed. In this way, American entry into the worldwide conflict certainly opened opportunities for women and people of color to question and even challenge traditional hierarchies

that had long undergirded American society; however, such openings hardly meant broad public support for far-reaching social change. Instead, faced with growing domestic uncertainties generated by the world-wide conflagration, Americans struggled to ascertain just what their nation should (or would) look like in the war's aftermath. As they did so, they cast about for reassurance in response to growing anxieties that were disguised—both then and later—by golden visions of an “American Century.”

### Superman and American Women at War

Wartime pressures to elevate the status of women presented one such source of anxiety. Indeed, the war opened the possibility of challenging what R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt have described as a “hegemonic masculinity” that allows “men’s dominance over women to continue.” Such dominance, they contend, did not require force (although force could be marshalled to support it, to be sure); male superiority could also be achieved via “culture, institutions, and persuasion” (832-3). Masculine hegemony had been constantly enforced (and reinforced) across the scope of American history in the face of new challenges before WWII, a historical reality revealing that gender hierarchies could in fact evolve, potentially in significant and even radical ways (Connell and Messerschmidt 832). The possibility of real change must have excited some and terrified other Americans, and the cartoon version of Superman, sympathizing with those who resisted such changes, did his best—in concert with a host of cultural and official entities—to hold the line during the war.

The developments of the early years of WWII, indeed, brought significant changes for women that divided Americans. Going to college and to work in larger numbers, women asserted an emerging agency as they took advantage of new opportunities “with skill and ingenuity” (Chafe 9; Dorn 534-6). Their educational assertiveness carried over from the Great Depression, when “college enrollment for women soared,” jumping by about 120,000 between 1930 and 1940. This translated into significantly more women receiving bachelor’s degrees, the number growing from almost 49,000 in 1930 to about 77,000 in 1940 (Nash and Romero, 2, 6, 20-3; Solomon, 142). During the war, college women entered traditionally male programs of study in larger numbers, and some assumed positions of leadership and political activism on and off campus. (Dorn 534-6, 541-52; Solomon 167-9) No longer actively discouraged or barred from employment, women also went to work

in unprecedented numbers. Some six million or more took jobs during the war, increasing the percentage of women in the workforce from 25% in 1940 to 36% by 1945 and making "Rosie the Riveter" an iconic wartime figure. Many of the new laborers initially imagined working only "for the duration," as the government bluntly suggested to them; however, by war's end many had begun to think differently (Blum 94-5; Chafe 8-11; Jeffries 5, 93-7, 102; Ware, 23).

But if some Americans, looking at such changes, believed that a "revolution" in gender norms had occurred, others were skeptical of such a drastic transformation. The latter, of course, could point to continuing gender discrimination in employment and the military as well as the persistence of gender segregated jobs. In addition, historians have noted, women had virtually no voice in the most important policy-making bodies, suffered a double standard in wages, and struggled to find adequate childcare facilities. Furthermore, women were themselves divided about what the future ought to look like; while a new-found agency and sense of opportunities outside the home inspired some, to be certain, others remained loyal to more traditional understandings of gender norms (Blum 94-5; Chafe 11-4, 25-6; Jeffries 101). It seems fair to say that the balance sheet was at best profoundly mixed for women, raising questions about just what the postwar world would look like.

Lois Lane, the female protagonist in Superman's adventures, found herself caught in the crosshairs of this cultural confusion. Lois arrived in the newsroom, indeed, not all that long after women had begun studying journalism in increasing numbers at college. (Nash and Romero, 20-3) Much like her real-world professional contemporaries who had to fight to move to jobs beyond the society pages or the rewrite desks, Lois also found limited opportunities in her new profession, confined in her earliest comic book appearances to the role of "'sob sister'—a dismissive term given to female reporters who wrote human interest stories, often with heart-tugging, sentimental hooks" (Nash and Romero, 25-6; Ware, 75-6; Weldon 22). The war seemingly brought new opportunities for Lois, especially on the silver screen. Here, Glen Weldon has noted that the cartoon version of the reporter was "considerably more tenacious and resourceful" than her comic-book counterpart; the cartoon version of Lois still needed rescuing, to be sure, but she was "her own woman—and one hell of a reporter" (47). Examinations of the Superman cartoons in terms of gender have, surprisingly, not gone much further than this broad generalization, in particular in failing to explore just how the cartoon treated this new-found assertiveness and independence.

Superman's cartoon adventures ultimately confronted the gendered complexities of wartime by depicting a limited sort of female empowerment; however, the cartoons ultimately came down firmly on the side of tradition as a bulwark against the anxieties engendered by such changes. The series' first episode, titled "Superman," captured the fundamentals of what would define Lois Lane's character in all the stories that followed: an ambitious and independent career woman, who from time to time gets to play the action hero, but always finds herself in peril and need of rescue, a reality undercutting any seeming celebration of her new-found agency. Lois establishes her independence at the start, protesting when the chief assigns Clark to work with her that she wants "the chance to crack the story on my own." Before her boss can respond to her demand, Lois sets off to investigate alone. She briefly assumes the role of action hero, dressing in a pilot's uniform and taking off in her one-seat propeller plane. Her heroism is short-lived, however, as she somewhat naively lands her plane next to a laboratory and then knocks on the front door, where the mad scientist easily captures her; she can now only await Superman's rescue. Thus, and ever, the story of Lois.

Scenes of Lois as the seemingly independent career woman follow throughout the rest of the series as she asserts herself against men. When Clark volunteers to join her in covering the story of a (temporarily) frozen giant creature being brought to Metropolis, she demurs, worrying that he might very likely faint in the face of such danger. "You scare so easily," she acidly observes to her unwanted colleague ("The Arctic Giant"). In "Volcano," Lois again sets out to work alone, grabbing their press passes away from Clark and later depriving her co-worker of access to the story. As they leave, the chief urges the pair to "work together for a change," but his plea falls on deaf ears. Clark readily agrees, but Lois refuses to acknowledge his order. Lois also contests a Native American villain who demands that Manhattan be returned to his people, dismissing his claim as simply too "fantastic" to take seriously ("Electric Earthquake"). In all such interactions, Lois asserts her status as—in her own words—an "ace" reporter who remains staunchly independent in her relationships with men ("Terror on the Midway").

Such assertiveness leads Lois, repeatedly, to pursue big scoops on her own, another way in which her character gestured toward what seemed an independence from men. She might pretend to play a submissive role as a woman—as, for example, when she tells Clark in one instance that she is just "getting the woman's angle on [a] story"—but she is actually pursuing something more ambitious: the story that, by implication, had previously belonged to men ("The Mechanical

Monsters"). When things go bad in "The Arctic Giant" and the slumbering monster is awakened, Lois is thrilled—"Boy, what a story," she exclaims—and refuses to evacuate. Similarly, "The Mechanical Monsters" and "Japoteurs" both see Lois stowing away (in a flying robot and a super-bomber, respectively) in her pursuit of a big scoop. Finally, Lois's nose for news is impressive; even though her boss quickly dismisses the Native American's threat of retribution if Manhattan is not returned, Lois knows better, sneaking off to follow the villain and even hiding aboard his boat to get the story that her boss cannot yet see ("Electric Earthquake"). Similarly, her instincts prove true in sniffing out a story of industrial sabotage in "Destruction, Inc.," the reporter piecing together the evidence of a plot that threatens the industrial basis of her country's ability to fight. No story, clearly, is too big for Lois.

Lois's ambitions also repeatedly lead her to run towards danger (in contrast to the men around her), further reinforcing a purported independence. Thus, as Clark retreats to a phone booth in "The Mechanical Monsters," Lois sneaks into a compartment on a flying robot's back, demonstrating her daring spirit. She does the same as a scientist causes mayhem in Metropolis when he tries to pull a comet from the heavens but things go badly; as men flee the scene, Lois runs in the opposite direction, choosing to confront danger instead of retreating to safety ("The Magnetic Telescope"). Finally, Lois confronts the ultimate enemy—the Nazis—in "Jungle Drums," flying into the face of danger and, after her capture, refusing to break during an intense interrogation, even under the threat of torture. Eventually freed in the episode, she works bravely to save American military lives, tussling with Nazis and ultimately playing a supporting heroic role by making a radio call that arrives just in the nick of time to save an important American convoy from predatory Nazi villains.

In asserting her independence in these various ways, Lois was, at least occasionally, given the opportunity to become an action hero in her own right, seizing control of her own destiny, if only for brief moments. In this way, "Billion Dollar Limited" sees Lois jump to the defense of a train under attack, picking up a machine gun and returning fire on the bad guys, even if to limited effect. More dramatically in another cartoon in the series, when a volcano erupts, Lois finds herself in immediate danger. Trapped, she jumps up to grab a trolley wire, acrobatically swinging hand over hand while traversing a threatening landscape ("Volcano"). Even more impressive is Lois's performance when discovered by the industrial saboteurs in "Destruction, Inc.;" here, Lois eludes her ill-intentioned

male pursuers, athletically gliding up the stairs, daringly leaping onto a ledge, smoothly shimmying down a post, and swinging gracefully on a fortuitously placed rope. While she is eventually captured (necessitating, of course, another heroic rescue), her athletic prowess is undeniable. Lois also occasionally will confront male antagonists directly, perhaps most dramatically in “Showdown” when she tussles with a fake Superman, managing to tear the “S” off his chest and thus prove that he is not the real deal. In such ways, Lois embodied the potential of liberated women to become active participants in their own stories.

Whatever such positive portrayals of women at work seemed to suggest, Lois’s independence was more often and repeatedly cut short and undermined as the cartoons ultimately enforced traditional gender norms; in almost every episode her inquisitive professionalism gets her into trouble that sees her needing rescue.<sup>2</sup> In this way, the series revealed a lack of faith in the independent woman that it might be mistaken for celebrating. Indeed, the anxiety about women’s new-found agency appeared in literally every episode and could not but call into question the legitimacy of independent women. Whatever her merits, Lois always ends up in peril, for example in “The Mechanical Monsters” when a villain ties her up and suspends her over a huge pot of molten lava; she is utterly helpless, her only hope being the dramatic and timely arrival of the Man of Steel. Throughout other episodes, Lois was, to provide but a small sample of the perils from which she was saved: stalked and attacked by an enraged gorilla (“Terror on the Midway”), dropped to her seeming doom by Japanese American saboteurs who have stolen a new American super-bomber (“Japoteurs”), threatened by a tribe of hawk people who want to sacrifice her (“The Underground World”), and bound and threatened by a Japanese firing squad (“Eleventh Hour”). In such and myriad other ways, the series repeatedly questioned the independence of women; whatever the short-term accomplishments of Lois, her actions ultimately bring her nothing but failure that necessitates a man’s intervention.

Such rescues in this way repeatedly implied that women’s new-found agency was suspect, and occasionally the series went further in driving this point home. For instance, “The Magnetic Telescope” reinforces the inferiority of Lois when she is rescued by Superman, who digs her out of debris. When Superman asks if she is unharmed, Lois replies that she is fine as she brushes her hair, reminding viewers

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<sup>2</sup> This would prove true in all of them, but the final episode, “Secret Agent,” replaced Lois with a blonde protagonist, who, while professional and independent, also, unsurprisingly, needed rescue.

that she is more object than agent. When Lois stumbles into danger in “The Arctic Giant” and finds herself about to be eaten by the giant monster, Superman arrives to save her. He then verbally reinforces her proper “place,” sternly lecturing her, “Now this time stay put.” Lois dutifully obeys, saying, “Yes, m’lord.” While such visual and verbal lessons were not as common as the ubiquitous rescues, these scenes certainly reinforce the message—present throughout the entire series—that any growing assertiveness and independence on the part of women was suspect. In this way, women might make some short-term contributions, but these were no more permanent in the cartoons than they were in real life, where women were expected to contribute only “for the duration,” after which men would again assume control in the workplace and beyond. Here, the cartoon—reflecting and reinforcing hegemonic social messages—asserted traditional gender norms as best for women, even in the allegedly new world ushered in by the war. Superman remained clearly her superior and her savior, winking—sometimes literally—at viewers to let them in on the joke of her seeming emancipation. Whatever gains women might be making, Superman, like many Americans, seemed unwilling to abandon traditional norms, looking to past traditions, and not future innovation, to provide solutions to contemporary concerns.

### Superman, Race, and WWII

The war also threatened to unsettle American race relations, ultimately bringing “small progress in the midst of massive racism” (Chafe 16). In this way, the transformations wrought by war encouraged more than two million African Americans to move north and west for new jobs and convinced President Franklin Roosevelt to create the Fair Employment Practice Committee (after A. Philip Randolph threatened a massive protest, of course) to protect their right to have them. At the same time, however, African Americans found themselves excluded from more than a dozen national trade unions, received limited help from the FEPC, and confronted racial violence, most prominently in urban race riots, with little support from government leaders. Such mistreatment spurred black activism, with growing numbers joining the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, talking about fighting for equality at home as well as abroad, and initiating protests (Blum 11, 182-8, 199-207; Chafe 15-9; Jeffries 108). The story was no better, and sometimes worse, for other nonwhites. After Pearl Harbor, Japanese Americans—citizens and aliens alike—found themselves facing the reality of exile

and mass incarceration, processes that deprived them of their basic rights. Even though others like Mexican Americans and Native Americans found some new opportunities in employment and military service opened by the war, wartime proved a mixed bag at best, as racism and discrimination continued to limit nonwhites. Anti-Semitism flourished, too (Chafe 19-22). Racism and prejudice had deep roots in American history; they were hardly going to disappear over the course of four short years (Blum 147).

Some scholars have nonetheless teased out more positive trends during the war. Ronald Takaki, looking back on the war as a moment of possibility, observes that some wartime intellectuals came to understand a fundamental incongruity: Americans fought for freedom but lived in a country in which all men and women were not created equal. He also notes that grass-roots activists demanded “inclusion in the democracy that they were defending.” In doing so, he avers, “they stirred a rising wind of diversity’s discontent, unfurling a hopeful vision of America as a multicultural democracy” that would provide an important foundation for the coming “Civil Rights Revolution” (Takaki 4-7). John W. Jeffries similarly, with the benefit of historical hindsight, argues that the war—despite racial tensions throughout—laid the groundwork for change and racial assertiveness (5, 144). Takaki and Jeffries can pull such optimistic threads together in looking back on the war and what followed; however, Chafe is right to note an even more important understanding: Americans at the time just didn’t know what was coming as a result of the war. “It was too soon,” he writes, “to say what it all meant” (19). The question of just what would come next generated anxieties, as Americans imagined different futures, some aspiring to a return to traditional norms, others envisioning a more innovative future.

Superman waded into these troubled waters with certain predispositions on race. The initial comic-book version of the character had embraced reform, albeit with limits made clear by the ways in which race was not addressed. In his earliest published adventures, Superman was a somewhat edgy, New Deal-style reformer who fought for the common man, but his reform agenda avoided issues of race (as the New Deal often did as well). The war then transformed the Man of Steel into a determined supporter of the very status quo that he had not that long ago questioned. Now wrapping himself in the American flag (especially on his covers), Superman’s wartime comic-book stories actually shied away from the war, adopting instead “an increasingly whimsical, juvenile tone” that continued to offer little in the way of

overt racial commentary (Wright, 22-9, 55; Gordon, "Nostalgia," 184; Weldon, 60).<sup>3</sup>

In addition to his own comic-book history, Superman's retrogressive relationship to race on the big screen was shaped by other historical forces. The racism endemic in early American animation, for one, compounded the problem, hardly predisposing the cartoon's creators to address race in progressive ways. Early American cartoons presented a wide range of racist images and understandings in the antics of characters including, among the better known, Felix the Cat and Mickey Mouse, and Fleischer Studios had actually profited from signature characters like Betty Boop and Ko-Ko, who starred in some episodes grounded in racism. This era of cartoons, indeed, "produced the most racist and sexist depictions of people of color in cartoon history." (Behnken and Smithers 83, 84, 85-92; Sammond 130, 132, 140-2) "Whether any specific animator was or was not racist," Nicholas Sammond concludes, "the practices that animators by necessity entered into were" (146).

Furthermore, the political context hardly encouraged serious consideration of racial reform. As Wendy L. Wall has shown, conservative opposition to the Office of War Information's advocacy for "greater racial equality" had wide-ranging and stultifying results; in response, the government resorted to linking tolerance and unity as twinned wartime ideals that marginalized those pushing for equality as "troublemakers, traitors to an 'American Way' that often put civility and social harmony above all else." As a result, calls for tolerance could condemn individual bigots but not federal policies or systems of power (Wall 116, 132, 149-50). Such realities made it easier for Superman's cartoon creators to resist OWI requests (and, indeed, even DC Comics' occasional efforts) "to present American society as a great melting pot," instead showcasing racial diversity as only threat (Munson 6-7; Wright 44-5, 34, 53-5). Set in this milieu, the Fleischer series mirrored other less progressive aspects of superhero popular culture more directly, especially in terms of engaging in paternalistic and reductive understandings of non-whites, imagining an internal racial threat, and amplifying a hateful, racialized portrayal of Japanese

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<sup>3</sup> Superman confronted race more directly in the newspapers, on the radio, and on the silver screen, of course, especially in denigrating the Japanese and Japanese American enemy (Chang 37-60; Gordon *Superman*, 44; Munson 5-13; Weldon 57). Scholars, however, have done very little with issues of race beyond Japanese and Japanese Americans, leaving unexplored the broader racial politics at play in the cartoons and, as a result, the ways in which these shorts help us better understand the American home front.

and Japanese Americans (Austin and Hamilton 14-5, 25-49; Munson 5-15; Wright 36-7, 54-5, 39, 45-7).

The Fleischers' Superman series, indeed, adopted a hard line against racial reform, presenting any and all racial difference, both at home and abroad, as a threat to white institutions and white Americans. In doing so, the cartoons assumed the United States to be a white society and supported an implied white supremacy. When Lois interviews the mayor of Metropolis, the city's inhabitants (and power brokers) are presented as uniformly white, manifestly connected to the progress associated with the modern, sleek Metropolis that they have built ("Bulleaters"). In contrast, when Lois and Clark investigate Mt. Monokoa, located somewhere in the Pacific, the natives scurry about hopelessly as lava approaches, looking disorganized and helpless, their primitive nature emphasized by their horse- and person-drawn carriages ("Volcano"). Closer to home, "Terror on the Midway" metaphorically connected danger with challenges to the long-established racial hierarchy. In this episode, staged at a local circus, a brown-skinned fire-eater performs backgrounded by a series of posters that connote exotic danger, one depicting a black panther pouncing on a barely-clothed African and another showcasing a giant, menacing ape, big enough to hold a person in each hand. The gorilla that later stalks Lois in this episode offers but a thinly veiled sense of racialized threat. Clearly, racial difference represented substantial danger to white Americans.

As suggested by the circus scene, racial difference in the cartoons threatened American unity and security. Native Americans present just such an internal enemy in "Electric Earthquake." Here, the unnamed villain—standing in for Native Americans generally—arrives with his unsmiling, rocky visage and longer, black hair, all of which immediately type him as Native American. When he visits the newspaper offices to demand that Manhattan be returned to "my people," he speaks in a stereotypically stoic fashion, standing proudly, arms folded across his chest, the classic image of the Native American; his suit and tie hardly mask his inherent primitiveness. When the reporters challenge their visitor, he snarls and the whites of his eyes grow large before he stalks off to ominous music. While hypocritically polite to Lois—gallantly stepping aside to allow her to enter an elevator first, for instance—the threat of the "Other" reaches its climax when he shackles Lois and later leaves her for dead in his flooding underwater headquarters, revealing a racialized threat to white womanhood. Whites might be trusted to pull together to fight the war, but non-whites presented a threat lurking within society.

Japanese Americans joined Native Americans as another racialized threat in “Japoteurs,” which launched a harsh attack that implicitly made clear the need for the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans (Austin 51-6). Here, the Japanese American saboteur, like the Native American, is instantly identifiable as dangerous and “Other.” He speaks with a thick accent, and his buck teeth and thick glasses play to widely held wartime stereotypes associated with his assumed inferior racial ancestry. Even more insidiously, the villain pretends to be loyal to the United States, a poster of the Statue of Liberty seemingly signifying his love of country, but is of course disloyal, as revealed when the poster transforms into a symbol of the rising sun (when no one else is watching, of course). His efforts to steal a new American super-bomber fit him into another stereotypical expectation as he attacks from behind. Finally, Lois’s call of distress after the plane is hijacked lays bare the racial threat: “Japs,” she radios, using the universal wartime racial epithet that collapsed Japanese and Japanese Americans alike into one undifferentiated and threatening mass, are up to no good. That the “Japoteur” also threatens white womanhood in attempting to drop Lois to her death suggests that such racial threat was both broad and nefarious.

Additional racial threats existed inside the U.S. “The Mummy Strikes,” for instance, highlighted the threat of brown-skinned Egyptians. Opening to roaring flames, an Egyptian tomb, and foreign-sounding music, this episode centers on the legend of an Egyptian boy king whose protectors—apparently ensconced in a barbaric culture—drank poison to join their leader in the afterlife after he died. Years later, in a local museum, the guardsmen’s blank, white eyes glow to ominous life. The menacing, brown-skinned guards attack, grabbing Lois, who is dwarfed by their fantastic size. Even though Superman eventually achieves victory over these menacing monsters, their lurking presence, hidden in an unassuming Metropolis museum, warned of a pervasive non-white threat to white women and wartime American society.

A racialized threat abroad included the Japanese enemy. In “Eleventh Hour,” Lois and Clark venture to Japan to report on the war. Clark, however, also sneaks off every night at 11 o’clock as Superman to commit sabotage. His actions enrage the Japanese militarists, who decide to make an example of Lois, kidnapping her and sentencing her to death before a firing squad. Throughout the film, the Japanese appear more like animals than humans, their appearance suggesting a kinship to rodents and their actions driven by unthinking anger. The showdown with the firing squad again plays to the idea of a racialized threat to white womanhood, although

the scene also critiques Japanese manhood when, in silhouette, a Japanese soldier approaches Lois; his sword hangs down, suggesting a limp phallus. He may have evil intentions towards Lois, but he will be impotent in acting on them. And, indeed, Superman arrives at the last moment to save Lois, doling out a well-deserved beating to her captors, suggesting hope in the battle versus the racialized “Other.”

Africa presented a racial threat, too, as the cartoon suggested that Africans’ ignorance made them susceptible to control by outsiders like the Nazis, a reality necessitating American intervention in the world. In doing so, the cartoons mimicked a prominent theme in comics of the day in which Nazis “exploited [non-white, colonized peoples] to suit their own hostile interests” (Wright 37) “Jungle Drums” opens to an exotic and darkly-lit scene, intending to portray a most primitive Africa. Here, in a society dominated by the Nazis, a priest in a horned helmet, arms outspread, appears as red lighting bathes the scene, all suggesting an ominous and threatening locale. Africans often appear in silhouette, their top knots seemingly elongating their skulls into more simian shapes. When shot from above in groups, the Africans appear disorganized, scurrying back and forth almost like ants and implying a chaotic society. Under Nazi control, the natives prepare to burn Lois at the stake (as white womanhood never escapes a racialized threat in Superman cartoons featuring non-white characters), an ominous drumming building tension for the viewers. Here again, the Africans have ape-like features, their arms too long for their bodies, as they dance and walk in primitive fashion, almost like monkeys. As the flames grow, the drummers come into better focus, their war-painted cheeks and simian features all grotesquely highlighted by the red/orange light thrown by the growing fire. As the scene continues, Africans wear strange garb—loin cloths, bones through their noses, bracelets on their wrists, ankles, and biceps—and are hidden in the shadows, further dehumanizing them. As Superman restores order, “Jungle Drums” served as a call to intervention for Americans grounded in blunt racism: if Americans did not take control of what the cartoon presented as inferior peoples, their enemies would.

### Conclusion: Superman as Savior?

WWII thus simultaneously opened new opportunities for women and people of color while reinforcing traditional roles and hierarchies. This paradoxical process led inexorably to increasing tensions, no matter how much myths of the “Good War” have obscured such realities. In the face of pressing concerns about gender

and race, Fleischer Studios offered Superman as a solution (Jeffries 93). In doing so, the studio presented a hero who both reflected and helped to constitute American norms (Gordon, *Superman* 52). The hero, to be certain, had his charms for Americans living in a world at war. At the start of each episode, Superman arrives to upbeat music, suggesting optimism and energy. In "Superman," his origin story presents the hero as something of an angel come to earth, arriving from Krypton backgrounded by heavenly harps. As he (at least indirectly) addressed assertions of gender and racial equality, the Man of Steel assumed the moral high ground; it should be pointed out that Superman, as Americans liked to believe about themselves, never starts a fight—he only finishes them, using a combination of resilience, strength, and intelligence to overcome whatever threats may come his (and Americans') way. In case viewers missed the larger symbolic point, later episodes emphasized Superman as embodying the United States. In "Terror on the Midway," for instance, as Clark changes into Superman, his shadow is cast against a circus tent's broad red and white strips, almost as if he is transforming in front of an American flag. Even more directly, the final episode, "Secret Agent," sees the hero, his mission completed, salute a massive American flag.<sup>4</sup>

Americans might have liked to have imagined that they could transform into Superman as easily as Clark, allowing some escape from the worries that beset them. Such security was, of course, deceptive. That Superman offered something different—and better—was made clear by the fact that the Man of Steel had his own set of model charts, different from Clark Kent's, at the studio. Further setting Superman off from his more mild-mannered alter ego, Clark's voice was given "a quavering tenor" while Superman, the new American, spoke in a "powerful baritone" (Cabarga 177). If Clark was not up to the challenges of the new world, Superman clearly was, or at least was intended to be. The purportedly "new" solutions offered by Superman, however, ironically looked only backward, and not forward.

Superman's adventures, indeed, suggested a retreat to tradition as the best solution to the possible changes raised by the war. When J.P. Telotte argues that

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<sup>4</sup> Superman's inherent goodness is cemented, of course, by the inherent evil of those he faces down. For instance, "Superman" introduced a recurring theme in the series by showcasing a villain who has no discernible motive; he acts in evil ways, as best the viewer can tell, only because he is an evil guy. At other times, the bad guys act irrationally; "Billion Dollar Limited," for example, presents criminals who target a train not to steal all the money onboard but simply to destroy it.

some of Superman's cartoon villains presented "a threat to normalcy," he gestures toward a larger point regarding the Man of Steel's big-screen WWII adventures: the episodes were suffused with a quiet, if rising and anxious acknowledgment that things might never be the same (293). Thus, as Superman went to battle, his cartoons attempted to ease American anxieties about the potential changes that were arising from the war. As a result, Marc DiPaolo correctly points out that the Superman cartoons were "more politically conservative than the comic book" and might even be considered "reactionary" (156; Dial 328).

This reality, however, seems to have been largely forgotten by most Americans today, who prefer to ignore the ways in which past versions of Superman have embodied unsavory qualities. Such romantic memories, Weldon argues, were later laid bare when DC "killed" Superman in 1992, provoking outrage at what many—and often casual—fans saw as "a curiously personal attack on something good, innocent, and fondly (if dimly) remembered." This was true, Weldon argues, because Superman "is not the hero with whom we identify [as Americans]; he is the hero in whom we believe. He is the first, the purest, the ideal" (Munson 5; Weldon 3, 4). As a result, for example, Americans tend to remember the wartime Superman doing his patriotic part to sell war bonds, but forget the ways in which he belittled and dehumanized the Japanese enemy to do so. As Ian Gordon has pointed out, race hatred helped to build national unity in early 1940s America (Gordon, *Superman* 44). An examination of the wartime cartoons in any detail serves to remind us, in this way, that there was a much less seemly side to the Man of Steel during the war, one that presented sexist and racist understandings of the "American Way" that Americans would continue to grapple with long after war's end, spurring civil rights and feminist movements demanding equality that clearly had not been achieved during the war. The much-neglected Superman cartoons thus provide essential, if previously unrealized, insights into some darker realities of what so many remember as just the "Good War."

Recognizing this more complex silver-screen Superman who emerged amidst the profound social challenges ignited by the war helps us better understand one prominent regressive solution favored by anxious Americans as they faced the threat of potentially far-reaching changes. Such attitudes had long-term consequences. Americans would win the war, but even then substantial work remained to be done in sorting out issues revolving around gender and race that had been made increasingly clear by that very conflict. In this way, winning WWII—no matter how much Americans then or since have wanted to believe otherwise—

was not the conclusion of a story of greatness; it is instead better understood as the opening chapter of a story that is still unfolding around them, even in the early years of the twenty-first century. In this way, the war evoked confidence and bravado, to be certain. But it also generated worries—even if they lurked beneath the triumphal spirit of the early postwar years—that encouraged Americans not to build a new, more equitable future but instead to fight a rear-guard action against nascent changes geared towards greater equality, pushing back against the claims to equality made by women and people of color. In this darker side of the so-called “Good War,” Superman encouraged viewers to understand the world in simplistic terms of good versus evil, promoting ways of thinking that didn't bode well for solving problems of race and gender, either at home or abroad. As a result, wartime society, whatever the American myths of unity and confidence, struggled to work through such issues, leaving Americans today to turn to superheroes to rescue them from wartime problems that they never really escaped.

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## The Myth of the Perfect Place: Creating a Voyeuristic Utopia in *House Hunters International*

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A single, African American woman living in Brooklyn New York and teaching at a local college, regrets that she did not study abroad while in college, so she applies for a position in the United Arab Emirates and flies off to start her new life. Her friends gather to reminisce about her time in New York and scenes of her in a late-night musical jam session are shown under the talk and the laughter. The scene changes, and Maisha Perkins is in Dubai with her friend Arthur Rogiers, who flew in from Spain to help her get settled. The two of them meet an English-speaking real estate agent, Andrea Theoni Karidis, to look for an apartment. The requirements for the apartment are reviewed: two bedrooms, two baths, a sea-view, and hopefully something close to the nightlife of Dubai; the budget is announced at \$2000 a month. Three properties are shown to the American expats, two in a high-rise building in Ajman, one of the 7 principalities, we learn, that make up the UAB. One has a city view but is well below the budget, one is more expensive, but has a panoramic view of the Arabian Sea. The third apartment is a one-bedroom in Dubai that is also slightly over the anticipated housing budget for “Mai.” The apartments are shown in similar ways: entrance, living room, bedrooms, kitchen, baths and then the view from the balcony that comes with each furnished unit. At the end of the tours, Mai and Rogier walk along the beachfront and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each apartment, eliminate one from consideration, and then choose the place where Mai will live. Three months later she is shown in her new place enjoying an evening with people who “are becoming good friends,” as well as several shots of her leaving her building and walking across the street to

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the beach. Her move from Brooklyn to the UAB is complete, her housing is perfect, and her experience of living abroad is successful.

The story of Mai and her search for a place to live in the UAE is shown on a program titled *House Hunters International (HHI)*, produced by Pie Town Productions (Leopard Films USA) and carried on the basic cable channel Home and Garden Television (HGTV). Discovery, Inc., a global leader in real life entertainment, owns HGTV as well as Discovery Channel, Food Network, TLC, Investigation Discovery, and OWN: Oprah Winfrey Network. This particular program is an offshoot of the original *House Hunters*, where prospective buyers or renters of properties in the United States are shown going through the selection process. *HHI* premiered in February 2006, and has the same form as *House Hunters*, only the search is carried on by an individual, couple, or family looking for a place to live in an international location, and the people showcased are no longer limited to Americans. There have been over 1,700 episodes produced and aired on HGTV (*thetvdb.com*). Its viewership is about 25 million people per episode and it is “consistently ranked in Nielsen’s Top 20 US Cable programs” (*Leopardusa.com*). Leopard Films, the producers of *HHI*, reports that they have had over 11,000 applications from potential participants on the show, have visited 118 countries, and generally have four film crews traveling to 45 countries and 131 locations during any given year.

The premise of the program—following the purchase or rental of a property for people moving to an international location—serves as a unique narrative on television that invites viewers to consider moving abroad. While other programs review international locations and give travel advice, like Anthony Bourdain’s *Parts Unknown*, Michael Palin’s *Travels*, or any of the travel shows with Rick Steves, *HHI* is unique in its representation of people who are actually planning to live in another country rather than just taking an international vacation. In this essay we argue that *HHI* utilizes a rigid, repeating structure to present the process of moving abroad as a utopic vision and an adventure that always has a happy ending. The people always find a house or apartment that suits their needs, the living choice always works within their finances, and it becomes part of their always successful move abroad. Importantly, the show places the viewer in a position of an observer of the searching process and makes them privy to the private deliberations of the individuals, couples, and families seek living quarters while also creating a space

for viewers to participate vicariously in the house selection.<sup>1</sup> Thus, *HHI* invites the viewer to consider moving abroad, creating a voyeuristic utopia of perfect people, perfect places, and perfect living.

In this paper we argue that through the creation of a voyeuristic utopia *House Hunters International* silences the complex social, political, and cultural contexts of the locations on the show and promotes an unproblematic view of Western privilege inherent in the ease with which Western bodies move transnationally. Our examination of *HHI* is based on a review of a representative sample of roughly 500 episodes of the show. Episodes selected for review represent the different seasons in the show's existence, the wide range of race, gender, socio-economic and familial status of the guests on the program, as well as the geographic distribution of the program's locations. To begin we will first analyze the narrative structure, paying particular attention to how the rigid nature of the show is part of the appeal of the show and allows viewers to participate in the program. Next, we will examine the three dimensions of creating a utopic vision: viewer identification, positive representation, and voyeuristic participation. We will then discuss the implications of the creation of a voyeuristic utopia for viewers of *HHI*.

### Narrative Structure of *House Hunters International*

In Aristotle's "The Poetics" he observed that drama consisted of plot, characters, and themes that have, quite simply, a beginning, a middle, and an end, a prescient anticipation of the regimented structure of current television production (Fyfe). In the ensuing 2000 years, the development of narrative theory has examined structure in a variety of ways, leading to an understanding of television as perhaps the most repetitious of artistic forms. In the early days of television, the use of similar sets, actors and narrative construction was an economic necessity for the newly formed genres of sitcoms, dramas, quiz shows, etc. borrowed from radio and film, but adapted for the voracious appetite of television for weekly or even daily production. Even as television has expanded its forms, the need for repetition and structural consistency has led to tightly controlled narratives in game shows, reality programs, cop shows, family comedies and so on. As Victoria O'Donnell writes in her book *Television Criticism*:

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the relationship between the viewer and reality TV, see Dauncey; Kaminer; Mendelson and Papacharissi; Reiss and Wiltz.

Narrative structure provides a tendency for stories to fall into predictable patterns or formulas. Some formulas are unique to certain television genres and particular shows. The crime show will have a crime solved at the end; harmony will be restored in the family situation comedy; a life will be saved in the hospital, a case will be decided in court, and so on. (86)

As a result, television has very little suspense. In almost any genre on any given show, O'Donnell argues, "the narrative presents the disturbance, followed by a crisis, ending in a resolution" (3).

*House Hunters International (HHI)* has taken this expected narrative structure and developed a "hyper-structured" program. The plot is simple and repeated in every single episode, the "characters," while not recurring, are given a minimal back story, their "personality" is displayed in brief moments of exposition, and the discourse of the story is told in virtual lockstep at every location and with every set of participants. The only surprise to the show is which home the participants will choose. This hyper-structured predictability serves two important functions: first, it creates a tightly structured narrative that provides the viewer with an ease of recognition even when setting and characters change in every episode. This in turn provides a clear and safe entrance for viewer participation wherein they can experience the pleasure of playing along with the selection process and feel the joy of reaching the same utopic ending as experienced by the renters and buyers on the program. As Fiske notes about television narratives:

[It] is exploited by the reader who "plays" the text as a musician plays a score: s/he interprets it, activates it, gives it a living presence. In doing this, the reader plays a text as one plays a game: s/he voluntarily accepts the rules of the text in order to participate in the practice that those rules make possible and pleasurable. (296)

The hyper-structured narratives of *HHI* inspire pleasure in viewers as they respond to the repetitious narrative structure with just enough "play" in the storyline (unique characters and new settings) to enjoy the program with minimal investment, but still with individual meanings associated with their watching (choosing the best house or apartment, liking or not liking the people, wishing they could visit the location or rejecting it, etc.). Second, the hyper-structured narratives allow for easy

access to the show. Unlike other types of television programming, viewers of hyper-structured reality programs like *HHI* (e.g. *House Hunters*, *Four Weddings*, *Say Yes to the Dress*, *Love It or List It*), are never lost when watching the show—not only are there frequent recaps, but no mystery exists in how the plot plays out. A viewer could tune in at any moment and understand where in the plot the show is, could quickly catch up on anything they might have missed earlier, and easily immerse themselves into the flow of the program.

As we have discussed, the structure of program genres is repetitious and the outcomes, in general, are predictable, thus the viewer finds suspense, curiosity, and satisfaction in the details and characters of a narrative. In *HHI*, the structure of the program is so intensely repetitious that the reaction to the program must be found in the participatory nature of the show and the fantasy that is created (Dauncey 83; Wong 33).

First, the structure of *HHI* episodes is particularly tight and inflexible. The programs start with a voiceover of the enigma for each story, such as this one from the “Honduras Home Hunt,” as reported on the *hgtv.com* description of the episode:

Gary Howorka and his girlfriend, Rebecca Anderson, love the laid-back lakefront home they live in on Minnesota's Lake Minnetonka. But with cold temperatures half the year and crowded tourist-filled waterways the other half, they are ready to escape to a true water-lovers paradise—a secluded tropical island. After hearing about Roatan, Honduras, from a friend, the couple went for a visit and were hooked by the friendly locals and beautiful water spots. They are ready to pack up and move there permanently. Local real estate agent Jeff J. Thekan is ready to show these Minnesotans how to invest their money wisely in a piece of island paradise.

The question then becomes simple: how will Gary and Rebecca manage their move to Honduras? The search for an answer to this question is literally the same in every episode. The guests, always new characters, are introduced and identified by their home location, often with video of them in their original surroundings. The images then shift to a montage of the location to which they are moving with a stylized map inserted to show the general starting and ending points of their journey. In short order a real estate agent is introduced, the requirements for the property the guests want to buy or rent are enumerated, the budget is set, and they begin their search for a new home. This introduction is then cut and replayed after every

commercial break, which helps keep watching audiences on track with the narrative and allows other viewers to begin watching the show at any point in the program without missing any foundational information. This structural predictability provides the viewer a sense of comfort and pleasure in their ability to participate in the selection process no matter at what point they start watching the show and enter the narrative themselves.

During conversations with the real estate agent the language is often repeated (e.g., how many bedrooms, location of the home or apartment, the range of remodel options, and the anticipated budget). Often, binary conflicts arise during these discussions (e.g., two vs. three bedrooms, urban vs. rural, turn key vs. rehab, and minimum vs. maximum budgets), creating a sense of tension and adding to the limited suspense the show may develop. Exactly three properties are then shown, with a video tour of the home or apartment while the guests and real estate agent comment on the strengths and weaknesses of each property. The tours of each property are also repeated in every episode, with shots of bedrooms, kitchens, bathrooms, closets and views of the location regularly included. After the third housing option is shown, the guests—almost always a pair—are left alone to summarize the decision-making elements and then make their choice. A denouement of sorts is then presented where the guests are shown some time after they have moved into their chosen property, and they describe how happy they are, how much they enjoy living in the new location and, often, how successful the move has been to their new country. This repetitive structure diminishes traditional elements of suspense—how will equilibrium be restored?—and supplants it with what seems like a simple participatory role for the viewer: whether to like or not like the participants' arguments for their choice, and agree or disagree with their selection of their new home or apartment. The “play along” component of the show is not unique and is a part of a variety of reality TV genres: game shows, performance programs, relationship and competition shows, and the like, but the repetitious nature of the tightly structured *HHI* series, provides viewers with a predictable and comfortable narrative.

### Creating a Utopic Vision

The idea of a utopian world, a world of perfection, is hinted at in Plato's *Republic* and given a name in Thomas More's 16<sup>th</sup> century book, *Utopia*. Since then, the idea of a “utopic vision” has found its way into a variety of academic fields—economics,

politics, religion, environmentalism, feminism and so on. However, “what is characteristic of virtually every definition of utopia is desire—for a better way of being and living,” argues Barbara Klonowska (13). “Construed broadly,” she continues, “utopia is primarily a method of thinking about reality and the way it should or could be organized to make life better” (Klonowska 13). In the case of *House Hunters International (HHI)*, participants search for that better life, by moving to a new place, with new people, and a new culture. For the show itself, it is imperative that viewers are given a sense that this utopia—this better way of living—is indeed available to them through the relocation of home. The power of the home and the drive to find perfection is, as James Mitchell theorizes, multi-faceted and intimately personal. “Home,” he writes, “molds creation of personal and family history and plans, as well as permits the activities that define family life. While never perfect, it provides a personal utopia in each member's organization of memory and vision of the future” (Mitchell 109). In the quest to find their personal perfect home, it is critical that the show creates a belief that the utopic vision is always realized. Anyone who participates will always find their utopia—and so can you, the viewer.

The utopic vision is created through a multi-step process that invites the viewer to experience identification, representation, and participation. The first step is identification, the process of creating a relationship between the viewer and the places and people on the show. The international sites featured on *HHI* tend to tilt toward traditional areas where expats can be found—the UK, Australia, Western Europe, Central America, and the Caribbean—but there is a wide range of locations that allows the viewer to experience all of the continents and a variety of urban, suburban, and rural settings. This is key to connecting with a viewer's fantasy vision of moving abroad—at any time a viewer should be able to find an episode (or episodes) featuring a country to which they fantasize traveling. For example, the representation of more common locations can be seen in the 12 episodes of season 33 (March 12, 2012 to February 17, 2013), where guests are shown in Nicaragua (twice), France (thrice), Columbia, Taiwan (twice), Belgium, Belize, Roatan, Portugal, Amsterdam, England, Naples and Anguilla. In other episodes, however, *HHI* visits locations in Bali, Tokyo, Slovenia, Shanghai, Tanzania, Thailand, Papua New Guinea, Reykjavik, Mauritius, and Cambodia. The wide array of nations and locations provides the viewer with a fantasy of places where they might move, and the house, apartments, and flats examined, with finances

clearly identified, encourages the viewer to imagine their own life in these likely, or far-flung, locations.

In addition to the variety of places, the people on the show represent a remarkable difference in family circumstance, social-economic status, sexual orientation, and motivations for their move, and provide multiple opportunities for viewers to identify with the featured guests. The people looking for housing in a new location are diverse: couples with and without children; some people are single, some married or engaged, and some unmarried; friends, business partners, or colleagues; gay or straight; men or women; Caucasian, African American, Asian, Indian, and so on. The range of socio-economic status can also be seen in the budgets they offer to rent a home or apartment. In London, Charles and Jon, dubbed the “two Dads” are a couple married for 20 years and raising three children, and have an upper level of \$16,000 a month for a city flat; Adam and Rebecca look in Bahktapur, Nepal look for an apartment costing less than \$500 a month. When purchasing a home or condo, guests like Harith and Grace budget as much as \$3 million for a home in St. John’s, US Virgin Islands while Lydia and Brian look for a condo or apartment to buy in Didim Turkey at a cost of \$95,000 or less. The spectrum of motivation for moving is also expansive, from retirees looking for relaxation and security, to young people looking for adventure; from business owners seeking a new venture, to vacation homes for hardworking expats. The variety of people featured on the program provides the viewer with many choices from which to find a role model for their own possible move, both real and fantasy.

The second step in creating a utopic vision as presented in *HHI* is the positive presentation of the cultures in the various locations. The montage during the introduction is supplemented by images of the local city or town after the commercial breaks (always between the tours of the properties). The beaches of Australia are either pristine or crowded with beautiful people, the winding streets of Cork Ireland are quaint and charming, or the undeveloped and crowded streets of Kathmandu are shown as filled with cultural color and texture. Again, the show presents a “cultural taste” to viewers to find the kind of place and lifestyle that suits their fantasies of moving abroad. Snippets of historical, architectural, economic, and cultural information are embedded in the program that stirs curiosity and appeals to viewers as they observe the activity from in front of their TV sets or computers. However, Manoucheka Celeste argues that *HHI* “does not acknowledge any racialized differences within those spaces. As such, racialized bodies in this genre of television become a part of the audience’s ‘international’ experience,

entities to be consumed rather than as actors” (530). Rarely do the participants interact with anyone local, even the realtors are frequently expats themselves. The divorce between locals and the potential buyers (and thus the viewers) presents a potential then for moving to a country without the complicated racial politics present in the viewers’ home countries. Yet particularly in places formerly colonized by European states, racialized caste systems were set in place in which the local people of color worked while white immigrants or tourists lived privileged lives (Sheller 2003). Oftentimes then the places featured on the show elide those power clashes, or as Gloria Anzaldúa writes, where “the Third World grates against the first and bleeds” (3). These spaces are thus attractive to viewers “precisely because [they are] apolitical and devoid of political consequences” (Celeste 530).

The lack of context for local people and culture in the show is essential in creating a perfect utopic vision of a country, one in which any viewer could move to seamlessly. Stuart Hall argues that representation is constitutive, that is, a place “doesn’t exist meaningfully *until* it has been represented” (*Representation and the Media*, emphasis added). Representation not only accounts for that which is represented, but as in this example, what is *not* represented. The silences and absences in *HHI* are an important aspect of how the utopic vision is created. Viewers see possibilities within this lack. As Ron Becker summarizes, “*House Hunters International* gives viewers an aspirational glimpse of what that life could be” ignoring though, the realities that could trouble that aspiration (131).

The third step of the program’s appeal is in the position of spectatorship created by the voyeuristic nature of the camera. Television is by nature voyeuristic, as it perches the viewer in a position of the watcher, occasionally addressed but for the most part ignored and not acknowledged. In this paper we understand voyeurism as “characterized by the pleasure derived from seeing what one is not supposed to see...[and] is a common personal trait enjoyed by all ‘normal’ individuals to different degrees” (Baruh 203). In this sense the common voyeur is interested in seeing that which is not normally accessible, but will only do so through legally sanctioned, safe, and easily available avenues of consumption, what Baruh calls “trait voyeurism” (Baruh 2010). Research conducted by a number of scholars (Hill 2002, 2005; Johnson-Woods 2002; Baruh 2010) suggest that viewers of reality TV understand this genre as voyeuristic and that the sense of voyeurism is, at least in part, what appeals to them. However, academic research on the topic of voyeurism and reality TV is less conclusive. Early research by Nabi, Biely, Morgan, and Stitt found voyeurism as a significant predictor of reality television consumption,

whereas later work (Nabi, Stitt, Halford and Finnerty; Papacharissi and Mendelson) found that voyeurism was only a small part of why people watch reality programming. More recent work argues that “voyeurism had a significant relationship with consumption of reality programming” and that there is “strong evidence supporting the oft-repeated hypothesis regarding the voyeuristic appeal of reality programming” (Baruh 216-7).

Furthermore, it is not just the simple act of voyeurism that appeals to viewers, but the participatory nature of the voyeuristic gaze. Both Dauncey and Wong have addressed the possibility that reality TV could empower audiences through participation which in turn could significantly impact the media content. While newer reality shows like *HHI* do not allow for direct participation—viewers do not call in and vote for a house for example—people watching at home do engage in a voyeuristic participation in that they are present throughout the process of buying and renting a home and can make judgments about the participants’ choices (e.g, did they choose the right house or apartment, is the wallpaper ugly or vintage, would they like a home in the city or country, etc.)

An unseen narrator exists on *HHI* who takes us through the history, motivation, and finances of the guests, gives us a flavor for the location, and then discusses the fundamentals of the properties as the guests and real estate agents tour them. The viewer can visit and observe the guests in their original locations, see them in their homes, in conversations with friends and family, at work and at play, listening as they tell of the excitement and anxiety they feel about their impending adventure. Once on location the camera is present during their meeting with the real estate agent where the guests supply their “dreams” and “must haves” for their home, it takes us on the tours of the properties where the candid assessments of each property are heard, and the viewer “sees” the property, often moving ahead of the guests and inviting them to see rooms, closets, landscaping, and views. This allows viewers to form their own opinions before the potential renters or buyers do so they can compare opinions and arguments both against and in favor of a property.

Then, most importantly, the viewer is present during the intimate moments of decision-making where no one other than the participating couple make their final choice. As Fiske tell us, “much of the pleasure of television realism comes from this sense of omniscience that it gives us” (70). The voyeuristic pleasure is in the unseen observation of the process of “house hunting” and is reinforced by the inevitably successful end to the search. The final segment of each program is a visit to the new home, now occupied by the guests the viewer has gotten to know, that

reinforces the happiness of the move and housing choice, and makes the move abroad seem easy, attainable, and fulfilling. It is important to note that the program never shows a participant who is unhappy with their decision about the housing or the location: jobs are great, housing is wonderful, children adapt, finances work out, etc. The “happily ever after” to the program both reinforces the success of the quest on the show and serves to reinforce the utopic nature of moving abroad. Viewers are not exposed to issues of intercultural conflict, the emotional and financial toll of moving abroad, or the challenges inherent in changing jobs, schools, communities, and housing.

Starting as early as 2008 there have been a number of online rumors about the authenticity of the show. A popular fan blog, *Hooked on Houses*, posted that “For quicker turn-around, producers sometimes choose buyers who are already in escrow with one of the three locations shown. The other two choices that are filmed, are only shown to allow viewers the option of making the choice themselves” (Gerber). The blog also offers testimony from a woman named Bobi Jensen who described:

how the show faked every single aspect of their story, drafting them to appear only after they'd already closed on a new house, forcing them through multiple takes of fake conversations, and—in one of the most revealing instances of how much the show can often be completely staged—taking them to houses that “weren't even for sale...they were just our two friends' houses who were nice enough to madly clean for days in preparation for the cameras.” (Jensen)

Studies conducted however have shown that audiences are indeed aware of the constructed nature of reality television (Jones, 2003; Engstrom and Semic, 2003) and yet see the show as containing important elements of reality, and the popularity of the shows have not suffered as a result. In fact, it has been argued that the “hunt for reality” in reality TV that provides viewers with enjoyment. Baruh argues:

Viewers of reality programming [are] willing to wait for those few moments when they can scrutinize the tiny bits of information that reveal participants' true selves...As such, the voyeuristic appeal of reality programs would be due to [viewers engagement] in careful scrutiny of participants' behavior to identify glimpses of “authentic” scattered in between the “contrived.” (205)

This voyeuristic utopia of affordable and comfortable adventure in beautiful and exotic locales has created a solid following of fans and has made *HHI* one of the most successful programs on HGTV. However, the show not only promotes a “fake” reality, it emphasizes Western privilege, and through the “happy ever after” structure to the episodes, silences the problems of moving to a foreign country and ignores the challenge of Western cultural imperialism. Throughout this section we refer to “the West” not as a geographic location but employ Wendy Hesford’s definition of the West as a “locus of power from which nations have imposed values, norms, and narratives on other parts of the world” (4).

The show also promotes problematic norms of Western culture. For instance, the entire show is conducted in English, and all the participants, consisting mainly of Americans, Canadians, Australians, and British citizens, are rarely shown speaking a local language. In addition, the real estate agent also always speaks English no matter the context and is in fact a requirement for both agents and buyers. In a general recruitment letter sent by Associate Producer Michelle James, it states:

We are basically looking for interesting and engaging expats who speak fluent English, are under 50 years old and have bought a property abroad within the last 2 years. We are also looking for Realtors who speak fluent English and have great outgoing personalities with a good portfolio of properties that we can profile. (*GoSouthExpats.com*)

A consequence of this focus on English as the sole language is the promotion of the common idea that “everyone speaks English.” According to a study published in *The Economist* it holds true that in small, wealthy, Western nations almost everyone has some English-speaking ability, however, in larger, or poorer nations, such as Colombia, Thailand, or Turkey, only a small percentage will speak English at all, much less fluently (Johnson). This whitewashing of language hides the challenges of moving to a country where a non-English language is spoken and viewers are not encouraged to learn the native language.

Culture is another aspect of the show that is glossed over. Viewers are encouraged to see themselves as making the move abroad, settling into a unique and exciting new place in the world that ultimately mimics their current, Western lifestyles. James writes in her recruitment letter that:

At its core, *House Hunters International* is a travel show concentrating on the idiosyncrasies of the locales and what makes them special and different. A great deal of effort will be made to capture rich visuals and to provide sequences where viewers will be exposed to local vistas, traditions, lifestyles and architecture. (*GoSouthExpats.com*)

So, while the premise of the show is international, in each case the local culture is so sterilized as to become a-cultural. For example, in every episode the new homeowners are seen enjoying time with their new “local friends,” most of whom look like them, dress in Western clothing, and presumably enjoy the same type of lifestyle they do. These local friends are never interviewed, so the viewers must base their assumptions on the visual cues present in the ending social scenes.

In addition, the show rarely discusses the problems faced by the locals in terms of poverty, crime, poor infrastructure, or political oppression. For example, a family from the Netherlands settles in Hoedspruit South Africa. At the end of the episode the family is shown at a local school, which is completely modern and appears Western in style and architecture. Students are shown in school uniforms common in Western Europe, classrooms appear well equipped, and the teacher shown is wearing what might be considered “traditional” teaching clothes—khaki pants, collared shirt, and a sweater vest. However, the region shown is an unusually wealthy town in the country, thanks in large part to its location near to major eco-tourism sites such as Kruger National Park and the Drakensberg Mountains, and is populated primarily by wealthy white families. This effectively allows the show to ignore the more difficult problems in South Africa that might impact expats who move there, particularly issues of poverty, violence, and racism. South Africa’s unemployment hovers around 25%, the majority of whom are black, and almost 50% of the population lives below the poverty line (de Witteet et. al. 235). A study released by the CIA World Factbook also indicated a major difference in the poverty rate according to gender: 45% of all female-headed households lived below the “lower-bound” poverty line, compared to only 25% of male-headed households. Similarly, a strong geographical dimension exists in the incidence of poverty. Based on the same data set, 72% of those below the poverty line reside in rural areas, and 71% of all rural people are poor. With regard to education, 22.3% of black Africans have received no schooling, only 16.8% have finished high school, and only 5.2% of the black population has an education higher than the high school level. By

silencing the reality of a country, viewers are encouraged to think of each new place as a potentially “perfect” place to move, free from the problems that may plague their home countries.

While this is a somewhat pointed example, even the episodes set in countries like France, Australia, Canada, or Italy where local politics and economics are more familiar to audiences, viewers are not encouraged to view these places as nuanced or complicated international spaces in which local culture will impact their day-to-day lifestyles. Instead the lives shown, both in the house hunting process and afterwards, are sterilized, and local culture is limited to balcony views or strolls down colorful streets with friendly and accommodating local merchants. This not only misleads viewers on the realities of living abroad, it emphasizes the Western subject as privileged and cosmopolitan; “we” can go anywhere and live, and besides our own budgets and the restrictions of the local real estate market, there are no limits. For instance, for Western audience’s passport issues rarely complicate moving abroad. In the last few years global consulting firm Henley and Partners created a ranking of the best and worst passports with which to travel. For best passports, Japan, Singapore, and South Korea top the list, and are allowed access to 189 countries in the world without any need to apply for a visa. The U.S. is tied for 6th place, with access to 184 countries in the world without a visa (Henley and Partners). These numbers stand in stark opposition to the number of countries citizens at the bottom of the list can visit. Sudanese, for example, can only enter 38 countries in the world without being approved for a visa before crossing the border. Pakistanis fare even worse, having access to only 33 countries without a visa. Since that ranking was published the United States has attempted to place even stricter rules on gaining entry to the county for people from Syria, Sudan, Somalia, Libya, Iran and Yemen.

The show does not completely censor local images as discussed previously—after all, that is what viewers hope, in part, to see. Therefore, what little culture is shown on the program runs the risk of stereotyping a place and a people, giving viewers a sense that culture is consumable. Pretty views, brightly garbed locals in crowded markets, exotic food, fauna, or animals—these are all sights to be enjoyed by the viewer, but not nuanced. This is not surprising given the framing of the show. As James writes, “*House Hunters International* is about [the buyers’] personal journey of discovery and the making of life-long dreams,” which, through the function of “reality” television extends to fulfilling the fantasies of viewers as well (*GoSouthExpats.com*).

## Conclusion

*House Hunters International* provides viewers with a voyeuristic utopic vision of the world, inviting them to consider moving abroad, finding a place to live and fitting into the local culture in an easy and relatively stress-free process. The viewer's pleasure in watching the show is found in the highly rigid structure of the show, the limited participatory element, an identification with the characters and the locations featured, and with the omniscient and voyeuristic mode in which the audience watches the show. However, the program ignores the challenges inherent in a move to another culture, undermining the difficulties faced by local populations and replacing authentic culture with a westernized, accessible, and manageable world of fun, friendly "natives" and financial success in an English-speaking world.

However, we cannot limit our understanding of how *HHI* influences viewers to the show itself, but must consider, if only briefly, how it has influenced the larger TV landscape. In addition to affecting the viewer, *HHI*, and its television predecessor, *House Hunters* has also impacted the way that similar programs are structured. The macro-structure of a program that invites audiences to participate in the selection of a home has become the norm, from *Caribbean Life* to *Bargain Hunters Beach Homes* to *My Lottery Dream Home*, (and many others) on HGTV, as well as other "lifestyle" cable channels. But other series have adopted the same approach as *HHI*: having us meet a person or group who are engaged in a "product seeking" activity, such as searching for wedding attire in *Say Yes to the Dress* or looking at houses in *Love it or List it*; developing a pseudo-relationship with people or a product; seeing three items featured, tried on or reviewed like cooking three meals in *The Great British Bake Off* or taking three photos on *America's Next Top Model*; and then a decision made about the purchase or winner chosen that always bring happiness and satisfaction. The pleasure of watching tightly regimented television shows with nominally suspenseful outcomes is now a staple televisual experience for viewers and perhaps gives them the solace of predictability in the chaos of an increasingly ambiguous world.

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# Fighters and Fathers: Managing Masculinity in Contemporary Boxing Cinema

JOSH SOPIARZ

In Antoine Fuqua's film *Southpaw* (2015), just as Jake Gyllenhaal's character Billy Hope attempts suicide by crashing his luxury sedan into a tree in the front yard, his ten-year-old daughter, Leila, sends him a text message asking: "Daddy. Where are you?" (00:46:04). Her answer comes seconds later when, upon hearing a crash, she finds her father in a heap concussed and bleeding badly on the white marble floor of their home's entryway. Upon waking, Billy's first and only concern is Leila. Hospital workers, in an effort to calm him, tell Billy that Leila is safe "with child services" (00:48:08-00:48:10). This news does not comfort Billy. Instead, upon learning that Leila is in the state's custody, the former light heavyweight champion of the world, with face bloodied and muscles rippling, makes his most concerted effort to get up and leave—presumably, to find his daughter. Before he can rise, however, a doctor administers a large dose of sedative and the heretofore unrestrainable Billy fades into unconsciousness as the scene ends.

Leila's simple question—"Daddy. Where are you?"—is central not only to *Southpaw* but is also relevant for most major boxing films of the 21st century.<sup>1</sup> This includes Clint Eastwood's *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), David O. Russell's *The Fighter* (2010), Ryan Coogler's *Creed* (2015), Jonathan Jakubowicz's *Hands of Stone* (2016), and Stephen Caple, Jr.'s *Creed II* (2018). These films establish fighter/trainer relationships as alternatives to otherwise biological or "traditional" father/son relationships. Fatherless fighters become vessels for the prototypical teachings of ring-hardened and stereotypically masculine identities of the mid-to late-twentieth century as represented by the boxing trainer character archetype.

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<sup>1</sup> Leila's question is relevant for the United States as a whole, too, as a combined 27% of the nation's children live in households without their fathers and where the percentage of children living in fatherless households is markedly higher in poorer urban and rural communities—the communities that generally produce the fighting class. The report also indicates that 23% of American children live with their mother alone and that 4% of the nation's children live with neither of their parents (see [www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2016/cb16-192.html](http://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2016/cb16-192.html)).

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Generally, the boxing trainer gets little consideration in scholarship, but this paper centers him and his teaching of masculinity, and it identifies his peculiar cultural significance on screen and for the real world.<sup>2</sup>

The boxing film genre—nearly a century old and comprised of more than 150 films—ranks alongside the Western and the detective film genres as among the most identifiable in American cinema (Grindon, *Knockout* 33). The genre's motifs, now familiar, consistently feature muscular fighters with something to prove; poverty in extremis; dingy gymnasiums; smoky arenas; crooked promoters; gangsters who predetermine the outcomes of fights, manipulate the fighters, and punish those who do not comply; and the ever-present toughness of men who take and deliver beatings in order to fulfill a cycle of success, failure, and redemption as audiences of the times deem appropriate. According to Leger Grindon, boxing films are motivated by four "conflicts:" body versus soul, opportunity versus difference, market values versus family values, and anger versus justice ("Body and Soul" 54). Audiences watching boxing films over the past century have experienced some variation of these conflicts.

Audience is key when it comes to film genres and individual films of which they are comprised because they "demand creativity and variation" and thus motivate filmmakers to explore their options while staying true to the genre's form (Jenkins 88). Further, "consumption of genre works also tells us a lot about the unique pleasures these texts afford" (Jenkins 89). In the case of boxing films, audiences of the past century have derived pleasure from watching tough fighters defeat not only their opponents, but the "odds" stacked against them as well. Regardless of the conflict motivating any individual example, the makers of boxing films alert audiences to the short and long-term stakes at play in every round of every fight. And audiences understand that every move a fighter makes in or out of the ring is loaded with potentially negative consequences just as they understand boxing is the only way out of whatever interminable situation the fighter inhabits at the moment—that a correlation exists between every punch a fighter endures and some unseen difficulty down the line. In many instances, filmmakers rely on the women in the fighter's lives to clue audiences in to the damage being done. The women who live with, and care for the men, who fight for a living see them struggling to walk or recall the names of their own children. Often, they plead with the men to not fight anymore; they ask them to look at themselves in the mirror and to consider a future in which they are only physically present (with their minds turned to mush) if they are present at all; very seldom do the men listen. Or, if they do listen and actually promise to quit, it is generally on the pretext that they will do so after one last cumulative fight.

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<sup>2</sup> *Creed II* is also interesting for the way it centers Adonis's struggles as a father and for its portrayal of the toxic father/son relationship between the supporting characters of Ivan Drago and his own biological son, Viktor.

In this quest for the last good fight, contemporary filmmakers stack the odds against their protagonists. They tempt and tease their fighters and ensnare them when they falter. Edward Buscombe suggests this is because boxing films “are always about so much more,” than just boxing. That “especially, they are about social commentary more or less bound up with issues of masculinity” (qtd. in Woodward 122). The majority of contemporary boxing films privilege Grindon’s “anger versus justice” conflict and are extensions of the “masculinity crisis-postmodern cluster, 1993-2005)” which he has identified (*Knockout* 33). *Southpaw* is one example, and the most important text to this essay, but the others also merit attention. While the threat of losing a fight and what it might mean for the characters in these films is present, the real conflict is that in losing fights a boxer might just lose everything. Contemporary boxing films make it clear that a fighter’s family is ultimately what is at stake. *Southpaw* does this most explicitly. Frequently faced with injustice, Billy Hope rages against not only the man who he believes is responsible for his wife’s death, but also doctors, a social worker, and a judge—all who are stand-ins for the system that failed to protect him as a parentless youth. And in that film, as is the case in other contemporary boxing films, just when it looks like things cannot get worse for the fighters on screen, they do. And just when it looks like all the doors have closed on the fighters, filmmakers open one more that just so happens to lead to an old and unimpressive gym run by an always-at-the-gym crotchety one-time legend of the boxing game—the trainer. Very little attention has been paid to the men who operate these gyms in these films despite how important they are to the genre.

### “Up the Stairs”: Archetypes in Boxing Films

For Leger Grindon, “the boxer stands alongside the cowboy, the gangster, and the detective as a figure that has shaped America’s idea of manhood” (*Knockout* 33). Certainly, with more than 150 boxing films produced, a strong case can be made, but boxers do not materialize out of thin air—nor do their onscreen counterparts. Any appreciation of the boxer as one of a select few archetypal masculinities recognizes the work of the boxing trainer to create that individual as well. Contemporary boxing films consistently present the trainer as an older former fighter who will only train those willing and able to absolutely follow their very strict rules.

The archetype for this no-nonsense trainer character is Mickey Goldmill from the *Rocky* franchise. The inspiration for that character was a real-life trainer named Cus D’Amato who, by all accounts was a tough trainer interested in training champions regardless of their ethnic or racial background so long as they could adhere to his rules and “live straight.” In addition to the hundreds of amateur fighters D’Amato trained, he also discovered Rocky Graziano and trained two

world champions—Floyd Patterson and Jose Torres—at the Gramercy Gym. He would later train, and become the legal guardian for, one of the best-known fighters of all time, Mike Tyson.

The journalist Pete Hamill was friends with Torres and would frequent the gym as an observer; he got to know D’Amato well and in 1985 he eulogized the man in a piece titled “Up the Stairs with Cus D’Amato.” He begins with a description of D’Amato’s gym and his personality:

In those days, you had to pass a small candy stand to get to the door of the Gramercy Gym on East 14<sup>th</sup> Street. The door was heavy, with painted zinc nailed across its face and a misspelled sign saying “Gramacy Gym,” and when you opened the door, you saw a long badly lit stairway climbing into darkness. There was another door on the landing, and a lot of tough New York kids would reach that landing and find themselves unable to open the second door. They’d go back down the stairs, try to look cool as they bought a soda at the candy stand, then hurry home. Many others opened the second door. And when they did, they entered the tough, hard, disciplined school of a man named Cus D’Amato. (Hamill 312)

The inside of that gym was dingy and crowded with assorted worn-out punching bags. Its walls were covered in posters advertising upcoming fights or remembering those that had already transpired. Ira Berkow, writing for the *New York Times*, remembered that “Inside, the large room is like a small barn, containing two boxing rings with drooping ropes [...] The smell of sweat in the gym seems embedded in the woodwork” (Berkow). For a time, D’Amato, a “tough, intelligent man who was almost Victorian in his beliefs in work and self-denial and fierce concentration,” lived alone in the gym’s office (Hamill 313).

A number of young amateur fighters who would later become actors (e.g. Tony Danza and Cliff Gorman) trained at D’Amato’s gym. Among this group is Burt Young—who would go on to play Paulie in the *Rocky* films. It is no coincidence then, that the gyms in the *Rocky* films all recall D’Amato’s Gramercy and that each of the gyms in these other contemporary boxing films look the same as well. No matter the technology available. No matter the upgrades. These gyms are all dingy. They are all sparsely furnished with nothing on the walls but old posters. All the equipment looks worn out and as if it literally could be the same equipment from the Gramercy Gym. In *Rocky*, when Rocky Balboa trained in Mickey Goldmill’s gym it looked like this. Forty years later, the gyms in contemporary boxing films still look the same. These gyms are presented this way in order to recall D’Amato’s “tough, hard, disciplined” masculine space and to suggest that that ethos persists—that it can be passed from generation to generation.

Consider the gyms in three major boxing films of the twenty-first century: The Hit Pit Gym from *Million Dollar Baby*; Front Street Gym from *Creed*, and Wills Gym from *Southpaw*. These three gyms, located in Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and New York look equally dilapidated from the outside and virtually identical on the inside. Each is run by a trainer who without question could be described as “tough,” hard,” and sincere about discipline and self-denial. Another trainer at the Hit Pit, Morgan Freeman’s character Eddie “Scrap Iron” Dupris lives in Spartan conditions in the gym and both he and Frankie Dunn dress as if they have not updated their wardrobes since the 1950s. This is especially true of Scrap, who wears bowling shirts and a homburg throughout the film. In *Creed*, Rocky—also attired as if he had not bought new clothes since the 1970s—takes Adonis to the Front Street Gym to train. The lights inside are either always off or just plain do not work. The walls of this gym are also plastered with old posters.

Lastly, Wills Gym in *Southpaw* has much in common with the other two just mentioned (dark, posters, crowded, old equipment) but, even more, this gym is situated atop a long and steep flight of stairs. On his first visit to Wills Gym in *Southpaw*, Billy hesitates before finally ascending the stairs to find a dark and crowded room full of boxers of all ages; he enters nervously. About his own stairs, D’Amato said “Any kid coming here for the first time who thinks he wants to be a fighter, and who makes the climb up those dark stairs has it 50 percent licked, because he’s licking fear” (Berkow). At this point in the film, this is just as true for Billy in *Southpaw*.

The trainers in contemporary boxing films are very conservative and almost militaristic in their approach. A common rule throughout: no girls in the gym. Also, no sex before a fight or, as Mickey Goldmill put it in *Rocky*, “women weaken legs” (01:20:22-24). Or, like in *Hands of Stone*, when Roberto Duran’s wife finds him in her hotel room before his rematch with Sugar Ray Leonard and she asks him, “Why are you here? If Ray [Arcel] finds out you’re dead” (00:45:16-20). Even more strict is Tick Wills (Forest Whitaker) from *Southpaw* not allowing swearing in his gym; a bad word earned fighters fifty pushups. When Billy asks for his help, Tick demurs saying, “Thing is, you couldn’t handle the rules here.” Billy responds, “I grew up in the system, I can handle the rules.” Then, within sixty seconds of screen time, Billy utters “fuck” three times in response to something Tick says. Clearly, Billy has work to do (00:57:36-00:58:20)..

Contemporary boxing films present a combination of strict rule following and exhausting and repetitive physical training as the path to redemption. This is best represented in the boxing film’s hallmark—the training montage. First popularized in the original *Rocky* during the “Gonna Fly Now” sequence, the training montage is a key component of contemporary boxing films. As inspiring music plays, fighters are shown doing roadwork (running), bag work, jumping rope, and all manner of calisthenics as weeks of intense training are condensed into a few

exciting moments—frequently these scenes are cut with images of trainers pushing fighters to exhaustion, shouting at them to go harder, or bouncing medicine balls off their abdomens as they complete countless sets of sit-ups. The work accomplished during these montages is the most important for a boxer, but they occupy very little screen time; however, they are often some of the most memorable sequences of these films.<sup>3</sup>

*Southpaw* features a montage like this, but the film also spends considerable time in a quieter training space: the darkened gym where Tick Wills slowly and methodically teaches Billy how to defend himself. There is no question Billy is a strong and indefatigable fighter and we understand that he has been fighting and winning fights his entire life. It is equally clear that Tick is the first adult male to teach Billy to defend himself and to use his head while in the ring—essentially, he teaches him to box rather than to fight. At one point after agreeing to train Billy, Tick tells him “I’m going to introduce you to something you never knew before. It’s called defense.” When Billy responds, “I have defense,” Tick tells him “stopping punches with your face is not defense” (01:15:23-01:15:36). Later, after informing him of a young trainee’s death, Tick asks Billy if he thinks he can win, to which Billy replies, “Not without you” (01:32:40). Thus begins the lead up to Billy’s big fight, his success in the ring, and his regaining custody of Leila. Billy’s willingness to trust Tick and learn from him demonstrates for viewers that he has matured and earned his shot at redemption; that he is ready to reclaim his masculine identities of Fighter and Father.

### The “Father/Son” Relationship in Contemporary Boxing Films

Boxing is inexpensive when compared to other sports or activities, and the majority of its participants come from impoverished backgrounds. Where boxing once countered “the mere womanishness of modern, over-civilized society” and “heralded the triumphant return of the Heroic Artisan as mythic hero,” it is now considered a poverty sport (Kimmel 102).<sup>4</sup> The economically disadvantaged communities from which thousands of real boxers come are the same as those that fictional characters like Rocky Balboa of the *Rocky* franchise (the rough and tumble streets of south Philadelphia), Maggie Fitzgerald from *Million Dollar Baby* (“the hills outside the scratchy-ass Ozark town of Theodosia”), Micky Ward from *The Fighter* (Boston’s gritty Dorchester neighborhood), Adonis Johnson from the

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<sup>3</sup> The advent of internet sites like YouTube allow individuals to access these montage sequences with relative ease. The user comments below are packed with everyday users proclaiming that they rely on the sequences to motivate themselves for their own life tasks and challenges (for *Southpaw*, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A-3gcVjAW-U>).

<sup>4</sup> For a nuanced discussion of boxing and poverty see Nicholas Dixon.

*Creed* films (a group home for parentless boys), Roberto Duran from *Hands of Stone* (the slums of Panama City), and Billy Hope of *Southpaw* (a “child of the system”) come from, too.

The main characters of these films have all been forced into the adult world with insufficient parental preparation. In real life, the literature suggests that such premature exposure to the difficulties of the world frequently begets shame, which leads to anger and potentially violent behavior. In these films, the majority of the boxers first started fighting in response to acts of shaming or bullying. Were these young fighters in more stable family/social situations, they might have had access to interventions intended to curb the violent response (Pope and Englar-Carlson). These fighters inhabit mostly unstable home situations where the “paternal intervention,” in which adult men model appropriate behavior, is unavailable to these young characters. Ultimately, across these films, their trainers fill this paternal role. Only, rather than focusing on “violence-free” time, empathy counseling, or discussions on violence in the media, these trainers teach fighters to contain their anger and to use it in appropriate situations (e.g. the gym, the ring, in defense of something or someone important). R.W. Connell and James Messerschmidt contend that “it is mens’ and boys’ practical relationships to collective images or models of masculinity, rather than simple reflections of them, that is central to understanding gendered consequences in violence, health, and education” (841). *Southpaw* and the other contemporary boxing films discussed in this paper put young people (mostly boys) into close contact with trainers to demonstrate that, in instances where fathers are missing, these relationships can achieve the same work as in relationships where the biological parent is present.

In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, as boxing appears to become increasingly irrelevant in the United States, it is worthwhile considering why boxing films still resonate with contemporary audiences. Leger Grindon offers an answer, suggesting that:

Though few members of the audience ever step into the ring, the dramatic conflicts that characterize the boxing film depict vital problems experienced throughout the culture. The genre thereby addresses issues of fundamental concern and maintains an audience. Through its engagement with these films the audience grapples, often subconsciously, with important social issues. (*Knockout* 11)

Kasia Boddy echoes this, saying that “the symbolism of boxing does not allow for ambiguity” (7). Kath Woodward suggests that “traditional masculinities could be on the ropes elsewhere, but men’s boxing would surely be a place where they are fighting back and hegemonic masculinity might be holding on” (10). Writing on the “Manly Art” of boxing, Elliot Gorn identifies what is meant by “traditionally masculine” behaviors relating to prizefighters: “composure under pressure,

unflinching fortitude, and heroic stoicism, all in the name of masculine prowess” (251). Historically, the absent father is a common motif in boxing cinema; however, a man’s inability to parent, and a child’s inability to access a proper male role model, are the central masculinity crises present in *Southpaw* and the other twenty-first century boxing films using the “anger versus justice” conflict analyzed in this paper. These are the important social issues, tethered to real-life analogs, waiting to be redressed in these films through the boxing trainer character.

Filmmakers imbuing trainers with these character traits show audiences how recognizably “traditional” masculine behaviors are passed on to others. They achieve this through the trainer’s unyielding insistence on selfless and unambiguous adherence to rigid and sometimes arbitrary rules and regimes including respect for the trainer and his code of conduct, self-control in and out of the gym, unquestioning loyalty to the trainer and his process, and dedication to grueling, limit-testing, physical training sessions. These films, somewhat troublingly, suggest proper fathering is the mechanism by which impoverished individuals might transcend their current disfranchised position in society. The main characters in these films, to varying degrees, need to discover and enact fathering and accept, as the veteran trainer Tick Wills in *Southpaw* put it, that they’re “here to train them so they can grow up to be men” even if it is hard or confusing, or both (00:57:55-00:58:00). Generally, the trainer and fighter relationship accomplishes this learning. On the surface these films are about boxing and boxers, but underneath they argue that hard work and strict-rule following can ameliorate generational difficulties.

*Southpaw* is a film about an orphan, Billy Hope, who defies the odds to become both a family man and the light heavyweight champion of the world only to see it all crumble away as a result of his own unyielding machismo. We first see Billy in the middle of a particularly tough fight where it is made clear that he has never been a defensive fighter, instead relying on his brute strength and endurance to outpunch his opponents. After this fight, in which he was badly hurt but ultimately won, Billy’s wife Maureen implores him to leave the profession and return home to co-parent their young daughter, Leila. Troubled by the physical beatings he endures, Maureen’s true concern is Billy’s quality of life moving forward. By this time in the film it is clear Billy will have mental and physical difficulties his entire life as a result of his career. Billy, acutely aware of the physical toll boxing has taken on his body appears receptive. However, after the challenger Miguel Escobar insults Maureen at a charity event by saying “How bout I take your belt, then I take your bitch” (00:26:21-00:26:25). Billy, against Maureen’s wishes, engages the man in a fistfight that ends with a member of Miguel’s entourage misfiring a pistol and killing Maureen.

The first two-thirds of the film depict Billy’s fall. He loses his boxing license after headbutting the referee during an exhibition bout. He loses his cars, his multi-

million-dollar contracts, and his mansion. Despairing, he pulls a gun on his rival's wife and intends to kill her if not for her children being there. And, most painfully, he loses custody of Leila who is remanded to the state's custody—Billy's worst fear for his daughter and the ultimate symbol of his failure as a parent. At a hearing a still-bloodied Billy pleads with the judge, crying out that "I want my daughter back! I'm her father!" To which the judge, echoing Frankie Dunn in *Million Dollar Baby*, answers "That's not enough" (00:49:57-00:50:02).<sup>5</sup> Though it is clear Billy loves Leila very much—he frequently declares his love for her and has her name and birthday tattooed on his chest—the fact is that Billy is not a good father. Even when Maureen was alive he was primarily interested in remaining the light heavyweight champion of the world while she raised their daughter. Once Maureen dies, Billy is forced into single parenthood. An orphan himself whose first boxing manager was a crook, Billy has no one to emulate or look to as an example of appropriate fathering. As such, he quickly fails Leila, focusing instead on revenge and suicide while ingesting pills and copious volumes of alcohol. Importantly, Billy sports other tattoos including two large script tattoos on his forearms. On his right arm: Fighter. On his left: Father. By the midway point of the film, however, minus his professional license and his daughter, it is clear Billy is neither.

In *Southpaw* Billy Hope is motivated by Grindon's "anger versus justice" conflict. In this conflict, the "anger, frustrated in the face of injustice, generates violence, which becomes distilled, redirected, and displayed in the spectacle of boxing. The anger experienced by the boxer is not simply a response to his malaise but also expresses his rage at being unable to expose its cause, or if revealed, to vanquish it" ("Body and Soul" 56-7). Here, the sources of Billy's substantial malaise are obvious. His wife has been killed, he has medicated with drugs and alcohol, lost his boxing license and his fortune, and has been deemed unfit to raise his daughter by the State. Billy rages at individual representatives of these groups. He headbutts a referee during an exhibition bout. He thrashes about a courtroom like a petulant child during a family court hearing. He attempts to murder the wife of the man he holds responsible for his wife's death. But, violence—his go-to coping mechanism—fails him in all these instances. In fact, this randomly applied violence complicates Billy's life. Only when he directs that angry energy into a sanctioned boxing match with Miguel Escobar can he resolve his anger versus justice conflict.

As the film progresses, Billy's big fight becomes twofold. First, he fights to regain custody of Leila. Second, there is the literal fight against Miguel Escobar. The former being tied to the result of the latter. Down and out, Billy ultimately falls in line and works to fulfill the societal requirements necessary to resume custody of his daughter (anger management classes, sobriety, proof of employment). All

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<sup>5</sup> In *Million Dollar Baby* Frankie says this to Maggie at 00:03:36-00:03:41.

this is in an aim to also regain his boxing license. While cleaning the toilets at the gym might satisfy a court as an example of “gainful employment,” Billy knows it is not enough to support Leila. Billy literally has no other options but to fight again where winning in the ring will require humbling himself, self-denial, and obedience in much the way winning back Leila will.

Despite the film’s title, Billy Hope is not a southpaw (lefthanded) fighter. He fights from an orthodox stance during his entire bout with Miguel Escobar right up until the final moments when, as he and Tick discussed, he flips his orientation and lands a devastating left hook that Escobar never saw coming. Symbolically, his left forearm—the one dealing the blow that will enable him to win Leila back—bears the tattoo “Father.” Ultimately, Billy wins his big fight and regains custody of his daughter.

There is no denying that an amateur and professional career in which Billy absorbed literally thousands of blows to the head will negatively impact his quality of life. This is what Tony Williams recognizes as happy and unhappy endings colliding in boxing films and that “the boxing movie’s semantics involves the presence of disturbing elements generally repressed from the American cultural consciousness which make ideologically viable syntactic associations extremely difficult” (Williams 306). Redemption of this sort in boxing films plays well on screen—and particularly so in *Southpaw*—but any serious thought about what happens next reveals that these characters’ difficulties are not resolved just because the film ended on a high note. *Southpaw* is the best film for this analysis because it shows both Billy (the fighter) and Tick (the trainer) doing their respective work at fathering. Still, it is just one example of a larger set of 21-st century boxing films in which audiences witness the protagonists’ tragic and total falls from grace; are given space to consider what the protagonists have done to arrive at what Rick Altman calls their “generic crossroads” (145). In boxing cinema audiences “enjoy the ritual satisfaction of overcoming social problems [...] while at the same time reinforcing traditional family values that support the prevailing ideology” (Grindon, “Boxing Film” 408). In twenty-first century boxing films, the protagonist’s path back to respectability is codified in adherence to severely conservative and/or rigid and culturally-sanctioned behaviors put in place by the fighter’s “old school” trainer, or “surrogate father”—a man who is himself trying to reclaim his masculinity (fatherhood).

Further, *Southpaw* is an interesting text in that its protagonist experienced a fatherless life as a ward of the state and still managed to become an outwardly recognizable masculine personality. In this regard, Hope seemingly embodies “positive” hegemonic traits of “bringing home a wage, sustaining a sexual relationship, and being a father” (Connell and Messerschmidt 840). Only after Hope loses his wife, his child, his fortune, his titles, and his future earning potential—all

his ostensibly masculine markers—do audiences see how gilded his façade really was.

After his wife's death, audiences recognize that Hope is not anything like the kind of "positive" man his successes belied. He abuses drugs and alcohol, turns paranoid and lashes out at his friends, and he even comes near to completing a retributive murder. This is Billy's "big fight," one of ten moves Grindon considers central to the masterplot of the boxing film genre. Specifically, Billy Hope's travails are an extension of Grindon's "Move 9: Big Fight 2" where "In an extended bout, the boxer suffers terrible punishment, but in a late round he regains his will and defeats his opponent" (Grindon, *Knockout* 13). Audiences familiar with boxing films, having now seen the real Billy and the sins he commits, expect him to atone for his shortcomings and do the necessary work to reclaim his masculinity and his titles of fighter and father. Since *Southpaw* is a boxing film, this means Hope must humble himself before his first real father figure—a no-nonsense trainer with one blind eye who teaches him discipline, defense, toughness, accountability, self-control, and humility—to win back his daughter and any attending trappings of material success.

## Conclusion

Palookaville, the figurative landing spot for could've-beens and wannabes, is where Marlon Brando's character, the boxer Terry Malloy, from Elia Kazan's crime drama *On the Waterfront* (1954), finds himself after a life of squandered promise. It is a destination all fighters, real or fictional, strive to avoid. Doing so, however, is far easier wished for than actually achieved. A small percentage of fighters are successful enough to make a living wage in the ring. And, the American Association of Neurological Surgeons estimates that 90 percent of boxers end up brain damaged. As many as 15-40 percent of fighters suffer from symptoms of chronic brain injury (AANS) and as many as 1 in 5 ex-fighters suffers from "dementia pugilistica"—a result of repeated blows to the head. Even titans of the sport—the "successful" fighters—luminaries like Joe Louis (knocked through the ropes by Rocky Marciano), Muhammad Ali (years lived with a debilitating condition), and Mike Tyson (myriad calamities) face ignominious defeats in and out of the ring. This is not to mention the broken hands, noses, ribs, jaws, and eye sockets; the ruptured ear drums; or the detached retinas fighters endure. Joyce Carol Oates put it most eloquently in her book *On Fighting*:

A boxing trainer's most difficult task is said to be to persuade a young boxer to get up and continue fighting after he has been knocked down. And if the boxer has been knocked down by a blow he hadn't seen coming—which is

usually the case—how can he hope to protect himself from being knocked down again? and again? The invisible blow is after all—invisible. (13)

Trainers teach boxers to stand up and continue fighting when every instinct in their body is telling them to run; it is most unnatural to continue throwing punches with a broken hand. Perhaps, even more so to continue absorbing punches with a fractured jaw, but this is what fighters do. And, it is the work of trainers to convince them to do this and to never quit. It is their job to take the anger fighters feel and focus it to achieve what film audiences believe they are due—redemption, in whatever form that might take.

Boxing films motivated by the “anger versus justice” conflict are loaded with dramatic “rock bottom” instances like in *Southpaw*. Often occurring early in the diegesis, these moments exposit what drives the fighters or trainers (or both; mostly male) in contemporary boxing films toward redemption. Moviegoers watching these films witness these characters descending lower and lower—each low seeming the lowest—until one final bad break or bad decision sinks the character to absolute rock bottom. It is the act of finally recognizing this ground level that ultimately stops the descent and awakens these characters to the damage they have done to themselves and the people they love. This recognition opens the door to their “shot at redemption.”

Once awakened, these characters are able to see their path—long and arduous though it may be. They pour out their alcohol and dispose of their drugs. If they have any left, they humble themselves before their friends and families. They isolate themselves, sometimes with great difficulty, away from negative influences. And, the final, most important act is finding an “old school” trainer and surrendering to their rigid demands. It is through this process that these characters ultimately earn one last fight such that they can be assured of their roles as contenders and breadwinners. Likewise, if trainers can turn a talented but troubled young fighter around, they can demonstrate that their domestic rigidity was simply good fathering and that their children chose to ignore them or were unable to follow their rules. This latter act might also work to ameliorate any feelings of guilt or inadequacy present in the trainers; it might, for the narrative’s purposes, even serve to validate whatever wrong it was that pushed their biological children away in the first place.

On film, and in real life, aimless fighters are ineffective fighters; discipline is key to winning fights and to avoiding serious, potentially life-threatening, injury. Often in boxing films audiences are made to understand that the fighters they see have raw talent, but lack the discipline to achieve world champion status. Some fighters introduced this way include Maggie Fitzgerald in *Million Dollar Baby* who has a winning amateur record, but once in the gym it is clear she does not have the discipline or training it takes to beat “real” boxers; Adonis Johnson, in *Creed*, who

blusters into the gym where other seasoned fighters train only to learn that he does not understand how to fight other professional boxers; he bristles at attempts to correct this; and, both Roberto Duran in *Hands of Stone* and Billy Hope in *Southpaw* who are introduced as aggressive, strong-chinned, and viciously talented fighters who do not generally need strong defensive skills because they physically dominate their opponents to such a degree it is unnecessary. These films identify these shortcomings early so that audiences know the characters they watch must improve if they plan to transcend their liminal status.<sup>6</sup> Key to this is the understanding that it will take a seasoned and serious trainer to instill the necessary discipline.

In *Southpaw*, Billy Hope yearned to prove to the State of New York and to his daughter that he was a good father. In *Creed*, Sylvester Stallone's Rocky Balboa character takes Apollo Creed's son, Adonis, under his wing out of a sense of what is right (Rocky is still guilty over Apollo's death in the ring from *Rocky IV*) and as a second chance at being a good father since his own son will have nothing to do with him. The Roberto Duran character in *Hands of Stone* similarly finds a father figure in Robert DeNiro's Ray Arcel character who tenderly combs his hair between rounds long after his own father—an American soldier—abandoned his Panamanian mother and her children.

In each of these instances, one thing remains clear—although the men in these movies might feel an inherent drive to parent these young people it is not so easily done. If any hope exists, for the characters in *Southpaw*, it is that Billy will not teach Leila to fight or encourage her to enter the ring or the boxing business at all. Though, despite all the lessons learned, one cannot be too sure. A deleted scene from *Southpaw* titled “Leila’s Fight” depicts Leila being bullied in the group home in which she has been placed. When another girl teases and threatens to steal her nightlight, Leila punches the girl in the nose (breaking it in the process) with a sharp right cross. Leila is stunned by the punch's effectiveness and stands looking at her balled fists in wonder; she is a natural. Tellingly, the punch stops the bullying. Later, in a meeting to discuss the incident with Leila and her social worker, it is impossible for Billy to hide how proud he is of Leila for standing up to her bully. He asks, “so you broke her nose?” She replies, “and I still have my light” (00:00:50-56). Billy tries to act as he is expected and tepidly chastises Leila, but it looks as if he would rather congratulate her.

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<sup>6</sup> When audiences first see Billy Hope he is in the midst of a light heavyweight title defense, which he wins despite employing virtually no defense. After winning the fight the audience sees the terrible physical toll his style has on his body—and mind. Worried his quality of life, his wife Maureen implores him to quit fighting. Billy cannot, and it is understood that if he is to continue his next fight it would be against Miguel Escobar, a challenger that would likely obliterate the defensively-challenged Hope. Nevertheless, Billy ultimately learns he must discipline himself to win back his boxing license and, ultimately, his daughter effectively reclaiming his masculine identities as Fighter and Father.

While unclear what Billy's "paternal intervention" with Leila will be absent a maternal counterpart, it seems likely he will inculcate his daughter with the same masculine qualities that he honed while training under Tick. When *Southpaw* and other contemporary films end with the fighters winning and the trainers being validated, filmmakers reinforce the notion that young disadvantaged people need only "live straight" and follow the rules to better their standing in society. It is true, though, that these fighters do not always win the big bout at the end of the film. Still, audiences derive pleasure from the fighter's generic crossroads and in seeing the fighters for whom they have been rooting affirm society's prevailing mores with the help of a father-figure trainer. Perhaps, just as much, audiences respond to trainers whose troubled fighters afford them their own last chance at fathering, win or lose.

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## Conspiracy, Poverty, and Lost Children in Tracy Letts's *Bug* and *The X-Files*

THOMAS FAHY

In the fifth season of the 1990s hit television series *The X-Files*, federal agent Fox Mulder (David Duchovny) finds himself strapped to a hospital bed for psychiatric evaluation: “Five years together. You must have seen this coming,” he quips to his partner Dana Scully (Gillian Anderson) (“Folie à Deux”). Mental illness looms large in the series, but it tends to function as misdirection. Whether through “spooky” Mulder’s reputation for being “out there,” the Lone Gunmen’s conspiracy theories, or the general view of alien abductees as crackpots, *The X-Files* uses characters routinely dismissed as “crazy” to locate truth in the strange and conspiratorial. The protagonist in “Duane Barry,” for example, takes several people hostage after escaping from a mental hospital, yet his story of repeated abductions inspires one unnamed hostage to tell him: “I just want to say that I believe you.” The show’s creator, Chris Carter, discusses the strategy behind these moments in the DVD commentary to “Fallen Angel”: “It’s a journey for Mulder and Scully to see—and for the audience to see—that these people who are crying wolf might be doing it for a reason [...], that they may be credible, seeing and knowing things that we don’t.” Just as the reasons for crying wolf often involve government conspiracies, Mulder and Scully’s investigations also uncover profound social inequalities at the heart of American culture. The oppressiveness and alienation of systemic poverty offer one example of this, and these economic narratives suggest that the real danger of conspiracy does not come from believing in aliens per se but in allowing these theories to deflect from social problems that demand action.

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While *The X-Files* emerged as one of the most popular and influential shows at the end of the twentieth century, Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Tracy Letts was writing and revising his second play, *Bug*. The work premiered in London in 1996, and he spent the next decade revising it for various productions. As Letts explains, “the play wasn’t worked out. It took a long time and a lot of productions for me to work out some of the problems with it” (Kenber). One of the great innovations of *Bug* involves its preoccupation with the unseen. Specifically, its psychological exploration of paranoia continually navigates between the real and the imaginary, the factual and conspiratorial. One never sees a bug onstage, and throughout most of the play, the sound of insects can be attributed to either the air conditioner, a distant helicopter, or the hum of traffic. Yet the actors playing Agnes White and Peter Evans respond visibly to the supposed infestation. They swat the air, squish bugs with their fingers, and scratch skin. As Uni Chaudhuri notes in her discussion of the play, “watching other people scratching themselves can cause people to start feeling an itch themselves” and this social contagion—much like one’s response to a yawn—establishes a physiological connection to the drama (332). One’s body becomes convinced of the protagonists’ claims. These elements force viewers to share in Peter and Agnes’s paranoid mindset, enabling Letts to capture both the appeal of and problem with conspiracy theories. Despite providing answers and comfort for the disenfranchised, conspiracy ultimately proves palliative. It provides no meaningful way to bring about social change.

Throughout *Bug* and *The X-Files*, conspiracy also gets linked with the pain of abducted, abandoned, or dead children. Agnes’s son, Lloyd, was kidnapped from a grocery store nearly ten years earlier, and she convinces herself that his disappearance is part of a government experiment to breed scientifically engineered bugs in her body. Fox Mulder constructs a similar narrative about loss. Once he learns about his sister’s abduction through regression hypnosis, he links it with a government plot to hide the existence of extraterrestrial life from the public. For both Agnes and Mulder, conspiracy theories provide solace. They help make sense of profound loss. They offer answers for the inconceivable, such as the abduction or death of a child, and they provide an epic narrative for trauma. Personal tragedies can often feel inconsequential in the broader context of day-to-day life, yet conspiracy theories give a grandeur to individual loss. They enable these protagonists to craft intricate stories whose scope matches the depth of their suffering.

At the same time, *Bug* and *The X-Files* use the conspiracy genre—as opposed to conspiracy theories themselves—as a vehicle for cultural critique. Its narratives about lost children, either among the working poor or among middle-class families victimized by a working-class predator, draw attention to the socioeconomic conditions facilitating exploitation and resentment, and they challenge audiences to recognize the dangers of systemic poverty. Beginning with an overview of the conspiracy genre, this article examines the link between poverty and abduction in *Bug* and *The X-Files*. Ultimately, Letts's play and Carter's series use missing children to represent the forgotten poor and the risks of not seeing social inequality as a social crisis. Confronting the truth about these abductions, these works suggest, requires confronting uncomfortable truths about American society more broadly. It requires the individual to do something about injustice.

### Conspiracy Narratives and Economic Hardship

Most scholars consider the 1960s a turning point in conspiracy culture as greater disillusionment with the US government emerged after the assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcom X. According to Peter Knight, the aftermath of these deaths made conspiracy theories “a regular feature of everyday political and cultural life, not so much an occasional outburst of countersubversive invective as part and parcel of many people's normal way of thinking about who they are and how the world works” (2). Indeed, a general distrust of the powers-that-be took hold by the end of the decade, and this mindset dovetailed with the disaffection of the countercultural movement. Whether through protests against the Vietnam War, the start of the environmental movement, the rallying cry against patriarchal oppression, or the beginning of the gay rights movement, these efforts forged an antiestablishment sensibility that resonated with millions. It considered white, heterosexist, male-dominated power structures to be the problem. It encouraged skepticism and distrust. And it radically shifted the way Americans perceived the government between the 1960s and 1990s. Prior to 1960, national polls revealed that 75 percent of Americans trusted the government, but that number would drop to 25 percent by 1994 (Knight 36). By the 1990s, in other words, conspiracy theory had moved from the fringes to the mainstream, characterizing the way most Americans viewed the government.

Theories about secret plots and cover-ups, as Theodore Zolkowski notes, have found their artistic counterpart in the conspiracy genre (4). This genre typically

features protagonists joined together by a sense of alienation,<sup>1</sup> placing them on a quest to uncover and destroy a mysterious agenda that threatens themselves and society. According to Adrian Wisnicki, these narratives have six distinct characteristics: 1) a conspiracy theorist, 2) a paranoid subject, 3) the “hidden hand,” 4) inaccessible authorities, 5) men plotting to defraud, and 6) a vanishing subject. The conspiracy theorist (a descendant of the literary detective) and paranoid subject offer a hypothesis that makes sense of and provides a means for resisting the threats posed by a conspiracy. This secret plot tends to be masterminded by inaccessible authorities or an oppressive group, such as the government or military, and oftentimes one character, or “hidden hand,” manipulates events or people behind the scenes (Wisnicki 16). Although the plot to defraud involves two men planning to steal a widow’s fortune in Victorian literature contemporary conspiracies regularly feature governments and corporations obfuscating the truth for financial, social, or political gain (Wisnicki 85). Finally, the vanishing subject refers to “a figure who somehow disappears in response to the oppression/surveillance of the authorities” (Wisnicki 16). These vanishing figures remain relatively undefined, allowing other characters—as well as the audience—to interpret their significance (Wisnicki 130).

The neatness of these characteristics, however, raises questions about the genre’s effectiveness for political engagement. As many scholars have noted, the conspiracy genre often responds to the longing for closure and unity in postmodernism with the assertion that everything is interconnected and explainable. According to Samuel Coale, “conspiracy as a fictional structure converts a cosmos of contingency and chance into a more rational realm of devious plot and secretive performance, thereby attempting to ground the mysteries and ambiguities of postmodernism in some kind of recognizable framework” (6). This contrast with postmodernism highlights the potential limitations of the genre. While conspiracies often draw attention to social problems, suggesting the desire for a better world, they tend to revolve around “systemic investigation, exposure, and elimination.” They fail, as Mark Fenster has argued, “to inform us how to move

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<sup>1</sup> For Timothy Melley, this alienation stems from “agency panic”—the fear that external forces or agents control the individual. As he explains, “paranoia and anxiety about human agency [...] are all part of the paradox in which a supposedly individualist culture conserves its individualism by continually imagining it to be in imminent peril” (6).

from the end of the uncovered plot to the beginning of a political movement” (289).<sup>2</sup> Postmodern fiction, by contrast, rejects the false comforts of conspiracy. It portrays this ideology as another form of entrapment by fostering a sense of alienation and invisibility that “make effective resistance (or separation) impossible” (McClure 258).

Despite these concerns about conspiratorial connectivity, this genre has proven itself an effective tool for addressing issues such as economic inequality. According to David Kelman, conspiracy theories do not merely reflect contemporary crises; they provide “the essential narrative structure of any political articulation. In short, an attention to the narrative structure of conspiracy theories shows that every political narrative must tell the story of an illegitimate force that is undermining the legitimacy of an official or hegemonic discourse” (9). This tension between a rogue force challenging dominant modes of power resonates with the conspiracy genre’s investment in economic exploitation. Many scholars have discussed the important link between financial instability and conspiracy ideology. Even though Richard Hofstadter’s famous essay “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” primarily focuses on ethnic and religious conflict as the wellspring of paranoia, for example, he acknowledges class as a mobilizing force as well: “Feeling that they have no access to political bargaining or making of decisions, [the dispossessed] find their original conception of the world of power as omnipotent, sinister, and malicious fully confirmed” (39). Knight finds economic inequity particularly important for understanding the conspiracy mindset of the 1990s. The widening gap between the wealthy and poor coupled with declining wages in the middle class inspired many in the “formerly secure mainstream [...] to turn] to the language and logic of extreme politics.” As he explains, deregulation offered greater flexibility to corporate America, but “flexibility for corporations often means insecurity for workers” (40). Indeed, as Colin Harrison observes, “America may have been richer, but its citizens were more divided and more insecure” (7). By 1999, for example, “half of the nation’s income was earned by the top fifth of the population while the bottom fifth took only 4.2 per cent” (Harrison 7). These conditions fostered feelings of

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<sup>2</sup> Such a sentiment has been echoed by a range of scholars. Charles Soukup, for example, notes that Mulder and Scully work for the very government they seek to expose, enabling the audience of *The X-Files* “to playfully resist governmental corruption [...] while maintaining] the desire for the system to correct itself” (23). Likewise, Stephanie Kelley-Romano observes that “it is easier [...] for people to blame a governmental conspiracy for low wages than it is to contemplate complex theories concerning economic restructuring” (117).

disenfranchisement and powerlessness, enhancing the appeal of conspiracies to provide a scapegoat for socioeconomic hardships.

*Bug* and *The X-Files* tap into this intersection between conspiracy and oppressive class hierarchies through their depiction of working-poor life in 1990s America. Poverty circumscribes the lives both of Letts's characters and of the destitute seeking Mulder and Scully's help. Conspiracy theories only fuel this oppression by tacitly condoning the status quo and deflecting attention away from social problems. Although both Letts's play and Carter's series acknowledge the psychological appeal of such theories, they do so to highlight their failure to inspire political action. *Bug* and *The X-Files* thus use the conspiracy genre to critique the way this ideology perpetuates social injustices, and the vanishing child, in particular, emerges as an image for the nation's failure to "see" the problems of poverty and ultimately to do something about it.

### "Put it together. The pieces fit.": Conspiracy Culture, Loss, and Poverty in *Bug*

Letts's *Bug* focuses on the relationship between two characters who turn to conspiracy theories as a way of coping with loneliness, loss, and economic hardship. After the abduction of her six-year-old son and the incarceration of her abusive ex-husband, Agnes White withdraws from the world. She takes refuge in a motel room outside of Oklahoma City, works a dead-end job as a waitress, drinks in excess, freebases cocaine, and appears to have only one friend, a lesbian coworker named R.C. One night, Agnes begins a romance with Peter, a handsome stranger from the bar, and she soon learns that this Gulf War veteran has recently gone AWOL from a military hospital. Peter claims to be the victim of a secret government program to test various technologies, chemical weapons, diseases, and drugs on soldiers. He soon becomes convinced of an insect infestation in Agnes's room, which he attributes to egg sacks that have been implanted under his skin by the military. In many respects, *Bug* maps Agnes's descent into Peter's conspiratorial view of the world. Their shared delusions give them a sense of belonging (to each other). They provide answers to the loss of her son and the loss of Peter's sanity. And they give Peter and Agnes a central role in a government plot to hatch experimental bugs that will infest the planet. This movement from victims to heroes, from marginalized poor to lynchpins in an international conspiracy, highlights the extent to which the working poor feel invisible in America. Peter and

Agnes rely on conspiracy for some degree of recognition. Ultimately, Letts uses the conspiracy genre to expose the flaws of this ideology. Peter and Agnes lock themselves inside a motel room, shut off from the outside world, and this insularity reflects the failure of conspiracy theories to inspire social change. This presentation of paranoia also calls attention to the harmfulness of economic inequity, and the culminating violence of the play—with both characters immolating themselves to save the world—serves as a warning about the dangers of maintaining hierarchies that disenfranchise so many.

Although Peter's unwavering conviction in conspiracy theories might even give Fox Mulder pause, these extreme beliefs mirror the extent of Peter's alienation. He references the medical experiments of Edgewood and Tuskegee, mind control, US collaboration with Nazi scientists, surveillance, domestic terrorism, chemical poisoning, Gulf War syndrome, abductions, implants, aliens, and machines/robots masquerading as humans. As Christopher Bigsby points out, there is an unnerving truth to many of Peter's claims, and the bizarreness of the play "is outdone by reality. Letts was in Oklahoma at the time of the bombing, which led him to become interested in people who had 'slipped out of the matrix' and desired to make sense of the event by locating it within a larger story" (Bigsby 104). The power of *Bug* does not come from the underlying truth in some of these assertions, however. It comes from the way conspiracies reflect a profound need among the dispossessed. They offer this group validation by acknowledging their struggles and by placing their lives, which mainstream society often ignores, at the center of contemporary life.

Peter, for example, relies on conspiracy to mitigate the depth of his social and familial isolation, but it only serves to marginalize him further. He admits that he has no place to go and in asking for Agnes's friendship, he explains, "I'm just trying to make a connection" (Letts 13). This isolation stems from his recent break with the Army. After serving in the Gulf War and spending four years in a military psychiatric hospital, Peter decides to go AWOL. This decision leaves him rootless and penniless, for he viewed the Army both as his family and as a path to a lifelong career. Even though he believes himself to be a victim of medical and technological experiments, the loss of this military family removes him from the community he has relied on for self-definition. It also parallels the absence of his biological family. His mother died at a young age, and his father is a preacher without a congregation or church.

This career mirrors Peter's own status. He has lost his congregation in the military. He has neither a home (church) nor a source of income. And he preaches conspiracy in the hopes of finding converts. At several points in the play, Agnes challenges his ideas, recognizing that this conspiratorial mindset may be an attempt to reestablish his identity as a soldier: "I'm just playin' devil's advocate here. [...] Maybe you're just lookin' for a connection to the army" (42). For Letts, this moment underscores the palliative nature of conspiracy culture. It appears to connect Peter with others, such as veteran Timothy McVeigh for being the other recipient of a "subcutaneous [...] computer chip," yet this "community" is artificial (48). Peter has never met McVeigh. In essence, Peter replaces real connections to family, fellow soldiers, and women with the extremist violence of the Oklahoma City bombing. The inexplicable horrors of that attack become a way for him to understand the horrific losses in his own life. They enable him to blame his own madness and feelings of violence on the government. Like the conviction that he is under constant surveillance, these beliefs offer him a narrative of self-importance that offsets the extent of his loneliness.

Agnes's isolation stems from poverty and familial loss as well. As a waitress in a dive nightclub, she makes just enough money to pay for a motel room and a steady stream of drugs and alcohol. Agnes cannot afford many consumer goods, an apartment, or a ticket out of town, which makes her vulnerable to Goss's (her ex-husband's) harassment. As such, her furnished room with its temperamental air conditioner captures the limitations of this working-poor life. She may take a certain satisfaction in the motel's "maid service," but she admits that she cannot pay all of her expenses. At one point, Goss even recalls their marriage in terms of economic hardship: "I drove [a sausage truck] twenty hours a day sometimes, so I could feed my wife and my kid" (Letts 31). Agnes's literal poverty also becomes a metaphor for her emotional losses. She hoped marriage and motherhood would give her a sense of belonging, but that proved not to be the case: "I just get sick of it, my lousy life, laundromats and grocery stores, dumb marriages and lost kids" (40). Economic hardship parallels the pain of broken families.

Just as marriage proved disappointing and dangerous (as Goss nearly killed her once in a drunken rage), the abduction of her son, Lloyd, remains an ongoing source of anguish. Nearly ten years ago, "he was with me, in the grocery store...in the cart...I forgot to get an onion...I went back for an onion, and left him in the cart...I came back to the cart, and he...he was just...he was gone" (Letts 50). Not surprisingly, when R.C. offers to protect her from Peter, Agnes protests: "You come

in here and try to take away the only thing in the world I have, that's mine. Why can't I have one thing?" (28, 39). As her motel residence suggests, Agnes has nothing. She wants this relationship to compensate for the emotional, economic, and material deficits in her life. She hopes that having "one thing" will make the mundane routines of life, like doing laundry and shopping for groceries, bearable.

Amid the pain of lost children and poverty, conspiracy ideology emerges as both a coping mechanism and an ironic means for maintaining hierarchies that erase the poor. Through her gradual acceptance of Peter's mindset, Agnes begins to view her friendship with R.C. as part of a government plot. Specifically, R.C. and her partner, Lavoice, are fighting a seemingly hopeless custody battle for Lavoice's child: "I don't think the state's too hot on reuniting children with their beautiful lesbian mothers" (Letts 9). The surprise victory, however, heightens Agnes's sense of injustice. On one level, it represents her own fears of insignificance. The legal system grants R.C. and Lavoice the kind of family denied to Agnes. Despite their friendship, Agnes cannot understand how a homophobic state could help them and not her: "I just can't believe it, not in Oklahoma" (37). Unable to reconcile the difference between her losses and R.C.'s gains, Agnes attributes it to a broader conspiracy: "The kid, Lavoice's boy, they gave her Lavoice's boy, they never woulda done that, but she brought the bugs to me in exchange for Lavoice's son" (51). Interestingly, this view of herself as host or queen bug lessens her guilt about Lloyd. It shifts the blame for the abduction from herself to governmental forces outside of her control. It also hinges on her ability to be a mother again, for Agnes can now view herself as exceptional: "I'm the supermother. I'm the super-mother. I'm the supermother" (52). As the repetition and the hyphen suggest, conspiracy enables Agnes to reimagine herself as a good mother and to view her insect progeny as too attached to leave: "they wouldn't leave us, they'd never leave us [...], so they're coming in here, these people, to kill us, and send the bugs out, out into the world, the world" (52). Conspiracy theories thus mitigate this loss by restoring her maternal identity and providing her with children that will not disappear.

While the abduction of Agnes's son becomes a metaphor for the erasure of Americans trapped by poverty, Letts also uses it to expose conspiracy ideology as perpetuating harmful class hierarchies. Agnes recalls that the FBI and police "wouldn't help" find her son, and just as the legal system never protected her from Goss ("I'd get another court order if I thought it'd do any—"), both details capture her sense of insignificance within broader social institutions (Letts 50, 18). The decision to "hermitize" herself on the margins of Oklahoma City reflects this sense

of erasure as well, for her isolation dovetails with the realization that society does not care (9). In the final moments of the play, she and Peter weave an intricate theory that magnifies their place in society. It provides a narrative for the inexplicable by removing the mystery surrounding some of the most difficult aspects of living—lost love, broken relationships, and missing children. It validates the depth of her loss. And it suggests that she and those in her socioeconomic circle matter. Though their narrative captures the fundamental appeal of conspiracy, it also highlights the tragedy of this ideology. Such a story offers Agnes no path for change or growth. Instead, she finds herself locked inside a motel room, walls covered in foil, contemplating suicide.

According to Peter, the driving force behind these secret experiments is maintaining the status quo, and Letts uses this theory to underscore his central message about economic inequity:

PETER: A consortium of bankers, industrialists, corporate CEOs, and politicians [in the 1950s ...] drew up a plan for maintaining the status quo. [...] It's *the way things are*. It's the rich get richer, and the poor poorer. It's a piece of shit, but you got to where you kind of liked it. [...] They devised a plan to manipulate technology, economics, the media, population control, world religion, to keep things *the way they are*. (48; italics in original)

Peter's narrative gets increasingly convoluted as he tries to explain the origins of brainwashing bugs, but his commentary about a class system that thrives on inequality resonates. It is a moment of moral and social clarity in the play. As the audience has been watching this relationship unfold in a grimy motel room, poverty emerges as one of the primary sources for their entrapment. Their use of drugs and alcohol for escapist pleasure—like Goss's desire to watch TV—fits Peter's assessment that "you got to where you kind of liked it." Such poverty stems from limited resources as well as a tacit acceptance of social practices that disenfranchise one group at the expense of another. For Letts, the conspiracy genre becomes an ideal vehicle for exposing the palliative nature of conspiracy theories. They reduce everyone to victims of outside forces, and as such, they perpetuate the status quo by discouraging change. Peter and Agnes turn inward, and their gestures at resistance remain largely private. Ultimately, Letts uses their immolation to suggest that such socioeconomic inequities have explosive consequences for the nation.

Lost Children and the Forgotten Poor in *The X-Files*

From 1992 to 2002 (as well as the current revivals in 2016 and 2018), *The X-Files* placed protagonists, FBI agents Fox Mulder and Dana Scully, at the center of a government conspiracy to hide the truth about extraterrestrial life, alien abductions, the engineering of alien-human hybrids, and a host of other horrors. Not every installment focused on this mythology. In the tradition of *The Twilight Zone* and *Kolchak: The Night Stalker*, *The X-Files* offered monster-of-the-week episodes, which featured various creatures such as ancient insects, cockroaches, werewolves, vampires, golems, zombies, and other mutants. Even these stand-alone episodes often revealed government agents and the military as responsible for varying degrees of mayhem and deception. The fundamental tension in *The X-Files* involves the juxtaposition of Mulder's unquestioning belief in conspiracy and supernatural phenomena with Scully's rational, scientific sensibility as a medical doctor. This dichotomy functions largely as sleight of hand, for science rarely triumphs in the show. It ends up supporting Mulder's paranoia by inviting audiences to find answers in conspiracy as well, much like Agnes does with Peter's ideas in *Bug*. In the world of *The X-Files*, the government is the problem. It tests biological weapons on the public, works closely with former Nazi scientists, stages alien abductions, assassinates people with impunity, impregnates (rapes) women to breed alien-human hybrids, and colludes with alien forces intent on colonizing the planet. As Douglas Kellner notes, the series depicts government agencies and the military as "filled with individuals who carry out villainous actions and constitute a threat to traditional humanistic moral values and human life itself" (218). In this context, conspiracy becomes the only reasonable lens for viewing modern American life.

*The X-Files* is also preoccupied with missing children. The driving motivation of Mulder stems from the loss of his sister. As he explains in the pilot episode, nothing matters more than finding out the truth about Samantha's abduction. Yet Mulder has only the vaguest recollection of what happened. With the Watergate hearings on television, his parents at a party next door, and the board game Stratego on the living room floor, he recalls a bright light carrying her away. This moment of utter paralysis foreshadows the way this loss will freeze him in time. Neither eyewitness accounts nor forensic evidence can confirm his story. In fact, from the beginning of the series, *The X-Files* raises doubts about Mulder's account through both Scully's scientific skepticism ("What I find fantastic is any notion that there

are answers beyond the realm of science”) and the fact that this memory can only be recalled through “deep regression hypnosis” (“Pilot”). Such uncertainty pushes Mulder into an obscure branch of the FBI called the X-Files—a potpourri of forgotten, unsolved cases involving paranormal phenomena and alien abductions. These strange cases, like the ambiguity surrounding Samantha’s abduction, become vehicles for the series to use lost children as metaphors for uncomfortable truths about American culture that people see but do not want to believe.

Many scholars have noted the way extraterrestrials or aliens allude to the theme of alienation in *The X-Files*. Kellner, for example, views the alien “as a figure for what humans have become in an era in which individuals no longer feel that they control their own destiny, in which their own bodies mutate out of control, and their minds and bodies are invaded with new societal, technological, and political forces” (228). Such feelings of vulnerability inspire many characters in *The X-Files* to turn to conspiracy for answers, and this shared ideology often forges connections among people of different economic and ethnic backgrounds. As Teresa Gellar has observed, the show’s exploration of social alienation includes “disenfranchised groups such as POWs from the Vietnam War and undocumented immigrants” (24), and Mulder and Scully’s efforts on their behalf demonstrate an earnest investment in justice. These investigations also challenge the kind of binaries that often justify the marginalization of certain groups. For Paul Cantor, such divisions are critical for the nation-state, which needs to create “aliens” to maintain power: “Nationalism rests on simplistic polarizations between *us* and *them* and above all develops a notion of distinct national identity, often based on ideas of cultural homogeneity, monolingualism, and even racial purity” (123, italics in original). The alienating impact of the nation-state stems largely from “its attempt to impose economic and bureaucratic rationality on its citizens; it alienates them from their ethnic heritage, their regional ties, their communal traditions, and above all their myths—which the nation-state views as an archaic sources of irrationality that must be eliminated for the sake of progress” (Cantor 190). This pressure for cultural uniformity, in other words, heightens the immigrant’s/outsider’s/alien’s sense of isolation and their vulnerability to exploitation.

Certainly, *The X-Files* includes ethnic identity in its portrait of alienation in the modern world, but far less attention has been paid to the show’s exploration of class. While immigrant groups (“aliens”) from Mexico, Haiti, Africa, China, and the like experience mistreatment because of their ethnicity, they also suffer from poverty. In “Hell Money,” for example, Hsin (Michael Yama) begins gambling

with his organs because he cannot afford medical treatment for his daughter's leukemia. Samuel Aboah (Willie Amakye) in "Teliko" can prey on poor African-American males because their deaths go largely unremarked outside of the black community: "young black men are dying and [...] nobody cares" (00:08:07-00:08:11). And poverty utterly shapes the lives of the Native Americans living on the Trego Indian Reservation in "Shapes." Other episodes use class resentment as a backdrop. In "Drive," for example, Patrick Crump (Bryan Cranston) believes that the "Jew FBI" has been secretly experimenting on him and his wife, in part, because the government views poor people as expendable. Jenny Uphouse (Gina Mastrogiacomo) in "Chimera" views her affair with the sheriff as a kind of revenge against the snobbery of middle-class suburban wives. She might not get access to the nice houses of these families, but sex at least provides a temporary outlet for feeling superior. "Pusher" features a killer, Robert Modell (Robert Wisden), who can impose his will on others. As an unremarkable student with a community college education, Modell only seems capable of getting a job as a convenience store clerk, and this mundane, working-class life makes him desperate for recognition. Pushing his will onto others becomes an inversion of the way external forces such as limited opportunities have determined his life. And "Theef" involves a poor, Southern man who uses voodoo to enact revenge on a wealthy doctor for euthanizing his daughter. Hexes and curses are the only weapons he has against the privilege and status of people like Dr. Wieder (James Morrison).

As with Tracy Letts's *Bug*, some of the most provocative uses of poverty in *The X-Files* come from its intersection with the lost child motif and its ability to expose conspiracy ideology as inhibiting social change. A number of episodes such as "Oubliette," "Paper Hearts," "Sein und Zeit" and "Closure" establish a connection between lost children and economic hardship, making abduction a metaphor for the invisible poor and conspiracy a way of avoiding the real impact of economic injustice in America. These episodes tend to place abduction at the center of broader narratives about poverty, forcing Mulder and Scully to confront their own privilege as they encounter the poor and destitute. Even when the abducted child is middle class, as with Samantha Mulder in "Paper Hearts" and "Closure" or Amy Jacobs in "Oubliette," the threat tends to come from working-class predators, suggesting a need to address some of the profound social problems and resentments at the heart of American society. Ultimately, through missing children, Mulder and Scully must engage with people of different socioeconomic backgrounds to solve a case, and in some instances, they must act on their behalf. In doing so, *The X-Files* suggests the

need to recognize the forces that marginalize people—particularly poverty—and it invites audiences to assume a shared responsibility for these groups as well.

Written by Charles Grant Craig, “Oubliette” juxtaposes two child abduction stories in its examination of class tensions in the United States. At the exact moment of Amy Jacobs’s (Jewel Staite) kidnapping in suburban Seattle, a fast-food waitress named Lucy Householder (Tracey Ellis) collapses with a severe nosebleed across town, muttering the words of the kidnapper and bleeding Amy’s blood. Mulder, intrigued by this strange connection, seeks out Lucy’s help in finding the missing girl. He soon discovers that Lucy had been kidnapped as a child, held captive in a basement, and sexually abused for years. Now, she seems to relive this abduction vicariously through Amy. The contrast between these young women establishes the different values associated with middle-class and working-class life. Amy is an attractive, articulate fifteen-year-old girl that appears to be a good student (as suggested by the books on her nightstand) and a model teenager, sharing a room with her baby sister and going to bed by ten o’clock. She lives in a suburban home with a spacious front yard and tastefully decorated rooms. Her bedroom contains countless stuffed animals, books, toys, and a stereo. In the opening sequence, both she and her sister nuzzle comfortably under thick comforters, and the open window suggests the family’s confidence in the security promised by suburbia. They do not expect a working-class photographer’s assistant to climb through the window and take their daughter. As Mrs. Jacobs (Sidonie Boll) explains in a daze, “Who could take somebody who wasn’t there’s?” (00:06:06-00:06:07). In many ways, however, the episode is about who takes things in America at the expense of others. Amy’s abduction garners the full resources of local police and the FBI. No expense is spared to find her, for Amy represents the values of white suburbia—values that must be protected from the likes of working-class predators.

By contrast, Lucy’s abduction experience has driven her to illegal, self-destructive behaviors, making her representative of an underclass that mainstream America would like to forget. The title, “Oubliette,” refers the dark cellar where sexual predator Carl Wade (Michael Chieffo) holds young girls captive, and this space becomes a haunting image for Lucy’s experiences both as a victim of prolonged abuse and as a member of the working poor. With hunched shoulders and darting eyes, Lucy’s body language communicates her sense of ongoing entrapment by past and present traumas. As Mulder notes, “She’d been held in the dark so long her eyes were hypersensitive to the light. [...] She’s thirteen years old here [in a video made shortly after her escape] and can barely string two words

together” (00:19:07-00:19:21). She subsequently turns to drugs and prostitution to cope. Like her status as a trainee at a fast-food restaurant, Lucy’s life in the Bright Angel Halfway House captures her financial and social instability. She is stuck between imprisonment and freedom, between a presumed middle-class childhood and a working-poor present, and between transitional housing and owning (“holding”) a home as her last name suggests. At one point, Mulder comments that “it’s amazing she’s gotten anywhere in life,” to which Scully replies: “Well, by most yardsticks, she hasn’t” (00:19:25-00:19:28). The yardstick here is a middle-class value system, and the episode suggests that those who fall outside of such standards tend not to be measured at all.

This contrast between Amy and Lucy also crafts the oubliette into an image for the hidden poor and for economic exploitation more broadly. Lucy’s prominent role in this case draws attention to her life on the social margins. Local cops grumble about her “kind,” convinced that poverty and a criminal past define her, and they have no interest in the forces that have produced and continue to limit Lucy. In this way, the quest to save Amy becomes a way of preserving middle-class values at the expense of the poor. Lucy’s vicarious experiences make her a victim of this crime without any support from officials (apart from Mulder). Lucy’s body bears Amy’s scratches and bruises. She feels the same bone-chilling cold, desperate thirst, and blindness from being locked in the dark. This shared pain culminates in Wade’s attempt to drown Amy. During this sequence, the camera cuts repeatedly to Lucy’s face as she coughs up water, turns blue, and draws her final breath. Not only does the coroner find five liters of water in Lucy’s lungs, but Amy also walks away unscathed. As Scully summarizes: “There were no injuries. [...] She didn’t have a cut on her, and nobody wants to talk about that right now. Everyone is just relieved to have her back again, to have her safe” (00:43:11-00:43:26). This moment underscores the class implications of the episode. A certain silence surrounds Lucy’s death and the lives of the working poor more broadly. As her damaged body suggests, Lucy becomes an expendable resource for the middle-class suburban culture that Amy represents. Lucy is used to find, rescue, and spare Amy the horrors of molestation and murder. Mulder may optimistically conclude that this sacrifice was “the only way she could escape, the only way she could forget what happened seventeen years ago. Finally the only way she could outrun Carl Wade.” But she cannot outrun the limitations of her class. Clearly, the police and community are much happier substituting Amy for Lucy, and Lucy’s erasure in death mirrors her social insignificance in life.

Finally, the connection between this case and Samantha Mulder's abduction reinforces the episode's message about economic inequity. Throughout the investigation, Mulder encourages Lucy to fight on Amy's behalf: "You're sharing her pain. [...] Now [she] needs some of your strength [...], and you have to help her" (00:35:43-00:35:49). This call to take a shared responsibility for others aligns with Mulder's theory about the case: "Wade's abduction of Amy triggered some kind of physical response in Lucy, some kind of empathic transference" (00:29:21-00:29:25). This notion extends to the audience as well, for the episode challenges viewers to empathize with both Amy and Lucy. In fact, Mulder's empathy for Lucy focuses the audience's attention on the various hegemonic forces that have victimized her, most notably poverty and trauma. Even Scully's questions about Mulder's motives end up supporting his perspective: "You're becoming some kind of an empath yourself, Mulder" (00:29:46-00:29:47). For Scully, this is a case of misplaced loyalties: "You are so sympathetic to Lucy, as a victim, like your sister, that you can't see her as a person who is capable of committing this crime" (00:29:48-00:29:53). Mulder, however, proves to be right about this transference, and Scully's errors in judgement—from Lucy's innocence to Amy's ability to be resuscitated—include the importance of self-sacrifice as well. Lucy's extreme empathy saves Amy's life after all, and in this way, the show makes empathy a heroic act. Mulder models such behavior, demonstrating an indefatigable willingness to sacrifice himself for both Lucy and Amy. In rejecting Scully's reductionist view of his relationship with Lucy, Mulder argues that "motivations for behavior can be more complex and mysterious than tracing them back to one single childhood experience" (00:30:00-00:30:05). His interest in the circumstances of her life transcends the personal. He recognizes the social factors that continue to trap Lucy, and his actions become an attempt to rectify some of this injustice.

The closing scene invites audiences to make Mulder's and arguably Lucy's commitment to individual sacrifice. After looking through her childhood pictures, which capture moments of carefree innocence and happiness, Mulder moves from Lucy's bed to the window. The acts of sitting on her bed and looking out her window reflect the depth of his empathy. Like his decision to protect her from law enforcement, Mulder tries to occupy her spaces and to assume her perspective on the world. He might not have any experience with a working-poor life, but he has done what no one else was willing to do: to understand and care for Lucy. In the final shot, with Scully now on the bed and Mulder at the window, the viewer's

vantage point from the doorway does not reveal what Mulder sees, and this distance suggests that we have to earn that place at the window. We—the show’s predominantly white, upper-middle-class viewership<sup>3</sup>—have to make efforts to see the struggles of people like Lucy. It is not enough to watch from a distance as one does with television. We have to enter the room and take steps that lead to social change.

### Lost and Found in the Age of Conspiracy

Just as Peter, Agnes, and Scully use microscopes to examine evidence, their desire to see the unseen invites questions about who and what gets overlooked in America. In a sense, *Bug* and several episodes of *The X-Files* give the audience a microscopic view into the lives of the working poor and their feelings of alienation and desperation. This kind of poverty proves to be fertile ground for conspiracy. Such theories provide solace, moving one from the margin to the center. They offer an escapist outlet for the hardships of daily life and explain the inexplicable: whether the loss of one’s child or sense of self. They do so, however, at the cost of maintaining the status quo. By providing no meaningful solutions for social problems, conspiracy reduces Agnes and Peter, for example, to victims of larger forces. It may function as a microscope for seeing previously hidden government plots and military secrets, but in truth, conspiracy is like the bug infestation that they fret over. It spreads and spreads, replacing one plot with another to avoid uncomfortable truths about modern life.

The infectious nature of conspiracy has only intensified in the twenty first century, giving *Bug* and *The X-Files* a compelling resonance today. The Internet Age has made it easier than at any other point in history to embrace the conspiratorial, to shut out dissenting voices and challenging viewpoints, and to find like-minded support for the most cynical and callous beliefs. This myopic insularity makes conspiracy believers particularly vulnerable to manipulation. Hackers can influence elections by spreading untruths. President Donald Trump can lie with

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<sup>3</sup> According to Soukup, “Demographically, viewers of *The X-Files* are upper middle class, white Americans. In fact, the Nielsen company ranked *The X-Files* as the top rated prime-time show for \$75,000-plus income homes (‘Nielsen Ratings,’ 1998). Increasing ratings, a devoted fan-base, and an ideal demographic audience (i.e., affluent, upwardly mobile consumers with disposable income) led to a record setting \$1.5 million per episode syndication deal with the cable network FX (Dempsey, 1998)” (15).

impunity on a daily basis, dismissing facts as “fake news,” and his administration can use conspiracies to justify draconian policies. In this climate, the conspiracy theory has made paranoia and intolerance the touchstone of American politics. And it has been weaponized to hurt the most vulnerable among us, whether putting migrant children in cages at the Southern border or attempting to tighten food stamp eligibility and other social services.

The conspiracy genre proves to be a particularly effective tool for exposing this ideology as part of the problem. It taps into the popularity of this thinking—with its simplistic view of the world (good/evil, us/them) and self-aggrandizing impulse—to comment on the need for social and political transformation. By using the vulnerability of missing children as an image for the working poor, the conspiracy genre in *Bug* and *The X-Files* challenges audiences to “see” those who have been alienated and to act on their behalf. The painful losses that afflict Agnes and Mulder require them to retread familiar ground to seek answers. As Agnes descends further into conspiratorial madness, her motel room becomes a relentless image for her social and psychological entrapment. Likewise, Mulder’s encounters with abducted children—like the ongoing mythology of the series—expose him repeatedly to class inequities and tensions. In both cases, audiences are challenged to look closer at these problems. They are asked to abandon the false comforts of conspiracy and to consider what responsibility they have for protecting the most vulnerable among us.

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## Scholarly Parody: Danielewski's *House of Leaves*

BILL CLOUGH

Mark Z. Danielewski's novel *House of Leaves* (2000) has enjoyed a cult following since its initial release. The novel (as well as several of his other novels) has a very active Facebook reading group, House of Leaves Book Club, with over 6,500 members worldwide as of this article's publication. The group is moderated in part by the author himself; Danielewski posts in the group as well, providing glimpses into side projects from the novel, including the development of a script for a television pilot that he shared as a file for members to access. House of Leaves Book Club has created a renewed interest in the novel, and the group has stayed active even after completing the scheduled reading, discussing similar experimental novels as well as other works by Danielewski. New members continue to join the group, and guidance is provided as to best methods of approaching the dense text as well as numerous threads sharing theories and ideas about the characters and plot of the novel.

Much has been written about *House of Leaves* in terms of its structure as a labyrinth,<sup>1</sup> but the structure of the novel can be read in other ways as well. As *House of Leaves* moves back into the broader popular culture consciousness, it is important to consider the ways in which the novel functions as a parody of the traditional scholarly edition of a text. An earlier novel that works in this format is Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, an intricate look at how a scholarly text is constructed, as well as the problems inherent in critical interpretations of texts. It has also been suggested that *Pale Fire* is "perhaps less about the interpretation of a text than about the textuality of interpretation: the way a reading rewrites the text and meaning is produced in the encounter-collision between text and audience" (Packman 77).

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<sup>1</sup> One such article is Natalie Hamilton's "The A-Mazing House."

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Danielewski's *House of Leaves* works in the same way.<sup>2</sup> By engaging the reader with the idea that the text cannot necessarily be trusted as accurate, the reader of *House of Leaves* must discover where the truth may be found, if it can be found at all, in this parody of the scholarly text.

## Postmodernism and Scholarly Parodies

In the traditional scholarly edition of a text, the reader is presented with an expert or editor/editors that guide them through the text being read. These editions often use a combination of devices, including a foreword, afterword, footnotes, endnotes, index, or appendices. The expert/scholar could be considered another author of the text in many ways, filling in gaps for the reader or providing an interpretation of the text through their own thinking and vision of the text. I will refer to this as "scholarly textuality," where the commentary becomes an embedded part of the original text. In most instances, the text can be read with or separate from the scholarly critique and still provide the reader with the experience of having read the original text, consulting the scholarly analysis when or if desired without removing anything from the original poem or novel.

Postmodern novels have often used parody to great effect. Linda Hutcheon notes that parody in postmodernism "is not nostalgic; it is always critical" (88). Scholarly textuality is parodied in this vein in *House of Leaves*. Danielewski's novel uses a multiplicity of narrators each offering a text of their own opinions and information with varying levels of applicability to one another. When encountering these texts, the reader is left wondering not only which narrator to believe, if any, but even which text is the most important to understanding the novel in question. In the second edition of *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne C. Booth defines a narrator as unreliable when they do not act "in accordance with the norms of the work" (158). The format in question here is that of the scholarly text, and the norms of scholarly textuality are that the commentator or scholar analyzing the text will act in good faith, providing valid critical interpretation and commentary on the original text. As *House of Leaves* is a parody of scholarly textuality, the norms of the form are upended. Unreliable narrators reinforce the parody being performed, forcing the reader to question the critical "analysis" being performed. While in a "real"

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<sup>2</sup> For additional information on *Pale Fire*, Brian Boyd's *Nabokov's Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery* (1999) is an excellent critical analysis of the novel.

scholarly text the reader can choose to disregard the commentary and not lose the ability to interpret the original text, this is not the case in these parodies of scholarly textuality. By framing the various commentators as unreliable narrator characters in the fiction being created, the reader is heartily encouraged to read the commentary along with the “text” being analyzed by the unreliable narrators. The form, in these cases, reinforces the parody being performed.

Additionally, scholarly texts are centered around the idea of useful and learned criticism provided by an expert on the text in question, typically possessing an advanced degree that qualifies them as an expert. In this parody of scholarly textuality, none of the narrators in the story can be considered “experts” in the traditional sense. *House of Leaves* takes the connection between unreliable narrators and parody to extremes. While Danielewski self-deprecatingly cites influences both literary and cinematic for his formal inventiveness, including among them Laurence Sterne, it cannot be denied that his first novel is, indeed, a bold development in the experimental novel, and an excellent parody of the scholarly text (McCaffrey and Gregory 106).

### The Unreliable Scholar-Narrator

The novel presents an essay by an old man known only as Zampanò. Upon his death, two friends, Lude and Johnny Truant, find an essay in his apartment, a detailed analysis of a documentary film called *The Navidson Record* about a house that grows progressively larger on the inside while maintaining the same size and boundaries on the outside. The text the reader is given has supposedly been prepared by a group of editors, and holds Zampanò’s essay and footnotes, Johnny Truant’s footnotes to the essay, and appendices provided by Zampanò and, at the editors’ request, Johnny Truant. In Johnny’s appendix are a series of letters written to Truant by his mother, Pelafina, from The Three Attic Whalestoe Institute, a mental institution. The main narrators of the novel are Zampanò and Johnny Truant; following the footnotes of each, however, leads the reader inevitably to begin consulting the appendices, switching the narrator at times to the unnamed editors of the text or Truant’s institutionalized mother. Through the layering of the narrators in this novel, as well as its at times bizarre typography and layout in the text, the reliability of the narrators, posed as textual experts, must be called into question.

In Johnny Truant's introduction, the reader is told that he is a chronic insomniac who suffers from nightmares: "In fact I get them so often I should be used to them by now. I'm not. No one ever really gets used to nightmares" (Danielewski xi). He has tried a long list of drugs to try to "curb the fear" he gets that causes his insomnia, but nothing can help (xi). Before the death of Zampanò, Truant describes enjoying sleep, alcohol, the bar scene, and his "mind numbing routine as an apprentice at a tattoo shop" (xii). Truant regrets responding to Lude's 3:00 a.m. phone call that brings him to Lude's building and, ultimately, into Zampanò's apartment: "Ever see yourself doing something in the past and no matter how many times you remember it you still want to scream stop, somehow redirect the action, reorder the present? I feel that way now, watching myself tugged stupidly along by inertia" (xiv). In the apartment, Lude points out Zampanò's manuscript:

As I discovered, there were reams and reams of it. Endless snarls of words, sometimes twisting into meaning, sometimes into nothing at all, frequently breaking apart, always branching off into other pieces I'd come across later—on old napkins, the tattered edges of an envelope, one even on the back of a postage stamp; everything and anything but empty; each fragment completely covered with the creep of years and years of ink pronouncements. (xvii)

As he reads Zampanò's manuscript on *The Navidson Record*, Johnny Truant begins to lose touch with reality. He shuts himself up in his apartment, nails the windows shut, buys several locks for his door, removes interior doors, and buys "a dozen measuring tapes, nailing all those straight to the floor and walls" (Danielewski xviii). As he reads about the house that grows inexplicably on the inside and its destructive presence, Truant wants "a closed, inviolate and most of all immutable space" (xix). In a note Zampanò wrote the day before he died, he asks that if the manuscript is ever published he be given credit for its authorship but warns that "truth stands the test of time. I can think of no greater comfort than knowing this document failed such a test" (xix). In this section, Johnny Truant begins to analyze Zampanò's text obsessively. His analysis of the text begins to drive him into madness. He seems to be intent on searching for the "truth" Zampanò says does not exist in his manuscript and finding there to be some level of truth in it based on his reaction of needing to assure himself that his apartment is not the same as the house in the text he has been analyzing. In his introduction to Zampanò's text, Truant

provides the reader with his own experience as the scholarly reader of the main text, giving an example of what a more analytical reading of the text has done to his own mental state, providing something akin to a warning to coming readers.

After revealing the contents of Zampanò's note that he hopes his manuscript fails a "truth test," Truant informs us that the study is a fraud: "Zampanò's entire project is about a film which doesn't even exist. You can look, I have, but no matter how long you search you will never find *The Navidson Record* in theaters or video stores. Furthermore, most of what's said by famous people has been made up" (xix-xx). The footnotes and source materials cited by Zampanò are also, mostly, false, though a few extant texts do creep in from time to time. The final blow is dealt with another shocking revelation: "all this language of light, film and photography, and he hadn't seen a thing since the mid-fifties. He was blind as a bat" (xxi). Zampanò becomes the first of the unreliable narrators in this multi-layered story, but as the footnotes provided by Truant unfold, added to his admitted break with reality in his Introduction, the reader is faced with two unreliable narrators. The reader additionally discovers through the text that Zampanò also had assistants to help with his writing due to his blindness. He, in other words, is any number of multiple narrators as well; it can be assumed that he dictated his writing to these assistants, but the level to which this allows for human error in the transcription adds another level to the unreliability of Zampanò's narrative voice in the text. Zampanò, then, becomes a perfect example of an unreliable "scholar" in Danielewski's novel.

If the reader knows that Zampanò is lying by the end of the introduction, why continue to read? Why would editors of a text that is a total fabrication, as well as notes from a commentator on this fabrication that plays into the lie, allow for its publication? The reason lies in the effect the text has on those who read it, according to Truant:

This much I'm certain of: it doesn't happen immediately. You'll finish and that will be that, until a moment will come, maybe in a month, maybe a year, maybe even several years. You'll be sick or feeling troubled or deeply in love or quietly uncertain or even content for the first time in your life. It won't matter. Out of the blue, beyond any cause you can trace, you'll suddenly realize things are not how you perceived them to be at all. For some reason, you will no longer be the person you believed you once were. You'll detect slow and subtle shifts going on all around you, more importantly shifts in you. Worse, you'll realize it's always been shifting,

like a shimmer of sorts, a vast shimmer, only dark like a room. But you won't understand why or how. You'll have forgotten what granted you this awareness in the first place. (xxii-iii)

Once this "awareness" sets in, obviously provided as a result of reading Zampanò's essay, "the nightmares will begin" (xxiii). The introduction was completed on Oct. 31, 1998, according to the date at the end. The reader is then left to decide if Truant's introduction to an entirely fictitious piece of "scholarship" has made that false document worth reading.

Further, the reader is left with the decision as to whether to believe anything Truant has told us. By his own admission, Johnny Truant lost his grip on reality during his scholarship on a text that has been ruled an out-and-out lie. The reader of *House of Leaves* is left wondering very early in the novel what can be trusted in a book with two admittedly unreliable narrators. This is an interesting gloss on the idea that the reading of a text changes a reader. Truant's statement leads to the reader questioning whether this text should be read, being cautioned of potential dangers that exist in reading the text. This is an interesting tactic for a commentator to take in a scholarly text, and it leads back into the function of parody quite well. When considering the dedication of the novel, "This is not for you," Truant's warning to the reader is thrown into starker contrast [ix]. The scholarly text in this parody is actively discouraging the reader from engaging with it, going as far as to suggest that little to no meaning can be gathered or made. Ironically, this is the very way that the reader is brought into the broader world of the novel and echoes the famous quotation from Dante provided as a footnote later in the first chapter of *House of Leaves*: "Abandon every hope, ye who enter here" (4). Additionally, as noted earlier, the publication of the supposed scholarly text presented by this novel is problematic in itself; Truant has told the reader that Zampanò's essay is a fiction, yet he still manages to find a publisher and a group of editors to bring the text to the public eye. Danielewski sets the stage for the reader of his novel to question the form of scholarly textuality beginning in the dedication and reinforces it in the introduction presented by the "scholars" Zampanò and Johnny Truant.

The presence of a supposed group of editors, then, would seem to give the reader a sense of "truth" as represented in the text, and it is exactly this sense of editorial process that keeps this parody of a scholarly text in line with a reader's expectations of the genre being parodied. But these unnamed editors, perhaps for showing Truant's descent into madness, leave all his digressive footnotes in the

text, regardless of their value to the text upon which Truant is commenting. Instead of clarifying matters for the reader, the editors of this text do the exact opposite, leaving in place the narrative of Johnny Truant's life as another thread to follow in the novel. This multi-layered set of narrative voices, including an odd and occasional group of editors, provides a set of interesting circumstances, leaving the reader with many decisions about whom to trust even by the end of the Introduction. In *House of Leaves*, the multitude of narrators compete from the very start, and there are no fewer than three that float through the main text, as well as additional voices using footnotes and appendices. As Martin Brick notes, while the "plot" of *House of Leaves* "is about a house that grows infinitely on the inside, his [Danielewski's] book is clearly about the reading process and a metaphor for interpretation of books themselves" (1).

Still another layer of complication in the text is that Johnny Truant, the editors, and those who surround Johnny Truant are put forward as telling the truth. They stand in contrast to Zampanò's lies, in that they are the ones who are given the task of sorting out and investigating the truthfulness of Zampanò's claims. Truant has done this task, and it would seem that he is believable; he is very forthright in the introduction, detailing his descent into madness as he completes the task of studying the manuscript. This honesty would seem to make him reliable, but the fact that his grip on reality is tenuous at best provides the reader with a reason to question whether Truant can, in fact, be relied upon. The editors admit in a footnote in Chapter I that "we have never actually met Mr. Truant. All matters regarding the publication were addressed in letters or in rare instances over the phone" (Danielewski 4). Still, because the information is supplied by a group of editors, and this is a parody of scholarly textuality, the assumption is to be made by the reader that Johnny Truant is real, because the editors said that he is real. Even if the reader accepts his existence, Truant's footnotes to the text provide another reason to question his reliability as a narrator or scholarly authority qualified to explicate a text.

Johnny Truant is often more interested in discussing his own life in his notes to Zampanò's essay. The use of footnotes rather than endnotes in this text is a crucial choice in format; the reader is given the footnotes of Zampanò himself, appearing right beneath the rest of the text on the page, citing the sources for his essay—sources that are often fictitious—as well as Johnny Truant's notes interwoven with the original footnotes. While the choice to follow the footnotes or not is given to the reader, their presence on the page along with the text being commented upon

gives the reader a greater feeling of intermingled voices, though they are not always working in concert. As well as these two narrators, the text's editors occasionally inserted a footnote, adding a third voice to the main body of Zampanò's essay on *The Navidson Record*.

The footnotes for Chapter I are relatively standard for an academic text, giving publication data for research, as well as notes from Truant providing some information germane to the subject at hand in Zampanò's text. By the second chapter of Zampanò's text, however, Truant begins using these footnotes to also comment upon his day-to-day life. The first lengthy story related is of Truant and Lude trying to pick up on some girls. To do this, Johnny begins making up a story about "some insane adventure I supposedly had when I was a Pit Boxer. Mind you I'd never heard that term before nor had Lude. Lude just made it up and I went with it" (Danielewski 12). As the story unfolds, it becomes more and more elaborate, taking on a life of its own: "By now even Lude was hooked. They all were. The girls all engrossed and smiling and still shimmying closer, as if maybe by touching me they could find out for sure if I was for real. Lude knew it was pure crap but he had no clue where I was heading. To tell you the truth neither did I. So I took my best shot" (14). After telling the story, Johnny admits in the footnote that the event he just described "doesn't sit right with me" because of "how fake it is" (15). This footnote, all to a line of dialogue in *The Navidson Record* about "last night" unfolds over the course of four pages (12). Johnny begins here to insert his own life into Zampanò's text, and the first instance is to reveal himself as an extraordinarily creative liar. This forces the reader again to question his reliability as a narrator, as well as his fitness to comment upon the text. Additionally, this storytelling is an excellent way of posing Truant in relation to Zampanò as a gifted storyteller, considering that *The Navidson Record* is a creation of Zampanò.

Another display of Johnny Truant's unreliability as a narrator is seen in Chapter XXI. The chapter occurs entirely in the font indicated by the editors as that used for Truant's commentary and is laid out as a journal. The section begins five days before the given date of completion in the introduction of October 25, 1998. The first entry consists of two simple words: "Lude's dead" (Danielewski 491). The chapter then moves chronologically for a bit, detailing Truant's attack of two people, Gdansk Man and Kyrie. Johnny blames Gdansk Man for Lude's death because of a beating he gave to Lude, based on a lie Kyrie told. After Johnny's revenge is narrated, the chapter moves back chronologically to May 1, 1998, while Truant is beginning to piece together the lies in Zampanò's text. As this section

continues, Johnny steadily begins to lose touch with reality, until the entries for September, when he goes to stay “with an old friend” who gets him into counseling (Danielewski 507).

In several of these journal entries, Johnny Truant details his improvement, only to write in the September 29, 1998 entry, “Are you fucking kidding me? Did you really think any of that was true? September 2 thru September 28? I just made all that up. Right out of thin air. Wrote it in two hours” (Danielewski 509). The idea that a commentator explicating a text would just invent information “right out of thin air” is another way that the scholarly text is clearly being parodied. Truant then returns to the entry on Lude’s death and follows chronologically until a flashback to the night when the introduction was completed. This scattered chronology is indicative of the scattered state of Truant’s mind, after the effects of Zampanò’s essay on his psyche. He is delusional, and his tendency to lie, shown in his footnote in Chapter II, is exaggerated in his journal. Truant’s reliability as a narrator is tenuous at best, but this is all to the broader purpose of the novel. Giving the reader a commentator who is an admitted liar, who is (as seen in the above quotation) at times boastful about his prowess at fabrication, is a perfect way to parody the “authority” with which someone performing textual analysis is supposed to behave. After revealing so blatant a lie, the reader of *House of Leaves* must question if Johnny Truant has been at all honest in any of his notes to the text, combining the parody of the academic explicator and the unreliable narrator perfectly.

### Parodying Scholarly Writing

Danielewski’s novel is set up as a traditional academic text, using appendices, plates, and other markers of scholarly textuality. One such appendix, Appendix E., is a collection of letters written to Johnny from his mother, Pelafina. This appendix adds yet another narrative voice to the text, as well as providing some details about Johnny’s childhood. One problem with the narrative presented in these letters, however, is that they’re being sent from a mental institution where Pelafina is a patient. Placing her character in an institution gives the reader a reason to question her reliability as a narrator. This is reinforced by the first sentence of the first letter: “Your mother is here, not altogether here, but here nonetheless” (Danielewski 587). However, the most important function of this appendix is that it asks the reader to become an additional scholar of the text. In the letter dated April 27, 1987, Pelafina details that her next letter will use a code to tell him how she is being abused at the

facility, saying that he should “use the first letter of each word to build subsequent words and phrases: your exquisite intuition will help you sort out the spaces” (619). It is also important to note that Johnny would have been 15 years old when he received this letter. When the first sentences of the letter are decoded, it reads: “They have found a way to break me. Rape a fifty-six-year old bag of bones” (Danielewski 620). She then goes on detailing the mistreatment she is receiving at the hands of the attendants in the facility. An additional coded phrase exists in the letter, using capital letters inside of words where they should not be: “A face in a cloud no trace in the crowd” (Danielewski 621-2). By having the reader decode the letters to fully understand the appendix, Danielewski is drawing the reader into the novel further and making them part of the scholarly textual analysis.

After this letter, the typography becomes scattered across the page in odd ways, and finally a letter details the reason Pelafina is institutionalized; when Johnny was small, she tried to kill him. His father intervened, and she was sent to the asylum. Eventually her letters become lucid, and she admits that her earlier letters and grasp of reality are “hopelessly unreliable” (Danielewski 636). The letter the reader decoded, then, was a fraud; it is highly unlikely that she was being raped or abused at all but was instead suffering from delusions. The reader is then forced to accept that decoding the letter was, essentially, decoding a lie. It may not have been done entirely in vain, as the letter is useful to understanding the depths of Pelafina’s delusions, but it still proves frustrating. In this way, the reader is directly placed in the position of scholar/expert, forced after the confession of unreliability to then weigh what they’ve read and decide which parts of it are truly important. The reader becomes part of the group interpreting the text and has to make the same decisions as the fictional Editors of the novel regarding the reliability and usefulness of the information being presented.

In addition to the use of appendices like the one detailed above, the novel uses varied font sizes and colors, as well as struck passages, indicative of different commentators and additions and deletions, as is often found in facsimile editions of famous novels or poems. The novel also at times is laid out strangely on the page, with passages written in reverse as mirror images of the facing page, words set in concentric circles and spirals, as well as written in diagonal areas on corners of pages.<sup>3</sup> This strange typography is indicative of Zampanò’s disturbed mental state,

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<sup>3</sup> In *Writing Machines*, N. Katherine Hayles argues persuasively that many of these footnotes, particularly footnote 144, a small box repeated at the top corner of twenty-five pages of the novel,

and hearkens back to Truant's assertion that the man scribbled on anything he could find at any time; the novel's typography also could indicate an effort of the editors to type-set the text as it has been provided by its commentator. Above all is the search for truth, for meaning, for an explanation for the continually referred to darkness felt by Truant after reading the manuscript, as manifested in Zampanò's text through the mutability and malice of a house in which people get lost and vanish, never to be seen again.

Though the primary narrators are unreliable, the theme of the search for truth among lies works so well for parody in *House of Leaves*. Truant searches for truth in Zampanò's manuscript and is driven mad; the reader of Danielewski's novel must then sift through the madness of both narrators to discern where the truth, if any, lies in the novel, or if the text is presented by these supposed editors as a cautionary tale: In searching for truth, one must be careful about how far one is willing to go and whom one chooses to believe. The parody in *House of Leaves*, then, functions "critically," as the quotation by Linda Hutcheon earlier indicates. The two primary narrators of the novel, Johnny Truant and Zampanò, are exposed nearly from the start as liars, but the reader continues. As the novel progresses, the lies become more elaborate, the sources of information more fabricated, and the narrators even less reliable than was originally thought possible. When reading a scholarly text, readers have an expectation of confusion being clarified, even if not searching for an ultimately "true" interpretation of a novel or poem. Instead, what Danielewski gives is a text built on an invention interpreted by a liar, calling into question the whole system of scholarly textuality.

## Conclusion

Caroline Hagood states that "[b]ecause Danielewski examines the attempt at meaning making rather than meaning itself, he places his reader in an intermediary space, right between any structure or text and how it is interpreted, between signifier and signified" (88). The reader of *House of Leaves* is encouraged, if not forced, to become an interpreter and scholar of the text along with the other scholars provided for their guidance, shown most explicitly in the decoding of the Appendix

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which mirrors itself on front and back pages, serves to act as a window in the text itself, made of "its own material" to provide a metaphorical view into the house in the novel (123).

E. letter, looking for any kind of truth as the novel is read. What is interpreted, however, are lies; the search for “truth” comes to a dead end.

In using a supposedly scholarly narrator that is unreliable, or whose reliability the reader should question, Danielewski forces the reader to ask questions about the reliability of all scholarly texts that follow this format. The reader is given the main text, supplied with a commentary from an outside party, and is left to sift through the details to arrive at their own conclusions. *House of Leaves* makes use of the trust that is typically placed in the explicator of a scholarly text to force the reader to encounter the text in a new way. Danielewski draws on the use of multiple unreliable narrators, bringing to light competing narratives as the narrators slide into madness, in addition to the voice of the editors, supposedly there to maintain order—though the text slides quickly away from any sort of order that readers of traditional scholarly texts would recognize. Danielewski’s novel takes the idea of a scholarly text to new levels, making the reader a scholar as well. In struggling with *House of Leaves* as a parody of scholarly textuality, the reader is forced to question the idea of what it means to be an expert, a scholar, or even a passive reader of a text.

In an era of “fake news” articles on social media and YouTube tutorials on everything from make-up techniques to auto repair, one must become even more careful about the sources chosen to provide expertise on anything. A healthy skepticism of the media we consume is quickly becoming the advised default position for engagement in many instances. Scholarly textuality, as parodied here, is treated no differently. The characters given authoritative voice in the novel are shown to be spinning elaborate lies, and the reader becomes complicit in decoding and interpreting them as well as passively reading the text. When read in the context of today’s social media popular culture, where anti-intellectualism and articles questioning the veracity of established science on issues such as the safety of vaccinations runs wild, Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* becomes an engaging critique on the very meaning of expertise, as well as an indictment of our own abilities to choose what texts we can or should trust as reliable.

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# Between Mimicry and Difference: Performing Elvis(es)

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Lookalike. Tribute artist. Impersonator. Mimic. Body double. Decoy. Stand-in. Just some of the terms that describe someone performing as somebody else. These “representers” embody many key postmodern and poststructural ideas of dualities and multiplicities. In this article I assert that tribute artists reiterate mythic histories of pop cultural icons and their relationships with audiences; create, enact and reperform fan communities; and construct and deconstruct fannish and performance notions of “transformation.”

This is an interdisciplinary research enquiry, engaging with analytical frameworks and ideas from performance, visual art, popular culture, and fan studies. As such, certain terms and definitional differences exist across disciplines, and I outline my understanding and use of key terms for clarification. I will also use language idiomatic to fan communities, which may be traditionally read in an academic text as colloquial or slang; however, it is appropriate to discuss fandoms using the language they themselves speak.

This interdisciplinary foreground can also be seen in my methodological approach. I use an autoethnographic method championed by key scholars of fan studies (see Hills 63-90) to investigate the performance of “tribute” and representation of Elvis, via my participation in the 2013 Live Art Development Agency workshop *Probing Elvis*, led by Nigel Barrett and Louise Mari of Shunt Theater. This included a visit to Europe’s largest Elvis lookalike-competition *The Elvies*, in Porthcawl, South Wales that same year. I interrogate my position as fan/non-fan and participant/observer within this research, and within my engagement with the various fan communities and their cultural outputs.

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One position that stays constant, however, is that of myself as artist-researcher. I use a practice-research method informed by a performance practice-as-research lineage by creating and analyzing a practice-experiment, *Vaseline and Rose Oil*, which was performed as part of live art festival *Experimentica* at Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff in 2013. This autoethnographic and practice-research methodological approach means that I employ the first-person perspective in this article.

Throughout my practice-research I utilize a poststructural methodological questioning of singularities, authenticity and essentialism. The poststructural premise is that texts do not have an “essential” meaning; rather, no one correct “reading” of literature, historical accounts, documentary images, artworks and performances exists. This notion is integral to critical iterative practices (such as fanfiction) and opens up the invitation for the creative practitioner to take ownership of the text and re-write it. From this autoethnography, I position celebrity re-presentation as fan labor: re-claiming and re-working the originary’s personae as their own. I use the term “originary” as distinct from “original.” The latter term infers a hierarchical preference to the icon or text that spawns “copies.” “Originary” moves away from this binary of the authentic and mimesis and connotes an inherent productive quality.

I analyze my experiences as both audience member and artist-researcher to unpack how tribute works as an embodied fan performance mode. I apply theoretical frameworks from performance and fan studies fields to do so, including Owen G. Parry’s “fictional realness,” John Fiske’s “producerly texts,” and Erving Goffman’s “frame analysis.”

### *The Elvies: Frame, Game and Play in Porthcawl*

In 2013 I participated in a Live Art Development Agency DIY<sup>1</sup> workshop entitled *Probing Elvis*, in South Wales, UK. Nigel Barratt and Louise Mari of the theater company Shunt developed this artist-led workshop and aimed to give performance-makers the chance to reflect on our own practices by exploring the working methods and performances of tribute artists. We began by meeting at *The Elvies*, the largest Elvis tribute artist competition and festival in Europe, taking place in

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<sup>1</sup> Whereas DIY is traditionally an acronym for “do-it-yourself,” the Live Art Development Agency are specifically referring to the fact that their program of workshops forms part of an unusual and innovative professional development scheme; developed by artists, for artists.

Porthcawl, a small seaside town in South Wales. The workshop participants came from diverse creative practices, but our interests coalesced around the idea of performing as someone recognized as a cultural icon, and how to re-present him to new audiences. Few of us were actual Elvis fans—honestly, at that stage, I could not name more than a handful of his most famous songs.

Our first action as a group was to attend some of the performances. While wandering towards the venue of the Elvis competition, Porthcawl Pavillion Theater, I realized how outnumbered we were by Elvis lookalikes: fans dressed as their idol regardless of whether they were performing, and representing him, with varying degrees of success. Once within the theater, the impersonators' level of professionalism and commitment to "becoming" Elvis became clear. The dozens of performers we saw were all excellent entertainers in their own right, sometimes in a bizarre, "end-of-pier" way.<sup>2</sup> We saw the current youngest-ever Elvis representer perform, Elvises with dodgy voices but incredible dancing performed, and there were gospel-singing Elvises, sex gods, caricatures, and Elvises who were older than Elvis ever lived to be. In short, just about every iteration of Elvis imaginable competed for awards such as the "Gold Lamé Jacket," "Best '68 Special," "Best Movie Elvis," "Best Gospel Elvis," "Best Vegas Elvis," and, like any good awards ceremony, the "Lifetime Achievement Award."

Something strange happened as the evening's performances wore on. As we got to the finals of the competition, our workshop group began to behave like fans. We shoved our way to the front of the auditorium, covertly elbowing out the crowd already gathered. Unlike them, we did not know the words to every song. We had not been following this particular lookalike's fortunes on the Elvis tribute artist circuit. But we cheered and whooped as if we were watching the real deal. When Gordon Davis performed his category-winning Vegas-era set, workshop pals and I were even jumping up and down to receive one of very sweaty kisses from his on-stage Elvis. How did we, seeming non-fans, come to act and perform as screaming Elvis fans while Davis performed Elvis?

Both performer and audience here worked together to co-create the performed Elvis, within a frame allowing us to both recognize the imitation or "fakery" and suspend that recognition within the performance. While within the Porthcawl Pavillion, Elvis performers and audience mutually locate and construct a

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<sup>2</sup> "End-of-pier" is a British-English term, referencing acts shown in small theaters built on the end of seaside piers. It can be derogatory, referring to broad comedy or light entertainment.

Goffmanian “distinctive interpretative frame,” in which we accept a hybrid performance of fantasy and reality (Goffman, *Frame Analysis* 26). As sociologist Kerry O. Ferris states in her ethnographic research of celebrity impersonators, this frame creates a collaborative and conspiratorial game between performer and audience (60). *The Elvies* audience’s tacit agreement to overlook the aesthetic, cultural and performance accuracy of the performers’ manifestations of Elvis ensured that we stayed within the impersonation frame; such acceptance represents an example of rules of irrelevance within the “play” of *The Elvies*. For Goffman, the rule of irrelevance encompasses what is and is not attended to within a given encounter or frame (*Encounters*). His example is a board game which can use either bottle tops or gold figurines as playing pieces. The structure’s “obligations [are] fulfilled and expectations realized” (Goffman, *Encounters* 11), regardless of the physical and aesthetic attributes. If we continually pointed out discrepancies in the Elvis re-presentations—“he didn’t have that paunch in 1968,” “that was a bum note,” “call that a hip gyration”—we would be dismantling the rules of the game, as well as being quite a mean audience.

When we were vying for the attention of “Elvis,” as we see the “original” Elvis fans in archive footage of studio performances doing, everyone in the theater was accepting the “deception” of the impersonators as Elvis, while simultaneously we all acknowledged that no one was deceived. It was a performance game that enabled us to engage in an uncynical and naïve viewership while we performed as fans. We wanted to be “fooled,” even though we never truly were, mirroring Richard Schechner’s argument that audiences must be engaged in the “play” of a performance (103-4). The audience became co-conspirators, willing Elvis onto the stage, enabling the transformation of the performer from Elvis-fan to Elvis-embodier.

The biggest stumbling block to accepting that we were seeing the “real” Elvis is that we all knew him to be dead (with the exception of some lovers of conspiracy theories among the fans). In literal terms, we were not seeing his reanimated body on stage. But in other ways, the Elvis impersonators were zombie-like in their both/and re-presentations. They appear as a Derridean undecidable: they appear as both fan and idol, present and absent (Derrida 42-3). In this sense, they are both alive and dead. A confusing hall-of-mirrors quality existed in the performances of the impersonators, which moved back and forth between sincere imitation, parody, and moments that revealed their own positions as fans of the originary. When not before the audience, the impersonators discussed their favorite Elvis songs or the

moments they fell in love with Elvis' music; they momentarily removed the façade of re-presenting Elvis and positioned themselves alongside the audience as fans. This "metacommunication"<sup>3</sup> or bracketing<sup>4</sup> allowed the audience to "see double"; revealing the performance of multiple personae and signaling the audience's multiple levels of awareness (Schechner 103).

Returning to Ferris' use of Goffman, the "frame sophistication" in celebrity impersonation requires a level of cooperative management from performer and audience of the multiple contextual layers and performances of self/other, both understanding this and "holding it to one side" (62). For Ferris, this marks the performance mode of tribute as a liminal space in which external realities are suppressed while alternative actualities are created (75). Victor Turner posits that liminal spaces are contexts which temporarily dissolve one's sense of identity and everyday social structures, often within a ritual context (95). Here I diverge from Ferris' use of Turner's liminal: tribute performances seem more "liminoid" than liminal. As liminoid, they present more an optional ritual rather than required rite-of-passage; a temporary break from society, with play and leisure at their heart. Rock concerts, and indeed tribute concerts, are therefore liminoid, while a graduation or wedding ceremony would be liminal.

My initial engagement with *The Elvies*, as a non-Elvis fan, had a light-hearted curiosity, and it did not occur to me to read it as a site of ritual. However, there were (temporary) transformations within the performance frame of tribute. Audience members acted simultaneously as non-fans and fans, and performers appeared as both amateur entertainers and iconic rock god(s). Building on Turner's broader definition of the limen, performance academic Susan Broadhurst states that hybridization characterizes liminal performances: indeterminacy, a lack of aura, and the collapse of the hierarchical distinction between high and popular culture (11-3). *The Elvies* performances demonstrated all these characteristics and more.

Broadhurst's invocation of "aura" connotes the mythic status and performance-presence of a cultural icon such as Elvis. It also reminds us of Walter Benjamin's use of the term and its relation to authenticity and presence. Discussing an actor

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<sup>3</sup> Schechner (103) draws on social scientist Gregory Bateman's theory of metacommunication as a signal that frames other signals contained within or after it. The example is a dog playfighting with its owner; the "nip" of the dog within this frame means play and love rather than harm.

<sup>4</sup> For Goffman, bracketing creates a frame within a frame which signals a behavior that might not otherwise occur within the wider cultural frame, for example, undressing in a life drawing class or doctor's surgery rather than in a public street (*Frame Analysis* 254-61).

performing on film for the first time, Benjamin states that the actor is now also concerned with performing himself, rather than solely the character; but in reproduction, the aura disappears: “for aura is tied to his presence; there can be no replica of it” (XI). As Philip Auslander argues, what musicians really perform on stage is not just music, but first and foremost “their own identities as musicians, their musical personae” (102). These personae are expected to be similar from performance to performance but are also newly produced at each performance by a working consensus with the audience.

Lorena Turner’s classifications of lookalikes, impersonators and tribute artists creates a hierarchy of representation, implying that the more “accurate” the mimicry of the celebrity, the more successful the performance (122-3). But for me as an audience-member at *The Elvies*, my “value” assessment of the performers moved away from focusing on the perfect simulation. The joy of *The Elvies* and the representer culture performed within and around the awards was, to return to Broadhurst, the collapse of assessments of high or popular culture and notions of performance rigor and polish. Binaries of amateur and virtuoso were dismantled. As one Elvis tribute artist stated when asked if he was an impersonator, “you can’t impersonate ‘genius’.” This mindset frees the Elvis representers to find their own transformative performance niche within the culture of “the King.”

### Performing Tribute: Celebrity Representation as Fan Labor

I argue that representers, particularly tribute acts, perform fanac, or fannish activity. Fanac, also known as fan labor, includes fanfiction, fan art, music and costuming based on pre-existing fictional and real-world people. Fanac is an important outlet for fans to express their creativity and dedication to the canon of a fictitious, celebrated, or mythic world (Duffett; Hellekson; Hills; Stanfill and Condis; Stein; Stein et al.). Fanac also serves as a context for those who created the original cultural output, such as writers and actors, to engage with their fans. Fan scholar Matt Hills positions impersonation practices as fanac; Elvis impersonators are “disciples of the text” and of the “icon” himself (166). Hills introduces the term “performative consumption” to capture the contradictions between “use-value” and “exchange-value” which fan culture represents and stages via tribute (158-9, 171). The term also refers to the dialectic between “self-reflexivity” and “self-absence” performed by tribute (171).

Many fanac creators term their outputs “transformative”; this wording becomes key to legal battles regarding intellectual property rights, and the term presents an alternative to “derivative” (Archive of Our Own). The Organization for Transformative Works, a nonprofit fan activist organization, defines transformative as a “work takes something extant and turns it into something with a new purpose, sensibility, or mode of expression.” Taking the example of fanfic, the term transformative can apply to something written from a character’s viewpoint that is not the canon’s protagonist, or something more overtly critically engaged. For example, fanfic can illustrate current attitudes towards celebrity, sexuality, race or gender.

The (fan) performances I saw, despite replicating Elvis’ songs and stagecraft, were far from derivative. The performances’ passion and unique, often bizarre representations were indeed transformative. Similar to fanfic forums, *The Elvies* were, despite the framework of a competition, refreshingly free from hierarchical value judgements of taste, aesthetics, and professionalism, criteria which can be crushingly prevalent in traditional cultural sectors. In fanac, some key criteria used to judge “value” are passion, imagination, and dedication (Dilling-Hansen; Polasek; Stein; Stein et al.). *The Elvies* gave a platform to anyone who wanted to perform and present themselves as Elvis; the earlier performances we encountered prior to the competition stages demonstrated that little to no ‘quality control’ was in place. This did not affect our enjoyment of those presentations, however. Indeed, many fanac producers relish the title of “amateur,” believing that contributing to their respective fandom strengthens the fan community.

Fanac can also create new audiences for the originary. Media scholar Henry Jenkins describes fanac as a productive mode that “embrac[es] an understanding of intellectual property as ‘shareware,’ something that accrues value as it moves across different contexts, gets retold in various ways, attracts multiple audiences, and opens itself up to a proliferation of alternative meanings” (*Convergence* 256). By highlighting and reiterating a cultural property, fans strengthen the cultural legacy and importance of the originary. Just as an art critic creates a response to an artwork, fanac authors both extend and replace the meaning of the cultural property itself. The embracing of the “amateur” qualities by representers, however, further subverts the representation of the celebrity. This position becomes actually (possibly unintentionally) quite transgressive: the icons of Elvis, Michael Jackson, Madonna and more are totems of the commodity of late-capitalist society, where the acts of the individual can be equated with acts of consumption. Placing fans as

the active producers of these cultural icons challenges the stranglehold of mythic celebrities created by the media and entertainment industry.

Fan communities, exemplified by *The Elvies*, have an active engagement with the cultural property they coalesce. Jenkins discusses the transformation of fanac in the advent of digital technologies such as Web 2.0, which provides platforms for fans to become “active” readers, participating in the production of content using inspiration from the fandoms they inhabit. He develops Michel de Certeau’s term “textual poaching” to describe fans’ “impertinent raid on the literary preserve where fans take away only those things that are useful or pleasurable” (*Textual Poachers* 9). However, Jenkins’ theory of active readership does not encapsulate the depth of transformation that both fans and tribute artists experienced at *The Elvies*. This performative transformation differs from the fannish definition.

Performance scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte terms “transformation” a liminal process that involves the performers and audience becoming co-subjects in the performance and a metacommunicative reversal of roles in which “all participants experience a metamorphosis” (*Transformative Power* 23). Fischer-Lichte unpacks the notion of the performative turn, a term prevalent in contemporary art since the 1960s. She states that the performative turn has changed the nature of many traditional performance binaries: between subject and object, observer and observed, and artist and audience. By collapsing these binaries, the performative turn creates a dynamic and transformative event. This troubling of performer and audience distinctions returns us to Ferris’ use of Goffman and Turner in her discussion of celebrity impersonation. *The Elvies* deconstructed traditional divisions of performance-maker and audience to create a space for a co-creation of the Elvis representer.

Fischer-Lichte’s refutation of the oppositional nature of “presence” and “representation” is also integral to the performances of *The Elvies*. As I understood the Elvis tribute artists (or ETAs) as non-celebrities vying for the title of best Elvis tribute artist, I also accepted them “as” Elvis; a “perceptual multistability” (Fischer-Lichte “Reality and Fiction,” 87), or an understanding that the performer stands in for a character and is also a bodily being in the world. This duality of understanding within *The Elvies* created moments of “destabilization” as a state of being caught “betwixt and between” perceptions, being on the threshold of understanding the performer in multiple ways to create a transitional, liminal state (Fischer-Lichte *Transformative Power*, 148).

Although Jenkins' model of fans-as-poachers is dominant in the field of fan studies, this approach does not allow us to consider the context and reception of the reworked and transformed cultural properties of fanac. Specifically, applying a performance studies paradigm to fandom reveals the generation of meaning through fan play and participation outside of the primary media text (Booth and Bennett). Kurt Lancaster's *Interacting with Babylon 5* is one of the first investigations to do this. Lancaster contrasts the experience of engaging with fan performances (whether reading or writing fanfic, performing as tribute, or watching as tribute-fan) with "traditional" entertainment such as television or novels (32-3). The latter participation takes place vicariously through another's performance, whereas fan-produced works require a more active engagement.

More often than not, within fan communities, representers are the super-fans. On the second day of the *Probing Elvis* workshop, we met with Garry Foley, that year's *Elvies* winner of the "Best '68 Special" award. Garry arrived in his off-duty clothes—slim fitting jeans and a western-style shirt—rather than one of his Elvis costumes, but I could still imagine Elvis wearing this outfit in his downtime in the early sixties. It seemed that Elvis had become ingrained in Garry's persona. Before leading a workshop in which we were taught some of Elvis' signature moves, and then collaborating on a group performance of "Return to Sender," Garry told us of his journey to become one of Europe's most successful Elvis performers. An Elvis fan from a young age, he started off in musical theater before performing as Elvis full-time. The workshop group had been really impressed with Garry's performance the night before; as he stated, the fact that there are so many ETAs means they each need to have their own unique selling point if they are to make their performances their profession. Garry's was to work with accomplished musicians as his "big band" backing him, and he himself was a talented piano player. This technical virtuosic flair was his selling point, but the attempt at more precise musical mimicry meant that there was less freedom in his act for him to improvise and engage with the crowd.

What his workshop was teaching us is what Ellen Kirkpatrick terms "embodied translation," Kirkpatrick relates this as a method of cosplay (a contraction of costume play) where fans wear costume and occasionally act as fictional characters. Cosplayers, ETAs, myself and the other workshop participants were creating a dialogue with the source character through costuming and rehearsals; we were learning how to read the originary's body language, and how to speak and perform it. The transference of this newly acquired language onto our own "unique material

visuality” is an instance of embodied translation (Kirkpatrick). In translating established characters, cosplayers—and indeed tribute artists—are implicated in a constant process of recreation, simultaneously producing a new character and a revised version of the originary.

### *Vaseline and Rose Oil: “Becoming” Elvis*

I took inspiration from the world of cosplay for my performance intervention *Vaseline and Rose Oil* at Experimentica festival in Cardiff (2013). The other *Probing Elvis* workshop participants all contributed to a cabaret of Elvis-inspired performances, but I wanted to create a participatory practice experiment in which the festival-goers could participate in the Elvis act. Named for the products that Elvis used to create his iconic quiff, *Vaseline and Rose Oil* was a temporary barbershop located in Chapter Arts Centre’s café, and offering only hairstyles which would signify the King. While cosplayers perform embodied translation, the transformations of the visitors to my barbers was more skin-deep, as only an aesthetic transformation occurred—they were not required to perform hip gyrations, sing, or enact a lip curl.

Nonetheless, this visual change signified to the other festival goers that their position had shifted from viewer to “performer” to fan, and the twelve or so Elvisified participants wandering around the festival became a kind of “I-spy” feature for other visitors, a “spot the Elvis” game. The space and time of the hairstyling (which was not that speedy given my poor ability at coiffure) provided a context to chat with the participants about Elvis, whether they were fans, and why they were participating. For example, was it an homage? For some, it was a tribute; for others, a bit of silliness; for many, just curiosity to engage with the work.

The 2017 *Cut Festival: The Art of Barbering*, a multidisciplinary arts festival in East London explored the history, politics, and craft of barbering and its relationship to themes of race, gender, ritual, community and social healing in their respective practices (*Archive*). The artists and audience involved stated that for many, hairstyling is an integral part of their identity and how others perceive them; a way of “keeping who you are intact” (*Archive*). To intervene in this identity self-construction, and to “map” another’s aesthetic identity, involves a level of trust, and indeed intimacy. Spending a lot of time touching a stranger’s head was, for me, an unusual experience. But far from the cliché of discussing holidays, this tactile intimacy actually became a sort of shortcut for the people I was styling to open up

and discuss Elvis, as well as topics such as the work, the festival, how the participants saw themselves and chose to present themselves to the world.

An element of power play also existed. Though I was the “transformer,” I made the decision that even if encouraged by the people in my “barber’s chair” I would not be cutting any hair. The transformations were mask-like in that they were temporary, a persona participants could “try on.” As artist Oreet Ashery states, reflecting on her use of hair as a medium in character building, hair can make gender and identities appear and disappear (*Archive*). I found it important that the participants had input into their Elvis-styling, choosing how their Elvis-ness manifested and understanding that it would last for only the day.

Some of the *Vaseline and Rose Oil* participants commented on the archival images I had pinned to the wall behind my salon chair set up: images from *Life* magazine in 1957 which showed teenage women getting their hair cut short in Elvis-fashion. The accompanying article, *Ain’t Nothin’ But A Hairdo*, explained that in Grand Rapids, Michigan, over 1000 girls had gone for the chop to style themselves after their musical hero. Some girls brought their chopped off long ponytails back to their parents and boyfriends, much to the recipients’ disgust. Their disgust related to how Elvis performed a very particular type of sexualized masculinity—an indication of how this was received is seen in CBS, the American TV network, filming him only from the waist up. His overt sexuality was censored and hidden from his contemporary audience. I was interested to see how these young women, and the festival goers, used the hairstyle to help them perform Elvis, a “trying on” of masculinity(ies). It was not about reenacting an “authentic” portrayal of Elvis, but about using an aesthetic signifier as a way of embodying a less overt Elvis performance: a bit of swagger, charisma and confidence.

Within *The Elvies*, Garry Foley’s performances, workshop content, and marketing rhetoric all strive to create the “authentic” Elvis experience. His website details how “his costumes are exact re-creations of Elvis’ stage wear and are all made by a renowned US costume maker, who holds the original patterns of Elvis’ jumpsuits”; that he is “one of the closest tribute artists you will ever see”; and lists testimonials exclaiming “Close your eyes and it really could be the King performing, just a few feet away from you!” (Foley). The accuracy of the impersonation, consolidated by Foley’s use of exact replicas of costumes, act as authenticators which sell his act to potential audiences. Celebrity impersonators offer audiences the prospect that the “real” is valuable but flexible: we desire an

encounter with Elvis, but accept that we cannot access him, so the impersonator steps into that absence (Ferris 77).

### Tribute Artists as Fan Labor

Despite professional tribute artists' reliance on "authentic" representations, representers' performances escape a circular and uncritical repetition. Instead, these reiterations of past performances affirm their own differences. Like Gilles Deleuze's example of Pop Art, the simulacrum<sup>5</sup> of impersonation breaks out of the copy mold, with its own agency and a life of its own. As Deleuze scholar Brian Massumi states: "The thrust of the process is not to become an equivalent of the 'model' but to turn against it and its world in order to open a new space for the simulacrum's own mad proliferation" (91). ETAs need to be equivalent to the "model" but other than it, to be of "value." Having a unique selling point within the saturated market of ETAs, a unique performance niche within the genre, contrasts with the ideal of the accuracy of mimesis of Elvis. While seemingly opposite performance values, both are required to have marketable value to the Elvis fans who follow the ETA circuit.

This commodification of fanac points to what media scholar John Fiske calls the "shadow cultural economy" of fandom (30). Fanac has its own systems of production and distribution of cultural production which circulates among, and helps to define, the fan community. Fiske draws on Bourdieu's metaphor of culture as an economy in which people invest and accrue capital, and in which judgements of taste and value are made. He argues that fandom works both outside and sometimes against dominant cultural capital, yet also reiterates and reworks certain characteristics of the "official" culture it opposes (34). "Official culture" sees its texts or cultural properties as the creations of special individuals, artists or geniuses: Elvis, for example. This reverence places the creator's audience in a subordinate relationship to them.

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<sup>5</sup> Deleuze argues that simulacra, being far more than "simple imitation," can utilize their iterative nature to challenge or even overturn an accepted ideal or "privileged position" (69). Deleuze defines simulacra as "those systems in which different relates to different by means of difference itself. What is essential is that we find in these systems no prior identity, no internal resemblance" (299). Deleuze sees the emancipatory possibilities of simulacra, to deconstruct, analyse, and subvert that which they reproduce.

Popular culture, and fandom itself, recognizes the multiplicity of production of “industrially produced” cultural properties; opening them up to a productive reworking and overwriting that a 'completed art-object' is not (as readily) subject to. Fiske argues that dominant culture denigrates and misunderstands the production and reception of popular culture (including fanworks), failing to recognize that many “industrially produced” texts have “producerly” characteristics that stimulate popular productivity because of their contradictions, “inadequacies,” and superficialities<sup>6</sup> (47). These qualities make the texts open and provocative, inviting transformation through fan labor such as tribute performances and fanfiction. ETAs and their audience are transformed from passive consumers to active co-producers through their reinscription of Elvis. They are not subordinate to the myth of the icon but produce a contemporary rewriting of him.

Fans' productivity is categorized by Fiske into three distinct areas, with the caveat that fanac may span all three. All productivity occurs at the interface of the cultural property and the everyday life of the fan. Semiotic productivity encapsulates a productive behavior relating to all popular culture rather than just fandom, including meaning-making of social identities and experiences from the semiotic resources of the cultural commodity (Fiske 37). Fiske gives the example of Madonna fans who performed their sexuality differently after engaging with her music video and stage performances (37). This productivity is usually a personal meaning-making; whereas in enunciative productivity, meaning-making is shared through oral culture or online forums, often fan-to-fan (Fiske 38). Soap opera fans discussing potential future storylines is an example (Fiske 38). Enunciative productivity is not solely verbal; the fans not performing on stage but also dressed as Elvis in Porthcawl are producing their fan identities and consolidating a fan commodity through this construction of social identity. Lastly, textual productivity is when fans produce their own cultural products based on their fandom, with production values ranging from a DIY aesthetic to a similar production value to that of the originary (Fiske 39).

ETA performance is fan labor that exemplifies all three of Fiske's categories of productivity. Foley's performance at *The Elvies*, for example, demonstrates

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<sup>6</sup> Fiske's chapter “The Cultural Economy of Fandom” was published in 1992, prior to web 2.0 technologies and fanac platforms such as AO3. At the time of publication, although some fan labor was disseminated on the web, many fan fics and fan art was shared at fan conventions and other IRL platforms. While fan labor is now more easily accessible and visible because of platforms such as AO3, Fiske's argument of fannish textual productivity is still relevant.

textual productivity by his reworkings of Elvis songs in a “big band” style, and his insertion of his opinions-as-fan in his onstage patter, moving in and out of Elvis and fan personae. His participation in ETA culture—judging other categories, offering advice to emerging ETAs, and even leading the workshop I attended—is enunciatively productive. Most interesting to me was the evidence of personal semiotic productivity that his chosen career brought to bear on his lived experience, even when not outwardly performing as Elvis. In our interview session, Garry spoke of the inner-confidence and conviction in his creativity that he had gained by studying and embodying Elvis’ performances.

Foley said that his ambition for his tribute as and to Elvis was to give something back to the contemporary Elvis fan community, who now would not be able to access the real King’s performances, as if he were a stand-in for the originary. This quality of mimicry is reminiscent of the colloquial terms “realness” and “passing” as used in Owen G. Parry’s interrogation of the term “realness” in relation to the film documenting 1980s drag balls, *Paris Is Burning*. “Realness” as the ability to pass as a specific class or gender other than one’s own functions as a repetitious device that deterritorializes the major language (“the real”) and subverts it from within, calling forth a new language (“realness”), and a new scene (the ballroom) (Deleuze and Guattari 108-9). “Realness” points to the fictions already at play in the so called “real,” freeing its performances from being subservient to, and free from the hegemonies of, the dominant “real” (i.e. the world outside the ball competitions). Parry offers the term “fictional realness” as a performance method produced through modes of “affective inhabitation” rather than uncritical imitation, as a framework to read “exaggerated experience,” cultural properties that present a hybrid of actual, virtual and fictional realities (115). As Judith Butler states in *Bodies That Matter*, “what determines the effects of realness is the ability to compel belief” (129). As discussed, the “acceptance” or “passing” of ETAs as Elvis is a co-created state by performer and audience; an acceptance which is simultaneously acknowledged as an ephemeral state within the frame of *The Elvies*, and a temporary, simultaneous knowing and *unknowing* of the ETAs’ other performed selves.

Parry’s term “fictional realness” is at work in *The Elvies*; by productively reenacting the myth of Elvis, the very “realness” of the myth is both deconstructed and reconstructed by fans and fan-performers. Elvis’ “genius” and status is brought into being by the breadth of fan labor; as Foley’s mission on his website states: “keeping the legacy of “Elvis” alive.” Note the quote marks here; Foley himself

even seems to call into question the fixed identity or original “realness” of Elvis. Performing ‘Elvisness’ is an expansive rather than reductive reiteration: as Claire Colebrook quoted in Parry recognizes, repeating the “hidden forces of difference that produce texts, rather than repeating the known texts themselves” (10). “Realness” and “tribute” are understood not through imitation but through affect: a layering of performed selves, a process of becoming.

## Conclusion

Through my analysis as audience-member at *The Elvies*, and as artist-researcher at *Experimentica*, I position tribute as embodied fan labor. The performance mode of tribute, like other fanac, both disseminates and constructs the mythos of celebrity. As an audience member, I was temporarily co-opted into the Elvis fandom, through tribute’s process of transformation. The performances were transformative in both the fannish and performance studies understandings: taking an existing “text: and giving it new expression, and both performers and audience going through a significant (though temporary) change, respectively.

Tribute is not an uncritical repetition; instead, tribute underscores identity as performative. A play of “fictional realness” is enacted; Elvis’ performance legend is constructed and deconstructed by both the ETAs and audiences as Elvis fans. Tribute also dismantles binaries of “amateur” and “virtuoso”; value judgements from both audiences and judges at *The Elvies* are not focused on precise mimesis of the originary, but on the performing, embodying, and enacting of fandom itself. Through the interpretive frame of *The Elvies*, the audience understood the ETA performers as simultaneously “the” Elvis and Elvis fan, and they act as co-conspirators in this performance “resurrection” of “The King.”

The ETAs at *The Elvies*, and the many live artists engaging with Elvis representation at *Experimentica*, demonstrate not only Elvis’ position as an open and producerly text which invites creative engagement, but his continued significance within wider popular culture.

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# Reviews

## THE *POPULAR CULTURE STUDIES JOURNAL* REVIEWS

### Introduction

This issue of the *Popular Culture Studies Journal* continues the tradition of looking beyond books to include reviews of other types of popular culture texts. In the following section, which begins with reviews of several monographs and anthologies that present vital scholarship, readers will find critical discussions of the film *Eighth Grade*, an episode of the Netflix series *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, and the tabletop roleplaying game *Fiasco*. The reviewers make the case for the importance of each text while also providing some ideas for how to integrate them into various pedagogical situations. Malynnda and I believe that these reviews serve an important function in that they highlight non-academic texts that nevertheless offer popular culture scholars some useful examples to either write about or utilize in a classroom setting. Ultimately, these reviews reveal the importance of popular culture artifacts that lie outside the realm of academia, while also pointing readers of this journal to a handful of entertaining texts that may provide them with some fun or enjoyment during those fleeting moments of downtime.

In addition to these critiques, this issue also includes reviews of scholarly books focused on a variety of topics, including the links between the free press and the legal system, the cultural history and impact of the United States' most popular soft drink, a multi-methodological analysis of the band U2, and more. Comic scholars will find much of interest in this section, which features critical discussions of books examining Brazilian graphic narratives, style and remediation in comic-to-film adaptations, and the sociocultural and educational relevance of female superheroes. Other reviewers look at books that apply a postcolonial lens to the settler narratives portrayed in science fiction screen texts such as *Avatar* (2009) and *District 9* (2010), or books that explore the cultural history of the prestige television series *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013). The reviews gathered here offer important

insights into these scholarly texts while also raising questions that offer students of popular culture a way to engage with the arguments put forth by the authors.

As always, Malynnda and I hope that anyone inspired by these reviews decides to take a chance and submit their own preproposal outlining a text they would like to critique, whether it be a book, a film, an episode of a TV show, etc. Readers interested in writing a review for this journal should contact Malynnda directly with an overview and short rationale for the text they wish to review.

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## Book Reviews

Bernstein, Dan. *Justice in Plain Sight: How a Small-Town Newspaper and Its Unlikely Lawyer Opened America's Courtrooms*. U of Nebraska Press, 2019.

As cries of collusion and mistrust of government resound across America today, the right for the public and its representative press to receive accurate, timely, and informative news about the judicial system is critical. Dan Bernstein's book *Justice in Plain Sight* provides a historical look at the recognition and protection of this right in two Supreme Court decisions: The *Press-Enterprise* cases. In a time when judges favored secrecy and closed trial proceedings to protect defendants and jurors from press scrutiny, the *Press-Enterprise* decisions cultivated a "soil of openness"<sup>1</sup> for the judicial system (Bernstein 171). Bernstein's writing style makes history come alive, at times seeming more like a thrilling true crime or legal drama rather than a historical review. Through its vivid storytelling, in-depth research, and easy-to-understand descriptions of complicated legal decisions, Bernstein's work invites readers on the journey of a small-town paper's unlikely Supreme Court legal victories protecting press freedoms.

*Justice in Plain Sight* weaves together the decisions of three California judges to close either voir dire (questioning of jurors in jury selection) or preliminary hearings in their capital murder cases. After being denied court access, the editorial team of the local newspaper *Press-Enterprise* began to "pound on courtroom doors until they opened" (3). The judges, defense lawyers, and some district attorneys in these three cases argued press coverage of the proceedings would bias juror pools and limit juror privacy; however, *Press-Enterprise*'s lawyer Jim Ward, who had no previous constitutional law experience, argued open courts build public trust in government, allow the media and public to function as a watchdog of the judicial system, and protect press rights. Ward believed "unless the media is [able] to gather

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<sup>1</sup> Robert (Bob) Allen Long Jr. is believed to have written this in a memo to Justice Powell in reaction to Justice Rehnquist's conference remarks. Powell, Washington and Lee, Docket 82-566, handwritten notes on Rehnquist conference marks.

the information, the right to disseminate is meaningless” (19).<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, Ward and the *Press-Enterprise*’s editor Tim Hays and executive editor Normal Cherniss appealed all three closure decisions to the Supreme Court. While the first case was just shy of the needed votes to move forward, the legality of the other two closure rulings were argued before the highest court in the land. *Press-Enterprise* won both cases, resulting in the Supreme Court setting a standard of openness and creating specific guidelines on what was considered acceptable reasons for closures during voir dire or preliminaries. Chief Justice Warren Burger considered these rulings to be a “safeguard against the corrupt and or overzealous prosecutor and against the compliant, biased or eccentric judge” (189).<sup>3</sup> The rulings in the Supreme Court cases, later called *Press-Enterprise I* and *Press-Enterprise II*, have been critical determining factors for judges ruling on press coverage of trials ever since. As Bernstein notes in the epilogue, these rulings continue to serve as a litmus test for ensuring balance between a trial’s adherence to both first and sixth amendment rights.

Beyond just detailing the historical significance of these court decisions, *Justice in Plain Sight* is intriguing for its insightful account of the underdogs who rose to victory in the face of the court’s “ominous progress”<sup>4</sup> toward limiting press freedom (134). Despite their limited resources and influence nationally, Hays and Cheniss passionately believed in championing press freedoms at any cost. They acted without fear of economic or sociopolitical repercussions. In addition, their lawyer Jim Ward was an unlikely advocate for *Press-Enterprise* with his limited experience, but he received not only one but two victories before the Supreme Court, highly unusual for even the most elite lawyers. Bernstein masterfully crafts these three Davids’ narratives in winning their Goliath battles. In an age where the bottom line is often more important than fighting the blurred lines of press freedom, *Justice in Plain Sight* reminds journalists, academics, and legal experts alike of how important it is to defend the press regardless of political, social, and economic pressures.

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<sup>2</sup> This quote is from lawyer Jim Ward in the Joint Appendix submitted to the US Supreme Court (No. 82-556) by the *Press-Enterprise*, 47.

<sup>3</sup> Justice Burger’s conference statement can be found in Brennan, Library of Congress, Dockey 84-1560.

<sup>4</sup> This phrase was written by the *Press-Enterprise* editorial staff written in 1984 about the Supreme Court cases entitled “Open Trials, Open jury Selection.”

While Bernstein's work is comprehensive, informative, and entertaining, there are times when the overly detailed accounts of the many players in the story become confusing and teeter into filler content. There could also be an increased emphasis on the impact of these court cases today. Only a handful of high-profile cases are listed as citing *Press-Enterprise* in the book's epilogue, missing the broader impact of the decisions on other First Amendment cases and the continuing legal battles for press freedoms. The ending also lacks the invoking call-to-action that could have tied this historical event to current climates. Bernstein maintains an air of journalistic neutrality throughout the book, but the epilogue especially could have shared more conviction that a need exists for future generations to maintain and protect press freedoms, weeding away the restrictions and biases against the press in an effort to till the "soil of openness" that *Press-Enterprise* fought so hard to harvest.

In conclusion, *Justice in Plain Sight* is a quick and enjoyable read that would make an excellent addition to reading lists, newsrooms, and syllabi. Utilizing a narrative journalistic style that both informs and entertains, Bernstein captures history in a way that appeals to a wide range of audiences. It is a fascinating case study of two Supreme Court cases, but it is so much more than that. The book presents a critical perspective on our government's past determination that "openness should prevail" (115). *Justice in Plain Sight* serves as a spotlight on the importance of transparent government through press scrutiny, when "fundamental questions should not be permitted to fester in secrecy but must be exposed to the cleansing light of public inquiry" (83).<sup>5</sup> In his 1981 majority opinion written in favor of *Press-Enterprise I*, Chief Justice Burger said, "People in an open society do not demand infallibility from their institutions, but it is difficult for them to accept what they are prohibited from observing" (130). Burger's words ring loudly in today's political climate. It is up to media representatives and their allies to shed light and fight for transparency, just as the *Press-Enterprise* editors did nearly four decades ago.

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<sup>5</sup> This argument from Ward can be found in the paper's brief in Joint Appendix, *Press-Enterprise I* (No.82-556)

Ciafone, Amanda. *Counter-Cola: A Multinational History of the Global Corporation*. U of California Press, 2019.

Coca-Cola, announces Amanda Ciafone in the opening line of her book, is “an icon of globalization,” sold in more countries than there are members of the United Nations (1). This achievement is impressive, but how did it occur and what does it mean for us? These questions animate Ciafone’s project, which traces Coca-Cola’s development into the brand and global corporation we know today. Her book makes two principal arguments. First, that The Coca-Cola Company is defined by interlocking systems of material production (of soft drinks) and immaterial production (of a brand and a way of life) (2). Given that much of its production and sales occur overseas, the Company’s attempts to navigate its place as a U.S. corporation participating in the markets, politics, natural environment, and culture of other countries is a key tension the book explores. Second, Ciafone argues that people have pushed back against the processes and consequences of unchecked capitalism that the company represents; Coca-Cola’s resistance to, and eventual co-optation of, such critique is another important strain in the book.

*Counter-Cola* is arranged chronologically, with much of its story told through the company’s activities in India and Colombia, which are central nodes in Coca-Cola’s global system. We begin in Chapter 1 with a narrative of the company’s bottling franchise system in the 1920s through 1940s by which Coca-Cola sold—and continues to sell—concentrate to franchisees who produce and bottle Coke products while the company retains control over how these products are marketed. Hence, as Ciafone explains, Coca-Cola does not actually produce much of its own physical product, making its mark—and money—by dictating how its product should be sold and by profiting from these sales.

Chapter 2 traces Coca-Cola’s projection of itself as an “ambassador” of democracy to its post-World War II host bottler countries (70), forging a linkage between a consumer’s choice of Coke and a voter’s choice in a democracy (88). In casting itself as a conduit to U.S.-style capitalism, Coca-Cola sought to sew itself into its newly independent hosts’ desires to modernize following long periods of colonialism. Ciafone’s analysis of Coca-Cola’s advertisements from this period illuminates how the company depicted itself as contributing to its host’s economy through local bottling plants that facilitated not just local consumption but employment (94-5). Yet, as Ciafone reminds us, most profits from these plants

flowed back to the U.S., and the small independent bottlers championed by Coca-Cola tended to be powerful conglomerates rather than the scrappy small businesses the company described them as (98).

Chapter 3 shifts from economics to culture, showing how Cola-Cola sought to use its ads to imbricate itself into its hosts' cultures. Here, Ciafone explicates Coca-Cola's use of "pattern advertising," by which the company created ads for the U.S. market and then had overseas subsidiaries tweak the ads to incorporate elements of local culture while hewing to the U.S. blueprint (106-7). Hence, although the ads featured local ethnicities and dialects, they always "had an American accent" and functioned as vectors of U.S. values (117). Such cultural imperialism was challenged by 1960s anti-capitalist groups, environmental groups, and labor unions in India and Colombia. This youth counterculture and rebellion presented a new target market, one the company capitalized upon by trying to convey "wokeness" through ads portraying Coca-Cola as a bringer of harmony (140-5) and a figure of counter-cultural cool (132-3).

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 delve into modes of resistance that Coca-Cola could not co-opt or capitalize on quite as easily. Chapter 4 narrates the Coca-Cola Company's exit from India in 1977 because it would not comply with the government's requirements for more Indian involvement in making, selling, and profiting from Coca-Cola. Chapter 5 examines the labor union pushback against working conditions in bottling plants in Colombia, along with the often violent reprisals against such resistance. Chapter 6 traces Coca-Cola's return to India in the 1990s, a triumph that soon faded in the face of pushback and organized resistance from local communities after reports of pesticides in Coca-Cola's drinks and mounting evidence of bottlers draining scarce groundwater from poorer communities to produce its drinks.

The final chapter addresses what happens when political, economic, and environmental realities such as the one in Chapter 6 cannot be papered over with advertisements. Here, Ciafone interrogates the trend toward corporate social responsibility, in which companies such as Coca-Cola acknowledge that their survival depends on improving conditions in their communities and thus they make some commitment to social welfare by sponsoring education initiatives or high-tech solutions to scarce energy and drinking water. Ciafone is troubled by such moves, seeing them as avenues by which governments relegate responsibilities to the private sector and make communities dependent on the whims of corporate entities.

The book is well-served by Ciafone's deep research into the political and economic context within which Coca-Cola operates, amassed from impressive archival and ethnographic investigations. Yet the book's most compelling moments are when it analyzes Coca-Cola's advertising strategies and unpacks specific advertisements. Ciafone has discovered gems in the older campaign materials and her careful contextual research facilitates not only her own insightful analysis of the ads, but allows readers to see what she sees, arming them with the ability, one hopes, to look deeper at the next Coca-Cola ad they encounter and wonder about the political and economic considerations that shaped it.

Ciafone's book cover is a bright red backdrop drenched in water droplets, evoking the condensation on an ice-cold Coca-Cola. The book's title is rendered in the famous cursive script and bold white font of the Coca-Cola symbol. Yet this is not ultimately a book about Coca-Cola but a much larger story of global capitalism and its corollary dynamics of resistance and co-optation. Let us pay attention to this story by stocking our shelves with *Counter-Cola*.

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Eckard, Sandra, ed. *Comic Connections: Reflecting on Women in Popular Culture*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.

Although characters such as Black Widow and Wonder Woman are at the forefront of modern entertainment, and "the woman who can be the heroine of her own story is becoming one of the most popular genres in current popular culture," there is a dearth of scholarship on comics for and about women (Eckard xiii). It is this issue which *Comic Connections: Reflecting on Women in Popular Culture*, edited by Sandra Eckard, seeks to remedy. The text does this by providing eight chapters from various scholars which focus on female superheroes and the ways that they "can be examined for cultural, social, and educational relevance that practicing teachers and college educators can use productively to deconstruct women's roles in popular culture" (Eckard xiii).

More specifically, each chapter examines a specific female hero, ranging from well-known figures like Wonder Woman and Buffy the Vampire Slayer to less

overtly heroic individuals such as Pepper Potts and Lois Lane. The scholars apply a variety of analytical frameworks to these characters, noting, for instance, the paradoxical dualities of masculine/feminine or Christ-like and diabolical in the character of Elektra (Kennedy). Moreover, every chapter includes a section entitled “Comic Relevance” that lays out the social relevance of a given comic figure, allowing teachers and academics to more readily connect it with the lived experiences of students (and others). In fact, this issue of relevance speaks to another primary goal of the text: to provide useful tools and exercises that enable teachers and students to engage these works in an actual classroom.

The “Classroom Connections” section at the end of every chapter provides several clear, detailed activities that can be used to engage students from primary school to the college level. These exercises range from more traditional analytical essays and journaling responses to incredibly creative activities such as designing one’s own superhero slogan or a Funko Pop! figurine. Admittedly, not every exercise is useful or appropriate for every grade level or teaching style, but much effort has been expended to make the activities adaptable. In his chapter on Elektra, for example, Michael D. Kennedy suggests an activity in which students develop a storyline incorporating the anti-hero into their own lives. He notes, however, that this assignment may be “impossible [or inappropriate] for younger students if it asks them to imagine how an assassin fits in their circumstance... Better call Wonder Woman with her Lasso of Truth rather than someone who is merciless with her sais” (81). He also suggests using the PG-13 Jennifer Garner film for middle school audiences, allowing the main core of the activity to be utilized with only minor adjustments for maturity level. In this way Kennedy and the other scholars included in *Comic Connections* succeed in providing a useful sourcebook for engaging classroom activities.

That is not to say, however, that the entirety of the text is a practical manual. There is still a great deal of comics scholarship on display, much of which may be unfamiliar to those scholars who, like this reviewer, are most familiar with the prototypically “manly” superhero. The backstories of Lois Lane and Pepper Potts, for example, are often relegated to that of mere girlfriends and damsels-in-distress. Eckard notes, however, that although they are (mostly) powerless and ordinary women, they “can hold their own in extraordinary circumstances and become extraordinary in their own rights” (Eckard, 89). For example, despite her initial inclusion as a love-sick secretary for Tony Stark and the fodder for a comedic love-triangle between her, Stark, and Happy Hogan, the character of Virginia “Pepper”

Potts rapidly grew. In the 1970s and 80s, for example, she begins to take on roles of responsibility throughout Stark Enterprises, eventually becoming the Chief Operating Officer in the 2000s. During this period, she established her authority by, among other things, firing Tony Stark from his own company, donning her own set of powered armor as the hero Rescue, and even using the Rescue suit to take on the mantle of Superior Iron Man and contest Stark himself for the heroic title. Likewise, in the Marvel Cinematic Universe Pepper is a competent businesswoman who holds her own against supervillains and tyrants. She not only survives a terrorist attack on her home in *Iron Man 3*, she even joins Tony in defeating the primary villain. Eckard convincingly shows that “to keep up with the evolution of women’s roles, the character of Pepper has also been reshaped to be of value to the story; she transitioned from a superficial supporting character in her early Iron Man comic years to a layered protagonist—capable of both emotional and physical strength—of her own” (91).

Similarly, the chapter by Slimane Aboulkacem et. al. examines the new Ms. Marvel, Kamala Khan, through the interplay of race, gender, and national identities. A Pakistani-American teenager, Kamala gets superpowers that allow her to shapeshift. Initially when using her powers Kamala takes the form of the previous Ms. Marvel, Carol Danvers; a tall, buxom, blue-eyed blonde in a skin-tight lightning-bolt-emblazoned black leotard. Over time, she develops a super-hero persona more based on her own identity, including a costume that “blends her traditional burkini-esque costume with Carol’s costume: a fashionable burkini with a lightning bolt and a bangle that belonged to her grandmother” (Aboulkacem, et al 45). As Kamala struggles not only with her superheroic identity, but her identity as a Muslim teenager in the United States, she provides a uniquely relevant insight into issues of culture and identity for American teens, allowing students to have a great appreciation for such literature. Which is, as stated, the primary purpose of the text.

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Foster, David William. *El Eternauta, Daytripper, and Beyond: Graphic Narrative in Argentina and Brazil*. U of Texas Press, 2016.

David William Foster's *El Eternauta, Daytripper, and beyond* constitutes an important contribution to the English-language bibliography on comic-book production in Latin America. More specifically, the book presents a sophisticated introduction to the rich world of "graphic narratives"—the author's term of choice—originating from Argentina and Brazil. Foster selects five works from each country, and they range from classic works by well-established authors such as *El Eternauta* (originally serialized between 1957 and 1959, and written by Héctor Germán Oesterheld and drawn by Francisco Solano López) or *Perramus* (written by Juan Sasturain and drawn by Alberto Breccia between 1984 and 1989) to recent works from the 2010s such as Fabio Moon and Gabriel Bá's *Daytripper* and Angélica Freitas and Odyr Bernardi's *Guadalupe*. Foster dedicates a chapter to a work by an author or authors, often presenting both the social and political context in which the works were produced as well as an analysis of the thematic, structural and visual elements that make them relevant within and beyond Argentina and Brazil. Instead of providing a methodical systematic analysis to graphic narratives, though, the book demonstrates a remarkable agility when approaching each work in its uniqueness and specificity. In this regard, besides exposing the reader to an impressive selection of foreign graphic narratives that might be new to them, Foster also develops different approaches to their analysis that could be applied by other scholars to other contexts.

The book addresses the radical difference, when looked at from the historical perspective, between the graphic narratives that Foster has chosen. Most of the Argentinian narratives analyzed are connected to the military dictatorship of the *Junta Militar* (1976-1983). Thus, *El Eternauta* can be seen as a forewarning of the oppression that was to come, while *Perramus* presents one of the earliest cultural artifacts to attempt to construct a memory of life under military control in the immediate past in Argentina. Even Patricia Breccia's work, some of it produced under the *Junta* and some after the restoration of democracy, allows Foster to trace the continuity in women's situation under the two political systems. Brazil, a country that also suffered a military dictatorship between 1964 and 1985, did not, according to Foster, produce graphic narratives with "the sort of highly defined analysis of the period of repression Argentina did" (xii). Following this verdict, the second half of the book is centered on how contemporary Brazilian narratives focus on issues of modernity, globalization, and the shifting location of Brazil within networks of economic and cultural exchanges.

Within the larger interpretative and national paradigms that the book poses, each chapter presents different theoretical approaches that showcase the diversity of graphic narrative production in these countries, while certain common threads also emerge. For instance, Foster identifies a continuity of issues related to gender and sexuality in a significant number of works. Immediately in the first chapter, his analysis of *El Eternauta* pays special attention to the role of masculinity in the community of resistance that the narrative constructs. Likewise, Patricia Breccia's work allows Foster to read the visual and thematic experimentation that she deploys in connection to the existential despair that afflicted a specific set of young women in Buenos Aires at the time.

Foster also delivers a compelling analysis of the articulations of queerness in contemporary rural Mexico in *Guadalupe* by Freitas and Bernardi, as a quest of lines of feminist and queer solidarity across national frontiers in Latin America. Further, Foster can develop other connecting themes and tropes across time and space, and an existential search of meaning (or a denial of such a possibility) emerges as another important plotline in the book, connecting Patricia Breccia to contemporary Brazilian works such as *Cachalote* or *Mesmo Delivery*. This book allows for such linkages to be conceptualized, while also offering suggestive sketches of other interpretative and analytical possibilities. When discussing Moon and Bá's *Daytripper* the relationship of these Brazilian authors to the English graphic narrative industry (and, indeed, the relationship between the Brazilian and U.S. graphic narrative markets) becomes a clear example of complex global connections between hegemonic and emerging powers. Foster explains how, for *Daytripper*, the two authors shifted from graphic narrative production in Brazilian Portuguese for the Brazilian market to English and publishing directly in the U.S. market via DC Comics. Their case is a perfect example of the cross-cultural and transnational movements that generate the contemporary graphic narrative industry, and it deserves further analysis.

This book is a valuable ally for scholars who want to further research into Latin American contemporary cultural production, and specifically for those working on Latin American or Global graphic narrative. Similarly, it offers a great selection of materials for scholars working on a variety of issues, such as memory versus history in societies transitioning from dictatorship or civil conflict to democracy, or women's and gender issues in contemporary Latin America. Only one problem exists with Foster's approach: although present in the title, it is confined to the preface, a couple of pages (i.e., 83-4), and some notes at the end of the book. The

author clearly sets up borders between different actualizations of comic book art as a medium. By advocating for the use of “graphic narrative” as referring to a body of work distinct to “comic books,” Foster replicates former distinctions between the “high” and “low,” and actually identifies “graphic narratives” as “publication units that vied for academic recognition and advanced critical analysis” (x). This re-hierarchization of the field of cultural production is highly problematic and debatable, and although it might be satisfying for scholars anchored in literary studies, it raises many questions. At the same time, though, and bearing in mind the scope and breadth of the current work, Foster’s distinction could also be positively interpreted as an invitation for the reader to think critically about conceptual and theoretical frameworks when approaching graphic narratives. As such, this initial problem can be inverted as another positive aspect of this impressive volume.

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Jeffries, Dru. *Comic Book Film Style: Cinema at 24 Panels Per Second*. Austin: U of Texas Press, 2017.

While Dru Jeffries never mentions prominent media theorist Marshall McLuhan by name, medium theory guides *Comic Book Film Style*, as Jeffries defines his titular concept not based on the content of comic book film adaptations but how films remediate comics on screen. Resisting the allure of superhero media, namely fidelity discourse’s concern for how a film “captures the essence” of a comic book it adapts (3), he defines film’s remediation of comics as ruptures in Classical Hollywood film style (4). His definition begins with a simple idea: comic book film style is rooted in “the form and content of comic books,” understood by how comics influence film style (12-3).

Chapter 1 explains comic book style in “six modes of interaction”: 1) “diegetic content” from the comics, 2) direct recall of specific panels, 3) use of “actual comics,” 4) comics’ “conventions” on screen, 5) “use of comics’ formal system,” like split screen, and 6) “mimicking comics’ elastic temporality and staccato rhythm” (23). To better understand these concepts, he focuses on one film, the adaptation of Vertigo Comics’ *The Losers* (2010), applying each mode and

explaining the high and low risk of remediated style, since some remediations go unnoticed by uninitiated spectators, while others—like a panel moment’s “successive speed ramping to visually remediate the process of closure” (45)—are stylizations meant to be seen.

Chapter 2 focuses on how comics remediation highlights “artificiality,” calling attention to style, instead of favoring the invisibility of Classical Hollywood (55). To this end, he addresses comics’ image/text relationship through textual tropes like onomatopoeia, stylized words like “Thwack!!” that appear in a comic book to accentuate action. In some instances, films replace onomatopoeia with entirely visual moments—how the camera focuses on Spider-Man’s hand as a “thwip” sound occurs, sans on-screen text (64)—but he focuses on the more artificial moments of onomatopoeia that occur in *Batman: The Movie* (1966) and *Super* (2010), where text actually appears on screen to accentuate action. He sees in these moments not redundancy, since film motion negates need for onomatopoeia, but something that stylistically accentuates scenes in atypical ways conventional filmmaking does not. He also addresses the use of text captions in *Kick-Ass 2* (2013) instead of subtitles, normally designed to be unobtrusive in most films (78), and how *American Splendor* (2003) remediates actual illustrations and text clouds, when coupled with a freeze frame, momentarily mimicking a comic book’s use of time on a static page (74).

Chapter 3 focuses on film’s aspect ratio and experimentations with comics panels in films like *Danger: Diabolik* (1968), which features a scene filmed through an empty bookcase that resembles panels on a comic book page. But he ultimately argues this moment does not tap into comics remediation as it shares more in common with the experimental cinematography first employed by Orson Welles. Instead, he highlights examples like *Hulk* (2003), which features various “panels” of the same cinematic moments from different perspectives, much like the television series *24* (2001-2010). Yet he does not see this as a perfect translation of comics panels on screen. Comics pages are always static, often constructing sequential motion through the combination of multiple panels, while *Hulk*’s use of split screen increases “narrative efficiency,” opening up the visual space (108). Ultimately, Jeffries argues something new occurs during this type of remediation that neither conventional comics nor cinema undertake.

Next, Chapter 4 delves into compositional mimesis, how films capture dramatically staged moments in comics, like Spider-Man throwing out his costume (129) or the “cover image” effect of a dramatically staged Batman atop a city tower

(137). While such moments might make spectators aware of comics style on screen (Batman could easily stand somewhere more practical, less picturesque), Jeffries uses the term “expressive intermediality” to explain more blatant tactics, like the use of motion lines on throwing knives in *V for Vendetta* (2006), which are clearly “ornamental” but “not at the expense of substance but in addition to it” (144), or the alternating “speed of playback” in *300* (2006), which remediates a series of “panel moments” during stylized action sequences (154).

Chapter 5 provides an analysis beneficial to both new media scholarship and medium theory for its detailed examination of the broader implications of remediation through film’s polymedial function. Just as film can remediate comics, film can also remediate other media. In close readings of *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* (2010) and *Watchmen: The Ultimate Cut* (2009), he notes how a film can remediate the style of comics, video games, laugh-track sitcoms, Bollywood musicals, and anime, as *Pilgrim* does, and “paratextual” material like DVD extras and extended film cuts available only on video, as found in the “Ultimate Cut” of *Watchmen*. Here, Jeffries joins scholars like Lev Manovich and Henry Jenkins in addressing how media interact and influence each other, never evolving in a vacuum.

*Comic Book Film Style* extensively provides many new terms to explain the language of comics film style, from panel moments to compositional mimesis, and he follows each explanation with multiple examples, most of which include figures that directly visualize concepts at hand. While Jeffries spends ample time fleshing out his new terminology for understanding comics film style, he also clearly states what remains beyond the scope of style, rejecting the notion that any comic book adaptation or superhero film that feels like a comic book should be included in this stylistic category by proxy. In fact, Jeffries argues that current superhero films premiering over the last twenty years rarely remediate comics, instead believing comic book film style is more suited for “the art house rather than the multiplex” since films like *American Splendor* and *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* (2015) better remediate comics style (217). That said, he does speak optimistically about *Deadpool* (2016).

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Johnston, Brian and Susan Mackey-Kallis. *Myth, Fan Culture, and the Popular Appeal of Liminality in the Music of U2: A Love Story*. Lexington, 2019.

As an admitted and often chastised non-U2 fan, I cannot help but find irony in the ways U2 has emerged in my life. The first time was at my Master's graduation, in the spring of 2004, from the University of Pennsylvania, where Bono was the speaker. He wore his iconic blue sunglasses, stomped around the stage in combat boots, and told the audience about his journey from rock star to social justice advocate. He encouraged us all to be rock stars (in our own way) and advocates for social justice. The university was criticized for having a rock star as their speaker, but the thrill of seeing Bono in person was the only reason I bothered to attend the hours-long graduation.

Years later, my Master's thesis advisor Susan Mackey-Kallis, and co-author of *Myth, Fan Culture, and the Popular Appeal of Liminality in the Music of U2: A Love Story*, finds me and asks me to write a review of her recently published monograph. As one of the first scholars who told me to treat media seriously and encouraged me to write about the media I love, I could not help but review the book; yet again finding myself emerged in the world of a band I have no interest in. Although, now after having read the book, I am admittedly more intrigued, and I find myself wanting to give U2 another chance. Author Brian Johnson's almost obsessive love for the band and the authors' combined passion for the music is infectious—the book truly is a love story.

Using a multi-methodological approach of lyrical analysis, autoethnography, and cultural criticism alongside a vast knowledge of philosophy, religion, mythology, and music, Johnson and Mackey-Kallis analyze tours, albums, shows, fan culture, websites, advertisements, and a film about the band's 2016 Innocence + Experience tour to argue "U2's ongoing popular appeal is constructed in the spaces between band and fan and commercialism and community" (169). Such a space creates a relationship that transitions "from one epoch (electronic) to another (digital)" (169) as a co-constructed mythic journey akin to Campbell's hero's quest. In this intersection of band and fan, U2 exists in a liminal space of politics and religion, electronic and digital eras, postmodernity and transmodernity. In fact, it is the band's transmodern perspective that allows for a consideration of them as more

than “*mere* entertainment” (113). U2 shows the world how to reinstitute a sense of spirit into an interpretive lens of popular culture.

Coming from similar, deeply Christian households as children, Johnson and Macky-Kallis revel in the ways that U2 and Bono provided them the space to understand love, compassion, and the joy of community through something other than church. This book is not just an analysis of U2, but a fascinating and thorough examination of the three types of love—agape, amor, and eros—and their manifestations in Western popular culture.

Part one of the book, Agape, brings readers into the beginning of the hero’s journey and the band’s emergence as a rock phenomenon. This coming of age story tells about a loss of innocence and an initiation into a source of power. Alongside lyrical analysis of the band’s early work, which reveals themes of leaving home, uncertainty, and religious doubt, Johnson and Mackey-Kallis also share their stories of coming to love U2 and taking the band seriously as a scholarly endeavor.

Part two of the book, Amor, is the quest itself as well as a biographical narrative of the band from punk rockers to spiritually conscious beings. The section follows U2 from the 1980s to Zoo TV, highlighting a shift from modern to postmodern music making and offering a creative comment on the Narcissus-Narcosis mentality of our age. Johnson and Mackey-Kallis argue that within the ZooTV era of technological overload, one situated within Marshall McLuhan’s notion of a Global Village, Bono enacts McLuhan’s figure that marches backwards into the future (89). His stage character, The Fly, is the prodigal son of the postmodern age, he is Frankenstein’s monster, he is: “a cybernetic incarnation of repressed spirit for technological embodiment” (92). Thus, the revelatory experience of “human touch” becomes salvation. Re-centered with a sense of spirit, the band can begin to come home, which may just be the hardest part of the journey.

Part three, Eros, the journey home, is both productive and destructive. This section focuses on the ways in which social media gave U2 a new platform to communicate with fans but also a platform that empowered and entitled fans. The merging of fan culture is best told through Johnson’s autoethnographic rendering of his own experience as a fan, a shift and evolution that directs both him and the larger culture towards individuation. Fandom and the integration of social media becomes a spiritual path to make sense of the world. The move through technology, which was once a means of dividing us, becomes a “force that connects us both to each other and to the global community” (162). The audience must share “one love” and “one life,” because, in the band’s words, “we need to carry each other.” U2

believes people have the power, individually and collectively, to change the world. That potential for change is where the authors end their analysis and where they claim the band to be now.

Early in the book, a comment is made about pop-culture criticism being seen as “less than”—less important than political rhetoric, less serious than film criticism—and it is here, in this concern of being “less than,” that the book’s fault emerges. There are so many details and facts and so much information it is nearly impossible to process everything. At times, it seems as if the authors are proving the worth of studying popular culture. Perhaps, it is their love for the phenomenon that is U2, like all loves, that makes the authors blind to just how much detail an average reader needs. Or perhaps, it is just this reader’s distaste for the band that makes it all seem like too much.

As an aside, while reading *Myth, Fan Culture, and the Popular Appeal of Liminality in the Music of U2* and writing this review, a U2 song came on in my local coffee shop exactly seven times. That happenstance seems oddly suiting for a book about universal and unconditional worldwide love.

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Loza, Susann. *Speculative Imperialisms: Monstrosity and Masquerade in Postracial Times*. Lexington, 2018.

From postcolonial and settler studies perspectives, Susann Loza’s *Speculative Imperialisms* ranges over current popular science fiction screen texts (a.k.a. speculative fiction) that include James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009), the South African *District 9* (2010), the BBC’s *Doctor Who* reboot (2005-present), the rebooted trilogy of *The Planet of the Apes* (2011, 2014, 2017), and the cultural phenomenon of steampunk fan criticism. Loza systematically exposes and challenges the oppressive and nimble settler logic of these popular texts that through their allegories deflect racism and endorse white supremacy. She argues that in many of these texts, the figure of the alien or monster operates as a stand in for neocolonial discourses that fail to engage with the genocidal colonial histories that most white people are reluctant to confront. Loza charges these screen texts’ use of red and

black face and orientalism support neocolonial ideology. This archive inevitably appeals to white savior tropes where neocolonial nonwhite actors or white actors playing aliens endorse racism in science fiction drag.

The title of this book suggests its initial writing started in an Obama-like era where the project aimed to rebuke these texts' "postracial" thinking as a way of countering a liberal humanist politics that insists on a colorblind world free of racism without a history of colonization, slavery or genocide. Loza's final two chapters situate this archive in an explicit white supremacist Trumpian moment where an urgency exists to demonstrate how this popular archive of cinematic pleasures reflects President Trump's extreme populist xenophobia (146). The book could be a bit more cohesive if the introduction explained that the chapters were written in different moments that move from an earlier millennial aspirational "post racial" moment into the "Trumpocalypse" mirroring the chapter structure that moves from earlier screen texts and culminates with the most recent *Planet of the Apes* film (Loza 145). Nevertheless, its call to challenge popular culture that endorses virulent militarism and xenophobia is timely and provocative.

Loza does not offer a Žižekian diagnosis of settler societies' inability to face their legacy and privilege, but instead documents how speculative fiction operates as a hegemonic form to resist discourses that might lead to decolonization or reconciliation. She puts into play counterarguments that suggest the contemporary science fiction archive might reflect a productive crisis in whiteness. For example, she suggests one could read *The Planet of the Apes* reboots as subversive cases of what Arata, writing in reference to Stoker's *Dracula*, calls "reverse colonization." An Arata-inspired reading of *The Planet of the Apes* reboots would argue the apes have colonized the humans thus giving viewers the "opportunity to atone for imperial sins" (120). Instead, she convincingly argues these films bypass settler guilt and insist on pernicious white innocence.

Loza demonstrates conclusively the pernicious and wily neocolonial narrative of contemporary science fiction films that give producers license to repeat a colonial image gallery bent on containing anti-colonial and progressive discourses. The lovely chapter on steampunk fan fiction moves away from film analysis to celebrate the work of black and aboriginal fan-writers. These fans-writers question why the prevailing sentiment in the genre can imagine all manner of fanciful invention located in an alternative Anglo imperial 19th century, but resists imagining an alternative reality that challenges the colonial trappings and tropes (66-9). This chapter suggests that while the mass producers of popular science

fiction and many of its fans might not be able to conceive of anti-oppressive narrative, certain fans, aware of the real and emotional political stakes in these narratives, seek imaginative spaces for such endeavors.

Given the science fiction premise of Jordan Peele's black horror-comedy *Get Out* (2017), I wished that, beyond the chapter on steam punk fan fiction and the mention of the subversive video game by Plague Inc called "Simian Flu" released in 2014 to promote the oppressive *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* (135-6), this book had featured discussion of science fiction explicitly undermining whiteness. I appreciated the detailed discussion of *District 9* and *Doctor Who* in relation to the historical slave trade, yet part of me yearns to know more precisely how the contemporary politics of both South Africa and England informs these texts. Given the audience for the book is likely scholars in the United States, the text can be forgiven for its American focus. Yet with a focus on the popular screen culture of Anglo-settler societies, I wished the book had looked at Canadian, New Zealand, and Australian science fiction, which I trust also repeats many of the tropes unpacked by Loza. The apocalyptic Australian film *These Final Hours* (2013) resonates with many of the settler white savior themes of the texts under discussion and would add to the argument that settler culture, despite its different national inflections, continues to draw from the same racist imaginary to deny the material history of colonization.

Loza's afterword suggests the far right in America are winning the culture war with its title "Trumpocalypse Now, Decolonized Tomorrows" (145-52). This afterword passionately demonstrates how Donald Trump's white supremacist politics have filtered almost word-for-word into the promotional copy for *War for the Planet of the Apes* (2017) (147) in a way that echoes D. W. Griffith's *Birth of Nation* (1919). One might be tempted to despair for the state of popular culture arguing recent film and television science fiction only perpetuates neo colonial attitudes. However, Loza demonstrates science fiction can tell different stories that might decolonize the imagination. Her analysis coupled with her expansive reading of blogs and newspaper reviews demonstrates there are many viewers and readers of science fiction who resist the neocolonial pull of this archive.

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Stache, Lara C. *Breaking Bad: A Cultural History*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2017.

*Breaking Bad: A Cultural History* covers AMC's hit series from an approachable stance of a fan and scholar. Author Lara C. Stache declares her fandom for the series early in her book and gives easily understandable nuance to this powerhouse series. Stache's analysis is geared more toward a lay audience. Fans and people who generally recognize the power of media are cited as the more particular audience for the book early on. The analysis is well-informed by the context of American culture and pertinent societal issues when the series aired on network. *Breaking Bad* is an esteemed example, and continues to be, of AMC's tagline: Life Imitates AMC. Stache explains, "*Breaking Bad* aired in 2008, during the housing bubble burst, and methamphetamine production was increasing year over year. Media scholars argue that media construct narratives that both mirror and create society" (xvi). The series, articulated well by Stache, explored the relevant and timely issues of its day with rich storytelling, nuance, and complex characters. After reading the book, the series' relevance and staying power are both palpable.

*Breaking Bad* is divided into three parts and nine chapters. The first part of the book focuses on the main character, Walter White. The second part delves into the series and its interplay with cultural and societal issues present during the run on AMC. The third and final part of the book, "Being *Bad* in Walt's World," investigates the roles of other major characters. I will devote the most detail on the first part, which mirrors Stache's attention in the book to Walter.

Chapter 1, Antihero or Villain: How Walter White Resists the Labels, explores the inability to categorize Walter and how the character ultimately defies generic

convention. Stache argues, “To me, Walter White dies not as an antihero or a villain, but as a tragic and complex human figure, at once an everyman and a villain: Walt *and* Heisenberg” (16).

The two personae, Walt and Heisenberg, are the subject of the second chapter. “The Evolution of Heisenberg,” dives into the personae shifts of Walter White’s character. Stache identifies the key moments in which these evolutionary shifts are most notable. The most poignant being when Walt sees Jane overdose and does nothing to prevent her death. This moment plays out in the series in major ways and impacts the entire city where the Walt resides. Interviews from Bryan Cranston, who plays the main character, and Vince Gilligan are cited with great regularity in this chapter. It is definitely a plus for fans of the series to hear so much from those two sources.

Chapter 3, “Does Walt Want to Die?,” rounds out the first part of the book by exploring the complexities of Walter’s motivations and decisions. Arrogance and hubris are the most compelling tropes used to explore the motivations and complexities of his character. Stache explains, “Although he finds himself in danger of being killed multiple times through the series, including twice in the first episode alone, Walter both cheats and courts death in his chaotic journey” (33). The opportunities to cease *breaking bad* are also highlighted to demonstrate this presumed death wish in the main character.

The second part of the book consists of three chapters. Chapter 4, “Morality, Legality, and Everything In Between,” is where the book hits its cultural and contextual stride. Drugs become the driving trope, as does the excitement of the series answering the question “of what people might do if they only had a short time to live” (47). For most of the audience, the laws and morals that are assumed as standard in the United States are key to that answer. Those presumed morals are put in tension with and challenged about how we deal with drugs in our society. It is part of what makes the series a hit. Chapter 5, “Just Say No?: Drug Use and Abuse in *Breaking Bad*,” looks at drug culture in the United States and how that was highlighted by the series. Chapter 6, “Marketing *Breaking Bad*,” enlightens the reader about the tact and skill that AMC deployed. It is a stratagem worthy of its own chapter. Additionally, the role of AMC as a network, the series streaming on Netflix, and the marketing genius of AMC round out the more series-driven arguments.

The third part of the book focuses on the other characters. The most in-depth, cultural argument in this part of the book delineates the dynamics of Skyler White,

Walt's wife. Chapter 7 is highly focused upon the cultural and societal response to Skyler's role in the series. Stache argues, "Skyler can be understood as a woman who is at once enacting and resisting traditional female roles, which ultimately works against Walt realizing his goal to enact a traditional male role in the public sphere as the breadwinner for the family" (106). The final two chapters cover the "baddies" and the "Anti-Walts," Jesse and Hank. The analyses of the villains, and there are many to choose from, are rather brief. They serve to support Stache's larger arguments about the cultural resonance and relevance of the series. The clearly bad characters keep the audience on their toes about where they stand with Walt. Jesse and Hank's objectives and goals are, as Stache articulates, "rarely compatible" with Walt's or each other. The two characters keep the audience in an "intense game of tug-of-war" (134).

Stache's goal to, "explore how media is both a mirror and creator of reality," is achieved by the end (152). The book is thorough, explores the cultural dynamics of the series, and is compelling. While an enticing read, it fits best for a general audience, as it does not rely heavily upon academic terms. Scholars wanting to introduce students to more general media concepts would be served well by this book. A brief note: watch the series beforehand.

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Steeves, H. Peter. *Beautiful, Bright, and Blinding: Phenomenological Aesthetics and the Life of Art*. State U of NY Press, 2018.

I am with you as you read this. My writing, printed and bound or floating before you on a screen, makes me—a total stranger—present in your consideration. Later, should you think back on this review, I will be there, too, myself unaware of our dialogue yet nonetheless there: present, though absent. This dialectic of presence and absence pervades aesthetic encounters writ large, whether they be in the art of scholarship or the more "traditional" arts of painting, cinema, songs, etc. While Plato feared that art as a representation of reality could overshadow the contours of reality itself, others in the tradition of Continental philosophy argue that "art does not represent" (61). Rather, as H. Peter Steeves argues in *Beautiful, Bright, and*

*Blinding*, “A picture or image of something is one way that that thing can be present to consciousness” (61). That thing is absent, in one sense, yet present in another. Hence: I am with you as you read this. My writing (though its aesthetic merit be debatable) makes me present to you, though you yourself remain absent to me. Which is also to say that I have spent a considerable amount of time with Steeves through the reading, contemplation, and now review of his book. One could argue that through my quotation of him he is also present to you as you read. Presence and absence are tricky.

The preceding may seem like a game, but these considerations are at the core of what Steeves aims to interrogate, play with, and explore throughout his book, making the adoption of this style not trickery but an essential element of considering the aesthetic. Steeves brands his approach to the aesthetic as grounded in phenomenological thinking and method, taking seriously the phenomenologist’s project of evoking how experience presents itself to the one experiencing. That Steeves’s work brings the reader into dialogue with other aesthetic objects that are themselves removed from the pages of his volume means that his writing must be that much cleverer and more deliberate. Some chapters in *Beautiful, Bright, and Blinding* are thus relatively straightforward, synthesizing scholarship and art; others are extended ruminations on vegetarian recipes; and in one particularly vivid chapter, Steeves writes in the form of a play, with characters as diverse as Descartes, Socrates, and Koko the Gorilla lending aid to Steeves’ project of examining the ethics of aesthetic objects and experiences, particularly in light of the complicated dialectic of presence/absence that pervades aesthetic experience. To approach these complex relations in the traditional manner of scholarly analysis and argumentation is to miss what the experience of these experiences brings to the individual, to the artist, and to understanding or comprehension for either party.

Forgive me, to this point I may seem to have been unclear. With *Beautiful, Bright, and Blinding*, Steeves undertakes the goal of removing consideration of the aesthetic from the realm of metaphysics, instead engaging a “phenomenology of aesthetics” and discovering that “life and art are fundamentally intertwined —so much so that there is no room to separate them” (2). This phenomenology of aesthetics is intimately tied to matters of presence, absence, and perspective, and acknowledges the conundrum of presence implied above; as Steeves says, “The fact that I cannot even really have your experience, but can only have an experience that is mine in which I try to take up your experience, is yet another reason that the object is an inexhaustible reserve of perspectives” (6). Recognizing the

complexities of experience, and the ties between experience, aesthetics, and life, necessarily requires Steeves to engage with the objects of his inquiry in a manner reflective of his experiences of these objects. Steeves the scholar, Steeves the fan, and Steeves the entertained/shocked/disturbed (aka Steeves the emotional human being) cannot be distinguished, for to do so is to introduce a false reality to the discussion, to unrealistically disentangle one part of an identity from the whole that comprises that identity. This is the innovation and deliberateness of style that Steeves brings to this work, which carefully engages with the objects mentioned above while also ruminating on Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*, zombies, violence in the films of Michael Haneke, the vagaries of conceptual art, and the post-ironic humor of *The Simpsons* and Andy Kaufman.

To this point, in a sense, I have said little about the actual content of Steeves's book. This has not been by accident. To some extent I wonder what the point would be. Steeves makes arguments and assertions here, particularly in his exploration of *Beauty in the Beast* and in the final two chapters on post-irony and performance art. But I question whether these arguments are the point even for Steeves. For instance, in the setup to his chapter on the postmodern, post-ironic humor of *The Simpson*, Steeves asserts that he intends to show "what was new—and arguably still is new—about *The Simpsons*" in relation to modernity (182), which he does only partially, asserting by the end that "all that talk up front about needing a new theory of comedy to deal with the show was just, well, talk" (197) before moving into an extended consideration of Andy Kaufman, the comedian known for being so antithetical to traditional understandings of comedy and humor that it is arguably fair to question his status as a comedian at all. That these chapters—and the aforementioned chapter written as a play or dialogue—are possibly performance art is part of the intrigue of Steeves's phenomenological method. He deconstructs the complexities of performance art through his examination of prominent performance artists all while engaging in performance art himself, with a self-awareness to his writing that strains the reflexivity of the phenomenological style and method in relation to his early assertions regarding the inseparability of life and art in order for us to consider the concomitant ethical component of aesthetic experience.

Steeves's book is bold. It is challenging. At times, it is maddening. And disappointing. And intriguing. And at the end of the day, I am not sure that the text itself matters so much as, strangely, the reading of it. While the words add up to meaningful sentences and (at times) argue for specific perspectives on art and

popular culture, the whole of the project is far more important than its individual components. Steeves argues that life cannot be divorced from art and vice versa, and as we read with him, he intentionally makes that so even for us. Through his style, through the number of beautifully reproduced color photographs spread throughout the volume, and through his presence with us as we read, Steeves makes the aesthetic and the ethics of aesthetics felt. I do not believe that his aim is for this work to necessarily be quoted and argued with or about even in the manner I have done in this brief review. Instead, his book requires a different sort of commitment to lived analysis and engagement, intermingling presence, absence, ethics, and aesthetics in the everyday. Having been present with me as I read, this was Steeves's challenge to me. Now, present as you read, I pass that challenge on to you.

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Stoddart, Scott F. & Michael Samuel, eds. *True Detective: Critical Essays on the HBO Series*. Lexington, 2018.

The first two seasons of *True Detective* are a challenging set of texts for an edited collection of scholarly essays. The two anthological seasons diverge wildly in terms of premise, tone, and setting. Moreover, the first season received almost universal critical praise while critics roundly panned the follow-up season. Scott Stoddart and Michael Samuel's *True Detective: Critical Essays on the HBO Series* reflects and addresses these two sets of challenges by including a diverse array of essays that draws more heavily from the critically acclaimed first season. A third season has subsequently aired after the book's publication.

*True Detective: Critical Essays on the HBO Series* is the second collection of essays published about the series. Jacob Graham and Tom Sparrow's *True Detective and Philosophy* was the first. Rust Cohle, one of the protagonists of Season One, is an amateur philosopher, specializing in pessimism, nihilism, and anti-natalism. Consequently, Season One particularly lends itself to philosophical analysis, and several of the authors in Stoddart and Samuel's collection focus on the philosophical implications of the show. In one of the strongest essays in the

collection, “The Secret Fate of all Pessimism,” Rich Elmore examines Nietzsche’s notion of eternal recurrence as explored by Rust Cohle in Season One. The most oft-quoted line from *True Detective* is Cohle’s declaration that “time is a flat circle.” Here, Cohle is engaging the notion of eternal return, which has Nietzsche positing the rhetorical question: What if the life we live we have already lived an infinite number of times and will continue to live an infinite number of times? For Nietzsche, each person should ask if they would choose to live their life if they had to live it on repeat. As Elmore explains, “In the face of eternal recurrence, it does not matter what one does, chooses, or wills, since every apparent ‘decision’ is merely the repetition of something one already did in a past life. Hence, eternal recurrence is proof of the illusory nature of decisions, development, progress, and resolution” (86). This is the crux of Nietzsche’s nihilism, as Nietzsche believes that most would not choose to live their life *ad infinitum*; however, Elmore suggests that in the final episode of Season One, Cohle has a change of heart. He writes that “Rust’s worldview changes over the course of the show, morphing from pessimism into fatalism” (85-86). Elmore challenges the myriad critics who read Season One as an endorsement of nihilism. Instead, he sees the final episode as a rejection of the Nietzschean nihilism that the season explores through Cohle: time is not, in fact, a flat circle.

One strength of the collection is the multiple analytical and disciplinary approaches of the authors. In addition to philosophical analysis, authors employ literary analysis, meta-narrative analysis, critical gender analysis, and often use multiple strategies in their critical readings of the show. One particularly captivating chapter is Helen Williams’s “Petrochemical Families,” in which she takes the Louisiana landscape that provides the setting for Season One as a frame for understanding the disturbing gender politics that haunt the entire season. For Williams, the key to understanding the mysteries that abound in the season is to read the narrative as cyclical, rather than linear. She uses the show’s bayou setting to stand in for the cycles of destruction that petrochemical industrialization has wrought on the Louisiana coastline. She contends that the “tension between industrial expansion and the repeated ‘return’ of natural forces in the form of flooding in particular [...] forms a fitting backdrop for a narrative largely preoccupied with exploring cycles of conflict and competing pressure” (23). In her schema, the violence that inheres in the show, mostly directed toward women, has a deep history in the land. Just as the petrochemical plants enact cyclical violence upon the landscape of the bayou, the patriarchal culture imparts cyclical violence

onto the women and girls who live there. She argues that “surrounded by destructive cycles of weather systems causing untold damage to the natural and man-made landscape [...] it is perhaps little wonder that these processes of repetition [...] are normalized into becoming the central controlling forces either organizing or ruling the lives of the various men and women in the narrative” (46-47). The show’s protagonists are only able to solve the case when they understand the ways in which the cyclical patterns of destruction are deeply imbricated into the culture’s cyclically repeated patriarchal violence, metaphorically represented by the ecologically cyclical destruction in which they are working.

While given short shrift compared to Season One, Stoddart and Samuel’s collection does examine the second season, which features an entirely different cast and moves from the swamps of Louisiana to the City of Angels. The last three contributions to the collection examine Season Two through the lens of Greek tragedy, a natural point of entry as one of the protagonists in the season is named Antigone (Ani). In “Names So Deep and Names So True,” Isabell Große reads Season Two through Sophocles’ *Antigone* and positions Ani as a “gender transgressor” (140). For Große, “Ani portrays herself as a modern version of Sophocles’ unfeminine heroine Antigone, but by the end of the season she is reduced to playing the role of a mother” (143). Große argues that critics largely lambasted Season One for its lack of anything resembling a female character with any sort of agency, and that Ani offered perhaps the only hope in Season Two for a feminist charter. For her, a cursory reading of the show would reveal that *True Detective* failed to offer any kind of feminist agency for Ani. Because by the end of the series she is reduced to playing the mother, “from a feminist point of view, this constituted one of the series’ most severe disappointments” (150). However, she offers an intertextual reading of Season Two and *Antigone* that reads agency into Ani’s character. She explains that “if one reads Ani’s character as an adaptation of Sophocles’ Antigone though, she remains true to her script” (150). In Große’s analysis, one cannot assess Ani merely within the confines of the text; one needs to understand her intertextually by understanding the context of her namesake. She maintains that “*Antigone* can be read as a representation of disparities, not only between private and public norms, but also and more significantly between the sexes and gender stereotypes. What Ani shares with Antigone is her self-confident deviation from conventional expectations of femininity” (145).

Stoddart and Samuel’s *True Detective: Critical Essays on the HBO Series* makes a meaningful contribution to the field of television studies. However, the

range of its essays make it a useful collection for scholars of literature, women's and gender studies, popular culture studies, communication, American Studies, philosophy, and other related fields. The diverse scholarly approaches of the chapters reflect both the range of disciplines that are currently invested in the study of television, and the wildly divergent nature of the first two seasons of *True Detective*.

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Oak Island, situated in Mahone Bay, Nova Scotia, has been a site of intrigue since the alleged discovery of the Money Pit in the late 18th century. The failure to discover a treasure of significant monetary or historical value has led to much speculation as to what (if anything) is buried on the island and who is responsible. This speculation has transformed the island into a cultural icon as it has been featured in documentaries, served as the backdrop for numerous novels, and currently acts as the setting for the popular television series *The Curse of Oak Island*. Randall Sullivan's book *The Curse of Oak Island: The Story of the World's Longest Treasure Hunt* is one of the more recent texts to explore the history of the Oak Island mystery and its associated theories. Sullivan is no stranger to the island as he wrote an article for *Rolling Stone* magazine, published in January 2004, that explored the history of the treasure hunt and some of the theories circulating as to the nature of the treasure. However, Sullivan was concerned that he "accepted the semiofficial legend" of the island "without sufficient examination" when he wrote the article (1). Sullivan's objective for *The Curse of Oak Island* was to write the

most comprehensive investigation of the Oak Island mystery and explore the topic with a more critical lens than he was able to achieve previously.

The first part of *The Curse of Oak Island* examines the history of the Money Pit's discovery and deconstructs some of the myths surrounding its discovery. Sullivan weaves together some of the earlier known texts that recount the discovery of the Money Pit to present an argument that the narrative is "mostly true" (7). Some of his reservations are directed at the part that entails McGinnis travelling "to a mysterious uninhabited island where he was startled by the discovery of a weird depression in the ground" (14). Sullivan continues his examination of the Oak Island mystery by providing glimpses into the activities of some of the major and minor treasure hunt companies that have operated on the island leading up to the present. This provides a list of the discoveries made on Oak Island, some of which have been carbon-dated to provide a window to narrow down possible candidates of who may have created the Money Pit. Furthermore, through this analysis of past activity on the island, Sullivan identifies patterns to which Oak Island treasure hunters have fallen victim since the mid-nineteenth century: the assumption that using more sophisticated technology than previous treasure searches would play a role in extracting the treasure. The damage done to the island by the excavations of failed treasure hunts has made it more difficult for future operations to be successful (50).

It is evident that Sullivan believes a treasure of some kind was buried on the island, and he has identified various theories that could possibly account for the nature of the treasure. Sullivan provides a comprehensive investigation into the origins of some of these theories and presents information that challenges their validity. After his analysis, Sullivan tends to suggest there are varying degrees of flaws in these theories, but no evidence exists that categorically disproves many of them either, which Sullivan concedes is part of the "perplexing thing about Oak Island" (391). This comprehensive analysis allows Sullivan to construct a spectrum with theories possessing minor flaws positioned on one extreme end of the spectrum and debunked theories on the other extreme. Sullivan is then able to position each theory on different points of this spectrum. Sullivan deviates from the belief that the Oak Island treasure is simply one of precious metals and stones as he believes the existence of Nolan's Cross and the amount of labor required to construct the flood tunnels suggests a treasure of religious, spiritual or historical value has been hidden on the island (245). Furthermore, the relationships that Sullivan has formed with some of the treasure hunters who have dominated the Oak

Island story from the 1960s to the present not only offers tantalizing insight into their respective theories regarding the Money Pit, but a well-informed perspective on some of the activity that has occurred on the island. The final chapter tries to connect with the title of the book and the television series as it examines some of the paranormal activity that people claim to have experienced on the island. Although Sullivan discusses the six deaths that have occurred in trying to recover the treasure, his book omits a discussion of one of the foundational legends that the television series emphasizes: the treasure will only be recovered after the seventh person has died.

One of the greatest strengths in Sullivan's text is the insights he provides via his participation on the television series *The Curse of Oak Island*. Sullivan's presence on Oak Island for approximately one month during the filming of season four helped him to present tantalizing insights into the personalities and the relationships of people involved in the series. For instance, Sullivan notes the suspicions the Lagina brothers harbored that the producers of the series engineered the discovery of a Spanish coin dated to 1652 that was shown in the final episode of the first season; a finding that helped convince Marty to continue with the treasure hunt. The producers repudiated these suspicions, but Sullivan notes the Lagina brothers threatened to cancel the series if the producers were caught lying on that point (338). Furthermore, Sullivan is also able to offer insight into the behind-the-scenes dynamics and decision-making process of the show. Sullivan sheds light as to why Daniel Ronnstam was invited onto the island to discuss his Baconian theory in season two instead of Petter Amundsen, who made an appearance on the show in the first season. Sullivan's investigation into this revealed that Amundsen wanted archaeologists involved when major excavations occur on the island so that artefacts and markers connected to his theory were not destroyed. Unfortunately, Amundsen's collaboration with some of the individuals responsible for creating the Peterson-Rafuse bill was interpreted as an action that could present major barriers in recovering the treasure, making him "persona non grata across the entire production" (339-40). Sullivan's interactions with Kevin Burns, the one responsible for creating the series, also reveals his perspectives as he was "continually surprised by viewers' obsessive fascination with Oak Island...[which]...even infected the show's crew" (390). Sullivan's book sheds a little more light on why individuals were willing to spend fortunes on their Oak Island quests.

As noted above, Sullivan's main motivation behind writing this book was to become more acquainted with the Oak Island legend, and he accomplished this in an easy-to-read book geared toward a popular audience. Although some errors have crept into the pages of his book, Sullivan does an admirable job exploring the history of the island and the origins of many of the theories as to what may be buried on the island, and he provides the reader with insight on the current efforts of the Lagina brothers to discover the treasure. Sullivan is convinced the Oak Island mystery will not be cracked in the immediate future, which is not an unreasonable belief given that the mystery has eluded treasure hunters for over two centuries. That said, Sullivan offers up a tantalizing question for his readers and fans of the television series to consider: the fact that the television series is so interconnected with the Lagina brothers' search for the treasure forces one to consider the future of that search should the series be cancelled before the treasure is extracted (396-7). With a seventh season coming, we will have to wait at least a little more time before that question is answered.

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Williams, Monica. *The Sex Offender Housing Dilemma*. New York UP, 2018.

How would you feel if you were notified that a "sexually violent predator" (SVP) was moving in next door? Author Monica Williams reports that many people not only feel moral outrage but take up action to block SVP placements in their neighborhoods. In the book *The Sex Offender Housing Dilemma*, Williams closely examines specific community responses to SVP placement. More than 750,000 individuals are registered as sex offenders in the United States, and California's sex offender registry alone includes more than 120,000 individuals (199).

Williams focused on three cities in California to analyze their activism resisting sex offender housing. She calls the three cities Ranchito, Deserton, and East City. Ranchito was an unincorporated town in Southern California with 20,000 mostly white residents. Desterton was also unincorporated, but rural, with only 200 residents. In northern California, East City was urban, with a substantial proportion

of racial and ethnic minorities, persistent poverty, and higher than average crime rates (17). Williams argues that despite portrayals of communities panicking at specific sex offender individuals, communities typically focus their frustration at the institutions superseding the local control.

After the introduction, Williams devotes one chapter to each city. She uses legal documents, interviews, and public neighborhood meetings to analyze the three community's activism styles. The thesis of the book is that activists rarely blamed individual offenders for their housing need, but mainly aimed their advocacy at institutional decision makers (6). She encourages re-framing the SVP housing conversation to include local community members. That could release the tension of their lack of control over unfavorable people and projects in the community.

Additionally, she uses Ranchito, Deserton, and East City to illustrate various tactics neighborhoods employ to oppose sex offender placements. Their strategies were influenced by the socioeconomic demographics and historical marginalization of the cities. For instance, Ranchito, a community used to governing themselves, employed political mobilization. Deserton, used legal strategies because legal influence had helped them in the past. In East City, "orientations to both types of authority had contributed to the community's oppression and disenfranchisement, neither political nor legal mobilization took hold as a central strategy for opposition" (201). Ultimately, Ranchito assembled enough political sway to stop the SVP placement. Neither Deserton nor East City were able to block their SVP placement.

Even the term SVP is problematic. In California, the term includes all variations of sexual misconduct. Only four states (including California) do not have a tiered system of naming sexual offenders based on the severity of their crime. The label is an obstacle in persuading landlords to rent to SVPs and makes it near impossible for politicians to support SVP placements. Williams explains, "In effect, the sex offender housing dilemma has become a zero-sum game in which any advocate for effective housing solutions is perceived as threatening 'good' citizens. To remain in office, politicians have little choice but to speak out against policies that would encourage sex offenders to live in their districts" (199). Not only does the SVP label and SVP notifications to the community make it more difficult for sex offenders to find housing placements, but without reintegration and connection to a community, the likelihood of reoffending is higher.

The closing chapter promises "Solving the Sex Offender Housing Dilemma," but lacks many practical steps. The intricacy of housing sex offenders is clear, and

while many people suggest long-term incarceration or segregating sex offenders forever as solutions, Williams argues that is not feasible or helpful. The incarceration system is overcrowded and overrepresents people of color, so long-term incarceration of sex offenders would only stress an already broken system. Segregating sex offenders will also not prevent new sex crimes from occurring (205). The majority of perpetrators know their victims, so the assailants are “already in our backyard”. After refuting the suggestions most lay people would give, Williams fails to suggest how to house SVPs.

Her major appeal for change is local governments inviting community participation in local decisions. I appreciate her advocacy that local communities should have a voice in institutional decisions related to their community, especially placement of SVPs. However, I wanted tangible ideas for sex offender housing. Williams quickly mentions Circles of Support and Accountability (COSAs), in which volunteers create a network to hold sex reoffenders accountable after release. COSAs have been implemented for high-risk offenders in a number of countries, including the United States, and they have contributed to successful reintegration efforts (207). I wish Williams’s book included an exploration of programs that have had successful outcomes.

Overall, the book complicates and subverts typical public knowledge about housing sex offenders. Williams writes, “While communities do react to sex offenders out of fear, their opposition also involves deep-seated, ongoing concerns about how political and legal institutions have differentially empowered some communities to maintain local control over local issues” (203). I imagine readers will begin to assess sexual offender housing regulations in their own community, likely finding no easy answers.

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Zoglin, Richard. *Elvis in Vegas: How the King Reinvented the Las Vegas Show*. Simon & Schuster, 2019.

In 1992, the United States Post Office offered Americans a chance to vote on two possible images of Elvis Presley for a stamp commemorating the singer. The first,

depicting the 1950s Elvis, triumphed over the second which depicted the Elvis of the early 1970s, by a factor of three to one. Synonymous with Las Vegas, the white-jumpsuited figure of the second image has become a cultural signifier of kitsch, embodied by a multitude of Elvis impersonators and film, television, and musical parodies. The Vegas-era Elvis has also come to embody something of an American understanding of tragedy, with the all-conquering hero reduced to an overweight, drug-impaired joke barely capable of performing even as his lavish lifestyle made it necessary to do so. One of the great strengths of Richard Zoglin's new book, *Elvis in Vegas: How the King Reinvented the Las Vegas Show*, is that it reminds its readers of why the stamp vote was mistaken. The Elvis who returned to live shows in 1969 after a nine-year hiatus spent making increasingly atrocious movies was, if not the most revolutionary Elvis, then certainly the greatest performer. The brilliance of the 1969-1970 shows, as Zoglin makes clear, were unmatched by any of his performances before or after, not even the jaw-dropping 1968 comeback special on ABC.

Las Vegas was, Zoglin argues, a big part of Elvis's identity, even before he became the first major star to establish a regular residency in the city, paving the way for later big names such as Celine Dion, Elton John, and Britney Spears. The book opens with an account of Elvis's disastrous first appearance in the city in 1956 when a brash young upstart with greasy hair and cringeworthy stage patter bombed with an older alternately appalled and disinterested audience. Despite this rare early career failure Elvis made Vegas a regular recreational stopover, especially during his Hollywood years. As he rarely gambled, Elvis preferred taking in the Vegas shows and the showgirls, and Zoglin suggests Liberace was a significant influence. Although Zoglin dismisses Elvis's 1964 movie *Viva Las Vegas* as "a pretty bad film" (105), perhaps unfairly so, his account of Elvis's affair with his co-star Ann-Margret captures her importance to him in a way that underlines the unsuitability of his 1967 marriage to the far-less worldly Priscilla Ann Wagner. (Zoglin fails to note that the singer had been involved with the woman who became his wife since she was fourteen years-old, behavior that might now demand a reconsideration of his legacy).

Zoglin's dismissal of *Viva Las Vegas* also extends to the lyrics of its title song which he criticizes as "some of the clunkiest in the Elvis canon" by having "three *theres* in two lines!" (106, italics in original). This strange criticism reflects some of the book's weaknesses. In the first instance, by focusing on the words over the feel of the song Zoglin seems to miss why it is significant (and thus, why it has

been covered by everybody from the Dead Kennedys to Shawn Colvin to Bruce Springsteen). In the second, Zoglin occasionally gets lost in the details and also frequently gets those details wrong. There are not, for example, three “theres” in the opening two lines of *Viva Las Vegas*, there are two and one “they’re,” an error made all the more egregious by Zoglin quoting the relevant lyrics immediately before making his erroneous assertion. It is not his only mistake. Early on in the book he asserts that Elvis died from “a drug overdose” (18), a claim that remains unsubstantiated (not least because the autopsy report was sealed). It is telling that having made this bold assertion, Zoglin walks it back towards the end of the book, asserting that of the fourteen different drugs found in the singer’s system, “at least five” were “in potentially toxic doses” (236). This is quite a different claim and it is not clear why Zoglin did not seek to fix the contradiction. Similarly, Zoglin asserts that in his later shows, Elvis began “performing a medley of patriotic songs [...] that he dubbed ‘An American Trilogy’” (232), a medley that was put together and named by country music singer Mickey Newbury in 1971. Such criticism might seem unnecessarily picayunish, but there are many such errors and the reader might be forgiven for being concerned about the veracity of some of the other claims made by the author.

These concerns aside, there is much of value in the book. Almost half of it is given over to a history of the development of Las Vegas as desert resort. Many stories exist of acts large and small who made Vegas a major attraction. The book also contains a valuable account of the city’s racial politics: a remarkably long-lasting commitment to Jim Crow segregation aimed at appeasing white southerners who flocked to Vegas in large numbers. Above all, however, the book offers a compelling glimpse into a brief moment when Elvis Presley cared about, and felt challenged by, what he was doing and the incredible artistry that he produced in the then-unlikely environment of a Las Vegas showroom.

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## Other Media Reviews

*Eighth Grade*. Dir. Bo Burnham. Screenplay by Bo Burnham.  
Perf. Elsie Fisher, Josh Hamilton, and Emily Robinson. A24, 2018.

*Eighth Grade* (2018), written and directed by Bo Burnham, follows the awkward attempts of a teenage girl to force herself out of her shell before she officially becomes a high schooler. For thirteen-year-old Kayla (Golden Globe nominee Elsie Fisher), this involves posting motivational videos to her YouTube channel, forcing herself to attend a pool party, and googling “how to give a blowjob.” *Eighth Grade* offers a contrast to darker coming-of-age movies featuring female protagonists, such as those trending in the 1990s and early 2000s: *Kids* (1995), *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1995), *The Virgin Suicides*, (1999), *American Beauty* (1999), *Thirteen* (2003). Instead, *Eighth Grade* offers a female character who is essentially safe despite dabbling in risky behavior. *Eighth Grade* is notable for its deftness in arousing viewer anxiety about young women in two important spheres: sexuality and technology. We watch lonely Kayla trudge through her last weeks of eighth grade with cell phone in hand, taking staged selfies as part of her wake-up routine and exhorting the imagined audience of her YouTube channel to “Be yourself.” As *HuffPost*’s Anna Krakowsky puts it, “we recognize Kayla as someone we sympathize with, but also someone we want to protect—who is loose in a new world too large even for us to control.”

So, what does that new world—our new world—look like? And for the grown-ups in the audience, why is this new world such a looming threat for the teenage girl writ large? One answer might be found in real world research on teens and sexuality. Despite having more access to pornographic material than maybe any generation before them, teens are having less sex (Twenge). Indeed, as researchers begin to ask the “why” questions around this issue, they’re finding that easy access to porn may actually be one cause of the decline in sexual contact among teens. And of course, the other possible cause is the decline in any-sort-of-contact-whatsoever among teens. Above all, *Eighth Grade* gives viewers an opportunity to meditate on the true risk of technology for our heroine: isolation. Night after night we watch Kayla’s bedtime routine: lights out, ear buds in, laptop open. Kayla’s screen becomes our screen and we are left feeling the queasy aftermath of an

Internet bender: a toxic mix of Instagram, streaming television, and YouTube tutorials.

Even the official representatives of Kayla's future self (the high schoolers she gets to hang out with at the mall on one fateful day) fear that Kayla is part of a "different generation," one in which technology surely ended her childhood too soon:

TREVOR: When did you get Snapchat? What grade?

KAYLA: Fifth grade.

ANIYAH: Wait, so were kids like sending each other like nudes in like fifth grade?

TREVOR: She's seen dicks in fifth grade! She's like wired differently.

After half a movie's worth of anxiety about what will happen to dear Kayla, we encounter our fear in the mouths of older teens and find that it sounds hysterical. Perhaps we shouldn't be so worried after all. Consider this: Kayla seeks the attention of her crush by pretending to have a "dirty photos folder" on her phone but never ultimately does anything with him; she practices her blowjob technique on a banana but never on a person. In the end, we discover a teenage girl who is notable for her kindness and who (gasp!) believes in God, and (double-gasp!) is actually capable of connection: with bubbly Olivia who she shadows during the annual eighth grade visit to the high school, with earnest Gabe who is the cousin of mean-girl Kennedy but who trumps Kayla's awkwardness by tenfold (he starts their "first official hang out" by showing off his archery certificate from camp and then asking if she believes in God), and most importantly, with her dorky-but-genuinely-loving father in what is the most gratifying relationship of the film. Amid the constant threats of alienation and sexualization we are also left to feel that perhaps Kayla is simply lucky to have made it safely out of middle school.

The world of teenage risk set up by Burnham finds its unique identity in a standout scene when Kayla takes a ride home from the mall with an older boy she just met. All the classic narrative signs are there: a teenage boy and girl unexpectedly left alone in his car, they end up in the back seat, he asks her to take off her shirt—and she says "No." And there we hold our breath. We hold our breath because we've seen this set up so many times before: this is where our heroine will be victimized. Instead, what happens next, or what doesn't happen, is what sets *Eighth Grade* apart: there is no rape scene.

What does it tell us that this feels radical? That a movie in which the adolescent female lead takes risks and yet is safe feels like a breath of fresh air? One of the impacts of the #MeToo movement is that we are suddenly encountering far more stories of sexual violence in our everyday lives. If we're going to fully reckon with our true stories of trauma, perhaps we are even more grateful now for stories of safety. If the risks our real-life Kaylas faced were truly limited to the perils of wearing the wrong bathing suit to the pool party or the pressure of choosing the right emoji for the mean-girl's new profile pic, we would all breathe a long-overdue sigh of relief.

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"Chapter Twenty: The Mephisto Waltz." *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, part 2, episode 9. Dir. Rob Seidenglanz. Teleplay by Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa. Perf. Kiernan Shipka, Ross Lynch, and Lucy Davis. Warner Bros. Television. 2019. *Netflix*.

The two-part finale of Netflix's *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* condenses all the supernatural strangeness from the show's former nineteen episodes into a satisfying conclusion. Throughout its two installments, alongside the show's satanic and magical fantasies, *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (henceforth *Sabrina*) has

maintained a queer sensibility, one that has resonated with audiences who identify as LGBTQ+.

A quick search online about Netflix's supernatural teen show yields several pages about the queer community's response to the show. Much appreciation exists for *Sabrina*'s queer characters, such as the trans male character Theo, the pansexual warlock Ambrose, and the general sexual fluidity of most of the witch and warlock characters. The queer appreciation for *Sabrina* might be best summarized by *Nylon*'s Sesali Bowen, who suggests the show resonates through its presentation of intersectional queer experiences and through symbolism suggestive of queer allegory. The amount of queer characters often allows the show to become much queerer than what this writer's Netflix categorizes as "gay shows," which seems to be the streaming service's classification for any identification under the LGBTQ umbrella. *Sabrina*, meanwhile, serves the queer community through its queer characters' actions and through the camp aesthetic that permeates the show.

Near the beginning of "Chapter Twenty: The Mephisto Waltz," the show's most powerful antagonist, a particularly sexy Satan, makes a dramatic entrance through the fog wearing only a thong loincloth. The emphasis on Satan's body as he approaches the camera is not just a reminder of the show's homoerotic tendencies—Nick Scratch also spends a good deal of time shirtless in the back half of *Sabrina*'s episodes—but also as a performative nod to audiences that this will, indeed, be one of the show's queerest hours.

In "Notes on Camp," Susan Sontag defined camp as a sensibility of aestheticism, exaggeration, and stylization (105). Sontag noted that camp was born one of two ways: either through naïve camp, which arises without intention, or deliberate camp, which is campy by design (110). As evidenced by Satan's sexy entrance, *Sabrina* certainly sits in the latter categorization, which, to counter Sontag's claim, does not make it any less satisfying (110). In the seventies, Jack Babuscio revisited camp, identifying it as a specifically gay sensibility of irony, aestheticism, theatricality, and humor (122). Each of these identified elements, which tend to play with and parody gender constructions, allow camp to be more than "specifically gay": camp is queer.

No sequence in the finale is more indicative of the show's campiness than in the Queen of Hell coronation at the finale's climax. First, it must be addressed that the climactic sequence is, indeed, a coronation, a theatrical and performative ceremony. As Satan sits on his throne of skulls, waiting for his legions of demons to witness Sabrina's crowning, Sabrina descends the stairs in an elegant gold gown

and begins to sing “Masquerade” from *The Phantom of the Opera*. Satan looks longingly at her, seemingly proud of her musical talents. As Sabrina begins to twirl in the ballroom, masked attendees—who were supposed to be demons, though Satan does not notice—enter the ballroom and sing alongside her. Why the song, “Masquerade?” Plot-wise, Sabrina has hidden her friends and family behind masks to help cast a spell and defeat Satan. Satan, perhaps a fan of the theatrical himself, views this performance gleefully. Narratively, the brief musical number serves no purpose. It is a theatrical spectacle, but more than anything, Sabrina’s entrance mirrors the self-aware entrance of Satan at the beginning of the episode. Does the fact that “Masquerade” is of a little narrative significance matter? Of course not, because the sequence does not take away from the effectiveness of the show, it increases it, specifically when viewing it through a queer lens. *Sabrina*, with its self-aware use of dark-fantasy aesthetic to express contemporary gender and sex concerns, uses this camp sensibility in both an artistic and political way.

The finale opens with a prologue narrated by and depicting Lilith as she serves as Satan’s handmaiden “in the beginning” of the universe. Lilith, the first woman and witch, spent the beginning of her eternal life serving Satan, with the promise that she would one day sit alongside him as the Queen of Hell. The prologue’s focus on Lilith indicates the finale will serve more as a conclusion to her storyline than to the titular character, a welcome shift as it allows more screen time for Michelle Gomez’s seductive performance. Lilith manipulates nearly all the various characters in the cast, but through her relationship with Sabrina, she finally chooses the light side of the battle—or lighter (after all, these are witches using dark magic from Hell)—against Satan and helps defeat him. Yes, this is so she can become the Queen of Hell as she has always wanted, but Lilith deserves the title and recognizes that just because serving a man is what she has known, does not mean it is all she can know. Lilith’s female-focused story is complemented by the arcs of other supporting women, such as Prudence, daughter of the coven’s misogynistic patriarch, and Aunt Zelda, the coven’s soon-to-be High Priestess. In each of the storylines concluded in *Sabrina’s* finale, women break free from the men who have attempted to contain them. Some might argue that these plots are too “obvious” in their feminist agenda, but that is the thing about camp media: it is not supposed to be subtle.

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"...life is a game we play."

– Noel Gallagher

If you believe, like me, that all the works of our imaginations are as real as the material world in which we are forced to pay rent—well, you cannot find a better lathe for creating worlds than Jason Morningstar's brilliant, awkward, messy, disastrous, and ultimately compelling storytelling game, *Fiasco*. Designed to create a ludic representation of the caper films of Joel and Ethan Coen, *Fiasco* allows players to inhabit, engage with, and eventually be burned by the worlds found in darkly comic films such as *Blood Simple* (1984), *Fargo* (1996), and *Burn After Reading* (2008), as well as Sam Raimi's *A Simple Plan* (1998).

Each of these films presents a narrative catalyzed by deeply flawed protagonists: morally, intellectually, or socially (and often a combination of all three) bankrupt yet determined to set an inevitably doomed, poorly-conceived plan into motion. *Fargo*, of course, offers the story of an impotent car salesman whose plan to fake his wife's kidnapping ends with corpses being fed into a North Dakota wood-chipper; *A Simple Plan* features three "friends" of varying moral turpitude attempting to abscond with \$4 million of lost drug money. Again, antics involving a spiraling body count and the deconstruction of a small Minnesota town's moral compass ensue.

*Fiasco* lovingly recreates the semantic and syntactic elements from these films, translating their cinematic representation into a ludic one. The game, billed as a “a game of powerful ambition and poor impulse control,” focuses on storytelling, and the enjoyment (or moral lessons, existential mediation, nihilistic conclusions) that players receive will depend on their willingness to fully cooperate as storytellers. Like other role-playing games (RPGs), the story and experience are only as good as its authors (i.e. the game’s players) make it. Unlike a traditional RPG, however, *Fiasco* involves no “dungeon master,” and every player is equally responsible for and complicit in the creation of the game’s story, action, and denouement.

The game is designed for 3-5 players, each of whom chooses a player character (PC) who inhabits one of the worlds offered in *Fiasco*’s playsets—the geographic backdrop of which provides unique tables and charts based on specific cinematic backdrops. The standard *Fiasco* rulebook features four unique playsets: “Main Street” (a sinister, southern American gothic landscape), “Boomtown” (for debacles in the old west), “Tales from Suburbia” (a tableau to explore the greed and vice concealed by the banality of mid-America), and “The Ice” (for recreating debacles in a remote, ice station in the Antarctic). Expansions for *Fiasco*, released by Bully Pulpit and by enthusiastic fans online, offer several more worlds in which to play.

After establishing a backdrop, players roll six-sided dice to select specific “needs” and “relationships” for their characters, even before they are fully defined. Nearly every element that players can choose from is directly lifted from a dark caper film. For instance, in the “Main Street” playset, players can choose “to get rich through a misplaced suitcase of cash” as a need and “mutual keepers of an ominous secret” for relationship (both allude to *A Simple Plan*). Morningstar designed each of these elements to place PCs in webs of intrigue, greed, lust, and deceit that recall their cinematic inspirations. Once these relationships and ambitions are in place, players finally define their characters, thereby developing the diegesis of the game and its major conflicts.

Gameplay revolves around roleplaying through “scenes” wherein each character takes turns acting as the central figure; like any RPG, players engage with other players while in character, exploring how each character responds to the heightening tension that results from the myriad combinations of relationships and ambitions codified during set-up. In each scene, the central character must either decide the outcome of an event, without knowing how the scene will arrive at that resolution, or determining how a scene will begin, without knowing how it might

resolve itself. *Fiasco*'s mechanics accurately recreate both the tension and the anxious anticipations of its cinematic antecedents; I have yet to play a single game in which I knew how a scene would progress or where I was not madly curious about its actualization. The higher level of investment (and immersion) that players provide their characters is necessary for compelling scenes. Furthermore, because of the darkly adult subject matter of the game (and the films it's based on), players should expect to encounter potentially disturbing scenarios.

For instance, in one game, I played as a broken drug dealer who murdered his father, a professional golfer, with help from his brother, played by another character. Because scenes in *Fiasco* need not unfold in chronological order (who put Tarantino in my Coens?), I got to roleplay my character before the murder and thus explore the abuse and romantic rejections that turned him into a social pariah and unrepentant felon. In another game, I played a Harold Camping-esque cult leader determined to uncover an apocalyptic secret in the Arctic. Scenes often revolved around my miserable attempts at proselytization and conversion. Every scene not only allowed me to develop my character, but to move them inexorably toward the brutal conclusion that awaits most (but not all) characters in *Fiasco*.

In all the dark capers that inspired Morningstar's game, the best laid plans of the protagonists—whether stealing money from drug dealers or blackmailing a government official (a la *Burn After Reading*)—go disastrously awry. This is represented during *Fiasco*'s "Tilt" phase, which happens in the middle of the game. In this phase, players choose from a list of "complications" meant to recreate the PC's lack of agency in a universe that seems to conspire against them. Morningstar's game is specifically designed for players to feel the same sense of inevitable impotence experienced by the characters in the films, and after playing a final set of scenes, players resolve the game by rolling dice to determine their character's fate. My cult leader, abandoned by the cruise ship's company, found himself marooned in frigid northern waters, wailing for an absent apocalypse that had betrayed him (perhaps I modeled him too closely on Harold Camping). I have yet to finish a game without considering the trials, tribulations, and unfortunate consequences with which I burdened my characters. I continue to meditate on my own complicity of creating these conspiratorial alternate worlds and populating them with unscrupulous, if also hopelessly credulous, patsies. Morningstar's game invites that type of introspection while promoting an uncommon engagement with the worlds it creates.

Academics are likely to find *Fiasco* compelling in several ways: for media theorists, analyzing the game's translation of a cinematic experience into the ergodic text of a game provides a fantastic study in media transmigration, as well as a validation of Marshall McLuhan's adage that "We impose the form of the old on the content of the new. [The malady lingers on.]" As Gary Gygax translated early 20th Century pulp fantasy fiction novels into the RPG *Dungeons & Dragons*, Morningstar faithfully adapts screen texts to the gaming table. For quantum theorists and existential philosophers, meanwhile, the surfeit of alternate worlds that *Fiasco* requires its players to create provides enormous insight into how we understand our material plane (and attempt to come to terms with our own lack of agency within it).

For all fans of play, however, *Fiasco* is just a lot of fun.

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# POPULAR CULTURE STUDIES JOURNAL

## ABOUT

The *Popular Culture Studies Journal* is an academic, peer-reviewed, refereed journal for scholars, academics, and students from the many disciplines that study popular culture. The journal serves the MPCA/ACA membership, as well as scholars globally who recognize and support its mission based on expanding the way we view popular culture as a fundamental component within the contemporary world.

## AIMS AND SCOPE

Popular culture is at the heart of democratic citizenship. It serves as an engine driving technology, innovation, and information, as well as a methodological lens employed by the many fields that examine culture, often from an interdisciplinary perspective. Managed by The Midwest Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association (MPCA/ACA), The *Popular Culture Studies Journal (PCSJ)* is an academic, refereed journal for scholars, academics, and students from the many disciplines that study America and American culture. The journal serves its membership and scholars globally who recognize and support its mission based on expanding the way we view popular culture as a fundamental component within the contemporary world.

## EDITOR

CarrieLynn D. Reinhard, Ph.D.  
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## FOR SUBMITTING ARTICLES

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### TOPICS COVERED:

Based on analysis of the proceedings of the Midwest PCA/ACA and the national organization reveals that most popular culture scholars are interested in American-based:

- Film
- Music
- Television
- Sports
- Celebrity Culture
- Technology
- Literature
- Comics/Cartoons/Graphic Novels
- Video Games

However, many scholars approach these topics from an interdisciplinary perspective, which adds significant value over single-issue or more focused/specialized journals.

All contributions to the *Popular Culture Studies Journal* will be forwarded to members of the Editorial Board or other reviewers for comment. Manuscripts must not be previously published, nor should they be submitted for publication elsewhere while being reviewed by the *PCSJ*'s Editorial Board.

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Essays should range between 15-25 pages of double-spaced text in 12 pt. Times New Roman font, including all images, endnotes, and Works Cited pages. Please note that the 15-page minimum should be 15 pages of written article material. Less than 15 pages of written material will be rejected and the author asked to develop the article further. Essays should also be written in clear US English in the active voice and third person, in a style accessible to the broadest possible audience. Authors should be sensitive to the social implications of language and choose wording free of discriminatory overtones.

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Reviews should adhere to the ethos of the *PCSJ* and be largely positive with any criticism of the work being constructive in nature. For more information about this journal, please visit: [mpcaaca.org/the-popular-culture-studies-journal](http://mpcaaca.org/the-popular-culture-studies-journal).

Written reviews should be roughly 800-1,000 words and should be typed, double-spaced with 12 pt. Times New Roman font. Research and documentation must adhere to *The MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* and *The MLA Style Manual*, 8th edition, which requires a Works Cited list, with parenthetical author/page references in the text. Punctuation, capitalization, hyphenation, and other matters of style must also follow *The MLA Handbook* and *The MLA Style Manual*. If you are interested in submitting any alternative form of review, please contact the reviews editor directly with your proposed format. Guidelines will be determined depending on the proposed format.

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In addition to *PCSJ* calls for ongoing journal and reviews submissions (above), we are also planning for special issues. In other words, the special issues will appear alongside *PCSJ* articles and reviews in upcoming volumes. If you have an idea of a special issue, please contact CarrieLynn D. Reinhard at [pcsj@mpcaaca.org](mailto:pcsj@mpcaaca.org).

### **OCTOBER 2020: INDEPENDENT SCHOLARS SHOWCASE**

# MidwestPCA/ACA

The Midwest Popular Culture Association / American Culture Association is a regional branch of the Popular Culture Association / American Culture Association. The organization held its first conference in Duluth, Minnesota, in 1973. After a five-year hiatus during the 1990s, the organization held a come-back conference in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 2002.

MPCA/ACA usually holds its annual conference in a large Midwestern city in the United States. In the last several years, conferences have been held in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Ohio. Upcoming conferences will be held in Missouri and Indiana. The conference typically is held in October.

Anyone is welcome to join and submit proposals for consideration at the MPCA/ACA conference. Membership in MPCA/ACA is by no means limited to those working or living in the Midwest or even the United States. In fact, presenters have come from as far away as Florida and California, and Norway and Australia.

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