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THE **POPULAR CULTURE STUDIES** JOURNAL

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CONTENTS

Editorial: All Me...All the Time 1
Bob Batchelor

ARTICLES

Relational Aggression on Film: An Intersectional Analysis of Mean Girls 5

Michaela D. E. Meyer, Linda M. Waldron, and Danielle M. Stern

No Face: Implied Author and Masculine Construct in the Fiction of Junot Díaz 35

Josef Benson

***Frankenstein* Performed: The Monster Who Will Not Die** 65

Jeanne Tiehen

Discipline and Policing: HBO's *The Wire* as a Critique of Modern American Culture 87

Morgan Shipley and Jack Taylor

Performing Ordinary: Politicians, Celebrity, & the Politics of Representation on Entertainment Talk 109

Sue Collins

Communication Deficiencies Provide Incongruities for Humor: The Asperger's-like Case of *The Big Bang Theory*'s Sheldon Cooper 140

Karen McGrath

Influence of Popular Television Programming on Students' Perception about Course Selection, Major, and Career 172

Kristy Tucciarone

Partisan Pop Cultural Awareness: Disclosing the Metaphoric Rhetoric of the “Culture Wars” 193
Jeremy V. Adolphson

‘Social’ TV: *Pretty Little Liars*, Casual Fandom, Celebrity Instagramming, and Media Life 215
Cory Barker

INTERVIEW

***The Popular Culture Studies Journal* Interview with GEORGE EDWARD CHENEY** 243

BOOK REVIEWS

THE STUART HALL FORUM 256
Stuart Hall: Relevance and Remembrance
Jennifer C. Dunn

Considering Hall and Reconsidering Foundations of the Popular
“Notes On Deconstructing ‘The Popular’”
Jules Wight

Still Getting Us a Little Further Down the Road
“The Narrative Construction of Reality: An Interview with Stuart Hall”
Linda Baughman

Reviewing and Reflecting: *Representations*
Adam W. Tyma

THE POPULAR CULTURE STUDIES JOURNAL BOOK REVIEWS 274
Introductions
Jennifer C. Dunn

Where the Aunts Are: Family, Feminism & Kinship in Popular Culture
Rachel E. Silverman

Love and Money: Queers, Class, and Cultural Production
Vanessa Campagna

Pranksters: Making Mischief in the Modern World
Aaron Barlow

*Renegade Hero or Faux Rogue: The Secret Traditionalism of
Television Bad Boys*
Bob Batchelor

Cable Guys: Television and Masculinities in the 21st Century
CarrieLynn D. Reinhard

*Motorsports and American Culture: From Demolition Derbies to
NASCAR*
Norma Jones

Words Will Break Cement: The Passion of Pussy Riot
Adam Perry

*Feeling Mediated: A History of Media Technology and Emotion in
America*
William Kist

Screening the Undead: Vampires and Zombies in Film and Television
Jesse Kavadlo

*My Lunches with Orson: Conversations between Henry Jaglom and
Orson
Welles*
L. Lelaine Bonine

*Twitter: Social Communication in the Twitter Age. Digital Media and
Society Series*
La Royce Batchelor

The United States of Paranoia
Ted Remington

*The Daily You: How the New Advertising Industry is Defining Your
Identity and Your Worth*
Janelle Applequist

The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks
Chrys Egan and John Egan

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

323

Partisan Pop Cultural Awareness: Disclosing the Metaphoric Rhetoric of the “Culture Wars”

Jeremy V. Adolphson

We may have often heard the expression, “Music is what feelings sound like,” but rather than pointing out the clichéd banality of this statement, we must first realize that, by and large, these feelings and emotions are often enmeshed, constrained, and guided by our own cultural and political worldviews. In the sphere of contemporary political discourse one does not have to traverse far to become aware by noticing and consuming personal ad hominem attacks, smear campaigns, or outlandish accusations that at once seem preposterous, yet on the other hand, strangely normalized. In fact, over the last twenty-five years, a sizeable amount of scholarship has reported just how polarized and partisan American political discourse has become. Social media has both complicated and accelerated the rate with which matters of culture, sexuality, race, and religion become disseminated. The kaleidoscope of texts, tweets and rants from today’s political pundits and public intellectuals reinvigorate the rhetoric by producing never-ending strings of binary classifications framed to simultaneously label and differentiate members as Left/Right, moral/immoral, religious/secular, etc.

I actively encourage my own students to practice critical engagement with the news media, but how many of us in higher education actually practice what we preach? Do these blatantly incomprehensible and irreconcilable categories accurately justify a particular politicized identity? We might even push this question further and ask how well these ideologies represent “our” own lives. If we are susceptible to this type of

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rhetoric, can these inherent inconsistencies ever be resolved? Scholars like James Davison Hunter do not think so. Hunter skeptically remarked: “How well does our democracy mediate disagreement that is seemingly, if not in fact, incommensurable and [ir]reconcilable” (*Before the Shooting Begins* vii). Perhaps, rather than getting lost in such partisan rhetoric (speaking pejoratively), we need to refocus on how their *rhetoric* (e.g., through the Aristotelian lens of *all the available means of persuasion*) works.

The heart of the culture wars argument, for Hunter “was that American public culture was undergoing a realignment that, in turn, was generating significant tension and conflict” (“Enduring Culture War” 13). The culture wars hypothesis rests upon the idea that these warring sides not only fundamentally disagree on matters of politics, family, education, law and the arts but that the strategies employed by both sides isolate and dispel venomous attacks against the seemingly innocuous and unrelated non-politicized ideas, such as where an individual shops, who one considers to be family, the music that we listen to, and even the clothes that we wear. American politics in the early 1990s was rife with a growing unease around a deep and broad cultural divide. As Patrick Buchanan famously remarked during his 1992 Republic National Convention speech:

Friends, this election is about more than who gets what. It is about who we are. It is about what we believe and what we stand for as Americans. There is a religious war going on in this country. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we shall be as the Cold War itself. For this war is for the soul of America. And in that struggle for the soul of America, Clinton & Clinton are on the other side, and George Bush is on our side. And so, we have to come home, and stand beside him.

Regardless of whether your ideological framework agrees or disagrees with Hunter, conservative political commentator Buchanan, or other

public address scholars, this article illustrates that the culture wars are largely a metaphorical war, and hence, a rhetorical war being waged in almost every sector of our lives. The personal is very much political, yet often, these battlegrounds or theatres are largely invisible to the everyday American public. Why is this so? If we contend that the personal is political, then we must relent that the popular – in art, music, literature – can also be read as political.

The culture wars discursively “exist” within public culture. Disclosing the rhetoric of the culture wars provides an opportunity to point out just how largely undemocratic these arguments are. Accepting and recognizing the culture wars hypothesis rests upon two prepositions that have a complex but connected relationship to American political discourse: 1) framing one’s position within the strict binary Left/Right, Traditionalists/Progressives eliminates the possibility for choice, change and discussion, all inherent components within a democracy, and 2) the rhetoric of the culture wars are related to arguments of quality and degrees to which one is indoctrinated or invested with actively seeking out political news – not just the general population that Hunter asserted were affected (*Culture Wars*). Explicitly related to these propositions is that the culture wars emphasize values that are only unique to the particular group, rather than locating generalized or universal beliefs, and that which is precious (i.e. certain conceptions of what is a family, definitions of decency, family values) to them. My aim in this essay is to highlight how almost any element of our culture can become the flashpoint for a conflict over opposing political worldview, but such labeling does not automatically become a stage within the culture wars. Rhetorically though, these are powerful, argumentative strategies that both scholars and non-academics can actually engage in and observe.

In this essay I interrogate the overarching rhetoric of the culture wars to provide a theoretical and pragmatic primer for individuals interested in American political discourse, rhetorical studies, or critical consumers of

news. First, I explore the historical precedents of the culture wars by summarizing and outlining Hunter's historical contribution surrounding the sociology of culture. Second, I provide a template for rhetorically situating the culture wars in terms of the metaphorical players, battlegrounds and strategies. Third, I provide a historical example of cultural wars enmeshed within both popular and public culture as a context-driven flashpoint used to ignite the discourse surrounding family values: the censorship and stigma aimed towards heavy metal musicians and fans instigated a national moral panic. Finally, I conclude my discussions of the culture wars to demystify the broad swath with which morality guides our everyday interactions. Largely, my analysis of culture wars rhetoric depends upon what Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca describe as arguments from quality. As already mentioned in this essay, one does not have to go too far to find articles, editorials, or news commentary mentioning the culture wars; however, those commenting upon the issues already have a predisposition towards politics, or are already enmeshed within the struggle that regardless of how they interpret the (oftentimes skewed) stories, thus rhetoric of culture wars will continue on ad infinitum.

Kulturkampf – Historically Grounding the Culture Wars

Kulturkampf literally refers to a cultural struggle. Historically rooted in 19th century Germany, the *kulturkampf* referred to Germany policies regarding secularity and the prevailing interest and influence from the Roman Catholic Church. *Kulturkampf*, as an ideology, has morphed and reappropriated into the current discussions on the contemporary culture wars. Hunter argued that the climate in America produced an intense cultural conflict that few were able to completely remove themselves from. Being both intimately connected to and vehemently repellent against a particular position both fascinated and troubled Hunter: "At stake is how

we as Americans will order our lives together” (*Culture Wars* 34). For Hunter and other proponents of the culture wars hypothesis, “the erosion of a common ground for reasoned ethical debate makes it difficult to resolve politicized moral issues and portends dangerous escalations in levels of social conflict” (Mouw and Sobel 913-914). According to this logic, individuals are inescapably forced into selecting and identifying on a particular side. These specific sides and conflicts are non-negotiable and are perceived to strengthen the cultural and moral order.

In *Culture Wars – The Struggle to Define America*, Hunter argued that the culture wars are not solely relegated to the politically-minded. In fact, Hunter argues “America is in the midst of a culture war that has had and will continue to have reverberations not only within public policy but within the lives of ordinary Americans everywhere” (*Culture Wars* 34). I will come back to this statement, particularly with my critique on the culture wars hypothesis, but for now, scholars like Hunter, have commented on its ubiquitous presence. These cultural conflicts, as identified by Hunter, are not fleeting or temporary approaches to particular topics, but are intimately connected to historical conceptions of moral understanding. According to Hunter, there is a sense of primacy with issues within the culture wars: “They are not merely attitudes that can change on a whim but [are] basic commitments and beliefs that provide a source of identity, purpose, and togetherness for the people who live by them” (*Culture Wars* 42). These warring sides often align along party lines, however there have been a variety of labels that have been proposed to situate where one fits on the continuum.

In Hunter’s terminology, the culture wars are fought between the orthodoxy and progressives. The orthodoxy best approximates stereotypical conservative thought through a more fundamental and objective approach to morality, value, and purpose. The opposite worldview is from the cultural progressives who tend to favor both a spirit of subjectivism and rationalism. For the cultural progressives, truth or

morality ought to be viewed as a process, rather than something stable and unchangeable.

John Fonte sought to explore the contemporary culture wars by examining the philosophical leanings of Marxist intellectual, Antonio Gramsci, and political thinker, Alex de Tocqueville. Comparing these two philosophical perspectives, Fonte attempted to map onto Hunter's classifications of the orthodoxy and progressives. From there, Fonte's article is enmeshed within the discourse of culture wars hypothesis, but his classifications provide readers with a sense of the historical importance of the culture wars. According to Fonte, "In the United States of the past few decades, recurring philosophical concepts have not only remained 'in the air,' but have proved influential, at times decisive, in cultural and legal and moral arguments about the most important questions facing the nation" (Fonte 1). Viewing our contemporary world through a Gramscian lens would provide insight to how a war of values would permeate society.

According to Gramscian thought, the powerful elites exert control upon the masses, or ensemble, through the process of hegemony. Hegemonic thought is rooted when the dominant class exerts their values upon the rest of society to further perpetuate the discrepancy between the few and the many. Through the process of hegemony, elites attempt to normalize certain worldviews, which in turn marginalizes and/or demonizes subordinate groups. The culture wars exist for scholars like Fonte "because hegemonic values permeate all spheres of civil society – schools, churches, the media, voluntary associations – [where] civil society itself [becomes] the great battleground in the struggle for hegemony [or] the war of position" (Fonte 2). The culture wars, viewed through a Gramscian lens, promotes that all facets of life are political. There are no distinctions made between the political and apolitical; this is why, according to proponents of the culture wars hypothesis, battlegrounds arise in a variety of locations, from the very personal and intimate to the popular and public. These contested arenas serve to

function as sites for societal transformation. As we will see, music, from a culture warrior is framed and injected with a distinct moralistic rhetoric and becomes discursively viewed as a threat to “proper” and “decent” citizens.

Conversely, contemporary Tocquevillianism represents American exceptionalism as normative values to be embraced and strived for. For Tocquevillians, the culture wars are adamantly defended through a singular American path to modernity. Fonte elaborated, “Americans combined strong religious and patriotic beliefs with dynamic, restless entrepreneurial energy that emphasized equality of individual opportunity and eschewed hierarchical and ascriptive affiliations” (5). This trinity of American exceptionalism is rooted strongly within the Puritan value system and the American Dream whereby individuals have the opportunity to achieve economic progress, and through a strong personal moral character and charitable leaning towards their community, one will live a complete and fulfilled life. Tocquevillians emphasize that America needs to embrace a more healthy civic and moral code, and that only through the renewal and rediscovery of these inherently American mores, can our society and cultural values thrive.

These classifications and categories are purposefully broad enough to embody an ideological leaning, but serve as the basis for contemporary culture wars rhetoric. The shift from progressive to orthodox, subjective worldview to objective truths, secular to sacred, Gramscian to Tocquevillian thought will not occur along a continuum within the culture wars hypothesis. Culture wars proponents recognized that these thought patterns and worldviews are essential to our identity – or in other words...they are us. The either/or dichotomous relationship provide scholars and practitioners with a wealth of information and case studies to analyze specifically how one positions themselves on a wide variety of topics; though, seeking complete societal transformation is out of the

question due to the intrinsic nature of our value systems. Hunter (1994) describes this particular cultural bind:

The culture war, and the particular controversies that constitute the larger conflict, posit a crisis of legitimacy. In practical terms, this means that people on opposing sides of the cultural divide operate with fundamentally different criteria of legitimacy: what one side regards as good law, the other side regards as bad law, and vice versa. The state, then, is caught in a zero-sum bind. Its legitimacy is contingent upon embracing what others reject as illegitimate, and rejecting what others hold as fundamentally good. (*Before the Shooting Begins* 29-30)

This rhetorical dilemma must be extrapolated to recognize the culture wars arguments cloaked within American political discourse. The dissemination of these arguments occur in a variety of publications and mediums; with the rise of social media, the Internet, and blogs, the spread of religious and moralistic arguments have a greater chance to impact and persuade the indifferent. Fonte noted that “[b]eneath the surface of our seemingly placid times, the ideological, political, and historical stakes are enormous” (10). In order to calculate the enormity of these stakes, we must first disclose the rhetoric of the culture wars.

Rhetorically Situating the Culture Wars

Analyzing the rhetorical and argumentative strategies of the culture war allows us to recognize patterns and tactics employed by both sides. The metaphor “war” has many connotations, all of which can be applied to the contemporary culture wars debate. A quick inventory of the word “war” accounts for a variety of terms: assault, casualty, conflict, collateral damage, scrimmage, hostility, onslaught, crusade, campaign, contention,

wrestle, winner/loser, brawl, calculated, precise, enemy, technical, terrorist, end, “mission accomplished,” grapple, disagree, feud, quarrel, encounter, an engagement, tactical maneuver, blueprints, borderlines, the front line, resistance, the trenches, hierarchy, resistance, citizens, soldiers, bystanders, guerilla warfare, pillage, SNAFU, etc. While by no means an exhaustive list of synonyms associated with warfare, the abovementioned list serves a rhetorical purpose for approaching, identifying and interpreting how key slogans and buzz words within public and popular culture become framed within the culture wars.

A majority of culture war arguments are ad hominem attacks against a specific person and/or ideology. These personal attacks are often made without any conscious attempt to engage in a sustained dialogue with the opposition. Culture warriors disseminate their “information” by engaging in a variety of emotional tactics designed to seek identification with likeminded individuals, while distancing the opposition. Hunter recognized that this “negative persuasion has become even more important, for in public discourse, dialogue has largely been replaced by name calling, denunciation, and even outright intolerance” (*Culture Wars* 136). You may ask: Why is this type of negative rhetoric being employed? The short answer is that controversial statements or accusations draw media attention that has the greater possibility to be excerpted and broadcast/rebroadcasted easily and with the simple click of a button. Culture wars arguments have only grown exponentially with the rise of new technologies including blogging, Twitter, Facebook and other social network tools. When Hunter initially wrote *Culture Wars* the main form of communication that culture warriors used was direct mail. As the shift towards electronic media continued to grow in the late 20th century, many organizations went digital and continued their moral crusades on the web.

Any war must have a fair share of viable players. We have already discussed the theoretical, philosophical and ideological leanings of liberals/conservatives, progressives/orthodoxy and any other derivations

of the two warring sides. If America is suffering from extreme forms of partisanship, then the polarization of American culture should be spearheaded by a particular leader. Who then should lead? One can gauge the spokespersons or leaders because they are often quoted as the voice of authority guiding America through a particular dark or bleak time. The spokesperson may be imbued with a special foresight and may also take on particular supernatural and charismatic qualities. The “general” or “prophet” would be applicable names for describing such individuals. We should begin to interrogate the rhetoric of the culture wars by first looking at how each side defines the enemy. Culture wars rhetoric rests upon not only specific definitions but also upon who is responsible for defining: one group’s extremist is the other’s martyr. The leaders, however, instill upon their congregation/constituents to put their faith in them, assuring that their platform is not only best but right for America.

It should come as no surprise that many of the organizations embroiled within the culture wars have a religious dimension (e.g., the Moral Majority and Religious Right in the times of Hunter; more current interest-groups include the American Decency Association and the American Family Association). Each side of the struggle attempts to monopolize symbols of legitimacy to best depict a normal and naturalized vision of America. The claims made by such groups capitalize consent by using fear-based appeals to identify with a relatively docile population hinging upon their General/Prophet’s every word. Things become complicated because both sides use the same rhetorical tactics. For example, one such tactic is rhetorical symmetry: “Both ends of the cultural axis claim to speak for the majority, both attempts to monopolize the symbols of legitimacy, both identify their opponents with a program of intolerance and totalitarian suppression. Both sides use the language of extremism and thereby sensationalize the threat represented by their adversaries” (*Culture Wars* 156). The culture wars, as both a rhetorical and metaphoric war, celebrate minor victories that are often overturned or pushed back on any

given moment. While the culture wars encapsulate a particular moment, culture, itself, does not remain static. Cultural fluidity provides an ever-changing landscape for culture warriors to navigate, stake their claims, defend or attack, move forward, fall back, only to repeat the same processes and strategies all over again.

Even though there is an ever-changing landscape, by isolating the various battlegrounds and strategies we, as *critical consumers of news and media* can assess how they are used to rhetorically best their opponent. So far, we have disclosed that certain “things” are within the culture wars.” These “things” can be any number of items, from sexual identity, higher education, low-brow art or popular music. These “things” are also imbued through the lens of a particular type of worldview. Once ascribed with a particular worldview, they become politicized and therefore a target that must be countered by the opposition. The opposition will use everything in its arsenal to neutralize and eradicate any positive associations stemming from the “thing.” Since there are no neutral grounds in the culture wars, the battle lines are drawn deeply into the moral character of the individual. It then becomes the duty of citizens to engage in perpetuating a certain lifestyle by voicing their opinions publically and without resolve. These “things” do more than just name a certain political ideology; they negate and demonize. This totalizing effect must go all the way down; visualize Stephen Hawking’s turtles analogy, hence the large amount and continuous stream of ad hominem attacks being waged in the media.

Culture wars rhetoric succeeds best through a well-planned calculated event geared to bombard and disseminate their messages to anyone who will listen. Rather than crafting a solid argument backed up by facts, culture warriors make use of the public spectacle. The culture wars rely upon public utterances that exaggerate or overstate a particular point of view. According to Hunter, this rhetoric of distortion

[C]reates much the same effect as a misshapen mirror at an arcade
– elongating, shrinking, or fattening the reality that the speaker is

attempting to address. Quite literally, it is rhetorical hyperbole whose main purpose is to appeal to the emotional predispositions of the listener. It is not as though these speech acts are technically untrue or unjustifiable by those who give voice to them, but they stretch, bloat, or conflate realities in order to evoke a visceral response for the listener. (*Before the Shooting Begins* 46-47)

In this section I have largely dealt with the rhetoric of the culture wars in general terms. Next, I will narrow my focus toward the discourse surrounding the music culture wars, particularly how moral panics stemmed from listening to heavy metal music.

The Sounds and the Fury – Heavy Metal and Moral Panics

The relationship between music and politics has been a tenuous one at best. Almost any genre of music includes outspoken advocates, pranksters, muckrakers, worrywarts, enthusiasts, activists, and any other derivation of the word that would seem applicable. For example, the rise of punk rock music both domestically and in the U.K. led to a series of disenfranchised youth seeking their own identity by distancing themselves from the mainstream. Throughout ancient Greece, music was an imitative art. For Plato and Aristotle, there was great political importance tied to both musical rhythm and harmony because it fulfilled the primary aim of political and democratic life: producing a strong moral and virtuous character capable to perform noble actions. If we follow this argument and accept the imitative nature music can hold, then it remains perfectly acceptable to grant how certain genres of music may be deemed dangerous, violent, vulgar and offensive. In this regard, the American popular culture wars include a “period of some decades [when] America’s cultural politics involved a debate between the left and the right over whether some popular music tended to weaken society by eroding

standards of personal conduct” (Holloway 1). The music culture wars contained a series of both political and religious crusades to quell the growing tide of America’s youth from listening to music that would damage their moral character.

The initial wave of attacks against popular music occurred during 1980s and continued through the 1990s. Even though groups like the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) may seem antiquated when looking at the current state of venomous attacks in political discourse, nonetheless, their attacks against the music industry spurred future discussions and battles between music and morality. The attacks themselves have morphed into more individual attacks waged against politicians, such as those using songs at their campaign rallies. The legal attacks directed at rock, rap, and heavy metal music seem much more food for fodder than actual guidelines that both artists and fans fear. It seems as though quite the opposite has occurred in the realm of CD sales.

The normalization of the Parental Advisory Label on an album failed to synecdochically stigmatize a modern-day Hester Prynne, but instead this sticker has transformed into a quasi-badge of honor. Also, Palmieri optimistically exclaimed the merits on the existence of the music culture wars: “It’s easy to dismiss these tussles over music tastes as silly cultural divides between progressives and conservatives, but [the music] reflect larger, more meaningful divides in how progressives and conservatives view America” (1) . Arguments over the appearance of artists have been replaced by more overt politicized statements being made by musicians. These comments have ranged from the Dixie Chicks chastising the Bush administration and the Iraq War, Kanye West’s 2005 statement at a relief concert for Hurricane Katrina that then-President Bush did not care for black people, to controversies directed at Barack Obama’s campaign managers for playing Jay-Z’s song “99 Problems” with a not-so-subtle nod towards Hillary Clinton. Thus, the contemporary music culture wars have become more diffuse with the widespread usage of the internet, personal

blogs, and the repeatability of political tweets broadcast across the all-consuming digital ether. Regardless though, the moral panics and political attacks against heavy metal musicians in the late 1980s and early 1990s depict culture wars rhetoric at its best, and ultimately therefore, its worst.

The rhetoric of the culture wars eerily maps onto the creation of moral panics. Moral panics are defined, according to sociologist Stanley Cohen, as

A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnosis and solutions. (1)

Societal moral panics are often indicative of events that “do not arise solely as a consequence of a rational and realistic assessment of the concrete damage that the behavior in question is likely to inflict on the society” (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 29). The prevailing discourse posed that society’s youth is susceptible and may be corrupted by the threat of immoral and deviant activities.

The rhetoric of moral panics often defines various youth subcultures that seek their own form of authenticity and identity apart from mainstream culture. Hebdige adds that youths’ stylistic innovation of choices (music tastes, attire, and attitude) becomes marginalized through the process of recuperation, whereby they are subject to “the labeling and re-definition of deviant behavior by dominant groups” (94). Through the process of recuperation, moral and religious leaders attempt to demonize and/or scapegoat the given subculture through a variety of legal, social, or normative measures. Culture warriors and opponents to heavy metal music amplified the moral panics and folk devils trope with specific charges of Satanism.

Heavy metal and hard rock music was targeted by religious organizations during the 1980s and 1990s for containing violent and sexually aggressive lyrics, anti-religious imagery, and the erroneously charged claims that heavy metal either motivated listeners to commit suicide or would “brainwash innocent youth into becoming criminal Satanists” (Victor 163). In 1985, the PMRC was created to help alleviate the social ills (obscenity, violence, immorality) that plagued the United States. The PMRC was situated as educators and model citizens to expose to parents just how harmful their children’s music is, thereby causally linking consumption of rock and heavy metal music and increased social problems such as rape, teenage suicide, and teen pregnancies. Thus, the PMRC was very much embroiled within culture wars rhetoric. In fact, their implication was that “many social evils should have been avoided by a stricter control of certain song lyrics, not because of their contents per se but because they subverted the ideological values of American society” (Chastagner 182).

The most effective way to encourage others about the dangerousness and deviance of this type of music and lifestyle was to create a moral panic and accusations of Satanism, thereby instilling a sense of doubt and identification with those citizens not listening to heavy metal. Creating identification through division served as a specific rhetorical strategy. As Kenneth Burke suggests through his discussion of terministic screens, “Men seek for vocabularies that will be faithful *reflections* of reality. To this end, they must develop vocabularies that are *selections* of reality. And any selection of reality must, in certain circumstances, function as a *deflection* of reality” (59). The PMRC’s worldview, using their culture wars rhetoric targeted on their scapegoat (heavy metal music, and selected the bands, artists, and fans as their representative anecdote) to depict all that is immoral in society.

The PMRC spearheaded a series of personal attacks directed at musicians, including “selling a ‘Satanism Research Packet’ for fifteen dollars, containing clippings of crimes connected with Satanism and heavy metal music” (Victor 165). On the legal front, the PMRC played a pivotal role in helping pass legislation requiring record companies to place a label over their album should it contain any questionable or obscene materials. The success and distribution of albums containing the explicit materials label lead to what Chastagner refers to as the “chill factor,” whereby certain retailers would refuse to carry the products. Rhetorically speaking, in an early criticism of the rock music labels, Robert Cutietta describes how the labeling process requires value judgments:

Unlike labels used in industries such as pharmaceuticals or tools, labels applied to the realm of art will usually be a reflection of particular values. Regardless of how many people agree with a certain value, there will always be some who do not and for whom the labels are wrong. (37)

Cutietta’s comments, regarding the value hierarchies, highlight the flexibility of culture wars rhetoric. While musicians may have suffered a loss of sales because a retailer would not carry their products, some stores did and still do carry those labeled albums. Also, the genre of heavy metal thrives to antagonize certain listeners. So, the labeled albums only fueled the fire in that heavy metal music only became more extreme to respond to these accusations. As Bogue states, “Much of the impetus behind these lyrics is to shock and offend – to offend fundamental Christians with satanic hymns, to offend liberals with sexist profanities, to offend just about everyone with descriptions of putrefying flesh, evisceration, blood and gore...frequently one detects an ironic and at times parodic sense of humor in the excesses of the imagery and the exaggerated postures of the songs’ persona” (p. 108).

Conclusion – The End is the Beginning is the End

The question remains: Do the culture wars still matter? As I have suggested in this chapter, yes, because public arguments are being waged about the moral character of Americans. These arguments are often directed at those who lack moral substance. Even though these arguments pervade and invade much of our political discourse, the fact remains that such arguments affect those who already have a predisposition towards politics. Scholars such as Alan Wolfe question whether or not there actually has been a culture war. He argued in *One Nation, After All*, that “the culture war has always existed more in the minds of journalists and political activists than in the lives of ordinary Americans” (42). Contemporary culture warriors often succumb to comical and/or trivial sound bites and/or are incessantly mocked by political pundits on television (such as John Stewart or Stephen Colbert) and across the politico-blogsphere. Hunter’s original culture wars hypothesis provided this strict binary relationship that eliminated any form of indifference. Wolfe, however, seeks to ground the culture wars not between two groups of Americans, but rather within the individual. Americans tend to waver on certain issues, which lead to a growing population known as the “moderate middle” who failed to take a strict approach to matters of political discourse. Wolfe expresses the distrust and distancing of the average Americans and these political concerns because the “media and the political class...were fighting the culture war for their own reasons; to the degree that Americans expressed a view about that fight, it was not to take sides but to distance themselves from it” (46).

In the twenty-years since Hunter wrote *Culture Wars*, there has neither been complete agreement nor a complete meltdown of culture at large. In a recent *New York Post* article, Smith suggests that the “morality armies [such as the Reagan-era Christian Coalition and Moral Majority] have failed to inspire their children to join the crusade” (1). The culture wars

suggest a flexible war that potentially, at times, has the ability to draw in supporters, but the degree those issues of morality and legality influence contemporary culture seems to be waning. Extreme forms of partisanship still exist, but to some extent, there has always been certain factions delving into the more extreme forms of life, culture, and politics. Paul Fischer describes his skepticism about the importance of a contemporary music culture war:

Despite repeated and ongoing instances of opposition to unfettered musical expression in the United States, I do not believe there is a coordinated nationwide campaign being waged against it. Anti-music alliances ebb and flow, but do not seem consistently organized...I do believe that American popular music is so directly a part of the lives and vitality of the people from whom the government's power derives (theoretically), that important non-mainstream voices will continue to be heard in our songs. (13-14)

The moderate middle has yet to definitively be swayed by either side of the culture wars: they still buy, download, or torrent a wide variety of music. Fischer's idea about the ebb and flow of anti-music alliances suggest that American political discourse is not as focused on music style, genre or subculture as it once was. The fluctuations and re-definitions of folk devils and scapegoats suggest, what Cohen refers to a cyclical pattern of moral panics:

I am pessimistic about the chances of changing social policy...[m]ore moral panics will be generated and other, as yet nameless, folk devils will be created. This is...because our society as present structured will continue to generate problems for some of its members, and condemn whatever solution these groups find. (172). Culture war issues change to fit the cultural climate, continually producing new threats and targets to direct their attacks upon. This is why, in the wake of much news on the Trayvon Martin trial and gay marriage, we are beginning to become

inundated with news about a new or revived culture wars that deal specifically with issues of race, sex, and marriage. Scholars and politically-minded individuals are more keenly tuned into picking up additional culture war discourse; others will ignore such statements, protests, and actions as “crazy” without picking up on the historical development and strategies of culture wars rhetoric. Perhaps it is time to throw in the white flag?

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