

THE  
**POPULAR**  
**CULTURE**  
STUDIES **JOURNAL**

SPECIAL ISSUE

**Monstrosity**

Edited by

Bernadette Marie Calafell

**MIDWEST PCA/ACA**

Volume 6 Number 2 & 3 2018

# THE **POPULAR CULTURE STUDIES** **JOURNAL**

**VOLUME 6**

**NUMBER 2 & 3**

**2018**

## **Editor**

**NORMA JONES**

*Liquid Flicks Media, Inc./IXMachine*

## **Managing Editor**

**JULIA LARGENT**

*McPherson College*

## **Assistant Editor**

**GARRET L. CASTLEBERRY**

*Mid-America Christian University*

## **Copy Editor**

**KEVIN CALCAMP**

*Queens University of Charlotte*

## **Reviews Editor**

**MALYNNDA JOHNSON**

*Indiana State University*

## **Assistant Reviews Editor**

**JESSICA BENHAM**

*University of Pittsburgh*

**Please visit the *PCSJ* at: <http://mpcaaca.org/the-popular-culture-studies-journal/>**

*The Popular Culture Studies Journal* is the official journal of the Midwest Popular and American Culture Association. Copyright © 2018 Midwest Popular and American Culture Association. All rights reserved. MPCA/ACA, 421 W. Huron St Unit 1304, Chicago, IL 60654

Cover credit: Cover Artwork: "Bump in the Night" by Brent Jones © 2018  
Courtesy of Pixabay/Kellepics

# EDITORIAL **ADVISORY** BOARD

**ANTHONY ADAH**

*Minnesota State University, Moorhead*

**GARY BURNS**

*Northern Illinois University*

**BRIAN COGAN**

*Molloy College*

**LEIGH H. EDWARDS**

*Florida State University*

**ART HERBIG**

*Indiana University - Purdue University, Fort Wayne*

**JESSE KAVADLO**

*Maryville University of St. Louis*

**SARAH MCFARLAND TAYLOR**

*Northwestern University*

**CARLOS D. MORRISON**

*Alabama State University*

**CARYN NEUMANN**

*Miami University*

**PAUL PETROVIC**

*Emmanuel College*

**PAUL BOOTH**

*DePaul University*

**ANNE M. CANAVAN**

*Salt Lake Community College*

**ASHLEY M. DONNELLY**

*Ball State University*

**KATIE FREDICKS**

*Rutgers University*

**ANDREW F. HERRMANN**

*East Tennessee State University*

**KATHLEEN A. KENNEDY**

*Missouri State University*

**KIT MEDJESKY**

*University of Findlay*

**SALVADOR MURGUIA**

*Akita International University*

**ANGELA NELSON**

*Bowling Green State University*

**CARRIELYNN D. REINHARD**

*Dominican University*

# **SPECIAL ISSUE EDITORIAL BOARD**

## **Monstrosity**

### **EDITOR**

**BERNADETTE MARIE CALAFELL**  
*University of Denver*

### **BOARD**

**SHADEE ABDI**  
*Arizona State University*

**JOSHUA ATKINSON**  
*Bowling Green State University*

**DAOINE BACHRAN**  
*University of Denver*

**BETTINA BILDHAUER**  
*University of Saint Andrews*

**KYLE WILLIAM BISHOP**  
*Southern Utah University*

**KINITRA BROOKS**  
*Michigan State University*

**PETER ODELL CAMPBELL**  
*University of Pittsburgh*

**JAMES L. CHERNEY**  
*Independent Scholar*

**LINDSEY DECKER**  
*Boston University*

**HANEEN GHABRA**  
*Kuwait University*

**STEVEN GRANELLI**  
*Northeastern University*

**CALEB J. GREEN**  
*University of Denver*

**BRIAN GREWE**  
*University of Denver*

**RACHEL ALICIA GRIFFIN**  
*University of Utah*

**JOSHUA GUNN**  
*University of Texas, Austin*

**ROBERT GUTIERREZ-PEREZ**  
*University of Nevada, Reno*

**BRENDAN G. A. HUGHES**  
*Metropolitan State University of Denver*

**SOPHIE JONES**  
*University of New Mexico*

**RICHARD G. JONES JR.**  
*Eastern Illinois University*

**ERIC KING WATTS**  
*University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill*

**CASEY RYAN KELLY**  
*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*

**MURRAY LEEDER**  
*University of Calgary*

**DAVID J. LEONARD**  
*Washington State University*

**SUSANA LOZA**  
*Hampshire College*

**DAWN MARIE D. MCINTOSH**  
*Independent Scholar*

**ROBERT MEJIA**  
*North Dakota State University*

**THOMAS OATES**  
*University of Iowa*

**PAVITHRA PRASAD**  
*California State University, Northridge*

**CLAIRE SISCO KING**  
*Vanderbilt University*

**AMANDA LEBLANC**  
*Adams State University*

**BENNY LEMASTER**  
*Arizona State University*

**MARINA LEVINA**  
*The University of Memphis*

**AMANDA MARTINEZ**  
*Davidson College*

**JASON MCROY**  
*University of Wisconsin, Parkside*

**RAQUEL MOREIRA**  
*Graceland University*

**KENDALL R. PHILLIPS**  
*Syracuse University*

**CRISTINA SANTOS**  
*Brock University*

**CRAIG WEATHERS**  
*University of Denver*

<b>Editorial: Six Years!</b>	<b>1</b>
Norma Jones	
<b>ARTICLES</b>	
<b>Cylons, Dolls, and Hosts: The Cyborg Plot Twist in Science Fiction Television</b>	<b>4</b>
EMILY MIDKIFF	
<b>“I’m too Drunk to Taste this Chicken”: The Hidden Poetry of Will Ferrell’s Comedies</b>	<b>28</b>
LAURA GARRISON	
<b>“Look at the Flowers”: Utilitarian Themes in the Post-Apocalypse</b>	<b>51</b>
KRISTINE LEVAN	
<b>“I’m into this Woodworking Stuff”: Hipster Masculinity and Adam Sackler on HBO’s Girls</b>	<b>72</b>
MICHAEL MARIO ALBRECHT	
<b>SPECIAL ISSUE</b>	
<b>Monstrosity</b>	
<b>Introduction to the Special Issue</b>	<b>94</b>
BERNADETTE MARIE CALAFELL	
<b>Transing Dystopia: Constituting Trans Monstrosity, Performing Trans Rage in Torrey Peters’ <i>Infect Your Friends and Loved Ones</i></b>	<b>96</b>
BENNY LEMASTER	
<b>Removing Racism from White Bodies: Peter Cvjetanovic’s White Masculine Monstrosity</b>	<b>118</b>
DAWN MARIE D. MCINTOSH	
<b>Preparing for the Zombie Apocalypse and other Neocolonial Monsters During the Endless Global War on Terrorism</b>	<b>145</b>
MAROUF HASIAN, JR. AND SEAN T. LAWSON	

<b>“If It’s in A Word”: Intersectional Feminism, Precarity, and <i>The Babadook</i></b>	<b>166</b>
CLAIRE SISCO KING	
<b>Awakening the Civic Dead: Political Mobilization of the <i>Zombie in Real Time</i></b>	<b>190</b>
NANCY WADSWORTH	
<b>A Very Well Tailored Person Suit: Hannibal Lecter, America Gothic and Cannibal Neoliberal Capitalism</b>	<b>217</b>
ALENA KIEL	
<b>ChicanX “Monsters” and ChicanX/LatinX “Futures” in Film (Or, Searching for LatinXs in Sci-Fi Movies)</b>	<b>239</b>
MICHAEL LECHUGA, ROBERTO AVANT-MIER, AND KATHERINE ALANIS RAMÍREZ	
<b>Resurrecting the Witch: The Reanimation of the Witch Archetype and Toxic White Femininity in American Horror Story: Coven</b>	<b>263</b>
MARYLOU R. NAUMOFF	
<b>Crafting a Monstrously Queer Space: A Medicalized Gothic Reading of Nathaniel Highmore’s <i>Case of a Foetus Found in the Abdomen of a Young Man</i></b>	<b>287</b>
SHANE MILLER	
<b>Voting Horrors: Youthful, Monstrous, and Worrying Agency in American Film</b>	<b>306</b>
DEREK LEWIS	
<b>Zaha Hadid: Locating the Monster Within Architecture</b>	<b>326</b>
CATHRYN LADD	
<b>Monstrosity in Everyday Life: <i>Nepantleras</i>, Theories in the Flesh, and Transformational Politics</b>	<b>345</b>
ROBERT GUTIERREZ-PEREZ	
<b>Erecting and Impaling the Monstrous Social Justice Warrior in <i>The Green Inferno</i></b>	<b>369</b>
MATTHEW FOY	

<b>Something's Not Right: Monstrous Motherhood and Traumatic Survival in <i>Among the Sleep</i></b>	<b>399</b>
BIANCA BATTI	
<b>The Literary Zombie in Robin Becker's <i>Brains</i>: "How Pop Culture Illuminates and Comments on the Current Zombie Crisis"</b>	<b>420</b>
T. MAY STONE	
<b>Hair-raising and knee taking: Colin Kaepernick's Monstrous Persona &amp; Nonviolent Civil Disobedience</b>	<b>441</b>
SCARLETT R. HESTER	
<b>SPECIAL ISSUE: INTERVIEWS</b>	
<b>Latin Horror is Luchagore: An Interview With Luchagore Productions</b>	<b>462</b>
CALEB GREEN	
<b>If It's Not Intersectional, It's Not Monstrosity: An Interview on Horror and Monstrosity with Marina Levina</b>	<b>474</b>
MIRANDA OLZMAN	
<b>Horror Films Almost Dare You to Come and Watch Them: An Interview With Kendall Phillips</b>	<b>484</b>
HANEEN GHABRA	
<b>REVIEWS</b>	<b>492</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	
MALYNNDA JOHNSON	
Babic, Annessa Ann. <i>America's Changing Icons: Constructing Patriotic Women from World War I to the Present</i> . Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.	
Tiara Good	
Womack, Kenneth, and Cox, Kathryn B. <i>The Beatles, Sgt. Pepper, and the Summer of Love</i> . Lexington Books, 2017.	
Gaurav Pai	
Olson, Liesl. <i>Chicago Renaissance: Literature and Art in the Midwest Metropolis</i> . New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013.	
Adam Q. Stauffer	



Garcia, Vanessa, and Arkerson, Samantha. <i>Crime, Media, and Reality: Examining Mixed Messages About Crime in Popular Media</i> . Rowman and Littlefield, 2018. Print.	
Monica Klonowski	
Natoli, Joseph. <i>Dark Affinities, Dark Imaginaries: A Mind's Odyssey</i> . Albany, State University of New York Press, 2017.	
Rachel Presley	
Theodore G. Ammon, editor, <i>David Bowie and Philosophy: Rebel Rebel</i> . Open Court, 2016.	
Noah Franken	
Steven Shaviro. <i>Digital Music Videos (Quick Takes: Movies and Popular Culture)</i> . Rutgers University Press, 2017.	
Marci Mazzarotto	
Wills, John. <i>Disney Culture</i> . Rutgers University Press, 2017.	
Anna Halipilias	
Matthews David, Alison. <i>Fashion Victims: Dangers of Dress Past and Present</i> . Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2017.	
Alexandra Jordan Thelin	
Engstrom, Erika. <i>Feminism, Gender, and Politics in NBC's Parks and Recreation</i> . New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2017. Print.	
Lori Henson	
Darowski, Joseph J, and Kate Darowski. <i>Frasier: A Cultural History</i> . Rowman & Littlefield, 2017.	
Paul Arras	
Condis, Megan. <i>Gaming Masculinity: Trolls, Fake Geeks, and the Gendered Battle for Online Culture</i> . University of Iowa Press, 2018.	
Kyle Robert McMillen	
Gunkel, David J. <i>Gaming the System: Deconstructing Video Games, Games Studies, and Virtual Worlds</i> . Indiana University Press, 2018.	
Scott R. Stalcup	

Rabinowitz, Aaron and Robert Axp editors. <i>Hamilton and Philosophy: Revolutionary Thinking</i> . Open Court Publishing Company, 2017.	
Melissa M. Spirek	
Flanagan, Martin, Andrew Livingstone, and Mike McKenny. <i>The Marvel Studios Phenomenon: Inside a Transmedia Universe</i> . Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2016.	
Curtis Sullivan	
Auxier, Randall E. <i>Metaphysical Graffiti: Deep Cuts in the Philosophy of Rock</i> . Open Court, 2017.	
Benjamin van Loon	
Kee, Chera. <i>Not Your Average Zombie: Rehumanizing the Dead from Voodoo to Zombie Walks</i> . University of Texas Press, 2017.	
Matt Sautman	
Christian, Aymar Jean. <i>Open TV: Innovation Beyond Hollywood and the Rise of Web Television</i> . NYU Press, 2018.	
James Perez	
Heyrman, John. <i>Politics, Hollywood Style: American Politics in Film from Mr. Smith to Selma</i> . Lexington Books, 2018.	
Katherine R. Fleck	
Santino, Jack. <i>Public Performances: Studies in the Carnavalesque and the Ritualesque</i> , Utah State University Press, 2017	
Lauren Cheek	
Lopez, Marco, Hazel Newlevant, Desiree Rodriguez, Derek Ruiz, and Neil Schwartz, editors. <i>Puerto Rico Strong: A Comics Anthology Supporting Puerto Rico Disaster</i> . Lion Forge. 2018.	
Joe Cruz	
Pugh, Tison, <i>The Queer Fantasies of the American Family Sitcom</i> . New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018.	
Jennifer Miller	

Brown, Simon. <i>Screening Stephen King: Adaptation and the Horror Genre in Film and Television</i> . University of Texas Press, 2018.	
Michelle Kay Hansen	
Cavalcante, Andre. <i>Struggling for Ordinary: Media and Transgender Belonging in Everyday Life</i> . New York University Press, 2018.	
Nicholas Lepp	
Boudreaux, Armond, and Corey Latta, <i>Titans: How Superheroes Can Help Us Make Sense of a Polarized World</i> . Cascade Books. 2017.	
Matthew Brake	
Mafe, Diana Adesola. <i>Where No Black Woman Has Gone Before: Subversive Portrayals in Speculative Film and TV</i> . University of Texas Press, 2018.	
Christopher R. Ortega	
Leonard, Suzanne. <i>Wife, Inc.: The Business of Marriage in the Twenty-First Century</i> . New York University Press, 2018. Print	
Andrea Ruehlicke	
Parkin, Katherine J., <i>Women at the Wheel: A Century of Buying, Driving, and Fixing Cars</i> . Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017. Print.	
Amy Jo Ellefson	
Arp, Robert, editor. <i>The X-Files and Philosophy: The Truth is in Here</i> . Open Court, 2016.	
Christina Blankenship	
<b>ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS</b>	<b>561</b>

# Editorial: Six Years!

NORMA JONES

We are celebrating our sixth year! Now, as our board is deciding on the future leadership of this journal, I want to take a moment to reflect on our accomplishments. In our pages, contributors have given us new ways to re/consider popular culture across areas spanning film, television, songs, musicals, art, photography, pedagogy/higher education, and theory. In addition, our guest editors and contributors brought us special sections/issues on autoethnography (award-winning), professional wrestling, #metoo/sexual assault, Stan Lee, Wonder Woman, and now monstrosity. We have come so far in six years, but I feel that we are just scratching the surface of what popular culture scholars and *The Popular Culture Studies Journal* can do together. I am looking forward to our future as we explore more ground and break more boundaries.

## About this Issue

We continue our updated format in that we are publishing two issues per year. This allows us to continue to be on the leading edge of emergent and shifting popular culture. We have a fantastic lineup, in this issue. To lead off, Emily Midkiff examines shifting representations of cyborgs in *Battlestar Galactica*, *Dollhouse*, and *Westworld* to address changes in our cultural anxieties. Next, Laura Garrison reveals the poetics behind the seemingly simple humor of Will Farrell's films. Kristine Levan discusses

The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 6, No. 2 & 3  
Copyright © 2018

utilitarianism in *The Walking Dead*. Then, Michael Mario Albrecht re/considers masculinity from his analysis of Adam Sackler from *Girls*.

### About the Special Issue on Monstrosity

As new immigrants, one of the first places my parents took our family was to visit Universal Studios in Hollywood, CA. Mom and Dad were both worked in television as writers, directors, and producers in Taiwan. Mom also scored music for shows. I was six.

As we waited in line for to board the trams for their Studio/Backlot Tour, I saw an extremely tall green creature lumbering towards me. He had a flat head, huge silver nails in his neck, and wore a dirty suit. He held his arms out, straight in front of him, reached for me, and grunted something in a language I did not understand (probably English). I was terrified. I ran (screaming) behind my parents and plowed into the legs of a balding older man with deep-set eyes, upturned nose, and big snaggle teeth. He was wearing a cape and large bow tie. The older man chased off the big green creature and then came back to check on me. He brought me a flower from a nearby bush.

Years later, I realized that “Lon Cheney’s Phantom of the Opera” had saved me from “Boris Karloff’s Frankenstein.” As a new immigrant, I had no frame of reference for Frankenstein, but I was from a culture that venerated our elderly. So, while Phantom was a monster for some, he was my savior from an unknown creature. From this early experience, I realized that the meanings of monsters are deeply tied to culture. In short, they could tell us so much about what scares us and why they scare us?

So, it was an extreme honor when, the esteemed, Bernadette Calafell contacted me about creating a special issue focused on monstrosity. In this special issue, she has assembled a remarkable collection from leading/established and emergent scholars, as well as practitioners. In

these innovative works, authors and contributors address the cultural significance of monsters.

### A Few Final Words

Before I sign off, I want to thank our members and board for continuing to support this journal. We have amazing contributors and reviewers. As always, *The Popular Culture Studies Journal* would not be possible without the hard work of our entire team. Julia Largent's incredible skills as an organizer and as a scholar are instrumental as our managing editor. Kevin Calcamp's attention to detail is invaluable as our copy editor. Malynnda Johnson, and her assistant, Jessica Benham, have assembled an outstanding and robust reviews section. And, I want to thank my husband/partner Brent Jones, for taking time away from producing television shows to create another original cover for us. Together, we have created an impressive issue. I hope you will enjoy what we offer.

# Cylons, Dolls, and Hosts: The Cyborg Plot Twist in Science Fiction Television

EMILY MIDKIFF

The re-imagined *Battlestar Galactica*, 2003-2009, reached its galactic conclusion just as *Dollhouse*, 2009-2010, began blazing through its short life. They ran so close together that *Dollhouse*'s creator Joss Whedon had to turn down the opportunity to direct a late episode of *Battlestar Galactica* (hereafter *BSG*) because he was already busy working on *Dollhouse* (West). These shows were not only close neighbors, but together participated in a significant moment for science fiction (hereafter SF) television's themes, acting as two turns in a dialogue about human artifice in cyborgs<sup>1</sup> and changing audience expectations for the genre. *BSG*, re-invigorated the cyborg trope by hinging its narrative on dramatic irony about who is a Cylon and revealing hidden Cylons to the audience at key moments. In this article, I call this the "cyborg plot twist." *Dollhouse* borrowed this dramatic irony and plot twist combination and modified it to further explore human artifice and cyborg embodiment. Now the reboot of *Westworld*, 2016-present, is utilizing audience familiarity with the cyborg plot twist from *BSG* and *Dollhouse*<sup>2</sup>. The resurgence of the cyborg plot twist in *Westworld* offers a perfect time to examine this conversation about cyborgs and SF television. When shows upgrade the cyborg plot twist for their own plots, they capitalize on

---

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article, the term cyborg will refer to Cylons, Dolls, and Hosts though some of these synthetic humanoid hybrids are not labeled as such within their own universe. They all can be theoretically considered as cyborgs due to their joining of robotic programming and living flesh (for instance, see Bronwen Calvert's discussion of why Dolls function as cyborgs).

<sup>2</sup> These series offer many juicy plot twists, which are revealed here without further spoiler warnings!

the long-standing symbol of the cyborg while also updating it to better represent and question contemporary cultural anxieties about identity and Otherness.

The changes between these three SF television shows represent a conversation because genre is a language, relying on familiar tropes and characters to say new things in response to previous iterations. J.P. Telotte claims that SF is more like slang, with grammatical rules and units that thrive on being re-imagined and used in new ways. Each development is not arbitrary, but rather each new shift in grammar “attaches to [SF’s] most identifiable concerns” (*Science Fiction Film* 18). Therefore, examining the changes between iterations of SF icons, like the cyborg and the cyborg plot twist, reveals relevant cultural anxieties behind those changes.

## The Cyborg and the Plot Twist

Telotte explains that the synthetic humanoid trope generally explores “the ability of our technology to let us, in nearly godlike fashion, craft images of ourselves, and the correspondent possibility that these creations, those emblems of our very power, might well *overpower* us and take our place” (*Science Fiction Film* 108). Humanoid machines function as humanity’s uncanny Other—as opposed to aliens, which Telotte associates with conservative fears of external attack by the Other. The uncanny Othering of humanoid machines focuses on “the collapse of subject-object distinctions” to inspire a “qualitative shift in our sense of the self or others” (*Science Fiction Film* 163). Humanoid machines in SF encourage audiences to view humanity as an artificial construct and question its definitions and categories.

Cyborgs, robots, and androids all share this uncanny effect, but cyborgs differ from other humanoid machines due to their hybrid organic/synthetic qualities. They excel at exploring themes about boundaries and ambiguity. Donna Haraway’s foundational 1985 essay “A Manifesto for Cyborgs” suggests that cyborg embodiment can be a positive force for feminism through dismantling dualisms such as male/female. Many scholars have since analyzed the cyborg as a productively or frighteningly ambiguous figure (i.e. Claudia Springer, Anne Cranny-Francis, Elaine Graham, Bronwen Calvert). Cyborgs are a potent icon for both highlighting and breaking down dualisms like male/female and synthetic/organic.



The cyborg plot twist intensifies this erosion of boundaries. The plot twist uses the television medium to capitalize on the visual aspect of the uncanny as well as the anticipatory structure of weekly programming. The uncanny has been associated with the eyes ever since Freud coined the term, both in a literal sense as well as “seeing double” with doppelgangers. In the predominantly visual format of SF television, the cyborg is visually doubled as human/non-human. The viewers watch a human actor playing a human-looking character that the story portrays as synthetic. The actors must play cyborgs that look and act human. These layers of visual cues and deceptions highlight the artificiality of film as well as the artifice of human behavior. When cyborgs are involved, what “looks” human is no longer trustworthy to viewers. Furthermore, television formatting allows for greater development of cyborg hybridity than possible in formats like feature-length films. Bronwen Calvert, in *Being Bionic: The World of TV Cyborgs*, points out that SF television cyborgs “become embedded in the ongoing story” allowing their depiction to “become more complex, contradictory and problematic, eroding and compromising divisions and boundaries” (14). Over multiple episodes, a cyborg can set up thematic boundaries and then undermine them weeks later.

Once the audience suspects that characters may be secretly cyborgs, the time between episodes only intensifies that suspicion. This cyborg plot twist encourages audience participation in the form of speculation, predictions, and fan theories online. The prevalence of this online audience participation has increased since *BSG* aired, culminating recently in some reviewers like Todd VanDerWerff on *Vox* even arguing that *Westworld* is putting more effort into fueling these online discussions than developing its characters. All this extra-textual theorizing about the cyborg plot twist directs the audience’s attention at the very definition of humanity, its performance, and embodiment. By extension, related themes of Othering like racial stereotypes and dualisms like male/female are called into question.

The cyborgs of *BSG*, *Dollhouse*, and *Westworld* reveal key variations on this plot twist across time. Tracing the chronology of these three television shows demonstrates their contributions to the development of cyborgs as a “slang term” of SF grammar. Between these three shows, the cyborg and its plot twist are updated to accommodate an audience increasingly familiar with the tropes. The differences between each show also highlight changes in the representation of Othering and dualisms, as each new show develops richer ambiguity and more

complex disruptions to divisions like race and gender. These updates move each series further into the postmodern and posthuman by fragmenting, complicating, and nuancing their representations of uncanny and boundary-challenging cyborgs. Any future portrayal of a cyborg must now choose whether or not to engage with the story elements and plot points that were exemplified and established in the SF lexicon by *BSG*, *Dollhouse*, and *Westworld*.

## Cylons

The writers of *BSG* drew on the original *Battlestar Galactica*, 1978-1979, and the existing body of SF cyborgs across media. Out of the three shows highlighted in this article, *BSG*'s Cylons have the most alien and technological sounding name, and the one that most echoes the sound of the word "cyborg." This name itself has transformed and became more cyborg-like over time. In the original series, it likely referred to Cylon of Athens, a noble who attempted a coup in 632 BCE on the advice of the Oracle at Delphi. This fits with the original characters' Greek and literary names, while also feeling science-fictional by sounding similar to "cyborg" and "cybernetic." In the reboot, the original archaic names like Apollo became call signs in favor of ostensibly normal names like Lee. Without the Greek names, the Cylon of Athens reference loses its context and becomes so obscure that the sound-association between Cylons and cyborgs takes center stage. This new context for the name parallels the new human appearance and ambiguous identity of Cylons. Only in the trailer for the 2010 prequel *Caprica* do we learn that Cylon means "cybernetic life-form node." The retconned acronym confirms Cylons as living, if not necessarily human. The Cylons' name has always hearkened to the cyborg, but with greater complexity as the show progressed—much like the portrayal of the Cylons themselves.

Unlike the original series, the reimagined *BSG* hinges on the ongoing mystery of Cylon identities. After introducing the new deceptively humanoid models and revealing Sharon (Boomer) Valerii's double at the end of the 2003 Miniseries, the internet bloomed with theories about who was a Cylon. The concept of a robot/cyborg reveal is not brand new, of course. It appeared beforehand in such famous contexts as *Alien* and *Blade Runner*, but *BSG*'s format altered the formula. The reference site *TV Tropes* named this trope after a *BSG* quote, "They Look Like Us Now." Due to the serialized nature of television, *BSG*'s original run

utilized these surprises to cultivate paranoia. The reveals were withheld not just for 40 or 90 minutes into a feature film, but for weeks – or years in the case of the Final Five Cylons. Even viewers binge-watching the show now can only get through four seasons' worth of episodes so quickly.

This delayed plot twist tactic not only encouraged fan theories, but also complements the cyborg themes of Othering and hybridity. Margaret Rose says the uncertainty about Cylon identity threads through the whole series, “ensuring that the designation of human is always provisional” (1199). Uncertainty about Cylon identities must coexist with viewers' developing attachments to characters and their daily dramas. This tactic questions whether it is important to know a character's species when getting familiar with them. The cyborg plot twists serve as the basis for how *BSG* grapples with humanity: the viewer does not know for sure who is in a body, what is organic or synthetic, who is self and who is Other, and therefore cannot rely on definitions or exclusions. Viewers are encouraged to embrace the ambiguity, despite or alongside paranoia—which was especially potent at the time of release in post-9/11 America. Academics have had much to say about the series' cultural milieu (i.e. *Battlestar Galactica and Philosophy: Mission Accomplished or Mission Frakked Up?* or *Politics and Popular Culture*, both of which feature multiple essays). The cylon plot twist evoked the world's fresh paranoia about terrorists hiding amongst us. In defiance of this charged political atmosphere, *BSG*'s cyborgs challenged viewers to embrace this hybridity and refuse categories like us-vs-them.

*BSG*'s emphatic ambiguity capitalizes on the potential that Haraway identifies in the cyborg, allowing for effective commentary on cultural categories and Othering. In contrast, the original *Battlestar Galactica* portrayed simple, hostile robots and straightforward conflict between human and machine. In the original series, reptilian aliens created the Cylons; the Cylons of the new series are created by, the responsibility of, and indistinguishable from the humans they attack.

This increased complexity and self-reflexivity, alongside the uncertainty bred by the plot twist, builds on the successes and shortcomings of cyborgs in previous SF television, including the monumental influence of *Star Trek*. In Rose's article, “Cyborg Selves in *Battlestar Galactica* and *Star Trek: The Next Generation*: Genre, Hybridity, Identity,” she compares *BSG* to *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (hereafter *TNG*), 1987–1994. Rose argues that the new *BSG*'s futuristic world complicates the original's simplistic Self versus Other narrative while also avoiding the problematic racial underpinnings of *TNG* (1200). The new *BSG*, she

says, exists in a universe noticeably free of aliens—a large departure from any *Star Trek*. This crucial change removes the ability to project race or bio-essentialism onto alien species, a problem that Rose identifies in *TNG* where hybrid characters like Worf (a Klingon raised by humans) struggle with racially-determined identities without any solution. Hybridity is more aptly dealt with in *BSG* through Cylon duality. The identical model eight Cylon characters Boomer and Athena emblemize this struggle, according to Rose. Boomer's struggle mirrors that of the inter-species hybrids in *TNG*, since she faces an impossible decision between two pre-determined identities and divided loyalties. In comparison, Athena's development becomes defiance of categories. Athena's individual actions overcome the bio-essentialist view that had undermined *TNG*'s representation of progress.

Cyborgs may seem like the perfect way for *TNG*'s show writers to address their hybridity problem, but *TNG*'s cyborgs (aptly named “the Borg”) fell short of this potential. Rose claims that these hive-mind half-organic cyborgs conflicted with *TNG*'s support of autonomous individual identity and therefore had to be destroyed rather than used to speculate on human/machine boundaries. This missed opportunity demonstrates *TNG*'s unwillingness to explore Othering or complex hybridity. Even though *TNG* was revolutionary in on-screen diversity, expanding on the groundbreaking progress of the original *Star Trek* series, 1966-1969, it could not entirely escape the problematic discourses it sought to overcome.

However, *Star Trek: Voyager*, 1995-2001, which concluded only two years before *BSG* was rebooted, revisits the Borg as a rich site for examining social issues around race and gender—paving the way for *BSG*. *Voyager*'s Borg character Seven of Nine develops a hybrid identity and complexity. Trudy Barber argues that Seven of Nine capitalizes on the cyborg body to complicate and examine fetishism within the feminist context of *Voyager*. However, viewers knew Seven of Nine's identity all along while *BSG* offered no such security. *BSG*'s increased uncertainty extends the potential for commentary. Barber concludes her article with the thought that “the character Six from *Battlestar Galactica* can be seen as an upgraded version of the character Seven of Nine from *Voyager* [...], no longer simply nerdifying the erotic, but hypersexualizing and perverting the political, posthuman, and virtual body” (145). Seven of Nine was androgynous, dominant, and a challenge to gender norms. Cylon number six, played as a literal femme fatale by former model Tricia Helfer, electrifies gender

norms to an absurd level and offers an ambiguous criticism of human sexuality. *BSG*'s ambiguity far exceeds *TNG*'s aliens or Borg, and even what *Voyager* achieves with Seven of Nine. In doing so, *BSG* complicates the Othering that preceded it in *Star Trek* and its own original series.

This upgrade does not mean that *BSG* resolved every problem and achieved the perfect culmination of television. Park and Carro point out that despite *BSG*'s updates like complicating *Star Trek*'s neat morals, the props reveal that SF's middle-class, North American values remain unchallenged and "perhaps *Battlestar Galactica* is not so different from *Star Trek* after all" (208). In scholarly analyses like Park and Carro's over the last decade, the series' ambiguity has been praised as well as faulted for not going far enough. Van Leavenworth, for instance, found that after four seasons of blurring the organic/synthetic boundary, the finale suddenly valorized the separation of organic human biology and synthetic cultural production, condemning hybridity at the last second.

Many other concerns revolve around the related social messages. Lewis Call uses Heidegger's being-toward-death to argue that the Cylon's ambiguous Otherness successfully separates eugenics from evolutionary valuing of reproduction, even if the finale does not go far enough into challenging heteronormative colonialism. Anne Kustritz disagrees, though she is similarly torn. She claims that while the bulk of the show productively undermined Othering, the last season regresses to support a troubling paradigm of eugenic thinking and heteronormativity. Similarly, Aino-kaisa Koistinen posits that *BSG* questions which bodies are perceived as "right" for the performance of humanity, but she also says that the predominantly white casting reinforces the hierarchy and rejection of some bodies. As these examples demonstrate, ambiguity and the erasure of boundaries are key contributions of *BSG*. For these scholars and many others, the series picks up on Haraway's usage of the cyborg by constantly complicating and politicizing dualities such as synthetic/organic and highlighting the performance of humanity. In the process, *BSG* reflects modern society's own conflicts as it rushes towards a posthuman condition. Yet the scholarly conversation around *BSG* is also rife with controversy and disagreements. This serves as a testament to that same ambiguity and space for interpretation, but also the ways in which the show may not have entirely succeeded at escaping from the same Othering and dualisms that it sought to criticize.

## Dolls

*BSG* unquestionably advanced the SF television cyborg and established the cyborg plot twist while the show's shortcomings created openings for conversational partners like *Dollhouse* to reply. *Dollhouse* may not be immediately obvious as a successor to *BSG*, but the connections are important to see how cyborgs are being passed between show writers. Rose concludes that new SF television shows operate on a knowledge of the old to comment upon them, complicate them, and find new ways to avoid reinforcing the negative cultural norms. The closer the association between shows, the more direct and effective this interplay and commentary. The closest possible association is a re-make, but Rose bases her analysis of *BSG* and *TNG* on the claim that other links have equivalent impact: "*Battlestar*'s developer, lead writer, and executive producer, Ronald D. Moore, was a staff writer for *TNG*. So, in a sense, the new *Battlestar Galactica* can trace a lineage to *TNG* as much as to the original *Battlestar*" (1199). Similarly, *Dollhouse* manifests connections to *BSG* beyond the cyborg plot twist.

*Dollhouse* creator Joss Whedon's love of *BSG* was prominent in the media at the time. In a promotional special called *Battlestar Galactica: The Phenomenon* that aired before the premier of Season Four, Whedon gushed praise like "that's more entertainment, more twists, more unexpected stuff, more humanity, more shocking extraordinary storytelling than I've seen. That was a great episode. And then they'll run the opening credits." Entertainment news sites like *TheTVAddict* featured titles such as "Exclusive: Joss Whedon Talks DOLLHOUSE and His Love Affair with BATTLESTAR GALACTICA." The two shows were linked in the public eye before *Dollhouse* began.

Whedon's love of *BSG* seeped into *Dollhouse*. Four *BSG* actors appear in just the first season, including Tahmoh Penikett (relatively unknown before *BSG*) as a lead. Characters occasionally swear with *BSG*'s "frakking" and *Dollhouse*'s Topher Brink accuses someone of going "all Cylon on me." The connections were noticeable enough to fans that IMDB's FAQ for *Dollhouse* includes the question "What is the connection between Dollhouse and Battlestar Galactica?" Fans debated if the shows existed in the same universe or if it was just Whedon's fandom showing through, while some of these conversations sparked insightful commentary on SF themes. On the *Movies and TV Stack Exchange* discussion

forum, user Liath asked “Are Dollhouse and Battlestar Galactica connected?” to which user Katie answered:

There are a million thematic links -- sleeper agents vs. cylons who think they're human. the goo-bath you get in the attic vs. the resurrection ship. the philosophical struggle between tech and real and "hybrid" as at the end of TDH with Anthony. The good guys being bad guys being good guys until they're all sort of blended together and only your actions matter. (Liath)

This was not satisfactory for user “cde,” who replied “They are thematically similar, but that's true for many unrelated scifi series. The question asks if they share any actual connection or if it's coincidence” (Liath). These replies are both correct, and showcase the developing SF slang around cyborgs. The similarity in cyborg themes is not coincidental. Whedon did not simply copy *BSG* or choose a common trope. Given the timing and his fandom, *Dollhouse* is a reply to *BSG*.

Whedon drew the clearest line to *BSG*'s cyborgs through borrowing the cyborg reveal plot twist. From the start of both series, the same mystery hooks viewers and undermines Othering: the question of who is programmed and who is real. Whedon himself noted that plot twists and surprises were part of his love for *BSG*: “Usually they surprise me, even if I'm working with all cylinders trying to figure it out” (*Battlestar Galactica: The Phenomenon*). Whedon adopts the plot twist almost exactly, priming it for comparison as well as developing it in new ways.

The Dolls are named after familiar objects, eschewing a futuristic neologism like Cylons in favor of the uncanny familiar. Their name connotes passive and receptive playthings: one can just as easily cuddle dolls and play house as one can give them a brutal haircut and tear out an arm. Dolls also offer extra uncanny associations, given the frequent fear of dolls coming alive and their association with uncanny children, as seen most prominently in horror films. These connotations capitalize on the uncanny aspects of cyborgs to help us examine the boundaries of self and technology. Likewise, the Dolls emphasize the threat to autonomous selfhood more than Cylons. While Cylon identities are hidden, there is a fixed number: the twelve models. In *Dollhouse* this boundary is uprooted. Anyone can be implanted with Active architecture, the technological component of these cyborgs that changes the human brain into a programmable receptacle for new personalities. Furthermore, episodes “Epitaph One” and “Epitaph Two” offer

the haunting potential that any person can be remotely implanted against their will.

*Dollhouse* accomplishes much of its boundary-erosion through surprise reveals about who is a Doll, but it increases the ambiguity a step beyond *BSG*. After viewers learn that someone is a Doll, they are still unable to fix an identity to that Doll since they do not know which personality is currently programmed, or if it has hidden subroutines. Calvert claims that this move goes so far as to “disrupt and challenge television conventions” through focusing on a cast of perpetually uncertain characters (167). More poignantly, while most of *Dollhouse*’s cyborg plot twists are revealed by the end of season one, the most bewildering identity reveal occurs last: the character Boyd Langton. In “The Hollow Men,” the most shocking reveal is not a programmed identity, but a pathological human disguising his identity. This late-show plot twist ultimately questions the self/Other divide in completely human terms. In a show that relied upon knowing who was programmed to establish/undermine a “correct” and “natural” definition of humanity and freedom, this completely human disguise is meant to blindside. This plot twist questions the validity of distinguishing between artificial brain programming and the “programming” of real psychopathic disorders. Unlike *BSG*’s much-debated pastoral finale, it is much harder to find a valorization of nature over technology in *Dollhouse*’s conclusion. It instead shows that both natural and synthetic brain processes can betray us.

*Dollhouse* also expands upon the project of embodiment while avoiding some of *BSG*’s pitfalls. The narrative undermines the division of mind and body, but on the much smaller scale of one Doll’s mind and body: Echo. Calvert points out that removing the personality of a Doll does not remove the entire person, but leaves muscle memory and other such embodied identity behind—defying any Cartesian dualism that identity is all in the brain (173). This detail is integral to the plot and development of Echo, who begins to collect physical affectations from her various programmed identities starting from the end of the second aired episode, “The Target.” Even though the show’s dialogue about the brain-wipe implies that all personality is removed, the plot slowly undermines this and allocates some identity to the body.

This advances the theme beyond *BSG*, in which identity is exclusively located in the abstract mind. When Cylons download, their entire personality transfers efficiently to a fresh, identical body. *BSG* only briefly nods to embodiment in the aberrant body of Athena, the only Cylon to give birth. “A Measure of Salvation”



reveals that the physical experience of pregnancy and birth left an imprint of motherhood on her body, specifically through the transfer of human Lymphocytic encephalitis antibodies from the hybrid fetus—giving Athena a physiological hybrid identity. However, *BSG* undermines this embodied identity when Athena downloads into a new body in “Rapture.” As Athena reunites with Hera in this new body, Caprica 6 comments on the similarity but crucial difference between Athena and Boomer: “Look at that. Hera knows her. That's amazing. You and she are biologically identical. Hera recognizes her mother” (“Rapture”). Since the bodies of Boomer and Athena are the same model, this scene suggests a difference in the mind that is recognizable to the child. Caprica 6’s comment also erases the difference between Athena’s different bodies, since there is no longer a physical imprint of motherhood. This scene emphasizes that bodies are merely vessels for identity in *BSG*, effectively Othering the body from the mind and reinforcing rather than blurring boundaries.

When *Dollhouse* broaches motherhood in the episode “Instinct,” it does so while confirming embodied identity. This episode focuses on the danger of programmer Topher’s casual meddling with the connections between Echo’s brain and body to trigger lactation: “I made code for the brain that changed the physical body. And I’m not talking about muscle memory so somebody can play fancy piano. I made changes on a glandular level” (“Instinct”). Later, when Echo attacks Topher and goes after the baby who she believes is her son, even after being wiped of the mother’s personality, Ballard refers back to Topher’s original comment: “Think about it: you changed her on a glandular level. Maybe her body was stronger than her brain.” Topher responds, “Yeah! Yeah. Yeah. The maternal instinct is the purest. It's too strong for a normal wipe” (“Instinct”). This representation of embodiment strongly adheres motherhood to the body, unlike Athena’s interchangeable bodies in *BSG*. It attributes a hierarchy of strength to certain embodied identities, with “maternal instinct” topping the charts. Even though Echo did not actually give birth to this baby, the changes to her physical body and the act of nursing the child carries the greater weight than an imprinted identity within the mind. Within *Dollhouse*, only mind and body together produce a complete identity, complicating any Cartesian inclination to Other our own bodies. *Dollhouse* also dodges *BSG*’s problematic reproductive politics and eugenics debated by Kustritz and Call through focusing on individual bodies rather than whole races.

Finally, one particularly interesting—and potentially negative—change in *Dollhouse* has to do with hope. Katie Moylan argues that *Dollhouse* succeeds where *BSG*'s finale failed because *Dollhouse* does not draw back from critique. *BSG* produces artificial negativity, she says, by subsuming race and class activism narrative arcs within the larger epic narrative, but *Dollhouse* retains its activism and consequences through an open, ambiguous conclusion. Yet the meta-narratives produce a very different effect. Both shows resolve the human/Other conflict through hybridity. In *BSG* it is the messianic and glorified Cylon/human hybrid child Hera, while in *Dollhouse* it is Echo's posthuman and fragmented hybrid identity, which is painted as necessary but tragic. Call explains that:

“*BSG*'s vision of human–Cylon hybridity is not innocent, and it offers no certainties. But it does offer the possibility of hope. The show's beautifully ambiguous conclusion offers the hope of a positive, (re)productive hybridity. That same conclusion also suggests that hybridity could one day give way, once again, to fragmentation, segregation and fear. *BSG* will not let hybridity become an achieved utopia. Rather, hybridity must remain a constant project” (106).

This hopeful project in *BSG* is literally inherited by the viewer. Breaking the cycle in *BSG* becomes a quest for the audience, who find themselves suddenly implicated by the twist that the final planet is in fact our ancient Earth and Hera is our common ancestor. After the final scenes of 80s robotic advances, the audience is left with an ancestral burden to decide what will happen next in an unusually direct call to action for SF. *Dollhouse*, on the other hand, concludes as a familiar cautionary tale about technology run amok. The epilogue episodes warn of a destroyed future. There is no implication or call to action, but instead a bittersweet space to reflect and nurse one's emotional wounds. Very Whedon-esque, but considerably less hopeful or direct.

While Whedon was clearly influenced by and commenting on what came before, of course the show cannot resolve every problem identified with *BSG*, or with cyborgs in general. Concerns about diverse casting and heteronormativity remain unresolved in both shows. Even as they both try to use SF futuristic thinking to move beyond social constructs, they ultimately reveal their contemporary context by falling prey to some of the same casting decisions that lurk throughout Hollywood and the film industry at large, reinforcing mainstream

casts and erasing difference. Additionally, *Dollhouse*'s attempted message about the exploitation of bodies in sex trafficking was not well received. As Calvert describes it: "there is a constant tension between viewer enjoyment in watching an entertaining fiction and viewer discomfort in discovering the intended parallels between Whedon's fantasy world and our own" (160). Calvert praises this design of the show, and claims that those who complained about the series' uncomfortable voyeurism did not get the point. Nonetheless, the relative unpopularity of *Dollhouse* undermined its troubling of boundaries and its message by severely limiting its audience.

## Hosts

These shows are turns in an ongoing conversation. *BSG* catalyzed a new phase of looking at cyborgs and hybrids in SF. *Dollhouse* responded to *BSG*, reflecting and improving on its terms and narrative devices. Now *Westworld* is replying as well. *Westworld* does not have direct connections to *BSG* or *Dollhouse*, but it no longer needs such a tangible link. The cyborg plot twist itself connects them. To return to the metaphor of SF language and slang, *Westworld* talks about cyborgs in the same new dialect as *BSG* and *Dollhouse*. The fandom has become fluent and recognizes the language when they hear it. Before *Westworld* aired, journalist Selina Wilken observed that the new series offers many connections to *BSG* and *Dollhouse*. Since it aired, articles from entertainment journals have listed *Dollhouse* and *BSG* as predecessors or recommended viewing for *Westworld* fans (see Kathryn VanArendonk or Aaron Pruner). During *Westworld*'s season 2, u/blur878 asked Reddit's r/westworld board "Is Westworld a Battlestar Prequel?" This thread was just one instance of an enthusiastic debate about whether *Westworld* had snuck one of *BSG*'s Cylon number 6 models into Season 2, Episode 2 as an Easter egg for fans. *Westworld* is clearly part of this cyborg conversation.

Like the Dolls, *Westworld*'s Hosts are not named with a futuristic neologism. The name seems to have hybrid potential, given the multiple meanings of the word. When used in the sense of host and hostess, the Hosts have implied ownership of their world—it is their home in which to receive guests—offering them a tiny bit more power and less passiveness than Dolls. Alternately, it is a hospitality job like a host or hostess at a restaurant, serving the whims of patrons.

At the same time, the biological usage of the word implies a parasitic relationship with the park patrons, who arrive only to feed—often fatally—off the bodies of the Hosts. Parasitic relationships are also an uncanny favorite, as they blur boundaries between the embodied self and something else. The Hosts inherit their concept from the original *Westworld* film, 1973, but not their name. In the original movie and its various sequels, *Westworld* and the other parks are populated with androids that remain unnamed as a group. They evoke the uncanny, but without much in the way of cyborg hybridity. The old androids do bleed, but when cut open they reveal a simple robotic core, unlike the organic muscles and tendons that are 3D printed for the new cyborg Hosts. The name moves toward the organic, granting *Westworld*'s residents a living group identity.

*Westworld* moves forward with its own cyborg contributions based on its predecessors. The original film contained many familiar Othering themes, but rejected hybridity. The film *Westworld* and its sequel *Futureworld*, 1976, “draw their lines quite starkly” according to Tellote because their storylines “oppose the ‘fake,’ the simulacrum, the technologically crafted body powered by artificial intelligence, while championing the real, the genuine, the human” (*Replications* 143). Tellote explains that these films were released in a time when the blurring of boundaries and technological doubling was a fresh cultural fear. The reboot series, on the other hand, offers ambiguity from the first episode through cultivating hybrid allegiance. While the films only offer human protagonists as viewpoints for the audience, the 2016 series encourages identification with Hosts. As though to emphasize this update, the first episode of the series parallels the beginning of the film, featuring patrons talking about the experience outside the park, only to flip the original by revealing that the earliest viewpoint character, Teddy Flood, is not a patron, but a Host.

This short-term fake-out about Teddy Flood's status as cyborg refers to but modifies the plot twist. This reveal does not quite work like in *BSG* and *Dollhouse*, wherein the first reveals are accompanied by the insinuation that many others may be hidden. After this miniature reveal in *Westworld*, the show avoids offering direct evidence that there may be other Hosts in disguise. After all, the human characters seemed to know all along what Teddy was—only the audience was in the dark, and for less than one episode. Additionally, Teddy does not believe he is a patron or perceive a difference between himself and the patrons, which would be closer to the sleeper agents in *BSG* and *Dollhouse*.

For six episodes after the premier, *Westworld* attempted to lure viewers into a tentative sense of security as to who is human, with other mysteries about the park drawing attention. For instance, *Westworld* kept plenty of dramatic irony in play. None of the Hosts start out knowing their own identity, fueling developments like Maeve Millay's awakening and attempted escapes. This plot incorporates extra uncanny fears like dead bodies coming to life, intensified by the ambiguous knowledge that Maeve was never quite dead or alive at all. She echoes D'Anna Biers, the model three Cylon that continually dies to glimpse what lies between lives. Unlike D'Anna, Maeve succeeds at gradually infiltrating this in-between place. Her uncanny power intensifies as she becomes the biggest threat by embracing her own programming and hybridity. By season 2, she has learned how to reprogram herself and any Hosts close enough to her.

Yet viewers familiar with *BSG* and *Dollhouse* remained wary that hidden Hosts might yet be revealed. For instance, Kathryn VanArendonk wrote for the entertainment site *Vulture* that "*Westworld* also thrives on something *Battlestar* milked almost ceaselessly — an uncertainty about who on the show is human, and who's a robot." VanArendonk's article on September 30, 2016 went up over a month before the next cyborg plot twist in episode seven aired on November 13, 2016. It is telling that the mere suggestion that these cyborgs can flawlessly imitate humanity offered fans sufficient grounds for suspicion. The audience's experiences with predecessor shows like *BSG* and *Dollhouse* primed them. *Westworld* did not need a Boomer or Victor to breed uncertainty, as it has become part of the expected genre slang when talking about deceptively human cyborgs. Given that the *Westworld* film featured a foolproof way to identify the androids from humans (their hands were imperfect) this switch to complete, convincing artifice is certainly intentional, drawing on the SF conversation about cyborg Others.

Viewers were right to be suspicious. The delayed plot twist in episode seven, "Trompe L'Oeil," expands on the formula in *BSG* and *Dollhouse* by threatening not just the viewer's identification or understanding of a character, but the truth of everything they have seen—a supremely uncanny effect. Bernard Lowe's status as a Host calls into question the previous six episodes, given that he is a main viewpoint character. The viewers' discoveries about the Hosts were his discoveries. Now that the audience knows he is programmed to be blind to things that would lead him into self-questioning, it is hard to be sure of anything depicted in the series up to that point. The name of the episode itself refers to an

optical illusion, highlighting the intentionality of this effect, and its relationship to the eyes. This is a new tactic, beyond what *BSG* and *Dollhouse* contrived. The extra uncertainty invokes the tradition of the unreliable narrator from literature, and draws attention to the concepts of perspective. Viewers must consider their sources of information about the narrative and world thus far. In season one's finale and throughout season two, this becomes increasingly mind-boggling when the Hosts cannot always distinguish between present and past timelines.

However, *Westworld* is frugal with its cyborg plot twists. It has many other plot twists about the park overall, human scheming, and its various timelines instead. The audience is left in anticipation, waiting to find another hidden cyborg. Even the characters within the show seem to be futilely looking for secret Hosts. The Man in Black kills his human daughter because she believes her to be a Host and then cuts into his own arm for evidence that he himself may be synthetic. When the Host Dolores finds him, she voices the audience's suspicions and repurposes a phrase used to test the Hosts: "Seems you've begun to question the nature of your reality" ("The Passenger"). The Man in Black stops cutting into his arm, but the question is left unanswered, blurring the boundaries between them. Gaius Baltar in *BSG* and Paul Ballard in *Dollhouse* also questioned whether they were secretly cyborgs, but their shows were inundated with secret cyborgs. The Man in Black has very little excuse for being so suspicious, and the consequences for his daughter makes his paranoia far more dire than Baltar or Ballard's moments of doubt. *Westworld's* relative scarcity of plot twists is itself a commentary on viewers' eagerness to speculate. Only at the end of season two do we get another cyborg plot twist, when Bernard replicates and then replaces a human's body with one controlled by Dolores. This version of the plot twist escalates the uncanny of cyborgs, since Charlotte Hale's synthetic double literally enacted the Freudian fear of being replaced by one's doppelganger.

*Westworld* also employs its cyborgs' uncanniness and hybridity to develop greater complexity the Othering and boundaries of humanity. Like *Dollhouse*, which questioned the mind/body Cartesian divide, the Hosts of *Westworld* complicate the question of where mind ends and the body begins. The end of season two reveals that Hosts' personalities are contained within the "pearl" in their cranium and can be removed and relocated to a new body seamlessly. However, the same is not true of natural humans. In season two, we learn that the park's founders and major funders have been attempting to print new bodies and upload a real person to them. However, they are never successful in creating a

transfer with full fidelity. Bernard, the most successful attempt at giving new life to a deceased human, is only similar to his human model. *Westworld* locates human personality squarely in the brain's flesh. Even the Hosts cannot recover from a damaged Pearl. The show rejects the concept of the body as an empty vessel ready for a completely digital download, as in *BSG*. It also goes beyond *Dollhouse*, since the brain-wipe process for creating a Doll depends upon emptying out the mind; the character development of Echo only works so far as the wiping process is incomplete or leaves a sort of muscle memory residue. There is no effort to completely empty the brains of the Hosts. Instead, the programmers modify and rearrange the same basic personality and set of experiences to create a mental mosaic of past storylines. *Westworld* makes this residual memory part of every cyborg, all the time, and it drives many conflicts. Meanwhile human consciousness cannot be relocated into a synthetic body. This sets up a new dualism between the humans and Hosts, but one that the humans are constantly trying to break down.

The performance of humanity, deemed problematic in *BSG* by Koistinen and not fully resolved in *Dollhouse*, has also received some progressive treatment thus far in *Westworld*. The casting of the show, for instance, offers a more complicated picture and commentary. The casting choices depict a distinct contrast between the park and the underground complex full of scientists. The park is populated by a distinctly white and a seemingly male-by-default population, with characters of color and women in demeaning or stereotyped roles of the type often excused as "accurate to the era." Meanwhile the scientists behind the scenes range freely across ethnicities and genders. This casting choice is an improvement on both *BSG* and *Dollhouse*, and also seems to draw attention to the film industry's excuses for historically whitewashing the Western genre.

In addition, *Westworld* made significant progress in the duly lauded episode "Kiksuya" in season two. This episode is partially narrated in Lakota, produced with Lakota consultants, and features a lead performance by Zahn McClarnon of the Lakota and Standing Rock Sioux Nations. Previous *Westworld* episodes had, at best, lumped its Native American Hosts in with the rest of the oppressed Hosts and, at worst, invoked the "hostile Indian" trope of the Wild West genre. "Kiksuya" calls out that representation and turns a nuanced eye to these Hosts. The Ghost Nation is a fictional tribe invented by the park designers to be Wild West flavored villains, and in "Kiksuya" we learn that these Hosts were modified to be less authentic and more violent so as to assuage patrons' guilt about killing

them. This concocted tribe highlights the artificiality of *Westworld* and hearkens to historic Othering of native people who were stereotyped or deemed animals to excuse their extermination. The focus character, Akecheta, is a construction of a construction. He is built on a false model. While this episode courts the “magical native” trope with its mystical treatment of Akecheta as the first self-aware Host, it takes *Westworld* far beyond the token representations in *BSG* and *Dollhouse* to a representation of cyborg identity that is influenced and reflective of non-privileged identities.

Additionally, Koistinen points out that *BSG* made great strides toward pointing out the dynamics of having the “right” body in order to pass as human and not be Othered as either robot or a liminal human identity (260). This performance of humanity manifests in *BSG*’s emphasis on how performing as white and male produces the most successful bodies. *Westworld*’s first large identity twist revealed that the non-white male character Bernard had been fooling not just the audience—clever internet theorists aside—but also the other human characters with whom he had been interacting, including his lover Theresa Cullen. Unlike Boomer’s haunting self-suspicion, Bernard seemed to have had none whatsoever. He had been a successful part of the company for some time, performing humanity flawlessly despite what the viewer may recognize as culturally Othered skin. This perfect success implies a future wherein Bernard’s body is not so Othered. Yet the guests enjoy an unquestioningly white park experience, undermining this apparent social progress.

*Westworld*’s ambiguity pairs uncomfortably with the violence, misogyny, and pathological behaviors that seem to be brought out by the park in general. Like *Dollhouse*’s uncomfortable focus on voyeurism and human trafficking, this show accuses the viewer of exploitation alongside the park patrons—accentuated by HBO’s freedom to show nudity. In combination with the casting choices, the show seems to question if revealing humanity’s darkest tendencies in the park undermines the potential of social progress outside of it, or if there is any such thing as “safely contained” violent Othering. This self-reflexively applies to viewing the show safely from outside of it. Thus far, this tactic has received criticism from the popular media for this approach, echoing *Dollhouse*’s detractors. However, *Westworld* has gathered a following that is already larger than *Dollhouse*’s, going so far as to break HBO’s records for ratings. It may at least reach more viewers and offer them the chance to think through this



uncomfortable disjunction between enjoying a show and feeling judged for the voyeurism of it.

*Westworld*'s ultimate contribution to the cyborg conversation is hard to state definitively, given that so many of *BSG*'s flaws emerged from the series finale. However, thus far *Westworld* offers signs of progress. Even with little idea how it will ultimately contribute to the SF cyborg, its additions are best seen through the lens of what has come before in this SF dialogue.

## Conclusion

The cyborg plot twist, as a unit of SF slang, offers SF writers a tool that complements the previously established strengths and powers of cyborgs to represent and question cultural anxieties. Each show examined here uses the plot twist to bring up different contemporary fears through expanding upon the ambiguity of the cyborg to highlight Self/Other and Self/Technology fears and encourage broader questioning of boundaries and categories. The infiltration of human-looking Cylons drew parallels to the post 9/11 horror of terrorists hiding among us, the Dolls confront the viewer with their own complicit voyeurism of sex trafficking, and the Hosts offer a similar confrontation with even more emphasis on how easy it may be to overlook the subjugation of Othered victims.

These shows also develop the cyborg plot twist as a unit of SF slang, priming it for further use within SF television or SF across media. Looking at a chronological chain of shows reveals a series of changes that update and upgrade cyborgs, ostensibly for the better. Progress, as a concept, is deeply engrained in SF. At the same time, contemporary postmodern SF is often suspicious of clean, utopian progress narratives. The shows discussed here demonstrate a similar suspicion at a meta level; each series offers an updated take on the issue of Othering and identity through cyborgs, but that progress is constantly complicated, questioned, and even undermined by the next iteration. The progress is not neat or perfect. The old issues linger even while new ones come to the fore. The dialogue between *BSG*, *Dollhouse*, and *Westworld* highlights how the issues of identity and Othering have developed in SF television but have not resolved, despite—or perhaps due to—SF's fascination with progress.

Yet it is important to recognize the progress along the way. Telotte explains that “science fiction series might represent an important voice for an increasingly

technologized and science-haunted world” (“Introduction” 1), especially since television is “positioned to become the most influential mode” of the SF genre (“Introduction” 2). With a wide audience and serial format, cyborgs in SF television offer viewers a weekly chance to process the concept and ramifications of science modifying and hybridizing human bodies, and which human bodies. The associated tropes, like the cyborg plot twist, deserve critical attention in *Westworld* and other series that may take up the conversation, as a unit of SF grammar that seems particularly well suited to expressing our cultural anxieties. Whether or not a television show with cyborgs chooses to include these story elements and plot twists is now a decision to be interrogated as meaningful by scholars of SF and popular culture.

## Works Cited

- “A Measure of Salvation.” *Battlestar Galactica*, written by Michael Angeli, directed by Bill Eagles, *Sci Fi*, 2006.
- Barber, Trudy. “Kinky Borgs and Sexy Robots: The Fetish, Fashion, and Discipline of Seven of Nine.” *Channeling the Future: Essays on Science Fiction and Fantasy Television*. Edited by Lincoln Geraghty, The Scarecrow P, 2009, pp. 133-48.
- Battlestar Galactica and Philosophy: Mission Accomplished or Mission Frakked Up?* Edited by Josef Steiff and Tristan D. Tamplin, Open Court, 2008. *Battlestar Galactica: The Phenomenon*. TV Promotional Short, written by Lana Kim, *Sci Fi*, 2008.
- Call, Lewis. “Death, Sex and the Cylon.” *Science Fiction Film & Television*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2012, pp. 85–113.
- Calvert, Bronwen. *Being Bionic: The World of TV Cyborgs*. I.B. Tauris, 2017.
- Cranny-Francis, Anne. “The Erotics of the (Cy)borg: Authority and Gender in the Sociocultural Imaginary.” *Future Females, The Next Generation: New Voices and Velocities in Feminist Science Fiction*. Edited by Marleen Barr, Rowman & Littlefield, 2000, pp. 145-63.

"Epitaph One." *Dollhouse*, written by Maurissa Tancharoen and Jed Whedon, directed by David Solomon, **Mutant Enemy Productions, 2009.**

"Epitaph Two: Return." *Dollhouse*, written by Maurissa Tancharoen, Jed Whedon, and Andrew Chambliss, directed by David Solomon, **Fox, 2010.**

"Exclusive: Joss Whedon Talks DOLLHOUSE and His Love Affair with BATTLESTAR GALACTICA." *TV Addict*, 16 July 2008, [thetvaddict.com/2008/07/16/exclusive-joss-whedon-talks-dollhouse-and-his-love-affair-with-battlestar-galactica](http://thetvaddict.com/2008/07/16/exclusive-joss-whedon-talks-dollhouse-and-his-love-affair-with-battlestar-galactica).

Graham, Elaine R. "Cyborgs or Goddesses?: Becoming Divine in a Cyberfeminist Age." *Virtual Gender: Technology, Consumption and Identity Matters*. Edited by Alison Adam and Eileen Green, Routledge, 2001.

Haraway, Donna. "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism for the 1980s." *Socialist Review*, vol. 15, no. 2, 1985, pp. 65-107.

"Instinct." *Dollhouse*, written by Michele Fazekas and Tara Butters, directed by Marita Grabiak, **Mutant Enemy Productions, 2009.**

"Kiksuya." *Westworld*, written by Carly Wray & Dan Dietz, directed by Uta Briesewitz, **Home Box Office, 2018.**

Koistinen, Aino-kaisa. "Passing for Human in Science Fiction: Comparing the TV Series *Battlestar Galactica* and *V*." *Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2011, pp. 249–63.

Kustritz, Anne. "Breeding Unity: *Battlestar Galactica*'s Biracial Reproductive Futurity." *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2012, pp. 1–37.

Leavenworth, Van. "Utopia, Relationality and Ecology: Resurrecting the Natural in *Battlestar Galactica*." *Extrapolation*, vol. 53, no. 1, 2012, pp. 61–81.

Liath. "Are Dollhouse and Battlestar Galactica Connected?" *Movie and TV Stackhouse Exchange*, Stack Exchange Inc., 10 Dec. 2013,

- movies.stackexchange.com/questions/15772/are-dollhouse-and-battlestar-galactica-connected.
- Moylan, Katie. “Nothing Is What It Appears to Be: Event Fidelity and Critique in *Battlestar Galactica* and *Dollhouse*.” *Science Fiction Film and Television*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2012, pp. 67–84.
- Park, Dylan, and John Carro. “‘Haven’t you heard? They look like us now!’: Realism and Metaphor in the New *Battlestar Galactica*.” *Channeling the Future: Essays on Science Fiction and Fantasy Television*, edited by Lincoln Geraghty, The Scarecrow P, 2009, pp. 199-216.
- Politics and Popular Culture*. Edited by Leah Murray. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010.
- Pruner, Aaron. “Missing ‘Westworld’ already?: 5 shows to binge to fill the void.” *Screeners*, Tribune Media Entertainment, 6 December 2016, screenertv.com/television/westworld-battlestar-galactica-humans-terminator-sarah-connor-chronicles-dollhouse-robot-tv-shows.
- “Rapture.” *Battlestar Galactica*, written by Bradley Thompson and David Weddle, directed by Michael Rymer, *Sci Fi*, 2007.
- Rose, Margaret. “Cyborg Selves in *Battlestar Galactica* and *Star Trek: The Next Generation*: Genre, Hybridity, Identity.” *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 48, no. 6, 2015, pp. 1193–1210.
- Springer, Claudia. “The Pleasure of the Interface.” *Screen*, vol. 32, no. 3, 1991, pp. 303-23.
- Telotte, J.P. “Introduction: The Trajectory of Science Fiction Television.” *The Essential Science Fiction Television Reader*. UP of Kentucky, 2008.
- . *Replications: A Robotic History of the Science Fiction Film*. U of Illinois P, 1995.
- . *Science Fiction Film*. Cambridge UP, 2001.

“The Hollow Men.” *Dollhouse*, written by Michele Fazekas, Tara Butters, and Tracy Bellomo, directed by Terrence O'Hara, **Mutant Enemy Productions, 2010.**

“The Passenger.” *Westworld*, written by Jonathan Nolan & Lisa Joy, directed by Frederick E.O. Toye, **Home Box Office, 2018.**

“The Target.” *Dollhouse*, written and directed by Steven S. DeKnight, **Mutant Enemy Productions, 2009.**

“They Look Like Us Now.” *TV Tropes*,  
<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/TheyLookLikeUsNow>  
 Accessed 10 July 2018.

“Trompe L’Oeil.” *Westworld*, written by Halley Gross and Jonathan Nolan, directed by Frederick E.O. Toye, **Home Box Office, 2016.**

u/blur878. “Is Westworld a Battlestar Prequel?” *Reddit*, 2 May 2018,  
[reddit.com/r/westworld/comments/8gmhrl/is\\_westworld\\_a\\_battlestar\\_prequel](https://www.reddit.com/r/westworld/comments/8gmhrl/is_westworld_a_battlestar_prequel).

VanArendonk, Kathryn. “4 Things *Westworld* Will Remind You of (and One Thing It Won’t).” *Vulture*, New York Media LLC., 30 Sept. 2016,  
[vulture.com/2016/09/westworld-influences-battlestar-galactica-fallout.html](https://www.vulture.com/2016/09/westworld-influences-battlestar-galactica-fallout.html).

VanDerWerff, Todd. “Am I watching Westworld wrong? Like a video game, Westworld only works when you ‘play’ it.” *Vox*, Vox Media, Inc., Jun 24 2018, [vox.com/culture/2018/6/22/17489862/westworld-season-2-review-finale-recap-the-passenger](https://www.vox.com/culture/2018/6/22/17489862/westworld-season-2-review-finale-recap-the-passenger).

West, Steve. “Battlestar Galactica's Fourth Season: What To Expect (Updated With Pictures!)” *CinemaBlend*, Gateway Blend Entertainment, 2007,  
[cinemablend.com/television/Battlestar-Galactica-s-Fourth-Season-What-To-Expect-Updated-With-Pictures-9508.html](http://cinemablend.com/television/Battlestar-Galactica-s-Fourth-Season-What-To-Expect-Updated-With-Pictures-9508.html). Accessed 19 Sept. 2016.

“What is the Connection Between Dollhouse and Battlestar Galactica?” *IMDB*,  
[imdb.com/title/tt1135300/faq](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1135300/faq). Accessed 19 September 2016.

Wilken, Selina. "Cylons in the Dollhouse: The Secret Origins of *Westworld*." *Hypable*, Hypable Media, 13 Sept. 2016, [hypable.com/westworld-battlestar-galactica-dollhouse/](http://hypable.com/westworld-battlestar-galactica-dollhouse/). Accessed 29 Sept. 2016.

# “I'm too Drunk to Taste this Chicken”: The Hidden Poetry of Will Ferrell's Comedies

LAURA GARRISON<sup>1</sup>

Although Will Ferrell's broad style of lowbrow humor is indisputably popular with American audiences—since 2003, comedies starring the actor have earned more than 1.3 billion dollars in domestic theaters—the attempt to introduce his films into academic discussions of poetics is likely to be met with a lukewarm-coffee spit take (*Box Office Mojo*). This response seems reasonable at first glance, as entertainments involving deliberate contact between drum sets and exposed testicles are unlikely subjects for serious scholarship. But vulgar humor is featured in many great works of literature. In Chaucer's “Miller's Tale,” Alison makes a fool of Absalon in the dark: “He put up his mouth and kissed her naked arse / Most savorously” (103). Petruchio conjures a similarly distasteful image of his own tongue in Katharina's tail in Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* (2.1.13). The unfortunate Strephon peers into Celia's brimming chamber-pot in Swift's “Lady's Dressing Room,” while Joyce's *Ulysses* treats readers to a description of Bloom “asquat on the cuckstool,” enjoying a leisurely poo while reading the newspaper (Joyce 68; Swift 89-90). There is nothing inherently unpoetical about crude or scatological references, and their presence within a work clearly does not indicate art of inferior quality.

Yet popular comedy continues to be regarded as aesthetically suspect, as illustrated by a scene in the NBC comedy *30 Rock* in which Tina Fey's character Liz Lemon tells a colleague about something that happened while she was waiting in line for “the Truffaut retrospective,” only to have a flashback reveal she was

---

<sup>1</sup> For students in my American Film class at Roanoke College initially drew my attention to this subject matter: Cameron Guernsey, Matthew Lintner, Thomas McAleer, and Dylan Stein. Thanks, guys. This would never have been written without your unflagging enthusiasm for Will Ferrell's *oeuvre* and cheerful disregard for my detailed directions.

actually buying a ticket for *Hot Tub Time Machine* (“Don Geiss” 00:02:43 - 00:02:55). Liz Lemon's impulse to hide her affection for these sorts of films likely resonates with anyone who wishes to be perceived as intellectual. Perhaps people worry others will conflate the characters in these films with the audiences who watch them. Aristotle says comedy presents “an imitation of inferior people . . . the laughable is a species of what is disgraceful,” and this is still a common perception of the genre (9). But some popular comedies have substance lurking beneath their insouciant surfaces.

Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque shows how an atmosphere of irreverence provides an important opportunity for social criticism: “carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions” (10). What Bakhtin terms “grotesque realism,” with its emphasis on “the material bodily principle, that is, images of the human body with its food, drink, defecation, and sexual life,” is rooted in a tradition of folk humor (18). Echoes of grotesque realism are seen in *Film Comedy*, in which Geoff King describes contemporary “gross-out” comedy as “based on crude and deliberate transgressions of the bounds of 'normal' everyday taste” (63).

Other film studies provide additional points of connection between old and new comedies. Gerald Mast's *The Comic Mind* is an important early effort to establish film comedy as a subject for serious study, and while its list of eight comic film plots is overly restrictive and incomplete, recognizing elements from some of these plots in Ferrell's films helps situate them within a broader tradition. Like Kubrick's *Doctor Strangelove*, Ferrell's *Step Brothers* and *The Other Guys* exemplify the *reductio ad absurdum* plot, in which “a simple human mistake or social question is magnified, reducing the action to chaos and the social question to absurdity, while the use of lots of “miscellaneous bits” in *Anchorman* connects it with Charlie Chaplin's pictures (Mast 5-6, 7). In *What Made Pistachio Nuts?*, Henry Jenkins argues that the fusion of Hollywood cinema's “demand for character consistency, causal logic, and narrative coherence” with vaudeville's “emphasis on performance, affective immediacy, and atomistic spectacle” produced a new film genre he dubs “anarchistic comedy,” which is exemplified by the Marx Brothers (24). The success of the Marx Brothers has a lot to do with their off-the-wall dialogue filling the need for verbal humor that emerged when motion pictures began to incorporate sound, and some of the funnier exchanges in Ferrell's films are animated by this same spirit of anarchy.



Ferrell's comedies have not received a great deal of attention within the field of film studies, and what has been written has largely focuses on specific characters he has played or his comedic persona. Michael Tueth's *Reeling with Laughter* covers eleven distinct categories of American film comedy but mentions Ferrell only in passing as a “clownish grown-up” (176). The study also includes *Old School* on a list of examples of “Dionysian” comedy, a sub-genre epitomized by *Animal House*. Tara Powell offers a thoughtful analysis of Ferrell's character Ricky Bobby, arguing that “*Talladega Nights* is the *Deliverance* of our time, responding to white anxieties about the suburbanization of the rural South by commodifying and colonizing its stereotypes” (218). Saul Austerlitz lauds *Anchorman* as “a luminously subversive tribute to misplaced masculine aggression” and singles out Ferrell as one of “American cinema's two great exemplars of the non sequitur exclamation” along with Ferrell's grandfather, W. C. Fields (362, 358). In his study of *Anchorman*, *Elf*, and *Talladega Nights*, Colin Tait finds a direct link between Ferrell's comedic persona and the theatre of the absurd, focusing on how both offer “thinly veiled critiques of institutional irrationality (corporate capitalism, patriarchy, whiteness) as well as the breakdown of language” (167). These studies offer some valuable insights about the ways in which these films reflect or critique American culture and society, but there is another important comedic element of these films that has not yet been examined in a systematic way.

A compelling case for a detailed poetic analysis of the dialogue in Ferrell's comedies is rooted in a facet of their popularity: the alluring yet elusive quality of quotability. A highly quotable film can be loosely defined as one from which many lines are quoted frequently by a large number of people. Comedy is subjective, but high quotability suggests that a film not only offers the sort of humor that resonates with a lot of people but also that its dialogue is funny in a particularly memorable way. This analysis focuses on four films: *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy* (2004); *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby* (2006); *Step Brothers* (2008); and *The Other Guys* (2010). All of these films were co-written by Will Ferrell and director Adam McKay, so there are reasons to expect common stylistic elements among them. In an interview for *Variety* with Ferrell and McKay for the tenth anniversary of Gary Sanchez—the production company they formed in 2006, which has become known for its “offbeat choices”—the interviewer observes, “they don't so much finish each other's sentences as trade off words throughout an ongoing free association”

(Riley). This playful approach to language is one of the many distinctive features their films share with well-crafted poetry. An investigation of underlying metrical patterns and other devices of sound along with an examination of vivid figurative language and original imagery will reveal how poetic techniques contribute to the comedic effects of the lines.

Different types of poetic meter, repetition of words and structure, figurative language, and surprising imagery work on their own or in combination to create funny lines that audiences tend to cache in their mental storage units. The devices of sound lend a catchy, musical quality to the rhythm of the dialogue, while the vivid descriptions create indelible sensory impressions. The success of Ferrell's comedies in this regard is a more meaningful indicator of their lasting popularity than their impressive box office receipts. Recognition of the subtle but persistent poetic qualities of their dialogue suggests these films possess some aesthetic merit, which makes it difficult for detractors to dismiss the films themselves or the audiences who flock to them.

It has been asserted that these films are highly quotable, but determining a film's relative quotability is an inherently squishy task. The sorts of informal conversations in which people tend to bat their favorite lines back and forth are not typically recorded or monitored in any way that would allow a sufficient sampling to be mined for relevant data, and an attempt to recreate such conversations in a structured environment would be hopelessly unnatural. Casual observation and interaction with people in social situations can build up a sense over time that certain films tend to embed themselves more deeply into a culture's consciousness than others, but that evidence is circumstantial.

The most useful resources in determining a film's quotability are media outlets with a focus on popular entertainment that have taken it upon themselves to weigh in on which films are the funniest and most quotable in the form of traditional lists and the list-article hybrid known as a *listicle*. These are either written by staff or compiled from reader responses to surveys. Among such pieces, *Anchorman* appears frequently and is consistently placed high on ranked lists (*Alloy*, *AV Club*, *College Humor*, *Esquire*, *Hollywood.com*, *MTV*, *TimeOut*). As noted in *Empire's* "50 Funniest Comedies Ever," where tens of thousands of reader votes determined *Anchorman's* rank of number two, "When endlessly quote-worthy dialogue enters everyday conversation (as it has at Empire Towers), you know it's something special." *Entertainment Weekly's* "35 Most Quotable Movie Comedies," where it is also ranked as number two, calls *Anchorman* "a delightful

collection of whimsical non sequiturs,” while *IndieWire* proclaims it “a satisfying, endlessly quotable masterpiece.” *Step Brothers* also appears on many lists of funniest and most quotable comedies (*Alloy*, *AV Club*, *College Humor*, *Esquire*, *Hollywood.com*, *IndieWire*, *MTV*). *Talladega Nights* is number thirty on *College Humor*'s list of the “Top 100 Best Comedies of All Time,” and Amber Lee refers to it as “one of the most quotable movies ever” in a feature on sports movie one-liners for *Bleacher Report*. Both *Uproxx* and *Moviefone* have recently published listicles focusing exclusively on humorous quotations from this film. *The Other Guys* is one of *College Humor*'s “Top 100 Best Comedies of All Time” as well as one of *MTV*'s “25 Funniest Movies Ever . . . This Millennium.”

Taken together, this evidence presents a compelling case for the high quotability of these films. In discussing the cumulative impact of Ferrell's films in “The 50 Best Comedies Since 2000,” the *AV Club* singles out their dialogue and connects it to their box-office dominance: “Sixteen years in, our new millennium looks like a banner age for big-screen comedy, as eclectic as any that came before it. This is when Will Ferrell transformed the multiplex into a deliriously Dadaist screaming match.” This description is particularly apt; as Walter Benjamin notes, “Dadaism attempted to create by pictorial—and literary—means the effects which the public today seeks in the film. . . . Their poems are 'word salad' containing obscenities and every imaginable waste product of language” (41). Contemporary film audiences seem to crave these same effects, and Ferrell and McKay consistently provide them.

With Ferrell's comedies situated within a rich tradition of literary and film history and their dialogue having been established as integral to their comedic effects, a close poetic analysis of particular lines can begin. Any attempt to explain what makes something funny is a perilous undertaking; as E. B. White notes, “Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind” (xvii). However, this scenario can be avoided by exploring the effects of poetic elements in these films in a way that leads to an increased appreciation of their craft and an encouraging view of the state of contemporary comedy in general. The formalist method employed here follows the approach outlined by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren in *Understanding Poetry*, with necessary adjustments to accommodate the transcription of auditory text as experienced by a film audience. The metrical analysis uses the scansion technique outlined by Brooks and Warren and explicated in detail by Paul Fussell in *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form* in which

stressed syllables are indicated with an acute accent and unstressed syllables are indicated with a breve, like so:

ˈ h ă n d l ɛ b ər | m ʊ s t ʌ t ʃ ə  
handlebar mustache

It also adopts the premise of Laurence Perrine's *Sound and Sense* that a poem's meaning is inseparable from its auditory effects.

## Poetic Meter

Naturally, the dialogue in *Anchorman*, *Talladega Nights*, *Step Brothers*, and *The Other Guys* is in prose, not verse. But as Brooks and Warren observe, “Rhythm is a principle of all life and all activity and is, of course, deeply involved in the experience of, and the expression of, emotion . . . rhythm is a natural and not an artificial aspect of poetry and is, therefore, an indication of the relation of poetry to the common experience of life” (2). Rhythm and timing are key elements of comedy, and an audience attuned to poetic stress patterns will detect several distinct poetic meters in the lines spoken by various characters, each with a corresponding range of humorous effects.

### *The Anapest*

Anapestic meter is composed of feet in which two unstressed syllables are followed by one stressed syllable, resulting in a carefree rhythm that bounces like a cartoon rabbit in a clover patch. It has a long tradition of use in the composition of humorous verse, with the limerick being the most famous example. As Fussell observes, “the very pattern of short anapestic lines is so firmly associated with light impudence or indecency that a poet can hardly write in anything resembling this measure without evoking smiles” (12). It is fitting, then, that this poetic meter sometimes emerges in the dialogue of Ferrell's films.

Brennan Huff, Ferrell's character in *Step Brothers*, is a reluctant guest at the reception following his mother's second marriage. When dinner is served, Brennan sums up his frustration at having his desires ignored in a single complaint: “I didn't want salmon; I said it four times” (00:03:42 - 00:03:45). Scanning reveals the dominant anapestic meter of this statement:

~ ~ | ~ ~ ~ ~ | ~ ~ ~ ~ | ~ ~ ~ ~  
 I didn't want salmon; I said it four times.

Unable to bear such disappointment, Brennan storms out of the banquet hall. Halfway to the exit, he makes a bitter declaration that reinforces the pattern by exactly replicating the meter of "I didn't want salmon":

~ ~ ~ ~ | ~ ~ ~ ~ | ~ ~ ~ ~  
 This wedding is horsesh\*t. (00:03:50 - 00:03:51)

Taken together, the whole speech forms a short poem with humor that is heightened by the disjunction between the speaker's anguished *cri de cœur* and the anapestic meter in which he expresses it:

I didn't want salmon;  
 I said it four times. . . .  
 This wedding is horsesh\*t.

This line spoken by Ferrell's character Ricky Bobby in *Talladega Nights* is also in anapestic meter:

~ ~ ~ ~ | ~ ~ ~ ~ | ~ ~ ~ ~  
 I'm not sure what to do with my hands. (00:09:28 -  
 00:09:30)

This dialogue is not intrinsically funny on the page. Without the visual context the film provides, the tone is ambiguous; the speaker could be anyone from a jittery bride-to-be posing for her engagement photographs to an axe murderer regarding his own blood-dripping fingers with consternation. In the actual film, racecar driver Ricky Bobby is being interviewed by a reporter, and the comedy arises from the combination of the words, which are delivered as an apologetic aside, and the actor's movements. While he answers questions, Ricky's hands rise into the air and hover awkwardly at chin level for a few seconds before starting to grope the microphone and his own face, seemingly of their own accord, as if feeling around for a doorknob in the dark (00:09:33-00:09:56). The simplicity of the dialogue allows the funny gestures to shine, while the anapestic meter's close association with light verse underscores the laugh.





“mix,” back-to-back, creating a jarring disruption of the established rhythm that is in keeping with the negative feelings expressed in the statement, which is the source of a great deal of stress for the protagonists.

As seen in these examples, the presence of meter in dialogue introduces a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables that can have different effects, sometimes by creating a rhythm that complements or contrasts with the message conveyed and other times by setting up a predictable pattern only to deviate from it, delivering an auditory goosing to startle the listener into a laugh.

## Repetition

Ferrell's films often employ repetition in dialogue for comedic effects. Neutral words or phrases become funny when they are repeated, and the effect of innately humorous words becomes magnified through repetition. As discussed in the previous section, this occurs with *Step Brothers'* refrain of “The f\*\*king Catalina wine mixer!” But it can also happen on a smaller scale within a single speech or line of dialogue. While repetition can be used for many different effects, in these comedies it often reinforces the immaturity of the male characters.

Ferrell's character Ron Burgundy delivers this short speech in *Anchorman* while seated at his desk drinking a glass of scotch, shortly before going live on the air to read the news:

I love scotch.  
Scotchy scotch scotch.  
Here it goes down,  
down into my belly. (00:02:35 - 00:02:41)

The repetition in these lines is glaring; the word “scotch” appears four times in a row, with a slight variant in the second instance, where the addition of the suffix “-y” transforms it into an adjective. Anadiplosis, a scheme in which a word occurring at the end of one phrase or clause is repeated at the beginning of the next, is also employed here with “down.” In both cases, the repetition of words contributes to the childlike quality of the speech, which is composed entirely of one-syllable words, except for “Scotchy” and “belly.” The latter is a child's word for “stomach,” while the silly-sounding “Scotchy scotch scotch” contains



phonetic echoes of *cootchie-cootchie-coo*, a nonsense phrase associated with tickling.

The action that accompanies the speech—drinking scotch—is mature in the sense that it is something only an adult would do (although a responsible adult would wait until after work to engage in this activity). The unprompted statement of adoration combined with the redundancy of describing one's own actions as they are happening suggests some state of intoxication has already been achieved; i.e., this is probably not Ron Burgundy's first scotch of the day. The overall effect of the words, the delivery, and the action makes Ron seem like a drunk toddler, and the laugh arises from the inappropriateness of this combination.

Less obvious but perceptible effects can be achieved through repetition of structure, as when Brennan exclaims “So much space! So many activities!” as he and Dale jump around their shared bedroom in celebration of having transformed their twin beds into a loft in *Step Brothers* (00:37:58 - 00:38:01). The parallelism in the construction of these phrases emphasizes the connection between the ideas, implying that the newly uncovered expanse of carpet is the potential site of a vast array of future undertakings. This effect is further reinforced by the use of anaphora, a scheme in which a word is repeated at the beginnings of successive phrases. This giddy enthusiasm is inherently funny in two middle-aged men who still live with their parents, and the comedy is heightened by the visual of the loft itself, a shoddy, haphazard construction that towers precariously in the frame, building anticipation of the inevitable collapse in which beds and dreams will be simultaneously crushed.

Repetition of words and structure can also work in combination; in a memorable exchange from *Anchorman*, Brick Tamland is moved to contribute to a discussion about love by professing his ardor for an assortment of inanimate objects in the office: “I love carpet”; “I love desk”; “I love lamp” (00:39:57 - 00:40:12). When Ron Burgundy gently questions the sincerity of these statements—“Do you really love the lamp, or are you just saying it because you saw it?”—Brick, instead of elaborating, staunchly reiterates his feelings, infusing each repetition with the fervor of deep commitment: “I love lamp. I love lamp” (00:40:14-00:40:17; 00:40:18 - 00:40:21). Alliteration strengthens the connection between “love” and “lamp,” while the omission of an article (e.g., “I love *a* lamp”) or demonstrative adjective (e.g., “I love *this* lamp”) results in an assertive subject-verb-object construction in which every word receives equal stress, which in turn magnifies the ridiculousness of the assertion. At the same time, the

absence of an article elevates the singular object's generic status to a proper noun with a unique identity, as in "I love Lucy" or "I love Paris." Through complementary elements of repetition and Carell's inspired delivery, which conveys both confusion and a stubborn devotion, this simple three-word sentence achieves a powerful comedic effect.

## Metaphor

Figurative language is another poetic element that frequently contributes to the comedic effects of the dialogue in Ferrell's comedies. Sometimes the role of this element is understated, as in this line from Ron Burgundy in *Anchorman*: "I'm in a glass case of emotion!" (00:52:00 - 00:52:02). On the page, the figurative implications of this statement are unclear, because only the source of the metaphor is identified. The target is provided by the visual context of the film—this outburst occurs inside a phone booth, in response to a question about Ron's location posed by the person on the receiving end of the call, Brian Fantana (Paul Rudd). Brian is baffled, but Cleanth Brooks would understand this organic fusion of the realm of ideas and the world of tangible things: "Finding its proper symbol, defined and refined by the participating metaphors, the theme becomes a part of the reality in which we live—an insight, rooted in and growing out of concrete experience, many-sided, three dimensional" ("Irony as a Principle of Structure" 741). Ron's feelings are in a tumultuous state that cannot be encapsulated in the vernacular, but his fumbling attempt at elevated language is so clunky that it is actually charming. Its utter uselessness as a reply to Brian's question "Where are you?" enhances this amusing effect, elevating it to an expression of pure poetry that is untainted by any hint of a practical purpose (00:51:58 - 00:52:59). The scene in which the line occurs could even be viewed as an example of T. S. Eliot's objective correlative: "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked" ("Hamlet" 61).

While the previous example demonstrates how figurative language can be used effectively in combination with visuals, many of the metaphors in Ferrell's films do not require any visual context beyond what the audience's imagination can supply. In *The Other Guys*, Mark Wahlberg's character Detective Terry Hoitz

encapsulates his frustration at being cooped up in the office with this metaphor: “I am a peacock; you gotta let me fly” (00:14:14 - 00:14:16). Likening his own situation to a generic caged bird would have made for an accurate yet clichéd (and therefore forgettable) comparison, but by specifically identifying himself a peacock, Hoitz ramps up the humor by defying conventional bird species symbolism. The peacock's most notable feature is its stunning tail fan, which it ostentatiously displays in its efforts to attract a mate. For this reason, the peacock suggests an exaggerated sense of self-importance; it is typically associated people who are vain about their looks and like to show off. So it is an odd choice for a self-descriptor. Furthermore, while the peacock *can* fly, it is not especially known for its flying abilities; any number of other avian species would have made for a more sensible comparison. This slight mismatch of diction and purpose undermines the character's argument in a humorous way.

Specificity plays a similar role in this metaphor flung by Ron Burgundy during an argument with his co-worker Veronica Corningstone (Christina Applegate) in *Anchorman*: “You are a smelly pirate hooker!” (01:07:57 - 01:08:00). There is quite a lot to unpack in this juvenile insult, which denigrates the object's personal hygiene, assigns a cutthroat viciousness to her character, and labels her a prostitute with admirable succinctness. “Hooker” gets the most emphasis as the object, which is an effective placement choice, because the implied comparison of Veronica and a woman who debases herself by performing sexual acts for money is the most cutting element of the remark. On its own, this word would have sounded cruel, but the two modifiers preceding it serve to mitigate this effect. “Smelly” disparages Veronica's odor, but as this adjective is associated more with the playground than the office, it comes across as amusingly childish. The second modifier, “pirate,” used here as an attributive noun, catapults the whole insult into the realm of a swashbuckling adventure on the high seas, achieving a level of absurdity that drains almost all the venom out of “hooker.” The comedic effect is heightened if one attempts to visualize the three elements in combination. Furthermore, the metrical similarity of the words emphasizes their close connection:

' ~ | ' ~ | ' ~  
 smelly pirate hooker

Each word receives stress on the first syllable; together, they form a line of trochaic trimeter, infusing the whole phrase with a metronomic severity that

attests to the speaker's anger but clashes with the silly metaphor he uses to express it.

There is an exchange in *Talladega Nights* in which ineffective similes are taken up as a topic of conversation. Ricky Bobby and his best friend Cal Naughton, Jr. (John C. Reilly), are celebrating another racetrack victory when Cal observes, "We go together like Chinese food and chocolate pudding" (00:21:27 - 00:21:30). When Ricky points out that those items do not pair particularly well, Cal tries again: "We go together like cocaine and waffles" (00:21:37 - 00:21:38). This would have been a funny exchange even if Ricky had given up at this point; matching an illegal stimulant with a family-friendly breakfast food is wildly inappropriate. But the dialogue continues as Ricky adopts a different tack, prompting, "We go together like peanut butter and . . ." Cal confidently finishes this sentence with "ladies," and Ricky patiently corrects him: "No. Jelly" (00:21:44 - 00:21:50). When Cal counters with "You'd like to put jelly on a lady?" Ricky finally abandons his attempt to extract a sensible simile from his friend, whose mind seems to follow some deviant system of internal logic (00:21:52 - 00:21:54). This exchange demonstrates a conscious awareness on the part of screenwriters Ferrell and McKay of the comedic applications of figurative language, which may help to explain why they incorporate so many off-kilter metaphors in the dialogue of their films.

## Unexpected Imagery

Vivid imagery is another key poetic element that appears in the dialogue of Ferrell's comedies, sometimes expressed as figurative language. Imagery is such a fundamental aspect of poetry that it has its own school, imagism, whose adherents follow Ezra Pound's command to "Go in fear of abstractions" and believe, as William Carlos Williams declares, there are "No ideas but in things" (Pound 201; Williams 9). Ferrell and McKay share this respect for the power of the concrete image, and the examples in this section focus on the comedic effects of unconventional sensory imagery that surprises the audience. Sometimes this is achieved by pushing a familiar image into unfamiliar territory, as in *Step Brothers* when Brennan confides to Dale, "I feel like a lightning bolt hit the tip of my penis" (00:43:13 - 00:43:16). This line occurs during a conversation in which the two stepbrothers come up with a plan to form their own international

entertainment company. There is nothing unusual about signifying the arrival of a brilliant idea with a lightning bolt, but there is something peculiar about specifying one's penis tip as the location of the strike. It introduces a sensation that sounds both sexual and painful, yet Brennan's experience is neither of these things. The comedic effect is achieved by stretching conventional imagery into an unexpected shape that is bafflingly at odds with the sensation it describes.

Detective Hoitz, the unjustly grounded peacock from *The Other Guys*, is scornful of any male who falls short of his minimum standard for masculinity, but his criteria are elusive. One man who definitely does not measure up is his colleague Detective Allen Gamble (Ferrell), a mild-mannered desk jockey. As part of a lengthy explanation of why he does not want to work with him, Hoitz offers this critique of Gamble's elimination process: “The sound of your piss hitting the urinal—it sounds feminine” (00:07:35 - 00:07:38). This comment is bizarre for a couple of reasons. While it is not uncommon for the sounds emanating from one coworker to act as an irritant upon another—constant sniffles, desktop pedicures, tuneless humming—voiding one's bladder into the appointed receptacle is not a noise typically singled out as problematic. The specific nature of the criticism is even more confounding, as it is unclear how the splash of anyone's pee in a urinal, a fixture that is absent from traditional ladies' rooms for anatomical reasons, could be perceived as “feminine.” Even attempting to imagine this auditory experience is funny.

The stress arrangement amplifies this humorous effect; the remark is a metrical cornucopia. It starts off with the skipping beat of anapestic meter:

~ ~ ~ | ~ ~ ~  
 The sound of your piss

But then there is a shift to dactyls, which are feet composed of one stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables. This is surprising because dactylic meter “is so rare as to be almost a museum specimen” and therefore calls attention to itself by virtue of being unusual (Arp 181n):

~ ~ ~ | ~ ~ ~  
 hitting the urinal—

Following the stressed syllable “piss” with another stressed syllable, “hit-,” has the added effect of emphasizing the assonance found in the *i* sounds of both those

words, which strengthens the connection between them; an unstressed echo of this occurs a few syllables later with “urinal.”

The last part of the line is composed of an iamb and another dactyl, which has the effect of bunching up the stress in the middle of the clause:

˘ ˘ ˘ | ˘ ˘ ˘  
it sounds feminine.

The back-to-back stressed syllables keep both the verb and the adjective in focus, which makes the audience more likely to note the nonsensical nature of the criticism itself. Because the rare dactylic foot has a “feminine” stress pattern (i.e., it ends with an unstressed syllable), its prominent use may even lend a subliminal irony to Hoitz's words. The “i” assonance established in the earlier portion continues in this clause with “it” and “feminine,” lending an audible coherence to the whole line that highlights the significant metrical variation within it.

Hoitz's complaints about the lack of testosteronicity in the sounds of Gamble's bodily functions do not end there. “Even your farts,” he observes, “they're not manly.” When Gamble dismisses this accusation as “ridiculous,” Hoitz gets more specific, using figurative language to convey sound imagery: “They sound like a baby blowing out the candles on a birthday cake” (00:25:23; 00:25:24 - 00:25:26). He first calls Gamble's masculinity into question by claiming the sound of his urination is effeminate; here, he continues this line of attack by describing the sound of gas emitting from his anus as infantile. Key words in the image are emphasized by consonance (“baby,” “blowing,” birthday”) and alliteration (“candles,” cake”) as well as consistency of stress—all of the two-syllable words in this line are trochees:

˘ ˘ | ˘ ˘ | ˘ ˘ | ˘ ˘  
baby      blowing      candles      birthday

These poetic devices of sound combine with the unique imagery to create a memorably funny line that makes Gamble's farts sound enthusiastic and cute. The insult is a mild one, conveying a sense of celebration even as it paints Gamble as helpless and inexperienced.

There's a scene in *Anchorman* where field reporter Brian Fantana attempts to seduce Veronica Corningstone after applying pungent cologne called Sex Panther. The fragrance is so objectionable it sends his coworkers fleeing from the room.

Veronica compares it to “a used diaper full of Indian food,” and another office worker, Garth Holliday (Chris Parnell), finds it reminiscent of “a turd covered in burnt hair” (00:23:41 - 00:23:44; 00:23:50 - 00:23:52). While both of these images are distinctive, and the second uses similar sounds to solidify the connection between “turd” and “burnt,” the funniest description is delivered in perfect iambic trimeter by an unnamed female character (uncredited):

~   '   |   ~   '   |   ~   '   |  
 It smells like Bigfoot's dick. (00:23:56 - 00.23.58)

While the imagery in the first two descriptions attempts to capture the smell by combining two undesirable but familiar odors, the third employs a single cryptozoological anatomical reference. This simple sentence adheres to the three principles of imagism that were first outlined in *Poetry* in 1913: be direct, avoid unnecessary words, and “compose in the sequence of the musical phrase” (Flint 199). Despite the Sasquatch's unsubstantiated existence, its large, hirsute form is humanoid enough to make visualizing its sex organ both easy and comical. However, the real genius of the image lies in its olfactory component—like an effective horror film, it harnesses the awesome power of the human imagination, daring the audience to conjure a stench that no one has ever experienced. Capturing this humorously crude image in the iamb's elegant, understated meter creates a line that is unforgettable.

## Conclusion

Examining Ferrell's films as part of a broader comic tradition is critical to evaluating their impact. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” T. S. Eliot observes,

The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the superinvention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. (5)

In this view, what has been learned through this study has significance beyond the films themselves, not just in terms of their potential influence on the next generation of comedies but also for our understanding of their precursors and the development of the genre as a whole. Bakhtin argues the medieval carnival “sought a dynamic expression; it demanded ever-changing, playful, undefined forms”; this applies in equal measure to comedy in general and McKay and Ferrell's films in particular (10-11). At its best, the dialogue in Ferrell's films is a creative fusion of original images with classic poetic devices, eliciting a laugh of mingled surprise and recognition that resonates deeply with the human experience. In the words of Mel Brooks, revered comedy director and pioneer in the field of cinematic fart jokes, “Humor is just another defense against the universe” (*Rolling Stone*). In this view, zany metrical schemes and nonsensical metaphors have purpose; they fight chaos with chaos and laugh in the face of cosmic indifference.

As this analysis of *Anchorman*, *Talladega Nights*, *Step Brothers*, and *The Other Guys* has demonstrated, the presence of poetic elements in the dialogue of these comedies amplifies their effects in a way that may help explain their exceptional quotability. The degree to which the lines penned by Will Ferrell and Adam McKay have been absorbed into the popular lexicon speaks to a cultural impact of some consequence. The act of quoting, whether tossing off a favorite one-liner or reenacting whole scenes verbatim with one's buddies, is a sort of verbal cosplay in which one playfully inhabits an aspect of a fictional character's identity by trying on his or her words. Memorizing a line of dialogue is an act of linguistic preservation that conveys value; if enough people within a culture can quote lines from the same film from memory, that film takes on the status of a cultural artifact. Understanding the factors that influence this process could help construct an effective critical framework for evaluating humor in dialogue. To that end, this study represents the first step in the development of a poetics of comedy in American film.



## Works Cited

“The 50 Funniest Comedies Ever.” *Empire*, Bauer Consumer Media Ltd., 20 June 2016, [empireonline.com/movies/features/50comedy/?film=2/](http://empireonline.com/movies/features/50comedy/?film=2/).

*Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy*. Directed by Adam McKay, performances by Will Ferrell, Christina Applegate, Steve Carell, Chris Parnell, and Paul Rudd, DreamWorks, 2004.

Aristotle. *Poetics*. Translated by Malcolm Heath, Penguin, 1996.

Arp, Thomas R., editor. *Perrine's Sound and Sense: An Introduction to Poetry*, 9th ed. Harcourt Brace, 1997.

Austerlitz, Saul. *Another Fine Mess: A History of American Film Comedy*. Chicago Review P, 2010.

AV Club Staff. “The 50 Best Comedies Since 2000.” *AV Club*, Onion Inc., 11 July 2016. [film.avclub.com/the-50-best-comedies-since-2000-1798250301](http://film.avclub.com/the-50-best-comedies-since-2000-1798250301).

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Helene Iswolsky, Indiana UP, 1984.

Benjamin, Walter. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Prism Key P, 2010.

*Box Office Mojo*. “Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy.” IMDb.com. 23 Sept. 2018. <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=anchorman.htm>.

---. “Anchorman 2: The Legend Continues.” IMDb.com. 23 Sept. 2018. <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=anchorman2.htm>.

---. “Blades of Glory.” IMDb.com. 23 Sept. 2018. <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=bladesofglory.htm>

---. “Daddy's Home.” IMDb.com. 23 Sept. 2018. <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=daddyshome.htm>

- . "Daddy's Home 2." IMDb.com. 23 Sept. 2018.  
<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=daddyshome2.htm>
- . "Elf." IMDb.com. 23 Sept. 2018.  
<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=elf.htm>
- . "Get Hard." IMDb.com. 23 Sept. 2018.  
<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=gethard.htm>
- . "Old School." IMDb.com. 23 Sept. 2018.  
<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=oldschool.htm>
- . "The Other Guys." IMDb.com. 23 Sept. 2018.  
<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=ferrellwahlberg2010.htm>.
- . "Step Brothers." IMDb.com. 23 Sept. 2018.  
<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=stepbrothers.htm>,
- . "Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby." IMDb.com. 23 Sept. 2018.  
<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=talladeganights.htm>.
- Brooks, Cleanth. "Irony as a Principle of Structure." *Literary Opinion in America*. Edited by Morton Dauwen Zabel, Rev. ed., Harper, 1951, pp. 729-41.
- Brooks, Cleanth and Robert Penn Warren. *Understanding Poetry*. 4th ed., Harcourt Brace, 1976.
- Brooks, Mel. "Seven Revelations about Mel Brooks." By Charles M. Young, *Rolling Stone* 9 Feb. 1978, [rollingstone.com/movies/movie-features/seven-revelations-about-mel-brooks-57086/](http://rollingstone.com/movies/movie-features/seven-revelations-about-mel-brooks-57086/).
- Calhoun, Dave, Cath Clarke, et al. "The 100 Best Comedy Movies." *TimeOut*, Time Out Group Plc., 11 June 2018, [timeout.com/london/film/100-best-comedy-movies](http://timeout.com/london/film/100-best-comedy-movies).
- Chaucer, Geoffrey. "The Miller's Tale." *The Canterbury Tales*. Translated by Nevill Coghill, Penguin, 2003, pp. 88-107.

- “Don Geiss, America and Hope.” *30 Rock*, season 4, episode 15, performance Tina Fey, National Broadcasting Company, 18 Mar. 2010.
- Eliot, T. S. “Hamlet.” *Elizabethan Essays*, Haskell House, 1964.
- . “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” *Selected Essays, 1917-1932*, Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1932, pp. 3-11.
- EW Staff. “‘Billy Madison’ at 20’ and the 35 most quotable movie comedies.” *Entertainment Weekly*. Entertainment Weekly Inc., 10 Feb. 2015, [ew.com/article/2015/02/09/most-quotable-comedies](http://ew.com/article/2015/02/09/most-quotable-comedies).
- Flint, Frank Stewart. “Imagisme.” *Poetry*, vol. 1, no. 6, Mar. 1913, pp. 198-200.
- Fussell, Paul. *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*. Rev. ed., McGraw-Hill, 1979.
- Holmes, Dave. “The 18 Most Quotable Movies of All Time.” *Esquire*, Hearst Communications, Inc., 5 Jul. 2016, [esquire.com/entertainment/movies/news/a46379/best-movie-quotes](http://esquire.com/entertainment/movies/news/a46379/best-movie-quotes).
- Horner, Rachel. “14 ‘Talladega Nights’ Quotes We’ll Never Stop Using.” *MovieFone*, AOL HuffPost Entertainment, 3 Aug. 2016, [moviefone.com/2016/08/05/14-talladega-nights-quotes-well-never-stop-using](http://moviefone.com/2016/08/05/14-talladega-nights-quotes-well-never-stop-using).
- Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. Reissue edition, Vintage, 1990.
- Jenkins, Henry. *What Made Pistachio Nuts? Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic*. Columbia UP, 1992.
- King, Geoff. *Film Comedy*. Wallflower Press, 2002.
- Lee, Amber. “20 Favorite One-Liners from Classic Sports Movies.” *Bleacher Report*, Turner Broadcasting System, Inc., 21 July 2014, [bleacherreport.com/articles/2136854-favorite-one-liners-from-classic-sports-movies](http://bleacherreport.com/articles/2136854-favorite-one-liners-from-classic-sports-movies).
- Mast, Gerald. *The Comic Mind: Comedy and the Movies*. Bobbs-Merrill, 1973.

- Newman, Jason. "The 25 Funniest Movies Ever . . . This Millenium." *MTV*, Viacom, 28 Mar. 2011, [mtv.com/news/2803280/best-comedies-2000s](http://mtv.com/news/2803280/best-comedies-2000s).
- The Other Guys*. Directed by Adam McKay, performances by Will Ferrell and Mark Wahlberg, Columbia Pictures, 2010.
- Playlist Staff. "The 25 Best Comedies of the 21st Century So Far." *IndieWire*, Penske Business Media, LLC, 12 May 2015, [indiewire.com/2015/05/the-25-best-comedies-of-the-21st-century-so-far-264139](http://indiewire.com/2015/05/the-25-best-comedies-of-the-21st-century-so-far-264139).
- Pound, Ezra. "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste." *Poetry*, vol. 1, no. 6, Mar. 1913, pp. 200-206.
- Powell, Tara. "'You Taste of America': *Talladega Nights*, *Deliverance*, and Southern Studies." *Southerners on Film: Essays on Hollywood Portrayals Since the 1970*,. Edited by Andrew B. Leiter, McFarland, 2011, pp. 217-29.
- Riley, Jenelle. "Will Ferrell and Adam McKay Celebrate a Decade of Gary Sanchez Productions." *Variety*, Penske Business Media LLC, 27 May 2016, [variety.com/2016/film/features/will-ferrell-and-adam-mckay-gary-sanchez-productions-1201782344](http://variety.com/2016/film/features/will-ferrell-and-adam-mckay-gary-sanchez-productions-1201782344).
- Savage, Lily. "The 15 Most Quotable Comedies of All Time." *Alloy*, Defy Media LLC, 5 July 2014, [alloy.com/entertainment/10-grool-quotable-comedies-time](http://alloy.com/entertainment/10-grool-quotable-comedies-time).
- Shakespeare, William. *The Taming of the Shrew*. Edited Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, et al., The Norton Shakespeare Comedies, Norton, 1997, pp. 144-203.
- Step Brothers*. Directed by Adam McKay, performances by Will Ferrell, John C. Reilly, Adam Scott, Kathryn Hahn, Richard Jenkins, Columbia Pictures, 2008.
- Suarez, Ana Luisa. "The 25 Most Quotable Movies of All Time." *Hollywood.com*, Hollywood.com, LLC, 27 Oct. 2015, <http://www.hollywood.com/movies/the-most-quotable-movies-of-all-time-60479486/#/ms-22554/1>.

Swift, Jonathan. "The Lady's Dressing Room." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 8th ed., vol. C: *The Restoration and the Eighteenth Century*, Edited by Stephen Greenblatt, Lawrence Lipking, and James Nogle. Norton, 2006, pp. 2590-93.

Tabrys, Jason. "'Talladega Nights: The Ballad Of Ricky Bobby' Lines That Will Turn You Into A Champion." *Uproxx*. Woven Digital, 23 Mar. 2015, [uproxx.com/movies/talladega-nights-quotes](http://uproxx.com/movies/talladega-nights-quotes).

Tait, R. Colin. "Absurd Masculinity: Will Ferrell's Time-Bending Comic Persona." *Communication Review*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2014, pp. 166-82.

*Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby*. Directed by Adam McKay, performances by Will Ferrell and John C. Reilly, Columbia Pictures, 2006.

"Top 100 Best Comedies of All Time." *College Humor*, Connected Ventures LLC, 11 Mar. 2011, [collegehumor.com/toplist/6426788/bestcomedy](http://collegehumor.com/toplist/6426788/bestcomedy).

Tueth, Michael. *Reeling with Laughter: American Film Comedies: From Anarchy to Mockumentary*. Scarecrow P, 2012.

White, E. B., and Katherine S. White, editors. Preface. "Some Remarks on Humor." *A Subtreasury of American Humor*. Coward-McCann, Inc., 1941, pp. i-xxxii.

Williams, William Carlos. *Paterson*. Edited by Christopher MacGowan. New Directions, 1995.

# “Look at the Flowers”: Utilitarian Themes in the Post-Apocalypse

KRISTINE LEVAN<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, the zombie genre has become pervasive in popular culture. Though there is little surprise in finding the undead in fictional movies and television shows, they also appear in more unlikely places, such as commercial advertisements (Cook 54). The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) even began using the zombie genre to advertise disaster preparedness on its website (Ambrosius and Valenzano 89).

This proliferation of zombies into mainstream culture initially seems benign, but it should be noted that public fascination does not end with fictitious storytelling. In recent years, news headlines have excessively featured cannibalism, human mutilation, and unexplained pandemics. Not only do these stories have the potential to spread panic, but they also help to normalize violence in society (Linnemann et al. 507-8). Such events may be considered a moral panic, or “...when a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests” (Cohen 9).

Public fascination with zombies may be connected to current events. Ho explains that some scholars, such as Hamilton, “have interpreted these apocalyptic fictions as American anxieties over potential catastrophes, ranging from viral pandemics to global warming to alienation in consumer society, with anxieties reflected in and toward the zombie horde” (58).

This paper will examine AMC’s *The Walking Dead (TWD)*, a popular television series in recent years with a focus on a zombie-filled, post-apocalyptic society. Specifically, I address instances of utilitarianism, and contend that examples of these instances are pervasive throughout the series. Here, I convey

---

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank David Mackey for his comments and suggestions on the early stages of this paper.

the reflection of the fears of some of America's population by demonstrating behavior possibilities in the event of an apocalypse or disaster scenario.

### Concepts of justice, utilitarianism and television

Understanding the conceptual foundation for utilitarianism is critical to appropriately posit the discussion herein and appropriately apply it to *TWD*. Utilitarianism states that the outcomes should be both the most morally correct and benefit the largest number of individuals in society. Jeremy Bentham's pleasure and pain principle indicates that individuals will seek out actions that maximize their pleasure and simultaneously minimize their pain.

Robinson discusses the role that television shows, including *Hillstreet Blues*, *Perry Mason*, and *ChiPs*, had in helping him formulate his ideals throughout his lifetime. For instance, some lessons learned include "...sometimes the work of one person will bring about justice...", "...it is acceptable and at times necessary to question authority and to resist bureaucracy as long as justice is achieved in the end...", and "...justice demands standing up for what is right even when it is not what is popular..." (333). Television was but one avenue by which Robinson claims to have had these revelations, in addition to films, music, and a range of real-life experiences. This culmination of sources assisted in his ability to comprehend concepts related to crime, justice and utilitarianism, among others.

Previous work has been published examining various issues arising throughout the series. For instance, Wayne Yuen has edited two volumes focusing on various philosophical aspects of *TWD*. Additionally, a few scholarly articles have discussed critical perspectives of *TWD*. The role of institutions constructed throughout the series, including science/medicine, government, religion, and family, has been explored (Ambrosius and Valenzano). These authors found that the only institution that persevered throughout the series and salvaged the characters was family, with other institutions failing over the course of the series. Other studies have explored the characterization and portrayal of race and gender, economic roles, and themes of colonialism (Sugg; Ho).

The value of studying the series is best explained by understanding the value of the decision-making processes:

Though the show is fictional in its content, the reactions of the characters are meant to portray an accurate or at least quasi-accurate

representation of human response to disaster, trauma, death, tragedy, etc. Therefore, analysis of *The Walking Dead* can actually provide useful diagnostic material relevant to post-disaster issues. (Waddell 12)

There has been scant scholarly research dedicated to in-depth analysis of the events, characters and dialogue in the series. While discussions are provided elsewhere on concepts of utilitarianism in the series (See e.g. Dean; Allaire; Yuen; Loza; Hawkes; Devlin and Cooper; Delfino and Lesinki), these are typically either peripheral to the main discussion, or do not contain a full analysis of the dialogue and interactions of the characters. Concepts specifically focused on utilitarianism as portrayed in *TWD* are discussed herein.

## Methodology and *The Walking Dead*

*The Walking Dead* is a television series that follows a group of survivors after zombies (or “walkers” as they are known on the series) have infected civilization. Through the progress of the series we are introduced to new characters, and the characters are almost constantly mobile, providing perpetual opportunities for experiences with walkers and remaining survivors.

The first episode of the show begins with Rick, a former law enforcement officer, waking in his hospital bed after being shot in the line of duty. As he leaves his room and a vacant hospital, he returns to the world outside, only to find that it is no longer recognizable to him. He reunites with his wife, Lori, and son, Carl, as well as his best friend and law enforcement partner, Shane. Over the next several years, the group’s dynamics and the individuals who comprise this group change substantially. Throughout the series, there is a consistent thread of morality and decision-making, as the audience watches the characters struggle with survival.

To analyze the dialogue between the characters, I will use qualitative textual analysis. Specifically, I will focus on narratology, which “focuses on narrative story-telling within a text with emphasis on meaning that may be produced by its structure and choice of words” (Macnamara 15).

For the analysis provided herein, each episode of seasons one through six (the full seasons for which each episode is available at the time of the initial writing of this analysis) of *TWD* was viewed multiple times. Dialog between characters and



major events were recorded and classified within one of the major themes of utilitarianism including: basic necessities, freedom of expression, act utilitarianism, indirect utilitarianism, rule utilitarianism and institutional utilitarianism. Each of these is expressed, either incidentally to the plot or blatantly by the characters, as themes throughout the series.

## Basic Necessities

Though basic needs exist prior to considering more long-term issues (Mulgan), the primary characters foremost concern is with acquiring basic necessities. On the series, there are several examples of the characters securing food, shelter or security, or protecting these amenities, as they are scarce in the post-apocalyptic society. Security is viewed by many utilitarian theorists as the most important interest to protect, and is inclusive of shelter, food and security (Mulgan 16). As time continues, these necessities become scarcer, as there is a lack of production of resources, and individuals continue using the existing supply of resources. Over time, individuals become more independent, for instance, growing their own food. Clearly, security is an issue for the survivors in *TWD* universe, as the characters contend with the constant threat of walkers, and find themselves at odds with other survivors. Scarcity of resources, such as weapons, food and shelter, pit various survivors against one another.

Throughout the series, one theme that consistently appears is the need for adequate and sustainable shelter. The seasons and sub-seasons can be almost categorically broken down by the location of the shelter in which the group inhabits, or is attempting to inhabit. For instance, a campground, farm, prison, or securitized town are all locations inhabited by the group. Each location has its unique set of challenges but offers some form of shelter against the elements and intruders.

After escaping an attack on the farm, the group finds a prison, already inhabited by both zombies and prisoners (including Thomas and Axel),

THOMAS. Group of civilians breaking into a prison you've got no business being in, got me thinking there ain't no place for us to go!

DARYL. Why don't you go find out?

AXEL. Maybe we'll just be going now.

THOMAS. Hey, we ain't leaving!

T-DOG. You ain't coming in either!

THOMAS. Hey, this is my house, my rules, I go where I damn well please! ("Sick")

As seen in this excerpt, the prisoners, trapped within the facility since the outbreak, are unaware of the exact nature of the chaos outside the prison walls, and are unwilling to surrender their existing shelter to this group of strangers. A prison, once regarded as a facility for punishment, has become a place for people to seek refuge. Here, both prisoners and free citizens grapple with viewing this as a safe shelter to keep walkers and human intruders out, rather than to maintain control and surveillance of those housed within.

As the main characters proceed through the landscape of what remains after the apocalypse, they find another group, which includes (among others) Eugene, Rosita and Abraham, who will all become major characters in the remaining seasons. Eugene claims to be a scientist that needs to get to Washington, D.C., and the others have placed their faith in him to be their best chance at security and survival. Eugene creates an elaborate lie to enlist the assistance of the characters to escort him to Washington, D.C. As we find out, this was done to guarantee his own personal security.:

EUGENE. I know I'm smarter than most people, I know I'm a very good liar, and I know I needed to get to DC.

MAGGIE. Why?

EUGENE. Because I do believe that locale holds the strongest possibility for survival, and I wanted to survive. If I could cheat some people into taking me there, well, I just reasoned that I'd be doin' them a solid, too, considering the perilous state of the city of Houston, the state of everything. ("Self Help")

Viewers realize that Eugene, though not the scientist he has masqueraded himself to be, is intelligent and cunning. His personal security, as well as the security of those in his cohort, was more likely if they reached a safer location.

Later in the series, the main characters find an established town called Alexandria. When deciding whether to stay at Alexandria, and how to integrate themselves into the established town, this quote from Rick shows the perseverance and determination of the group: “But it's not gonna happen. We won't get weak. That's not in us anymore. We'll make it work. And if they can't make it... then we'll just take this place.” (“Remember”). Established locations such as Alexandria are in short supply and Rick and his group see the value in a structured town over playing by the rules of those occupying that town.

## Freedom of expression

Freedom of expression is another important aspect of utilitarianism. Particularly, if individuals disagree with the views of others, it is still important to allow these views to be expressed.

Throughout the series, there are multiple scenarios where characters disagree. In many instances, the characters are willing to hear one another out to reach a decision. For instance, in season one, Jim is clearly ill (infected). Some members of the group engage in discussion about the best way to handle a visibly ill Jim. This very telling exchange illustrates how various group members believe the situation should be handled.

DARYL. I say we put a pickaxe in his head and the dead girl's and be done with it.

SHANE. Is that what you'd want if it were you?

DARYL. Yeah, and I'd thank you while you did it.

DALE. I hate to say it... I never thought I would... but maybe Daryl's right.

RICK. Jim's not a monster, Dale, or some rabid dog.

DALE. I'm not suggesting...

RICK. He's sick. A sick man. We start down that road, where do we draw the line?

DARYL. The line's pretty clear. Zero tolerance for walkers, or them to be. ("Wildfire").

Here, Daryl is attempting to forge ahead with the utilitarian decision to execute Jim, who is clearly ill and may pose a risk to the remaining members of the group. Ever the moralist of the group, Rick resists this initial decision. To Rick, Jim is still a human, whereas Daryl and perhaps Dale, view him as a threat to the group. Ultimately, they leave Jim behind to fend for himself while they leave in the RV. Perhaps this is a moral negotiation to ease any of the group members from being forced to be Jim's executioner.

In season two, Dale urges Shane to leave the group after Shane has been acting questionably. Dale (correctly) suspects that Shane intentionally killed Otis (Herschel's farmhand), and that he wants to kill Rick, in part out of jealousy. While Dale discusses these issues with Shane, Shane reacts with animosity by threatening Dale "Well, maybe we ought to just think that through. Say I'm the kind of man who'd gun down his own best friend. What do you think I'd do to some guy that I don't even like when he starts throwing accusations my way?" ("Secrets"). Shane is clearly unhappy that Dale has discovered his secrets, and fears these actions being revealed to the other group members. Although Dale may make more morally sound decisions, it can be argued that many of Shane's decisions follow the utilitarian line of reasoning (the greater good rationale).

In the first two seasons, Dale is often in the moral decision-making process, usually elicited through group discussion. A substantial amount of discussion and division is generated between the characters in season two by Randall's presence at the farm. Dale is the most vocal in advocating for keeping Randall alive, but is met with criticism and resistance by other members of the group.

ANDREA. You really want to debate about saving a guy who will lead his buddies right to our door?

DALE. That's what a civilized society does.

ANDREA. Who says we're civilized anymore?

DALE. No, the world we knew is gone, but keeping our humanity? That's a choice.

DALE. But don't you see? If we do this, the people that we were... The world that we knew is dead. And this new world is ugly. It's... Harsh. It's... it's survival of the fittest. And that's a world I don't wanna live in, and I don't.... And I don't believe that any of you do. I can't. Please. Let's just do what's right. Isn't there anybody else who's gonna stand with me? (“Judge, Jury, Executioner”).

Both of these examples involving the group decision-making process highlight Dale’s optimism, even in the face of the apocalypse. Not killing Randal is certainly not a utilitarian move; Randall would certainly be the one who benefitted. Whereas, killing him would allow the others to feel safe, albeit somewhat guilty, for opting to do so. Shortly after a series of catastrophic incidents in season two, the group loses their “moral compass” when Dale is killed.

### Act utilitarianism

Act utilitarianism means the “right act is the act that produces the most well-being” (Mulgan 115). Calculations of what is “right” become problematic when considering issues such as spontaneity, danger, timeliness, friendship, and coordination of calculation between individuals (Mulgan 115-17). Because some of the decisions that must be made by the characters are spur of the moment, they may not be able to adequately consider every factor for the most utilitarian decision. Some decisions, however, are made over a period of time and with more deliberation.

When Rick joins the camp early in season one, he is reunited with Lori and Carl. He feels compelled, by his own set of ethical rules, to return to attempt to save Merle Dixon, who they had left handcuffed to the roof of a building. New to the group, Rick emerges with his unique moral code, which counter Shane’s. Shane bases this decision on his perceptions of Merle’s character

SHANE. ...Merle Dixon...The guy wouldn't give you a glass of water if you were dying of thirst.

RICK. What he would or wouldn't do doesn't interest me. I can't let a man die of thirst... me. Thirst and exposure. We left him like an animal caught in a trap. That's no way for anything to die, let alone a human being. ("Tell it to the Frogs").

Going back solely to rescue Merle, who seems to have increased the number of disagreements and amount of dissention among group members, would run counter utilitarianism ideals. Rick argues against these utilitarian ideals when he argues to return to the roof to save him. However, the second objective to returning to the scene, to secure the duffel bag of weapons that Rick had left behind, would clearly fulfill utilitarian purposes (Yuen What's 244-45). This could allow the group to be better able to protect themselves against walkers (as part and parcel to the basic necessities discussion) or other groups of survivors that may mean their group harm.

A major dilemma falling under the act utilitarianism category the group deals with is Sophia (Carol's daughter) being lost. The group remains divided on whether and how long to search for Sophia. Dale pretends to fix his RV as others search for her and he explains to T-Dog, almost verbatim, the considerations implicit in utilitarianism: "Sooner or later, if she's not found, people will start doing math. I want to hold off the needs of the many versus the needs of the few arguments as long as I can" ("What Lies Ahead").

Although many may view Dale's desire to have the group continue to search for Sophia as morally correct, he clearly indicates in the above that he understands that it is in opposition to utilitarian principles (Dean 92). By maintaining that the RV is not fixable yet, the group is essentially stranded and it makes reasonable sense to continue the search for her, since there are no other viable options to leave. Should Dale have been honest with the other group members about the condition of the RV, the discussion would surely have taken a utilitarian turn toward leaving and abandoning Sophia.

In "Save the Last One" in season two, after Otis (Herschel's farmhand) accidentally shot Carl, Shane and Otis leave to acquire medical supplies. While on this excursion, they are overrun by zombies, and Shane shoots Otis and leaves him behind to be devoured by zombies. Initially, viewers may believe this act was done merely to save his own hide. Viewing Otis as weaker than himself, Shane may spot an opportunity to escape. Shane's quick decision actually served multiple purposes. Not only was he able to save his own life but also was able to

return to the farm with the medical supplies to save Carl as quickly as possible (Gaskin 21). In this case, it could be considered act utilitarianism. Had he not shot Otis, it is possible that neither would have returned with the medical supplies and Carl may not have survived.

Until Abraham discovers Eugene has been dishonest with them, he considers his primary mission making sure Eugene journeys to Washington, D.C. As shown in the two passages below, Abraham is dedicated to the greater good:

ABRAHAM. Got to hand it to him. He's a persistent son of a bitch. I get why you're following him. You're loyal. You're a good person. I like it. But what we're doing... I don't know how else to say it... saving the world is just... is just more important. I mean, even if he does find his wife, so what? How long do you think they'll live happily ever after if we don't get Eugene up to Washington? (“Claimed”).

ABRAHAM. I respect that, but there's a clear threat here to Eugene. I need to extract his ass before things get any uglier. (“Four Walls and a Roof”).

Ironically, this second passage is said just a few episodes prior to the group discovering Eugene “is not a scientist”, and Abraham repeatedly punches Eugene, knocking him unconscious. While the initial actions to protect Eugene were seen as justified by Abraham, regardless of what those actions were, the greater good was worth the consequences from his perspective. Once Eugene is no longer seen as the savior that can find the cure, Abraham feels betrayed and can no longer justify protecting him.

### Indirect utilitarianism

Indirect utilitarianism indicates an individual should attempt to clear their mind prior to making decisions, as well as attempt to go by the “general rule of thumb” (Mulgan 117) for decisions and attempt to make decisions in a timely manner. In addition to trying to conserve precious resources, friendships should also be considered in the decision-making process (Mulgan).

An example of indirect utilitarianism in *TWD* is the decision that sometimes has to be made to kill individuals that are part of the group, even if they aren't walkers, if they are considered a threat to the others. Rick killed his former best friend, Shane, when he was threatening to kill Rick. Carol killed Karen and David because they were ill, and she was concerned they would infect other members of the group.

Carol's choice to kill Karen and David initially seems utilitarian. In an attempt to prevent the spread of the illness, she killed two members of the group. But, her actions counter utilitarianism because 1.) the deaths of the two people did not ultimately prevent the illness from spreading, and 2.) Carol's decision to kill them upset several other group members (Delfino and Lesinski 181), including Tyreese, who Carol had a close relationship with. But the question remains whether it is considered a utilitarian action if the person acting on (in this case, Carol) believes it to be utilitarian, even if the outcomes aren't expected? Carol could not have known that killing Karen and David would be a futile attempt at containing an illness.

Later, Carol chooses to kill Lizzie, one the children in the group, after she discovers that Lizzie is a danger to others (and has killed other members of the group, including Mica, one of the other children). Delfino and Lesinski indicate that, from a utilitarian perspective, killing Lizzie, who was clearly delusional and capable of homicide, may make sense (184-85). Carol tells Lizzie, "You just... Just look at the flowers, Lizzie. Just look at the flowers. Just... just look at the flowers", and then shoots Lizzie in the head ("The Grove"). In this scene, it is apparent that Carol is struggling with her decision to kill Lizzie. Both Lizzie and Mica served as semi-surrogate children to her after the loss of her own daughter, Sophia. But, Carol weighs the costs and the benefits and chooses the best course of action for the greatest number of people within the group. She tells Lizzie to look at the flowers so that she is seeing something beautiful in a world that has turned ugly, and a time when a terrible fate is about to befall her.

### Rule utilitarianism

Rule utilitarianism is defined as "the right act is the act called for by the ideal code" (Mulgan, 119). This means individuals should have and understand a



framework for the specific rules that are being followed, or the rules that the ideal code imposes on them.

In the first season, there is a structure in the communal living at the camp, as evidenced by a seemingly minor infraction, such as when Ed decides to put an extra log on the fire. Although Ed explains how cold it is, which he believes justifies another log on the fire, Shane retorts, “The cold don't change the rules, does it? Keep our fires low, just embers so we can't be seen from a distance, right?” (“Tell it to the Frogs”).

Ed's decision here is not only breaking “the rules” as imposed by the structure of the camp, it is endangering the lives of the inhabitants by potentially alerting walkers to their whereabouts. Shane, who became the temporary and unofficial leader of the camp, enforces the rules against Ed. Under typical circumstances, an extra log on a fire is a minor issue. In the zombie apocalypse, however, every rule seems to matter for survival.

Perhaps no character in the series is more definitive in the standard of self-imposed rules they hold than Morgan. Despite attacks by walkers and other survivor groups, he refuses to take human lives. Morgan's mantra after he resurfaces (after witnessing his own fair share of personal horrors, including losing both his son and his wife), is “all life is precious”. Although he repeats this mantra often throughout the series, this quote from the sixth season explains the internal struggle for Morgan:

MORGAN. Back there I would have killed you as soon as look at you. And I tried. But you, you let me live and then I was there to help Aaron and Daryl. See, if I... if I wasn't there... if they died... maybe those wolves wouldn't have been able to come back here. I don't know what's right anymore. 'Cause I did want to kill those men. I seen what they did, what they keep doing. I knew I could end it. But I also know that people can change. 'Cause everyone sitting here has. All life is precious. And that idea... that idea changed me. It brought me back and it keeps me living. (“Heads Up”).

Throughout most of his presence on the series, Morgan maintains his disciplined belief system, even as their living spaces are under attack by various outsiders. Is this in line with the utilitarian way of thinking? As can be seen in the passage

above, Morgan struggles with the concept of “right”. If killing one saves many, he contemplates the morality of those actions.

### Institutional utilitarianism

In institutional utilitarianism, effective institutions are defined as those that “produce the greatest total well-being” (Mulgan 128). In the series, in the absence of official government structures, there are no formal organizations, so institutions are informally structured. Most of the institutional structures have a clear hierarchy with a leader (such as The Governor, Deanna, or Negan). Rick is consistently called upon or expected to be the primary leader among the primary main protagonists, which has led some viewers to jokingly coin the term “Ricktatorship” to describe his leadership style.

When Andrea and Michonne discover Woodbury in season three, they also discover a town with strictly enforced rules, including a curfew and immediate confiscation of their weapons, including Andrea’s gun and Michonne’s prized possession, her katana. The following dialogue illustrates the security of the town, as well as examples of the rules that are imposed on the citizens.

ANDREA. How many people do you have here?

WOMAN. 73. Eileen’s about to pop, so her kid will make it 74. Still a work in progress, but Rome wasn’t built in a day.

ANDREA. That’s a bold comparison.

WOMAN. I think we’ve earned it. Walls haven’t been breached in well over a month, we haven’t suffered a casualty on the inside since early winter.

ANDREA. How’s that possible?

WOMAN. Our governor’s set a strict curfew. Nobody out after dark. Noise and light kept to the bare minimum, armed guards on the fence and patrolling the perimeter to keep the biters away. (“Walk With Me”).

Clearly, the need for strict rules is a result of the Governor's need for power and control over the citizens. He claims Andrea and Michonne can come and go as they please, but their presence is coerced to stay at Woodbury. The armed guards protect those within Woodbury, but also keep the citizens captive within the town.

An example of Rick's leadership style and the institutional structure is seen when, after the characters take up residence at the prison, several people become ill. Rick and several others immediately enact institutional protocols to contain the illness.

RICK. Patrick got sick last night. It's some kind of flu. It moves fast. We think he died and attacked the cell block. Look, I know he was your friend and I'm sorry. He was a good kid. We lost a lot of good people. Glenn and your dad are okay, but they were in there. You shouldn't get too close to anyone that might have been exposed, at least for a little while. Carl. All of you.

CAROL. Patrick was fine yesterday, and he died overnight. Two people died that quick? We'll have to separate everyone that's been exposed.

DARYL. That's everyone in that cell block. That's all of us. Maybe more.

HERSCHEL. We know that this sickness can be lethal. We don't know how easily it spreads. Is anyone else showing symptoms that we know of?

CAROL. We can't just wait and see. And there's children. It isn't just the illness. If people die, they become a threat.

HERSCHEL. We need a place for them to go. They can't stay in D. We can't risk going in there to clean it up.

CAROL. We can use cell block A. ("Infected").

Since a deadly flu will also result in zombie infection post-mortem, this is a serious threat to the group. Here, Rick works with Carol, Herschel, and Daryl, his trusted companions, to reach a viable solution. As seen in this passage, and

throughout much of the series, Rick's leadership style is one that focuses on generating ideas among the various group members as opposed to simply ordering individuals to complete particular tasks or follow certain rules without question.

At Alexandria, there is a conflict between Rick and Deanna, both of whom are leaders of their subgroups. Pete, one of the town residents, has been abusing his wife and children. Upon learning this, Rick and Deanna engage in conversation that demonstrates differences in informal institutional structure and how to handle those who have clearly violated institutionalized norms and values.

DEANNA. We don't kill people. This is civilization, Rick.

RICK. Warning someone to stop or die, that is civilized nowadays.

DEANNA. Oh.

RICK. So what? So we just let him hit her? We let him kill her?

DEANNA. No, we exile him if it comes to that.

RICK. We do that, we don't know when he comes back and what he does to them. Letting him go makes this place vulnerable. You really want to wait till someone in that tower has to take care of it? And that's if we're lucky.

DEANNA. We are not... executing anyone. Don't ever suggest it again. That sort of thinking doesn't belong in here. ("Try").

Over the course of the show, Rick's character develops in a way that allows him to be more amenable to killing non-walkers (humans). This passage could be compared with the discussion on whether to kill Randall earlier in the series, which Rick adamantly opposed. After this exchange, Rick kills Pete very publicly, despite Deanna's warning.

When Rick's group runs into the Savivors (an opposing group of survivors), a clear example of institutionalized rules and differences in institutions emerges. Rick's group had intended on seizing the Savivors belongings and leaving. However, the Savivors planned on seizing all the groups' belongings, as well as killing one of their members. Clearly, the Savivors recognize their group (institution) as the more powerful of the two, and refuse negotiation.

As Rick and his group become more willing to break the rules that guided them in society as it existed pre-apocalypse, they seem to have fewer casualties, although they do suffer some major losses to their core group to the Savivors. Negan's long term goal seems to be to continue leading the Savivors with various subgroups operating in a hierarchical structure beneath them. It is unclear how well Rick's group (under the "Ricktatorship") will fare, how long Morgan can abide his "all life is precious" mantra, or whether more (or fewer) rules will be necessary for survival in the apocalypse.

## Discussion

The current analysis provides examples of several instances where utilitarianism or a lack thereof, may be applied to *TWD*. Throughout the series they contend with other survivor groups and zombies to have adequate shelter, security and food. Because no location is ever completely "safe", the survivors are constantly challenged and forced to move due to imminent danger.

One constant throughout the series is the willingness for most of the protagonists to openly discuss and debate contentious issues. Some characters, such as Shane, are less willing to listen to the opinions of others if they oppose his views. While many of these dialogues seem to take place in earlier seasons, dissention from the status quo continues throughout the series.

When discussing individual acts, some follow act utilitarianism principles, and some do not. Many acts are not wholly utilitarian or non-utilitarian, but instead contain elements of both. Moreover, while many of Shane's actions may be viewed as non-utilitarian, so may many of Dale's, who historically holds the position of the moral reasoner in the group. This polarity effects the complexity in the decision-making process for many of the situations.

The group of survivors naturally became close to one another throughout their journey, making decisions more nuanced. Often placed in situations where they had to make difficult decisions, and do so quickly or at the expense of other individuals, many choices weigh heavily on the conscience of the characters.

Rules seem to be strictly enforced in many situations. In the absence of a stable structure, consistent rules may be the one thing the survivors hold on to. For instance, in the first season, Glenn adamantly proclaims that they bury bodies of people from their groups but burn the others. Also, sticking to rules on

systematically killing walkers by piercing their brains has been essential to the survival of the group.

As the characters form institutional structures to the best of their abilities, they continue to instill rules. Institutional utilitarianism follows rules, norms and values for survival and protection from walkers and intruders. Not following guidance from the informally organized institutions can lead to various negative consequences, ranging from arguments, to exile, to death.

## Conclusion

*The Walking Dead* provides a unique insight into both the individual and group dynamics in a post-apocalyptic world, where survivors must act in ways they likely would not have otherwise considered in order to live. As Allaire explains, “Since moral values are humanly created and bound by cultural norms, values tend to change as the culture changes over time or as circumstances change” (197). As illustrated herein, individual characters and the story in general of this series illustrate major changes across time and place, as dictated by the new world and the remaining survivors.

Understanding the decisions and rationale behind their choices helps to posit decision-making more broadly. Though individuals are clearly not faced with ethical decisions related to zombies every day, they are faced with ethical decisions. *The Walking Dead* can help us understand the human experience and the process by which individuals make difficult choices.

## Works Cited

Allaire, Franklin. “The Only Good Walker is a Dead Walker.” *The Walking Dead and Philosophy: Zombie Apocalypse Now*. Edited by Wayne Yuen, Open Court Publishing, 2012, pp. 195-206.

Ambrosius, Joshua D., and Joseph M. Valenzano, III. “‘People in Hell want Slurpees’: The Redefinition of the Zombie Genre Through the Salvic Portrayal of Family on AMC’s *The Walking Dead*.” *Communication Monographs*, vol. 83, no. 1, 2016, pp. 69-93.

- “Claimed.” *The Walking Dead*, season 4, episode 11, AMC, 23, Feb. 2014, <https://www.amc.com/shows/the-walking-dead/season-4/episode-11-claimed>.
- Cohen, Stanley. *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and the Rockers*. London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1972.
- Cook, Denise N. “The Cultural Life of the Living Dead.” *Contexts*, vol. 12, no. 4, 2013, pp. 54-6.
- Dean, Robert. “Re-writing the Social Contract: Ethical catechism and ‘The Walking Dead’.” *Ekphrasis*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2012, pp. 87-95.
- Delfino, Robert A., and Lea R. Lesinski. “Carol’s Transformation.” *The Walking Dead and Philosophy: Hungry for More*. Edited by Wayne Yuen. Open Court Publishing, 2016, pp. 175-88.
- Devlin, William J., and Angel M. Cooper. “Back from the Dead.” *The Walking Dead and Philosophy: Hungry for More*. Edited by Wayne Yuen. Open Court Publishing, 2016, pp. 63-78.
- “Four Walls and a Roof.” *The Walking Dead*, season 5, episode 3, AMC, 26, Oct. 2014. <https://www.amc.com/shows/the-walking-dead/season-5/episode-03-four-walls-and-a-roof>
- “The Grove.” *The Walking Dead*, season 4, episode 14, AMC, 16, March 2014. <https://www.amc.com/shows/the-walking-dead/season-4/episode-14-the-grove>
- Gaskin, Stacey. “Shane Walsh’s Decisions and Demise.” Tenth Annual SC Upstate Research Symposium. April 18, 2014, USC Upstate, Spartanburg, 2014. pp. 20-21. <https://www.uscupstate.edu/globalassets/academics/symposium-2014.pdf>
- Hamilton, Patrick L. “Simulating the Zombie Apocalypse in Popular Culture and Media.” *Thinking Dead: What the Zombie Apocalypse Means*. Edited by Murali Balaji, Lexington, 2013, pp. 45-59.

Hawkes, Gordon. "Lie or Die". *The Walking Dead and Philosophy: Hungry for More*. Edited by Wayne Yuen. Open Court Publishing, 2016, pp. 49-62.

"Heads Up." *The Walking Dead*, season 6, episode 7, AMC, 22, Nov. 2015.  
<https://www.amc.com/shows/the-walking-dead/season-6/episode-07-heads-up>

Ho, Helen K. "The Model Minority in the Zombie Apocalypse: Asian American Manhood on AMC's *The Walking Dead*." *The Journal of Pop Culture*, vol. 49, no. 1, 2016, pp. 57-76.

"Infected." *The Walking Dead*, season 4, episode 2, AMC, 20, Oct. 2013.  
<https://www.amc.com/shows/the-walking-dead/season-4/episode-02-infected>

"Judge, Jury, Executioner." *The Walking Dead*, season 2, episode 11, AMC, 4, March 2012. <https://www.amc.com/shows/the-walking-dead/season-2/episode-11-judge-jury-executioner>

Linnemann, Travis, Tyler Wall, and Edward Green. "The Walking Dead and Killing State: Zombification and the Normalization of Police Violence." *Theoretical Criminology*, vol. 18, no. 4, 2014, pp. 506-527.

Loza, Bibiana. "The Walking Dead Character Analysis." Tenth Annual SC Upstate Research Symposium. April 18, 2014, USC Upstate, Spartanburg, 2014, pp. 18-20.  
<https://www.uscupstate.edu/globalassets/academics/symposium-2014.pdf>

Macnamara, Jim. "Media Content Analysis: Its Uses, Benefits and Best Practice Methodology." *Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2011, pp. 1-34.

Mulgan, Tim. *Understanding Utilitarianism*. Routledge, 2014.

"Remember." *The Walking Dead*, season 5, episode 12, AMC, 1, March, 2015.  
<https://www.amc.com/shows/the-walking-dead/season-5/episode-12-remember>

Robinson, Matthew B. "Justice as Freedom, Fairness, Compassion, and Utilitarianism: How My Life Experiences Shaped My Views of Justice."



- Contemporary Justice Review*, vol. 6, no. 4, 2003, pp. 329-40.
- “Save the Last One.” *The Walking Dead*, season 2, episode 3, AMC, 30, Oct. 2011. <https://www.amc.com/shows/the-walking-dead/season-2/episode-03-save-the-last-one>
- “Secrets.” *The Walking Dead*, season 2, episode 6, AMC, 20, Nov. 2011. <https://www.amc.com/shows/the-walking-dead/season-2/episode-06-secrets>
- “Self Help.” *The Walking Dead*, season 5, episode 5, AMC, 9, Nov. 2014. <https://www.amc.com/shows/the-walking-dead/season-5/episode-05-self-help>
- “Sick.” *The Walking Dead*, season 3, episode 2, AMC, 21, Oct. 2012. <https://www.amc.com/shows/the-walking-dead/season-3/episode-02-sick>
- “Strangers.” *The Walking Dead*, season 5, episode 2, AMC, 19, Oct. 2014. <https://www.amc.com/shows/the-walking-dead/season-5/episode-02-strangers>
- Sugg, Katherine. “The Walking Dead: Late liberalism and Masculine Subjection in Apocalypse Fictions.” *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 49, no. 4, 2015, pp. 793-811.
- “Tell it to the Frogs.” *The Walking Dead*, season 1, episode 3, AMC, 14, Nov. 2014. <https://www.amc.com/shows/the-walking-dead/season-1/episode-03-tell-it-to-the-frogs>
- “Try.” *The Walking Dead*, season 5, episode 15, AMC, 22, March, 2015. <https://www.amc.com/shows/the-walking-dead/season-5/episode-15-try>
- Waddell, Melanie. “Are Zombies Bad for Your Mental Health Too?” Tenth Annual SC Upstate Research Symposium. April 18, 2014, USC Upstate, Spartanburg, 2014, pp. 12-15. <https://www.uscupstate.edu/globalassets/academics/symposium-2014.pdf>
- “Walk with Me.” *The Walking Dead*, <https://www.amc.com/shows/the-walking-dead/season-3/episode-03-walk-with-me>
- “What Lies Ahead.” *The Walking Dead*, season 2, episode 1, AMC, 16, Oct. 2011. <https://www.amc.com/shows/the-walking-dead/season-2/episode-01-what-lies-ahead>
- “Wildfire.” *The Walking Dead*, season 1, episode 5, AMC, 28, Nov. 2010. <https://www.amc.com/shows/the-walking-dead/season-1/episode-05-wildfire>

Yuen, Wayne. "Carol Didn't Die." *The Walking Dead and Philosophy: Hungry for More*. Edited by Wayne Yuen. Open Court Publishing, 2016, pp. 193-204.

---. "What's Eating You?" *The Walking Dead and Philosophy: Zombie Apocalypse Now*. Edited by Wayne Yuen. Open Court Publishing, 2012, pp. 243-51.

---., editor. *The Ultimate Walking Dead and Philosophy: Hungry for More*. Open Court Publishing, 2016.

---., editor . *The Walking Dead and Philosophy: Zombie Apocalypse Now*. Open Court Publishing, 2012.

## “I’m into this Woodworking Stuff”: Hipster Masculinity and Adam Sackler on HBO’s *Girls*

MICHAEL MARIO ALBRECHT<sup>1</sup>

HBO’s *Girls* was one of the most dissected shows of the 2010s. In a blog posting for the popular culture blog *Vulture*, Bryan Moynan snarkily writes that *Girls* “was less of a television program and more of an internet think-piece factory.” Nearly all of the critical, journalistic, and scholarly writing about *Girls* has (justifiably) focused on the young women from whom the show takes its name. In addition to the compelling way in which the show depicts these women as voices of their generation (or at least a voice of a generation), *Girls* offers portrayals of the men in these women’s lives as complex, provocative, and often unfamiliar. Adam Sackler is particularly worthy of critical examination because of the complicated and often contradictory ways in which the character inhabits a particular version of twenty-first century hipster masculinity in the US. The show’s protagonist is Hannah Horvath, and Adam is Hannah’s sporadically employed on-again-off-again boyfriend. He is searching for something real in his relationships, employment, and life, but ultimately seems befuddled as to how to attain that authenticity.

Adam stands in synecdochally for a version of white urban masculinity, visible in US culture in the 2010s, which conflicts with traditional iterations of masculinity. To varying degrees of success, Adam inhabits hipster masculinity, or a version of masculinity that takes up discourses and practices of hip,

---

<sup>1</sup> Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Karen Pitcher Christiansen, Leslie Hahner, and Holly Holladay for reading drafts and working with me throughout the writing process. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers and the journal editors for their thoughtful revision recommendations. All of these folks greatly contributed to making this a much stronger piece.

economically-privileged, mostly white urban Millennials who dwell in enclaves such as Brooklyn. Hipster masculinity encompasses both aspects of traditional masculinity as well as aspects of a new masculinity that emerged in the wake of second-wave feminism. The contemporary hipster of the 2010s exists alongside and intersects with myriad versions of masculinities that circulate in popular culture and in people's lived practices. In this article, I take masculinity to be a set of gendered discourses and practices that mark subjects as a particular kind of man, and suggest that subjects inhabit those discourses and practices through performative iterations.

Television studies as a field of study has provided fruitful ground for exploring the various versions of masculinity on offer in the twenty-first century. In addition to myriad scholarly articles and edited collections, Rebecca Feasey's *Masculinity and Popular Culture*, Amanda Lotz's *Cable Guys*, and Michael Mario Albrecht's *Masculinity in Contemporary Quality Television* provide valuable insight into the ways in which televised representations of men replicate, complicate, and at times challenge dominant assumptions about masculinity. Many of the characters these authors study are deeply conflicted about their position as men in the twenty-first century at a moment when discourses and expectations about masculinity are rapidly changing. Many of these characters demonstrate traits that reflect influences by discourses of feminism that have circulated widely in the last half century. However, these men often are unable to live up to the expectations of these feminist discourses and consequently perform a version of masculinity that is at times at odds with itself as it grapples with the complex expectations that accompany feminist-influenced versions of masculinity.

*Girls* itself has been the subject of a great deal of scholarly attention, particularly about its gender politics and its relationship to feminism. That scholarship including three edited collections from academic publishers: Meredith Nash and Imelda Whelehan's *Reading Lena Dunham's Girls*, Jocelyn Bailey *et al's HBO's Girls and the Awkward Politics of Gender, Race, and Privilege*, and Betty Kaklamanidou & Margaret Tally's *HBO's Girls*. Nearly all of the entries in these collections focus on the women of *Girls*, and my goal in this paper is to broaden the conversation and offer an analysis of Adam Sackler that reflects both the general work on masculinity in television and the more specific work on *Girls*. In the next section, I interrogate the figure of the hipster, and develop the notion of hipster masculinity, a category into which Adam certainly falls, albeit often

uncomfortably. From there, I offer a specific reading of the ways in which Adam inhabits and complicates the category of masculinity, first through his performance of masculinity and his relationship to labor and class, and then through his often turbulent and ultimately unsuccessful relationship with Hannah. Finally, I try to understand the multiple and conflicted reactions that Adam evoked in the show's audience. Many wanted to hate him for the moments in which he seemed misogynist or even abusive. Similarly, many watchers wanted to like Adam and understood Hannah's compassion and love for him. Often, those sentiments came from the same person. Ultimately, I suggest that Adam's version of masculinity is complicated, conflicting, and often contradictory. At times his character seems to offer the possibility of reshaping problematic versions of masculinity; at other times he seems to be an unredeemable misogynist who is intent on controlling Hannah and exerting power over her. Adam's character is fascinating because this tension is never neatly resolved. He is neither a caring boyfriend nor an unrepentant boor; rather he has characteristics that suggest that he is both, often simultaneously.

## Hipsters

### *The Hipster and Race*

The hipster as a figure was popularized by Norman Mailer in his 1957 essay "The White Negro." Mailer describes a particular kind of white, male New Yorker who was deeply invested in bebop jazz, which was popular in the African American community at the time. In Mailer's estimation, the hipster was not satisfied with simply enjoying and appreciating bebop; he had to inhabit the culture by adopting many of the affect, slang, and mannerisms popular with the black members of that scene. In a racially problematic formulation, Mailer argues that because of their marginalized position in U.S. society, "the Negro was forced into the position of exploring all those moral wildernesses of civilized life which the Square automatically condemns as delinquent or evil or immature or morbid or self-destructive or corrupt." On his reading, the hipster was fascinated by the ability of members of the African American community to avoid the stultifying conformity of white middle-class "Square" culture that pervaded the 1950s. For Mailer, Black culture offered a bit of danger for the hipster, though Mailer fails to identify the

privilege afforded to the hipster who could at any time return to mainstream white society.

Mailer's version of the hipster, as well as Mailer's complicated and problematic depiction of the figure, echo racial complexities that historian Eric Lott outlines in *Love and Theft*. For Lott, the history of popular culture in the United States reflects dominant white culture's concomitant fascination with and repulsion by Black culture. For Lott, this phenomenon is always more complicated than simple appropriation; the fascination always reflects a complicated mix of love for Black culture that strips that culture of some of its context in an act of theft. Even from its onset, the hipster exists as a duality. On the one hand, he may truly have a deep appreciation for the culture milieu he inhabits; on the other hand, the stakes are much lower for the hipster because he is not forced to bear the incredible weight of racism that shapes the culture that he adores, mimics, and seeks to inhabit.

While the figure of the hipster has a long history, the particular version of hipsterdom that characterizes Adam (as well as several other men on *Girls*) has its roots around the turn of the twenty-first century.<sup>2</sup> In *Hip: The History*, journalist John Leland offers a genealogy of the category of hip as a set of discourses running through US culture from the Civil War until the beginning of the twenty-first century. For him, hipness historically intertwines with racial issues, and the figure of the hipster provides a way for white culture to appropriate and appreciate African American culture while maintaining a safe distance. In his model, the character that Mailer describes has many antecedents and decedents. A descendent of Mailer's hipster, the twenty-first century version, embodied by the character of Adam Sackler, is usually a white male whose performance of hipsterdom explores the complexities of class in contemporary culture more than those of race.

### *The Hipster and Class*

Leland's genealogy ends with this new iteration of the hipster, which has since emerged as the predominant form of hipsterdom in the US. He suggests that class mimicry has replaced racial mimicry in this version and writes that "after

---

<sup>2</sup> Future scholarship might examine other male characters on *Girls*, as many of the show's men are written with depth and richness.

generations of white negro hipsters, the trucker hat introduces the hipster as White Boy. He is a whiteface minstrel” (Leland 353). Writing at the beginning of the first decade of the 2000s, Leland was already able to identify this new figure and to locate the figure in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn (as well as other hip enclaves in Los Angeles, Chicago, and Portland, among others). In the years since Leland identified this hipster, the figure has proliferated in nearly every sizeable US city and has become a recognizable figure in mainstream US culture. Leland’s hipster adopts a playful orientation towards the white working class; the hipster occupies a class position that allows him to dabble in performances of working-class-ness while not being bound by the limitations of the class position. The adoption of the meshed trucker hat and an affinity for erstwhile cheap beer brands such as Pabst Blue Ribbon mark the twenty-first century hipster as a nonconformist, and creates distinction between the subculture and mainstream culture writ large.

The notion of cultural distinction evokes sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital. In *Distinction*, he argues that “taste classifies and it classifies the classifier” (6); cultural knowledge positions individuals within a classed hierarchy and this hierarchy does not necessarily correlate with economic capital. Drawing from Bourdieu, sociologist Sarah Thornton articulates the need for distinction that characterizes subcultures. She holds that subcultures “assert their distinctive character and affirm that they are not anonymous members of an undifferentiated mass” (201). Leland takes the importance of distinction that characterizes subcultures and applies it to the figure of the hipster, writing that “for hipsters of any bearing, the goal remains the same: to be not one thing but two, or three, or four” (355). The urban twenty-first century version of the hipster needs to be able to embrace the duality of the hipster scene; he needs to love cheap beer and old-timey moustaches, but he cannot ever really mean it. Leland notes that the twenty-first century hipster “explores symbolic *authenticity*” (350), and performs this authenticity by adopting styles and tastes that are distinct from the mainstream culture that he despises for its inauthenticity. However, the version of authenticity that hipsters embrace is one that exudes irony rather than sincerity. He drinks Pabst and wears trucker hats not only because he wants to distinguish himself from the mainstream by adopting unpopular consumption habits, but also as a sly knowing put-down of working class culture. The white working class drink cheap beer because it is affordable and wear mesh hats because they are comfortable when performing manual labor. The hipster knows

that he can afford expensive imported beer and does not need to perform manual labor out of necessity, so adopting those cultural practices is an inside joke for those who are able to understand the language of hipster culture.

The hipster distinguishes himself both from the conventionally fashionable mainstream consumer culture and the unfashionable working class by ironically adopting the markers of the working class in hip urban spaces such as Brooklyn. The hipster occupies a precarious position vis-à-vis class as he reimagines the environs of spaces such as Brooklyn that were once dominated by the working class. In *What Was the Hipster?*, cultural critic Mark Greif identifies a fundamental tension in the figure of the hipster, as an active member of a subculture who also occupies a space of relative privilege vis-à-vis class. For Greif, “the hipster is that person, overlapping with declassing or disaffiliating groupings—the starving artist, the starving graduate student [...] who in fact aligns himself both with rebel subculture and with the dominant class” (Greif 9). Thus, adopting the clothing and consumption practices of the working place suggests that the new denizens of Brooklyn are “slumming it” as starving artists or destitute graduate students, but their ostensible poverty is always undergirded by the privilege to leave if things become too difficult. Theirs is a poverty of choice rather than necessity.

### *The Hipster and Masculinity*

By simultaneously embracing and distancing himself from the working class, the hipster troubles any easy distinctions between class distinctions while also reaffirming his position of status in a classed system. Similarly, the version of masculinity that the hipster performs complicates the notion of masculinity while reintroducing masculinities of the past that have considerable cultural baggage. While there are certainly women who fit the description of the twenty-first century hipster, the archetypical figure of the hipster remains one that is predominantly male in the popular imagination. Writing in his blog, sociologist Tristan Bridges maintains that “hipster masculinity is associated with a specific group of men: they’re young, straight, and white. But they are also different from other young, straight, white guys—at least they seem to want to believe they are.” In other words, hipsters are men who do not want to completely destroy the category of masculinity, but rather hope to occupy a special distinguished position vis-à-vis masculinity.



Rather than essentially stable, the category of masculinity is precarious and consistently evolving, and performances of masculinity evoke both assumptions and expectations about gender in the present as well as gendered discourses from the past. In the introduction to *Debating Modern Masculinities*, sociologist Steven Roberts asserts that “the shifting and complex nature of masculinity as a gender category belies and unsettles fixed normative definitions of masculinity” (4). The hipster both unsettles and reinscribes normative assumptions about masculinity. Historically, masculinity has been aligned with labor and productivity; traditional masculinity values certain forms of work, self-sufficiency, and the potential to be a breadwinner. In “Working on Masculinity at Home,” cultural geographer Rosie Cox maintains that “there is labour that takes place in the home which has traditionally been done by men and has, at some times and in some places, been embraced by them as contributing to certain culturally-valued versions of masculinity” (228). She lists “home repairs, renovations, car maintenance, gardening and woodworking” as having “been particularly important to the performance of masculinity at certain times and in certain places” (Cox 228). Masculinity has deep roots in an ethos of production that distances men from practices of consumption, which society marked as feminine.

More recently versions of mainstream urban masculinity have centered on practices of consumption, rather than production. In “A Pedigree for the Consumerist Male,” his historical account of the complicated relationship between gender and consumption, sociologist Bill Osgerby notes that traditional distinctions between masculine production and feminist consumption had a long history, but also a great deal of overlap. According to his narrative, the post-war rise of middle class consumption in urban and suburban areas brought about a new figure of the consuming man. He writes that “as this cosmopolitan and hedonistic middle-class faction came into its own, models of masculinity rooted in personal consumption and an ‘ethic of fun’ increasingly came to the fore [...] within the culture of the new middle class, masculine identities posited on consumerist appetites became more pronounced and acceptable” (Osgerby 76). The contemporary hipster seeks to transgress the ethic of consumption by producing products through an ethic of DIY, or purchasing the discarded remnants of consumption from second-hand stores. In “The Twenty-First Century Hipster,” cultural studies scholars Ico Mali and Piia Varis note that “hipster fashion is one of the major markers of hipsterism, with an enormous emphasis on style, fashion and a particular ethic of consumption” (4). The hipster uses his

particular ethic of consumption to differentiate his performance of masculinity from mainstream men who might prefer to furnish their apartment with new artifacts from big box stores. However, in the process of disavowing consumerist masculinity, he reinscribes a version of a productionist masculinity that no longer characterizes middle-class urban life, but continues to hold considerable purchase in rural and working-class communities.

One of the strategies that the hipster adopts is a logic of pastiche. In “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” Frederic Jameson popularized the term pastiche, which he defines as “the mimicry of other styles and particularly of the mannerisms and stylistic twitches of other styles” (113). He pessimistically argued that critique and innovation in postmodern society is no longer possible, because the logic of pastiche is neutral rather than political. He avers that “in a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in an imaginary museum” (Jameson 115). The hipster offers a more optimistic understanding of the logic of pastiche; he embraces the dead styles of the past in order to critique the consumerist culture of the present, and ostensibly the problematic version of masculinity on offer in a consumerist society. As Bridges notes, hipsters do not adopt the masculinities of the past, or of the working class in total, but rather “they borrow bits and pieces, like styles of facial hair or dress or very particular cultural artifacts.” Specifically addressing gender, he notes that “hipster culture is popularly presumed to be more gender and sexually egalitarian” (Bridges). However, by adopting masculinities of the past, the hipster also reinscribes “a great deal of hipster style plays on a cultural nostalgia for masculinities of old—what I like to call ‘vintage masculinity’” (Bridges). This description of hipster masculinity highlights a contradiction that pervades in hipster masculinity. On the one hand, the hipster adheres to more progressive gender norms and eschews conformity; on the other hand, the “vintage masculinity” that often serves as a template for hipster masculinity carries with it a great deal of sexist and anti-egalitarian baggage.

In the hipster’s framework, the logic of pastiche shifts from neutrality to ambivalence. Rather than offering no point of critique, the hipster is able to offer a critique of the present, but he cannot shake the specter of the past. Bridges argues that hipsters purport to disavow the very category of masculinity through their refusal of consumerist masculinity. However, through their disavowal they constitute a new version of masculinity that may be an improvement over the

consumerist version, but that also bears traces of the past. Bridges states that “as an identity, hipster masculinity seems to simultaneously—if contradictorily—claim: ‘Real men don’t care about masculinity,’ ‘I don’t care what people think of my masculinity, and, more subtly, ‘This (practiced) indifference is why I’m more of a man than you!’” Prominent feminist journalist Susan Faludi argues that the shift to consumerism as the dominant mode of middle-class masculinity creates a feeling of ennui or malaise among men who feel trapped in the confines of a stultifying life. In *Stiffed*, she asserts that because of economic shifts such as deindustrialization and cultural shifts associated with second-wave feminism, men in contemporary US society are struggling with the role of masculinity in contemporary culture. Faludi writes that “men of the late twentieth century are falling into a status oddly similar to that of women at mid-century. The fifties housewife [...] could be said to have morphed into the nineties man, stripped of his connections to a wider world and invited to fill the void with consumption and a gym-bred display of masculinity” (40). Film scholar D. Gilson specifically locates this desire for a pre-industrial masculinity and affinity for physical craftwork in performances of hipster masculinity. In “Buddy Holly Glasses, Tube Socks, and Angst,” he asserts that “if the postindustrial United States has simultaneously seen an actual loss in ‘hard-labor’ jobs and a perceived loss of power for white men, then a return to the value of masculine handicraft under hipster aestheticism [...] should not be surprising” (Gilson 88). The desire to reconnect with physical labor through hobbies such as woodworking evokes an older version of masculinity based upon physical labor. This version of masculinity also bears traces of the pre-feminist world in which this masculinity dominated.

### Adam as Reluctant Hipster

By the time that *Girls* premiered in 2012, Adam Sackler is easily identifiable as a hipster of the twenty-first century variety. However, Adam’s version of hipsterdom is not enthusiastic, though this is not uncommon among the hipster population. One of the tropes of hipsterdom is to deny one’s position as a hipster; in an article for *Millennial*, Daniel Allan snarkily argues that while hipsters are an identifiable group, “it actually has zero self-claimed members.” While few may confess to being a hipster, many are invested in adopting a style and set of

performative markers that identify the person as a hipster to others. Though Adam adopts many of the traits of the hipster, he seems uncomfortable with any public performance thereof, and instead leads a relatively hermetic life. The anxiety that Adam feels about his position within a hipster enclave reflects the complicated ways in which masculinity and class intersect in such an environment.

Adam's conflicted hipster identity points to conflicts and contradictions in his performance of masculinity, and the ways it intertwines with class issues. These complexities and contradictions emerge upon his introduction in the series pilot. The audience meets Adam as Hannah visits him at his apartment. The apartment is disheveled, but it projects an ethic of consumption that eschews mainstream consumer culture by reusing artifacts from the past. His affinity for the past similarly manifests in his proclivity for woodworking, a necessary skill for survival in industrial past, but a hobby made possible only by his position of relative privilege. Woodworking provides a lens into Adam's complicated relationship to work and money. In the pilot, he reveals that he majored in comparative literature in college, "and it hasn't done shit" ("Pilot"). Here, he is questioning the value of a college education, one of the bedrocks of middle-class life and masculinity. Though Adam has not actually tried to find work by using his comparative literature degree, Hannah tries to validate his other achievements. She refers to him as an actor, though at the time he does not seem to be working at all as an actor. His identification as an actor (or at least Hannah's identification of him as such) situates him outside of middle-class norms and suggests that he has an affinity for a more Bohemian lifestyle, beyond the uncomfortable confines of the traditional capitalist rat-race. Further, the profession of acting does not comport with dominant expectations about heterosexual masculinity; acting is often marked as feminine or gay rather than normatively masculine. Further, heteronormative masculinity is deeply intertwined with the ideal of a breadwinner, an unlikely position for an actor to find himself in. However, perhaps to quell any doubts about his heterosexual bona fides, he elaborates, saying that "I'm really into this woodworking stuff. It's just more honest." Woodworking may be outside of the confines of dominant expectations of middle-class comfort, but it definitely marks Adam as a heterosexual man and evokes a working-class masculinity, which he sees as more authentic, or honest.

However, the honesty that Adam expresses about his woodwork is undermined by his inability to survive on his own financially; he is certainly not in a position to play the role of a breadwinner who must provide for others. Adam

confides that his grandmother gives him \$800 a month, noting that “it gives me the feeling that I don’t have to be anyone’s slave” (“Pilot”). Here, Adam is performing an ironic critique of the capitalist system. On the one hand, he does not need to labor in the service of an employer; however, this luxury only comes about because of his financial stability. As Marx was only able to critique capitalism from a position of comfort because of his sponsor Engels, Adam can only challenge the capitalist system because of his grandmother’s allowance. However, Adam seems unfazed by his financial dependence. When Hannah mentions that she feels embarrassed because she is unable to earn a living for herself, Adam rebuffs her, pointing out the ostensible freedom that accompanies by financial dependence. I suggest that Adam’s seeming self-assurance about his dependence on his grandmother masks a deeper anxiety about discourses of masculinity. Further, it reflects the fundamental tension outlined by Greif about the classed contradictions that characterize the hipster as he navigates the privileged world of economic stability while working to disrupt many of the norms that undergird that world of privilege.

If traditional masculinity was closely aligned with one’s occupation, then Adam’s masculinity is characterized by his ability to exist as a man with no full-time occupation but only hobbies that evoke erstwhile masculinities. In the pilot, Adam even seems proud to be mostly unemployed, stating confidently “I haven’t applied for a job in a long fucking time” (“Pilot”). Adam is ultimately uncomfortable inhabiting many aspects of hipster masculinity, particularly the aspects that require public presentation and performance as part of everyday existence. However, he craves the authenticity that accompanies the more bohemian aspects of hipsterdom. His ultimate dream is to be an actor unencumbered by the conventions of theater or the dictatorial impulses of the director. He yearns for an irreverent authenticity that characterizes many bohemian conclaves. However, Adam is only able to pursue his dreams to the fullest because he is bankrolled by his grandmother. He wants to inhabit a working-class experience, but like many hipsters, is only able to achieve this because of his financial security. Adam is searching for value in woodworking while living in a tiny apartment that does not require woodworking skills for survival and an urban US mainstream that does not value production in the era of consumption. Adam inhabits an urban cultural landscape in Brooklyn, historically a working-class borough, which seems to have forsaken many of the tenets of the erstwhile masculinities that he values, especially those that accompany manual

labor. Adam is fascinated by the ostensible authenticity of traditional manual labor, but is ironically only able to perform this kind of manual work because of his privileged class position.

His performance of masculinity is deeply imbricated with his ambivalent position vis-à-vis class. While he takes up many of the traits of hipster masculinity, Adam is at times uncomfortable with the version of masculinity that often circulates within hipster culture. Specifically, the urban hipster often adopts an air of ironic distance that allows him to enjoy a handlebar moustache and a trucker hat without really being invested in those trappings. Adam wants to explore what he considers to be a more authentic version of masculinity that does not need to put on airs for public performance. Especially in the early seasons of the show, Adam feels constrained by the limits of his gentrified urban environment and instead evokes a more traditional blue-collar masculinity in his affinity for woodworking and his search for something more real. Throughout the show, Adam seems intent on disrupting a familiar version of white urban masculinity; however, he is haunted by specters of traditional masculinity.

One way in which Adam creates a distinction between himself and the larger hipster community is by refusing to adopt a curated version of style. The hipster may abhor middle-class sensibilities, but he is often particular about his presentation of fashion in clothes, music, and domicile. Adam first appears on *Girls* in the pilot as Hannah goes to visit his apartment; he answers the door shirtless, and he is often shirtless throughout the show. In fact, his proclivity for not wearing a shirt becomes an inside joke for the writers of the show. In the series' seventh episode, "Welcome to Bushwick aka the Crackcident," Hannah remarks that: "I've never seen him outside his house. I've never seen him with his shirt on." This quote is telling because it shows the ways in which Adam eschews the fashion aspect of hipsterdom. If part of performing the part of the hipster is putting oneself on display as an urban dandy, Adam utterly refuses to do that by existing half-naked in his own home. Adam is unable to function within either the social framework of mainstream consumption or the ironic version of consumption on offer by most hipsters. Instead, he is most comfortable working with wood while not wearing a shirt.

The show's first shot of Adam's apartment in the pilot shows a messy assemblage of vintage items: a mid-century typewriter, a 1970s television, a work bench with tools for woodworking. The second shot of the apartment reveals two old bikes in need of disrepair, a vintage alarm clock, and a couch from the 1960s

or 1970s. Nothing from the apartment seems new, suggesting that Adam rejects mainstream consumerism and the version of masculinity that accompanies that lifestyle. The lack of mainstream consumer products and the vintage nature of the objects in the apartment identifies Adam as a hipster. However the lack of curation and general messiness shows that Adam is not completely comfortable inhabiting the part of the hipster. Or perhaps, Adam's particular performance of chaos and filth suggests that his version of hipsterdom is a performance of apathy.

His apartment demonstrates a refusal to take part in the bourgeois comforts that should accompany his college degree and his income from his grandmother. The apartment is sparse, filthy, and devoid of any markers of middle-class comfort. In her description of the space in "Girls: An Economic Redemption through Production and Labor," television scholar Laura Witherington writes that "nails, dust, discarded boards and buckets litter the floor. In other scenes, Adam uses power tools in his carpentry, and the result of work is strewn about the place. His bed is a mattress on top of wooden pallets" (Witherington 135). The dirty apartment aligns Adam with a working-class aesthetic and seems to distance him from both mainstream and hipster modes of consumption that is tightly curated and self-consciously performative. If the traditional hipster seeks to revisit the consumptive practices of the past through thrift stores and irony, Adam wants to find a version of masculinity that is historically prior to the era of consumption.

His obsession with woodworking gives him a sense that he is doing something that is more real than the standard choices on offer in contemporary society. Woodworking provides an authenticity that supersedes both the mainstream consumerist ethos and hipster masculinity in its realness. Adam does not want to participate in the ironic sensibilities that often characterize hipsterdom; he does not want to enjoy woodworking superficially as a hobby while simultaneously critiquing the working-class masculinity that he is performing. Instead, he proclaims to enjoy woodworking because it's more "honest," but does not seem to make the connection between manual labor and income. He wants to transcend hipster masculinity and strive for something more primal; however, he seems oblivious to the fact that the only reason that he is able to aspire to such a pure version of masculinity is because he has the privilege of backup finances. Adam believes himself to be different from other men while simultaneously benefiting from the cultural position of straight white guys. He can refuse many of the comforts of the middle class because he ultimately does not need to worry about financial security.

## Adam and Hannah

Adam's performance of masculinity is often on display through his schizophrenic relationship with Hannah. Though his version of masculinity often feels regressive and speaks to what pre-feminist understandings of the role of men, Adam is more than simply a nostalgic figure yearning for a simpler time when men did physical labor and aggression towards women was the norm. Adam seems torn between the appeal of this pre-liberationist version of masculinity and a version that aligns with what Faludi refers to as a "nineties man," but which continues to maintain purchase in the 2010s. The "nineties man" that Faludi outlines is a similar figure to the new man who television scholar Amanda Lotz suggests is the precursor to the more complicated masculinities that proliferate in contemporary television. In *Cable Guys*, Lotz locates her new man in the television shows of the 1980s and 1990s, and notes that many characters on these shows "exhibited masculinity either changed by the women's movement or at least less antagonistic toward women's changing social roles than counterparts who were characterized as deeply committed to patriarchal masculinity" (Lotz 43). Hipster masculinity aligns with the new man that Lotz outlines, while remaining sympathetic to some of the performances and practices of more traditional pre-liberationist masculinity. For example, Bridges writes about the ways in which hipsters have incorporated traditionally masculine practices such as beard-wearing and bacon-eating as part of their performance of masculinity. In his performance of hipster masculinity, Adam bears traces of both the new man as well more traditional pre-feminist masculinity. This more sensitive version of masculinity comes out in his love of acting, and Adam consistently seems torn between the shirtless woodworker and the sensitive actor. This more sensitive version of masculinity emerges only sporadically in his relationship with Hannah, in those few moments when he demonstrates tenderness and affection, rather than trying to control her.

This tenderness is on display in "Together," the second-season finale in which Adam literally runs while Facetiming with a mentally distraught Hannah. When Hannah remarks, "You're here," he responds, "Well, I was always here" ("Together"). This interaction demonstrates the tension between Adam's usually gruff demeanor, which points to a traditional version of masculinity and a moment in which he expresses actual compassion and affection, evoking the new man discourses. These multiple masculinities exist within the character of Adam



and are indicative of the multiple versions of masculinity that exist in televised versions of twenty-first century contemporary masculinities. Further, Adam seems unable to reconcile these versions of masculinity; instead he exudes an anxiety about masculinity and gender that speak not only to Adam's internal struggles but also to a larger cultural anxiety about masculinity that circulates in contemporary US culture, or at least the version of US culture inhabited by relatively well-off white millennial men.

The contradictions and complexities of Adam's masculinity often manifest in his behavior towards Hannah. At times, Adam seems completely indifferent towards Hannah, and he often treats her with disgust or disdain. At other moments, he believes that the two are soulmates and that their relationship can transcend the banality from which Adam hopes to escape. The complexity of his relationship with Hannah emerges in the pilot, when he refers to Hannah as "doll," which immediately evokes a vintage masculinity ("Pilot"). Hannah is, at least nominally, a character with feminist sensibilities, who might ordinarily bristle at the word. However, she seems unfazed by this pet name, and this suggests that Adam is using the term ironically; he knows very well that the term is sexist, but he believes his connection to Hannah is great enough that she will know that he doesn't really mean it. Adam and his masculinity often present a cipher, as Hannah and the audience are unsure about when he's being serious and when he's adopting an ironic stance. He might like woodworking because it feels more real, but he seems unable to find authenticity in his relationship with Hannah.

As he does with his privilege of being unemployed, Adam extols his desire for freedom and autonomy. In the pilot he quips that "you should never be anyone's fucking slave...except mine" ("Pilot"). While Adam is espousing the virtues of freedom, he undermines Hannah's potential freedom by insisting that she be his slave. Adam problematizes this dynamic as his seemingly unredeemable misogynist comment is mitigated by subsequent flirtation and sexual activity. Just as the writing plays on the word "you" as both a stand-in for a more generalizable "one" and a direct address of Hannah, the word "fucking" takes on a dual meaning in the tension between its adjectival and gerund forms ("Pilot"). Perhaps he just wants Hannah to be his slave for the purposes of fucking. The clever writing plays on polysemy and further marks Adam as a cipher; Hannah and the audience are left unsure about what Adam actually means, and perhaps Adam is unsure of this as he grapples between two competing versions of masculinity. On the one hand, he believes that everyone should have

complete freedom and should avoid having to be a slave. On the other hand, he feels a desire to control Hannah and to stifle her freedom

Adam's performance of masculinity is an amalgam of previous iterations of masculinity that are seemingly incompatible. In Adam—and by way of synecdoche in white, hipster, millennial masculinity in the US—multiple versions of masculinity circulate including a traditional version of masculinity that assumes that men have power over women in relationships and the new man who maintains a more egalitarian notion of masculinity and the power dynamics of heterosexual relationships. The hipster masculinity that Adam struggles to inhabit encompasses both the gruffness of the pre-feminist man as well as the sensitivity of the new man, and Adam remains unable to reconcile the contradictions that characterize masculinity in the twenty-first century. At times, Adam wants to assert his dominance, while at others he is uncomfortable doing so and these different versions of masculinity manifest as confusion and anxiety at different moments in his relationship with Hannah, especially in their sex life.

"Vagina Panic," the series' second episode, starts *in media res* while Adam and Hannah are engaging in sex ("Vagina Panic"). They are playing out a fantasy in which Adam finds an eleven-year-old junkie Hannah who is donning a Cabbage Patch Kids lunchbox. Adam, who controls the narrative of the fantasy, proclaims, "You're a dirty little whore and I'm going to send you home to your parents covered in cum" ("Vagina Panic"). He then insists that Hannah touch herself, but wants to control her orgasm, telling her: "From now on, you have to ask my permission whenever you want to cum. If you're touching yourself and you think you're going to cum, you'd better fucking call me first" ("Vagina Panic"). Here, Adam wants to control Hannah's sexuality even when he is not around; he is performing a version of masculinity that replicates traditional power dynamics of the heterosexual relationship.

Whether these controlling impulses are really part of Adam's sexual desires or just sexual fantasy is ambiguous. In either case, the scene works to demonstrate a desire to control his sexual partner that evokes a version of masculinity that seems incompatible with the more moderated, caring version of masculinity that characterizes the new man. Instead, Adam's possessiveness points towards pre-liberationist versions of masculinity. Bridges contends that "hipster masculinities rely on a specific interpretation of their performances of gender. They rely on a sort of 'when men used to be men' understanding." Adam's performance of masculinity in this scene especially aligns with Bridges' description, though the

performance seems to evoke more anxiety and ambivalence than satisfaction for Adam. Adam's version of masculinity seems devoid of the hipster irony that might soften his aggression towards women. By striving for something more honest," Adam is unable to evoke a sense of play conducive to navigating the powerful sexual dynamics that the couple is exploring.

However, the show complicates the power dynamics of Adam and Hannah's sex life in later seasons. In the third season, *Girls* revisits the idea of roleplaying in an episode titled "Role-Play." At this point, Adam and Hannah are now in a more serious relationship, but at least from Hannah's perspective, their sex life needs a spark. She tries to persuade Adam to have sex "the way they used to," telling him "you used to have all these ideas about me being like a little baby street slut, or like an orphan with a disease" ("Role-Play"). Adam suggests that he is no longer able to enjoy the type of fantasy talk that used to arouse him; the bawdy talk was part of his past, "but then we fell in love, and I just wanted to have sex with you as us. Just fuck and be sweet or whatever" ("Role-Play"). For Adam, intimacy is incompatible with dirty sexual talk; once he perceives Hannah as his girlfriend, he is no longer able to inhabit the violent version of masculinity that allowed him to degrade Hannah previously.

The differences in Adam's ability to successfully and willingly perform abusive versions of masculinity demonstrate the competing versions of masculinity that constitute Adam's conflicted subject positions. He seems unable to integrate his competing desires about control and sex into a version that works for him; he consistently fails and flails and seems lost in his efforts to perform masculinity in a satisfying and successful way. He seems to experience a profound ambivalence between two competing versions of masculinity. On the one hand, he wants to play the part of the new man who is more sensitive and egalitarian in his romantic and sexual relationships. On the other hand, he enjoys the individual freedom of more traditional versions of masculinity, when woodworking was important, and guys referred to women as dolls. His ambivalence towards these two versions of masculinity and his inability to articulate what he really means as he vacillates between powerful earnestness, confused reclusiveness, and hipster irony are ultimately what keep Hannah from choosing a life with him at the end of the series, and why the show presents this romantic refusal as an act of empowerment for Hannah.

## Conclusion

Ambivalence towards Adam, especially in his relationship with Hannah, runs throughout many critiques of the show and the question of Adam's appeal recurs throughout the series. In a blog for *Entertainment Weekly*, Sarah Caldwell asks "how are we supposed to feel about Adam?" Because of the multiple iterations of masculinity that circulate in contemporary discourses and Adam's ability to engage multiple discourses of masculinity in his performance, the show invites an ambivalence towards Adam, and subsequently to the version of hipster masculinity that he represents. The myriad versions of masculinity that exist in contemporary US culture—including the version of hipster masculinity with which Adam wrestles—arguably reflect both accommodation of and resistance to women's gains in the public sphere. A generous reading of Adam maintains that he desires to perform a version of gender that is palatable to the sensibilities of a feminist-inspired 2010s Brooklyn, but is unable to navigate this terrain as his actions often belie any ostensible commitment to post-liberationist gender relations.

Any feminist understanding of Adam needs to account for not only his often abhorrent behavior towards women, but also the continued sympathy that the character evokes in both Hannah's willingness to give him multiple chances at a relationship, as well as the sympathy that Adam's character evokes in readings of the show. The problematic nature of Adam's character is especially on display in "On All Fours" in which Adam performs a frightening version of masculinity with Natalia, a girl he is dating while he and Hannah are on one of their many breaks. A drunken Adam orders her to crawl on his filthy floor, throws her aggressively onto the bed, roughly mounts her from behind, and deposits his semen against her wishes on her dress. Immediately afterwards, Natalia remarks that "I like really didn't like that" ("On All Fours"). In her blog for a community of HBO viewers, M. J. Snow asks "did we witness a rape?" On my read, the scene amplifies a lack of consent, and should consequently be viewed as an instance of rape. However, Blow disagrees, maintaining that "what he inflicted upon Natalia wasn't rape at all, but a kind of test to see if she could actually handle the *real* Adam." Thus, in her understanding, the authentic Adam, which seems to be what he is striving for throughout the show is angry and horrible, but not a rapist. The scene definitely presents Adam as inhabiting a version of masculinity that is unacceptable in any feminist-informed performance of masculinity. Yet Adam is

not immediately disqualified as an acceptable character, and readings such as Snow's sympathize with a person who may indeed have committed rape. Why is Adam able to redeem himself in the eyes of the viewer, when his true self performs in such a way that is arguably rapacious?

Perhaps Adam is able to be palatable or even desirable in spite of his flaws because he is ultimately a tragic figure; he wants to be enlightened and challenge the system, but he seems unable to figure out how to do that. His natural habitat would seem to be that of the hipster, but hipster masculinity requires too much pretense for a person intent on interrogating what's real. He wants to work with wood because it's real, not because it's ironic. Similarly, he wants his sexual performance to be real, but when he tries to negotiate sex on a register that he's comfortable with, he reinforces the virgin/whore dichotomy at the heart of many feminist critiques. Adam wants to have sex in an authentic way that jibes with his understandings about freedom and autonomy, but that reality is often at odds with the feminist sensibilities to which he might strive. The discourses of masculinity that Adam inhabits reflect an anxiety about men's loss of power and status, and sympathy for the complicated character reflects a tragic nostalgia for a bygone era of unquestioned masculine power.

As the show ends, Adam is left with an unfulfilling relationship with Jessa while Hannah moves to the suburbs to raise the child alone. The final episode, "Latching," features no men and suggests that Hannah's newborn boy will be raised by various configurations of women. If Adam's performance of masculinity evoked a constellation of anxieties about masculinity in the twenty-first century, the erasure of men from the final episode would seem to exacerbate those anxieties. The show remains ambivalent on the question of "how we're supposed to feel about Adam," but it does clearly articulate that Adam (and perhaps men in general) are unnecessary in Hannah's life. In a television landscape that focuses on men and masculinity, *Girls* displaces men and the heterosexual romantic dyad by removing Adam from the final two episodes. Adam remains a frustrating, complicated, intriguing character, and the version of masculinity for which he stands in similarly confounds and eludes easy conclusions.

## Works Cited

- Albrecht, Michael Mario. *Masculinity in Contemporary Quality Television*. Routledge, 2015.
- Allan, Daniel. "Why Hipsters Hate Being Called a 'Hipster.'" *Millennial*, Millennial Magazine LLC, 6 Jan. 2016.  
[millennialmagazine.com/2016/01/06/why-hipsters-hate-being-called-a-hipster/](http://millennialmagazine.com/2016/01/06/why-hipsters-hate-being-called-a-hipster/)
- Bailey, Joycelyn, et al. *HBO's Girls and the Awkward Politics of Gender, Race, and Privilege*. Lexington Books, 2015.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinctions: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Translated by Richard Nice, Harvard UP, 1984.
- Bridges, Tristan. "Bacon, Beards, and Beer: Feminist Reflections on Hipster Masculinity." *The Society Pages*, University of Minnesota Press, 31 Jul. 2014.  
[thesocietypages.org/feminist/2014/07/31/bacon-beards-and-beer-feminist-reflections-on-hipster-masculinity/](http://thesocietypages.org/feminist/2014/07/31/bacon-beards-and-beer-feminist-reflections-on-hipster-masculinity/)
- Caldwell, Sarah. "Girls: How Are We Supposed to Feel About Adam?" *Entertainment Weekly*, Meredith Corporation., 13 Mar. 2013.  
[ew.com/article/2013/03/18/girls-adam-season-finale/](http://ew.com/article/2013/03/18/girls-adam-season-finale/)
- Cox, Rosie. "Working on Masculinity at Home." *Masculinities and Place*, Edited by Andrew Gorman-Murry and Peter Hopkins. Burlington, Ashgate Publishing, 2014, pp. 227-240.
- Faludi, Susan. *Stuffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*. Perennial Press, 1999.
- Feasey, Rebecca. *Masculinity and Popular Television*. Edinburgh UP, 2008.
- Gilson, D. "Buddy Holly Glasses, Tube Socks, and Angst: Hipster Boyhoods in Moonrise Kingdom." *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* vol. 33, no. 1, 2016, pp. 83-95.

- Grief, Mark. "Positions" *What Was the Hipster? A Sociological Investigation*, Edited by Mark Grief, Kathleen Ross, and Dayna Tortorici, n+1 Foundation, 2010.
- Jameson, Frederic. "Postmodernism and Consumer Society." *Postmodern Culture*. Edited by Hal Foster, Pluto Press, 1985.
- Kaklamanidou, Despoina-Betty, and Margaret Tally, editors. *HBO's Girls: Questions of Gender, Politics, and Millennial Angst*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014.
- "Latching." *Girls*, directed by Jenni Konner, written by Lena Dunham, Jenni Konner & Judd Apatow, Home Box Office, 2017.
- Leland, John. *Hip: The History*. Harper Collins, 2004.
- Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. Oxford UP, 1995.
- Lotz, Amanda. *Cable Guys: Television and Masculinities in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. New York UP, 2014.
- Mailer, Norman. "The White Negro." *Dissent*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 20 Jun. 2007. [dissentmagazine.org/online\\_articles/the-white-negro-fall-1957](http://dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/the-white-negro-fall-1957)
- Mali, Ico. & Piia Varis. "The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Hipster: On Micro-Populations in Times of Superdiversity." *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol 19, no. 6, 2016, pp. 637-53.
- Moylan, Bryan. "A Complete Timeline of All Controversies Girls Started." *Vulture*, New York Media LLC, 12 Feb. 2017, [vulture.com/2017/02/hbos-girls-a-complete-controversy-timeline.html](http://vulture.com/2017/02/hbos-girls-a-complete-controversy-timeline.html).
- Nash, Meredith, and Imelda Whelehan, editors. *Reading Lena Dunham's Girls: Feminism, Postfeminism, Authenticity and Gendered Performance in Contemporary Television*. Springer Television, 2017.
- "On All Fours." *Girls*, directed by Lena Dunham, written by Lena Dunham and Jenni Konner, Home Box Office, 2013.

Osgerby, Bill. "A Pedigree of the Consuming Male: Masculinity, Consumption and the American 'Leisure Class.'" *The Sociological Review*, vol. 51, no. 1, 2003, pp. 57-85.

"Pilot." *Girls*, directed by Lena Dunham, written by Lena Dunham, Home Box Office, 2012.

Roberts, Steven. "Introduction: Masculinities in Crisis? Opening the Debate." *Debating Modern Masculinities: Change, Continuity, Crisis?*, Edited by Steven Roberts, Palgrave MacMillan, 2014, pp. 1-16.

"Role-Play." *Girls*, directed by Jesse Peretz, written by Lena Dunham and Judd Apatow, Home Box Office, 2014.

Snow, M.J. "On All Fours: Did We Witness a Rape on Sunday's Episode of Girls?" *HBO Watch*, 16 Mar 2013. [hbowatch.com/on-all-fours-did-we-witness-a-rape-on-sundays-episode-of-girls/](http://hbowatch.com/on-all-fours-did-we-witness-a-rape-on-sundays-episode-of-girls/)

Thornton, Sarah. "The Social Logic of Subcultural Capital." *The Subcultures Reader*, Edited by Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton, Routledge, 1997, pp. 200-09.

"Together." *Girls*, directed by Lena Dunham, written by Lena Dunham and Jenni Konner, Home Box Office, 2013.

"Vagina Panic." *Girls*, directed by Lena Dunham, written by Lena Dunham, Home Box Office, 2012.

"Welcome to Bushwick aka the Crackcident." *Girls*, directed by Jody Lee Lipes, written by Lena Dunham and Jenni Konner, Home Box Office, 2012.

Witherington, Laura "Girls: An Economic Redemption through Production and Labor" *HBO's Girls: Questions of Gender, Politics, and Millennial Angst*. Edited by Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally, Cambridge Scholars, 2014, pp. 122-39.



# Introduction to the Special Issue

BERNADETTE MARIE CALAFELL

White Walkers. Hosts gone awry. Undead wrestlers. We are surrounded by monsters. Whether it is in horror films, children's movies, video games, or even in the form of our politicians, monsters inundate our everyday life. They teach us lessons, convey ideologies about what is socially acceptable, and they tell us who or what to fear. Whether through folklore, myth, or film, monsters have always been present. Monsters come to represent collective anxieties around difference (Calafell; Cohen; Levina and Bui; Loza; Phillips; Poole). They also have the potential to resist oppressive ideologies or stereotypes (Abdi and Calafell).

In this current political climate monsters provide us with a site to work through collective fears and address issues that we have yet to have forthright public discussions about. Thus, in this moment, monsters have become increasingly important. They demand our attention. They ask us to hear their screams. Each of the essays in this special issue provide us with an opportunity to consider the role of monstrosity in not only popular culture, but as meaning makers, and as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues, pure culture. Monsters tell us who we are. The essays included in this issue critically unpack representations of monstrosity intersectionally through the lenses of race, class, gender, ability, and sexuality. They also demonstrate how monsters are symbolically made or constructed in the practice of every life. Scholars from Political Science, Communication Studies, Performance Studies, Rhetoric, and Literary Studies bring their unique lenses and methodologies to bear on monsters to offer interdisciplinary perspectives that mirror the wide ranging approaches of the fields of horror and monster studies. This special issue brings together established scholars, as well as new voices, to reflect on the cultural significance of monsters and monstrosity.

This issue also includes the voices of practitioners as we pull back the curtains to hear from the up and coming Vancouver based Latin themed horror production company, Luchagore Productions, as Caleb Green interviews them about their history, motivations, and their most recent projects. We round out the issue with

The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 6, No. 2 & 3

Copyright © 2018

interviews with leading scholars in the fields of monster and horror studies; Marina Levina and Kendall Phillips.

This special issue would not have been possible without the vision and support of Norma Jones, as well as the labor of the editorial board for the special issue. Thank you to each of them. I am also grateful to Luchagore Productions, Marina Levina, and Kendall Phillips for their willingness to be interviewed. This special issue would not have been complete without them.

### Works Cited

- Abdi, Shadee and Bernadette Marie Calafell. "Queer Utopias and a (Feminist) Iranian Vampire: A Critical Analysis of Resistive Monstrosity in *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*." *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2017, pp. 358-370.
- Calafell, Bernadette Marie. *Monstrosity, Performance, and Race in Contemporary Culture*. Peter Lang, 2015.
- Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. "Monster Culture: Seven Theses." *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen. University of Minnesota Press, 1996, pp. 3-25.
- Levina, Marina and Diem-My T. Bui. *Monster Culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Reader*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.
- Loza, Susana. *Speculative Imperialisms: Monstrosity and Masquerade in Postracial Times*. Lexington Books, 2017.
- Phillips, Kendall. *Projected Fears: Horror Films and American Culture*. Praeger, 2005.
- Poole, W. Scott. *Monsters in America: Our Historical Obsession With the Hideous and the Haunting*. Baylor University Press, 2013.

# Transing Dystopia: Constituting Trans Monstrosity, Performing Trans Rage in Torrey Peters' *Infect Your Friends and Loved Ones*

BENNY LEMASTER

The current US government is aggressively rolling back Obama era policies that directly target trans people. Concurrently, US government structures are animated through an intersectional platform disproportionately effecting trans folks navigating multiple marginalized identities. These reversals are legitimized through the rhetorical construction of a world constituted in fear; and these changes allegedly seek to ease these fears. More precisely, marginalized difference is exploited precisely because of its outsider status and promoted as monstrous enactments to be feared. Once the other is rendered monstrous and of eliciting fear, the State is enabled to promote a series of policies and procedures that attempt to remedy the fear by demolishing the monster. For instance, in recent and ongoing bathroom legislation designed to target and criminalize trans folks, stereotypical images of trans women are conjured as a means of provoking fear. The erasure of trans men and non-binary folks in many of these scare tactics highlight the transmisogyny that undergirds these monstrous renderings (Serano, *Excluded*).<sup>1</sup>

A recent YouGov survey finds trans phenomena continues to be understood as either a mental illness or as a choice and less as a core sense of self. Moreover,

---

<sup>1</sup> Cisheterosexism locates gender within various intersections of sexism, cissexism, and heterosexism. Conversely, cisheteronormativity names gender norms defined through cisgender and heterosexual criteria that privileges men, males, and masculinity (see LeMaster). At the same time, identity is always intersectional and thus any focus on cisheterosexism is equally defined in and through race and class, for instance.

the survey found that most cisgender or non-trans folks have no interest in befriending, dating, or fucking trans people. In short, trans folks are understood conceptually not dialogically and often through mass mediated means that continue to use stereotypes to tell their stories (Lester). In addition, political and religious discourse is constituted through exclusionary ideologies. For example, Pope Francis placed the detriment of the human race in tension with trans-affirming subjectivity in his address to the 23<sup>rd</sup> General Assembly of the Members of the Pontifical Academy for Life (see Holy See Press Office). He paradoxically calls for a “renewed culture of identity and difference” and to end women’s oppression while referring to trans-affirmation as “techniques and practices that make it irrelevant for the development of the person and for human relationships.” The inference being isolation and desolation; that is, if one is not authoring the future through cisheteronormative reproductive means, one is ushering in apocalyptic ends. He continues by suggesting that these techniques and practices “remove both the human dignity of the sexually different constitution, and the personal quality of the generative transmission of life” effectively rendering trans subjects as anything but human; indeed, monstrous. Ultimately, the Pope warns against the “utopia of the ‘neutral,’” a world that is defined through the antithesis of “creativ[ity] and fruitful[ness].” Though, the utopia the Pope warns against is clearly utopic from the vantage of those who affirm those techniques and practices he warns against. Indeed, from his vantage, this *utopia* is his *dystopia*. Likewise, the Pope’s utopia—one in which trans-affirmation is inconceivable—is dystopic from the vantage of trans and gender non-conforming subjects. Said differently, temporality serves as a point of contention in which differing ideological positionalities provide frameworks for constructing a particular futurity cast as utopic for some and dystopic for others.

Informed by theories of monstrosity and transfeminism, this essay examines the dystopic potentialities that emerge as a result of “trans monstrosity” and its affect “trans rage.” This essay argues trans rage can enable queer worldmaking that serves as the grounds for reassessing and reconfiguring dystopia as a queer utopia all along. If one is to desire a *utopia of the neutral*, and this essay asserts one ought to, then one must first recognize such utopias as relationally dystopic enactments constituted through normative fears. Indeed, to trans dystopia—to destabilize the boundaries attempting to contain dystopic meaning—is to consider the contradictory ways dystopia and utopia are co-constitutive. In this way, such an endeavor reveals queer utopias to have been always already “creative and

fruitful” all along, regardless of the Pope’s apocalyptic vision otherwise. Indeed, it is in the refusal to embrace normative futurity that utopia and dystopia are understood as co-constitutive and as the epistemic grounds on which monstrosity and its concomitant affects animate potentiality.

Four sections order the remainder of this essay. First, the theoretical grounds for an analytic framework are provided. Specifically, we explicate a heuristic device derived of Susan Stryker’s theorization of “transsexual monstrosity” and its attending affect “transgender rage” (“Words” 241).<sup>2</sup> Second, we describe the text under investigation: Torrey Peters’ *Infect Your Friends and Loves Ones* (henceforth: *Infect*), a dystopic novella centering trans women. Third, *Infect* is analyzed through a transfeminist approach to monstrosity. In particular, the analysis engages two co-constitutive processes derived of Stryker’s work: becoming monstrous and monstrous becomings. And fourth, a conclusion traces the potentiality of dystopia through a transfeminist framing of monstrosity. In the end, we explore trans monstrous affect as a ground for enacting queer worldmaking. With that, let us shift to theory.

## THEORIZING TRANS MONSTROSITY AND THE POTENTIALITY OF TRANS RAGE

The figure of the monster has long haunted transness just as transness has long haunted monstrosity. Anson Koch-Rein characterizes the relationship between monstrosity and trans discourse as “ambivalent,” or as “serving widely divergent narratives of transphobic insult and trans\*<sup>3</sup> resistance alike” (135). On one end, the monster has been used as a metaphoric means of articulating a dehumanized trans subject; in particular, trans women. For instance, citing Frankenstein’s Monster, Mary Daly infamously characterizes trans women in nothing short of

---

<sup>2</sup> While the subjects of the current analysis are indeed transsexual, “trans” is used so as to open the epistemic terrain for scholars to explore the potentiality in trans discourses as they pertain to a multitude of experiences (For distinctions, see Johnson; Booth).

<sup>3</sup> Following Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore, this essay deploys *trans* (without an asterisk) as “the capillary space of connection and circulation between the macro- and micro-political registers” including monstrosity (14).

monstrously cissexist terms: a “necrophilic invasion . . . of cyborgs which will be part flesh, part robot, of clones” (71). Borrowing Jeffrey Cohen’s words, one can read this framing as the “exaggeration of cultural difference into monstrous aberration” (7). In a more recent projection of trans-exclusionary thought, Sheila Jeffreys frames trans folks as pathological creations of modern patriarchal medicine enacting harm against self and other. For Jeffreys, the “treatment” for this monstrous ailment is “iatrogenic” in that its purported cure exacerbates the illness (183). In this regard, Jeffreys feigns concern that people must be saved from the monstrosity of transness, including children who Jeffreys frames as victims of “gender eugenics” (123). In Jeffreys’ discursive/dehumanizing/monstrous rendering, trans folks are victims and perpetrators of (their own) monstrosity.

Such views are not new. While trans folks are recent pariahs in a long line of cultural scapegoats, cisheterosexism is an intersectionally constituted structure that has long been used to categorize bodies within Western culture. Indeed, taxonomy is a hallmark of colonialism used to distinguish bodies based on arbitrary racialized criteria that persists to this day.<sup>4</sup> María Lugones frames gender as a “colonial imposition” that distinguished/s European “men” as humans and “women” as inverted men whose task it was to reproduce men from non-Europeans (e.g., monstrous others) who were taxonomized based on sexual dimorphism (“male” from “female”) with the intent of designating reproductive capacity. Similarly, C. Riley Snorton finds in his powerful study of racialized gender at the intersections of blackness and transness that the institution of slavery discursively crafted a “plantation visuality” that positioned “captive flesh [as] the material and metaphorical ground for unsettling a view of sex and gender as neatly divided according to each term’s relation to medicoscientific knowledge” (*Black* 33). In this way, colonial racialization animates cisheteronormative gender. Thus, those whose sense of gender evades normative binary criteria are forced to endure legacies of colonial articulation that attempt to assert a hierarchy of racialized relevance.

---

<sup>4</sup> For a history on transgender communities, identities, and subjectivities see Susan Stryker’s *Transgender History*.

Within feminist movements, these colonial fronts manifest in the works of anti-intersectional feminists like Daly and Jeffreys above. Such trans-exclusionary works are designed to antagonize trans phenomena.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, religious and political leaders continue to privilege a binarized worldview that articulates transness as a deviation from a presumed cisheteronormative core evidenced in conservative ranks or as models of individual freedom and agency lauded by liberal camps. In either framework, the trans subject is defined in and through a cisheteronormative model that either constrains trans difference or demands a respectable universal formation in line with liberal-humanist sensibilities. In turn, many trans activists have resisted both camps, vying for self-determined gender articulations that evade normative criteria. Indeed, self-determination animates trans social histories through its rejection of state-imposed taxonomy and pathology. Noted in the coloniality that opens this paragraph, self-determination “opens up space for multiple embodiments and their expressions by collectivizing the struggle against both interpersonal and state violence” (Stanley 90). Gender self-determination functions as a coalitional strategy that affirms different experiences with a common force: Cisheterosexism.

Given this cisheterosexist and colonial backdrop—one on which trans folks are rendered monstrous due to their difference—trans folks have turned to the image of the monster as a source of identification through resignification. That is, the monster provides a metaphoric means of re-articulating the self in light of monstrous renderings. Eric Stanley notes the importance of this self-determined labor: We are “*becoming liberated as we speak*” (91). On this, Susan Stryker asserts: “I will say this as bluntly as I know how: I am a transsexual, and therefore I am a monster” (“Words” 240). For Stryker, “rage” is the affect that constitutes and animates trans monstrosity. This rage is located at “the margin of subjectivity and the limit of signification” (248). Discursive and material cisheteronormative standards constitute the trans monster while rage is the effect of those standards affectively animating the trans monster. Stryker clarifies, transgender rage marks “the subjective experience of being *compelled* to transgress . . . the highly gendered regulatory schema that determine the viability of bodies” (249,

---

<sup>5</sup>. For an important discussion on transfeminism in response to trans-exclusionary articulations see Susan Stryker and Talia Bettcher’s special issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly* titled “Trans/Feminisms.”

emphasis added). Said differently, trans rage emerges in recognition of being *compelled* to perpetually assert one's own worth as a human in a cisheterosexist culture. Stryker frames trans rage as a site of potentiality in which "stigma itself becomes the source of transformative power" (249). This reclamation labor situates Stryker's work as transfeminist, or in Talia Bettcher's words, committed to a "politics that focuses on the intersections of sexist and transphobic oppression" (387). Conversely, a transfeminist reading of trans monstrosity demands an heir of ambivalence. That is, of embracing the positive (trans monstrosity as generative) and negative (cisheterosexist renderings of trans folks as monstrous). As such, a transfeminist analysis of trans monstrosity and its attendant affect trans rage focuses our attention to two co-constitutive processes: (1) becoming monstrous and its affect (2) monstrous becomings.

First, becoming monstrous engages the discursive and material means by which a trans subject is rendered monstrous as an effect of oppressive structures. Informed by Bernadette Calafell, here one is concerned with "how [...] difference, or Otherness, gets constructed as monstrosity" (4). In the case of trans monstrosity, this includes analyzing the effects of cisheterosexism on trans subjects. At the same time, identity is always intersectional and as Calafell adds, "intersectionalities inform monstrosities" (5). Becoming monstrous traces embodiment and subjectivity as it is rendered monstrous precisely because of its intersectional difference. In her transfeminist analysis, Stryker argues both Frankenstein's monster and "transsexual monstrosity" resist normative criteria, and thus thrive, in oppositional though complimentary ways. Frankenstein's monster fails normative visual standards and is thus rendered monstrous. Though, as Stryker writes, the monster masters a human language "in order to claim a position as a speaking subject and enact verbally the very subjectivity denied it in the specular realm" ("Words" 241). Thus, by acquiring language, Frankenstein's monster destabilizes a human/monster distinction via existing normative linguistic means.

Conversely, Stryker argues "transsexual monstrosity" resists a cis-human/trans-monster distinction by contextually meeting cisheteronormative standards while refusing to be interpolated as such through linguistic means. She writes, while trans folks may "successfully cite" cisheteronormative standards, the "citation" is resistant only "through a provisional use of language, [in which] we verbally declare the unnaturalness of our claim to the subject positions we nevertheless occupy" ("Words" 241). While Frankenstein's monster uses



language to minimize and distract from his physical monstrosity, trans monsters use language to assert one's monstrosity while "passing" cisheteronormative criteria. At the same time, Stryker's framing presumes whiteness in that racialization, Blackness in particular (Snorton, *Black*), always already signals monstrosity in a white supremacist culture; transness thus risks exacerbating already persistent monstrous projections along intersecting lines of identification and embodiment.

The effect of these structures pressing on and creating monsters lends itself to our second analytic pillar: monstrous becomings. Monstrous becomings denote the affects that are the effect of becoming monstrous. In essence, monstrous becomings explore the "emotional response to conditions in which it becomes imperative to take up, for the sake of one's own continued survival as a subject" (Stryker, "Words" 249). In the case of trans subjects, this might include the affects that enable one to fight back or the affects that sustain a family of choice. More than emotions, Harlan Weaver articulates affect as a "technology integral to embodiment and bodily movements" (289). For Stryker, trans rage animates trans monstrosity; it is a refusal in the sense that trans rage refuses victimhood. It thus understands monstrosity not as destructive but as productive. Monstrous becomings realize, desire, and embody futurities that have yet to be realized. Refusing normativity in favor of monstrosity, thus, "enables the establishment of subjects in new modes, regulated by different codes of intelligibility" ("Words" 249). The trans monster is thus "affirmed from the vantage of becoming itself" (Rai 16). In summary, analyzing trans monstrosity highlights two focal points: (1) becoming monstrous and (2) monstrous becomings. With an analytic framework in place, we now consider text.

## INFECT YOUR FRIENDS AND LOVED ONES

*Infect* is a dystopic story that author Torrey Peters describes on her website as depicting "how two trans women can love each other, hate each other, and pull everyone they know into their violent, vengeful, and righteous orbit." The narrative flow follows a non-normative temporality that in Jules Roskam's words maintains the "queer temporalities and teleological inversions inherent in trans lives" (587). The story thus ebbs and flows and unfolds in relation to that which

names the tale: Infection. At the same time, the story centers two primary characters: you—the reader—and Lexi.

The protagonist of this tale is unnamed. Her name is ostensibly your—the reader's—name and you are thus the central trans woman character. In this regard, pronouns such as *you* and *your* are used to reference you-as-protagonist in this analysis. We maintain that this complex narrative form animates trans monstrosity in this tale; that is, you, the reader, are equipped to empathically grapple with the material means by which you are rendered monstrous precisely because of *your* trans womanness—regardless of your personal identity—and, in turn, to note the liberatory means by which *you*, as a *trans woman*, might envision queer utopic potentiality while grappling against and transforming cisheterosexism. Indeed, Lexi, your love-hate interest, declares: “In the future, everyone will be trans” (Peters 15). And in the case of the reader-as-protagonist—*you*—you are precisely that: Trans.

You and Lexi first meet on Craigslist in the “t4t” personals; that is, “trans girls fucking trans girls” (Peters 53). Your first physical meeting takes place at Lexi’s “small three-room cabin on a lake in rural New Hampshire, the interior marred by half-finished repairs or renovations; from every surface [you] look, nails and screws menace soft fabric or skin” (21). Like her home, scars map Lexi’s body; and you’re intrigued as you come from a relatively privileged background that has insulated you from such corporeal violations. Lexi lives in isolation and is conscious of, and vengeful of, cisheterosexism (her scars providing the justificatory means); in response, she is isolated and armed. Conversely, you are working on a doctorate from Dartmouth and are on fellowship. You live with your cisgender girlfriend of eight years in an apartment owned by a professor of medieval literature (23). You note the three things the two of you have in common: “we are both trans, we are both newly on hormones, and we are both lonely as fuck” (24). Raleen is a key—though temporary—character largely responsible for Contagion Day.

Raleen is a homeless trans woman of color “despite her enrollment as a NSF-funded graduate student in molecular biology at the University of Washington”

(Peters 16). Raleen is a first-generation student whose parents live in Colombia.<sup>6</sup> She began transitioning while conducting her dissertation research; her parents do not know and her doctoral advisor “lost interest in advising and collaborating with her” once she began to transition (16). Raleen and Lexi get wind of Improvac: a bio-engineering company that vaccinates livestock against their own sex hormones leaving industrial farmers to determine the hormone a mammal receives. Raleen clarifies, “The vaccine causes a body’s antibodies to bind to gonadotropin (GnRH)” (28). Once GnRH is synthesized it is “hook[ed] to a foreign protein” (28). Once in the body, antibodies re-classify GnRH as “bad” (28); “subsequently, any and all GnRH in the body triggers an autoimmune response, resulting in a complete cessation of the production of all sex hormones” (28). On Contagion Day, Lexi infects you—without your consent—with synthesized GnRH bonded to “live bacteria,” which means *you* are contagious (28-9). In this dystopic future, access to sex hormones are regulated by local provisional governments, which echoes the past.

## READING TRANS MONSTROSITY

We have suggested thus far an analytic means of reading monstrosity through a transfeminist lens. The result is a focus on two co-constitutive processes: becoming monstrous and monstrous becomings.

### *Becoming Monstrous: Constituting Trans Monstrosity.*

Becoming monstrous engages the means by which a subject is rendered monstrous as a result of their embodied difference. In *Infect*, the constitution of trans monstrosity, of becoming monstrous, assumes two co-constitutive formations: physical and psychic. The physical form engages the corporeal effects of navigating cisheterosexist violences while the psychic form is interested in the psychological and emotional effects of negotiating cisheterosexism. Snorton makes a bid for the “psychic dimensions” of passing so as to account for those

---

<sup>6</sup> Raleen’s parents are from “Columbia” (17). In personal correspondence with the author, this is a spelling error. Raleen’s parents are from Colombia; Raleen is a “first generation Latina.”

embodiments and experiences that are “not read as the gender they prefer all the time” (“New” 87). The psychic dimensions affirm “internal deliberation” as key to one’s sense of self. Snorton adds that the psychic dimensions of passing allude to an “aspirational future” that “allows for the flexibility to make claims about the body that transcend conversations about materiality. It allows for the possibility of transition, which does not occur on the surgeon’s table but instead in the spaces where people come together or in the quiet moments of reflection in one’s room” (89-90). Moreover, that transition is subjectively defined and not always desirable nor accessible highlights the importance of affirming the psychic dimensions of passing. Extending Snorton’s thought to the psychic dimensions of becoming monstrous, we consider the psychological and emotional effects of cisheterosexism but also the productive dimensions of misrecognition by privileging a subjective sense of self regardless of externality. Taken together, trans monstrosity is constituted through physical and psychic means.

You and Lexi first meet two years prior to *Contagion* with the intent of fucking; in her isolated rural home in New Hampshire. What is established are the classed differences between the two of you, in particular, as white trans women. Lexi’s isolation is a direct result of her being trans, alluding to the psychic dimensions of becoming monstrous. Describing Lexi, Peters writes: “By the time she hit twenty, she had a routine: Come home from work every day, lower the blackout shades so no one could see in, put on women’s clothes, and get to work on a bottle of vodka. She bought the cabin so that she could expand the routine without attracting noise” (21). Matt Fournier positions gender dysphoria as the moment “when the socially determined coordinates of familiarity-identity-gender no longer add up to a legible (legitimate) pattern, when materiality escapes the frame of representation, because this frame is built on gender binarism” (121). The result is potentially shattering. While our intent is not to pathologize, it is worth noting the medical discourse that highlights psychic dimensions of becoming monstrous and how these internalized renderings co-constitute materiality.

The American Psychiatric Association’s most recent edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistic Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5) pathologizes transness through gender dysphoria which is determined by (a) “marked incongruence” between the sex one was assigned at birth and one’s gender identity and (b) “evidence of distress about this incongruence” (453). The DSM-5 notes that prior to accessing gender affirming “techniques and practices”—citing the Pope—trans

folks are at increased risk of suicide. Concurrently, the long-term consequences of cultural exclusion as a result of cisheterosexism highlights that for some, gender transition does not minimize the risks of suicide (454). In addition, anxiety and depression tend to accompany gender dysphoria. Indeed, cisheterosexist oppression can lead to “negative self-concept, increased rates of mental disorder comorbidity, school dropout, and economic marginalization, including unemployment” in trans subjects (458). While Snorton’s psychic dimensions of passing privilege an internal sense of self as a means of avoiding psychological harm, the reality persists that for some trans subjects, the psychological depth of these traumas run deep regardless of ones’ capacity to harness a productive sense of misrecognition. However, by honoring internal deliberation as Snorton advocates, we are arguing the psychic dimensions of becoming monstrous includes the psychological and emotional effects of cisheterosexism and the means by which one is forced to navigate immaterial toxicity; this navigation denotes both internal deliberation as well as externality, which emerges as the materialization of these psychic dimensions via articulation, performance, and practice (“New” 79).

Lexi, like her home, is disheveled and unraveled. Peters adds, “Occasionally, she’d [Lexi] get it into her head to repair or change something in the house, and would tear out a cabinet, or pull up a floorboard. Most of those projects, she never completed” (22). In fact, the incompleteness alludes to a perpetually unfolding horizon in which a beginning and end are indiscernible. Likewise, becoming monstrous is understood as a process with no foreseeable beginning or end (Cohen). For her home, this becoming includes “half-finished repairs and renovations” along with “nails and screws . . . from every surface you look” (Peters 21). However, she also admits that some of the “fucked up or half-replaced” items in her home are such because she “shot them to shit while drunk” (23). Her unruly home, in short, is a materialization of the psychic dimensions of trans monstrosity.

Noting the stark difference in lived experiences, you are both “fascinated and repelled” by Lexi (Peters 23). Exploring her body, you inquire about the scars that map her monstrosity. The “long scar of faded pink on her forearm” is attributed to drunkenness coupled with manual labor (22). The “white button of scar tissue just under her armpit,” Lexi recalls, happened after she “blacked out, and hung [herself] up from a nail” (22). A scar on her abdomen and “a jagged line cut by a fishing hook where the hip bone kisses against the inside of her skin” denote

additional means of becoming monstrous (25). While none of these scars suggest self-harm in the physical sense, we understand Lexi's alcoholism, understood as a coping mechanism, as a mode of self-harm. In this regard, the scarring marks an indirect means by which monstrosity is materialized. Your lack of scars are made all the more clear when you find yourself a fully realized monster five and a half years after Contagion; when monstrosity eclipses your privileges in this dystopic future.

After roaming the dystopic land for years, you are scavenged by a trans woman who Lexi has sent to find you. In this dystopia, the privileges that once enabled you to ignore your trans monstrosity have faded away. You and Lexi are once again lying together in Lexi's home; this time on a couch. This time in "a tiny cabin next to a little pond, on the edge of the land" patrolled by other trans women in rural Iowa (Peters 60). Your "hair is long and scraggled. [You've] been avoiding the sight of [yourself] for years" (48). When you first arrived in Iowa, you took estrogen that was intentionally poisoned by a Nebraska militia. The result: "caused rashes and boils that ruined [your] skin, especially the left side of [your] face" (48). You note plainly of the long term and uncertain disfigurement: *You* will "never again be a beauty" as you, like Lexi, are now monstrous (48). As structures amalgamate into new formations in this dystopic tale, access to endocrinology is reserved for fertile cisgender women. In turn, your transition is defined through unregulated hormones with unknown consequences including disfigurement and death. Prior to Contagion, class and racial privileges insulated you from many of the realities poor trans folks, and trans folks of color in particular, endure including unregulated hormones. However, it would be naïve to suggest that your trans monstrosity is realized only after Contagion and only as a response to unregulated hormones. Indeed, the trajectory of your monstrosity is evident though shielded through class and racial privileges.

It is two years prior to Contagion and *you* have just begun hormone therapy. Shortly after starting hormones, you and your cisgender girlfriend stop having sex. "You smell different," your girlfriend notes during a final sexual encounter. And as your monstrosity materializes, you "wake every morning ... to her back, want[ing] to spoon her, but pull[ing] away from the chill of her grief" (Peters 24). Your girlfriend believes she has lost you; well, the human part of you. You internalize your exclusion "knowing that you beckoned it [trans monstrosity] by . . . choice" (24). You begin to believe your transness is the cause of your relational struggles as opposed to the cisheterosexist expectations your partner has projected

onto your body and identity; standards designed with your exclusion in mind and thus standards you can only ever fail. Later, when you try to kiss her after picking her up from the airport, she “flinches” refusing to engage you; at this point, you look like “neither boy nor a girl” (33). In turn, you leave her; and your pursuit of a doctorate declaring: “Fuck doctorates, I wanna be a rich dude’s housewife” (33). The monstrosity others project onto your body is unbearable and yet you desire to be affirmed.

Unlike Lexi who opts for cultural exclusion, you strive to pass cisheterosexist standards so as to deny your monstrosity. In your pursuit of this denial/affirmation you date a few men who enact “inadvertent cruelty,” as a result of perpetual transmisogynistic violences (42). Indeed, becoming monstrous is materialized through perpetual, subtle even, inadvertent machinations of cisheterosexism. One boyfriend covers your cost of living in exchange for sex: “He can come over and fuck me when he wants, which has turned out to be for about two hours, three times a month” (34). Your limited interactions are amplified by the reality that he is married and that you are his secret. Another boyfriend who was also married expressed his attraction to you thusly: “You’re so beautiful, I feel sick” (43). Indeed, your beauty “triggered a desire that made him disgusted with himself” (43). Even in dating a trans man you find inadvertent cruelty as he minimizes your daily navigation of cisheterosexism. Over time, the psychological and emotional impact of these microaggressive gestures materializes *your* trans monstrosity. Taken together, becoming monstrous is constituted through physical and psychic dimensions. The affects that are the result of becoming monstrous signal monstrous becomings.

*Monstrous Becomings: Performing Trans Rage.*

Monstrous becomings explore the potentiality in becoming monstrous. More specifically, monstrous becomings theorize mundane affects as providing the embodied grounds for modes of resistance and survival as a result of becoming monstrous. Revenge drives the impulse to infect, which is a performance of trans rage enacting global dimensions of trans monstrous revenge. Raleen and Lexi resolve early on to develop a pathogen. While cisheterosexism drives both Raleen and Lexi’s respective performances of trans rage, classed whiteness animates Lexi’s enactment as classed racism compounds Raleen’s. Raleen is an immigrant trans woman from Colombia who was pursuing a doctorate in molecular biology

but who was pushed out of her program as a result of her mentor's racist cisheterosexist biases. While her parents remain in Colombia, Raleen's immigration status is unaddressed. In Calafell's critical exploration of women of color in the academy, she writes: "Women of color already embody monstrosity" (12). Indeed, becoming monstrous for Raleen is the intersectional effect of compounded identities in the context of higher education. The cisheterosexism that materializes her monstrosity is defined in and through racist and classist policies that restrict movement across national borders. Her monstrosity materializes and is read through a racist lens that presumes whiteness: Raleen "barely speaks, and even when she does, she hardly makes sense" (Peters 16). Moreover, Raleen carries herself in an "unobtrusive way" taking up "less space than a child" while failing to make mention of Lexi's abusive proclivities; white supremacy, compounded by cisheterosexism, elicits the mundane embodied responses Raleen performs (16). José Esteban Muñoz theorizes "feeling brown" as a means of affirming "minoritarian affect" (in Latinas in particular) as always "no matter its register, partially illegible in relation to the normative affect performed by normative citizen subjects" (679). In this regard, Raleen is neither inarticulate nor passive but, rather, interpreted through a white supremacist lens that presumes whiteness and that serves as an "affective gauge" that "prescribes and regulates national feelings and comportment" (680). Indeed, you interpret Raleen's affect—"feeling brown, feeling down" (680)—in a way similar to your own exclusion as a result of cisheterosexist standards: As monstrous; and yet, you discursively distance yourself through racialized stereotypes.

So as to complicate whiteness, Muñoz notes: "some modes of whiteness—for example, working-class whiteness—are stigmatized within the majoritarian public sphere" (680). Lexi is a white ("pale" [38]) working-class trans woman from New England. Though Raleen's intellect enables dystopia, it is Lexi who is understood as the mastermind. Indeed, Raleen's monstrosity—intersectionally rendered through Peters' racist and classist description above (nonsensical, quiet, child-like)—renders Raleen *surprisingly* capable of molecular biology. At the same time, the emotionally unstable, abusive, and alcoholic white heroine, Lexi, is framed as the *natural* trans leader in this apocalyptic tale; we do not hear from Raleen after Contagion Day. Raleen has served her purpose for Lexi's utopic projection informed through classed whiteness; a utopia that excludes Raleen's racialized gender. In this way, we might understand Lexi's global infection as a white working-class woman's performance of trans rage in that her pursuit of



mass infection fails to account for the existing structures that will inevitably and disproportionately impact already multiply oppressed communities—trans or otherwise. Lexi exploits both Raleen’s intellect and your body as conduits to enact her white trans rage. Conversely, your monstrosity is evident though unrealized until the end of Contagion Day. You thus emerge as a “feminist monster” who embodies utopic potential as you transform from human to monster; your broader purpose is to “actualize” queer utopia in relation to Lexi’s classed whiteness and Raleen’s racialized gender (Abdi and Calafell 362).

You’re sitting with Lexi and Raleen. Lexi excitedly foreshadows that *everyone will be trans*. Though she clarifies, not “trans” in some “squishy philosophical way. I mean we’re all gonna be on hormones. Even the cis” (Peters 15). She restates her sentiment clearing any ambiguity: “*Especially the cissies*” (15). Raleen envisioned the infection beginning with “one of the frat boys that called [her] faggot” (29); to that, we might add racist microaggressions—a point she may not readily disclose to her white counterparts who readily center their transness at the dismissal of intersecting lines of identity and embodiment. Raleen ultimately wanted “to live in a world where everyone has to choose their gender” effectively normalizing trans monstrosity by neutralizing difference via global transition; a framing that discursively erases race through the author’s rendering of a trans woman of color in relation to white protagonists who author this political trajectory. Lexi, Raleen, and you jokingly plot about vaccinating J. Michael Bailey whose research perpetuated institutionalized cisheterosexism. While you joke alongside Lexi and Raleen you do not yet fully grasp the reality of the situation; you are simply along for the ride. Indeed, your monstrosity is not yet realized. And it is Lexi who pushes you; indeed, you –like Raleen—are but a supporting role in Lexi’s performance of white trans rage, which in turn enables your own trans monstrous performance of trans rage. Lexi takes the “epi-pen thing” that holds the pathogen and “slams the blunt end into [your] forearm. There’s a prick as the needle goes in, and when [you] pull [your] arm back, the point scrapes [your] skin” (20). *You* are Patient Zero.

Up to Contagion Day, your monstrosity was insulated by privileges that afforded you the capacity to pass white middle-class cisheterosexist standards. Your monstrosity was internalized vying for release. Lexi looks at you as you hold your newly punctured forearm and says, “Now you’ll have a scar, too” (Peters 20). You leave angrily, confused even. It’s late. Your monstrosity materializes as you walk home. Two white men stop and harass you. They learn

you are trans. They hold you and “wanna see your dick” (70). They note your physical monstrosity effectively enacting a performance of trans rage in which your psychic self counters their physical expectancies. *You* transform: “My emotions are back. Fury, then a wave of bone-weary exhaustion, then back to fury, when they both begin to laugh” (70). You think to yourself in the heat of your transformation, like Lexi and Raleen, you are “sick of this shit” (71). *Infect* ends, in its non-normative temporal sequence, with your realized trans monstrosity and a concomitant performance of trans rage. You narrate the performance: “[You] want them to know how [you] suffer. [You] want them to suffer. [You] open [your] mouth to say something, and he leans forward, to catch [your] words. But no voice comes out. Instead, an elated, vengeful sprite rises up from [your] lungs, ascends through the passage of [your] throat, and announces itself to the world as [you] cough right in his face” (71). Through infection your dystopia becomes utopic.

The performance of trans rage in this instance is understood as biological in origin. In particular, trans range ruptures a static sense of self. The medical industrial complex assigns sex based on an arbitrary and binarized articulation that privileges genital morphology over gonads, chromosomes, hormones, or secondary sex characteristics. The performance of trans rage through global infection dislodges the privileging of binarized genital morphology in favor of a new gender order defined through classed, raced, and sexed access to hormones. Indeed, through Contagion, the world becomes a staged performance of trans rage.

Because sex hormones are regulated by local provisional governments including state militias, only those cisgender men with the material means and cisgender women with the biological means are equipped to “choose” their sex hormones. The resulting post-Contagion gender order is rearticulated in slight though substantial ways. For instance, “T-slabs” are males who can afford access to industrial-grade testosterone that they “overinject” resulting in an embodied and performed hyper and toxic masculinity. Conversely, “auntie-boys” are males who, as a result of racialized classism, are incapable of affording testosterone and thus “began to inject poor-quality estrogen” (Peters 10). In this way, these men are forced to trans their gender as a means of survival. Concurrently, we might locate trans men and non-binary folks in this category as they may lack the material means needed to access testosterone effectively forcing them to acquiesce to poor quality estrogen. In this regard, racialized classism determines

hormone access and thus men's placement within the new gender order, regardless of assigned sex or identity. Trans women are termed "Antediluvian," referencing their transness prior to Contagion; *you* are Antediluvian (11). Cisgender "women of promising fertility" are granted the "good estrogen" because estrogen is "tightly rationed and regulated" in a future in which the population is "aging, dwindling" (10, 12). Peters notes, "everyone knew" Antediluvian trans women were to blame for the Contagion (49). As a result, Antediluvian trans women continue to bear cisheterosexism's violent regulatory grasp even in the new gender order. Indeed, you note, "Even if we came out of hiding, there's no bribe large enough to get us estrogen" (11). As a result, trans women rely on "black market estrogen" harvested from genetically modified pigs (10).

In the new gender order, in which trans women remain cultural pariahs, separatism emerges as a performance of trans rage. In this regard, there is little difference for Antediluvian trans women who knew a world prior to Contagion in which exclusion organized much of Western culture. Indeed, prior to Contagion, Lexi and Raleen lived among fellow trans women in what you term a "freak coven" in an attempt to discursively amplify the distance between *you* and the *real* trans monsters (Peters 26). However, after Contagion, and after the materialization of your own trans monstrosity, even you consider the potentiality in separatist logics.

In this dystopic theatre, trans women survive through an ethical commitment to one another. While "t4t" was used as a means of generating intimacy between trans women before Contagion, t4t emerges in a post-Contagion world as a relational ethos (Peters 53). To be certain, you do perform utterances of this ethos prior to Contagion when you house Lexi in times of need (31) or when you recognize "of course trans girls all love and fuck each other. Who else will?" (42). Zoey, a fellow Antediluvian trans woman clarifies: "It's not a gang. It's a promise. You just promise to love trans girls above all else. . . We settle for looking out for each other. And even if we don't all love each other, we mostly all respect each other" (54). In hearing this commitment you recall your pre-Contagion orientation to trans monstrosity as defined through embarrassment, "for fear that her transness would reveal [your] transness" (55). The performance of trans rage is enacted through becoming monstrous and affirming the means by which one becomes such. In this dystopia, you no longer seek the affirmation of cisheterosexual folks as the distinctions have become blurry since Contagion.

Your performance of trans rage emerges in chorus with other Antediluvian trans women seeking survival through a collective commitment to one another. And it is solidified through the materialization of this psychic ethos. That is, through scarring. On Contagion Day, you note Lexi's tattoo—marked physical monstrosity—denoting the performance of trans rage: “a stick and poke. It reads t4t” (14). In this regard, becoming monstrous and monstrous becomings are co-constitutive means animating the materialization of trans monstrosity and the performance of trans rage that existed all along.

## TRANSING DYSTOPIA

In this essay, we read monstrosity through a transfeminist lens. In developing Stryker's theory, we articulate a heuristic means that highlights two co-constitutive processes: becoming monstrous and monstrous becomings. Becoming monstrous engages the material means by which a character is rendered monstrous as a result of oppressive structures. For the trans subject, this includes cisheterosexism. But it also includes intersecting structures that animate cisheterosexism: racism and classism, for instance. With monstrosity materialized, the concomitant effect are monstrous becomings or the performance of affect, which are the grounds for queer worldmaking. In reading Peters' *Infect*, physical and psychic dimensions are revealed as key dimensions of becoming monstrous. Conversely, monstrous becomings are understood as the performance of trans rage, which functions through global infection and local survival.

While the global implications of infection certainly render the world “trans,” it would be naïve to suggest the new gender order is defined through identity alone. Indeed, post-Contagion gender is reliant on existing structures of domination in ways similar and different than pre-Contagion gender. Prior to infection, gender is articulated through subjective and administrative tensions (Spade). After infection, gender is articulated through material and biological means while identity is reserved for those like Antediluvian trans women who craft communities of survival in response to continued persecution. Those with material means are equipped to “choose” the sex hormones they will use, regardless of genitals. Cisgender women who are determined to embody promising fertility are granted privileged access to regulated estrogen that enhance human reproductive capacity while the rest of the population, including

Antediluvian trans women, are forced to use unregulated hormones that are often poisoned effectively marking its users as estrogenized monsters, regardless of identity. Indeed, this dystopia is a repetition with a difference.

The Pope's concern for the "utopia of the neutral," his dystopia, is realized in *Infect*. A transfeminist reading of monstrosity reveal utopia and dystopia as blueprints for futures informed through ideological commitments. The Pope's desire for a cisheterosexual utopia defined through reproductive capacity emerges as a trans dystopia in which trans-affirmation is framed as antithetical to human development. At the same time, the trans utopia (of the neutral) realized in *Infect* is defined through a new gender order that while rendering all bodies trans reinscribes trans women as persistent monstrous exemplars. In this way, the performance of trans rage is not about liberating trans monsters. Rather, the performance of trans rage is about externalizing the internalization of becoming monstrous. It is about enacting rage against a cisheterosexual gender order that relentlessly oppresses and in turn oppresses others as noted in the exploitation and concomitant erasure of Raleen in this dystopic future. In this regard, transing utopia necessarily recognizes potentiality in desiring that which is at odds with normative ruminations of futurity. It requires recognizing the means by which trans utopia always already exists in the performance of mundane survival; in the performance of trans rage.

## Works Cited

- Abdi, Shadee and Bernadette Marie Calafell. "Queer Utopias and a (Feminist) Iranian Vampire." *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, vol. 24, no. 4, 2017, pp. 358-370.
- American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed., American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013.
- Bettcher, Talia Mae. "Trapped in the Wrong Theory." *Signs*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2014, pp. 383-406.
- Booth, E. Tristan. "The Provisional Acknowledgement of Identity Claims in Televised Documentary." *Transgender Communication Studies*, edited by

- Leland G. Spencer and Jamie C. Capuzza, Lexington Books, 2015, pp. 111-126.
- Calafell, Bernadette Marie. *Monstrosity, Performance, and Race in Contemporary Culture*. Peter Lang, 2015.
- Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)." *Monster Theory*, edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, University of Minnesota Press, 1996, pp. 3-25.
- Daly, Mary. *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. Beacon Press, 1990.
- Fournier, Matt. "Lines of Flights." *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2014, pp. 121-122.
- Holy See Press Office. "Audience with Participants in the 23<sup>rd</sup> General Assembly of the Members of the Pontifical Academy for Life, 05.10.2017." *Summary of Bulletin*, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2017/10/05/171005d.html>. Accessed 10 October 2017.
- Jeffreys, Sheila. *Gender Hurts: A Feminist Analysis of the Politics of Transgenderism*. Routledge, 2014.
- Johnson, Julia. R. "Cisgender Privilege, Intersectionality, and the Criminalization of CeCe McDonald". *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2013, pp. 135-144.
- Koch-Rein, Anson. "Monster." *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2014, pp. 134-135.
- LeMaster, Benny. "Unlearning the Violence of the Normative." *QED*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2017, pp. 123-130.
- Lester, Paul Martin. "From Abomination to Indifference." *Transgender Communication Studies*, edited by Leland G. Spencer and Jamie C. Capuzza, Lexington Books, 2015, pp. 143-154.

- Lugones, María. "Toward a Decolonial Feminism." *Hypatia*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2010, pp. 742-759.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down." *Signs*, vol. 31, no. 3, 2006, pp. 675-688.
- Peters, Torrey. *Infect your Friends and Loved Ones*. Torrey Peters, 2016, <http://www.torreypeters.com/book/infect-your-friends-and-loved-ones/>
- Rai, Amit S. "Ontology and Monstrosity." *Monster Culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, edited by Marina Levina and Diem-My T. Bui, Bloomsbury Academic, 2013, pp. 15-31.
- Roskam, Jules. "Porous Cells." *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 4, 2015, pp. 586-589.
- Serano, Julia. *Excluded: Making Feminist and Queer Movements more Inclusive*. Seal, 2013.
- Snorton, C. Riley. "'A New Hope.'" *Hypatia*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2009, pp. 77-92.
- Snorton, C. Riley. *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*. University of Minnesota Press, 2017.
- Spade, Dean. *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law*. Duke University Press, 2015.
- Stanley, Eric A. "Gender Self-Determination." *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 1-2, 2014, pp. 89-91.
- Stryker, Susan. "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 1, 1994, pp. 237-254.
- Stryker, Susan. *Transgender History*. Seal Press, 2017.
- Stryker, Susan and Talia M. Bettcher, editors. *Trans/Feminisms*, special issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, vol. 3, no. 1-2, 2016.

Stryker, Susan, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore. "Trans-, Trans, or Transgender?" *Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol. 36, no. 3-4, 2008, pp. 11-22.

Weaver, Harlan. "Monster Trans." *Somatechnics*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2013, pp. 287-306.

YouGov. "21% of Americans believe that Being Transgender is a Mental Illness." *YouGov*, [www.today.yougov.com/news/2017/05/17/21-americans-believe-identifying-transgender-menta/](http://www.today.yougov.com/news/2017/05/17/21-americans-believe-identifying-transgender-menta/). Accessed 1 December 2017.



# Removing Racism from White Bodies: Monstrous White Men Marching with Torches

DAWN MARIE D. MCINTOSH

White racist monsters seem to be revealing traces of themselves lately. King notes the growing trend of prominent characters who are overt racists and/or enacting white supremacist attitudes have “emerged as something of a meme, a preferred trope for putting drama in motion” (219). The imagery of the overt white racist serves colorblind racism by denoting that white racist monsters exist only within the imagination, their monstrosity confined to the limits of the screen (219). People of color know otherwise. Calafell marks the norms of white racist violence within the everyday and calls for an acknowledgement of the violence of white monstrosity (Calafell *Monstrosity; Latina/o Communication*; “When Will;” “She Ain’t”). Heeding her call, I embarked on a journey to locate the monstrosity of white racism. Not surprisingly, I could only find traces of white racist monsters. Since white monstrosity works through the norms of whiteness white racist monsters become hidden and transformed from white people leaving only pieces of white racism to trace its monstrosity. In his foundational essay for reading culture for the monsters they engender, Cohen assures that I must be “content with the fragments (footprints, bones, talismans, teeth, shadows, obscured glimpses -signifiers of monstrous passing that stand in for the monstrous body itself)” (6). So, I pieced these monstrous fragments together to visualize white racism for a white readership. I use the framing of white racism specifically here to call attention to the relationship between white bodies and racism (Feagin et al. 3). Too often the labor of marking the workings of white racism falls on scholars of color and is overlooked by whites (Anzaldúa; Calafell “When will we”), my hope is that if a white scholar, like myself, marks the embodied workings of white racism there will be a larger acknowledgement of its existence by whites.

This paper unpacks the workings of whiteness, heteronormativity (Yep), and patriarchy to maintain white masculine supremacy by deconstructing two white racist monsters from the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville. I focus on the

The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 6, No. 2 & 3  
Copyright © 2018

“Unite the Right” event in Charlottesville because of the notoriety of white racism fore-fronted. As Heim put it, “It would prove to be the catalyst for a horrific 24 hours in this usually quiet college town that would come to be seen by the nation and world as a day of racial rage, hate, violence and death.” The workings of whiteness and heteropatriarchy respond to this event to remove racism from white people by isolating racism to extreme white racists, confining white racism to fixed imagery, and transforming the white racists involved back to norms of white masculinity. To denote these workings of whiteness, I conducted a critical rhetorical analysis of media coverage of James Alex Fields and Peter Cvjetanovic. Fields is the convicted white male murderer that drove his car into a crowd of people, injuring at least nineteen people and killing white thirty-two-year-old counter-protester, Heather Heyer. Peter Cvjetanovic is a young white man that participated in the “Unite the Right” march in Charlottesville. Cvjetanovic was pictured marching on the front page of the *Daily Progress* the day after the march and an image of him became an online fascination by identifying him on the @yesyoureracist twitter account. Cvjetanovic quickly became the face of the “Unite the Right” as his image and responses to it are given worldwide attention. Taken together, Fields and Cvjetanovic picture the reality of white racist monstrosity that is part of the racial landscape of white bodies. The news coverage of them demonstrates how white monstrosity is offered the privilege of erasure from white racial consciousness, mirroring DiAngelo’s claims of cultural constructions of “white racial literacy” (*What Does It Mean*).

Within her book *Monstrosity, Performance and Race in Contemporary Culture*, Calafell dedicates an entire chapter on explicating the monstrosity of whiteness through an examination of media coverage of Aurora theater shooter, James Holmes. This chapter demonstrates how and why white terrorists’ actions are never correlated to racist motivations. Along these same cultural lines, the events in Charlottesville are significant as they are inexplicitly connected to white racism but the discourse surrounding the events strategically reframes the white masculine bodies identified by removing these white men from racial narratives and racist motivations. Certainly, the monstrosity of whiteness can be directly connected to white racism within this space. While I am most interested in the discursive (re)framing of Cvjetanovic from a white racist monster to a well-meaning white college student, the constellation of many texts manifests the fragment of white masculinity in/through white monstrosity. I follow McGee’s suggestion that “critical rhetoric does not *begin* with a finished text in need of

interpretation; rather texts are understood to be larger than the apparently finished discourse that presents itself as transparent” (70 emphasis in original). The fragments that point to the monstrosity of whiteness here are the “Unite the Right” event, James Alex Fields and mediated texts involving him, the Cvjetanovic photograph, the tweet identifying Cvjetanovic, the online forums responding to the initial tweet, and the mediated interviews and news broadcastings of Cvjetanovic. These “texts” provide the “fragments (footprints, bones, talismans, teeth, shadows, obscured glimpses -signifiers of [the white] monstrous passing that stand in for the [white masculine] monstrous body itself)” (Cohen 6). The constellation of these discourses compiles a cultural collage of “the meaning we are urged to see in the whole discourse” (McGee 70).

To analyze these discursive constructs, I searched Lexis-Nexis for all newspaper and magazine articles pertaining to Fields and Cvjetanovic. I narrowed my scope to limit repeated articles and then selected the news coverage detailed by *The Washington Post*, *Independent*, and the *New York Times*. I also focused on the local news of Cvjetanovic, as well as, the local college newspapers that had direct interviews with him, *The Nevada Sagebrush* and *Reynolds Sandbox*. As I delved into this research, each international and national news source, in regards to Cvjetanovic, specifically referenced his on camera interview with the local news station Reno’s NBC 4 News. So, I opted to research this interview with Cvjetanovic as well. Finally, Cvjetanovic’s worldwide publicity was primarily linked to his original identification through a tweet on @yesyoureracist twitter account. I researched the original tweet and the comments posted pertaining to it. As McKerrow suggests I examined the workings of whiteness to empower white masculinity by looking to the larger social spectrum that ripples from this event not the event in isolation (446).

Furthermore, Ono and Sloop challenge critical rhetoricians to acknowledge how our positionalities influence our analysis and remain committed to analyzing how identities influence cultural politics. As a white straight married cisgendered mother, my positionalities situate my analysis from an intragrouping perspective. The politics of my identities inform my analysis of Fields and Cvjetanovic as much as their normative white masculinity frames the discursive (re)workings of their white monstrosity. I was and continue to be culturally trained to not see whites as a race, as racists, nor my role in white racial privileges. hooks reminds me, white supremacist thinking is “imprinted on the consciousness of every white child at birth, reinforced by the culture” and “tends to function unconsciously”

(3). These affective responses are key junctures to how whiteness functions through white bodies and are all too often overlooked as consequences of affective lacking located in white bodies' consciousness (McIntosh "Feeling White") or defended through white fragility (DiAngelo "White Fragility") or excused by notions of whiteness functioning as invisibility (Frankenberg "Introduction"). Thus, my interrogation of these white masculine monsters is informed by my hetero-feminine whiteness and locates how whiteness benefits whites and is maneuvered by white bodies.

Specifically, this piece extends the theoretical conversation on the monstrosity of whiteness to articulate how white racist discourse serves white people in a strategic manner to remove white racism from white bodies. White masculinity redefines itself as a protector not perpetrator, and in turn, white racist monstrosity is separated from all white bodies and displaced on white racist imageries and isolated events. To demonstrate this claim I first articulate how I define whiteness, white racism, and employ the theoretical lens of the monstrosity of whiteness. I then describe the events of Charlottesville alongside the assailant James Alex Fields and how white monstrosity serves white racism through him. Finally, I examine the discourses circling Cvjetanovic and how the monstrosity of whiteness transforms white racism back to norms of white masculinity.

### Reading White Racism through the Monstrosity of Whiteness

Alcoff claims "...social dynamics form races, racialized groups, and racial identities, and not just racial ideas" (63). Her proposed theory of identities informs how whiteness functions to frame race contextually, discursively, and in turn, constructs our material realities. Frankenberg adds, "Whiteness is always constructed, always in the process of being made and unmade" (16). Approaching whiteness from this perspective denotes how whites are offered the power of fluidity which allows for white racialization to be in a constant state of definition. Thus, white bodies are not confined to norms of race but rather are offered the privilege to be un-definable. In their foundational piece, Nakayama and Krizek demonstrate how whiteness functions through strategic discursive practices to position whites at the center. Other scholars have noted how whiteness functions to empower the white race by normalizing race as white (Dyer; Shome; Warren; Frankenberg, "The Mirage;" Crenshaw). To mark the racialization process is key

to deconstructing the harmful realities of white racism. However, this process of marking whiteness and the white race has led to visceral white racist responses in/through white fragility (DiAngelo, “White Fragility”).

If white racism is a practice then whiteness is a mode for racism’s reiteration to be contextualized, embodied, and theorized. Raka Shome contends, “Whiteness indeed matters as *a current of racism*” (45 emphasis in original). Whiteness’ ability to normalize and centralize whites in relation to bodies of color is a foundation of white racism. Bonilla-Silva points out, “Whereas for most whites racism is prejudice, for most people of color racism is systemic or institutionalized” (8). Inferential racism is a response to these growing cultural realities and propelled by whites denying personal responsibility in racism. In turn, whites are able to retain white privilege by never being seen as racists. Post-race ideologies pull from these same colorblind norms to feed white fragility. Hence overt, rather than covert, white racism is manifesting rapidly. For example, hate groups have grown from 602 noted hate groups in 2000 to 930 formed hate groups today (Berman).

The rapid growth in hate groups is not surprising given the current escalation in white-supremacist activism that is visible across the country today, “signaling a new willingness by racist groups to put themselves front and center on the American public stage” (Greenblatt 12). Greenblatt adds, “Modern day white supremacist ideologies are founded on the belief that white people are on the verge of extinction...it becomes easier for them [white supremacists and other racists] to justify or rationalize violence in the name of ‘preserving’ the race” (13). White fragility is a response to post-race ideology and a colorblind era that has led many whites to become violently racist, while simultaneously not being categorically termed as such<sup>1</sup> (DiAngelo *White Fragility*). According to the Anti-Defamation League’s annual assessment on extremist-related killings, white supremacists and other far-right extremists were responsible for fifty-nine percent of all extremist-related fatalities in the U.S. in 2015, up dramatically from twenty percent in 2016. Clearly the manifestation of systemic racism is a product of our current cultural climate, and the growth of violent white racism is a terrifying fact. Violent white racism is often muted by post-race rhetoric that places explicit

---

<sup>1</sup> For further explanation of white fragility see DeAngelo’s work on *White Fragility*. DeAngelo points to multiple manners in which white bodies are violently racist but are allowed to continue to culturally frame themselves as not racist through cultural tactics.

racism as functioning at the cultural margins and reduces white racism as “bad” or “taboo” isolations rather than functioning at the center of the white race. The monstrosity of whiteness is a theoretical tool to understand the growing correlation between violence and white racism and also how white bodies are removed from the articulations of racism.

First coined by Calafell, the monstrosity of whiteness refers to the manners in which whiteness is in a constant state of translation that manipulates monstrosity from the white race in order to idealize whiteness and demonize racialized Others (*Monstrosity* 46-53). Calafell exposes how the monstrosity of whiteness functions through white privilege, entitlement, and narcissism to reposition culture to identify with white terrorists through inferential racism (52). The premise of the monstrosity of whiteness is the ability to manufacture idealized whiteness through projections of the monstrum. First monstrosity in relation to whiteness functions through dichotomy rhetoric to formulate whiteness as normalized and stigmatize Othered bodies (38-46). Additionally, the monstrosity of whiteness constructs white monsters as an isolated, “individual problem rather than as a product of an increasingly violent culture” (36; also see Smith and Hollian). Finally, Calafell notes the monstrosity of whiteness works through a post-racial era to remove whites’ responsibilities from any constructs of non-idealized cultural norms (46-52). While each of these white monstrosities pull and press on the other in order to function culturally, I am most interested in the monstrosity of whiteness as a means to remove white accountability from the monstrum. I build on Calafell’s theorization of the monstrosity of whiteness by continuing to draw correlations between whiteness, white bodies, and white racism in the everyday.

Cohen claims one primary thesis of monstrosity is the monster’s ability to always escape (4-6). He notes, “The anxiety that condenses like green vapor into the form of the vampire can be dispersed temporarily, but the revenant by definition returns. And so the monster’s body is both corporal and incorporeal; its threat is its propensity to shift” (5). This assertion of temporality and fluidity detonates a condition of whiteness to divert white bodies as monstrous and shapeshift white bodies to idealized/normalized racial constructs. What the monstrosity of whiteness demonstrates is how post-race ideologies strategically function to remove embodied racism and inferential racism from correlations of white embodiments. As a white straight woman allowed the privilege of racist escape, I take up the responsibility to (re)locate the monstrosity of white racism, “to concern [my]self with strings of cultural moments, connected by a logic that

always threatens to shift” (6). The remainder of this essay specifies how the monstrosity of whiteness removes white racism from white embodiments to benefit whites.

## Excusing White Racism through Extremes

### *James Alex Fields: The Face of a Deranged Racist*

In the evening of August 11th, 2017 rumors became reality as a surprise torchlight march came to fruition on the campus of University of Virginia. A group of roughly 250 young white men dressed in khaki pants and white polo shirts gathered and marched with ignited torches, chanting “Blood and Soil!” “You will not replace us!” “Jews will not replace us!” Waiting in response were roughly thirty University of Virginia students - some students of color, some white students - interlocked in arms around the base of the statue of Robert Lee (Heim). As the “Unite the Right” march closed in on the statue of Robert Lee, protesters and counter protesters collided and marked the beginning of the violence that ended a day later in nineteen injured and one woman’s death. Roughly sixteen hours following the first altercation, James Alex Fields drove his car into counter protesters as they dispersed, injuring and terrifying many, and killing Heather Heyer.

I, like most white people, was captivated by the news coverage of this event. My engagement entranced by the “white supremacist logic” to make sense of the ‘who and why’ behind this white racist tragedy in order to separate myself, and whites in general, from this event (hooks 3). The media responded accordingly by never revealing the twenty-year-old white man’s motives. Instead what is reiterated are discourses about his lifestyle, personality, and misguided investments in Germans and Nazis (Bromwich and Binder). The media stories that surface around Fields significantly frame the monstrosity of whiteness. The coverage of Fields describes him as shy, quiet, and introverted but also troubled (Bromwich and Binder). His high school teacher describes him as “a very bright kid but very misguided and disillusioned” (Bromwich and Binder). This rhetoric echoes Calafell’s argument of the discourses that framed Aurora shooter James Holmes as exceptional with poor social skills, removing the accountability of monstrous white masculinity from these white male perpetrators (41). The

discursive workings to frame Fields as misguided follow the same whiteness rhetoric to remove white masculinity from the responsibility of white violence.

What differentiates Fields from other violent white terrorists is his clear link to racism. Connections with other white terrorists and racism are absent in mediated coverage to strategically remove racism as a factor in white embodiments (Calafell 49). However, the reality of Fields' actions in correlation to the weekend's events connect him to structural racism. Thus, the media responds by associating Fields to hate groups and constructing him as an extreme racist which place him outside normative white masculinity. Images of Fields holding the Vanguard America shield and dressed in a white polo and khaki pants, the attire of white supremacist groups, circulate the media (Hensley). Simultaneously people that know Fields are interviewed, claiming that at a young age he was politically obsessed with the neo-Nazi movement and is a self-declared white supremacist (Bromwich and Binder). Mediated constructions of Fields as an extreme racist serve to substantiate the whiteness logic that white racism exists only on the fringe through white extremists. King claims white racism is always constructed as existing in extreme, excessive, and marginal spaces (219). Positioning Fields as an extreme racist removes white racism from white masculinity. More poignantly the reality of white racism in relation to violence is reconstituted as a tokenized radical event by a disillusioned man rather than a systemic underlining component to white racism.

These white narratives function to remove white responsibility. The more I follow the coverage of Fields I find myself feeling less implicated. I am set to conclude white racism is not imbued in violence. Instead Fields is framed as deranged by his racist ideologies. White viewers, myself included, embrace the strategic rhetoric of whiteness set into motion through the news coverage of Fields because these extreme white racist characters serve to let white audiences "off the hook" (King 220). King concludes, "Such disengagements, anchor post-racial worldviews, nurturing racial power and its reproduction, precisely because they prompt (predominately white) audiences not to see race and racism or discern their lasting significance" (221). The coverage of Fields transforms him from normative framings of white masculinity to a monstrous white racist. The discursive connection between white racism and the disillusioned, self-proclaimed white supremacist murder allows for all "normative/civil" whites to be removed from white racism. The specificity given to white racists functions to limit who a white racist is, as opposed to the generalized brown Muslims as terrorists.



Detailing Fields as a racist extremist grants the white audience points of departure from white racism, which serves to remove whites' personal engagement with white racism. White racism is removed from violent enactments and systemic norms and instead exists only in isolated events by white extremists, allowing the normative nature of white racism (which is inherently violent) in correlation to all whites remain unmarked and unacknowledged as violent.

Photos not only surface of Fields holding the Vanguard America hate group shield, but these pictures also situate him "on the front lines of the volatile rally flanked by other white men in polo shirts and tan slacks clutching the racially charged black and white insignia of the Vanguard America hate group" (Hensley). From these pictures I interpreted Fields as not only associated with the group but ranking in power based on his placement within the group. He leads the march. The association with this group was a clear opportunity to connect violence with white racism and we should acknowledge that *no* discussion arises. Instead media focus on the quickly released tweet by Vanguard America that states, "The driver of the vehicle that hit counter protesters today was, in no way, a member of Vanguard America. All our members had been safely evacuated by the time of the incident" (Hensley). Even members of white racist groups can distance themselves from Fields, leaving his monstrous portrayal to stand in solitude. Once again, whiteness provides white racism definitive points of isolation. The public acceptance of Vanguard America's statement demonstrates how white audiences are allowed the privilege to separate white racist norms from white bodies at large. The monstrosity of Fields strategically confines white racism as existing only in these disillusioned white supremacists and white racial violence only occurs during these radical racially charged events.

What we learn from the analysis of Fields is the way whiteness removes racism from whites by constructing white racism as a dark pathway that corrupts isolated mentally unstable individuals. White racism is reduced to these extreme cases, not a systematic reality enacted through our everyday lives. Alongside the media coverage of Fields was the newspaper picture and online subtexts of Peter Cvjetanovic. The discourse associated with the picture of Cvjetanovic overshadows Fields in many capacities. It could be suggested that this shift in focus was due to the fact that Cvjetanovic's picture had received significant news and social media attention prior to Fields' violent attack. But the monstrosity of whiteness suggests otherwise. Whereas Fields forces white audiences to acknowledge the correlation of violence with white racism, Cvjetanovic provides

whites a means to transform white racism entirely as a misguided mediated moment.

## Normalizing Logics of White Racism

### *Peter Cvjetanovic: The Face of a Racist Monster*

Peter Cvjetanovic looks like any other white male college student. His thin white frame, dark hair, soft voice, and quiet demeanor culturally situates his white masculinity as rational, controlled, and moral. But late Saturday afternoon following Fields' malicious attack, the social media Twitter account, @yesyou'reacist, identifies Cvjetanovic at the "Unite the Right" march. The tweet picturing Cvjetanovic and identifying him quickly went viral "as of Sunday (after the rally) its (sic) been retweeted more than 26,000 times and received nearly 1,500 comments" (Roedel, Mariott, and Bales). In addition, the news and social media coverage of Cvjetanovic continued to reference and re-reference the tweeted image of him. This does not account for the thousands of comments in response to the online news coverage and blogs of him. Or the 35,000 people that had signed a petition to expel Cvjetanovic from his academic institution ("UNR Student"). In many respects, the mass outcries against Cvjetanovic positioned him as a racist monster and shifted the public focus from Fields to Cvjetanovic. In turn, Cvjetanovic quickly became the face of white racism, the face of the racist monster. What transpires from the public vilifying of Cvjetanovic is how heteronormativity and whiteness permit white masculinity to transform him from racist monster to white normative masculinity. The texts of Cvjetanovic demonstrates the discursive and performative tactics the monstrosity of whiteness employs to remove racism from white masculinity.

The photo identifying Cvjetanovic positions him as a racist. His polo adorns the "Dragon's Eye" emblem for the far-right extremist group Identity Evropa. Established in March of 2016, Identity Evropa describes themselves as, "an American Identitarian organization. As such our main objective is to create a better world for people of European heritage -particularly in America -by peacefully effecting cultural change. Identity Evropa is thus an explicitly non-violent organization" (Discover What Your). While the organization constructs itself definitively against violent propaganda, the Anti-Defamation League labels them as a neo-Nazi and white supremacist organization and is designated as a hate

group by the Southern Poverty Law Center. These framings are acknowledged by Identity Evropa as “smears.” They respond by saying “We are not supremacists because we do not believe that White people should rule over non-White people. Rather we are etho-pluralists... all racial groups should have somewhere in the world to call home” (Discover What Your). The discursive ideologies of hate can also be detected by Identity Evropa’s stated belief that, “The fetishization of diversity has resulted in a paradigm wherein ‘less White people...’ is accepted as a moral imperative. We categorically reject this ‘progressive’ morality and instead demand that we, people of European heritage, retain demographic supermajorities in *our* homeland” (Discover What Your, my emphasis). Cvjetanovic’s association with the group positions him as a white racist and the public acknowledges his affiliations to racism. For example, John Beazley’s comment in reference to Cvjetanovic’s story in the *Independent* states, “He’d do a better job of convincing us he’s not a racist if he wasn’t wearing a t-shirt with a logo of a white supremacist group on it.” In the end, Cvjetanovic’s association with Identity Evropa inexplicitly connects him to white supremacist ideologies and racist categorizations -despite the group’s efforts to speak against these articulations.

I am not surprised to see Cvjetanovic’s affiliation with this white nationalist group as it heavily targets college campuses with its outreach programs and online feeds (Discover What Your). Noteworthy then, Cvjetanovic is among many young white male college students that are members of Identity Evropa. He and others employ the logics of Identity Evropa that white nationalist organizations are not white supremacist groups, or racists for that matter, but conservative groups that are simply fighting for their personal rights. In his first interview, Cvjetanovic employs these same racist discourses. He qualifies that he identifies as a white nationalist and “identitarian,” not a white supremacist. In fact, he does not believe that whites are supreme in any way (Roedel et al.). He believes all cultures are under threat by globalism and all nations need to preserve their culture and history (Roedel et al.). Cvjetanovic’s response mirrors white nationalists’ new branding framed by “discourses of unity, acceptance, and multiculturalism and principles of abstract liberalism, fairness, and laissez-faire egalitarianism and individualism” (Hughley). Cvjetanovic employs the discursive strategies of what Bonilla-Silva terms abstract liberalism, which situates whites as morally engaged for all cultures while blatantly ignoring the fact of people of color’s realities (74-76). Of course, Cvjetanovic employs these same discursive strategies of the white nationalists to remove themselves from framings of white

supremacy. Cvjetanovic invites white audiences to reevaluate racist logics by framing himself through normative white ideologies. In turn white racism becomes normalized. These discursive logics form the foundation for whites to justify white racism as not actually being racist.

## Diverting White Racism

The photograph of Cvjetanovic pictures him holding his torch, screaming, sweat beaded along his forehead, eyebrows furrowed and leaning forward as if about to pounce. He is pictured as violent, monstrous, in essence, scary. In many respects the photo transports viewers back to the 1960s Jim Crow era of violent racism. His image provides a face to the masked, nameless, silhouetted figure of the white racists Klansmen of the past. But more so, it disrupts the ideologies of post-race, colorblind whites by fore fronting that white racism is still very prevalent. Notably the close range in which this image frames him thrusts viewers to intimately engage with the affective norms of the monstrosity of white racism. Cvjetanovic's viral image is such a depiction of rage and violence he becomes dubbed "The Angry Torch Guy" (@yesyourearacist). In many respects the scope of his imagery forced whites to acknowledge the existence of white monstrous racism among white people. The photo identifying Cvjetanovic also indisputably locates his participation in a racist event and in racist organizations. These circumstances alone serve to vilify Cvjetanovic in the public space because white people must demonize him to exonerate whites from racism. I echo this white supremacist practice by dumbfoundingly staring at his picture. I am shocked by the image because I am forced to acknowledge that violent white racists exist. My whiteness provides me the privilege to not have to experience violent white racism daily. But I perpetuate its violence by never acknowledging its existence. In response to this image, whites, myself included, separate ourselves from Cvjetanovic by responding with distain towards him. Cvjetanovic is a horrible person because he is a racist. This white supremacist logic nullifies whites from white racism. Whiteness functions strategically here to characterize a particular type of white masculinity as racist in order to remove "good" whites from "bad" racists. It is not the identifying of Cvjetanovic that drives him to viral status. It is the photograph that poignantly projects a monstrous racist image of him. It is this monstrosity of whiteness that propels the media hype. Colorblind

racist ideologies postulate white racists/racism exist solely within these enraged, torch carrying, screaming white male images. In turn, whiteness and patriarchy work to secure white racism to this stand-alone image.

The strategic manners of post-racist and liberalist discourses that arise to remove white racism from white people is perhaps best located in the social media backlash to the Cvjetanovic's image. The online comments function to recenter post-racist ideologies and displace white racism from white bodies onto the Cvjetanovic image. Leonardo reminds us that strategies of whiteness "frequently serve to perpetuate white racial supremacy through color-blindness, ahistorical justifications, and sleights-of-mind" (141). The social media responses to the photo of Cvjetanovic is used by whites to define what white racism looks like, removing the reality of covert norms of white racism. Furthermore, the posted comments provide the larger white audience the capacity to escape from their own white monstrosity. Whites are granted a projected imagery to disassociate themselves from racism and also erase the reality of systematic inequality embodied by white masculinity as inadvertently racist and misogynist.

For example, one comment posted in response to the original "@yesyoureracists" tweet by a presumably white woman said, "I spy a virgin" (sonotpopular @anne\_mohri). Interestingly, her comment assumes a heteronormative stance and challenges his white masculinity through her degrading comment of lack of masculine sexual conquest. It also provides white femininity a means to disassociate white straight women with racist white men. In essence, white straight women would never engage with any form of racism. This white-looking woman is able to ascribe that white racism cannot hold heteronormative ground and removes Cvjetanovic from normative whiteness. McIntosh notes that white women feed the workings of heteronormative whiteness by defending the racism of white men ("Victims"). This white women's comment mirrors the many other attacks on Cvjetanovic's physical appearance, sexuality, last name/heritage, and intelligence.

Rather than reflexively engaging with our own (white peoples') relationship to white racism (McIntosh and Hobson), the online forum functions as a narrative space to vilify the image of Cvjetanovic while never noting our white enculturation with white supremacy (Moon). While much of the other online feeds reiterate his racism, not anywhere in these dialogues does any white person acknowledge their white relation to this imagery, to our white history, or relate to the fact that this does not actually affect us (white people). Rather whiteness

serves to exonerate those whites attacking Cvjetanovic from white racism. Whites -at large- should be held accountable for the grotesque reality of these white men's racist actions, but instead whiteness absolves white accountability. Whites subsequently capitalizes on this image by perpetuating post-racist narratives and neoliberal ideological constructs of racism. White racism becomes reduced to the image of the "Angry Torch Guy," enabling white folks to separate themselves from our role in white monstrosity by vilifying Cvjetanovic as the tokenized white racist monster. In essence, whites maintain the norms of white supremacy by claiming we are not racist since we did not march through a college campus holding lit torches and screaming neo-Nazi slogans. Before reflexively diving into my analysis I consumed these comments with vindication. The comments allowed for me to displace racism onto Cvjetanovic. Overall by rebuking him, I can further exonerate myself from white racism and instead believe I stand in solitude with people of color.

The image of Cvjetanovic serves an imperative role in the monstrosity of whiteness to construct what white monsters look like. This strategy of whiteness excuses white folks because the real racist monsters are these white extremists. With the monstrous image of Cvjetanovic serving to define racist white people, white masculinity is discursively secured as *not* racist when in fact these monstrous diversions are *the* norms of the monstrosity of whiteness. In a post-race era, liberalism works diligently with whiteness to ensure that white patriarchy continue to be crowned as savior figures, not the monstrous racism that is inexplicitly part of the white race/white realities. Discursive workings of whiteness function to contain white monstrosity to this image not the person represented in it or other white bodies. With his image fixed, Cvjetanovic is then provided ample news and media outlets to transform himself back to norms of white masculinity.

## Transforming White Racism

First and foremost, Cvjetanovic embodies norms of white masculinity, which serves to transform him from the screaming racist imagery to a humanized white male college student. Cvjetanovic's transformation detonates white masculinities shapeshifting privileges and abilities to always return to points of normative power. Calafell writes of Chicana feminists legacies of escaping psychic and

physical trauma through their abilities of shapeshifting (*Monstrosity* 59-68). Notably white masculinities' shapeshifting is not a response to harms but a norm. In other words, the monstrosity of whiteness grants white masculine embodiments shapeshifting capabilities in order to always re-conform white masculinity back to normative frames of power. These transformations are effortless enactments most often embodied by white men and accomplished through the dominating powers of heteronormativity, patriarchy, and whiteness. Cvjetanovic is a beautiful depiction of white racism's shapeshifting.

Upon his return to Reno following the Charlottesville protest, the news media awaited Cvjetanovic's arrival in the airport. Cameras followed him in a blue polo shirt and jeans as he rode the escalator down to baggage claim. Cvjetanovic was not embarrassed or surprised by the reporters awaiting him. Instead, he welcomed their questions and was provided over thirty minutes to voice his views and clarify his positions (Roedel et al.). In all his interviews, Cvjetanovic embodies power and control, confidence and assurance; he perfectly enacts hegemonic masculinity (Trujillo). Despite being crowned as the picture of white racism in America and completely vilified, Cvjetanovic is composed and prepared to speak publicly on his own behalf. He and his family received hundreds of death threats (Roedel et al.), yet he calmly walks through the airport and confidently articulates his views. He is completely unscathed. Here in his white masculine embodiments begins the transformation of repositioning his white masculinity away from white racism.

Cvjetanovic showcases his privilege of white masculinity as he looks directly into the camera and responds. He demonstrates how, as a white man, he owns the power to re-frame himself and what he says will be accepted as truth by other white listeners. Trujillo reminds us the media affirms hegemonic masculinity through the (white) male body (297). The confidence in which Cvjetanovic speaks forefronts that he knows he has this power. He understands his white monstrosity must be redirected and he knows exactly how to conduct himself in order to regain his masculine white normativity. He nonchalantly addresses the cameras with a matter-of-fact tone and ends his interviews with a "business as usual" demeanor. I am reminded of Thompson's descriptions of his own understandings of white masculinity. He writes, "I always had a deep sense of confidence that came, in part, from my privilege" (27). Confidence is a primary trait awarded to white masculinity, and when embodied correctly, white men are afforded authentication.

White masculinity also maintains privilege to define itself even in vilified contradiction. Cvjetanovic testifies that he attended the march “for the message that white European culture has a right to be here just like every other culture,” and he believes the removal of Lee’s statue symbolized “the slow replacement of white heritage” in the U.S. (Sheth). In a later interview, he clarifies his intentions were simply to “hear a few alt-right speakers and then go home” (“UNR Student”). He is then referenced quoting, “The 14 words, one of the most famous white supremacist slogans. ‘We all deserve a future for our children and for our culture. White nationalists aren’t all hateful: We just want to preserve what we have’” (Sheth). Cvjetanovic is pictured at the center of a hate-filled chanting protest and then calmly claims he is not hateful but simply went to listen to some speakers. He recites the words of a white supremacist slogan but claims he is not a white supremacist.

The media allows Cvjetanovic to redefine himself in the space of vilified contradiction in order to remove the monstrosity of racism from white bodies. He states, “...I hope that the people sharing the photo are willing to listen that I’m not the angry racist they see in that photo” (Sheth). His comment drips with contradiction as just days earlier he is pictured chanting neo-Nazi sentiments. Whiteness and patriarchy ensure that the embodiment of white masculinity always be allowed to define itself no matter the circumstances, no matter the contradiction. In fact, not one interviewer challenges Cvjetanovic’s contradictory sentiments. In his airport interview, the white male reporter asks Cvjetanovic to explain his views rather than challenge his contradictory claims. He asks, “You have been called a White Supremacist, tell me how you identify?” (Roedel et al.). Even in his questioning, he opens the door for Cvjetanovic to redefine himself. Each following interview allows Cvjetanovic to respond to the image as not representing who he is as a person (even though it was in fact him participating in a racist march, adorned in racist emblems, and screaming racist chants). But he defines himself as not a racist. This blatant discursive contradiction only functions through white masculinity.

Atkinson and Calafell demonstrate a primary component of hegemonic masculinity is its ability to function in/through “grey areas” that remove responsibility for taboo acts and violent associations. They define grey areas as “the nebulous and confusing space where responsibility for inappropriate actions becomes tangled and lost” (5). Cvjetanovic’s grey areas are further seen when he responds to being directly asked about participating in “Blood and Soil” chants. He



claims, “I did *not* participate in those chats like ‘Jews will not replace us.’ I think that is actually stupid. What I did chant was ‘One people, one nation, end immigration,’” which he goes on for more than a minute clarifying his thoughts on immigration (Roedel et al.). He explains the picture of him screaming was when the march got really “heated” and “I was just saying this was ‘Our Home and we have the right to defend it’” (Roedel et al.). As with the grey areas of hegemonic masculinity, Cvjetanovic never assumes responsibility for his depictions, nor even needs to defend his actions, rather “clarifies” how he was negatively portrayed.

White people use the defense of a mistaken identity and employ colorblind liberalist rhetoric to explain away their racist acts, while bodies of color are confined to the monstrous threats/villains/terrorists/criminals ascribed to them. Whiteness and patriarchy empower the embodiment of white masculinity to control who is ascribed as monstrous, even when white men enact violence. In another interview, Cvjetanovic responds to people calling him a Nazi. He says, “[Those claims] are gross lies... I am a Nationalist... It’s their own fear of nationalism that is twisting how they see us. And I am hoping if they sit down and talk with us, they will see I am not a monster, that we are not all monsters” (Roedel et al.). Here again, Cvjetanovic redefine himself. Cvjetanovic is pictured monstrous but he is not a monster. The systems of power, “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy,” always provide the embodiment of white masculinity the power to position itself how it *should*, and in turn, *will* (by white people) be seen (hooks 3).

Cvjetanovic’s transformation from screaming, volatile white supremacist is further removed as he claims he is “quiet, shy, and non-confrontational” (“Post UNR Decision”). To follow the lineage of white liberal colorblind racism he finishes his self-definition by stating, “I’m a good person” (“Post UNR Decision”). Interestingly he acknowledges the photograph does not portray an image of a “good person” but asks that we see him differently. This falls in line with what Feagin et al. term as “sincere fictions,” which they define as “personal ideological constructions that reproduce societal mythologies at the individual level” (186). They go on to clarify, “In such personal characterizations, white individuals usually see themselves as “not racist,” as “good people,” even while they think and act in antiblack ways” (186-7). Once Cvjetanovic redefines himself, he then shapeshifts to a victim of misrepresentation and finally into a

white savior. Cvjetanovic demonstrates how white masculinity can transform from negative framings to idealized norms.

In another interview, we learn of the online petition to expel Cvjetanovic and his personal choice to quit his job as a university escort driver (“UNR Student”). In fact, before his plane had even landed in Reno-Tahoe International Airport more than 35,000 people had signed a petition on change.org to have Cvjetanovic expelled from his university and fired from his campus position (“UNR Student”). However, we learn of this petition through Cvjetanovic’s response to it. The media as an agent of hegemonic masculinity supports his voice over the thousands of voices of those that signed the petition. There is no effort to interview or invite a comment from change.org, only Cvjetanovic’s response to the petition is offered. So, the lone rhetoric heard is one that places Cvjetanovic at a loss and as an outcast from his university, all while reiterating, “I didn’t commit any crimes.” (UNR Student”). The monstrosity of whiteness pulls on white ignorance and white victimization to create empathy for his white embodiments.

Calafell notes that white terrorists are humanized to structure victim ideologies (51). As I listen to the interviews I find myself even beginning to sympathize with Cvjetanovic. He utilizes tactics of white ignorance by claiming he had no idea this would happen, he claims he “didn’t even know about the march until he got there and wasn’t sure he would do it” (Roedel et al.). He also employs victimization discourses to reposition himself from white monstrosity to an innocent victim of misrepresentation. Over a series of interviews, we hear how this experience has affected his life and future (e.g. see Roedel et al.; Goss and McAndrews). There is certainly an intradiscursive connection to my growing sympathy as a white straight mother to this white young man’s story. My white body responds to the role white women play in securing white masculinity (McIntosh “Victims”). The racist monster is slowly removed from my eyes and I come to only see the normative of white masculinity. My personal relations here to Cvjetanovic’s interviews demonstrate how white cultural memory removes racism from whites.

Along with being a victim Cvjetanovic manifests himself as a white savior. When questioned regarding the threats made against him (Roedel et al.), he simultaneously positions himself as the white savior that wants liberty for all but refuses to acknowledge the racial disparages that benefit him. After repetitively noting the personal threats against him, he goes on to say how these threats have extended to his father, grandfather, mother, and sister. He offers,

I understand the photo is very, very, bad looking but I don't believe you should threaten my family. To me that's monstrous. I mean call me a Nazi; you can hate my ideology. But I wouldn't threaten anyone. And they are threatening my sister and my mother, my dad, my grandparents and to me, I can't say, "Oh that's ok."... I can understand if you want to threaten me, but they are threatening innocent people. (Roedel et al.)

Here Cvjetanovic strategically positions himself through white masculinity as also a protector<sup>2</sup>. In turn, the rhetoric used empathetically frames him as a victim to death threats, then reconstructs him as the brave protector to stand in for the innocent. Cvjetanovic redefines his monstrosity and to do so he relies on the Other to define his normality (Shildrick). Discursively he constructs himself as a martyr noting the threats against him. Simultaneously he also becomes a protector unwilling to accept threats against "the innocent." Like the seductive vampire, his transformation is complete from white monstrosity to white savior by framing those threatening his family as the *real* monsters.

Cvjetanovic's story denotes the extreme privilege afforded to white masculinity to fluidly transform from "The Angry Torch Guy" to normative white masculinity. Whiteness and patriarchy shapeshift his body from the once irate monstrous racist into the rational and confident white savior. Cvjetanovic's white masculine embodiments afford him authority and authenticity. In the end, whites are only left with small traces of Cvjetanovic's monstrosity. The fleeting white cultural memory of his volatile imagery is nearly removed as the university releases a statement that Cvjetanovic will not be expelled and that his second amendment rights will be upheld ("Post UNR Decision"). The worldwide acceptance of the university's decision demonstrates how whites benefit from Cvjetanovic's life returning to normal. He serves as a clear representation that white racism is not confined to mediated tropes but is a part of white racial expectations. Furthermore, white monstrosity leaves white masculinity completely unscathed. As Cvjetanovic says in an on-campus interview on November 28, 2017, just over three months after his public racist debut, "He no longer feels like his safety is being threatened and that life almost feels like it has gone back to normal" (Reynolds Sandbox). Cvjetanovic's life is back to normal,

---

<sup>2</sup> For more on white masculinity as saviors/protectors see Dawn Marie D. McIntosh "From White Ladies" and Bernadette Marie Calafell "When Will We All Matter."

meaning he has regained full ownership of his white masculine privilege. His vilified image has faded from white cultural memory and shapeshifted him back to the normative white masculinity he has owned his whole life. The monstrosity of white racism provides whites the privilege of purifying erasure, while bodies of color continue to hide from the white monsters among them. Like a green mist that vaporizes away, white racism slowly vanished from white cultural reality.

### Signifiers of White Racist Monstrosity

The events in Charlottesville require whites acknowledge the monstrosity of white racism is a current reality. White racists exist everywhere. What is more telling is how discursive responses to Fields and Cvjetanovic denote white racism as more than simply monstrous violent acts or angry torch carrying men. White racism is a norm of whiteness shielded as anything but racism. Cohen cautions, “The monster always escapes because it refuses easy categorization” (6). Similarly, whiteness provides whites a means to escape from the constructs of racism. Like “the undead returns in slightly different clothing, each time to be read against contemporary social movements or specific, determining event” (5), white racism alters its form and vaporizes from white cultural realities. The tales of Fields and Cvjetanovic serve as clear examples for how white racism works for white people and the discursive tactics to remove white racism from white cultural realities. This work adds to the theoretical understandings of whiteness by demonstrating how whites employ monstrosity in order to remove racism from whites and white culture. It is the covert workings of white racism by all whites that is quite possibly the most monstrous of white racism because these forms of white racism completely vindicate whites from white supremacy and remain unacknowledged by whites.

Calafell began the conversation of the monstrosity of whiteness by demonstrating what monstrous whiteness is in relationship to violent white assailants/terrorists. This piece builds on her work to challenge white readership to locate the monstrosity of whiteness that exists in our everyday white embodied realities by demonstrating how whiteness and patriarchy function to purify whites, even those whites blatantly caught in racist enactments, as normalized non-racist protectors of the innocent. Racist monstrosities are historical realities of our white enculturation that cannot and should not be pushed to the extreme boundaries of

select racist assailants. Rather, white people must come to see how these monstrosities can be transposed from our (white) bodies to isolated imagery and/or denoted extremists. Shome challenges, “Critical engagements with formations of whiteness (as part of larger racial formations) must continue to remain an important and urgent political project for our times” (44). Now more than ever, whites must not only express disdain for public displays of white racism, but more so, we (white people) must reflexively engage with how our everyday white cultural norms are “signifiers of monstrous passing that stand in for the monstrous body itself” (Cohen 6). Whites must acknowledge the historical and present realities of our white racism. We must hold tight to these cultural realities as present states of how we benefit and negotiate our everyday ways of being. In doing so whites are then capable of locating our personal investments in white racism.

#### **\* Post-Script \***

A year later students of color hang the notorious picture of Cvjetanovic around the campus warning of the white racist monsters existing among the college students (Perdue). These students haven’t forgotten. There are still monstrous sightings, but they seem to dissipate faster as each day passes from the initial event. And life for Cvjetanovic, as he claims, is “pretty much back to normal” (Reynolds Sandbox). He goes to class, works his job, goes to lunch, hangs with friends never to be confronted for his monstrosity. Whites benefit from Cvjetanovic’s life being unscathed. In the end, whites benefit from his white racism being forgotten. However, students of color continue to live in fear of his racist monstrosity. In response to this fear, during Black History Month a poster draped over the University of Nevada, Reno’s, Charlton Family Business and Lecture Center proclaimed “UNR Protects Racists” (Perdue). These students challenge whites to acknowledge that by allowing Cvjetanovic’s life to return to normal, we protect white racism. White bodies must acknowledge the role we take in this national imagery of white monstrosity and our role in the current political pulse of inferential racism. But more so, this white acknowledgment must remain present in our white consciousness each day. In full transparency before beginning this project the imagery of these events and the conscious awareness of white racism had faded from my thoughts. These students reminded

me of my white privilege to disregard white racism. They cannot forget the reality of white racist monstrosity. Have you forgotten?

### Works Cited

Alcoff, Linda. *The Future of Whiteness*. Polity Press, 2015.

Anti-Deformation League "ADL Report: White Supremacist Murders More than Doubled in 2017," <https://www.adl.org>. 17 January 2018, Web Accessed 14 March 2018

Atkinson, Joshua, and Bernadette Calafell. "Darth Vader Made Me Do It! Anakin Skywalker's Avoidance of Responsibility and the Gray Areas of Hegemonic Masculinity in the Star Wars Universe." *Communication, Culture & Critique*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2009, pp. 1-20.

Anzaldúa, Gloria E. *Borderlands: La Frontera*. 4th ed. Aunt Lute Books, 2007.

Beazley, John. "He'd Do a Better Job of Convincing Us He's Not a Racist if He Wasn't Wearing a T-Shirt with a Logo of a White Supremacist Group on It..." *Independent*. 8 August 2017, 7:13pm.  
<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/charlotteville-photo-student-peter-cvjetanovic-not-angry-racist-white-nationalists-uva-university-of-a7891791.html>

hooks, bell. *Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice*. Routledge, 2013.

Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*. 4th ed. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2014.

Bromwich, Jonah and Blinder, Alan. "What We Know about James Alex Fields, Driver Charged in Charlottesville Killing." *The New York Times*. 13 August 2017. Web. Accessed 8 December 2017  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/13/us/james-alex-fields-charlottesville-driver-.html?search-input-2=james+alex+feilds>.

- Calafell, Bernadette Marie. *Latina/o Communication Studies: Theorizing Performance*. Peter Lang, 2007.
- Calafell, Bernadette Marie. "'She Ain't No Diva!': Reflections on in/Hospitable Guests/Hosts, Reciprocity, and Desire." *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies*, vol. 5, no. 5, 2009, pp. 1-18.
- Calafell, Bernadette Marie. "When Will We All Matter?: Exploring Race, Pedagogy, and Sustained Hope for the Academy." *The Sage Handbook of Communication and Instruction*, edited by Deanna L. Fassett and John T. Warren. Sage, 2010, pp. 343-59.
- Calafell, Bernadette Marie. *Monstrosity, Performance, and Race in Contemporary Culture*. Peter Lang, 2015.
- Calhoun, Lindsay R. "'Will the Real Slim Shady Please Stand Up?' Masking Whiteness, Encoding Hegemonic Masculinity in Eminem's *Marshall Mathers LP*." *The Howard Journal of Communication*, vol. 16, 2005, pp. 267-294.
- Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. (Ed.). "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)." *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*. University of Minnesota Press, 1996, pp. 3-25.
- Crenshaw, Carrie. "Resisting Whiteness' Rhetorical Silence." *Western Journal of Communication*, vol. 61, no. 3, 1997, pp. 253-278.
- DiAngelo, Robin. "White Fragility." *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, vol. 3, 2011, pp. 54-70.
- DiAngelo, Robin. *What Does It Mean to Be White: Developing White Racial Literacy*. Peter Lang Publishing, 2012.
- Discover What Your Professors Never Told You. *Identity Evropa*. Web Accessed 19 March 2018. <https://www.identityevropa.com/education>
- Dyer, Richard. "The Matter of Whiteness." *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism*, edited by Paula S. Rothenberg. 4 ed. Worth Publishers, 2012, pp. 9-14.

Feagin, Joe R., Hernàn Vera, and Pinar Batur. *White Racism*. 2nd ed. Routledge, 2001.

Frankenberg, Ruth. (Ed.). "Introduction: Local Whiteness, Localizing Whiteness." *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*. Duke University Press, 1997, pp. 1-34.

Frankenberg, Ruth. "The Mirage of an Unmarked Whiteness." *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*, edited by Birgit Rasmussen, Eric Klinenberg, Irene J. Nexica, and Matt Wray. Duke University Press, 2001, pp. 72-96.

Greenblat, Johnathan, "The Resurgent Threat of White-Supremacist Violence" *The Atlantic*, Jan 17, 2018. Web. Accessed 10 March 2018.  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/01/the-resurgent-threat-of-white-supremacist-violence/550634/>.

Hughey, Matthew. *White Bound: Nationalists, Antiracists, and the Shared Meanings of Race*. Stanford University Press, 2012.

Heim, Joe. "Recounting a Day of Rage, Hate, Violence, and Death." *The Washington Post*. 14 August 2017. Web. 8 Accessed December 2017.  
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/local/charlottesville-timeline/?noredirect=on>

Hensley, Nicole. "Charlottesville Suspect Held Hate Group Shield Before Attack." *New York Daily News*. 13 August 2017. Web. 27 Accessed March 2018. <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/charlottesville-suspect-held-hate-group-shield-attack-article-1.3407245>

King, C. Richard "Watching TV with White Supremacists: A More Complex View of the Colorblind Screen." *The Colorblind Screen: Television in Post-Racial America*, edited by Sarah Nilsen and Sarah E Turner. University Press, 2014, pp. 219-36.

Leonardo, Zeus. "The Color of Supremacy: Beyond the Discourse of 'white privilege.'" *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, vol. 36, 2004, pp. 137-152.



- McKerrow, Raymie E. "Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis." *Communication Monographs*, vol. 56, 1989, pp. 91-111.
- McIntosh, Dawn Marie D. "White Feelings, Feeling Straight: Cultivating Affective Attentiveness for Queer Futurities." *QED: A Journal of Queer Worldmaking*, vol. 1, no. 3, 2014, pp. 154-58.
- McIntosh, Dawn Marie D. "Victims, Protectors, and Possibilities for Change: White Womanhood and the Violence of Heteronormativity." *QED: A Journal of Queer Worldmaking* vol. 4, no. 2, 2017, pp. 162-69.
- McIntosh, Dawn Marie D. "From White Ladies to White Trash Mamas: Performances of White Femininity." *Communicative Power of Whiteness*, edited by Dawn Marie D. McIntosh, Dreama Moon and Thomas K. Nakayama. Routledge, Forthcoming.
- McIntosh, Dawn Marie D, and Kathryn Hobson. "Reflexive Engagement: A White (Queer) Women's Performance of Failures and Alliance Possibilities." *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2013, pp. 1-23.
- McGee, Michael Calvin. "Text, Context, and the Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture." *Contemporary Rhetorical Theory: A Reader*, edited by John Louis Lucaites, Celeste Michelle Condit and Sally Caudill. The Guilford Press, 1999, pp. 65-78.
- Moon, Dreama G. "'Be/Coming' White and the Myth of White Ignorance: Identity Projects in White Communities." *Western Journal of Communication*, vol. 80, no. 3, 2016, pp. 282-303.
- Nakayama, Thomas K. "Show/Down Time: "Race," Gender, Sexuality, and Popular Culture." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 11 (1994): 162-79.
- Nakayama, Thomas K., and Robert L. Krizek. "Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, vol. 81, 1995, pp. 291-309.
- Ono, Kent A, and John M. Sloop. "Commitment to *Telos*--a Sustained Critical Rhetoric." *Communication Monographs*, vol. 59, 1992, pp. 48-60.

Purdue, Madelen. “‘We Haven’t Forgotten’: With Start of Black History Month, UNR Diversity Debate Resurfaces.” *The Nevada Sagebrush* (Reno). 6 February 2018. Web. Accessed 15 March 2018.  
<http://nevadasagebrush.com/blog/2018/02/06/we-havent-forgotten-with-start-of-black-history-month-unr-diversity-debate-resurfaces/>

Sheth, Sonam. “White Supremacist Who Marched in Charlottesville: ‘I’m not the angry racist they see in that photo’” *Business Insider* 14 August 2017. Web. Accessed 8 December 2017. <https://www.businessinsider.com/peter-cvjetanovic-white-supremacist-charlottesville-photo-not-angry-racist-2017-8>

Shildrick, Margrit. *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self*. Sage, 2002.

Shome, Raka. *Diana and Beyond: White Femininity, National Identity, and Contemporary Media Culture*. University of Illinois Press, 2014.

Silva, Kumarini. *Brown Threat: Identification in the Security State*. University of Minnesota Press, 2016.

Smith, Francesa Marie and Thomas A. Hollihan. “‘Out of Chaos Breathes Creation’: Human Agency, Mental Illness, and Conservative Arguments Locating Responsibility for the Tucson Massacre.” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, vol. 17, 2014, pp. 585-618.

Reynolds Sandbox. “Investigations of Reno: A White Identitarian on Campus.” 20 December 2017. Web. Accessed 26 March 2018. <https://medium.com/the-reynolds-media-lab/investigations-of-reno-a-white-identitarian-on-campus-2e3f1395f147>

Roedel, Kaleb, Ben Margiott, and Kenzie Bales. “University of Nevada, Reno Student Attends Charlottesville Rally.” *CBS News 4* 13 August 2017. Web. Accessed 16 November 2017. <https://mynews4.com/news/local/university-of-nevada-reno-student-participates-in-charlottesville-white-nationalist-rally>

@ Sonotpopular anne\_mohri “I spy a virgin.” 16 August 2017 *Twitter*  
[@pathickory@enevareno,https://twitter.com/YesYoureRacist/status/896502810971426818](https://twitter.com/YesYoureRacist/status/896502810971426818)

- Thompson, Cooper. "A White Man's Experience of Oppression in a Life of Privilege." *Diversity Perspectives*, vol. 16, 2008, pp. 26-31.
- Trujillo, Nick. "Hegemonic Masculinity on the Mound: Media Representations of Nolan Ryan and American Sports Culture." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, vol. 8, no. 3, 1991, pp. 290-308.
- "UNR Student Who Attended White Nationalist Rally Resigns From Campus Job" *CBS News 4*. 28 August 2017. Web. Accessed 16 November 2017.  
<https://mynews4.com/news/local/unr-student-who-attended-white-nationalist-rally-resigns-from-campus-job>
- Warren, John T. *Performing Purity: Whiteness, Pedagogy, and the Reconstitution of Power*. Peter Lang, 2003.
- Watts, Eric King. "Border Patrolling and 'Passing' in Eminem's *8 Mile*." *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, vol. 22, 2005, pp. 187-206.
- @yesyoureracist. "This angry young man is Peter Cvjetanovic.." *Twitter* 3:45 August 12, 2017  
<https://twitter.com/yesyoureracist/status/896502810971426818?lang=en>
- Yep, Gust A. . "The Violence of Heteronormativity in Communication Studies: Notes on Injury, Healing, and Queer World-Making." *Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 45, nos. 2/3/4, 2003, pp. 11-59.

# Preparing for the Zombie Apocalypse and other Neocolonial Monsters During the Endless Global War on Terrorism

MAROUF HASIAN, JR. AND SEAN T. LAWSON

Fears of monstrous “others” have always been a part of ghostly colonial, postcolonial, and neocolonial representations of spaces and places. For example, after the famous Haitian Revolution in 1804—where hundreds of thousands of former slaves fought off French and other European imperial armies--writers on several continents worried about how to control their own slaves and maintain prosperous slave trades. Over time apocalyptic genres appeared in books, films, and other outlets. Many former colonial powers had audiences who conveniently forgot that the “horror-movie” zombie tropes owed their heritage in part to the efforts of living former slaves, who “imagined being imprisoned in their bodies forever” (Mariani 1). Those who hunted, worked for colonial police, or were defended by imperial military forces demanded that their publics accept the idea that horrific and ungodly weapons should not be prohibited when used in colonies to control unruly people of color.

With the passage of time layers of sedimented figurations were crafted by those who wanted to comment on hordes, swarms, or other existential dangers, and the persistent circulation of global imaginary productions allowed generations to see parallels across space and time. Note, for example, how President Trump referenced the ways that American imperialists in the Philippines, led General Pershing, supposedly used bullets dipped in pigs’ blood to “deter” hordes of Muslim Moro fighters (Shalby). On several occasions during 2016 and 2017 America’s commander-in-chief insisted that the use of these types of imperial strategies led to decades of peace in Southern parts of Philippines and that this provided lessons for today’s warriors who fought “Islamic fundamentalists.”

These *dispositifs* are not created in a vacuum. As Phillips argued, the works of George Romero, Wes Craven, John Carpenter, and others who have contributed to the production of some of these popular culture visualities were not always

The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 6, No. 2 & 3  
Copyright © 2018

viewed as purveyors of “respectable” genres (10). However, changes in cultural moods, and the recent mainstreaming of zombie films underscores the permeable boundaries that exist between societal anxieties and similar affective states, especially during times of war. As we note below, it is no coincidence that some planning against zombies resembles counterterrorist planning against Muslim or Arab “others.”

Twenty-first century audiences, who enjoy watching episodes of the *Walking Dead* or *Game of Thrones*, are helping craft a sub-genre of monstrosity narratives that we are calling “postcolonial zombie terrorism.” We extend the work of Professor Al-Ghabra, who as argued that we are living during times when human beings become “monsterized” when neoliberals feel perceived crises of neoliberalism and colonialism (33). Neoliberal anxieties in the sense that economies can crash, and colonial monsterization that is based on contemporary settler colonial anxieties.

Unlike the European vampires of old, or the colonial hordes that could be fought off until they died, the new morphing enemies straddle the line between fact and fiction as the “undead” pose supposed terrorist threats that cannot be defeated with maxim guns or conventional weaponry. Today’s Department of Defense needs different monsterring.

As countless communication and interdisciplinary scholars have noted before us, there is no shortage of anxious post-9/11 communities who put up walls and join groups of “preppers” as they prepare for all types of catastrophes. While Professor Calafell has commented on the potential subversive functions of some of these contemporary monsters, Watts reminds us of the problematic nature of some of these zombie characterizations that may be admissions of “postracial fantasies” that take advantage of “tropes of (bio) racism” (329). Phillips has explained that the return of particular “Gothic” representations has everything to do with a “cultural resonance” between projection of horror films and the presentist needs of societies (12).

Clearly journalists, academics, governmental officials, and many others are discovering that zombie discourses can no longer be treated as mere fabrications, ephemeral collections of commercialized phantasms or entertaining visualities. While some writers argue that these figurations are only used for “thought experiments” (Prospero), others aver that the popular circulation of materials on the undead in zombie apocalyptic frames reflects and refracts not just “reel” but “real” societal problematics.

That said, where are those studies of monsterring that put on display how these representations actually impact neo-liberal or neo-colonial governmentalities? Where are those critical cultural investigations that provide demonstrative evidence that documents how zombification actually influences U.S. or other Western official decision-making in counterterrorist situations?

In this particular essay we provide readers with a nuanced praxiological and critical cultural reading of how some sub-genres of monstrosity gothics are symbolically and materially linked to a key topic—U.S. counterterrorism and public perceptions of preparedness. As Jackson explained critical terrorist studies now involve the intersectional study of “ontological, epistemological and praxiological issues” (6), and this means that scholars need to investigate how particular representations are actually appropriated by empowered Western decision-makers. For example, rather than simply speculating about how particular acts of zombification or monsterring “may” have influenced U.S. leaders or institutions praxiological studies put on display how zombies are referenced in key emergency and counterterrorist texts and contexts.

We argue that savvy U.S. governmental officials have tried to hijack interest in monsters and zombies in order to further their militaristic agendas in their fight against post-9/11 enemies. Using a purposive sampling of key mainstream and alternative press commentaries on zombies and preparedness against terrorism--as well as a detailed critique of a key Department of Defense text called CONPLAN 8888--we illustrate how interest in zombies is used to help legitimate the use of massive violence against both “reel” zombies and “real” terrorist enemies. Instead of simply being dismissive of terrorist zombies as matters of “play,” empowered state actors produce ideological governmentalities that take advantage of the polysemic features of zombie apocalyptic rhetorics to help further American warfighting.

However, if we want to understand the meaning of the “post” in these postcolonial zombie studies readers need to be aware of some of the genealogical, colonial fragments that prefigured the more contemporary terrorist monstrosities. We therefore begin with an overview of some of the early U.S. imperial monsterring before commenting on governmental appropriations before and after the circulation of CONPLAN-8888.

## Enemy Monsters and the Formation of American Martial Gothics

Both colonial policing of older “voodoo” monsters and control of post-colonial hordes might be conceptualized as variants of what Johan Höglund and others now call the “American Imperial Gothic,” a genre that includes fragments that have been taken from older European gothics, tales of “benevolent assimilation.” These representations of the other are just some of the “master narratives” that are, “by definition, lies and untruths” (Poole xv). Historian Poole goes on to argue that given that fact that “monsters have been manufacturing complex meanings for four hundred years” don’t expect that anyone is going to find any single definitions of a monster when critics tackle a “messy subject like monsters” (Poole xiv).

This is especially the case when neoliberals use popular representations of Gothic “others” to explain Cold War horrors, post-Vietnam worries, and post-9/11 insecurities. As Höglund explains video games, movies, governmental exercises, and gun shows put on display those “muscular” angels who oftentimes provide the only bulwark against a whole host of “Gothic” others, including “angry ghosts, vampires, zombies, atavistic monsters, serial killers, cyborg hordes let loose from hell” or “extraterrestrial invasion forces” that threaten to “overrun the planet” (1).

Sadly, as readers might imagine, the contemporary formation of many postcolonial zombie terrorist displays and performances is based on residual archival materials that put on display the horrific nature of the creative destruction that came when indigenous communities around the globe came in contact with American, European, and other imperialists. Buescher and Ono remarked that even “benevolent colonialism” cannot win “without the concurrent elimination” of “identifiable threats” that often take the form of the “dark, colonized man” [sic] (146). In today’s counterterrorist planning, it is the zombies—with their persistence, their apparent irrational behavior, and other existential threat--that are linked to preparations to deal with Arab or Muslim threats.

Today’s “Islamic fundamentalists” join a long list of colonial foes. Our Anglo-American contested histories and selective public memories are filled with tales of how outnumbered white settlers had no choice but to use overwhelming force when righteous forces had to confront savage others. When European imperialists sat down to write down the laws that dictated how they would carve up places like the “Dark Continent” they also had to craft international laws that

would regulate how they would fight in these violent altercations. Those who were not allowed to have a say in any of this planning were the hordes of Africans, Asians, and other colonized subalterns, who became “their dark alter ego, the uncivilized ‘barbarian,’ ‘savage’ from which the lawgivers sought to ‘distance themselves’ (Mégret 1-5). Those supposedly impervious to pain set the stage for today’s zombification.

In fascinating ways those interested in colonial or imperial hordes or the zombie apocalypse now troll the World Wide Web as they learn about antiquated ethnic, class, and gendered disputes that took place historically when some questioned the morality of having peasants use crossbows against nobles on horses. They find texts written by those conversing about the legality of using snipers, mustard gas, dum-dum bullets, and any other weapons that needed to be used to stop those on the peripheries of empire from winning colonial engagements. Those interested in “Steampunk,” for example, can dress up in costumes that combine their interest in the Zombie Apocalypse with studies of the British celebrations of the battle of Omdurman. This mesmerizes some because this was a battle that took place near Khartoum in the Sudan, where some 11,000 heavily-armed British soldiers killed 60,000 supposedly blood-thirsty savages called the Mahdists, while losing 47 European lives (Clark pars. 1-25).

Another variant of the American monster gothic, that focused on “Arab” or “Muslim” threats, appeared in the tales that would be told by generations of soldiers and American diplomats who celebrated the “victories” of soldiers like “Black Jack” Pershing. Pershing was a US military leader who led hundreds of soldiers in battles that stopped the spread of Muslim “piracy” and “outlaws” in the Southern Philippines. Newspaper accounts, books, memoirs, U.S. governmental documents, posters, and films that were circulated after the Spanish-American War tried to explain why several conflicts on Jolo Island led to the massacre of hundreds—if not thousands—of men, women and children. These were the colonized who tried to flee to volcanic regions in order to avoid U.S. colonial governmentalities. The use of artillery and a new weapon—the .45 caliber revolver—were used to kill somewhere between 600 and 1000 Moro “Mohammedan” fighters who refused to surrender. After what many today call the 1906 Bud Dajo Massacre the slaughter of knife-wielding “*juramentado*” was justified by defenders of U.S. army officials by referring the existential dangers that came from the “religious fanatics” who “believed paradise to be their immediate reward” if they were “killed in action with Christians” (IVC Author par. 34). It would be some of these very same



Muslim communities, and their suppression by generals like Pershing, that President Donald Trump was referencing during the 2016 campaign trial as he talked about the efficacy of using bullets dipped in pig blood to stop Muslim hordes. The deaths of those who died on Jolo Island were just some of the hundreds of thousands of Filipinos who were killed, and had their villages burned, between 1898 and 1920.

During the 1920's books like William Brook's novel *The Magic Island* tapped into the older European fears about slave or class rebellions and they were adapted for "New World" audience who learned about the nexus that existed between social control, capitalism, and "vodou" practices in Haiti. A few years later films like Victor Halérin's *White Zombie* (1932) and Jacques Tourneur's *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943) brought some of these same tropes to the silver screen, and Western fears about the lingering impact of the Great Depression could be linked to native "voodoo" priests, white slave victims, and the threat of decolonization. "As zombie legends took root in the U.S.," explained Zimbardo, "they expressed imperialist anxieties associated with colonialism and slavery, fears of racial mixing and specters of white people becoming dominated through zombification" (273).

The British stories that would be told about the battle of Omdurman, and U.S. remembrances of the Bud Dajo Massacre, can be viewed as just some of the countless examples of Anglo-American martial gothics, military orientalist tales (Porter) that pit the prowess of the West against Eastern "others." In today's postcolonial defenses and appropriation of these gothic figurations "the forces of darkness represent the threat from many different political entities: extremist Islam, Chinese economic competition, Russian imperialism, or even the anti-war, and anti-gun, liberal left" (Höglund 1). However, unlike the older hordes that could be killed and controlled by maxim guns the new postcolonial zombie terrorists are the undead who pose greater threats.

### The Praxiological Zombification of Contemporary "Islamic" or Radical "Arab" Enemies

As noted above, critical praxiological studies, that merge together theory with praxis, are investigations of how contemporary empowered audiences actually use cultural representations to advance key political, social, legal, or military

objectives. In this particular case, as Al-Ghabra once argued “some of today’s monstrous creations are symptomatic of colonial anxiety and have resulted out of today’s modern colonialism that is carried out through the ‘War on Terror’ and the U.S. of presence in the Middle East and other countries” (25). Arjana similarly noted that critical genealogical studies of monstrous representations of Muslims in various Western imaginaries—that cover temporal periods spanning more than 1200 years—illustrate how dehumanizing representations became a part of dense representational landscapes. These landscapes were populated with other monsters, including dwarfs, giants, and dragons. She contends that the sedimented nature of all of this Islamophobia explains Western obsessions with “hijab bans and outlawed minarets, secret renditions of enemy combatants, Abu Ghraib, and GTMO” (1)

In the same way that colonial figurations of “voodoo” were used to rationalize threats that came from empowered former slaves in Haiti, monstrosity and zombification strategies are used by those who wish to take-for-granted the need for aggressive “counterterrorist” strategies that help normalize and legitimate select representations of Taliban, Al-Qaeda, Hamas, or other “terrorist” enemies.

Given the nature of post-9/11 anxieties it is understandable why so many popular cultural representations, historical accounts, diplomatic efforts, and military initiatives focus on securitizing borders and the perceived need to stop the pernicious spread of perfidious “Islamic fundamentalism.” In Sophia Rose Arjana’s genealogical study of Muslims and monstrosity she touches on many of the martial features of this vilification as she traces anti-Muslim sentiments during Medieval, Ottoman, and other colonial and postcolonial periods. Her review of the “archive of Muslim monsters” and anxieties” about “Jihad” (16) helped her explain how incidents like Abu Ghraib during Operation Iraqi Freedom could be linked to earlier concerns regarding the “giant, man-eating Saracens of medieval romances” where “Black Saracens” were shown in medieval art “executing saints” and “murdering other Christian innocents” (Arjana 102).

As we explain in our next two sections, even apparently benign or neutral preparedness texts produced by Western militarists can carry similar conscious or unconscious messages.

## Military Preparedness, Counter Insurgency, Counterterrorism, and The Invention of the Postcolonial Zombie Terrorist

There are obviously many co-authors involved in the production of neo-colonial or post-colonial counter-terrorist rhetorics that reference real and symbolic post-9/11 threats. Notice, for example, the haunting ways that then-President George W. Bush, during a visit to South Bend, Indiana (September 5, 2002) characterized the nation's latest foes: "This is a war where we're fighting tough people, smart killers, who hide in dark caves or who kind of slither into shadowy recesses in large cities and parts of the world and then send youngsters to their suicidal death" (Bush 1547). These types of attributes—hiding, slithering, moving in dark recesses—help set the stage for military zombifications.

In the same way that U.S. generals once worried about the fanaticism of Muslims during the "suppression" of the Moro rebellion in the Philippines those who produced new American martial gothics magnified the dangers presented by their opponents. In 2014 Army General Dempsey argued that some surging Islamic State groups had some "apocalyptic, end-of-days strategic vision," and he invited his listeners to move from supporting a restricted series of airstrikes in Iraq to sanctioning more extensive bombing campaigns elsewhere (Associated Press Staff par. 1-3.). The generic template—that assumed that publics saw the need to fight fanatically "Mohammedan" or "Muslim" hordes—was passed on to other generations. However, the inflections changed as particular presentist needs influenced the morphing and twisting of the specific rationales that would be used to destroy threatening hordes. Texts like Dempsey's helped fabricate the new postcolonial zombie terrorist, that required drastic action.

Note how presences and absences, the naturalized securitized assumptions and possible irruptions, become a part of this type of performative application of zombie conceptualizations. The threats that are prioritized are not the ones coming from individuals or small groups in the West—in the form of lone wolf terrorism or Right wing terrorists—but are instead coming from the populations living in the "Eurasian landmass." This is in keeping with the notion that it is places like Iraq, Afghanistan, Indonesia, or other Arab or Muslim sites, that serve as the geopolitical reservoirs for zombie-like contagion. We can see that some of the very same arguments that were once used to rationalize President George W. Bush's harsh interrogation techniques (based on "unitary executive" powers), or sanction President Barack Obama's use of "necessitous" drones, are now being

adapted to confer even greater powers to those military forces who have to stop the spread of “zombiesm.” Zombies are no longer “limited to nation-states and terrorist groups” because “zombies” are “contagious” (Neocleous 21).

### Implementing a “Real” Plan for Controlling Zombie Terrorism-- CONPLAN 8888 – America’s “Counter-Zombie Dominance” Strategizing

The figure of the zombie still haunts U.S. military thinking to this day. The Pentagon made headlines in 2014 when a fictional planning document created by U.S. Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM) was obtained, and reported on, by Foreign Policy, commonly referred to as simply FP (Lubold). The document published by FP was entitled CONPLAN 8888, and it purported to offer USSTRATCOM’s plan for achieving “counter-zombie dominance” in the event of a worldwide, zombie apocalypse. The “disclaimer” section that opened CONPLAN 8888 made it abundantly clear that this was a training exercise for military planners that had used “hyperbole” and suspension of reality in an effort to “take a very dry, monotonous topic and turn it into something rather enjoyable” (USSTRATCOM 3).

But there was also a political reason for the use of the fictional zombie scenario. This was the avoidance of “the political fallout that occurs if the general public mistakenly believes that a fictional training scenario is actually a real plan.” Instead of “using the fictional ‘Tunisia’ or ‘Nigeria’ scenarios” normally used by U.S planners the document authors explained that they elected “to use a completely-impossible scenario that could never be mistaken as a real plan” (USSTRATCOM 3). Interestingly, we learn that these trainers believed that zombies were a viable substitute for the two “third world” countries that would have normally been the object of such a training scenario.

In short, the goal was to provide a scenario to train strategic military planners to think about the possibility of a global threat to human survival, but to do it in a way that did not raise political alarm bells. Indeed, the document opens by saying: “This plan was not actually designed as a joke” (USSTRATCOM 2). Thus, while the scenario is hyperbolic and unreal, it was not unserious.

The report generated quite a bit of media buzz. A search of *Google News*--from the time it was created through late November 2017--returns around 130

results. Our purposive sampling of the roughly two dozen English-language articles found among these results demonstrated that less than a handful engaged the underlying ideas and assumptions of the plan in a serious or critical way. Thus, it would seem that CONPLAN 8888 achieved its goal of avoiding “political fallout,” despite the attention that it received. This, we contend, was a result of the hyperbolic nature of the scenario and the news media’s resulting difficulty in determining how seriously to take the document. As we explain below, those who produced this plan could make ideological claims about the “other” that were hidden by neutral-sounding terrorist allegations.

Much of the tone for English-language media reaction to CONPLAN 8888 was set by the initial *Foreign Policy (FP)* reporting, which was ambivalent about whether the plan was real. The *FP*’s headline claimed, “The Pentagon Has a Plan to Stop the Zombie Apocalypse. Seriously.” The second paragraph begins, “Incredibly, the Defense Department has a response if zombies attacked,” and the third describes the plan as, “Buried on the military’s secret computer network.” That all sounds very real indeed. Only later in the piece did *FP* acknowledge that the document was created as a training exercise and that the plan it contains is not real. Or did it? The article then adds that, even if the real document does not contain a real plan, “should there be a zombie apocalypse, the military indeed has a plan” (Lubold).

One would have expected *FP* to have had a more nuanced, perhaps even critical, view of CONPLAN 8888, but perhaps the authors here took for-granted the existential nature of “Islamic” fundamentalist threats. After all, it is a publication widely read by serious-minded national security professionals and other neo-liberals. Instead, it ignores most of the more troubling aspects of the plan, including the potential use of nuclear weapons and declaration of martial law, both in the United States. Instead, the article presents CONPLAN 8888 in a click-bait, man-bites-dog style of reporting, that does little to unpack the ideological assumptions embedded in both zombie and terrorist rhetorical texts.

Most other English-language coverage followed *FP*’s lead, exhibiting ambivalence about the realness of the plan and providing little to no substantive engagement with its contents. There were few notable exceptions, however. For example, the UK’s *Daily Mail* ran a story on the plan that cited the *FP* article. Though the *Daily Mail* article quotes a U.S. military spokeswoman saying, “This document is not a U.S. Strategic Command plan,” the article otherwise treats CONPLAN 8888 as a real plan, even claiming that UK’s Ministry of Defense has

a similar plan (Reilly). Other sources that portrayed the plan as real included Russia's state-run *RT* and *Sputnik*, *Time*, and an online publication for Chinese Americans called, *Yibada* (Bridge; "Day of the Dead"; Stampler; Villasanta; V.). Several sources also clearly portrayed CONPLAN 8888 as fictional. These included *PBS*, *Gizmodo*, *Huffington Post*, and *Washington Times* (Tam; Novak; Whitehead; Ernst).

Did this lack of serious engagement underscore the point that military analysts were willing to treat postcolonial zombie terrorists as "real" figurations whose fictive nature could not hide ontological realities? As mentioned above, less than a handful of the two dozen English-language articles we analyzed provided any substantive or critical engagement with CONPLAN 8888's contents. For example, one local news report suggested that the Pentagon should focus its exercises on real scenarios and took note of the plan's contemplated use of nuclear weapons inside the United States ("Pentagon Has Zombie Apocalypse Plan"). In the *Washington Post*, Tufts University professor Daniel Drezner—one of the most popular academic writers on public discourse and zombies—criticized the "trigger happy" nature of the plan, especially its contemplated use of nuclear weapons. Otherwise, his main criticisms were that CONPLAN 8888 did not take the threat seriously enough and that the plan was not widely known among DOD leaders (Drezner).

The two articles that engaged most critically with CONPLAN 8888 came from the *New York Post* and *The Huffington Post*. The *New York Post* article raised possibility that zombies represent "radical Muslims," asking, "Is this some kind of perverse, politically correct humor? Is the government substituting outlandish villains for, say, radical Muslims?" The same article considered the focus on zombies in the USSTRATCOM document to be reflective of our collective fears about Ebola at that time, and it also mentioned more generalized societal anxieties about terrorism, the economy, and climate change (Peyser).

The harshest criticism of CONPLAN 8888 came from *The Huffington Post* article written by a libertarian author who writes about the growing police state in the United States. He saw the DOD document as reflective of growing "government paranoia," fears that American citizens are the real enemy, and government planning for mass civil unrest and martial law. Both articles make some insightful points about the DOD document (Whitehead). Sadly, analysis of those articles using the social media analytics platform *SharedCount.com* show

that neither were shared at all on popular social media platforms, meaning that they likely had very little impact on the wider discourse about CONPLAN 8888.

We argue that this lack of critical engagement with CONPLAN 8888 is not the result of lack of concerning material in the document. As mentioned above, the first disturbing aspect is the substitution of zombies for scenarios that would normally involve countries from the African continent. We know that “third world” others—especially in colonial or imperial contexts—have historically been described in zombie-like terms or even as zombies. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that CONPLAN 8888 identifies the origins of “zombie infections” as “the Eurasian landmass.” Textual portions of the document warn about the dangers of immigration by potentially infected Others, noting that “air and sea traffic . . . could transport the source of a zombie infection to North and South America” (USSTRATCOM 5). In theory, the training that is a part of the “Joint Operational Planning and Execution System” is intended to help USSTRATCOM “preserve the sanctity” of human life by neutralizing zombie hordes (3).

Oftentimes the authors of the CONPLAN 8888 use postcolonial arguments that mirror earlier European rationales for the use of maxim guns or other weaponry. For example, the document reflects the recent penchant of the U.S. for unilateral use of force when it notes that “the rapidity at which zombie outbreaks spread” may necessitate “unilateral military force” by the United States (USSTRATCOM 5). This also replicates some of the same legalese that appears in other texts about the use of enhanced interrogation techniques, drones, and other controversial weapons. We would argue that some of the very same geographical bases that are used for launching attacks on Al-Qaeda, Taliban, and other terrorists—“Hawaii, Guam, and Diego Garcia”—are the spaces and places that are used to refuel the war machines that go after zombie threats (USSTRATCOM 16).

Moreover, the nation’s commander-in-chief needs the “flexible” tools that can be used to fight off postcolonial zombie terrorists. As in the U.S. “war on terror” CONPLAN 8888 contemplates a response that encompasses the “entire globe” (USSTRATCOM 9). This response, we are told, must include the elimination or eradication of zombies. This is a viable option because the plan assumes that zombies are non-human, incurable, and, therefore, outside of the law. The document states in no uncertain terms that “LOAC [Law of Armed Conflict] will not apply to zombies” (USSTRATCOM 14) and that, therefore, “[t]here are almost no restrictions on hostile actions that may be taken either defensively or

offensively” (USSTRATCOM 8). Those responses will involve using “all available forces,” including “bomber and missile strikes” (USSTRATCOM 10). The plan even contemplates that “nuclear weapons. . . are likely to be the most effective weapons against hordes of the undead” (USSTRATCOM 22). Indeed, complete elimination even applies to the dead undead and will include “ensur[ing] all zombie corpses are immolated” (USSTRATCOM 11). We see here shades of the legal debates about whether terrorist suspects and “enemy combatants” have any rights at all under international or domestic law. Zombification aids the cause of militarists who want to “take the gloves off” when dealing with such savage enemies.

That said, there is one kind of zombie that may not even be truly dead after immolation. This is where we see shades of discourses that portray the “war on terror” as a never-ending ideological or spiritual battle. So-called “evil magic zombies” or EMZs, can be created and “weaponized” by “evil magicians” who use occult powers to create a zombie so powerful that it cannot even be truly destroyed by immolation (USSTRATCOM 6, 14). Thus, the plan says, “the Chaplain Corps may provide the only viable means of combating EMZs. As such, atheists could be particularly vulnerable to EMZ threats” (USSTRATCOM 14).

These are allusions that allow the producers of CONPLAN-8888 to use a mixture of fantasy and realism as they put on display the prowess of muscular-Christian warriors. Like the “war on terror,” where one cannot reason with fanatical terrorists, the authors of the document tell us that zombies “cannot be deterred or reasoned with in any way.” Instead, military capabilities must be applied to “zombie-inducing forces” like rogue states, groups, or individuals (including “evil magicians”) who are creating or promoting zombies. Like combatting terrorists, it is not just that zombies themselves who must be eliminated, but also the recruiters, funders, and ideological leaders (the “evil magicians” who radicalize youth into weaponized suicide attackers), but also the “rogue states” who harbor these bad actors (USSTRATCOM 12). This brings to mind the drone attacks on recruiters like Al-Awlaki or the U.S. disposal of Osama bin Laden’s corpse at sea.

As Calafell once argued, “some monsters” simply “reify structures of domination” (118) and it is no coincidence that Defense planners use some types of zombification to legitimate the unshackling of military power during what Agamben would call “states of exception.” States of exception, according to



Agamben, have to do with the carving out of a state's use of emergency powers in ways that prevent civilian oversight of military decision-making.

The U.S. government's use of zombies allows for the appropriation of these emergency powers by the military in both zombie and terrorist contexts. Interestingly, we see a reconfiguration of the citizenry's relationship to the military here too. "Given the likelihood of an all-out threat to 'human survival', it is likely that this plan will be executed concurrently with a declaration of martial law within CONUS and US territories," the document states (USSTRATCOM 8). Just as there will be no restrictions on how military force can be used against the non-human enemy during early colonial "emergencies," there will also be few restrictions on the postcolonial interactions between military forces and the humans they are meant to protect.

In the end, the underlying assumptions about foreign "Others," and how to deal with what we have called postcolonial zombie terrorism, are not as thinly disguised as the authors of CONPLAN 8888 may believe. Or, perhaps the authors are not attempting to disguise them at all. Perhaps, in poststructuralist terms, they are saying more than they realize because they do not have full control over the language they use. Perhaps they have been infected by a zombie rhetoric of colonialism and race that hides "neo-colonial colonial anxieties" under the guise of "desensitizing warfare" (Al-Ghabra 27).

## Conclusion

Clearly Crockett and Zarracina are right when they contend that the "undead have been used by filmmakers and writers as a metaphor for much deeper fears; racial sublimation, atomic destruction, communism, mass contagion, globalism—and, more than anything, each other" (par. 3). As we noted above, there are strategic reasons why these topics have been linked so many colonial gothic narratives or post-9/11 anxieties.

In this particular essay we have provided readers with a brief genealogy of some of the colonial antecedent zombie genres that have gone into the production of contemporary monstrosities, and we our praxiological investigation has purposely focused primary attention on U.S. governmentalities that continue to appropriate zombie obsessions in an attempt to encourage us to take-for-granted the need to fight implacable Islamist foes. In future years we should not be

surprised when ISIL zombies will join the legions of other monsters—slaves, rebels, Mau Maus, Nazis, Al Qaeda operatives, the Taliban, “Muslim fundamentalists”—who populate so many geopolitical and cultural imaginations. Watts has written about the *jouissance* involved with the shooting of Obama-like zombies, but think of how expansive these interests can become when returning soldiers and their families can prepare for many other futuristic terrorist threats.

Given the unknowing acting and speaking that we referenced above critical cultural scholars cannot sit on the sidelines and provide merely descriptive studies of texts like the CONPLAN-8888. It behooves us to join the ranks of those who refuse to see zombies as only “reel” monsters when so many others lose their lives in a seemingly endless “War on Terrorism.”

“Real world terrorist mobs like ISIS and Boko,’ argued Cohen, are “striking similar to fictional zombie hordes” so why not see what “lessons learned” could be taken from “zombie literatures” to help deal with “real world threats”? (par. 15). Perhaps it also time to consider how praxiological zombification can be utilized to fabricate threats and rationales for even more creative counterterrorist destruction.

## Works Cited

Agamben, Giorgio. *States of Exception*. University of Chicago Press, 2003.

Al-Ghabra, Haneen. “*Beauty and the Beast: An Abusive Tale as Old as Time: Reinforcing Notions of Masculinity, Abuse and Neoliberal Anxiety through Popular Culture.*” *Monsters and the Monstrous*, vol. 5, 2015, pp. 25-40.

Arjana, Sophia Rose. *Muslims in the Western Imagination*. Oxford UP, 2015.

Associated Press Staff. “Army Gen. Dempsey asserts Islamic Militants Have ‘Apocalyptic, End-of-days Strategic Vision.’” *Fox News*, 22 Aug. 2014, <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2014/08/22/army-gen-dempsey-asserts-islamic-militants-have-apocalyptic-end-days-strategic.html>. Accessed 11 Sept. 2018.

- Bishop, Kyle. "The Sub-Subaltern Monster: Imperialist Hegemony and the Cinematic Voodoo Zombie." *Journal of American Culture*, vol. 31, 2008, pp. 141-152.
- Block, Hillaire. *The Modern Traveller*. Edward-Arnold, 1898.
- Bridge, Robert. "American Psycho: Has the United States lost its collective mind?" *RT*, 15 Oct. 2015, <https://www.rt.com/op-edge/318768-american-psycho-zombies-drugs/>. Accessed 30 Nov. 2017.
- Buescher, Derek T., & Kent A. Ono. "Civilized Colonialism: Pocahontas as Neocolonial Rhetoric." *Women's Studies in Communication*, volume 19, 1996, 127-153.
- Bush, George W. *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*, Book I. Government Printing Office, 2004.
- Calafell, Bernadette Marie. *Monstrosity, Performance, and Race in Contemporary Culture*. Peter Lang, 2015.
- Chen, Adrian. "The Centers for Disease Control Is Officially Prepared for a Zombie Invasion." *Gawker*. 18 May, 2011, <http://gawker.com/5803076/the-centers-for-disease-control-is-officially-prepared-for-a-zombie-invasion>. Accessed 11 Sept. 2018.
- Chodorow, A. "Death and Taxes and Zombies." *Iowa Law Review*, vol. 98, 2012, pp. 1207-1231.
- Clark, Phenderson Djèli. "Steampunk, Guns and the Imperial Mission." *Phenderson Djèli Clark*. 5. Dec., 2013, <https://pdjeliclark.wordpress.com/2013/12/05/steampunk-guns-and-the-imperial-mission/>. Accessed 11 Sept. 2018.
- Cohen, Neil. "Zombies and Terrorists." *Permuted Press*, 2017, <http://permutedpress.com/zombies-and-terrorists>. Accessed 11 Sept. 2018.
- Crockett, Zachary, and Zarrachina, Javier. "How the Zombie Represents America's Deepest Fears." *Vox*. 31 Oct. 2016, <https://www.vox.com/policy->

and-politics/2016/10/31/13440402/zombie-political-history. Accessed 11 Sept. 2018.

"Day of the Dead: Indiana Hackers Use Alert System to Warn of Zombie Outbreak." *Sputnik International*, 2 Mar. 2017, [https://sputniknews.com/art\\_living/201703021051211161-indiana-hacking-zombie-outbreak-warning/](https://sputniknews.com/art_living/201703021051211161-indiana-hacking-zombie-outbreak-warning/). Accessed 30 Nov. 2017.

Drezner, Daniel W. "Metaphor of the Living Dead: Or, the Effect of the Zombie Apocalypse on Public Policy Discourse." *Social Research*, vol. 81, no. 4, 2014, pp. 825-849.

Drezner, Danial. "What's wrong with the Pentagon's plan to thwart the zombie apocalypse." *The Washington Post*, 20 June 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/06/20/whats-wrong-with-the-pentagons-plan-to-thwart-the-zombie-apocalypse/>. Accessed 30 Nov. 2017.

Elgot, Jessica and Matthew Taylor. "Calais Crisis: Cameron Condemned for 'Dehumanising' Description of Migrants." *The Guardian*. 30 July, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/jul/30/david-cameron-migrant-swarm-language-condemned>. Accessed 11 Sept. 2018.

Ernst, Douglas. "Pentagon has plan for 'Counter-Zombie Dominance' during zombie apocalypse." *Washington Times*, 15 May 2014, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/may/15/pentagon-has-plan-counter-zombie-dominance-during-/>. Accessed 30 Nov. 2017.

Fraustino, Julie D., & Liang, Ma. "CDC's Use of Social Media and Humor in a Risk Campaign—"Preparedness 101-Zombie Apocalypse." *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2015, pp. 222-241.

Froula, Anna. "Prolepsis and the 'War on Terror': Zombie Pathology and the Culture of Fear in *28 Days Later*." *Reframing 9/11: Film, Popular Culture and the 'War on Terror*, edited by Jeff Birkenstein, Anna Froula, and Karen Randell, Continuum, 2010, pp. 195-208.

- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. "The Curse on Haiti." *The Root*, 25. Jan. 2010, <http://www.theroot.com/the-curse-on-haiti-1790878416>. Accessed 11 Sept. 2018.
- Gilroy, Paul. "'My Britain is Fuck All': Zombie Multiculturalism and the Race Politics of Citizenship." *Identities*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2012, pp. 380-397.
- Hage, Ghassan. "État De Siege: A Dying Domesticating Colonialism?" *American Ethnologist*, vol. 43, no. 1, 2016, pp. 38-49.
- Höglund, Johan. *The American Imperial Gothic: Popular Culture, Empire, Violence*. Routledge, 2016.
- IVC Author. "Intimacy and Annihilation: Approach the Enforcement of U.S. Colonial Rule in the Southern Philippines through a Private Photograph Collection." *InVisible Culture: An Electronic Journal for Visual Culture*. 3 Apr. 2017, <https://ivc.lib.rochester.edu/intimacy-and-annihilation-approaching-the-enforcement-of-u-s-colonial-rule-in-the-southern-philippines-through-a-private-photograph-collection/>. Accessed 11 Sept. 2018.
- Jackson, Richard. "The Study of Terrorism 10 Years After 9/11: Successes, Issues, Challenges." *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, vol. 8, no 32, 2012, pp. 1-16.
- Kelly, Casey Ryan. "The Man-pocalypse: Domsday Preppers and the Rituals of Apocalyptic Manhood." *Text and Performance Quarterly*, vol. 36, nos. 2/3, 2016, pp. 95-114.
- Khan, Ali S. "Preparedness 101: Zombie Apocalypse." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*. 16 May 2011, <https://blogs.cdc.gov/publichealthmatters/2011/05/preparedness-101-zombie-apocalypse/>. Accessed 11 Sept. 2018.
- Lubold, Gordon. "Exclusive: The Pentagon Has a Plan to Stop the Zombie Apocalypse. Seriously." *Foreign Policy*, 14 May 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/05/13/exclusive-the-pentagon-has-a-plan-to-stop-the-zombie-apocalypse-seriously/>. Accessed 30 Nov. 2017.

Maloney, Devon. "Want to Understand a Generation? Look No Further Than its Zombie Movies." *Wired*. 28 June 2013, <https://www.wired.com/2013/06/world-war-z-zombie-messages/>. Accessed 11 Sept. 2018.

Mariani, Mike. "The Tragic, Forgotten History of Zombies." *The Atlantic*. 28 Oct. 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/10/how-america-erased-the-tragic-history-of-the-zombie/412264/>. Accessed 11 Sept. 2018.

Mégret, Frederic. "From 'Savages' to 'Unlawful Combatants.'" *International Law and Its Others*, edited by Anne Orford, Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 265-317.

Mulrine, Anna. "No Prank: On Halloween, U.S. Military Forces Train for Zombie Apocalypse." *The Christian Science Monitor*. 31 Oct. 2012, <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Military/2012/1031/No-prank-On-Halloween-US-military-forces-train-for-zombie-apocalypse>. Accessed 11 Sept. 2018.

National Geographic Staff. "Doomsday Preppers." *National Geographic*. n.d. <http://channel.nationalgeographic.com/doomsday-preppers/>. Accessed 11 Sept. 2018.

Neocleous, Mark. "The Universal Adversary Will Attack: Pigs, Pirates, Zombies, Satan and the Class War." *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2015, pp. 15-32.

Novak, Matt. "UberFacts Is Still Full of Lies." *Gizmodo*, 2 Dec. 2014, <https://gizmodo.com/uberfacts-is-still-full-of-lies-1664836449>. Accessed 30 Nov. 2017.

"Pentagon has zombie apocalypse plan." *Fox8*, 16 May 2014, <http://myfox8.com/2014/05/16/pentagon-has-zombie-apocalypse-plan/>. Accessed 30 Nov. 2017.

- Peyser, Andrea. "The Department of Defense is prepared for a zombie attack." *New York Post*, 13 Oct. 2014, <https://nypost.com/2014/10/13/the-department-of-defense-is-prepared-for-a-zombie-attack/>. Accessed 30 Nov. 2017.
- Phillips, Kendall R. *Dark directions: Romero, Craven, Carpenter and the Modern Horror Film*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2012.
- Poole, Scott W. *Monsters in America: Our Historical Obsessions with the Hideous and the Haunting*. Baylor University Press, 2011.
- Reilly, Jill. "The Pentagon's guide to surviving a zombie apocalypse." *Daily Mail*, 15 May 2014, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2629064/The-Pentagons-guide-surviving-zombie-apocalypse-US-military-outlines-plans-deal-undead-chickens-space-invaders-VEGETARIANS.html>. Accessed 30 Nov. 2017.
- Shalby, Colleen. "Trump Repeats Claim about Gen. Pershing's Treatment of Muslim Prisoners that Historians Doubt Ever Happened." *Los Angeles Times*, 17 Aug. 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/politics/washington/la-na-essential-washington-updates-trump-tweets-unsupported-claim-about-1503002456-htlmstory.html>. Accessed 1 Dec. 2017.
- Stampler, Laura. "The UN and U.S. Pentagon Are Actively Working to Save Us from Killer Robots and Zombies." *Time*, 14 May 2014, <http://time.com/99430/the-un-and-u-s-pentagon-are-actively-working-to-save-us-from-killer-robots-and-zombies/>. Accessed 30 Nov. 2017.
- Tam, Ruth. "8 things you didn't know about Halloween." *PBS NewsHour*, 31 Oct. 2014, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/8-things-didnt-know-halloween>. Accessed 30 Nov. 2017.
- United States Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM). *CDRUSSTRATCOM CONPLAN 8888-11 "Counter-Zombie Dominance"*, 30 Apr. 2011. Offut AFB, NB.
- V., Marcus. "The Zombie Apocalypse: Study reveals how long humanity would." *Yibada*, 6 Jan. 2017, <http://en.yibada.com/articles/183882/20170106/the->

- zombie-apocalypse-study-reveals-how-long-humanity-would-survive-one.htm. Accessed 30 Nov. 2017.
- Villasanta, Arthur Dominic. "Bad News: We Don't Know what to do if Intelligent Space AI." *Yibada*, 16 Nov. 2016, <http://en.yibada.com/articles/173921/20161116/bad-news-don-t-know-what-intelligent-space-aliens-land.htm>. Accessed 30 Nov. 2017.
- Watts, Eric King. "Postracial Fantasies, Blackness, and Zombies." *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 14, no. 4, 2017, pp. 317-333.
- Whitehead, John W. "Fear of the Walking Dead: The American Police State Takes Aim." *Huffington Post*, 28 Oct. 2015, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-w-whitehead/fear-of-the-walking-dead-\\_b\\_8392544.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-w-whitehead/fear-of-the-walking-dead-_b_8392544.html). Accessed 30 Nov. 2017.



## “If It’s in A Word”: Intersectional Feminism, Precarity, and The Babadook

CLAIRE SISCO KING

In 2017, a perhaps unlikely queer icon emerged in the form of a black and white cartoon character from Australia with sharp teeth, theatrical makeup, and a top hat. This cultural phenomenon began with a 2016 Tumblr thread initiated by online user ianstagram who declared Mister Babadook, the eponymous monster from Jennifer Kent’s 2014 horror film, to be “fearlessly and proudly” gay. In this initial post, ianstagram wonders, “Whenever someone says the Babadook isn’t openly gay it’s like?? Did you even watch the movie???” Sparking what participants called a “Babadiscourse,” scores of others weighed in on the Tumblr thread, with one user proclaiming, “The B in LGBT stands for Babadook” and another posting a fake screenshot claiming that Netflix had categorized *The Babadook* as an LGBT movie. The next several months saw the proliferation of queer Babadook memes and multiple representations of Babadook at 2017 Pride festivals across the United States.

Babadook has emerged as a queer icon because he can be read as having characteristics associated with cultural gayness. For example, he wears dramatic—even scene-stealing—costuming that recalls the theatricality of drag, and he struggles against a (rather literally) closeted existence in which many disavow or reject him. While references to these characteristics abound in the typically humorous and ironic figurations of the character’s queerness, this essay takes Babadook’s queer iconicity quite seriously, arguing that this character and the film from which he emerges call for critical attention to normative constructions of the family, the hegemony of reproductive heterosexuality, and the implications of both for the lives of women.<sup>1</sup> That is, Babadook invites queer

appropriation because he voices and makes visible horrors perpetrated in the name of heteronormative family life and gender politics.

While socially conservative rhetoric, which has intensified coextensively with Donald Trump’s rise to power, frequently casts the family as a site of innocence imperiled by outside forces, including members of LGBTQ communities, *The Babadook* constructs the family as a site that is too often constitutive of and constituted by myriad forms of structural, symbolic, and material violence. Likewise, the film considers how intersections among cultural constructions of sexuality, gender, dis/ability, and class place certain bodies and subjectivities in positions of precarity. Accordingly, this essay argues that *The Babadook* and its titular monster disrupt tropes associated with the family, and white motherhood in particular, to reveal their emplacement in discourses structured by heteronormative, sexist, ableist, and classist logics. At the same time, however, *The Babadook*’s exclusive focus on the experiences of white characters without consideration of their racial privilege risks undermining its intersectionality. This analysis will proceed with a discussion of intersectional feminism and its relationship to theories of precarity, a contextualization of Kent’s film within feminist analyses of the genre of horror and public discourse about the film’s meaning, and a close reading of the film itself.

## Intersectional Feminism

The term intersectionality emerges from Kimberlé Crenshaw’s work in the late 1980s, which itself has antecedents in the 19th century in the writings of such figures as Sojourner Truth and Anna Julia Cooper, as well as the work of the Combahee River Collective in the 1970s—all of which understand ideas about gender as inseparable from discourses about race. Crenshaw’s work aims to

---

<sup>1</sup> To illustrate this rhetoric, consider Karen Tongson’s description of Babadook, “He lives in a basement, he’s weird and flamboyant, he’s living adjacently to a single mother in this kind of queer kinship structure.” Likewise, Jessica Roy writes, “The Babadook is creative (remember the pop-up book) and a distinctive dresser. Instead of living in a proverbial closet, he lives in a literal basement. He exists in a half-acknowledged state by the other people in his house. The family is afraid of what he is, but finds a way to accept him over time.”

redress a lack of articulation between feminist and antiracist critical practices, which have too often addressed *either* gender *or* race but not their coextensivity, or the extent to which, as Patricia Hill Collins contends, “oppressions work together in producing injustice” (18). As Crenshaw writes, “Although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices” (1242). Along similar lines, bell hooks identifies a historical tendency within feminist film criticism by white women critics to atomize questions of gender and race, rarely considering the “intersection of race and gender in relation to the construction of the category of ‘woman’ in film as object of the phallogocentric gaze” (119). Building on this work, intersectional feminism aims, as Banu Gökariksel and Sara Smith argue, to challenge “homogenous identity categories” by calling attention to “subject positions differentially situated in relation to multiple axes of power” (629), given that the impact of a particular form of subordination may vary, depending on its combination with other potential sources of subordination” (Denis 677).

Such attention to the differential positioning of subjects in relation to multiple, often dynamic, and overlapping lines of power suggests a particular affinity between intersectional perspectives and analyses of precarity. The concept of *precariousness*, or *precarity*, has roots in labor activism in Europe in the early 2000s, responding to the casualization of labor and the consequent instability of employment for workers (Neilson and Rossiter 51-52). Since that time, academic considerations of precarity have broadened and expanded the concept to include conditions of insecurity that extend beyond economics. For example, Judith Butler defines precarity as illustrating “that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death” (*Frames of War* ii). In addition to what might be considered spectacular and evental forms of violence, those in positions of precarity also experience what Lauren Berlant calls “slow death,” or “the physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population that is very nearly a defining condition of its experience and historical existence” (754).

While Butler defines vulnerability as a condition experienced by all humans, precarity is an uneven distribution of vulnerability caused by structural forces and systemic inequalities. Butler further argues that precarity should be understood as “directly linked with gender norms,” given that “those who do not live their genders in intelligible ways are at heightened risk for harassment and violence”

(“Performativity, Precarity, and Sexual Politics” ii). Likewise, Eileen Boris and Leigh Dodson understand economic insecurity as tied inextricably to “ideological constructs of gender, ethnicity, race, sexuality, ability, age, and citizenship” (3). An intersectional understanding of precarity, therefore, considers not only how these various ideological constructs might impact economic security but also how the overlaps and articulations among them may affect a subject’s experiences of vulnerability and inequality. “Intersectional identities,” Sarah Mosoetsa, Joel Stillerman, and Chris Tilly contend, “bring with them not just a set of stereotypes and other aspects of marginalization, but also a set of actual and potential relations—economic and political” (14). For example, Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall remind us that “analysis of the overlapping structures of subordination” can illuminate “how certain groups of women [are] made particularly vulnerable to abuse” and failed by “inadequate interventions” that ignore “the structural dimensions of the context” (797).

Questions of structurally-engineered vulnerability maintain a central place within *The Babadook*, and the trope of monstrosity offers unique resources for considering intersectional forms of precarity. Just as monsters themselves frequently occupy interstitial sites between seemingly incompatible categories—animal/human, living/dead, material/immaterial, hero/villain—their conflicted positionalities recall the double-binds and paradoxes that often characterize life lived in precarity. That is, monsters like Babadook offer particularly fruitful ground for considering the experiences of those for whom precarity means being both held hostage by *and* excluded from structures and systems that do not consider their bodies or subjectivities fully legible. And yet, while *The Babadook* encourages productive consideration of the ways that intersections among gender, sexuality, class, and ability may engender conditions of precariousness, its inattention to the politics of race risks reinforcing the normativity of whiteness, deflecting attention from the ways in which racial and ethnic differences also impact precarity, and becoming complicit in what Sirma Bilge describes as the “whitening of intersectionality” (412). Before turning to in-depth analysis of Kent’s film itself, this essay will now offer a brief introduction to the text and consider the various discursive frames used to interpret *The Babadook* in order to highlight the importance of reading the film intersectionally.

## Intersecting Babadiscourses

Kent's *The Babadook* received limited release in Australia, the country in which it was produced, in 2014. It fared well with reviewers but not audiences. Traveling through the international film festival circuit, including Sundance, the film received critical accolades, bringing it considerable attention in the U.S. and in Europe, and also leading to its revival in Australia. Narratively, *The Babadook* is the story of Amelia, a white single mother, and her only son Samuel, who has both emotional and behavioral struggles. On the day her son would be born, Amelia and her husband Oskar have a car accident on the way to the hospital, and Oskar dies. The film opens with Amelia literally dreaming about this nightmare scenario almost seven years later, just days before Samuel's birthday and the anniversary of Oskar's death. Having given up her career as a writer to earn wages as a nursing home attendant, Amelia has been Samuel's only caregiver—an isolating experience exacerbated by both other people's uneasiness with her grief and by their ableist discomfort with Samuel's differences.

Amelia's ability to care for her son becomes severely constrained when she decides she must remove him from his school, which seems unwilling or unable to accommodate Samuel's needs. At the same time, Samuel becomes fixated on an invisible monster that he warns lives in their house and aims to do harm to his mother. When a mysterious and violent children's book appears, Amelia begins to fear that the monster is not a figment of Samuel's imagination, and soon she and her home are tormented by a bogeyman known as Babadook, who lives under her child's bed and in his closet. As anxiety, sleeplessness, and trauma take a toll on Amelia, she first directs her anger at Samuel, toward whom she becomes violent, before eventually confronting Babadook. Realizing she can never fully rid their lives of the monster that now resides in their home, she determines to make relative peace with Babadook, locking him in their basement but keeping him well fed and alive. As illustrated by a line in Babadook's book—"The more you deny, the stronger I get"—the monster certainly operates as a signifier of Amelia's grief over Oskar's death; the more she represses this trauma, the more power it has to return and disrupt her life. This allegory is not, however, the only one at work within *The Babadook*.

Depicting a mother who is raising a son in the wake of immense personal loss and in the face of economic instability, the film operates as an allegory about the intersectional politics of white motherhood. *The Babadook* deploys familiar

conventions of the horror genre in ways that shed unexpected light on the affective registers of motherhood; and yet, while the narrative centers on Amelia’s experiences, *The Babadook* expands its attention beyond the individual figure of the mother to consider the cultural and structural constraints that render some bodies more vulnerable than others. Although *The Babadook*’s story of a supernatural threat is presumably dissimilar to its imagined audiences’ actual lives, the film spends a great deal of time and visual energy depicting material conditions and experiences that are likely quite familiar to audience members who care or have cared for children. In this way, *The Babadook* resembles a number of films interested in mother-child relationships, which have been the subject of much feminist film criticism; and this relationship occupies a central space in much of the public discourse about Kent’s film. What follows, then, is a survey of the lineage of feminist film criticism that precedes and, perhaps, helps shape this film, as well as a consideration of contemporary responses to it.

The figure of the mother—especially the white mother—looms largely within horror cinema and feminist scholarship about the genre. In particular, the late 1960s and 1970s offered especially fertile ground for films attentive to gender politics and discourses of maternity, which have typically been understood as anxiously responding to second-wave feminism. Scholarship that addresses representations of maternity in such horror cinema often falls into one of two categories: feminist criticism of the representations of “bad”, if not monstrous, maternity or allegorical interpretations of horror films as expressing proto-feminist sensibilities. The former body of scholarship often deploys Freudian and/or Kristevan psychoanalytic theories to explore Oedipal anxieties in the cinematic constructions of mothers and/or abject figurations of them.

For example, Barbara Creed’s *Monstrous Feminine* contends that “when woman is represented as monstrous it is almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions,” citing such tropes as the “archaic mother; the monstrous womb; the witch; the vampire; and the possessed mother” (7). Examples of such films include: *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973), *Carrie* (Bryan DePalma, 1976), *The Brood* (David Cronenberg, 1979), and *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979). In all of these films, the overwhelming figure of the mother threatens the autonomy of the child whose subjectivity and body the mother hopes to control, contain, and even consume, and feminist criticism of these films reads them as misogynistic expressions of

this anxiety that frequently intensify in response to shifting cultural and social norms regarding gender, reproductivity, and the family.

The second category of feminist scholarship on maternal horror films reads certain texts as offering what Lucy Fischer describes as allegorical expression of (mostly white) women's affective experiences of pregnancy and childbirth (4). As such, this category of scholarship historically attends to films that, while not necessarily articulating clearly or consistently feminist politics, speak to the various forms of material and symbolic violence exacted against women's bodies and subjectivities by patriarchal institutions—namely, marriage and medicine. Examples of such films include *Rosemary's Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968) and *It's Alive* (Larry Cohen, 1974), which Fischer reads as documenting “the societal and personal turmoil that has attended female reproduction” (4). In both of these films, for instance, a pregnant white woman suspects that something is wrong with the fetus she carries in her womb, only to find her anxieties dismissed by her husband and her medical care providers, relegating her to positions of disempowerment as well as “virtual,” and sometimes literal, “silence” (Fischer 5).

*The Babadook* shares with these predecessors, as Fischer figures them, an interest in the affective experiences of mothers who have been disciplined and even dismissed by the institutions that should support them; but, while the latter films focus on pregnancy and parturition, *The Babadook* emphasizes the daily, mundane horrors of childrearing experienced by women who act as their children's primary (if not sole) caregivers in the often isolating context of the single family home.<sup>2</sup> In particular, *The Babadook* contends that culturally idealized performances of feminine maternity depend on not only heteronormative and ableist constructs about what it means to be a mother but also class privileges to which many women do not have access.

In addition to approaching *The Babadook* in line with Fischer's analysis of such films as *Rosemary's Baby* and *It's Alive*, this analysis interprets Kent's film in light of prevailing readings of it by both film critics and fans, which illustrate the film's value as a tool for making sense of the politics of everyday living. Many viewers have acknowledged the film's allegorical interest in the subjects of

---

<sup>2</sup> *The Babadook* should also be understood in relation to recent horror films, including *Teeth* (Mitchell Lichtenstein, 2007), *Let the Right One In* (Tomas Alfredson, 2008), *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (Ana Lily Amirpour, 2014), and *It Follows* (David Robert Mitchell, 2014), which take up intersectional feminist considerations of gender and sexuality.

heteronormativity, gender, *or* disability, but I want to extend and articulate these considerations of *The Babadook* because its value as a resource for intersectional feminist criticism lies in its understanding of these discourses not as *isolated* but as *imbricated*. Moreover, this essay also calls attention to *The Babadook’s* treatment of the politics of class and race, which are aspects of the film that critics and fans rarely mention.

While the Babadiscourse concentrates on how “queer-coded villains” such as Babadook manifest the violence that heteronormativity enacts through practices of exclusion and othering (Turner), many responses to *The Babadook* within both trade sources and the blogosphere interpret this film as an allegory about what it feels like to be a mother. For example, multiple reviews and fan posts describe the film as addressing issues faced by all parents and mothers, in particular. Such readings note the considerable attention the film pays to the daily rhythms and frustrations of caring for children, including the fact that the first twelve minutes of the film focus almost exclusively on the quotidian rituals of parenting: dressing a squirmy and uncooperative child, waking up in the middle of the night and making room in bed for a scared child, tackling the often stressful task of grocery shopping with a child, and struggling to maintain a pleasant tone in one’s voice in otherwise unpleasant interactions with a child. For example, writing for *Slate*, Tammy Oler frames *The Babadook* as visualizing the pressures placed on women to be “good” mothers and to love what they do, despite the often isolating and exhausting conditions of motherhood in postindustrial, capitalist societies that treat parenting as private, individualized responsibilities and therefore provide few networks of support. Likewise, Caroline Madden describes the film as offering an unusually candid picture of the demanding expectations placed on women to perform both emotional and material labor for the sake of their children such that, to paraphrase Mary Beth Haralovich, “too much guilt is never enough.”

Many responses to *The Babadook* also cast the film as attentive to the subjects of disability, mental illness, and ableism. Such readings emphasize the film’s renderings of the affective experiences of parents who care for their children while also facing their own personal losses and mental health crises. These readings frame the film as speaking to those parents suffering from trauma, grief, and attendant forms of addiction and/or depression, as Amelia herself experiences symptoms associated with posttraumatic stress disorder and/or depression, including nightmares, flashbacks, hallucinations, mood disorders, and sleep disturbances. For example, in her review for *Bitch Media*, Monica Castillo notes



that, in addition to the film's depiction of Amelia's acute trauma, *The Babadook* also names such "unspeakable horrors of motherhood" as post-partum depression and anxiety. Castillo's response also notes how abelist cultures exacerbate the harms of trauma and mental illness by stigmatizing these experiences and failing to offer adequate resources for support.

Other critics and viewers of the film have suggested that *The Babadook* not only speaks to the affective dimensions of motherhood generally but also addresses the experiences of parents who have children with disabilities. For example, Alexander Pape interprets Samuel as having an autism-spectrum disorder, citing Samuel's trouble relating to his peers, his difficulty performing in a traditional school setting, his sleep disorders and anxiety, his fixation on mechanical weapons and repetitive behaviors, and his experience of seizures. Such interpretations, which were frequently offered by authors who describe themselves as parents of children with autism, including Pape and Jeremiah Dollins, emphasize the amount of labor caregivers must perform to advocate for children in the context of an ableist society, in addition to navigating their own personal responses to and feelings about their children and their parental role.

Ultimately, there is merit to each of these readings of the film, which are (of course) not mutually exclusive from one another and which illustrate the film's polyvalence and allegorical richness—not to mention the resourcefulness of audiences who deploy the text as a sense-making tool. Moreover, when taken together, these readings point toward the ways in which expectations about motherhood are constrained by heteronormative expectations about gender and ability, wherein a "good" mother is expected to be "physically attractive, heterosexual and not disabled" (Kendrick 259). As Ora Prilleltensky notes, ableist discourse has often positioned disability as incompatible with both heteronormative femininity and motherhood, figuring "women with disabilities...as child-like, dependent and asexual" and therefore as incapable of "fulfilling traditionally feminine roles" (22).

Largely absent from the responses to *The Babadook*, however, is acknowledgment of the film's interest in the politics of class and conditions of economic instability. To demonstrate, most of these reviews identify Amelia as a "single" mother; in addition to characterizations of her relational status as isolating and taxing on her as a parent, which itself risks reaffirming heteronormative dictates that all individuals should be coupled, discussions of Amelia's status as a "single mother" also abound with references to her lack of

resources to care for herself and her son. That is, “single” also operates in this rhetoric as a metonym for being economically insecure, a slippage that owes to the fact that Amelia is the sole income-earner for her family. While this material reality matters, singular attention to Amelia’s marital status inhibits consideration of the failures of larger social structures and the state to support her and her child. That is, this rhetoric focuses attention on Amelia’s lack of a partner at the expense of considerations of the lack of structures of opportunity made available to her and others in positions of disenfranchisement.

This essay, therefore, aims to redress this inattention to the politics of class within discourse about *The Babadook* by reading the film as considering how socioeconomic precarity and the “organized abandonment” of marginalized people (Kelly 237) compound the harms of heteronormativity, sexism, and ableism. Specifically, *The Babadook* addresses how class precarity conflicts with normative and ableist expectations about performances of white femininity and maternity. However, as I will argue later, attention to these interlocking registers of identity, difference, and power without attention to the politics of race undermines *The Babadook*’s critiques, given that whiteness is articulated with and through a chain of “unspoken privileges,” including those associated with sexuality, gender, ability, and class (Nayak 738). I turn now to aspects of the film’s *mise-en-scène*, cinematography, and narrative that encourage interpretations focused on how socioeconomic insecurity interarticulates with other forms of inequality. I will structure my analysis around three salient thematics throughout the film: constructions of the home, depictions of various surveillance cultures, and the figuration of monstrosity via Babadook.

### “Let Me In!”

Central to *The Babadook*’s consideration of the politics of class is the film’s figuration of Amelia and Samuel’s home—a Victorian-style house that Kent had constructed specifically for this film and that operates as a character in the film in its own right. Specifically of note are the ways that the home in the film diverges from both idealized constructions of the home and the role of the home within the horror genre. The signifier of the home often functions as a synecdoche for heteronormative, sexist, ableist, and classist figurations of the family. Consider, for instance, how often home-ownership functions as a milestone marker for

success and stability along heteronormative timelines and within constructions of middle-classness, how often the home acts as a site for the production and regulation of bodies that are normatively gendered and sexed, and how consistently the “culture of suburban home life” and typical design practices presume that a house’s inhabitants will be non-disabled, thereby rendering these spaces inaccessible to many (Hamraie). Note also the extent to which figurations of the single family, private home often stand in contrast to other, less culturally idealized types of homes, such as public housing, group homes, nursing homes, or institutions, which are often imagined as sites of containment for bodies and subjects deemed to be disruptive or “misfitting” (Hamraie). The trope of the home also plays a significant role within the horror genre, which frequently inverts constructions of the home as a site of safety and security. As Carol Clover notes, horror films abound with images of homes as “Terrible Places,” whose dreadfulness owes less to the “Victorian decrepitude” of the houses themselves than the “terrible families” that occupy them (30).

In some ways, Amelia and Samuel’s home recalls the Terrible Places that Clover describes, particularly in its “Victorian decrepitude.” Rather than figuring the home as an insular site for the incubation of monsters, however, Kent’s film locates it within the larger sociocultural context and political economy in which Amelia attempts to make her life. Kent’s camera and intricately staged *mise-en-scène* emphasize the age and deterioration of the home—chipping paint, stained wallpaper, worn floors. The film does not treat such details as signifiers of the home’s innate horror or the horror of the house’s inhabitants but, instead, deploys them to call attention to conditions that may make “proper” home life inaccessible to many and to make visible those forms of (invisible) labor often associated with women and the economically insecure. In one scene, for example, Amelia discovers thousands of roaches streaming into her kitchen. Pulling back her refrigerator, she is horrified to find a hole in a water-damaged wall through which the insects have gained entry; and without financial resources or outside assistance, Amelia must tend to this problem in isolation—not through spectacular heroics but through banal and tedious labor.

*The Babadook*’s attention to the house’s process of decay disrupts bourgeois constructions of the home as a signifier of success and stability, thereby challenging heteronormative timelines and their interarticulation with class hierarchies. This image of Amelia’s aging home also makes visible the extent to which metonymic associations between femininity and domesticity depend on and

reinforce classed fantasies about womanhood. Further, the emphasis on the gradually decaying home calls attention to Amelia’s experience of Berlant’s concept of “slow death,” wherein her economic precarity amplifies the coextensivity of her everyday attempts at lifebuilding and her experience of the mundane process of dying. In contrast to Oskar’s sudden death, which the film represents only briefly in flashback form, *The Babadook* offers prolonged attention to the sluggishness and constancy of Amelia’s experience of what Butler describes as “precaritization as an ongoing process” (Puar 169).

The labor of tending to others is not only definitive of Amelia’s life at home but also becomes the primary modality with which she moves through the world. For example, Amelia cares for her next-door neighbor, Mrs. Roach, an elderly woman who lives alone and who has the neurodegenerative disorder Parkinson’s Disease—a fact the film makes explicit. Amelia, the film implies, has made a habit of looking after her neighbor and helping with mundane tasks such as trash removal. Of course, in the context of the scene described above, it matters that this character bears the surname *Roach*. This naming choice signals the extent to which ableist cultures often treat those who are elderly, ill, and/or disabled as pests or nuisances to be done away with. This choice also recalls the very banality—which is to say ordinariness and routineness—of a situation like this one in which, absent proper systems and structures of care, one individual is left to the mercy of another. At the same time that Amelia looks after her neighbor, she must also depend on her for occasional childcare; this aspect of the narrative highlights the extent to which conditions of interdependence often typify the lived experiences of those in positions of precarity and simultaneously emphasizes the lack of reciprocal care from institutions that are, in fact, in the position to offer such support.

Amelia’s job in a nursing home—or, aged care home as it would be called in Australia—also requires the labor of caring for others. As such, on the rare occasions in *The Babadook* in which Amelia is able to leave her home, she finds herself doing much of the same labor that she provides for Samuel (and Mrs. Roach). What is more, Samuel’s needs require that she take time off of work to care for him, cutting her off from life-sustaining wages and from some of her only opportunities for interacting with other adults. In the absence of institutional resources, such an interruption to Amelia’s work schedule has incredibly high stakes for her family, even if her employer imagines her as disposable. *The Babadook* makes clear that, without accessible and stable options for childcare,

Amelia must make the choice of potentially sacrificing her family's already uncertain financial stability to care for Samuel's immediate needs; but rather than linking this situation to Amelia's status as a "single mother," *The Babadook's* attention to Amelia's myriad forms of labor—both public and private—invite consideration of the larger context of life in postindustrial societies in which the casualization of labor, the "rise of the service economy," the weakening of labor unions, and the deregulation of labor markets have contributed to cultures of socioeconomic insecurity (McGann, White, and Moss 768).

*The Babadook* also offers protracted representations of Amelia's own deterioration as she grows increasingly undone by the demands of her care for Samuel and by her fear for his wellbeing and her own. For example, early in the narrative, the film depicts Amelia making rather small sacrifices for the sake of her child, relinquishing in one scene the pleasure of masturbation when a nightmare drives Samuel into her bed. As the narrative develops, these sacrifices grow more severe, and Amelia struggles physically and psychologically, becoming increasingly anxious, irritable, and exhausted. To demonstrate, throughout much of the film Amelia experiences a toothache, which gradually worsens because she does not have the temporal, financial, or emotional resources to engage in acts of self-care, such as going to the dentist. At her most exhausted state, the pain becomes so formidable that she rips out the infected tooth with her bare hands, leaving her speechless and bloodied. In this scene, Amelia's painful removal of her festering tooth synecdochally signals the ongoing process by which she has been expected to give up and discard parts of herself for the sake of others. In contrast to those horror films that depict the spectacular horrors of parturition as an isolated event, *The Babadook* envisions the cumulating traumas of a different kind of labor, visualizing how, as Berlant argues, the ongoing "labor of reproducing life itself exhausts the bodies that perform it" (Puar 171).

### "If It's in a Look"

Significantly, *The Babadook* refuses a clean distinction between material and immaterial forms of labor as it demonstrates the exhausting effects of Amelia's manual labor in the service of home maintenance and the emotional labor she must perform for her son and those positioned to monitor and assess the value of her labor. For example, in conversations with her socioeconomically privileged

sister Claire, Amelia consistently receives the message that she should hide her grief and struggles in order to make others more comfortable. In one scene, Claire complains about the tradition of sharing a birthday party for her daughter and Samuel, which was a practice aimed at protecting Amelia from having to celebrate her son’s birthday on the anniversary of her husband’s death and insulating her from the costs of the celebration. Claire claims that this ritual inconveniences her by making her “feel awful.” In response, Amelia must do the work of regulating her own feelings to accommodate her sister, while she also feels compelled to apologize and atone for her sister’s discomfort. Claire, who refuses to visit her sister’s house because it’s “too depressing,” later chastises Amelia for not being able to “cope” with Oskar’s death and for not having “moved on” from her grief.

This attention to Claire’s feelings about Amelia’s feelings makes clear that *The Babadook* does not understand trauma and depression as entirely private or individualized experiences. Rather, the film casts depression as what Ann Cvetkovich might call a “public feeling” constituted in the context of social relations and power inequities, wherein depression develops in the context of “political failure[s]” including histories of racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and classism (7). For instance, by juxtaposing Claire’s ableist impatience toward her sister with conspicuous representations of her socioeconomic privilege and by coupling Claire’s disdainful remarks about Amelia’s grief with her blithe suggestions that her sister should “just get back into” her writing, the film emphasizes that Amelia’s grief is not unrelated to or unaffected by her economic insecurity. As such, *The Babadook* also demonstrates that health and trauma are not apolitical and that the “economically and politically marginalized are uniquely exposed to preventable risks to health and safety” (Kelly 237).

As much as Amelia must spend her time watching over Samuel, she also becomes the object of various institutional gazes. At his school, for instance, Amelia must face the scrutiny of Samuel’s teacher and head of school. Insisting on a monitor to oversee Samuel throughout the school day, these officials approach Amelia with condescension, if not hostility, when Samuel acts out. Likewise, after Amelia chooses to remove Samuel from this school, she finds herself under surveillance by the state, as representatives of the Department of Community Services make multiple, unannounced visits to Amelia’s home to inspect its condition and assess Samuel’s well-being. The fact that one visit occurs in the midst of Amelia’s efforts to manage the roach infestation

underscores the state's investment in surveillance over and against providing support for those in need. Claustrophobic cinematography in the scenes featuring the DCS agents highlights the various disciplinary gazes aimed at Amelia, and the film's attention to these institutional forces illustrates the extent to which low-income families and/or single mothers are subject to more state supervision, surveillance, and discipline than others.

This depiction of the state echoes through another scene in the film in which Amelia asks for but does not receive help from local law enforcement agencies. As Babadook's presence becomes increasingly menacing, Amelia presumes that she has a stalker. Having received no support from Claire, who dismisses her sister's fears, sighing that she "just can't help [her] right now," Amelia seeks help at the police station. The officer to whom she speaks and others who watch her skeptically from across the room are largely nonresponsive to her distress and pleas for help. One officer even laughs condescendingly when Amelia mentions having received threats in the form of a children's book. A shot/reverse shot sequence in which one officer stares blankly and silently at Amelia as she describes being stalked visualizes the tactics of gaslighting that lead her to doubt her own experiences and her attendant feelings of helplessness or isolation. Having been dismissed by the officer, Amelia runs from the station after seeing what she believes to be Babadook's cloak and top hat hanging on a coat rack in the station, illustrating her understandable fear that institutions may exacerbate, rather than lessen, the threats she faces. This scene echoes the history of "organized abandonment" by lawmakers, law enforcement agencies, and the judicial system (to name a few) in their treatment of violence against women as private issues to be dealt with in the home or as acts committed by individual bad actors outside the context of "broader structures of patriarchal dominance" (Enck-Wanzer 6).

Amelia also finds herself the target of another disciplinary (and condescending) gaze: that of Claire and Claire's friends. At her daughter's birthday party, Claire's friends, clad in expensive suits, stare at Amelia with a mixture of pity and horror in their eyes. As the women complain about their husbands' work schedules and their lack of time to go to the gym, the cinematography—including wide framing and low-angle shooting—embodies the hierarchy that structures the scene. One woman attempts to forge an identification with Amelia by claiming to know how "hard" her situation is because of her volunteer work with "disadvantaged women." This reference to volunteer, or

charity, work further highlights the failures of the neoliberal state to care for its marginalized citizens, shifting such labor onto individuals and private institutions. This conversation also points to the metonymic equation of “good” femininity and motherhood with acts of caretaking and the extent to which the conspicuous volunteer work of privileged (white, heterosexual, nondisabled, wealthy) women may carry more cultural capital than the invisible but life-sustaining labor of women in positions of precarity.

Accordingly, *The Babadook*’s rendering of Amelia’s and Samuel’s trauma demonstrates the importance of differentiating states of vulnerability from conditions of precarity, visualizing the “politically induced condition of maximized vulnerability and exposure” (Butler *Frames of War* ii). The struggles Amelia faces are not solely her own, but they are the result of cultural, social, and political forces that precede and exceed her; and the traumas she experiences do not result solely from the sudden loss of her partner, as a quick synopsis of the film might suggest, but also from the ongoing lack of resources for her and her son.

### “You Can’t Get Rid of the Babadook!”

Just as this essay begins by referencing online texts that have made *Babadook* a queer icon, it is also a text in the film that introduces the monster into Amelia and Samuel’s home. When Samuel finds a mysterious book, *Mister Babadook*, on his bedroom shelf, he asks his mother to read it to him at bedtime. The pop-up book, bound in red cloth and featuring crude black and white lettering and drawings, begins with these words, “If it’s in a word, or it’s in a look, you can’t get rid of the The Babadook.” Amelia reads the book to Samuel, becoming increasingly uncomfortable with its references to fear and sleeplessness, and its illustrations of a black and white creature staring at a sleeping child in his bed. The book, which contains many blank pages toward the end, frightens Samuel to the point that he curls up in his mother’s lap, screaming as she tries to read a more soothing bedtime story.

That night, Amelia hides the book, only to later discover that it has reappeared in Samuel’s room alongside a vandalized picture of her and Oskar. After tearing up the book, Amelia finds that it has returned with its pages taped back together, and this reappearance corresponds with an increase in erratic and even violent



behavior from Samuel. This version of the book also has its missing pages filled with illustrations of a woman who resembles Amelia being taunted by Babadook before killing her pet and her child. A final attempt to destroy the book by burning it appears to work on the text itself, but other manifestations of Babadook begin to taunt Amelia: she receives a prank call, she has visions of his cloak and hat, and she hears various noises in her home. As Babadook occupies more and more space in their lives, the escalation in Samuel's violent behaviors is redoubled in Amelia's own increasingly unpredictable, angry, and aggressive conduct.

This brief narrative synopsis likely illustrates why many reviewers have come to understand Babadook as the manifestation of Amelia's repressed grief about the loss of Oskar. More detailed attention to Kent's construction of Babadook in her film lends additional insights into how this monster gives shape to *The Babadook's* critique of the precarious conditions of white motherhood in postindustrial society. It matters, for instance, that the Babadook almost never appears in any corporeal form in the film; audiences see illustrated representations of him within the diegesis (such as the drawings in the book) and encounter traces of his presence (including hearing noises and seeing items that seemingly belong to him). But, the monster is never fully materialized as an actual presence in the film, as audiences only hear him or see his shadow, and his face only appears onscreen in the briefest of flashes. Babadook is no thing—or, more precisely, no one. In fact, so “unimportant” is the corporeal presence of Babadook that the actor who plays him (Tim Purcell) does not appear in the credits until the very end of the cast list, after the lead actors' stunt doubles and such tangential roles as “Fast Food Mum” and “Car Guy.”

Babadook's origination in a pop-up book (not to mention his construction as a queer icon via online memes) suggests Bernadette Calafell's observation that “monsters are made, not born” (1). That is, monsters do not exist innately or naturally but are produced by discourse, culture, and structures of domination. They are the constructed outcomes of power and its often-unequal distribution. The immaterial materiality (or material immateriality) of Babadook also signals a concept akin to what Casey Ryan Kelly describes as “ambient horror.” In his analysis of the horror film, *It Follows*, Kelly discusses how the film depicts horror not as “gory spectacle” but through a diffusion of affects that collectively “cultivat[e] dread” to signify the “steady intensification and precarity” and the organization of bodily vulnerability and death along lines of power (238). Babadook is everywhere and nowhere at once; he cannot be located in any single

context or at any one site. Rather, like precarity, he exists interstitially, along lines of division and stratification. He resides in thresholds and in borders, and can only be seen if, as *Mister Babadook* says, “you know what it is to see.”

At the end of Kent’s film, Babadook finds a kind of “queer kinship” with Amelia (Tongson); or, as Tim Teeman puts it, the two live together in a “queer community of mutually accepting perversity.” Babadook remains there, but not there; hidden in the basement but acknowledged as a part of everyday life; dreaded but also cared for; material but also immaterial; physical but also polymorphous. Babadook’s not-quite-materialized presence in Amelia’s home serves as a constant reminder of the structures of inequity that shape her life—never quite visible but felt all the same. Babadook does not come to stand in for an individualized bad actor who has made Amelia’s life more difficult; there is, in fact, no single bogeyman to whom she could point a finger or from whom she could demand redress. Rather, Babadook signals the confluence and accretion of structural forces that have precaritized Amelia’s (and Samuel’s) life. Just as the Babadiscourse emerges from those who “know what it is to see” heteronormativity and homophobia, *The Babadook* asks audiences to see the various intersections among heteronormativity, sexism, ableism, and classism and how these im/material forces take shape in the lives of the precarious. Of course, at the same time, Babadook’s continued presence in Amelia’s home and the attendant forms of (maternal) labor she must perform on his behalf remind viewers of the enduring and exhausting conditions of living precarious lives. That is, the film’s purported resolution of Amelia’s trauma is anything but; she may be less acutely in crisis, but her responsibilities for Samuel, Mrs. Roach, and now Babadook will continue to accumulate as conditions of her slow death.

### “And Once You See What’s Underneath”

Despite its productive attention to forms of precarity that result from the overlapping of heteronormativity, sexism, classism, and ableism, an intersectional reading of *The Babadook* reveals the film to be haunted by presumptive whiteness. The film’s figuration of the home with Victorian stylistics, for instance, resounds with signifiers of whiteness that are never acknowledged as such; neither does the film attend explicitly to the legacy of colonialism in Australia, which included both the exploitation of impoverished and incarcerated

British citizens that were transported to the colony and enslavement and genocide of Indigenous people in Australia. Further, the film's depictions of the institutional gazes that scrutinize and discipline Amelia leave no space for considering the privileges her whiteness (and presumed heterosexuality) might afford her. To wit, one might imagine that women of color (and queers of color) may have experienced even harsher treatment by representatives of the state or found even fewer resources for support. Inattention to this racial inequity is particularly problematic given the history of colonialism and that fact that for most of the twentieth century the Australian government forcibly removed Indigenous children from their homes with the aim of assimilating them into white society and, effectively, destroying Indigenous populations.

In the context of the film's exclusion of people of color, however, the figure of Babadook does perhaps offer a moment of rupture within the film's presumptions of whiteness. Quite literally, Babadook is illustrated mostly in black with conspicuous white makeup on his face. Suggesting an inversion of racist tropes of blackface—while also referencing well-circulated imagery of Indigenous people from Australia wearing white body paint—this aesthetic figuration of the monster suggests conflicting possibilities regarding the politics of race.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, a suspicious reading of this film might suggest that it harbors racist fantasies of Black and/or Indigenous men's bodies posing threats to white women, invading their bedrooms at night. On the other hand, a generous reading might interpret this depiction of Babadook as literalizing the film's whitewashing of its story of precarity. That is, the black and white animation of Babadook serves, purposefully or not, as a signal and contestation of the film's inattention to racial difference, reminding the film's characters and imagined viewers that race, like the Babadook, cannot be ignored. In fact, one line within

---

<sup>3</sup> Images of Indigenous people in Australia engaging in practices of body painting and ornamentation have circulated widely in a range of sites, including photojournalism, art, and cinema. While some of these images have attempted to offer respectful depictions of these cultural practices and the spiritual traditions they reflect, other representations have participated in exoticizing and Othering Indigenous bodies. For examples of the latter, consider such films as *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (Fred Schepisi, 1978) and *Crocodile Dundee* (Peter Faiman, 1986)—both of which are films directed by white men that have been decried as racist for having deployed the bodies of Indigenous people as resources for bolstering white hegemony.

*The Babadook* book encourages such a reparative interpretation, imploring readers to “see what’s underneath” the monster’s disguise.<sup>4</sup>

It is perhaps no accident, then, that queer appropriations of Babadook in the U.S. have explicitly referenced signifiers associated with cultural performances of Black queerness, including frequent use of the tagline, “Get Ready to be Babashook”; representations of Babadook voguing; and, in one of the most high-profile iterations of Babadook’s queer iconicity, the appearance of Miles Jai, a queer person of color and social media star, at the finale of RuPaul’s *Drag Race* in costume as the top-hatted monster. While some of these representations reflect the histories of white appropriation of Black cultural performances of queerness, we might also read them reparatively as signaling (perhaps unwittingly) what *The Babadook* itself does not see: its own investment in the normative invisibility of whiteness, even as tries to make visible other forms of discrimination and inequity. To this end, the figure of The Babadook offers an important reminder about the tropological richness of monstrosity. Just as monsters themselves often defy easy containment and exceed the categories aimed at defining them, monsters as signifiers have rich capacity to invite interpretations and identifications, often at interstitial, overlapping, and even contradictory registers.

---

<sup>4</sup> I borrow the language of suspicious, or paranoid, and generous, or reparative, reading practices from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s work on queer feminist hermeneutics.

## Works Cited

- Berlant, Lauren. "Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2007, pp. 754-780.
- Bilge, Simra. "Intersectionality Undone: Saving Intersectionality from Feminist Intersectionalist Studies," *Du Bois Review*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2013, pp. 405-424.
- Boris, Eileen and Leigh Dodson. "Introduction." *Working at Living: The Social Relations of Precarity*, 28 July 2013, [escholarship.org/uc/item/6bk5x0j5](https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6bk5x0j5). Accessed 15 Feb. 2018.
- Butler, Judith. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* Verso Books, 2016.
- Butler, Judith. "Performativity, Precarity, and Sexual Politics," *AIBR: Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2009, pp. i-xiii.
- Calafell, Bernadette Marie. *Monstrosity, Performance, and Race in Contemporary Culture*. Peter Lang, 2015.
- Castillo, Monica. "The Horrors of Motherhood Creep Through 'The Babadook,'" *Bitch Media*, 31 Dec. 2014, [bitchmedia.org/post/the-horrors-of-motherhood-creep-through-the-babadook](http://bitchmedia.org/post/the-horrors-of-motherhood-creep-through-the-babadook). Accessed 25 Nov. 2017.
- Cho, Sumi, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall. "Toward a Field of Intersectional Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 38, no. 4, 2013, pp. 785-810.
- Clover, Carol. *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. Princeton University Press, 1993.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Routledge, 2000.
- Creed, Barbara. *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. New York and Routledge, 1993.

- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991, pp. 1241-1299.
- Cvetkovich, Ann. *Depression: A Public Feeling*. Duke University Press, 2012.
- Denis, Ann. "Intersectional Analysis: A Contribution of Feminism to Sociology," *International Sociology*, vol. 23, no. 5, 2009, pp. 677-694.
- Dollins, Jeremiah. "Review: The Babadook," *Letterboxd*, 26 Nov. 2014, [letterboxd.com/ambivalentman/film/the-babadook/](http://letterboxd.com/ambivalentman/film/the-babadook/). Accessed 25 Nov. 2017.
- Enck-Wanzer, Suzanne Marie. "All's Fair in Love and Sport: Black Masculinity and Domestic Violence in the News," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2009, pp. 1-18.
- Gökarkırsel, Banu and Sara Smith. "Intersectional Feminism Beyond U.S. Flag Hijab and Pussy Hats in Trump's America," *Gender, Place & Culture*, vol. 24, no. 5, 2017, pp. 628-644.
- Hamraie, Aimi. "Designing Collective Access: A Feminist Disability Theory of Universal Design," *Disability Studies Quarterly*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2013, [dsqds.org/article/view/3871/3411](http://dsqds.org/article/view/3871/3411). Accessed 25 Nov. 2017.
- Haralovich, Mary Beth. "Too Much Guilt is Never Enough for Working Mothers: Joan Crawford, *Mildred Pierce*, and *Mommie Dearest*," *The Velvet Light Trap*, vol. 29, 1992, pp. 43-52.
- hooks, bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Routledge, 2015.
- Fischer, Lucy. "Birth Traumas: Parturition and Horror in 'Rosemary's Baby,'" *Cinema Journal*, vol. 31, no. 3, 1992, pp. 3-18.
- Kelly, Casey Ryan. "It Follows: Precarity, Thanatopolitics, and the Ambient Horror Film," *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, vol. 34, no. 3, 2017, pp. 234-249.

- Kendrick, Karen. "Normalizing Female Cancer Patients: Look Good, Feel Better and Other Image Problems," *Disability & Society*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2008, pp. 259-269.
- Madden, Caroline. "The Babadook and the Horrors of Motherhood," *Bitch Flicks*, 26 May 2015, [btchfleks.com/2015/05/the-babadook-and-the-horrors-of-motherhood.html#.WiG7F0trxBx](http://btchfleks.com/2015/05/the-babadook-and-the-horrors-of-motherhood.html#.WiG7F0trxBx). Accessed 25 Nov. 2017.
- McGann, Michael, Kevin White, and Jeremy Moss. "Labour Casualization and the Psychosocial Health of Workers in Australia," *Work, Employment, & Society*, vol. 30, no. 5, 2016, pp. 766-782.
- Mosoetsa, Sarah, Joel Stillerman, and Chris Tilly. "Precarious Labor, South and North: An Introduction," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, vol. 89, 2016, pp. 5-19.
- Nayak, Anoop. "Critical Whiteness Studies," *Sociology Compass*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2007, pp. 737-755.
- Neilson, Brett and Ned Rossiter. "Precarity as a Political Concept, or Fordism as Exception," *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 25, no. 7-8, 2008, pp. 51-72.
- Oler, Tammy. "The Mommy Trap: Four Recent Horror Movies by Women Explore the Most Troubling Aspects of Motherhood," *Culturebox*, 24 Nov. 2014, [slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2014/11/horror\\_movies\\_about\\_mothers\\_and\\_children\\_the\\_babadook\\_lyle\\_and\\_other\\_films.html](http://slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2014/11/horror_movies_about_mothers_and_children_the_babadook_lyle_and_other_films.html). Accessed 25. Nov. 2017.
- Pape, Alexander. "The Babadook and Autism," *Medium*, 24 Nov. 2015, [medium.com/dispatching/the-babadook-a-horror-film-or-an-autism-metaphor-6975b2f9eb85](http://medium.com/dispatching/the-babadook-a-horror-film-or-an-autism-metaphor-6975b2f9eb85). Accessed 25. Nov 2017.
- Prilleltensky, Ora. "A Ramp to Motherhood: The Experience of Mothers with Physical Disabilities," *Sexuality and Disability*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2003, pp. 21-47.

Puar, Jasbir, ed. “Precarity Talk: A Virtual Roundtable with Lauren Berlant, Judith Butler, Bojana Cvejić, Isabell Lorey, Jasbir Puar, and Ana Vujanović,” *TDR: The Drama Review*, vol. 56, no. 4, 2012, pp. 163-177.

Roy, Jessica. “The Babadook as an LGBT Icon Makes Sense. No, Really.” *Los Angeles Times*, 9 June 2017, [latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-babadook-gay-icon-lgbt-history-20170609-story.html](http://latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-babadook-gay-icon-lgbt-history-20170609-story.html). Accessed 25 Nov. 2017.

Teeman, Tim. “Scene by Scene, This is What Makes the Babadook Such an LGBT Icon,” *Daily Beast*, 6 Aug. 2017, [thedailybeast.com/scene-by-scene-this-is-what-makes-the-babadook-such-an-lgbt-icon](http://thedailybeast.com/scene-by-scene-this-is-what-makes-the-babadook-such-an-lgbt-icon). Accessed 25 Nov. 2017

Turner, Kyle. “Why Pennywise and the Babadook Were Reclaimed by the Queer Community,” *Teen Vogue*, 31 Oct. 2017, [teenvogue.com/story/pennywise-babadook-horror-queer-reclaiming](http://teenvogue.com/story/pennywise-babadook-horror-queer-reclaiming). Accessed 25 Nov. 2017.



# Awakening the Civic Dead: Political Mobilization of the Zombie in Real Time

NANCY D. WADSWORTH

“We are zombies, but we are very much alive, actually.”  
– Slovenian “Zombie Church” Activist

“We want to motivate people to take part. To free themselves from their crusted shells, to take part in the political process.”  
– Hamburg 1000Gestalten Organizer

The field of monster studies has left little doubt that the modern zombie functions as a kind of floating signifier for a wide range of cultural fantasies and fears, which shift with changing circumstances (Lauro “Zombie Theory” xix). As in the United States, where zombies have come and gone since the 1930s, so across an increasingly interconnected world, the zombie tends to mirror “the current state of...society or its eventual direction” (Poole 217). A liminal creature, the zombie slips the binaries of life and death, the individual and the multitude, impotence and agency, often managing to be neither/nor and both/and (Bishop How *Zombies Conquered* 6). Like most monsters, the zombie’s “cultural body” carries the irresolvable paradoxes plaguing the human condition (Cohen 4). But the zombie narrative—zombie’s life in story—is particularly useful for teasing out the fraught relationships between the individual, the crowd (or mob, or swarm), and the larger power constellations circumscribing social behavior.

Given the living dead’s social orientation, zombie narratives often deliver customized political metaphors. Scholars have traced how the political referent has morphed across context. In the twentieth century, zombies stood in for everything from communism to the Vietnam War, urbanization to AIDS, racial anxieties and mass consumerism.<sup>1</sup> Today “millennial zombies” channel anxieties

---

<sup>1</sup> For brief recaps of different manifestations over time and across culture, see Sarah Juliet Lauro’s Introduction to her *Zombie Theory: A Reader* ix-xii, and Platts 549-553. For a collection of historical treatments of the zombie in popular culture see Christie and Lauro’s *Better Off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human*.

about our dependence on technology, globalization and migration, ecological destruction, fears for the place of the individual in an increasingly demanding society, and vulnerabilities that, like viruses, spring from our porous social condition in a global world.<sup>2</sup> Yet across context, the powerful multivalence of zombie narratives enables many points of identification for audiences. We may identify with the survivors fighting off menacing forces chomping at our heels (an effort always hindered by our evident weakness and corruptibility), where zombies stand in for the unassimilable other that the imagined social body resists (Canavan 414). At the same time, we may sense how much in common we have with these gluttonous creatures seemingly doomed to destroy the very ecologies on which their existence depends. Like them, we live in a state of degeneration, dying a bit more the longer we survive, but also causing damage to much of the life around us. As Kyle William Bishop has suggested, we might even envy the zombie a bit, seeing potential in the idea of joining the zombie horde, rather than suffering as human (“I Always Wanted” 26-7). In its multivalence, zombie is perhaps the most flexible monster for interrogating political power on many levels simultaneously, serving as a symbol for both the perceived *us* and the imagined *them*; both the external forces stacked against humans and the internal ones complicating our best efforts. Even in the dark visions they cast, zombie narratives offer occasional glimpses of how a lost species might rise against overwhelming odds to birth a future that looks different, maybe even better.

We have seen some exploration of the zombie’s relevance for thinking about contemporary global politics in the field of political theory.<sup>3</sup> But until recently,

---

<sup>2</sup> Peter Dendle uses the term “millennial zombie” in his section introduction to Christie and Lauro’s *Better Off Dead*, 159-162, and explores “Zombie Movies and the Millennial Generation” in the same volume, 175-186. For a fascinating discussion of the (re)emergence of zombie mythos in South Africa during massive labor dislocations at the turn of the millennium, see Jean and John Camaroff, “Alien-Nation: Zombies, Immigrants, and Millennial Capitalism” in Sarah Juliet Lauro’s *Zombie Theory: A Reader*, 137-156. For a summary of the massive academic literature that has grown just in the past decade, see Lauro’s introduction to *Zombie Theory: A Reader*, xix.

<sup>3</sup> In political science, Dan Drezner’s *Theories of International Politics and Zombies* marked one of political science’s early forays into zombie studies. Henry Giroux continued it in *Zombie Politics and Culture in the Age of Casino Capitalism*. Wadsworth considers Herbert Marcuse’s possible read of zombie popularity in “Are We The Walking Dead? Zombie Apocalypse as Liberatory Art.”

mobilization of the zombie metaphor in political real-time—that is, employed in public space for specific political purposes beyond the occasional fundraiser—has been quite rare. Starting in the mid-aughts, scholars began investigating whether public zombie gatherings, such as urban “zombie walks,” wherein participants dress up as zombies or their potential victims and take over a public space for a period of time for fun, might serve as prototypes or vehicles for some sort of political critique or revolutionary identity. While such gatherings have displayed provocative uses of zombie imagery in public space, scholars have suggested that, for the most part, zombie walks and the like contain more *potential* for the expression of collective power than any meaningful *activation* of it. As Sarah Juliet Lauro mused in 2011, “Maybe when the zombie walk phenomenon has slouched toward its final resting place, we will begin knowing and speaking that which the zombie mob only played at: community, action, (r)evolution” (“Playing Dead” 230). As it happened, just shortly after her reflections on zombie walks were published, zombies began to surface in public political space, particularly in relation to protests against the forces of advanced capitalism.

Below, I examine two recent developments on the global stage in which the zombie mob was not playing at power; two instances in which, politically, the political zombie was dead serious, moving well beyond the civic spectacle of the zombie walk and into the field of public protest. These phenomena demonstrate potent instances of the zombie figure being intentionally transferred from the realm of political metaphor in popular culture (via filmic, literary, and commercial representations), to the more agonal space of political action. In 2012-13, citizens of the small central European nation of Slovenia broke two decades of relative quiescence with a political uprising that employed the zombie as a dynamic icon to target corruption and other grievances and simultaneously signify resistance against larger political and economic forces. A few years later, during the G20 summit in 2017 in Hamburg, Germany, a performance collective called The 1000Gestalten leveraged the zombie metaphor in a large-scale performance art piece in a public square. Both of these cases exceeded the parameters of the conventional zombie walk. In these examples we see the emergence of zombie in real time and real space—that is, as a metaphor visibly mobilized in physical public arenas as a mode of critical interrogation, ironic inversion, political invitation, and collective envisioning of alternatives to the status quo. In both cases, activists leveraged the multivalence of zombie to significant political effect, expressing exuberant resistance to the forces arrayed under the term neoliberalism (which I define further on).

---

Recognition of these phenomena can advance monster scholarship in several ways. As I detail, the zombie metaphor proves mobilizable as a mechanism for translating the complex political, economic, and cultural dynamics characterized by neoliberalism into a vocabulary of collective grievance, resistance, and resilience. The recent ubiquity of zombie in popular culture has made the connotations of concepts like the “living dead” widely accessible, and upon this foundation activists draw attention to concrete frustrations with the global neoliberal order. The Slovene and German cases demonstrate how political zombies employed in public spaces can, on one hand, signal despair about the suffering of the human spirit under conditions of hyper-capitalism, but, on the other, envision—literally enact public visions of—a collective awakening and rebellion against oppressive forces. Brought into the agon, the space of public contestations over power and justice, politicized zombies draw on the carnivalesque tradition to perform politically fruitful inversions and subversions. But beyond being sites of dark play, they interrogate the status quo and demonstrate paths to action. Perhaps most importantly, zombie-themed political events themselves become modes of community building and cultural expression against global forces that foster isolation and political apathy. Despite the inherent paradoxes that we know can constrain the zombie figure politically, mobilizations of zombie in real time can and do activate a liberatory visual imaginary in a world in which alternatives to the status quo can be hard to conceive.

Below, I first review scholarship on the political potentiality and limitations of earlier versions of zombie gatherings, and suggest why the conditions of neoliberalism set the stage for fresh uses of “dead flesh” in public space, starting with Occupy Wall Street protests in London and New York. Part 2 turns to the Slovenian case, in which protests that coordinated under the umbrella of the Trans-Universal Zombie Church of the Blissful Ringing became a catalytic vehicle for a two-year protest movement that enjoyed some tangible victories, including the forced resignation of several prominent officials. This section draws on English-language reporting, contemporary participant accounts, and interviews I conducted with Slovenians in March 2017. In Part 3, I engage a close reading of 1000Gestalten’s embrace of the zombie in its Hamburg performance, highlighting the politically salient inversions it enacted in the context of the 2017 G20 summit. Keeping the differences between these two political employments of zombie in view, I believe these cases illuminate how zombie is proving its potential as a figure of real-time critique and liberation in the era of neoliberalism.

## Zombie: Entertainer, Prophet, or Revolutionary?

A perpetual interest in zombie studies has been whether the reanimated corpse can serve as a politically inspiring archetype, and, correspondingly, whether popular interest in zombies suggests a possible awakening to current political predicaments, or merely reflects the half-deadness of modern subjects. If the latest wave of zombie popularity has been fixated on global apocalypse, does this mirror a kind of mass political apathy in the face of catastrophe? Or could it provide images of rebellion against zombification, or on behalf of new kinds of community, new forms of humanness?

In *How Zombies Conquered Popular Culture*, Kyle William Bishop notes that there are many ways contemporary viewers may relate to the zombie and even see positive potential in it. The metaphorical slave figure of the Haitian tradition, for instance, often takes symbolic form under conditions of modern capitalism as the soul-deadened “working stiff” (8). Millennial audiences instantly recognize this figure in the opening scenes of *Shaun of the Dead*, which is part of why viewers root for Shaun and his crew even when his best friend becomes a zombie (and integrated into society as such). Bishop also identifies the emergence in the twenty-first century of “hero zombies,” sympathetic zombie protagonists who seem to bend the defining features of zombie by acquiring (recovering) communication skills or the ability to feel (as in films like *Day of the Dead*, *Fido*, and *Warm Bodies*) (13-14). But absent from Bishop’s four major zombie types is the collective zombie as a politicized redeemer—the zombie-horde-as-slave-uprising.

Indeed, in “I Always Wanted to See How the Other Half Lives,” Bishop suggests that the zombie renaissance in the post-9/11 era is mostly an escape valve for audiences overwhelmed with economic pressures, terrorism and war. “[T]he zombie provides the anxious and overwhelmed with a therapeutic outlet, a brief moment of respite and full-body escapism,” he writes, which may be amplified when people dress up as zombies in public space (36). Others see hope tucked into the warnings carried in millennial zombie narratives—a hope that if we play our cards right, we might avert total disaster. As Collins and Bond write:

Zombies, and apocalyptic fiction generally, can function as jeremiad, a warning to its audience to repent and reform. In this sense, the new millennium zombies share a similar role with their shambling predecessors as social critiques. But rather than ending with a nearly extinct humanity, these newer zombie apocalypses depict a regeneration following the plague’s scourging. (188)

In contemporary zombie productions such as *World War Z*, hopeful signs include the way technology is reclaimed for humane purposes, old social divides are transcended by the common threat, and humanity prevails through mutual aid (192-3). Even the emergence of the new hybrid human-zombie (Bishop's "zombie protagonist"), can be read, according to Collins and Bond, as a sort of savior figure who rises in the interstitial space between zombie and human to assist in rebuilding the world (200).

Caution and catharsis are not mutually exclusive options, given the zombie's symbolic multivalence. But researchers have regarded expressions of collective zombie-ness performed in public spaces more as venues for irreverent communal play than as modes of political intervention. Thea Faulds organized the first recorded zombie walk in 2003, when she and a group of friends wandered through Toronto dressed as zombies. The event is now the sanctioned Toronto Zombie Walk, which attracts thousands annually and has inspired zombie walks around the world and even a World Zombie Day in late October (Orpana 294). Such gatherings contribute to what Glennis Byron has called the "globalgothic" aesthetic (Bishop 33).

Scholars have been keen to note that zombie walks display contemporary variations on what Mikhail Bakhtin vividly detailed as the uncanny carnivalesque in the medieval folk festival tradition (Bakhtin). Emma Austin observes how public zombies embrace the carnival setting as a "space of inversion" where meanings are contested and the people bawdily (and bodily) speak back against the expectations of power elites (181). Simon Orpana describes how Bakhtin's understanding of the "grotesque realism, physical degradation, and folk laughter—as inoculation against the 'cosmic terror' of hegemonic social control—are particularly relevant for characterizing zombie walks as modern manifestations of the carnivalesque" (295). Through a cathartic fixation on the morbid, on corporeal degeneration and gore, public zombies in walks and festivals may challenge bourgeois social norms (after all, status professionals like Wall Street bankers, doctors, and lawyers are all reduced to shambling corpses) and demonstrate what Bakhtin describes as a kind of cosmic laughter (302). Orpana argues that zombie culture "exhibits dark humor that laughs in the face of overwhelming power" (302) and, through symbol, performance, and pleasure resists the kind of disciplinary control that Foucault described as biopower (306). While Orpana does not read zombie walks as political sites in and of themselves, he notes that they demonstrate a potential kind of politics, in that the "zombie mob collects new participants as it goes," turns casual observers into potential victims of the horde, and transforms the physical infrastructure of a city (300). The zombie mass, in art and in real-time zombie gatherings, is "a mass with its own rudimentary sense of agency"—the agency of a voracious, excessive

challenge to the social order (308). I will return to these carnivalesque forms of agency in zombie gatherings in the case studies.

Sarah Juliet Lauro (whose “Zombie Manifesto” co-written with Karen Embry has been an influential case for the zombie’s political salience in the twenty-first century) studied zombie walks around 2009, sometimes as a participant-observer. She was curious whether coordinated zombie events could “afford the kind of revolutionary shift in consciousness that earlier avant-gardes hoped would come out of collective or Situationist art” (220). Was there potential in the zombie “swarm identity” to create a new kind of image of “common being” like that which she and Embry theorize in their manifesto, and could this foster consciousness of the collective as an insurrectionary force (214)? She emerged pessimistic. Although zombie gatherings pushed the boundaries between art and experience, and sometimes implicitly offered social critique, she found that their potential for inciting revolutionary consciousness was stifled by the “frustrating dialectic” at the heart of the zombie metaphor:

In playing zombie, one becomes aware of the subject/object duality of our everyday existence, that which specifically inhibits the success of revolution...[I]n general, the zombie is a reminder of the inherent duality of the human condition: as thinking subjects, and as future corpses [i.e., objects]. In playing zombie, we make visible the thingness of our body as that recalcitrant object from which we do not hurry to separate, and which real revolution endangers...A figuration of slave and slave rebellion, the zombie always connotes the annihilation of revolution at the same time that it embodies revolutionary drive; likewise, these zombie mobs are antirevolutionary even as they illustrate the concept’s latent potential. (225)

Lauro assessed zombie walks and other gatherings as “too thin” to find traction for a meaningful shift in consciousness, an enactment of collective power (228). Curating a communal moment that ultimately just disperses and in which the players parade as objects rendered only temporarily into public subjects, she argued that zombie walks amount more to a “veiled threat,” “dry run,” or “dress rehearsal” than a transformative process (228-9).

Lauro’s pessimism about the power of the zombie walk to transform is reasonable, especially in the context of gatherings where acting the zombie is the sole objective, and neither organizers nor participants approach them with political intent. But something I find striking in Lauro’s depiction of zombie walks as gatherings of individuals who manage to overcome disconnection to coordinate in public space for a pleasurable spectacle, *only to have the potential power of that swarm-assembly inevitably diffused* is that this dynamic is also a defining feature of the neoliberal order. For that reason, it is interesting that

zombie performances became part of the global anti-neoliberal resistance movement known as Occupy Wall Street in 2011.

## Neoliberal Zombies Resist

To briefly define it, neoliberalism connotes a set of political and economic forces that ascended in the mid-twentieth century through the advocacy of libertarian procapitalist economists like Milton Friedman and F.A. Hayek.<sup>4</sup> Promoted by capitalist superpowers under Reagan and Thatcher in the 1980s and normalized after Soviet Communism collapsed, neoliberalism eventually became a hegemonic global paradigm, which today defies even the power of nation-states to restrain it. Its key characteristics are its prioritization of market forces over human capital; defense of deregulation and corporate dominance as extensions of individual liberty; weakening of the public arena as it privatizes formerly public goods and shrinks social safety nets; legal restriction of organized labor, and normalization of a social Darwinist, hyper-capitalist view of human competitiveness in which people are expected to act like “little human capitals” solely responsible for their survival and success (Brown 2015). As the conditions of neoliberalism produce greater economic inequality alongside flat wage growth and expensive access to once-public provisions like higher education, people live in an increasing state of precarity, amplified for groups already marginalized or struggling, such as young adults, people of color, immigrants, and the elderly and disabled (Camaroff and Camaroff 138).

Neoliberalism’s power derives partly from the fact that neither its proponents nor the citizens at its mercy recognize it as ideological; rather, we are told that the “free market” has created improved opportunities for everyone, and that those who are losing have simply failed to exert proper effort. Neoliberal economic pressures keep most people stretched too thin juggling the demands of work and family life with so little support from government that most would rather stay

---

<sup>4</sup> There is now a massive literature on neoliberalism, a fraction of which I will signal here. For early analyses of the rise of neoliberalism, see Carl Friedrich’s “The Political Thought of Neo-Liberalism” and Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-9*. For influential contemporary analyses, see Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*, Bonnie Honig, *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair*, and Simon Springer, *The Discourse of Neoliberalism: An Anatomy of a Powerful Idea*. For a useful short but accurate overview, see George Monbiot, “Neoliberalism—The Ideology at the Root of All Our Problems.”



home and watch the zombie uprising in HD than spend Saturday at the zombie walk, much less at the capitol to protest. But if they are to gather, neoliberalism incentivizes gathering for entertainment rather than expressions of collective agency. When citizens do organize resistance, as they did in the turn of the millennium in events like the 1999 Seattle World Trade Organization protests, the neoliberal system responds with displays of overwhelming state force, condemnation from establishment centers of power, and accusations of socialist or communist “radicalism.”

At the height of the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) actions that broke out in New York, London and a host of other cities in the fall of 2011, some activists seized on the political possibilities of zombies as the perfect “creatures of the moment” (to use Jean and John Camaroff’s phrase [139]) to symbolize both agents and victims of rapacious capitalism. In “The Scene of Occupation,” Tavia Nyong’o analyzes how Occupy London organizers produced a version of Michael Jackson’s *Thriller* video dance in front of St. Paul’s Cathedral, and occupiers in New York leveraged zombie marches and the term itself as political vehicles in actions around Zuccotti Park. Nyong’o focuses less on the logistics of zombie events in these OWS sites than on the ways in which zombie performances in the context of political action help interrupt ordinary experiences of “space, time, and the act of naming” under contemporary capitalism (319).

Nyong’o’s analysis, which draws on Antonio Negri and Paolo Virno’s contemplations of time, as well as work by Agamben, Marx, Foucault and others, is rich in a way I cannot capture in this essay. But several of his observations stand out in relation to the Slovenian and Hamburgian uses of zombie we will shortly review. One is that zombies, in their in-betweenness, their performance of a kind of bodily “openness” as a living-dead form stumbling around in a state of decay, potently convey the precarity of life under late-capitalism (321). “The particular, atypical shamble of the zombie—its asocial sociality, its decomposing ecology—choreographs a relation to the tense, dreadful time of precarity,” as Nyong’o puts it (327). But for that reason, *performing* the zombie in political space can be a liberating “*transfer* of energy” that is also a transformation of time—as those performing the zombie move from dead time (at a dull, underpaid job, or at a long political occupation) to an “intensification” of time dancing or walking through the city in an engaged critique of the current political reality (327). The zombie dance, Nyong’o suggests, “is a survival skill for living with dead time” (326).

Remembering Orpana’s observations on the carnivalesque, we might say that to bring zombies to a political action resisting neoliberal systems is to use the zombified figure of capitalism to laugh at its expectations that we (workers, students, citizens) behave like zombies; it is to both ridicule the norms and rebuke their power sources. When zombies occupy public space in “real time,” they have

the capacity to breach our ordinary experience of time and, in the particular space of a politicized occupation or action, to slow things down or “stretch out” time, which can be quite impactful as observers stop to watch and are potentially drawn in by the spectacle (327).

The OWS movement’s mobilization of public zombies in London and New York certainly were important precursors for the multi-layered zombie symbolism employed by activists in Slovenia and Hamburg. As we will see, these activists leveraged the zombie, the figure so often defined by its unconsciousness, into conscious political critique of neoliberal forces, and performed the zombie horde as a vehicle of political resistance. In so doing, they innovated on the political use of public zombie.

### The All-Slovenian Upheaval and the “Zombie Church”

In retrospect, the six-month wave of protests that started in 2012 may feel to Slovenes like a flash in the pan; many today complain that their political system has not meaningfully changed. But at the time, the uprising (eventually named the All-Slovenian Upheaval) was significant in at least three ways: 1) it brought thousands into the streets, which hadn’t occurred since Slovenia’s break from socialist Yugoslavia in 1991; 2) it led to the ouster of a number of office holders, and disrupted the existing party politics associated with corrupt regimes; and 3) its demonstrations incorporated a diverse cross-section of Slovene society, including groups and identities that had not often coordinated in the past. The zombie figure, at least for a time, became a focal point for all that.

Since the early 1990s, this small ethnic nation tucked between Austria, Italy, Hungary, and Croatia, had been regarded as a model for a stable post-socialist transition, the first to enter the Eurozone, and relatively prosperous, with strong national industries and relative political equilibrium. But by 2012 the country of two million was experiencing the painful effects of the 2009 global recession, including shrinking European exports, rising public debt, and unemployment (KOKS). Much of this was attributed to the right-wing party’s mismanagement of publicly owned industries, which many characterized as an autocratic government pushing neoliberal economic policies.

The Upheaval emerged from a municipal scandal that, were it not for the economic strain brought on by austerity measures and simmering discontent over corruption, might have been far less catalytic. In November 2012, citizens of Maribor became angry upon learning that five million euros of public funds had been used to install high-tech radars to monitor traffic offenses—and 93% of the revenue would land in the pockets of a private corporation (Korsika and Mesec 80). When the press uncovered the scheme, infuriated citizens vandalized eleven

radars and eventually took to the streets, first in small numbers, to brand their mayor, already under corruption charges, a public enemy and to express outrage against other corrupt or distant politicians (Maza). On November 29, more than 10,000 Mariboran protesters gathered in a city of only 95,000, and a few days later the numbers doubled (Korsika and Mesec 80). Within days, demonstrations had erupted in other cities, including the capitol of Ljubljana (pronounced *loo-blee-AH-nah*), and the protests across the country became coordinated (Slovenia Times). The Mariboran mayor was deposed for corruption in December, and the first “All Slovenian Upheaval” occurred on December 21, when simultaneous protests were organized in the six largest cities.

Soon Ljubljana became the nexus of protest. Angry protesters heaped fury upon both the left-wing mayor, Zoran Jankovic, and right-wing prime minister, Janez Janša (pronounced *YAN-sha*), who styled himself after his Hungarian counterpart, Viktor Orban (Korsika and Mesec 80). Janša was regarded as the figurehead for the implementation of harsh austerity measures, public sector cuts, privatization of public resources, establishment of a bad bank, and limiting the usage of public referenda to “matters without fiscal consequences” (Korsika and Mesec 80). Protests in December and January attracted as many as 20,000—10% of the city’s population—with nearly 70% of the national population expressing support for the actions (Novak; KOKS). Protestors galvanized around the deposal of Janša.

The state responded to the largely peaceful gatherings with an overwhelming display of force, employing riot police, fences, horses, water cannons and helicopters, and effectively shutting down the center of the city (KOKS 3). Some protestors clashed with police, while others attended large demonstrations in front of the parliamentary building. According to one report, “The police imprisoned large number (sic) of youngsters, mistreating them, holding them hostages (sic), blackmailing their parents to stop protesting, if they want to see their kids liberated” (KOKS 3). But the tactics seemed to backfire, drawing more protesters into the streets.

### “Communist Zombies”

During the large Ljubljana uprising on December 21<sup>st</sup>, where some protesters waved the flags of the former Socialist Republic of Slovenia, Janša was quick to deride the popular assemblies, tweeting that the participants were “left-fascists,” and “communist zombies” (Korsika and Mesec). English-language reports tended not to translate the significance of this rhetorical move, but my Slovene interviewees did. According to one participant:

[I]t was really wild, and he said the zombies are the protesters. [Q: What do you think he meant?] He meant resurrected Communists, you know? What he wanted to say basically was it's a resurrection of the old system. All these people are Communists! Which should be dead and is dead; all of them are just Communists who are haters of our liberal freedoms and stuff. This is what he wanted to say, because this is how basic his discourse is all the time. But it struck against him because then the protesters took this as a badge of honor and said, 'Yeah, we are zombies.' And then these masks started and stuff, and it became huge. – C., March 2, 2017.

B., who attended most of the Ljubljana protests and later helped construct the zombie-themed visuals, said, “[He meant] that we don’t stand a chance anyway, like we are a group of people standing here, but tomorrow we’re dead. Already we’re dead. Like, phew, these few people who will lose the status and will live off nothing [under a neoliberal administration] don’t stand a chance” (Interview March 2, 2017).

The prime minister’s use of zombie as epithet rhetorically framed protest against neoliberal capitalist policies as a relic of the past. Janša figured demonstrators as not only somehow out-of-time—not modern, bearing outdated attachments—but also attached to an older political mindset (Communism) implied to be “dead” but still shuffling around in public space. Protesters, in other words, amounted to an idiotic, backwards horde. Paired with “Communist,” Janša associated this irritating protest zombie with misplaced nostalgia for Yugoslavian socialism, yearning for a leftist ideological utopia long pronounced dead. As New Left M.P. Luka Mesec put it to me in an interview, paraphrasing Janša: “Socialism died 25 years ago. Now we are in power and the remnants of socialism [such as the welfare state] are being removed, and the people that appear on the street are dead people who don’t want to die. So, they are zombies” (March 15, 2017). As several interviewees noted, there was an absurd irony to this, given that Janša himself led the Communist youth organization at the end of the Yugoslav regime and been a prominent young member of the Party. Indeed, most of his administration was comprised of former Communist elites, still leveraging state power to serve their own interests.

### Protestivals and the Undead Awakened

The protesters were not fooled; indeed, they almost instantly subverted Janša’s epithet. Activists were already using the term “protestival” to capture the combination of political resistance and exuberant festival at their demonstrations, and they promptly absorbed the symbol of the zombie into them. *Protestival*

captured the idea of a fusion of art, performance, and political critique, inverting the condemnations of powerful elites, and creating space for the collective envisioning of a new Slovenian society—elements we will recognize as resonant of the carnivalesque tradition. This approach continued a centuries-long history of Slovenes using festivals to celebrate and preserve their distinctive ethnic culture, which had survived many centuries of conquering regimes. But protestival also was intentionally mobilized as a means of visualizing alternative community against the homogenizing pressures of liberal capitalism. “The protestival is a calling for a social renaissance and a return to the human while rejecting the manipulations of capital,” explained two movement leaders. “It is connecting people through their cultural expression, via musical performances, physical theatre, puppets, poetry, as well as giving a voice to the protesters themselves, thus creating a unique people’s forum” (Novak). Almost as soon as Janša tweeted his “zombie” insult, the zombie became a central motif of the power of the movement, inverting Janša’s meaning from a dead tradition to a vibrant—and threatening—political force.



**Image 1**

Organizers drew on the talents of local artists to embrace the figure of the zombie in a variety of modes. A prominent young musician and puppeteer, Matija Solce, took the lead on representing a zombie resistance, building large, visually arresting zombie puppets with moving hands. People from the theater community set up meetings to teach participants to cut and fold paper masks that were paraded in demonstrations from late-2012 through spring of 2013, capturing considerable international media attention. Others painted their faces with white

and black paint. Protesters said the masks “stand for the rottenness of present-day politics, which [they] hope will be replaced by more life-supporting social structures” (Novak). The masks had the additional function of obscuring the identities of protesters in front of police and TV cameras.



**Image 2**

One of the key valences of the zombie symbol on the protesters’ side was the critique, through visual spectacle, of a kind of popular deadness in the face of overwhelming political-economic forces. Zombie quickly became an indictment of both the deadly sins of the state, a drain on the young republic’s lifeblood, and the deadening effect on citizens of political unaccountability and economic exploitation. In public protests, and across Slovenian civic space, different readings of deadly politics and half-dead citizens emerged. In a commentary essay, one activist reversed Janša’s meaning, reading the *real* zombies as the political class. “The political elite, in its complete alienation from the people, is incapable of understanding the message of being politically dead,” he wrote. “They live on, but as political zombies, who merely strive to preserve power with more and more desperate and legally questionable attempts” (Tomšič 4).

Asked to reflect on how the zombie symbol worked to critique neoliberalism (a term activists themselves raised), one participant told me:

Well, zombie is actually living dead by definition, isn’t it? I don’t know, but perhaps you could understand it as, you know: people in this system right now are hardly living, you know? They get up, they work for money,

children are in school all day; otherwise people are on computers or on phones. They do not communicate, they do not go out, they do not have fun. They are kind of zombies, aren't they? So if you feel that community actually is full of people who are, like, empty—they have no fun, no ideas, no imagination—they see things as they are and accept them because they feel that they cannot change anything, I think those people are real zombies.  
—B.

B. refers to the ways zombies represent the routinized, isolated subjects of neoliberalism, wherein work and productivity constitute value, rendering the complex wholeness of human beings into the living dead—citizens by designation, not by meaningful engagement. These are exactly the terms in which political Wendy Brown describes the “stealth revolution” of neoliberalism, a force that converts individuals from complex entities to “little human capitals,” reduced to the perpetual labor and investment required to survive in a hypercapitalist environment with fewer and fewer public amenities.

In the streets, the recognition of a dead-but-not-deadness via zombie imagery was unavoidable. The white paper masks rendered formerly politically inert citizens into something of a homogeneous horde, an uprising of individuals sharing a common predicament vis a vis the state. Shambling down the cobblestone streets of central Ljubljana, the zombies seemed to transmit that the people have been fodder for the machine—that the civic dead are clearly unhappy.



**Image 3**

Even in its representation of a kind of civic deadness, though, the Slovene zombie protest horde carried a second layer, a conceptual counter-valence. This was the

idea of an unconscious populace reawakening—of the zombie rising. Here the metaphor is the *awakened* collective, an angry horde focused en masse on something it wants, which is to destroy an oppressive system and be reborn. Asked how the zombie imagery pushed back on Janša's characterization of protesters, one participant put it bluntly: "We are zombies, but very, very much alive, actually" (Interview with B, March 2, 2017). Another said, "to me it meant how many thousands we are. We are zombies; deal with us!" I asked these two speakers (interviewed together) what, in political terms, the zombie does. One said, "Burns everything down. Down to the, you know, Ten Commandments, if you want. Burn it all down to some basic fair rules. End the exploitation somehow, I think. Exploitation of people, resources, country ideas—everything. Try to make the future bright again somehow...[Zombie is] a force of destruction of a system that does not work for people" (March 3, 2017).

Drawing on Antonio Negri, Nyong'o notes that the political occupation enacts a sort of *kairos*, a "different time" or "precarious time"—a rupture from ordinary time (322-3). And when brought into the space of occupation (of a city, square, or other public site), Nyong'o argues, the politicized zombie can perform a kind of *dezombification*, a pushback on both the precarity of being human in time and living under capitalism. Indeed the zombie aesthetic can be a potent expression of the affect produced by the feeling of precarity. "Crushed by the everyday weight of reproducing social life under capital...we *feel* zombified, And yet, to *perform* the zombie is to experiment with the pleasures of terror, shock, and surprise" (323). Slovenia's politicized zombies, who literally rose in response to being named as such by a dismissive prime ministers, did exactly what Nyong'o describes "[moved] beyond the scene of occupation and into the pedestrian crush of the corporate city" (323).

In the uprising of the politicized zombie, we see another compelling inversion, which repeats in the Hamburg performance. The "awakened" zombie is potentially destructive, but for the sake of preparing the ground for a new, fairer social contract; it is a figure of regeneration. The arisen zombie has political power as symbol of a deadened polity reviving—a force which, when fixed on a shared goal, can be an agent for clearing away the old and reviving hope. If "the people, united, can never be defeated" is a standard chant of the political demonstration, the zombie chants "the dead are arisen." Zombie brings a monster showdown, a force especially potent for its destructive capacity and the singularity that a swarm-like resistance visually connotes. In this valence, the zombie is politically very much alive, embodying the *living* in the living dead.

The Upheaval galvanized a broad coalition of interests not before seen in Slovenian public space—among them anarchists, intellectuals, feminists, environmentalists, trade-unionists, retirees, and punks. With zombie at the center, the protestivals became what Austin (184) would call a ludic space, permeated



with humor, irreverence, and performative play. In bringing these groups together and calling for not just the removal of a few corrupt leaders but also the assertion of a political holism against the divisive and privatizing influences of neoliberal rule, the movement encouraged visions of a new political community. As one intellectual collective put it, “The demands made by Slovenian citizens on the streets of their country are not merely for improved economic conditions, but for the basic foundations of a just and democratic state: the rule of law, the preservation of social services, and a sustainable economic policy that will serve the interests of the majority of the population rather than the narrow interests of a few” (KOKS, Tomšič 5). Slovenian protesters used the symbol of irreverent, rising zombies to explicitly blast the modus operandi of neoliberalism: banking policies that jeopardized their nation’s relative economic health; party corruption that stacked industries with political insiders; the privatization of public funds; attacks on public education; restrictions on the free press and other political failures. By creating an array of festive but engaging public forums soliciting input from citizens on the changes they wanted to see, they created a more democratic alternative that forced some immediate changes in Slovenia.

By January, 2013, after weeks of continuous mobilization, the Slovenian news daily announced the current government “clinically dead.” Janša was ousted in a no-confidence vote in the parliament on February 27, and eventually jailed on multiple corruption counts (Maza). (In a bizarre quirk of Slovenian political life, he later was reelected to Parliament, where he represents his party during the day and returns to jail in the evenings.) In mid-March, a center-left coalition agreement was signed, and was endorsed by the parliament a week later. A new prime-minister, Alenka Bratusek, was designated and, in line with protesters’ demands, pledged that she would ask for a confidence vote a year after the government was sworn in, to gauge people’s satisfaction (Novak). The following fall, the New Left coalition secured about 10% of the popular election, earning them seats in Parliament.

Nor did the use of zombie as political metaphor disappear with these changes. In March, 2013, one stream of the zombie protesters convened under the name of the Zombie Church of the Blissful Ringing, and registered with the Slovene Ministry of Culture for recognition as an official religion of Slovenia. The “Zombie Church” declared Parliament the “sanctuary of corruption,” and began meeting for “Mass” in front of the parliament building every Wednesday to sing their quest to root out graft, accompanied by the clanging of cowbells and pots and pans. This “church” has become a semi-permanent activist collective whose work continues into the present.<sup>5</sup> Slovenian zombies not only created a moment of

---

<sup>5</sup> The more particular mission of the Slovenian Zombie Church is the subject of my ongoing research.

significant political reform in 2012-13, but their presence continues as a reminder of their enduring capacity for political mobilization.

## Zombies Descend on Hamburg

The Hamburg summit in early July, 2017, marked the twelfth meeting of the Group of 20 (G20), the international forum of heads of state to discuss international financial policy in coordination with international banking institutions and corporations, neoliberalism's key players. This was the first G20 meeting attended by newly elected U.S. president, Donald Trump. In an era of widening inequality and rising populism, the summit would have been a prime target for criticism even without the added uncertainty caused by Trump's withdrawal of the U.S. from the Paris Climate Accords just months earlier. Protesters descended on Hamburg, with more than 30 demonstrations planned before, during, and after the summit. Germany deployed over 20,000 police officers, and hundreds were arrested or detained (Fox).

The 1000Gestalten zombie performance, which was months in the planning, made deft use of the legions of media gathered in Hamburg and hungry for compelling imagery. Months in the planning and staged over weeks, accompanied by press releases and a website explaining its symbolism, the performance was covered by video and print media, drawing headlines around the world. The description below is based on a mix of my own interpretation of the live footage of it and the official description provided by the group's website.<sup>6</sup>

Weeks before the G20 gathering, on June 17<sup>th</sup> a delegation of the undead "marched through Hamburg's inner city, passed the famous Moenckebergstraße and Hamburg's town hall and became the talk of the town" (1000 Gestalten "Presse"). Dressed in business attire caked with grey clay (applied with a spray gun), these figures bore an uncanny resemblance to the ambulant undead of the original Night of the Living Dead, slow-walking the streets with vacant stares. The monochrome effect of the clay crust gave the scenes created by these clearly recognizable zombies the look of black-and-white film characters shuffling aimlessly in a full-color world. As the summit drew near, zombies reappeared around the city, a preview of the final action. When the G20 finally assembled on July 5<sup>th</sup>, the scattered groups grew over the course of several hours, ultimately convening into a horde of 1,000 for the crescendo performance.

---

<sup>6</sup> For a 7-minute official video summary and photo gallery, see the <https://1000gestalten.de/en/images-videos/>. Another source is <https://vimeo.com/222486717>.

The finale begins at midday. First meandering in isolation, the clay-caked figures cast an eerie reflection against shop windows, their shambling pace in stark contrast to the bustling business districts they pass. They travel trance-like and in extreme slow motion, individuals gradually clumping into pairs and small groups. Approaching the city center, Burchardplatz, from all directions, twenty-five groups in total, each group gathers more as it goes. Along the way, some figures collapse, languish on the ground, or crawl forward on hands and knees, but after almost ninety minutes they assemble in the central city square. They seem enervated, stiff, bereft of life force—“a uniformed, soulless army” (1000Gestalten “The Performance”). As they move, we hear an odd, consistent clacking, something like tap shoes on a hard surface, but more mechanical. This clatter is generated by “invisible boxes” participants hold in their hands and, as the numbers grow, it periodically “swells like a swarm of bees” (1000Gestalten “The Performance”).



**Image 4**

But this is not a conventional zombie walk that diffuses back into the city once its destination is reached. Rather, the pallid horde descends on the central square, but hovers there, building tension as people stop to watch. Eventually one figure in a business suit seems to struggle painfully, grasping his face as if feeling skin for the first time, then stumbling backward and, with a shout, opening his arms wide, wiping each eye, and slowly gazing around. He struggles out of his suit coat, clay dust rising off him, and soon has stripped off his encrusted vest and shirt to reveal a bright blue tank top underneath. He raises his face toward the sun, as if newly birthed, and others angle toward him, as if beginning to focus. The figure in blue ambles toward a female figure collapsed on the ground, reaches down, and helps her to her feet. She seems barely able to stand, but he guides her hands toward her own face and she slowly comes to life, gasping with awareness. The process

repeats as people peel away their outer clothing, under which they are all wearing vivid colors. A dusty cloud rises over the group as the clay-encrusted outer layers are shed. (“That’s the actual symbol of this performance,” explains the website. “Because suddenly that cloud keeps everything that has made those people’s life this gray.”) Breaking their vacancy, the figures seem newly human, embracing or gripping one another with expressions of relief, as if grateful to be rescued by strangers.



**Image 5**

There is a momentum to this awakening and emergence in full color. Individuals laugh, as if liberated. (Website copy: “They turned colourful and they scream, dance, and laugh. Grab hands and hug each other. The message came across and the audience cheered in. Another existence is possible and one is enough to start this change.”) Throughout, the actors are disciplined, neither breaking composure in their zombie state, nor dropping character once “awakened.” The entire performance is wordless. The celebrants seem to be in some libidinal state of humanness—physically connecting with one another, dancing in circles with arms interlinked, carrying one another, and so forth. The aerial videos reveal a plaza full of people in colorful clothing, applauding, jumping up and down, hollering, and raising their arms in victory, as observers watch from the periphery. Eventually, the awakened humans stroll out of the plaza in lively fashion, their clay-caked castaway clothes in piles on the ground.

It is hard to know objectively how live observers reacted, though the footage, shot from many cameras at once, shows spectators stepping out of performers’ paths, quietly watching, or even interacting from the sidelines. According to the organizers’ descriptions, reactions varied:

For a long time the audience is not quite sure how to behave in the face of this procession. Some sit still on their chairs in the open-air areas of the restaurants around, but nevertheless continuously peep above the edge of their plates. Others stand right by the figures that simulate a break down and remain on the ground, to take pictures as if they were shot animals. Many however leave mobiles and cameras off, maybe because they are too much involved with the decoding of the message behind the performance and the question, what this means for themselves and their life's (sic). This is especially noticeable since the volume at Burchardplatz lowers, the longer the performance continues. (1000Gestalten "The Performance")

What seems obvious from video capture and the media's subsequent coverage is that the size, the obvious coordination, the relative quietness, and the visual distinctiveness of the performance made it difficult to ignore.

### Coordinating the Zombie Horde

1000Gestalten, also translated as 1000Figures, is a Hamburg-based collective. Merriam-Webster defines *Gestalten* as "something that is made of many parts and yet is somehow more than or different from the combination of its parts" (merriam-webster.com). While the collective is not a political organization, per se, it articulates itself as concerned with the modern conditions of civic life. "Alarmed by the recent events of our contemporary history," organizers seized on the idea of the G20 performance in February 2017, and collaborated with other organizations to coordinate the volunteer actors, photographers, videographers, and other support players, some who bussed in from outside Hamburg (1000Gestalten "Presse"). Sven Kämmerer, a leader of the group, said volunteers hailed from all age groups, professions, and other social identities (Vomiero). Though this was 1000Gestalten's first performance, organizers anticipated more to come.

According to organizers, zombies were chosen as an image to represent political disengagement, the "crustedness" of political apathy in the face of apparent futility. "The 1000Gestalten shall represent a society that has lost their feeling for the fact that a different way of life is possible," says the event description copy. "It's not the financial news that determine (sic) our happiness, but healthy relationships" (1000 Gestalten "The Performance"). Describing the spectacle, designbloom magazine suggested that "the dusty clay shells evoke a society that has lost its solidarity, ultimately contaminating itself with the taste of selfishness and nonacceptance. Yet at some point during the act the group dramatically sheds its second skin—symbolizing a people that has freed itself

from its rigid ideological structures” (Zeitoun). Here we see the reemergence of Bishop’s “zombie protagonist”—the zombie that has regained elements of its humanity, only here the effort is clearly framed by organizers as heroic. In the action, the zombie was used as catalyst for regeneration through meaningful human contact. After the action, organizers said the performance was a call to human reconnection, initiative, and small-d democracy. As Kämmerer told one news outlet, the performance conveys that, “No change can start from some political elite, it starts with you and me” (Abc.net.au).

The performance was inspired by and part of “new democratic movement” across the world, exemplified by phenomena like the Women’s Marches in early 2017 and the Pulse of Europe Initiative (which is something like the U.S.’s Indivisible movement) (<https://pulseofeurope.eu>; Volmiero). By design, the predominant focus of the action was on ordinary people outside the summit, not the leadership within. Organizer Catalina Lopez noted that the performance used accessible images to inspire people out of disengagement. The goal, she said, “is to move the people in their hearts, to give them the motivation to get politically engaged again. We want to create an image, because we believe in the power of images... We want to motivate people to take part. To free themselves from their crusted shells, to take part in the political process” (Vomiero). As another spokesperson put it, “We cannot wait until change happens from the world’s most powerful, we have to show political and social responsibility—all of us—now!” (Said-Moorhouse).

But 1000Gestalten organizers also articulated a more directly critical message tailored to the site of the G20 summit. “Our campaign is a further symbol for the fact that many people do not want to put up with the destructive impact of capitalism any longer,” said one press release. “What will save us in the end is not our account balance but someone who will offer their helping hand” (Said-Moorhouse). In other words, the seeds of societal transformation lie in human solidarity and care, not in the power of leaders and organizations, like the IMF, claiming to speak on behalf of the people. As one report stated, “this represents a society that has overcome political turmoil and came together (sic) in demand of more tolerance, open-mindedness and constructive discourse” (Zeitoun).

## Conclusion

Slovenia’s “Zombie Church” movement and The 1000Gestalten’s G20 performance differed in important respects. The first was a spontaneous political uprising sparked by long-simmering grievances about neoliberal pressures on a small political economy. The second was an elaborately planned public art performance that used public space under permission from political authorities to

inspire reflection. The 1000Gestalten recruited volunteers, gave them a script, and built a public interpretive apparatus to translate its objectives, while All-Slovenian Upheaval innovated as it went, using every opportunity that arose to transmit political frustration and desire for concrete structural reforms to the country's elected leaders. Slovenia's protests became coordinated around specific political objectives while the Hamburg performance sought to sponsor reflection on the enervation of political community under neoliberal conditions.

Their differences notwithstanding, though, both cases demonstrate—not only in theory but in public practice—the fertile use of zombie as a kind of political interlocutor in the era of neoliberalism. Volunteers in Hamburg and activists in Slovenia leveraged the public zombie as a metaphor of deadness, against which they juxtaposed a more regenerative vision of human interconnectedness. Slovenia's Zombie Church protesters cleverly reappropriated a symbol thrown at protesters by a powerful figure, inverted its meaning, and exploited its symbolic power. In both cases, activists, intellectuals, and ordinary citizens alike found pleasure and power in zombie symbolism, as they refuted civic deadness and sought to convert it into life-affirming, dezombified resistance.

These examples exemplify the multivalence of the zombie metaphor, the way it can signal multiple things simultaneously, or sequentially: dead, but with some germ of life; depleted, but potentially arising with some kind of agency. Zombie is an accessible analog for the despair and impotence many feel under late-modern capitalism. At the same time, it provides a way of imagining awakening out of the zombie state, or if not that, rising up *as zombies* and instigating an insurrection. Zombies evoke the monstrosity of a life without meaning or consciousness or human connection, but they also provide subversive hero image for concerted global resistance.

It is too soon to tell whether the use of the zombie as a political metaphor in real time will have durable walking legs, as it were, or whether it will prove to have been a brief moment, politically speaking. It has already proven more durable than even its most dedicated scholars had expected (Lauro 2017, xii-xiii). Either way, scholars should continue to study how the zombie is mobilized not just in popular cultural productions—films, comics, novels—but in real-time displays of political critique and agency. For the producers of zombie genre, it is significant that zombies have walked off the stages and pages of their creative worlds and into the *agon*, the public space of political contestation. I know of no other monster that has proven mobilizable in public space in the same way. This sort of coming-to-life of the zombie attests to the now decades-long salience of this particular monster. It is important that we track its permutations into the future.

## Works Cited

- 1000Gestalten. "Presse release Berlin/Hamburg 22.06.2017." *1000Gestalten* 2017. Web. 1000gestalten.de/fileadmin/presse/1000GESTALTEN\_PR\_2071\_22\_06.pdf. Accessed 11 Sept. 2018.
- 1000Gestalten. "The performance of July 5: That's how our day went." *1000Gestalten* 2017. Web. 1000gestalten.de/en/the-performance/. Accessed 11 Sept. 2018.
- Abc.net.au. "G20: Zombies Descend on Hamburg to Protest Against Two-Day Meeting of 'Political Elite,'" 5 July 2017, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-07-06/anti-g20-protests-flare-up-across-hamburg/8683684>. Accessed 11 Sept. 2018.
- Austin, Emma. "Zombie Culture: Dissent, Celebration and the Carnavalesque in Social Spaces." *The Zombie Renaissance in Popular Culture*, edited by Laura Hubner, Marcus Leaning, and Paul Manning. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, pp. 26-38.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Helene Iswolsky. Indiana University Press, 1984.
- Bishop, Kyle William. "I Always Wanted to See How the Other Half Lives': The Contemporary Zombie as Proselyte." *The Zombie Renaissance in Popular Culture*, edited by Laura Hubner, Marcus Leaning, and Paul Manning, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, pp. 26-38.
- Bishop, Kyle William. *How Zombies Conquered Popular Culture: The Multifarious Walking Dead in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. McFarland, 2015.
- Boluk, Stephanie and Wylie Lenz. "Infection, Media, and Capitalism: From Early Modern Plagues to Postmodern Zombies." *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2010, pp. 126-147.
- Brown, Wendy. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. The MIT Press, 2015.
- Byron, Glennis (Ed.). *Globalgothic*. Manchester University Press, 2013.



- Camaroff, Jean and John Camaroff. "Alien-Nation: Zombies, Immigrants, and Millennial Capitalism." *Zombie Theory: A Reader*, edited by Sarah Juliet Lauro. University of Minnesota Press, 2017, pp. 137-156.
- Canavan, Gerry. "We Are the Walking Dead": Race, Time, and Survival in Zombie Narrative. *Zombie Theory: A Reader*, edited by Sarah Juliet Lauro, University of Minnesota Press, 2017, pp. 414-432.
- Christie, Deborah and Sarah Juliet Lauro, editors. *Better off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Posthuman*. Fordham University Press, 2011.
- Cohen, Jerome, editor. "Monster Culture: Seven Theses." *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, U of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- Collins, Margo and Elson Bond. "Off the Page and into Your Brains!": New Millennial Zombies and the Scourge of Hopeful Apocalypse." *Better Off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human*, edited by Deborah Christie and Sarah Juliet Lauro, 2011, pp. 187-204.
- Cook, Denise N. "The Cultural Life of the Living Dead." *Contexts*, vol. 12, no. 24, 2013, pp. 54-56.
- Dendle, Peter. "And the Dead Shall Inherit the Earth". *Better off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Posthuman*, edited by Deborah Christie and Sarah Juliet Lauro. New York: Fordham University Press, 2011, pp. 159-162.
- Dendle, Peter. "Zombie Movies and the Millennial Generation." *Better off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Posthuman*, edited by Deborah Christie and Sarah Juliet Lauro. Fordham University Press, 2011, pp. 175-186.
- Drezner, Dan. *Theories of International Politics and Zombies*. University Press, 2001.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France 1978-1979*, Picador, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
- Fox, Kara. "Rallies, Riots, and Raves: Hamburg's Three Days of G20 Protests." *CNN*. August 18, 2017. [www.cnn.com/2017/07/08/europe/g20-protests/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2017/07/08/europe/g20-protests/index.html). Accessed 11 Sept. 2018.
- Friedrich, Carl. "The Political Thought of Neo-Liberalism." *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 49, no. 2, June 1955, pp. 509-25.

- Giroux, Henry. *Zombie Politics and Culture in the Age of Casino Capitalism*. Peter Lang, 2011.
- Honig, Bonnie. *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair*. Fordham University Press, 2017.
- Kavcic, Bojan. “‘Zombie Church’ helps Slovenia crucify corrupt leaders.” *Yahoo News*, December 12, 2014. [yhoo.it/1Hbd07N](http://yhoo.it/1Hbd07N). Accessed 11 Sept. 2018.
- Klein, Naomi. *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. Random House, 2007.
- KOKS Coordinating Committee for Cultural Slovenia. “Slovenians Demand Radical Change.” *Critical Legal Thinking: Law & The Political*, January 16, 2013.
- Korsika, Anej and Luka Mesec. 2014. “Slovenia: From spontaneous protests to renewal of the Socialist Left.” *Kurswechsel*, vol. 1, 2014, pp. 80-88.
- Lauro, Sarah Juliet, editors. *Zombie Theory: A Reader*. University of Minnesota Press, 2017.
- Lauro, Sarah Juliet. “Playing Dead: Zombies Invade Performance Art...and Your Neighborhood.” *Better Off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human*. 2011, pp. 205-30.
- Lauro, Sarah Juliet and Karen Embry. “A Zombie Manifesto: The Nonhuman Condition in the Era of Advanced Capitalism.” *boundary 2*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2008, pp. 85-108.
- Maza, Christina. “Rough guide to Slovenian protests, 2012/2013.” *Cafebabel*, February 4, 2013. [bit.ly/1MY21no](http://bit.ly/1MY21no). Accessed 11 Sept. 2018.
- Merriam-Webster. “Gestalten.” [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gestalt](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gestalt).
- Monbiot, George. “Neoliberalism—the ideology at the root of all our problems.” *The Guardian*, April 15, 2016.
- Moreman, Christopher M. and Cory James Rushton, Eds. *Race, Oppression and the Zombie: Essays on Cross-Cultural Appropriations of the Caribbean Tradition*. McFarland & Company, 2011.

- Novak, Marjeta. "Slovenia rises in artful 'protestivals.'" *Waging Nonviolence*, March 21, 2013. [bit.ly/1LVcwsR](http://bit.ly/1LVcwsR). Accessed 11 Sept. 2018.
- Nyong'o, Tavia. "The Scene of Occupation." *Zombie Theory: A Reader*, edited by Sarah Juliet Lauro, University of Minnesota Press, 2017, 316-31.
- Orpana, Simon. "Spooks of Biopower: The Uncanny Carnavalesque of Zombie Walks." *Zombie Theory: A Reader*, edited by Sarah Juliet Lauro, University of Minnesota Press, 2017, 294-315.
- Platts, Todd. "Locating Zombies in the Sociology of Popular Culture." *Sociology Compass*, no. 7, 2013, pp. 547-60.
- Poole, W. Scott. *Monsters in America: Our Historical Obsession with the Hideous and the Haunting*. Baylor University Press, 2011.
- Slovenia Times. "New Protests to Be Held Across Slovenia on Monday." December 3, 2012.
- Springer, Simon. *The Discourse of Neoliberalism: An Anatomy of a Powerful Idea*. Roman & Littlefield, 2016.
- Tomšič, Samo. "The People Returns: A footnote to protests in Slovenia." *Critical Legal Thinking: Law & The Political*, January 16, 2013.
- Wadsworth, Nancy. 2016. "Are We The Walking Dead? Zombie Apocalypse as Liberatory Art." *New Political Science* vol. 38, no. 4, pp. 561-81. Special Issue on Herbert Marcuse.
- William S. Larkin and Hamish Thompson, eds., *Zombies, Vampires, and Philosophy: New Life for the Undead*. Open Court Publishing Company, 2010.
- Zeitoun, Leah. "1000 ghostly figures march the streets of Hamburg in protest for the G20 summit." *Designboom*. July 9, 2017. [//www.designboom.com/art/1000-gestalten-protest-g20-summit-hamburg-07-08-2017/](http://www.designboom.com/art/1000-gestalten-protest-g20-summit-hamburg-07-08-2017/). Accessed 11 Sept. 2018.

# “A very well-tailored person suit”<sup>1</sup> Hannibal Lecter as Genderqueer American Gothic Cannibal

ALENA KIEL

The character Hannibal Lecter has continued to captivate popular imagination since his introduction in Thomas Harris’ 1981 novel *Red Dragon*. In addition to the three subsequent novels, Dr. Lecter has featured as the central character in five film adaptations and a television series. The 1991 film *Silence of the Lambs* was the first in its genre (horror) to win an Academy Award for Best Picture, and is only the third in the history of the Awards to win across the five major categories (Picture, Screenplay, Director, Leading Actor and Actress) (Fernandez “Silence of the Lambs”). Anthony Hopkins’ iconic portrayal of the character is pervasive: certain lines from the film, with his signature, singularly spine-chilling delivery, remain embedded in the cultural imagination so much so that even people who have not seen the film might understand references made to it. His “Good evening, Clarice,” and of course the infamous “A census taker one tried to test me; I ate his liver with some fava beans and a nice chianti,” (Demme) in combination with Hopkins’ ad-libbed mouth noise, are oft-repeated and parodied. The fear we feel when we look upon that iconic leather face-mask is rivaled only by the intrigue, excitement, fascination, and even attraction that comes with only the best known of cultural signs. But why do we continue to be fascinated with this cannibalistic serial killer? How has he managed to remain so culturally relevant?

The following essay has two aims: first, using the texts mentioned above, to establish a reading of Hannibal Lecter as a genderqueer subject; and second, to situate these texts in the American Gothic tradition, which I view as a particularly useful literary framework from which to create queer theoretical readings. It is my contention that Kristeva’s theory of the abject, in addition to Braidotti’s theorisation of the nomadic subject, as applied to a human being, creates the

---

<sup>1</sup> (Fuller 2013)  
The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 6, No. 2 & 3  
Copyright © 2018

ideological space necessary for gender non-conforming (here, specifically genderqueer) identities. Kristeva's theory, as a literary one, is more applicable to a text in the horror genre, whereas Braidotti's sociological theory more or less enables the application of Kristeva's literary theory of the abject to a human, nomadic subject. That is to say, one situates the other, and they play off one another well in order to enable the genderqueer space I argue Hannibal Lecter inhabits. Lecter displays a number of normatively gendered characteristics which fall into both masculine and feminine categories, thus preventing (at least as I contend) anyone seeking to label his gender using definitive, static terms.

The second portion of this essay will be devoted to an investigation of Dr. Hannibal Lecter's criminality, and the ways in which his specific crimes relate to his abjection. The fact that he often chooses his victims from amongst his psychiatric patients, taken in combination with his murder and cannibalism, and the displaying of their bodies in theatrical/artistic tableaux, speaks to Lecter's inability to appropriately create distance between Self and Other. Lecter's undecidable gender identity and performance, as well as his queer sexuality, all play important roles in his ability to lure, manipulate, charm, deceive, murder and cannibalize his victims, all without drawing speculation from the authorities. The concept of liminality, or the state of being in-between, is one which unites the different forms of queerness I have attributed to Hannibal, and is a central tenant of literary Gothicism. Alongside Kristeva's theory of the abject, which I view as a logical extension of liminality, I will use Halberstam's book *Skin Shows*, a chapter of which is about the uniquely American Gothic context of the film *Silence of the Lambs*, and Messent's application of Gothic literary tropes to the Lecter novels. I will also use pieces of Kilgour's 1998 article and 1990 book, on cannibalism and anthropology, which Messent used extensively and which offers a unique view of cannibalism as metaphor. Finally, I draw informally from documentaries on such notable murderer/cannibals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as Jeffrey Dahmer, Armin Meiwes, Albert Fish, and Issei Sagawa, as well as a few more general documentaries about cannibalism, in order to try and decipher Hannibal's motives for eating his victims apart from my own theoretical understandings of his actions.

Beginning with an expansion of my understanding of the terms gender identity and gender performance so as to situate my point of view with respect to other queer theorists, I will then outline some particularly noteworthy aspects of Lecter's gender identity and performance, both in normatively feminine and normatively masculine iterations. Following this, I will give some further details

on both Kristeva's and Braidotti's theories to provide full background for my argument. I will then provide a synthesis section where I bring the theories of the abject and nomadic subjectivity to bear on specifically Hannibal Lecter's gender identity and performance. The final sections will explore the unique applicability of his performances and multiform identity to both the American Gothic as a genre, and to Lecter's cannibalism. I explore of the significance of cannibalism to Lecter's criminality, balancing Harris', to my mind, unacceptable "explanation" in *Hannibal Rising*, with Kilgour's work on the anthropological significance of metaphorical versus literal cannibalism. This section will also refer to several documentaries about noted, nonfictional cannibalistic serial killers, as listed above. Lecter is in all ways above, beyond, and outside of societal norms, which I see as inextricably linked to the Gothic, abjection, and the gender-related queerness which I will discuss below. By uniting these subject matters in this essay, I hope to further ground my arguments in the texts themselves and place them in a legible literary (as opposed to simply queer theoretical or sociological) context.

### Toward a (Personal) Definition of Gender Performance and Gender Identity

The twinned concepts of gender identity and gender performance are particularly important to this study insofar as they are both bodily and mental/psychological frames of reference. As Braidotti writes, gender cannot be separated from the body, and by doing so one might risk making one's argument ungrounded and ahistorical (Braidotti *Nomadic Subjects*). I see this in direct accordance with Butler's understanding of gender, specifically as she writes in the final chapter of her 1993 *Bodies that Matter*, "Critically Queer". It becomes important to, by the same token, avoid placing *too much* emphasis on the body as the site of gender, because to do so would discount or render illegible, transgender identities, both binary and not. Because this paper is one which deals so heavily with queerness, both in terms of gender and in terms of sexuality, I am exceedingly wary of statements like Braidotti's which seem, on face value, to reify essentialist dialogue which appear to cite biology as destiny and which locate masculinity and femininity as monolithic, static forms of gender between which there may be no interplay. In reality, though, the context of Braidotti's arguments assuage my fears

of an essentialist bogeyman: she argues passionately and eloquently for a new, nomadic subjectivity which is at once intensely embodied and definitively fluid, and while she is very specific about the kind of queerness her theories enable, she is clear that her ideas and queer theory are not mutually exclusive.

Speaking from a perspective formulated by studying a number of gender theories, I would define gender identity as something which is necessarily a composite of mental/emotional/psychological processes as assumed by an embodied subject. In general, this identity would be either aligned with the so-called “biological” sex assigned at birth (cisgender), or not (transgender). I very strongly favour the concept of the term transgender as an umbrella, encompassing a wide variety of gender identifications that are generally considered non-normative<sup>2</sup>. I regard gender identity as something which is closely related to the body, but also to the way we *think* our bodies. As such, gender identity is a fluid subject which hinges upon (or has the capacity to do so) a variety of temporal, spatial, contextual, cultural, etc. factors. Gender identity far exceeds the binary constraints that are generally imposed upon it; instead, there are those which select or cherry-pick behaviours and ideas assigned to normative (cis)genders and combine them to create something new. My reading of Hannibal Lecter as a gender non-conforming subject places him in this transitory space.

I use gender performance here directly in reference to Butler’s understanding of it as a series of repeated acts which shore up a normative, and as such, binary, reading of gender (Butler “Performative Acts”). In order to subvert gender which conforms to the male-masculine/female-feminine binary, one must first acknowledge that those norms exist, and that any play between them does not eliminate, but in fact reifies, their existence (Butler *Undoing Gender*). In this instance, I disagree with Bersani’s reading of Butler, which seems to insinuate that Butler’s theory discounts or erases the presence or validity of transgender identities. I would classify this as a paranoid reading because Bersani fears, above all else, the dissolution of LGBTQQIAP identities into what he views as a queer muddle of palatable, normalized homogeneity. My own views on the use of queer align more closely with Butler’s, though I do not discount Bersani’s concern: “queer” can and should be its own category of gender, desire, relationality,

---

<sup>2</sup> Examples of transgender identities would be genderqueer, non-binary, genderfluid, agender, pangender, etc. etc.

subjectivity, etc.: queer is best understood as neither synonymous with “gay” nor as an umbrella term. Rather it is, as poet Brandon Wint writes, “...escaping definition. Queer like some sort of fluidity and limitlessness at once. Queer like a freedom too strange to be conquered. Queer like the fearlessness to imagine what love can look like and pursue it” (Wint, qtd. in Slenker).

Boundaries remain important and difference remains intact in my utility of the term “queer”. In order to grow, there must be fertile soil; the veritable rainbow of transgender identities need the mucky binary identities *and* the fertilizer of constructed, constraining societal norms in order to flower (become visible). To break the mould, there must first be a mould to break. Further, I see gender performance, like gender identity, as something which is embodied, but is not entirely defined by the body. Gender performance as a broad category becomes the way gender identity is made visible or legible to others, and can be played out through body language and postures, modes of dress, vocal intonations/speech patterns, personal style and taste (in food, art, decorations, etc.), interpersonal interactions, interests and hobbies, etc. etc.

Further, there is no such thing as an entirely masculine or entirely feminine gender identity. Inasmuch as gender performance is a conscious play we enact (or a form of drag, to invoke Butler), a subject can choose to “stack” their performance in a certain way, to appear in a hyper-masculine or hyper-feminine (or even hyper-queer) way. Of course, we perform these genders within our own geographical, cultural, religious, ethnic, socio-economic, etc. contexts, so there is no monolithic “correct” femininity or masculinity. In this, I find Connell and Messerschmidt’s theorisation of hegemonic masculinity as historically dynamic, extremely important: while certain traits are generally coded masculine, such as physical strength or toughness, and as such shore up a hegemonic form of masculinity, this form is not immutable or immune to historical social changes. I believe gender identity and gender performance are ultimately even less rigid, and that they ultimately allow for a great deal of heterogeneity in terms of self-conception – meaning, for example, that an AFAB<sup>3</sup> person who self-identifies as cisgender might perform certain masculine traits and still be cisgender. What’s more, a transgender person might come out as such and feel no need to transition using hormone therapy or surgery, and might not even alter their appearance in

---

<sup>3</sup> “Assigned Female at Birth”



any way – that does not make their gender identity less valid or less trans. The same would apply to a genderqueer person: they still inhabit their bodies in a society which privileges legible, cisgender identities (and, for that matter, bigender trans identities<sup>4</sup>), but they choose or accept that their gender identity is some combination of multiple performances. I see no reason to police gender identity or to limit it to outward performance or legibility, because what matters is self-conception. I think of Hannibal Lecter no differently simply because he is fictional: conversations about his gender identity should not be reduced to observations about his gender performance but should instead seek to combine elements of his performance and his own self-conceptions regarding his gender identity.

### Lecter as Hybrid Masculinity? Or Something More?

Harris does not give us Hannibal Lecter's gender identity, nor does Lecter ever engage in any self-reflection related to gender: the reader is given to understand precious little about him from his own point of view, so anything written about him is, by necessity, extrapolation. It is my contention, however, based upon my application of Braidotti's theorisation of the nomadic subject and Kristeva's understanding of abjection to the character, that Hannibal Lecter can be read as someone who plays with the idea of the gender binary with knowing *jouissance*. What is most fascinating about Lecter's gender performance is that he remains in-between and one never quite feels comfortable positively assigning him to a cisgender identity. That is to say, Lecter does not conform to the hegemonic masculine standards of the time in which he was created<sup>5</sup>, though he does exhibit some qualities which might place him in a generally masculine standing. Rather, Lecter fits more closely with Demetriou's hybrid masculinity, which further historicizes Connell and Messerschmidt's hegemonic masculinity by viewing it as

---

<sup>4</sup> Bigender is used here in reference to 'normatively'-gendered or passing trans people, who go from one gender to another and generally (though obviously not in all cases) do so with the aid of hormone replacement therapy or cosmetic surgery. There is nothing wrong with bigender trans identities, the same way there is nothing wrong with cisgender identities – as both represent a societal norm per se, it is important to name them and study them critically. That is my intent in using the term, borrowed from Lane, here. (more on Lane shortly)

<sup>5</sup> *Red Dragon* was first published in 1981.

a subject position which can and does change with a variety of societal and local factors, and often absorbs qualities of marginalised masculinities. Interestingly, certain gendered traits about Lecter change concurrently with what is considered as hegemonic masculinity.

When Harris first wrote about Hannibal Lecter, he was the mysterious, godly form of (nearly) hegemonic masculinity popularized in crime dramas. Lecter was written as a kind of noir antagonist, behind bars but nonetheless threatening for it, dark and sleek rather than tall or showy. He is smart and physically strong, and to an extent, the reader is meant to be attracted to him; morbid curiosity and sexual desire in equal measure. To place him in a more directly historical standpoint, we are meant to feel about Lecter as Americans in the decades leading up to *Red Dragon* felt about, for example, Albert Fish<sup>6</sup>, Jeffrey Dahmer, Charles Manson, or Ted Bundy. He is the powerful, hegemonic male that defies limitations and labels outside 'human' (and even that, in Hannibal's case, is up for debate in the narrative).

As the years progressed, Hannibal changed slightly. *Silence of the Lambs*, the film adaptation of the second novel in the series, saw the beginning of Anthony Hopkins' iconic portrayal of the character. With this, many readers *saw* Hannibal for the first time,<sup>7</sup> and this looking served to humanize him slightly. I do not deny that we are meant to be very afraid of Hopkins' Lecter, but I do believe that adding the dimension of sight to the character removed a certain piece of his mystique. Further, the film features a great many close-ups on Hopkins/Lecter's eyes, as if to remind us not only that he is human and experiences emotions just like any member of the audience (presumably anyway), but that he is the one in power because he is the one who holds the gaze. Even though we are the ones watching the film, and by Mulvey's logic the ones in possession of the objectifying gaze, we still feel uncomfortable under Lecter's icy blue, unblinking stare. Finally, Hopkins' Lecter was viewed by contemporary American film-goers as quite effete given his European descent, taken in combination with his

---

<sup>6</sup> Though he was active around the time of the Depression rather than mid-20<sup>th</sup> century like the other serial killers listed, Fish is among the few that were immortalised for the cannibalization of his victims, a trait which ties him inexorably to Lecter.

<sup>7</sup> That is if we, like a great deal of fans of the series insist, forget all about the 1986 Michael Mann film *Manhunter*, a film adaptation of the novel *Red Dragon*. The film has regained some popularity among hard-core fans in recent years but continues to receive very mixed reviews.

appreciation of a number of feminine-coded objects and interests (enumerated in a more detailed fashion below). Because of these factors, Lecter's masculinity is a slightly modified hegemonic masculinity, one wherein physical prowess matters less than intellectual cunning and mastery.

Fast-forward about twenty-five years to Bryan Fuller's revolutionary television series *Hannibal* (2013-2015), which is set just before the events of *Red Dragon* (1981) and features Danish actor/sex symbol Mads Mikkelsen in the titular role. If we continue through with my argument that Hannibal Lecter is representative of evolving hegemonic masculinity, then this new masculinity is the most contentious yet. Dr. Lecter is, as I said, a suave aesthete, with carefully parted and gelled hair, and an incredible variety of three-piece windowpane plaid suits. Rather than being conventionally attractive, Mikkelsen's Lecter is interesting looking, with a facial structure that looks as though it was carved out of granite or marble, and a knack for brief, almost imperceptible micro-facial expressions. The character, as iterated by Fuller, contains elements of a number of gay stereotypes: he cooks well and often, he is well-dressed and groomed, he hosts lavish dinner parties, he has an immense appreciation for opera and classical music, etc. Plus, this new Lecter is more or less canonically bisexual, as the television series features him in various kinds of sexual and romantic relationships with both men and women. But *Hannibal* still contains the deadly masculine strength and murderous intent that he was written with in the source material – the difference is that now viewers get to actually *see* the crimes for which he was incarcerated in *Red Dragon* and *Silence of the Lambs*.

I find Demetriou's concept of hybrid masculinities useful in this context insofar as I see Lecter combining traits of hegemonic masculinity with traits of marginalized gay masculinities, but I nonetheless believe that Lecter has reflected a distinct change in the type of masculinity favored in specifically American society. In this age of neoliberal individualism, we have also seen the rise and flourishing of LGBT narratives to the extent that, at least in the primary market to which the television series *Hannibal* was designed to appeal, they are almost a *preferred* type of narrative over the heteronormative template to which Lecter used to be confined. This is related to the growth of neoliberalism in that one of its key tenants is a rise in the belief in the importance of individual freedoms and choices, which is crucial to contemporary iterations of American LGBT and feminist movements. The new hegemonic masculinity is one which has room for sexualities apart from heterosexuality and room for more fluidity of gender than

might have been the case even five or ten years ago. The sensitive, well-dressed man “in touch with his feminine side” is exemplary of the masculinity which has, in recent years, dethroned the muscular, combative, chivalrous masculinity of years past in the arena of hegemony.

But even this form of hybridized masculinity seems inadequate to describe Lecter, as his feminine traits serve to add gendered dimension to the character and balance his hybridized masculine ones. He has a weakness for fine material items like wine, food, and clothing, and takes joy from living in pampered luxury. He dresses himself and others (Clarice in *Hannibal*, 1999) with care and an eye for lavish materials. His handwriting is small, neat, and elegant, and he often writes letters (to Clarice, to Will, even to Dolarhyde)<sup>8</sup>. His penchant for hosting extravagant dinner parties blends maternal nurturing sentiment with a markedly masculine drive for power gleaned from feeding his murder victims to a high society crowd without their knowledge or consent<sup>9</sup>. He is unfailingly polite, as “discourtesy is unspeakably ugly” to him (Harris *Hannibal* 102), and in fact he chooses his victims from amongst those he feels have been rude to him, spawning the chilling and delightful line “Whenever feasible one should always try to eat the rude” (Fuller 2013). He is the picture of composure and is often described by Clarice as having a dancer-like grace and poise (Harris). He speaks quietly, in measured tones<sup>10</sup>, and only very seldom yells (but one has the distinct feeling that even this slip is calculated). He enjoys classical music and opera, and plays as well as composes pieces for piano, harpsichord and Theremin.

## Non-Binary Gender: Bodily Becoming, Nomadic Subjectivity, and Abjection

Based on the evidence above, it becomes clear that an entirely separate, non-binary approach to gender is needed in reference to Hannibal Lecter. Simply

---

<sup>8</sup> Using the books as reference points here – 1999 for Clarice Starling and 1981 for Will Graham and Francis Dolarhyde.

<sup>9</sup> More on cannibalism to follow.

<sup>10</sup> Though no definitive study exists on this point, linguist/psychologist Adelaide Haas published a paper in 1979 which features a collection of evidence and stereotypes to do with varying speech patterns and intonations between men and women. Notably, Lecter seems to speak in a more feminine than masculine way.

splitting his behaviours into either masculine or feminine subject positions seems trite, overly-limiting, and contrived; rather, Lecter merits something above and beyond (or perhaps, in between, beneath, or around) a binary conception of gender. I have found that, through a combination of literary, feminist, and specifically transgender theories, space can be created for a gender identity in transit like the one Hannibal Lecter embodies.

“Becoming” as a physical, mental, and emotional process is heavily emphasized throughout the source material for a variety of characters (Dolarhyde in *Red Dragon*, Buffalo Bill in *Silence of the Lambs*, both Will Graham and Randall Tier in the television series *Hannibal*<sup>11</sup>), and this idea should be extended to Lecter as well. With the addition in 2006 of the novel *Hannibal Rising*, which Harris himself was reluctant to write and publish (Simpson *Making Murder*), more weight is laid upon the concept of personal origin as explanation: readers and moviegoers were no longer content to simply witness the monster on the screen; they had to know exactly how he *became* a cannibalistic serial killer (as if such a thing had a linear explanation). Thus Lecter was provided with a beginning to place neatly before his “middle,” which we had already been given in the form of the three preceding novels and four film adaptations. This trend toward historicity, however reluctant on the part of Harris himself, lends credence to my understanding of Hannibal as a nomadic subject in a constant state of Becoming, (Braidotti; Deleuze and Guattari)<sup>12</sup> with neither end nor any need for a stopping point or goal.

Braidotti’s nomadic subject carries “home” on her back and creates room for comfort in each new space to which she travels. Lecter has no home: having been ousted at a very young age from Lecter castle by the encroaching front of the second World War, Lecter never knew anything but nomadism. Moving from Lithuania, to the French countryside, to Paris, back to Lithuania, back to Paris, to the United States, to Florence – and on and on – Lecter leaves traces of himself behind but does not settle. The nomadic subject is identified by where they have

---

<sup>11</sup> 1981, 1988 and 2013, respectively.

<sup>12</sup> My understanding of nomadic Becoming has emerged from Braidotti, whose own work on nomadic subjectivity is highly indebted to Deleuze and Guattari. In this matter I draw principally from chapter 9 of *Nomadic Subjects* (2011), which is devoted entirely to the idea of Becoming, and seems to most heavily be influenced by Deleuze and Guattari’s 1987 *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.

been and, eventually, where they will go. “Our desires are that which evades us, in the very act of propelling us forth, leaving as the only indicator of who we are, the traces of where we have already been, that is to say, of what we have already ceased to be. Identity is a retrospective notion” (Braidotti 40). As a literal representation of this idea, in *Hannibal* (560), Harris says that the police remain a “comfortable two faces behind” the one which Hannibal has most recently constructed. Lecter sheds homes, faces, and, I contend, greatly varied gender performances which are indicative of a nonconforming or queer gender identity. Applying the concept of nomadic subjectivity to the character enables us to understand the different genders he performs, from the savagely powerful, murderous monster who bites people’s faces; to the suave, suited dandy-esque aesthete.

It is important to note, however, that “nomadism... is not fluidity without borders, but rather an acute awareness of the nonfixity of boundaries” (Braidotti 66). Lecter knows that the boundaries between male-ness and female-ness, as well as between masculinity and femininity, are mutable and infinitely changeable, open to interpretation. The porousness of certain boundaries calls into play Kristeva’s concept of abjection, which is a conscious blending of or movement among several subject positions or object categories. Abjection is simultaneous masculinity and femininity, enabling a movement across and outside of the gender binary, the same way a person labelled abject moves through and above (and beneath) society. Lecter masquerades as human, a (more than/less than) human abjection who is the “essential if not initial boundary of biological and psychic individualism,” (Kristeva 101) or, as Hannibal’s psychiatrist Bedelia DuMaurier says so well, Hannibal is wearing a “well-tailored person suit” (Fuller 2013). In order to ground the nomadic subject or the abject human in historical (and as such accountable) terms, it is necessary to bring in more body-based theories, keeping in mind that essentialism or “body as destiny” dialogues have the capacity to be entirely limiting. In welcome opposition to this, transgender theorist Riki Lane uses the theory of bodily becoming as a way of opening up the bigender view of what it means to be a trans person, writing instead that it would be more beneficial to look at being trans as a constant process of self-reinvention rather than a set, linear progression from point A to point B (Lane). Lane also asserts that it makes more scientific, “empirical” sense to view assigned sex as biologically diverse, rather than biologically dichotomous. This reading helps to validate my contention that Lecter be read as genderqueer, without further

definition aside from gender non-conforming in certain ways. Simply, Lane's theories about biological diversity are helpful "especially when they stress nonlinearity, contingency, self-organization, open-endedness, and becoming. Mobilizing a reading of biology as open-ended and creative supports a perspective that sees sex and gender diversity as a continuum, rather than a dichotomy..." (Lane 137). This continuum-based conception of sex and gender<sup>13</sup>, both performance and identity, links excellently with Braidotti's nomadic subject, who moves from place to place and is identified retrospectively, Kristeva's theory of abjection, and the joyful non-fixity (to borrow Braidotti's term) of moving amongst boundaries.

### American Gothic: Liminality and Expressions of Contemporary Social Anxieties

Moving amongst boundaries calls to mind the concept of liminality, one of the defining characteristics of Gothic literature. Liminality can be defined as a state of being in between two clearly-defined mental, cultural, or literal spaces. Originated as an anthropological term used in reference to a person's passage from one state of being to another via a ritualistic practice (a wedding, for example), liminality has since been used with increasing frequency in both literary and queer theories. In Victorian ghost stories, which are sometimes used as examples of a Gothic subgenre, the ghost can be used as a metaphor for societal anxieties by virtue of its unreality, but also because it exists in a liminal space between the realms of the living and the dead. Braidotti's nomadic subject, to which I have referred in preceding sections, would be an example of someone who exists in liminal spaces and has the capacity to consciously move between categories of being with ease. Liminality can also be connected to abjection and to the conflicting simultaneity of certain states or experiences, such as fear and seduction, wrath and love, empathy and vengeance. Lecter is constantly moving between/among, creating spaces for himself somewhere in the middle, on the fringe, or straddling multiple

---

<sup>13</sup> Though the argument can and is frequently made that even a continuum or spectrum is too limited when the conversation turns to gender identity. My current personal favourite is the "gender as a constellation or universe" comparison. For the purposes of this paper, we will stick to continuum.

extremes of gender, morality, or emotion. Liminality, abjection, and nomadism, observed from the outside, breed uncertainty, which in turn breeds fear. Lecter is and remains frightening because he is unpredictable, whimsical, and constantly in motion.

There has been no deficit of scholarly work which seeks to define the Gothic as a literary tradition, genre, or mode though it is, like other literary theories, dynamic depending on cultural and spatiotemporal context. As such, Irish Gothic written in the height of popularity of literary Gothicism (generally, the 18<sup>th</sup> into the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries), is characterized by slightly different themes than are American Gothic texts. One of the main tenets attributed to Gothicism and, to an extent, horror literature in general, is that it serves as a way for societies to vent contemporary anxieties without naming them outright. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde, for example, served as a metaphorical representation of a number of Victorian fears about the perceived loss of morality due to the decline of religion and development of rationalist scientific and philosophical thought concurrent with the Industrial Revolution (Halberstam *Skin Shows*). These fears were not exclusive by any means to Irish, British, or continental European Gothic texts, but they can certainly be read as significantly located within those specific traditions. The American Gothic, as it specifically relates to Harris' texts, can be characterised by xenophobia, homophobia/misogyny and trans-misogyny, and anxieties about the ever-increasing presence of surveillance technology. Texts such as the Hannibal Lecter novels and their film and television adaptations illustrate these fears, which are in no way specific to American society, but which are nonetheless an integral part of what it means to be American in both a pre- and post-9/11 society.<sup>14</sup> Lecter is an embodiment of everything Americans fear: he is Eastern European (too geographically close to the Middle East for comfort), his gender and sexuality are undecidable, he is a cannibalistic serial killer, and, worst of all, he blends in with "normal" American people and escapes detection for years despite working right under the nose of the sacred FBI. He can be anywhere at any time, he is "the devil [in the details], he is smoke" (Fuller 2013).

---

<sup>14</sup> Halberstam's text was published in 1995, 6 years before 9/11, and only one of Harris's novels is published after 2001. But a significant number of the filmic/television adaptations are *post-9/11*, thus setting up an interesting comparison. I believe that, as a catalyst for so much fear in American (and global) society, 9/11 remains an extremely significant event to consider when one is studying the literary representation of both societal and personal fears and anxieties.



In my own observation, Americans like to place their fears in something they can easily see, from Muslims in traditional garb to “failed transvestites” like Buffalo Bill: blame is easily placed when one is able to visually identify the so-called “guilty” party. What makes Lecter so frightening is that he is not easy to see.

Harris’s Gothic Lecter novels serve to vent American homophobia, misogyny and trans-misogyny (in addition to, more generally, transphobia). In general, I agree with Halberstam’s assertion that Demme’s 1991 film adaptation of *Silence of the Lambs* “clearly represents ... sexism and punishes actions motivated by [it]” (Halberstam 4). In my opinion, the film does an excellent job building Clarice Starling into the feminist hero she deserves to be, and part of the film’s success should be attributed to the way viewers of all genders are encouraged to empathise with her, including or perhaps especially her treatment of those who would limit her based on her femaleness. But I diverge with Halberstam where he refers to the film’s ability to adequately depict and punish acts of homophobia and argue that this is a problem throughout each of the novels and their subsequent film adaptations. In fact, in addition to the blatant homophobic language in *Hannibal* (book published in 1999, film in 2001) it is arguable that the punishment of specifically misogynistic behaviours is inadequate in the other books and films. For example, in the novel and film *Hannibal*, Deputy Assistant Attorney General (US Department of Justice) Paul Krendler refers to Hannibal repeatedly as a “queer” (here purposefully invoking “queer” as a slur for “gay”) in conversation with Clarice Starling, and directs countless degrading, objectifying comments toward her both to her face and behind her back. In a scene meant to convey a sick kind of poetic justice, Lecter and Starling cook and consume Krendler’s brain while the man is still alive – and continuing to refer to Starling in a derogatory manner<sup>15</sup>. In a series wherein the titular character is known for killing and eating those who he considers rude, this is probably the best possible outcome for a man like Krendler. But it does not exactly feel like Starling “won,” or that she was in any way successful in shutting down Krendler’s horrible behaviour: it was Hannibal who hunted him down and killed him *for* her, she’s merely a non-consenting (drugged) observer. In *Silence*

---

<sup>15</sup> In the film, Starling does not eat any of the dish prepared for her. The ending of the film differs vastly from the ending of the novel – in the film, Lecter escapes the FBI and leaves Starling behind to face professional and personal ruin; in the book, the two escape together and travel the world as a married couple.

of *the Lambs* (1991), viewers saw Starling verbally snapping back at her abusers and physically outdoing them in her training at the FBI academy; in *Hannibal*, (2001) she fights to remain conscious and barely does more than glare at Krendler and Lecter. (It should be noted again how different the ending scenes of the novel and film are, but the dinner scene remains uncomfortable and degrading for Starling in both.) As such, it would seem that Starling lost some of her autonomy and that Harris, for whatever reason, failed to continue his trend of punishing characters who engaged in misogynistic behaviours.

The trans-misogyny and transphobia in *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) is perhaps more obvious, but less easy to put into words. It is never actually made clear how Buffalo Bill feels about his own gender – should I refer to the character using she/her pronouns? Is this really a transgender character, or just a “failed transvestite” as the narrative insists? Who am I or anyone else to police whether a character is gender-deviant *enough* to be considered transgender? Nothing is clear about Buffalo Bill, but I do believe that this is a discriminatory, falsified caricature of someone who is (whatever else one might say about them) probably not cisgender. It is difficult to know whether to explain away any gender-related gaffs using the old, unsatisfying “it was a different time/we have more words to explain different genders than ever before,” or to be more severe and call out everyone involved on their intolerance, discrimination, and ignorance. There is no easy conclusion, but the fact that no one is adequately punished for treating Buffalo Bill exceedingly poorly because of his gender deviance<sup>16</sup> seems clear.

The third plot point which makes the Lecter tetralogy uniquely Gothic is their expression of anxieties about the growing ubiquity of surveillance technology. This 21<sup>st</sup> century anxiety about who is watching whom and for what purpose is correlative to 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century discomfort over increasing industrialisation and the replacement of human workers by machines. Though the 2001 film adaptation of *Hannibal* failed in many respects to deliver an adequate sequel to the legendary *Silence*, the cinematography does an excellent job emphasizing what had been a largely underplayed plot point in the novel: surveillance. For example, the film’s opening sequence is a supercut of various anonymous surveillance clips from Florence (one of the story’s main settings) in black and

---

<sup>16</sup> Of course, BB didn’t exactly go about his transition in a healthy, legal, or sane way. But the number of rude “transvestite” comments remains inexcusable.

white, undercut by the aria section of Bach's "Goldberg Variations" performed on piano<sup>17</sup> and combined with pieces of static feedback and garbled recorded dialogue (Scott 2001). A flock of pigeons, which feature heavily in the sequence, crowd together to form an eerie portrait of Lecter's face, which then fades into a shot of Starling sleeping in the back of an FBI van. The result is a stylish, suspenseful opening, and the motif of black and white surveillance footage combined with static and garbled electronic feedback is carried throughout the film and score. The film was released in February of 2001, 7 months before the attack on the World Trade Centre in New York, but one nonetheless feels the relevance of the surveillance-related fears as a kind of foreshadowing for today's obsessive paranoia in reaction to international terrorism and racial tensions<sup>18</sup>. Insofar as they serve as a mirror to reflect contemporary social/cultural fears, Harris's Lecter novels can be read as a form of American Gothic.

### Literature Meets Anthropology: Kilgour & Messent on Cannibalism as Metaphor

Cannibalism has, particularly recently, become a field of some interest in contemporary anthropological study. Theorists such as Maggie Kilgour speculate as to whether cannibalism might be a metaphor rather than a literal practice, used by certain communities to assert dominance over others, and that "[a]nthropology itself, in its use of cannibalism, is then 'a prime example of... 'colonial discourse': the strategies through which imperialism justifies its own desire to absorb others by projecting that desire onto a demonised 'other'" (239-40). This, in part, explains the popular attraction to Hannibal Lecter as a character, because he is the embodiment of that demonised other. Lecter, then, becomes "...a literally cannibal ego... the most exaggerated version of the modern Hobbesian individual, governed only by will and appetite, detached from the world and other humans, whom he sees only as objects for his own consumption" (Kilgour 248).

---

<sup>17</sup> This is, of course, the same piece of classical music Lecter is listening to when he murders the prison guard in *Silence of the Lambs*, creating an effective parallelism between the two films.

<sup>18</sup> Especially considering that the main factor for Starling's fall from grace at the FBI is her killing, in the line of duty and well within rights, of a Black woman whom she had been trying to apprehend. This activated a number of race-related arguments and tensions which were given much more weight in the novel and largely glossed over in the film.

Lecter is almost akin to a tasteful parody of Kilgour's theories about cannibalism not being an actual practice. While the metaphorical nature of Lecter's cannibalism should be explored (and will be very shortly), it is imperative that we do not forget that Lecter is literally a cannibal. He provides a wonderful foil for the pictures of savage, starving, brutal cannibals we conjure at the mention of the word (though of course for all his pomp he is still a vicious, powerful serial killer). He is very careful about what he puts into his body, and artfully prepares his meals so as to create elegant tableaux which entertain and delight, whether he is dining solo or hosting a dinner party. He has a very particular "taste," which he cultivated for years growing up in the French countryside and, later, Paris and Florence: he is the epitome of high class sophistication in all areas of life, but particularly with regards to the culinary. That he chooses to eat people is part of his identity and stems at least in part from the traumatizing event in his past wherein his younger sister Mischa was murdered and cannibalized by Nazi soldiers; he feels that he was unable to save Mischa, though they were both just children at the time. He adopts the soldiers' cannibalistic methods in order to enact a more fitting revenge when he later seeks out and murders them. The continued cannibalism throughout his adult life might be a product of pathology more than anything else, as if by repeating or reliving the traumatic event he might one day change the course of the past and regain his precious sister.

Lecter's cannibalism thus has some interesting psychoanalytic implications, which only get deeper with his seduction of and subsequent pair-bonding with Clarice Starling. The two engage in a bizarrely communal rite when together they consume the brain of Paul Krendler, the government official who was almost singlehandedly responsible for bringing down Starling's FBI career and, further, "typifies aggressive male sexuality and its relationship to institutional power..." (Messent 26). Kilgour describes the rite of communion as one which is cannibalistic in essence,

a banquet at which host and guest can come together without one subsuming the other, and both can eat and be eaten... the individual bodies of the members of the community are identified with the corporate body of the church, which in turn is identified with the individual body of the sacrificed Christ. (Kilgour *From Communion* 79-80).

By according this scene such important narrative weight, Harris has appropriated this Catholic ritual, which can be understood as merely metaphorically

cannibalistic, to one which is made strange or uncanny by the horrific presence of literal cannibalism.

Later that same evening, Clarice suggests to Hannibal that his preoccupation with Mischa stems from an unresolved issue wherein he felt forced to give up his place at his mother's breast to make room for Mischa. Kilgour explains breastfeeding as a metaphorical form of cannibalism as such: "The individual's original existence... is thus described as a cannibalistic experience of fluid boundaries between self and world, who are joined in a symbiotic oneness" (244). Clarice goes on to encourage Hannibal to taste a drop of champagne from her exposed nipple, "re-creat[ing] for Lecter that original form of (cannibal) satisfaction...translat[ing] Freudian theory to literal practice" (Messent 27-8). Thus the line between metaphorical and literal cannibalism continues to be blurred, even more complicated by the addition of sexuality.

The question of why Lecter cannibalizes his victims is not one which can be answered in a singular manner. First is the answer which follows most logically from my argument to this point: that Lecter has a queer sense of self, the literal/corporeal manifestation of which is the act of cannibalism. That is to say, he bridges the gap between Self and Other in a literal sense by *eating* other people, by taking a bite of them and merging his Self with theirs by way of consumption. His personal emphasis on aestheticism and love for theatricality explains his trademark of creating elegant, if gruesome, tableaux with the leftovers of his victims. Second is the answer which seems to be the generally-accepted one, as it is repeated often throughout the television series: that Lecter sees the rude people he murders and eats as no better than pigs who deserve whatever he does to them (Fuller 2014). One might cobble together a third answer from viewing the lives of nonfictional serial killers and cannibals. Albert Fish, who cannibalized young children in the era roughly around the Great Depression, said he did so out of a desire to save them from lives of unavoidable sin (Borowski *Albert Fish*). Jeffrey Dahmer cannibalized young men in an effort to keep them with him forever<sup>19</sup>, a sentiment echoed by Armin Meiwes<sup>20</sup> and Issei Sagawa<sup>21</sup>. Fourth is the unsatisfactory answer Harris gives in *Hannibal Rising*,

---

<sup>19</sup> Paraphrased from the infamous 1994 Stone Phillips interview with Dahmer on the NBC programme *Dateline*.

<sup>20</sup> See the 2007 documentary *Interview with a Cannibal*, cited below.

<sup>21</sup> See the 2007 documentary *The Cannibal That Walked Free*, cited below.

which seems to be that Lecter continues to cannibalize his victims as a way to somehow “fix” the fact that he unwittingly ate his sister Mischa as a child. I find this answer reductive and uninteresting and believe that it raises more questions than it answers. I think in the end, the question is ultimately a combination of things and largely undecidable, a trait which the motives of his criminality shares with his sexuality and gender identity.

## Conclusion

Using a variety of literary and sociological theories, this essay has sought to perform a queer reading of Hannibal Lecter’s various expressions of monstrosity. In order to more concretely express this idea, I started by defining both gender performance and gender identity, identifying the dynamic nature of both, and cited a few examples of the ways in which Lecter embodies, subverts, or combines characteristics of both hegemonic and hybrid masculinities, in combination with certain feminine traits. I argued that self-conception is more important than labelling or policing based on outward appearance alone and examined the ways in which Lecter might conceive of his own gender identity. I contend that Kristeva’s theory of abjection (a literary theory meant to be applied first and foremost to texts within the horror genre), when looked at alongside Braidotti’s sociological theory of the nomadic subject, creates the transitory space necessary for a character such as Hannibal, who expresses multiple gender identities and performances. Both the nomadic subject and the abject person moves between borders effortlessly, but always with conscious understanding of the “non-fixity” of the boundaries, such as those between male and female, masculine and feminine, Self and Other, etc. In order to root my arguments in the body as well as the mind, I used transgender theorist Lane’s concept of “trans as bodily becoming,” a radical way of looking at being a transgender person that seeks to move away from binaries and dichotomies in favour of a new gender and bodily diversity.

Following this, I engaged in an analysis of the novels, films, and television series as particularly American Gothic, inasmuch as they express contemporary social anxieties, and engage with various pivotal Gothic tropes. The Gothic is a particularly useful literary framework from which to perform queer readings due to its ability to express the unspeakable and its reliance upon such an influential

concept as liminality. The final section was devoted to an examination of Lecter's cannibalism and its fascinatingly Freudian implications. As a character which has undergone various transformations since his first appearance in 1981, Hannibal Lecter is a perfect foil for a variety of social changes which have taken place in the intervening decades. The term genderqueer best fits Hannibal as it denies the temptation of rigid classification and instead allows for a freer, less limiting, interpretation that the doctor himself, who so willingly plays with the boundaries between good and evil or life and death, might perhaps appreciate.

### Works Cited

*Albert Fish: In Sin He Found Salvation.* dir. Borowski, John. Facets Video, 2007.

Bersani, Leo. *Homos*. Harvard UP, 1995.

Braidotti, Rosi. *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. Columbia University Press, 2011.

Butler, Judith. "Critically Queer," in *Bodies That Matter*. Routledge, 1993.

Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, no. 4, 1988. pp. 519-531.

Butler, Judith. *Undoing Gender*. Routledge, 2004.

Connell, Raewynn and James Messerschmidt. "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept." *Gender and Society*, vol. 19, no. 6, 2005. pp. 829-859.

Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi. University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

Demetriou, Demetrakis Z. "Connell's Concept of Hegemonic Masculinity: A Critique." *Theory and Society* vol. 30, no. 3, 2009. pp. 337-361.

- Fernandez, Jay A. "Silence of the Lambs: 25 and Still Important (Here's Why)." *Signature*, 12 February 2016. <http://www.signature-reads.com/2016/02/silence-of-the-lambs-25>. Accessed 14 Feb. 2016.
- Haas, Adelaide. "Male and Female Spoken Language Differences: Stereotypes and Evidence." *Psychological Bulletin* vol. 86, no. 3, 1979, pp. 616-626.
- Halberstam, Jack. *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*. Duke UP, 1995.
- Hannibal* (TV series). Directed by Bryan Fuller, Sony Pictures Television, 2013-2015.
- Hannibal* (film). Directed by Ridley Scott, Universal Pictures, 2001.
- Hannibal Rising*. Directed by Peter Webber, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 2007.
- Harris, Thomas. *Red Dragon*. Dell Publishing, 1981.
- Harris, Thomas. *Silence of the Lambs*. St. Martin's Press, 1988.
- Harris, Thomas. *Hannibal*. Delacorte Press, 1999.
- Harris, Thomas. *Hannibal Rising*. Delacorte Press, 2006.
- Interview with a Cannibal: der Kannibale von Rotenburg*. Directed by Jane Cameron and Günter Stampf. Upgrade Productions, 2007.
- Kilgour, Maggie. "The Function of Cannibalism at the Present Time." *Cannibalism and the Colonial World*. Edited by Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, and Margaret Iverson. Cambridge UP, 1998. pp. 238-259.
- Kilgour, Maggie. *From Communion to Cannibalism: An Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation*. Princeton UP, 1990.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Columbia UP. 1980.
- Lane, Riki. "Trans as Bodily Becoming: Rethinking the Biological as Diversity, Not Dichotomy." *Hypatia*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2009. pp. 136-157.



*Manhunter*. Directed by Michael Mann. De Laurentiis Entertainment Group, 1986.

Messent, Peter. "American Gothic: Liminality and the Gothic in Thomas Harris's Hannibal Lecter Novels." *Dissecting Hannibal Lecter*. Edited by Benjamin Szumskyj, McFarland and Company, Inc., 2008.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* vol. 16, no. 3, 1975. pp. 6-18.

Phillips, Stone (interviewer). "Jeffrey Dahmer". *Dateline*. NBC. 1994. available online: [https://archive.org/details/Dahmer\\_on\\_Dateline\\_NBC](https://archive.org/details/Dahmer_on_Dateline_NBC)

*Red Dragon*. Directed by Brett Ratner, Universal Pictures, 2002.

*Silence of the Lambs*. Directed by Jonathan Demme, Orion Pictures Corporation, 1991.

Simpson, Philip L. *Making Murder: the Fiction of Thomas Harris*. Praeger, 2010.

Slenker, Sami. "Queer like, escaping definition." *Facebook*, 2016.  
<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10207839020632039>.

*The Cannibal that Walked Free*. Directed by Toby Dye. Voodoo Visuals, *BBC Channel Five*, 2007.

## Chicanx “Monsters” and Chicanx/Latinx “Futures” in Film (Or, Searching for Latinxs in Sci-Fi Movies)

MICHAEL LECHUGA, ROBERTO AVANT-MIER, AND  
KATHERINE ALANIS RAMÍREZ

“In James Whale’s [1931] studio production of *Frankenstein*, the monster ‘Frankenstein’ was shunned by society because he was visually repulsive... making *Frankenstein* studio cinema’s greatest essay in prejudice.”

– Mark Cousins, *The Story of Film*

“This affirms that Chicano is a science fiction state of being. Chicano identity is rooted in the strange and the sublime, evoking (science) fiction and its dystopian and utopian subgenres [...]”

– Cathryn Josefina Merla-Watson and B.V. Olguín, *Altermundos*

One could argue that repulsive monsters have been a part of cinematic history since its early days, although monsters such as “The Golem” and Dr. Frankenstein’s monster (or “the creature”) were initially characters representing capitalism, modernity, and fears about the rise of technology (and later, about “difference”) more so than simply scary stories or tales of “horror.” For Chicanx and Latinx scholars, Chicanx movie monsters are still about economic developments, socio-political trends and cultural difference, although maybe also about horror to contemporary mainstream audiences. Furthermore, in our own analysis of Chicanx representations in US movies and film, we demonstrate how Chicanx and Latinx experiences have always and will continue to be shaped by the ever-changing cultural and political tensions in the US. In previous research, we pointed out how for more than a century, various Chicanx and Latinx experiences have been represented in cinema to popular US-American audiences with both negative (*i.e.*, omission first, and then stereotypes, clichés, and caricatures) and positive results (*i.e.*, Chicanx characters, attention on issues

The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 6, No. 2 & 3  
Copyright © 2018

facing Chicanx communities, and then the development of what scholars call a “Chicano cinema” and beyond). Also, as we have argued previously, today’s political issues like migration, gender equality, and rampant corporatization are all shaping the current cinematic expressions for, by, and about Chicanx/Latinx communities. In this research, we turn our attention to “the future” of Chicanxs and Latinxs in US film—through “science-fiction” Chicanxs. Of course, we cannot talk about films that will be made in the future, but we can talk about how today’s popular movies are depicting a science-fiction future for Chicanxs and Latinxs. So, why science-fiction? Or rather why does Chicanx science-fiction matter? Why should Chicanx or other Latinxs care about science-fiction, which for the most part does not include them? These are the questions that drive this research.

Of course, one response by Loza to why science fiction matters is that science-fiction film, television, and fandom are prolific purveyors of monsters and monstrosities, thus it should be seen as “vital that we scrutinize them carefully” (3). Or, as Calafell asserts, whether it is on television or in film, “monsters are all the rage” and “monsters are everywhere” (7, 118). On the other hand, it is worth noting here how scholars are actually arguing for the inclusion of horror, science-fiction, and fantasy works in our analyses of Chicanx and Latinx popular culture precisely because it fits with the Chicanx/Latinx experience. For example, Merla-Watson and Olgún recently noted:

... *horror* and related genres are apropos for interpreting Latin@ social life and subjectivity, not only because Latin@s have been continually figured as the *monstrous* other in US popular culture but also because *horror* and *terror* have been endemic to and have textured Latin@ lived experience and history [...] Indeed, the histories of Chican@s and Latin@s in the Americas have been punctuated by graphic forms of violence, both banal and apocalyptic—the very stuff of *horror*. (3; emphasis added)

Furthermore, they claim, while there is a fairly robust body of scholarship dedicated to the “African American gothic,” there remains “a dearth of culturally and ethnically specific theoretical lenses for understanding Latin@ horror, gothic, and fantasy cultural productions” (13). It only follows that scholars should push further into the analysis of popular culture that articulates Chicanx and Latinx

experiences in horror, science-fiction, and/or fantasy. These genres, and others, make up what is known as speculative fiction—a field where artists imagine radically different social relations, identities, and structures of control as a way to comment on the social relations, identities, and structures of control at hand. Thus, in the essay, we focus on a subset of speculative sci-fi that depicts the extremes that the militarized state will go to in order to safeguard from alien invasion.

To address the questions above that inspired our investigation, we begin with the assertion that science fiction depicting the future is a suggestive “glimpse” into our culture’s future. It is a way for filmmakers to create a universe that is advancing in technology and has its own set of cultural and political issues to deal with. We will discuss the question about what a science-fiction future means for Chicanx/Latinx filmmakers later in this essay, but first, we submit that it is rather difficult to think about a “sci-fi” film today that would be received positively by Chicanx or Latinx scholars.<sup>1</sup> We note how there are not many Chicanx or Latinx sci-fi films, especially not coming out of Hollywood. In most cases of sci-fi “futurism,” we see a grim science-fiction future where a stereotypical White male “hero” is saving “the world” from extinction, either from killer robots (*e.g.*, *Blade Runner*, 1982; *The Matrix*, 1999; and *Terminator*, 1984 film franchises), or from invading extraterrestrials (*i.e.*, *Alien*, 1979; *Men in Black*, 1997; or *Predator*, 1987 film franchises). For film scholars, like Charles Ramírez Berg and others, these nativist and hyper-paranoid films that portray the future for Caucasian US-Americans are a clear reflection of the lingering anxiety around non-white communities—including and perhaps especially growing Chicanxs and Latinxs communities. Therefore, in this examination of sci-fi “futures,” we will look a bit closer at the problem with having a one-sided view of the future that typically does not include the experiences of Chicanxs/Latinxs (or others), and instead, only includes distorted images of invasive, alien “monsters.” As Loza argues in the recent *Speculative Imperialisms*,

---

<sup>1</sup> Or that would score well in the “Chicanx Cinema Matrix” (*e.g.*, three stars or more)—our proposed ratings system for analyzing Chicanx representation(s) in movies; See Avant-Mier and Lechuga.

Filmic and televisual representations of racial otherness are key to the social construction of reality and the negotiations of the future. The colorblind images of others that dominate Hollywood must be seen as a form of cultural polemics. (13)

In other words, “science fiction is not about the future,” science fiction “is about the problems of the present” (11).

We will begin our analysis with a necessarily brief review of the relevant literature on monsters and monstrosity in US popular culture. Moving forward, we will engage in another brief review of the history of “aliens” in popular films from the perspective of how cinematic aliens can be articulated to Chicanxs, Mexican Americans, and perhaps, other Latinxs in the US. Unfortunately, not a lot of research exists on Chicanx Science-Fiction, so we will rely on the work of Ramírez Berg a lot here.

Finally, we examine a handful of films that in one way or another capture the Chicanx/Latinx experience. We analyze *Children of Men* (2006), *Elysium* (2013), and *Sleep Dealer* (2008).<sup>2</sup> In spite of the fact that they would not pass the Chicano Cinema “test” (since they are not made *by* Chicanos, *for* Chicanos, and hardly *about* Chicanos in particular), these films challenge the status quo sci-fi future by undermining the typical alien narrative dominating Hollywood today through depictions of a future where migrants (mostly Latinx) challenge the White-state apparatus. These films are unique because the filmmakers of each makes a monster out of the White-state apparatus. To conclude, we discuss of how important it is to continue a legacy of Chicanx filmmaking, especially science fiction futurism, so that we won’t get left out of the US-American future.

---

<sup>2</sup> Of the three films, *Elysium* saw the most mainstream success, grossing nearly \$286 million in international sales and more than \$93 million in the US. In addition, the film was nominated for multiple international awards for its cinematography, its visual effects, and its director, Neill Blomkamp. *Children of Men* had relatively quieter success, grossing around \$70 million internationally and \$35 million in the US. *Children of Men*, though, was nominated for three Academy Awards for its screenplay, cinematography, and editing. Finally, *Sleep Dealer* was released only in the US and saw little mainstream success. The film grossed only \$75,000. This information was retrieved from the Internet Movie Database (IMDB.com).

## Monsters in Popular Culture

From vampires, werewolves, zombies, and other earth-bound creatures, to science-fiction aliens and alien monsters, the "monster" has played a central role in folklore, literature, film, and even bedtime stories. Monsters create an allure within their audiences, and unlike other types of entertainment, "we are very much curious about the monsters we fear." As Castillo notes, "We may be utterly repulsed by them, but we are also fascinated by their extraordinary nature, their perverted views, and their deviant behaviors" (41). Unlike fairytales and stories of enchantment, monsters captivate people in a much darker way. "An intense curiosity and awe for the different, morbid, and monstrous - omnipresent in child tales throughout history - have always permeated Western culture" (do Vale 194) essentially providing the most important description of monsters: different. In *Monster Theory*, Jeffrey Cohen describes the idea of the monster as a form of the Other, and as an "incorporation of the Outside, or the Beyond" (7).

Monsters represent something that is outside of the normal, outside of the realms of what is known to people. According to Cohen:

This refusal to participate in the classificatory "order of things" is true of monsters generally: they are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration. And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threaten to smash distinctions. (28)

In other words, monsters are created to be something outside of the systematic representation of what a person, or thing should be or look like, or as Cohen refers to them, "difference made flesh, come to dwell among us" (7). They represent an anomaly to the types of characters to which people are accustomed. Cohen continues to say that each monster tells two tales, the first is the origin of the monster, its storyline, and the second, lies in the "cultural use the monster serves" (13). When it comes to cultural use, we can refer to the prior idea of the monster serving as a representation of the Other, something outside the norm, thus "the abnormality of the monster would come to be widely interpreted in European cultures as defiance of law, be it the natural law or the established political and moral orders" (Castillo 40). While monsters serve as a representation of the obstruction of order, they can also, as Cohen states, become "cultural, political,

racial, economic, sexual” (7). Thus, while monsters form part of the Other, the obscure, and the different, they still serve as a representation of the real-life horrors outside of lore and storytelling.

Monsters are symbols of deviance and cultural taboos, or images of erotic desire and thus symbolize “fears about sex, gender, desire, and death” (Geczy and Karaminas 714). Aside from this, it is worth reiterating a point that we began with at the outset, that monsters and horror also have deeper meaning beyond fears of difference. As scholars note:

The concepts of horror and monstrosity share a long fruitful history together that predates early modernity. Monsters are cultural constructions that function to highlight difference *and* have appeared during times of political and social crises. (Geczy & Karaminas 714; emphasis added)

For our research here, we are interested in the articulations of monsters and monstrosity to social and political crises. For analysis of cinematic representations, it is increasingly obvious that Mexican, Latinx, and “hispanic” migrants are being symbolized by sci-fi aliens and the social crises that those aliens produce.

Noting this, another significant theoretical formulation on monsters comes from Loza who argues that scholars should see and understand cinematic monsters as a “technology” itself. As Loza informs us,

Seeing monstrosity as a technology, a vehicle by which race is made, helps us understand why the West is so consumed with this liminal figure... Like monstrosity, [science-fiction] is a primary technology through which race is produced and white supremacy maintained. (2-3)

Adding to critical scholarship on media and monsters, Calafell theorizes “monster-making” and monstrosity as a “space of activation and possibility” – citing how Chicana scholar Gloria Anzaldúa identified with the mother alien in the *Alien* film franchise (3). Here, we interpret this to mean that monstrosity in popular culture can be understood through ambivalence or bifurcation. If, historically speaking, Mexicanxs (or “Mexicans”) and Latinxs have been portrayed as marginal, animalistic, beastly, scary, and fear-inducing, it is also important to note how monstrous or “alien” characters also provide an identification point for Chicanxs, Latinxs and others from those very margins.

As Calafell avers, there are instances in which we (Chicanxs or Latinxs) are represented through monstrosity, but also times when we call attention to the monstrous actions of the dominant culture (118). Our analysis that will follow below supports the latter; science-fiction/fantasy aliens and monsters in cinema result from a potentially productive site, one that allows Chicanx/Latinx representations to contest sci-fi/fantasy “futures” by including Chicanxs/Latinxs but also through questioning the logic of techno-military and/or corporate-state control. As Calafell argues, monsters “ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance toward its expression” (7).

### Invasive Aliens and Scared White People

As film scholar Ramírez Berg notes in his research, Mexicans and Latinxs in Hollywood films are overwhelmingly portrayed through a very limited range of representations, essentially six major character types (or stereotypes): ugly bandidos/villains, Latin lovers, hot Latinas or “hot tamales,” etc. (159). As Merla-Watson and Olguín affirm in *Altermundos*:

We frequently are figured as monstrous, threatening, or beastly through stereotypes of the bandido, drug dealer, or gang member, and as actual *monsters*. These vexed filmic representations can be found as early as 1915... (14-15; emphasis in the original)

Yet, another “hispanic” character in contemporary cinema is visible through invading, monstrous, extraterrestrial aliens.<sup>3</sup> As Ramírez Berg notes, extraterrestrial aliens can be understood as symbols for other aliens because of how cinematic aliens invoke the nation, hyper-nationalism, and patriotism. As he puts it:

---

<sup>3</sup> We use the word “hispanic” here, because this is the term that Ramírez Berg uses in the original text of his analysis of sci-fi aliens. Likewise, he uses “Alien” (with a capital A) to distinguish the monstrous cinematic extra-terrestrials (citizen aliens are in lower case).



The new immigrant “invasion” calls into question the very identity of the nation itself, and the rejection of the Alien in [sci-fi] is projected, mass-mediated nativism. [...] Today’s [sci-fi] film provides an arena for the negotiation of the pluralist-nativist tension; in order for this to occur, the immigrant takes the symbolic shape of the Alien. (162)

Furthermore, science-fiction aliens are remarkable because of how they have transformed in recent decades.

On the social/political front, it is worth noting that ever since President Ronald Reagan declared a “War on Drugs” in the US in the 1980s, the use of military technology to patrol the US border also increased dramatically. Scholars point out that by making immigration and drug smuggling synonymous with one another, the US was able to declare immigrants a threat to national safety, justifying the use of the military.<sup>4</sup> In film, it is worth noting that this is the point in cinematic history when movie “aliens” become much less friendly and begin to appear much more menacing. This explains how film scholars began to understand cinematic aliens (and/or “monsters”) as a mediated metaphor for citizenship “aliens.” It is worth noting here how monster theory, such as Yair and Soyer, tells us that:

“[Monsters] can serve the community [...] Yet, at the same time [...] the Golem [or monster] can become bigger than his creator intended him to be, and confine his master’s individuality and destroy his independence.” (61)

Of course, this all leads back to more recent cinematic narratives of alien invasion. In *Independence Day* (1997), *Men in Black* (1997), *Cloverfield* (2008), and *Battle: Los Angeles* (2011), Hollywood is using extremely distorted images of aliens to create large, menacing, hyper-violent, extraterrestrial invaders. In most cases, the aliens in these films are the furthest distorted from humans (think about

---

<sup>4</sup> Today, US Customs and Border Protection are part of The Department of Homeland Defense (for more on this, see T. Dunn, 1996).

the giant lizard in *Cloverfield*, or the alien in *Independence Day* that has arms, tentacles, and *cucaracha* legs).<sup>5</sup>

In response, the “earthlings” in the films deploy the US military to fight off the alien invasion. Naturally then, patriotism ensues. Then, hyper-nationalist, violent patriotism ensues (And ’Murica wins. Yeah!). These films are most telling in how the current popular sentiment of US-Americans is imagining a future without Chicanx/Latinx bodies, where they are fighting off a wave of dehumanized others that are trying to rob, rape, and kill them.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, as Ramírez Berg reminds us the immigrant is transformed into the Hollywood extraterrestrial invader through a process of “distortion,” and of course, distortion is evident in the sympathetic aliens as well as the more monstrous aliens. Distortion (difference from, but also twisting, deforming, perverting, and misrepresenting) is dangerous, because it allows the filmmaker to imagine a non-human creature that is host to all the fears of white nationalism: invading hordes, stealing resources, threatening the White-European majority, and others. He also points out that there may be some left-over guilt from when Europeans colonized the Americas through colonization (*i.e.*, robbery, rape, and murder). Either way, dehumanizing the alien “Other” means that audiences are usually fine with eliminating the alien threat by any means necessary.

As Ramírez Berg observes, dehumanizing people is dangerous. He discusses how in the recent past, patriotic/nationalistic groups like the Nazis used distortion and dehumanization to influence the public attitude toward Jewish people and other minority groups (*e.g.*, LGBTQ communities), which eventually lead to nationalistic (*i.e.*, “patriotic”) eradication of those groups (all in the name of fervent nationalism and/or zealous “patriotism”). We use this discussion of aliens in Hollywood to draw attention to facts such as, (a.) there are still very few

---

<sup>5</sup> Interestingly enough, Mexicans are sometimes depicted in US movies through scenes that include a traditional Spanish folk song called “La Cucaracha.” For example, see *Despicable Me 2* (2013).

<sup>6</sup> For more on the relationships between alien invasion film, immigration rhetoric, and the US military, see Lechuga “Battling”.

representations of Chicanxs/Latinxs in today's popular science-fiction future cinema, (b.) the popular science-fiction industry is full of distorted images of alien invaders that are rooted in nativist and xenophobic attitudes towards cultural Others, and (c.) imagining a future through film is a way to express current tensions in communities and cultural-wide anxieties or zeitgeist. If, in fact, zeitgeist refers to a general thought or trend that defines a specific era or period of time, it is worth noting how zeitgeist can sometimes be constructed through or at the very least reflected in media—the popular press, literature, music, and even film. Therefore, we will now shift our focus to discuss some films that are actually bringing some rare Chicanx/Latinx “futures” to the screen for popular audiences.

### Chicanx/Latinx Futurism in Film: Monster-Making

As we alluded to above (and elsewhere), contemporary social issues and political pressures that are being felt by Chicanx communities are making their way into today's Chicanx films about race, gender equality, sexual orientation, and migration. Filmmakers cannot necessarily predict what the political landscape in the US will be in the future; however, we often see today's political themes in films about tomorrow. For example, if we think about *The Hunger Games* (2012-2015) film franchise for a moment, the film's basic narrative is set in a dystopian future where characters struggle with income inequality, racial prejudice (although the films do not address this as much as the novels do), and media sensationalism. Further, the *Hunger Games* franchise, like most dystopian science-fiction cinema, imagines the ways that technology magnifies the political struggles of its usually white characters. One only needs to consider all the advanced military and communication technology that is used to create the dystopia that Katniss (played by Jennifer Lawrence) must endure to bring social change in her world. As we consider the next few films, it is important to keep these two major science-fiction themes in mind: (1.) today's problems are happening in tomorrow's world, and (2.) technology magnifies those problems.

The extraterrestrial invasion narrative is one such dystopia that, according to Charles Ramírez Berg, is pervasive in the US-American imaginary specifically because it distorts the current national conversation on migration into a sci-fi production of grotesque alien invasion. He writes: “The [science fiction] Alien as

immigrant Hispanic reveals a significant amount of stress within the dominant ideology. Cultural tension about immigrants, coupled with psychological guilt and fear, together with doubts about national identity combine to produce, as they have done in other times of our history, xenophobia, isolationism, and nativism” (182). The filmic production of distorted alien/migrant Other is typically as monstrous. Today’s aliens in film, as Ramírez Berg points out, are frightful, anxiety-producing, dehumanized, and incommunicable Others that are representations of the perceived threats that migrants pose to the white, nativist, and colonial US paradigm. We would also like to add that based on Ramírez Berg’s characterization of alien narratives, we have extracted three types of alien that will be productive for this essay: the robot (like *The Terminator* from the 1984 *Terminator* movie or “Roy Batty” from *Blade Runner* (1982)); the insect invader like those in *Independence Day* (1996); and the mother, like the Queen from the *Aliens* (1985) film sequel.

Beyond just the representational, though, the process of making monstrous aliens is a material one. Early production of frightening, invasive aliens relied on camera and lighting techniques, visual effects like costume and make-up, and eventually, computer-generated imagery (CGI) graphics (Dirks; Lechuga, “Coding”). Interestingly, Ridley Scott’s Xenomorph from the *Alien* franchise utilizes all three of these monster-making techniques at various points. Some of the most memorable scenes in the franchise, like the first time a face-hugger jumps out of an alien egg onto the face of a crewmember of the *USCSS Nostromo*, rely on a combination of blue-screen technology along with lighting and camera techniques to depict horrifying encounters with extraterrestrials. In the more recent films in the franchise, the Xenomorph alien and face-huggers are entirely CGI-generated, allowing filmmakers to create detailed renderings of scary aliens (Lechuga “Coding”). Therefore, monster-making is a process that allows filmmakers to imagine the menacing and frightful bodies that threaten humankind. This process, as we see in the case studies below, most certainly applies to the powerful, insidious, and violent non-human entity that already torments people of color in our communities today—the US corporate techno-state (Thomas).

To begin our own analysis, the three films discussed here—*Children of Men* (2007), *Elysium* (2013), and *Sleep Dealer* (2006)—are all traditional dystopias and each fits into one of the types of alien narratives discussed above, but with a twist. Each of the films is set in the near future in which technology has advanced

beyond its current capacity, but humans have not advanced much beyond the current sets of social ills facing them today—segregation, vast wealth accumulation, environmental decay, and others. More specifically, these films revolve around migration narratives that are set in highly militarized worlds where ecological disarray has motivated the wealthy and powerful elite to hoard access to things like water, health care, and shelter. However, these are not your traditional futuristic, sci-fi thrillers about invasive alien migrants; each film uniquely depicts a world where people of color are being terrorized by the techno-corporate government (although the films are all overlaid on a heteronormative love interest that at times, can be a driving factor for the otherwise resistive actions taken by the protagonists). In other words, the three films take the alien-monster narrative and flip the script, making the alien-migrant character the protagonist while rendering the authoritarian state system of control the antagonist—or in other words, the terrorizing monster.

### The Monster in *Children of Men*

The first film that we would like to discuss more deeply is *Children of Men* (2006). *Children of Men* is a post-apocalyptic dystopia that is set in 2027, where its characters are faced with a world-wide infertility crisis; there have been no children born for more than twenty years. The film was written and directed by Mexican director Alfonso Cuarón and released in the US. And while the film is set in England, the underlying tension at the center of the film is that the government is closing its borders and rounding up immigrants and refugees. There are violent scenes that depict highly-militarized immigration agents capturing and removing refugees. Even though the film is not set in the US, it was written and directed by a Mexican filmmaker in the US, about political struggles facing Latinx communities embedded in the US, and thus, we suggest it warrants attention of critical scholars. On one hand, this movie depicts the brutal treatment of migrants in the future. Furthermore, this film fits Ramírez Berg's mothering alien narrative, in that one protagonist of the film, "Kee" (played by Clare-Hope Ashitey), is a pregnant refugee who is navigating a foreign terrain. Director Cuarón does not represent her as a monster, however, but the militarized techno-state as the monster that is tormenting her.

*Children of Men* utilizes the four strategies to monster-making discussed above to depict the state as violent, frightening, predatory, and latent. First, Cuarón creates a world where fear and violence are omnipresent; state violence is indistinguishable from "terrorist" violence. For example, Julia Echeverría Domingo borrows Zygmunt Bauman's term "liquid fears" to describe how *Children of Men* depicts a state where fear and anxiety spread throughout a surface finding spaces to fill violence. This tone is set from the opening scene, where the male protagonist, "Theo" (played by Clive Owen), enters into a coffee shop where onlookers watch the blaring televised news of the death of "Baby Diego" (who is actually 18-years-old), marking the passing of the world's youngest person. Just as Theo leaves the café with his coffee in hand, an explosion rips apart the scene; scattered body parts, rubble, and smoke are set to the sound of ears ringing and sirens. This scene, like many others in the film, depict widespread chaos and fear in otherwise mundane places. Echeverría Domingo observes:

In *Children of Men* this liquid cinematography serves to introduce the dangers and threats that spread easily and circulate boundlessly within such a fluid environment. One of the most distinguishing features of the constant threats presented in the film is that they usually seem to have neither a cause nor a traceable executor. In a conversation with his friend Jasper after the opening explosion, Theo wonders who may have planted the bomb in the coffee shop... "Fuck knows," to which Jasper replies, "I'll bet it was the government. Every time one of our politicians is in trouble, a bomb explodes." (146)

As we see in the remainder of the film, this invisible state violence is directed squarely at refugees who are the primary victims of the UK's violent regime.

Another element of the film that depicts the predatory and violent nature of the dystopia that Cuarón creates is in the character of "Syd" (played by Peter Mullan). He is an immigration officer who drives a heavily armored vehicle that is used to hunt down refugees. Toward the film's climax, Syd escorts Theo, Kee, and "Miriam" (Kee's midwife played by Pam Ferris) to the Brexhill refugee encampment—a concentration camp for refugees depicted as overcrowded, dark, and filthy—a grotesque appendage of the state obscured from the view of citizenry. Once Syd has violently placed the three in the custody of the soldiers

operating the camp, they are placed on a bus and driven past the gates of the encampment. It is in these scenes that we see the monstrosity of the state. Soldiers strip refugees of their possessions (including their clothes) and line them on the ground. Many are blindfolded with black hoods and trapped in open-air jail cells.

In the final scenes of the film, after Kee has given birth to the first world's first child in nearly two decades, the military moves into the refugee camp to kill a rebel force of refugees, all the while leaving destruction and death in their wake. Soldiers are indiscriminately killing women and children in the streets of Brexhill, while many others hide and cower in fear. Kee and Theo, in trying to outrun the group of rebels and the military, stumble over the bodies of the dead while seeking shelter. They eventually reach a small boat where they are able to escape the violence. In the film's closing scenes, we see the monstrous state finally slay its victim: obscured behind an overcast sky, fighter jets drop several bombs on the encampment, silencing the migrants. Cuarón's strategic cinematic choices portray a future state that spreads violence, fear, and anxiety as it hunts refugees. These choices realign the alien/migrant narrative to elicit hope in refugees and to vilify the white, xenophobic military state apparatus. It is also a comment on the hypermasculinity of the state, embodied by Syd that violently preys on migrant women of color even if it means the end of the world.

### The Monster in *Elysium*

The film *Elysium* (2013) takes a slightly more direct approach to portraying today's issues facing Chicanxs/Latinxs in the US than *Children of Men*. This story is set in 2159, and the earth is a scorched wasteland. The world's white elite have moved to a space station orbiting earth called "Elysium," while everyone else is left to scrape together a living on a barren planet. Not only do the residents of Elysium enjoy fresh air, ample food, clean water, and lavish housing, those on Elysium also have the technology to heal from any illness or injury instantly; those on earth do not. The scenes on earth take place in what is now Southern California, which is not the US anymore, but a Mexican/American hybridized civilization. The film centers on the premise that earthlings (basically, the future "Chicanxs") are suffering from extreme global warming and deep poverty. The main character, "Max" (Matt Damon as a "Chicano" hero of sorts, presumably... or at least a "halfie"... ) becomes ill after exposure to high doses of radiation.

With only days to live, he makes a deal with a notorious *space coyote* named “Spider” (played by Wagner Moura) to fulfill Max’s lifelong dream of visiting Elysium. He leaves his (hetero) love interest, Frey (played by Alice Braga) in an emotional goodbye and sets off on a perilous journey to the satellite. The information Max steals in exchange for passage to Elysium, however, raises the ire of Elysium’s president “Delacourt” (Jodie Foster) who wants to see Max killed. In the end, though, Max reaches Elysium and uploads a hack that gives all Earthlings access and safe passage onto Elysium.

This film is notable for several reasons. First, like *Children of Men*, this film realigns the traditional future science-fiction alien/migrant narrative to portray the migrant as heroic and the techno-militarized state as monstrous. Interestingly, this film also fits the insect-invader typology from Ramírez Berg. After his radiation exposure, Spider surgically implants Max with a robotic exoskeleton which makes Max stronger, faster, and able to communicate with the others on Earth. He transforms into the insect invader with the help of those who wish to create an equal society where citizens of Elysium and Earth are able to benefit from state; not suffer at its hands. The film was directed and written by Neill Blomkamp, the South African director known for the “socially conscious” alien drama *District 9* (2009), and although he is not Chicanx or Latinx, *Elysium* is a film for popular US audiences starring many Latinx characters, that also illuminates political issues facing Chicanxs/Latinxs today.

Secondly, Blomkamp is able to make a filmic statement on the conditions facing Latinx migrants in the US today through monster-making. Like Alfonso Cuarón in *Children of Men*, Blomkamp portrays the monstrosity of the state apparatus that violently controls people of color, preys on their bodies, and promotes fear and panic in spaces where communities of color are struggling to survive the stark inequality imposed by the all-powerful state. For example, when “Kruger” (Sharlto Copely) is sent to hunt down Max because he now possesses the power to open access to Elysium, he is given free rein to kill Max and destroy all that stand in the way. This hyper-violent, masculine military force is able to single-handedly threaten Max, his family, friends, and community without reservation. Moreover, Kruger’s ability move through the terrains allows him to appear and disappear quickly, demonstrating the visible/invisible dynamic that is often attributed to filmic monstrosity.

In other words, “by depicting the Elysian state as one that relies on brute force to maintain social order, *Elysium* addresses real fears that state coercion, not



persuasion, is the norm for maintaining law and order on behalf of the power of the few to exploit people, and nature” (Mirrlees and Pederson 312). The monstrous state is one that is able to reproduce itself through the predator’s capitalist exploitation of Latinx communities stuck in Los Angeles, never reaping the benefits enjoyed by the elites on Elysium. Max’s efforts show how the alien/migrant figure is able to conquer the monstrous militarized techno-state in order to bring safety and security to the vulnerable communities also terrorized by government of Elysium. Blomkamp’s film also places the hope of humanity (namely people of color) in the (male) migrant body and vilifies the white, xenophobic military state apparatus.

### The Monster in *Sleep Dealer*

In a similar vein, the final film that we would like to discuss here is a 2006 production that we feel most closely speaks to the issues facing Latinx migrants in the US today. *Sleep Dealer* was produced, written, and directed by Alex Rivera who is a US-born, New York American and child of Latinx migrants (from Peru). Everything about *Sleep Dealer* suggests that this might be our greatest example of Latinx sci-fi futurism. First, all of its main characters are either Mexican or Chicano, it takes place on both sides of the México/US border, and the film is almost entirely in Spanish with some US-American English here and there.

The film begins in Oaxáca, México where “Memo” (played by Luis Fernando Peña) farms with his father by day and tinkers as an amateur radio hacker by night. The Del Rio Water Company, which owns the rights to the water used to sustain the family farm, finds out that Memo is a hacker, accuses him of “water terrorism,” and uses a drone attack to destroy the family’s house, killing Memo’s father in the attack. This leads Memo to leave Oaxaca and journey to the northern border to find work. On his way, he meets a journalist (and love interest) “Luz” (Lionel Valera), who records his story using an internet memory technology that allows people to record and sell memories online, which will be important later.

Once he arrives in Tijuana, he gets a job at a factory called a “Cybracero,” or a cyber-bracero (harkening to the real-life Bracero Program of decades past). In these factories, workers like Memo plug into virtual reality computers that operate machines in the US, doing jobs that are typically associated with migrant labor—like farm work and construction. This fulfills the final typology of Ramírez

Berg’s alien narratives; Memo is the robot alien/migrant that appears in the US as a cybernetic immigrant. *Sleep Dealer*, while not quite as popular as *Children of Men* and/or *Elysium*, continues a tradition of Chicanx independent filmmaking (see Avant-Mier and Lechuga, 18). Specifically, *Sleep Dealer* depicts how Chicanx and Mexican characters navigate the treacherous terrain of modern US capitalism, describes the ways that technology is making it easier to exploit Chicanxs/Latinxs in the labor force, and demonstrates how Latinx filmmakers are tackling issues of migration and transnational globalization in their own films (Villazaña, 2013). Rivera accomplishes this feat by portraying the US industrialized, military tech-state as a movie monster.

After Memo and Luz begin a (hetero) relationship, she tells him that she has sold the memory of meeting him to a man in the US. In many ways, this aspect of the film plays into a longstanding stereotype in Chicano Cinema, where Latinas are often portrayed as manipulative seductresses (see Avant-Mier and Lechuga). This man who buys Memo’s dreams, “Rudy” (Jacob Vargas), is a drone operator for the Del Rio Water Co. Rudy is a Chicano (or, Mexican-American) and a drone operator for Del Rio who begins to feel immense guilt over his role in destroying Memo’s home. The drone represents the invisible state force that can torment communities of color without having to share a landscape with them. Like Kruger in *Elysium*, the drones and their operators unleash violent state power from the skies and are able to disappear quickly. They are violent, as demonstrated in the scene where Rudy destroys Memo’s Oaxaca home with a missile fired from the drone, killing Memo’s father and leaving the home in flames. The drone is predatory; it hunts for “eco-terrorists” that threaten the industrial, militarized state’s hold on water rights with increased surveillance and weaponry. It is a representation of the power of the state to strike fear into communities of color under the guise of national organization (or *i.e.*, nationalism/patriotism). Rivera uses a specific strategy to show Memo as the victim of state violence by making the US militarism into the monster.

The film ends when Rudy is able to access Memo’s memories through Luz, and realizes the harm that he has brought to Memo. This guilt eventually drives Rudy to cross the border into Tijuana from San Diego, California where he tries to locate Memo and Luz. We see in these scenes that there is a tense interaction between Rudy and Memo that symbolizes of a history of tense and conflicted relationships between Chicanxs (Mexican-Americans) and Mexican nationals that lingers even today. Once Rudy can apologize for his actions, the three characters

work together to hack into Del Rio's drone system, hijack a drone, and use it to destroy a dam controlled by the Del Rio Water Co (reminiscent of the final scenes in the original *Star Wars* (1977) in which the lowly rebels are attacking the evil empire's Death Star). This releases water back to Memo's family farm and prosperity back to rural México. Like the other films, the monster in *Sleep Dealer* is not killed, only injured, which creates a temporary space of liberation for the migrant/alien protagonist.

*Sleep Dealer* depicts how Chicanx and Mexican characters navigate the treacherous terrain of modern US capitalism. The film describes the ways that technology is making it easier to exploit Chicanxs/Latinxs in the labor force, demonstrates how Latinx filmmakers are tackling issues of migration and transnational globalization in their films (Villazana), and exposes audiences to a science-fiction narrative that does not imagine a future of just white people, but a future for Mexicans, Chicanxs, and even others (although the film lacks a nuanced depiction of gender, often relying in heteronormative tropes to develop the storyline). As Villazana puts it, the film:

“...happens to be situated in the border between Mexico and the United States [...] the representation of Mexicans as perilous aliens is prominent throughout the film; they are portrayed as terrorists to be eliminated without giving them any possibility of defense [...] and] there are strong references to the so-called ‘assimilation process’ that has been at the heart of the research into transnational and migration studies.”

In sum, while the narratives of *Children of Men*, *Elysium*, and *Sleep Dealer* reverse the conventions of the monstrous alien trope, audiences are still left with the violent, predatory, and often invisible terror-state of control that is tormenting people of color both on screen and in our day-to-day lives (in the recent past and present). As Merla-Watson and Olguín argue,

Perhaps most saliently, the Latin@ speculative arts remind us that we cannot imagine our collective futures without reckoning with the hoary *ghosts* of colonialism and modernity that continue to exert force through globalization and neoliberal capitalism. (4)

As we established above, Chicanx/Latinx science fiction representations are statements about the present as much as they are about the future. The monster-

makers that we analyzed here—Cuarón, Blomkamp, and Rivera (respectively)—have only shown us a slight glimpse of the true nature of such real-life monsters, and what they are showing us is rather frightening.

### Conclusion: Creating a Chicanx/Latinx “Future” through Film

At the outset of this research project, we established a rationale for investigating Chicanx/Latinx representations in popular science-fiction and fantasy films in which Latinxs are mostly absent, or can only be understood as horrifying and monstrous. We further investigated a theory of monstrosity in which various scholars have established how filmic monsters symbolize characters on the margins and in hidden sectors of society. An important theoretical assumption in recent scholarship on monstrosity, and that informs our research, is the nature of monstrosity in that it can be both negative (through omission or through stereotypical images of Others as monstrous) but also positive (at least potentially, through recognizing how people of color actively identify with aliens and monsters... specifically as a response to images of militarized state domination). Moving forward, we noted how our analysis relies on several filmic tropes established by Chicano film scholar Ramírez Berg—the robot, the insect invader, and the alien mother.

In our analysis in the previous section, we investigated three films (*Children of Men*, *Elysium*, and *Sleep Dealer*) and demonstrated how these films advance Chicanx/Latinx representation(s) in film through fairly accurate depictions of Chicanxs/Latinxs. These cinematic Chicanxs/Latinxs are mostly absent from the power centers of the narratives, and Chicanxs/Latinxs are mostly portrayed as being subjugated by a techno-military-industrial state complex. As we argue above, if cinematic Latinxs are almost always a sort of “monster” or typically symbolize some horrifying image for the implied mainstream U.S. audience, the three films analyzed here are significant because of how they invert cinematic conventions and subvert cultural assumptions. The films take the position of the Chicanx/Latinx subject who is actively resisting military-industrial terror and/or techno-state control. Admittedly, while these films subverted attitudes towards migrants, they also fall short of opening an intersectional speculative imaginary inclusive to gender and sexual fluidity.

Furthermore, we offer this interpretation as a contribution to critical scholarship through how (1) film-making Others are actually constructing a sci-fi/fantasy “future” in which Chicanxs and Latinxs actually exist, (2) cinematic Others are actively resisting being relegated to the margins of “the future,” (3) these recent films reject convenient tropes of Hispanics, Latinxs, Chicanx, other people of color, immigrants, and refugees as alien and monstrous, in order to project more enlightened visions of humanity, and perhaps most important, (4) these recent films dare to reverse the cinematic gaze by calling attention to how military-industrial might and state-induced terror are the actual monsters that terrorize humans.

Moreover, our contribution here is significant because it confirms and contributes to existing theoretical formulations (*e.g.*, Loza) that assert how we should actively “reimagine ourselves, to dis-identify with empire” and how we should “embrace affinity with those that refuse to be colonized (148). As Loza observes,

We need fabulist fictions that decolonize our imaginations, [science-fiction] that gives us the tools to combat prejudice and the courage to craft new and freer worlds [...] The power to imagine is the first step toward decolonizing our future, past, and present. (149)

We submit that the three films analyzed here are evidence for popular films contributing to those ends.

To end, we take up the questions that we posed at the outset: Why is science-fiction important for Chicanxs (or Latinxs), or as a possible extension of Chicano movement politics? Why should we care about Chicanxs in sci-fi movies? Two reasons: first, Alex Rivera, director of *Sleep Dealer*, suggests that the cinematic future is where a culture can imagine itself. If only European-American/White US filmmakers are the privileged ones with access to making science-fiction images, then it’s highly likely that those images will continue to exclude Black/African-American, Chicanx, LGBTQ, and immigrant images, essentially erasing these Others from the future. According to Rivera, *Sleep Dealer* might be the first popular US film where people from the developing world imagined themselves in the future (Rivera). Films like *Sleep Dealer* are a way for Latinx filmmakers to carve out a space for Latinxs in the future, because we can’t wait around for Hollywood to do it. Films such as these demonstrate the need to continue to fight

for equal and positive representations in popular cinema that not only describe our history as a culture, but our culture’s “future” as well.

Second, as many have already suggested (like Merla-Watson and Olguín, and Thomas), many people of color in the US are already living in a dystopia. Many Black and Latinx communities already are being surveilled closely by the state’s advanced technologies (such as drones, police databases, and others). Many Black and Latinx communities are living in poverty, vulnerable to the violent changes in the global climate, and unable to shelter themselves from the effects of the capitalist, White-settler colonial projects. Many Black and Latinx communities are exposed to the brutal force of US state-sanctioned violence in the form of police brutality, incarceration, deportation, a lack of access to healthcare, lead-poisoned water, or murder: everything from the death penalty to being left to die unsheltered and starving after a natural disaster.

Interestingly, the recent Academy Awards ceremony in March 2018 concluded with Mexican director Guillermo del Toro winning multiple Oscars for “Best Picture” and “Best Director” (and other awards) for the sci-fi/fantasy film *The Shape of Water* (2018)—a film about a not so human creature and the monstrous White, military state trying to kill it. The director closed his acceptance speech by commenting on how sci-fi/fantasy films can be used for social commentary.<sup>7</sup> As the speech ended, del Toro called for a celebration of sci-fi films for such ends and also implored others to follow. With that in mind, we conclude this examination of cinematic Chicanxs/Latinxs by asking a few questions to consider for the future of Chicanx/Latinx “futures” in film: How can we continue to use science-fiction narratives to fight the distortion and stereotypes that persist about Chicanxs and Latinxs in general? How can filmmakers continue to represent Chicanx and/or Latinx experiences in the science-fiction future while being allies to other groups that are also being oppressed? How can filmmakers draw more attention to gender and possibly use speculative science fiction to create more inclusive spaces for non-binary gender identification? How can Chicanxs use technology to better express their experiences in today’s media-rich

---

<sup>7</sup> For example, see B. Bishop (2018, March 4), <https://www.theverge.com/2018/3/4/17078958/guillermo-del-toro-wins-best-director-best-picture-oscar-2018>.

society? What challenges do Latinxs and Chicanxs face in a future of strict (and even militarized) immigration control?<sup>8</sup> While we cannot offer any specific answers to these questions at this point, we do hope and expect that future film and media scholars will take up such questions in the (Chicanx?/Latinx?) future(s). Likewise, we hope and expect that future filmmakers will do so as well, so we look forward to “future” Chicanx/Latinx representation(s) in popular films.

### Works Cited:

- Avant-Mier, Roberto A. and Lechuga, Michael. *Cine-Mexicans: An Introduction to Chicano Cinema*. Kendall Hunt Publishing, 2018.
- Calafell, Bernadette M. *Monstrosity, Performance, and Race in Contemporary Culture*. Peter Lang, 2015.
- Castillo, David. “Zombie Masses: Monsters for the Age of Global Capitalism.” *Zombie Talk: Culture, History, Politics*, edited by David Castillo., Palgrave, 2016, pp. 39–62.
- Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. *Monster theory: Reading culture*. University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- Cousins, Mark, creator. *The Story of Film: An Odyssey*. Music Box Films, 2011.
- Dirks, Tim. *Film Milestones in Visual and Special Effects*. AMC Filmsite, 2015, [www.filmsite.org/visualeffects.html](http://www.filmsite.org/visualeffects.html). Accessed 11 Sep. 2018.

---

<sup>8</sup> For more about the relationship between film and the militarization of the México/US border, see Lechuga “Coding”.

- do Vale, Simone. "Trash Mob: Zombie Walks and the Positivity of Monsters in Western Popular Culture." *At The Interface / Probing The Boundaries*, vol. 70, 2010, pp.194-198.
- Dunn, Timothy. *The Militarization of the U.S.-Mexico Border, 1978-1992: Low-Intensity Conflict Doctrine Comes Home*. CMAS Books University of Texas at Austin, 1997.
- Echeverría Domingo, Julia. "Liquid Cinematography and the Representation of Viral Threats in Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men*." *Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies* vol. 37, no.2, 2015, pp. 137-153.
- Fregoso, Rosa Linda. *The Bronze Screen*. University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
- Geczy, Adam, and Karaminas, Vicki. "Lady Gaga: American Horror Story, Fashion, Monstrosity and the Grotesque." *Fashion Theory*, vol. 21, no. 6, 2017, pp. 709-731.
- Lechuga, Michael. "Coding Intensive Movement with Technologies of Visibility: Alien Affect." *Capacious: A Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2017, pp. 83-97.
- Lechuga, Michael. "Battling Identity Warfare on the Imagined U.S.-México Border: Performing Immigrant Alien in *Independence Day* and *Battle: Los Angeles*." *Defining Communities: Identity and Otherness in the Rhetorics of U.S. Immigration*, edited by E. Johanna Hartelius, Penn State University Press, 2015, pp. 240-266.
- Loza, Susana. *Speculative Imperialisms: Monstrosity and Masquerade in Postracial Times*. Lexington Books, 2007.
- Merla-Watson, Cathryn J, and Olguín, B.V. *Altermundos: Latin@ Speculative Literature, Film, and Popular Culture*. UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2017.
- Mirrlees, Tanner and Pederson, Isabela. "Elysium as a Critical Dystopia." *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2016, pp. 305-322.



Nericcio, William A. *Tex{t}-Mex: Seductive Hallucinations of the "Mexican" in America*. The University of Texas Press, 2007.

Ramírez Berg, Charles. *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion, and Resistance*. The University of Texas Press, 2002.

Rivera, Alex. "Lecture by Alex Rivera at The 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Platform Summit," October 2014, Atlanta, GA.

Thomas, Sheree Renée. "Forward." *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, edited by Walidah Imarish and adrienne maree brown, AK Press, 2015, pp. 1–2.

Yair, Gad, and Soyer, Michaela. *The Golem in German Social Theory*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2008.

Villazaña, Libia. "Transnational Virtual Mobility as a Reification of Deployment of Power: Exploring Transnational Processes in the Film *Sleep Dealer*." *Transnational Cinemas*, vol. 4, 2013, pp. 217-230.

## The Future is [White] Female: *American Horror Story: Coven* and Toxic White Femininity

MARYLOU R. NAUMOFFF

Hanna Rosin's book, *The End of Men: And the Rise of Women* captures current popular sentiments regarding changing gender roles in the United States. Case studies and interviews reveal that for the first time in history the perception is that women are surpassing men's accomplishments in education and work. Many feel that Americans are not experiencing a leveling of the playing field, but rather, an inversion of it. As women become increasingly visible and influential in male-dominated spaces, representations of women in television and film respond accordingly. New possibilities in the social allow for believable portrayals of strong, capable women that demonstrate, not only women's potential but also their ability to do all that men can do. Challenges to long-held conventions can conversely reanimate staid representations of women that should no longer register as sensical.

*American Horror Story: Coven*, appearing in October 2013 on the FX Channel, presents women as mystical, evil, and seductive, as monstrous. This article argues that *Coven* seeks to negotiate the rise of monstrous women by offering a more acceptable version of the empowered woman that reasserts white, male patriarchal authority by promoting toxic white femininity. The analysis reveals how the nation's legacy of white supremacy continues to inform representations of race and gender. *Coven* exposes the toxic white femininity that continues to not only permeate contemporary feminism, but also supports the claims of a disgruntled white America. Using an intersectional approach to unpacking portrayals of good and bad witches as they are connected to race and gender, the analysis reveals that ultimately *Coven* tempers the acceptance of monstrous, empowered woman by presenting her as a woman that maintains conventions and perpetuates white patriarchy.

The horror genre in general is an ideal site to examine questions of gender and race. Levina and Bui assert that monstrous narratives have long represented  
The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 6, No. 2 & 3  
Copyright © 2018

collective and social anxieties, but they are particularly needed in this present decade because these stories tap into the uncertainty over the changing nature of American culture and society (1-2). *Coven* presents viewers with a landscape to grapple with the inevitability of the “rise of women.” “In horror cinema, the recurrence of women-as-monster (witch, vampire, succubus, possessed body, primal mother, femme fatale) suggests that the dread of woman arises not from her lack but from her eviscerating power” (Kelly 86). Studies looking at the intersection of race and gender are necessary to correct and expand the years of theory that look at women in horror through the lens of assumed whiteness (Brooks 21). More specifically, “*Coven* is a particularly important site to examine issues of race because it directly addresses race, racial difference, and racism through multiple plot lines” (LeBlanc 2).

*American Horror Story: Coven* aired in the fall of 2013. In this moment, Americans were confronted with many challenges to white centrality. Our cultural and political terrain became rife with white male victimage beginning with the 2008 economic collapse that was followed by the election of the nation’s first black president (Johnson 17). Calafell argues that the “rise in conservatism and nostalgia can be tied to the 2008 election of Barack Obama” (76). Heteronormativity, which directly connected to the perpetuation and constitution of white masculinity, was compromised as “don’t ask, don’t tell” policies had been repealed in the military and the promise of marriage equality nationwide seemed more possible than ever. If this is not enough of a challenge to white hetero-patriarchy, some of the most influential women in America were black women. The beloved mother of the nation and first lady, Michelle Obama was touted as the queen of health and style. No one could match the impact and following of the musical artist Beyoncé. And finally rounding out the list is one of the most influential people and thought leaders of the last several decades, Oprah Winfrey. These powerful women present a double-threat to white patriarchy. As all of these assaults are mounted against white patriarchy something as archaic and reoccurring as the figure of the witch provides the perfect villain to quell national anxieties.

## American Horror Story: Coven

*American Horror Story* is unique from many other television series in that each season is written more like a miniseries because each show run contains a different storyline and theme. The show is praised by critics and fans for its edgy storylines, cinematic filming, and the casting of well-known and respected actors. *Coven* is season three of the series and aired October 2013 through January 2014. Season three focuses on a coven of witches and their rivals that practice voodoo. The coven of Salem descendants hides under the guise of a boarding school. The headmistress, Cordelia Foxx, is a committed and studious witch that has lived in the shadow of her powerful mother, Fiona, her entire life. Fiona is the “Supreme,” or most powerful witch, that took her position by killing her mentor and is now seeking out the next “Supreme.” As the new head witch realizes her powers and matures, Fiona begins to die. This creates danger and tension in the household for the four young witches enrolled at the school. In addition to the in-house issues, the coven must also deal with the wrath of the high voodoo priestess Marie Laveau. A longstanding truce between the covens resulted in segregating New Orleans into white coven and black coven territories. Voodoo high priestess Marie Laveau threatens war because Fiona digs up a 200-year-old slave mistress, the sadistic and brutal Delphine LaLaurie, that Laveau had cursed with immortality and buried alive as punishment for the unspeakable torture and murder of her love. This division is put on pause when the coven and voodoo priestess are forced to form an alliance when faced with the threat of witch hunters.

*Coven* not only addresses gender roles and their corresponding power relations but issues of race as well. Marie Laveau is an immortal voodoo priestess that resents the coven of Salem descendants because she believes that the Salem witches were generously given magic by an African house girl. The coven of predominantly white women would not even possess the craft if their ancestors had not taken that gift so many years ago, perverted it, and used it to gain power on the magical playing field. The white women’s procurement of magic from an African woman directly mirrors colonial relations. The fictional erasure of women of color from the history of magic is consistent with actual American history. When recalling the Salem witches, history has tended to omit one of the first three women put on trial, Tituba. She was an “Amerindian slave” that admitted to learning “techniques of divination” from her encounters with African and Creole culture and religion on a plantation in Barbados (Breslaw 21-39). Without her

testimony Breslaw speculates that the trial might not have happened (108). What should be noted is that Tituba did not view herself as practicing witchcraft in the sense that her accusers were defining it. She believed in the nuances of white and dark magic, and therefore did not see her practice of witchcraft as evil (Breslaw 109).

The show harnesses many longstanding archetypes of women in film and culture. The female characters can be grouped into one or several common characterizations of women: (bad) mother, whore, bitch, good girl/bad girl, and the selfless woman. The male characters on the show are predominantly emasculated men destroyed by women with the exception of a few characters that represent conventional, heteronormative (white) masculinity. This article cannot speak to all these different characterizations. This analysis will focus on how the narrative generates two types of witches: the “bad witches” that represent repugnant, monstrous women that seek to dismantle white patriarchy and the “good witches” that represent women, that may be powerful, but do not completely disrupt the “natural” order. I argue that these two types of witches represent the promise and threat of two different Americas. Women have long been viewed as the “body” of the nation because she gives life to the next generation of citizens and rears them, shaping their minds and morals. Amy Kaplan cites Catherine Beecher’s 1841 *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*, “to American women, more than to any others on earth, is committed the exalted privilege of extending over the world those blessed influences, that are to renovate degraded men” (18). Even though the women of *AHS: Coven* are monstrous they still represent the potential futures of the nation.

### *The Bad Witch*

The bad witches, Fiona Goode and Marie Laveau, are those women that present a great threat to white patriarchy. Both witches are the elders of their two covens and could easily be conceived of as representing a bygone era. As will be illustrated by presenting these two women as figures that make more sense in the past, they also promote the belief in a post-racial, post-feminist era in America. Two notions that work in their own way to secure a white supremacist nation.

While virtually all mothers on *Coven* are “bad” mothers, none as stereotypically so as Fiona Foxx. She is consumed with her own power and enjoyment. She abandons her daughter Cordelia at the academy leaving her to be

raised by fellow witch Myrtle Snow (a good mother figure). Fiona demonstrates many times that her sole concern is her vanity and own survival.

Fiona represents all things that would be viewed as repugnant by white patriarchy, particularly the alt-right. She is enervating, power-hungry, and a bad mother. Her control and emasculation of men is illustrated most cruelly by her treatment of the coven's longtime butler Spalding. He is so loyal to Fiona that when his tongue was cursed to speak the truth he cut it out to protect her. He is further cast in less than masculine terms by being shown collecting dolls and wearing women's nightwear while having tea parties with them. Spalding in turn represents what the future could hold for men if women like Fiona come into power.

Given Fiona's age she could be viewed as representing the second-wave of feminism (1960s – 1970s), and all the progress the women of that movement set in motion. With the perceived success of feminist activity of the 1970s a wave of feminist backlash discourse begins circulating in culture and society. Amanda LeBlanc asserts that Fiona "represents contemporary 'enlightened' anti-racism" because of her famous tirade when confronting LaLaurie, "there is nothing I hate more than a racist" (6). Fiona's character is consistent with a common type of "colorblind" white folk that perceive at the least themselves, if not the entire nation, as beyond race. Despite how despicable Fiona may be, she appears to be both post-racial and the deliverance of all that anti-feminists predicted would become of women if we achieve gender equality.

The second woman that exemplifies the "bad witch" camp is Marie Laveau. The portrayals of Salem witches versus voodoo witches is heavily laden with racial codes that reference longstanding constructions of black femininity. Voodoo horror has been connected to characterizations of black women as "odd and primitive" (Means Coleman 38). Since the beginning of the film medium Voodoo depicts danger and is often achieved through the presence of a Voodoo Queen (Means Coleman 49).

Marie Laveau can be read (perhaps too simplistically) through several of the "controlling images" of black women identified by Patricia Hill-Collins. Laveau is portrayed as an "overly aggressive women" that emasculate her lovers (75). Brooks asserts that the monstrosity of black women largely stems from the stereotype of the black Superwoman, also known as the strong black women (25). This stereotype was popularized by the 1950s television character Sapphire (*Amos 'n Andy*). Sapphire characters are black women "depicted as evil, treacherous,

bitchy, stubborn, and hateful” (hooks, *Ain't I a Woman* 85). LeBlanc notes that these controlling images are consistent with Laveau's characterization “that relies on stereotypes of a particularly threatening and exotic kind of black woman, even as she is presented as strong and capable” (9).

While *Coven* can be critiqued for lazily referencing stereotypical and dangerous representations of black women, it should be noted that Laveau's character also harkens back to cinematic representations of black women as vanquishers of white supremacy and this reference serves an important narrative function. Just as Fiona could be said to represent the white feminists of the second-wave of feminism, Marie Laveau is the resurrection of female characters from that same era featured in Blaxploitation films. Her character calls to mind what Means Coleman has identified as the Enduring Woman, the 1970s powerful black woman that uses voodoo to combat racism (120). “Much like the White Final Girl, Black women stare down death. However, these Black women are not going up against some boogeyman; rather, often their battle is with racism and corruption” (Means Coleman 132). One can connect the Enduring Woman back to Tituba and her observation that voodoo was not solely evil, and it is more about how you yield and practice the power that matters. Tituba and the Enduring Woman point to a continued misunderstanding, misrepresentation, and vilification of cultures that are outside of Eurocentric standards of acceptability. Ultimately and importantly, Laveau's embodiment of the Enduring Woman's qualities make her more terrifying and monstrous than Fiona because she directly challenges and threatens not only patriarchy, but white supremacy as well.

These two witches pose a threat to white patriarchy individually, but when combined their powers represent the ultimate threat. One of the few conventionally masculine characters, Harrison Renard is the patriarch of his family that have been witch hunters for generations (which espouse rhetoric reminiscent of white supremacist and ethnic purity). Renard is also the CEO for a billionaire assets management corporation. It is interesting to note that the great white, corporate hegemon is not only a successful capitalist but his real purpose is to kill witches; to kill monstrous women with unpredictable and dangerous powers. Fiona and Marie Laveau join forces to cut off the supplies to the corporation and thus render it bankrupt. When Renard and the witches meet to come to a negotiation they refuse his offer of a 100-year truce between the hunters and the witches. They demand that the witch hunting must stop or they will kill him. He does not relent, resulting in his death. It is at this moment in the series

when it seems as though the notion that women are the destroyer of men has been realized. White, heteronormative masculinity has been defeated by the unification of the coven Supreme and Voodoo priestess.

Attacks on masculinity in the United States is also a direct threat to the centrality of whiteness. They have been inextricably linked since the founding of the nation because white men create the institutions and systems that guaranteed their hegemonic authority and privilege. The remasculinization of American culture has been ongoing since the end of the Vietnam War (Daniels 54). This is largely due to the proliferation of social movements of the 1960s and 1970s that called into question white hetero-patriarchy. This decades long struggle has led to a crisis of masculinity where "... the growing power of women and sexual minorities is seen as a zero-sum game for 'real men' by attacking those who are perceived as threatening the status quo" (Blazak 177). "[F]eminism, multiculturalism, homosexuality, and Christian-bashing are all tied together, part and parcel of the New World order... so that multicultural textbooks, women in government, and legalized abortion can individually be taken as signs of the impending New World Order" (Ferber 155). It is because of the perceived threat of this New World Order that Fiona and Marie represent the embodiment of the ultimate hazard to white patriarchy and their generational representation holds powerful symbolism given that they stand-in for the second-wave of feminism and the Black Power movement.

Amy King provides an assessment of the significance of the alliance of Fiona and Marie, that *Coven's* "very obvious equating of women (both black and white) with magic underscores popular fears about women's power that, if united, would could undo patriarchal structures" (566). Their alliance demonstrates what is possible when white and black women form alliances; when they see that their liberation is intertwined. Such an alliance would also represent the end of the white supremacy and toxic white femininity that has plagued feminism in America since the nineteenth century and has prevented the alliance of white women with women of color.

The criticisms of white feminists have existed in the United States since the days of abolition where even though white women were seeking to free black women, as well as black men, white women rarely viewed or treated black women as equals and often refused to organize with them. As struggles for suffrage quickened in the United States many white women withdrew from struggles for race equality and focused on securing the right for *white* women to



vote. Angela Davis cites the Seneca Falls Declaration as the marker of the historical division between black and white women as evidenced by the fact that black women were in attendance at Seneca Falls but white women's documents make no mention of them (Davis 54). Barbara Andolsen addresses the shortsightedness of the majority of white suffragettes in the 1920s:

The moral irony of the American woman suffrage movement is that the suffragists committed the very sin for which they called others to task... They insisted on the universality of human rights principles when they were the beneficiaries of an application of those principles; but in their concern to defend their own rights, they gradually turned away from situations, in which they were called upon to demand unequivocally those same rights for black women and men. (130)

This "sin" continued into the next moment of increased feminist activity, often called the second wave of feminism, spanning the 1960s and 1970s. A group of black feminists formed the Combahee River Collective in 1974 and wrote the definitive text, "A Black Feminist Statement," which is arguably the theorization of feminism that Kimberlé Crenshaw coined as "intersectionality" in her 1991 article "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." The CRC state "... we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and we see our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking" (233). Fiona and Laveau's victory demonstrate the potential of a truly intersectional feminism to disrupt patriarchy; when women are capable of seeing that they are united by a shared identity (witch, woman) and that one cannot ignore one group of women to ensure the advancement of the other. In short, the end of toxic white femininity within feminist movements.

*Coven* would conclude with a tidy ending if the destruction of Harrison Renard were the end of the story. The victory over Renard is short-lived as both women are punished in horrible ways. Due to tensions within the coven, which is mostly because of Fiona's unwillingness to let her power flow into the next Supreme, the story continues. Fiona tricks the coven into believing she has been killed resulting in the necessity to identify the next Supreme. She does this so the next leader will be revealed and she can kill her to capture her power and remain

living. In the end Fiona relents and dies in her daughter's embrace. Viewers see Fiona trapped in her own personal hell. She is stuck in a small house in the woods with her psychotic lover, serial killer the Axeman. With the Axeman she is not able to use her mystical powers to control him. Fiona's end seems a fitting punishment as she is relegated to the realm of the home, serving a man for all of eternity.

Marie Laveau meets an arguably more horrid end. Delphine LaLaurie is a demented eighteenth century socialite that committed unspeakable acts towards her slaves. She becomes the target of Marie's wrath when she kills Laveau's lover for having sex with her daughter (that the daughter initiated). Delphine is placed under a curse that grants her immortality so that Marie can bury her alive, where she remains until Fiona digs her up. In the end Marie is robbed of her immortality because Delphine dismembers her and she is not able to fulfill her promise to Papa Legma (a demon) of delivering one newborn sacrifice each year so he banishes her to hell. The combined fates of Fiona and Marie serve as warning to those that seek to disrupt the authority of white patriarchy, that dare to be monstrous women. The "good witches" of *Coven* provide a contrast to the cautionary tale of Fiona and Marie by presenting viewers with the preferred potential future of female empowerment.

### *The Good Witch*

Cordelia, Queenie, and to a lesser degree Zoe, all serve as not only the good witch but as representations of the future of empowered women, of the future of feminism. Just as Fiona and Marie represented the generation of empowered women that experienced the height of their activism in the 1970s, these three women represent third-wave and millennial-aged feminists. While Marie and Fiona represent challenges to white patriarchy, these three witches present a vision of feminism that masquerades as women empowerment when it actually reinforces white supremacy and masculinity.

Just as the "bad witch" group contains an archetypal white women and black woman, so too does the "good witch" pair. Queenie is a teenaged, black witch that grew up in the foster system of Detroit. She possesses the unusual gift of being a voodoo doll in reverse. If she harms herself the damage will appear on the body of the person she is focusing on. Queenie is initially presented as angry, just like Marie, but that changes by the end of the season. When the witches in the

Robichaux's Academy meet Queenie there is a lot tension. Once she meets Marie she decides to join the Voodoo coven for a brief time before returning to the Academy to complete the Supreme trials. As the series ends, Queenie has found her place among her (white) coven and by Cordelia's side. Queenie becomes the "model minority" in that we no longer see her resisting white authority or succumbing to stereotypical behaviors. She reassures viewers that an idealized post-racial America where minority groups assimilate to white supremacy is possible and benefits Queenie.

The ultimate symbol of goodness (i.e. white feminine heteronormativity) and the future is Cordelia Foxx. She is Fiona's abandoned daughter that was raised by coven member, Myrtle. At the beginning of the series Cordelia is a gifted teacher, that cares for the girls like her own daughters, and is longing for children of her own. She is also married to an ordinary man (that is later revealed to be the son of Harrison Renard). Despite her inability to have children she is the best mother in the series.

The Supreme trial uncovers that the Supreme is not one of the young witches but rather Cordelia. This is an important point in the storyline for several reasons, by making Cordelia the Supreme the audience is provided with a corrective for all the negative portrayals of women as whore, bitch, and evil. Cordelia in many ways represents conventional and safe forms of female power. She does not seek to overpower others but rather empowers them, thus providing an acceptable form of female power to the viewers.

Cordelia possessed a strong desire to be a mother but was sadly unable to bear children. She in many ways plays the role of the good mother in how she cares for and disciplines the young witches. Like a good mother and woman, she puts the well-being of the coven before herself. She was rendered blind due to an acid attack made by the witch hunters. This allowed her to develop a second sight. She was able to use this sight to sense danger that threatened the coven. Once her eyesight was restored by her surrogate mother, Myrtle Snow, she is distressed to find that she has lost her second sight. In an attempt to protect and preserve the coven Cordelia stabs herself in both eyes with gardening shears rendering herself blind and disfigured. This act demonstrates the expected female qualities of selflessness and the instinct to protect her family unit.

Cordelia also does not desire power. She just wants to serve the coven and teach young witches. She does not come to power because she wants it but because Myrtle Snow encourages her to do so. It seems as though Madison may

be the next supreme and if that were to happen it would just be a repeating of the events that took place when Fiona was the Supreme. Cordelia ultimately decides to take the leadership role and realize her full power, not for selfish reasons, but for the greater good. She is even admonished by Myrtle Snow when she tells Cordelia that her “tasteful modesty is out of fashion” (“The Seven Wonders”).

Cordelia also creates racial harmony within the coven by appointing Queenie as an equal council member with Zoe (a young white witch). While Cordelia embraces Queenie and gives her an important place in the planning of the coven’s future, it is only under the condition that Queenie assimilates to the ways of the coven and practice Salem, i.e. white, magic. Queenie’s appointment to the council demonstrates that the Coven, like America, is founded on equality; whereby equality is premised on (a hegemonic form of) sameness. LeBlanc describes Queenie’s assimilation,

The last moments of the season show Queenie, a black witch, and Zoe, a white witch, accepting a position on Cordelia’s council. After Queenie tenderly reminds Cordelia that ‘I have your back,’ we see her descending the staircase of the (stark white) coven foyer surrounded by her all white peers and superiors. She has been fully and completely integrated into the white coven. (11)

This final scene supports Amanda LeBlanc’s overall thesis that *Coven* represents a post-racial America by presenting racism that exists in the past via the repugnant character of Delphine LaLaurie and by doing so presents the *false* notion that America has moved beyond the horrors and injustices of that past (3). If Queenie delivers on the promises of a post-racial America, Cordelia represents a postfeminist one. Calafell citing Jess Butler urges us to not merely think of post-feminism as backlash but also as achievement of gender equality rendering feminist activism obsolete and a reviving of natural sexual differences (76). Cordelia not only represents the championing of more conventional femininity but also reasserts the centrality of whiteness and white authority.

In the end Fiona relents and dies in her daughter’s embrace, the rebellious witch and “whore” Madison has died at the hands of Kyle, and Marie Laveau has been banished to hell. Thus, all the dark magic has been purged from the earth. The source of this dark magic was ultimately the result of the pursuit of power, vanity, jealousy, and revenge, in short monstrous women. Cordelia is the new

leader of the coven with her former beauty restored and with this an assurance that the world is safe from evil, monstrous women. She perpetuates the historical focus of feminism on “primarily white bourgeois women” (hooks, *Margin to Center* 43). She is the promise of a proliferation of safe (white) female power and a warning of what is to come if the dangerous women are left unchecked.

*Cordelia Foxx: Tradwife of Coven*

It stands to reason that as masculinity is called into question white supremacy groups will gain members. Because American masculinity is premised on whiteness an attack on one is viewed as an attack on the other. These groups restore a white man’s sense of place in a society that no longer resembles the America of his father and grandfather. Whiteness has long been used as a way to downplay class inequalities and divert the attention of white men away from economic disparities. Many white Americans idealize the mythic period of prosperity when blue-collar jobs and G.I. bills were plentiful, enabling most families to thrive. As the economic downturn has eradicated the promise of prosperity a discourse of racial discrimination against whites has diverted attention away from the real culprits of the loss of economic opportunity. Paul Johnson observes that white male victimage has been circulated via literature and cinema since the second half of the twentieth century and the television series *Breaking Bad* is one of the most influential of these contemporary texts:

For a long time being white and male has entailed imagining that you are on the run, hounded by a public that no longer appreciates your genius while harassed by a cavalcade of critics possessed of ‘political correctness;’ since 2008, it has also meant that to look to the political for reassurance leads to an encounter with a calm, collected, and racially Other man whose easy charisma exacerbates rather than reassures your anxieties.” (Johnson 23)

The rhetoric of white supremacy reassures followers that they are victims that merely need to regain their rightful place as the leaders of the nation.

A restoration of a social order that is under threat will require the cooperation and participation of white women. At the most basic level white women are essential to the continuation of the white race (Daniels 58). “Gender is further implicated in that one of the major arenas of threat is to the homes of white men.

The notion of ‘home’ again conjures up a vision of the nuclear family... it is within this ‘home’ that white women are located” (Daniels 44). The notion of home has been central to white patriarchy as it is not only the proverbial man’s castle but it also constitutes the division of the public and private sphere. Whiteness and heterosexuality work in tandem and each needs the other to sustain their power (McIntosh, “Victims” 162). Many white women have embraced their role of mother of the white race. Elizabeth Gillespie McRae’s *Mothers of Mass Resistance* chronicles the role of women in white supremacist movements and identifies their contributions in and outside of the home. Within the home white women “police[d] the relationships and racial identities of their neighbors” (6). Outside of the home they “maintain the ‘color line,’ they drew on evidence gathered from their work as registrars, social workers, and teachers and provided by local knowledge, local history, and even rumor” (6).

White supremacy does not only take the form of organized Nazi groups and militias. Many white Americans ignore their privilege and participate in unquestioned rituals and practices that reassert the authority and invisibility of whiteness. Dawn McIntosh explains how she, like so many other white women, did integrate these practices:

... white women overtly defend whiteness and heteronormativity through displacing the blame for many white men’s racist, sexist, and homophobic actions. We let out a disregarding laugh, shrug our shoulders and claim, ‘that’s the way it is.’ Defending white heteronormativity is how white straight women are taught to love white men, work for white men, and befriend white men. (“Victims” 164)

When white men and women “perform whiteness correctly [they] have no emotive understanding of these performances and/or the affective consequences these performances displace on Others” (McIntosh, “White Feelings” 155). The fact that white supremacist practices and ideologies are unconscious, and at times unintentional, does not excuse it and speaks to the nefarious nature of racism in the United States and illustrates how it continues to structure culture and society today.

The recent phenomenon of “tradwives” (traditional wives) illustrates how white heteronormativity, that perpetuates white supremacy, is being given a makeover. In her opinion piece for the *New York Times*, Annie Kelly reports that

alt-right movements in the United States and Europe are having to address “The Women Question” given the power of the female vote to swing elections. The answer, according to Kelly, is the rise of “tradwives.” These are women that use YouTube and social media platforms to promote the virtues of traditional motherhood that include staying home with many children and submitting to male authority. These women also hide under the guise of trending DIY activities such as growing your own organic produce and making your own nontoxic cleaning products. Kelly finds tradwives to be especially specious in that the women’s underlying discourse is that of white nationalism be it overt like the challenge from “Wife With a Purpose” to match or beat her “white baby challenge” to more subtle racist references. Kelly notes that these women’s grievances compliment those of the alt-right that we are living in a world that has been dismantled by diversity initiatives and immigration resulting in a loss of livelihood. These tradwives wish to restore the conditions necessary for them to return to an idyllic time when their men could provide and they would never have to consider employment to support a family. Kelly warns she has seen the number of tradwives and their followers dramatically increase since 2015.

Tradwives not only represent an acceptable form of female respectability to white supremacists but they also draw from longstanding tropes of womanhood that are also paradoxically directly connected to women being characterized as witches. Western civilization<sup>1</sup> has historically positioned woman as the binary opposition to man. Part of the reason is to maintain strictly defined power relations, but it is also because there is something perceived to be mysterious, mystical even, about women. It has always been imagined that women were more connected to the earth and the ethereal. In ancient Greece as Athenians made the move away from myth and towards science and logic, women were removed from society. Solon, the ancient Athenian leader, enacted strict laws that required women to have a chaperone and follow a strict dress code as they were believed to be temptresses. Perhaps even more severe was that he no longer permitted women to lament at funerals. Priestesses were prohibited from practicing in religious ceremonies that often included rapturous singing and dancing (J. Williams 15). Women represented an archaic, mystical past and as such were

---

<sup>1</sup> My discussion of the witch stems from a largely Eurocentric perspective because I am primarily considering how this trope is functioning within the narrative of *AHS: Coven*, which relies heavily on Eurocentric constructs in its treatment of witches.

characterized as vessels or conduits of all that was dark and evil in the world. This construction of women as dark vessels also provides plausible explanations for their sources of power as demonic, thereby labeling female spiritual leaders as witches. Charlene Spretnak explains:

In patriarchal societies that replace the earlier Earth-honoring and female-honoring cultures of Neolithic Europe, both women and nature were – and are – considered potentially dangerous and chaotic. Only by dominating and transcending both to those seats of supposedly threatening power could males experience spiritual deliverance, according to patriarchal religion. (272)

The notion that women were somehow closer to, or even a part of, nature is central to the logic that positions women as the opposite to men and also his inferior. Or as Catherine Roach succinctly states, “The basic argument is that in patriarchal culture, when women are seen as closer to nature than men, women are inevitably seen as less fully human than men” (56). The conflation of women and nature allowed for both to be viewed as things that were chaotic and unpredictable, but they were also things that needed to be tamed and made subject to the domination of man. Women then – just like the earth, animals, and nature – were something to be controlled by men, and both were also terrifying. It is not only the unpredictable and unknown, mystical elements of both that were particularly troubling, but also that to be close to one was to be confronted with a part of oneself that must be overcome.

Josephine Donovan citing Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, explains that the male maturation process is dependent upon the ability to establish an autonomous masculine identity. To achieve this, separation from the feminine/maternal is necessary. Because woman has been conflated with nature and beast, it has led to men’s desire to control and establish a firm separation from the female sex. To be close to one’s mother is to remind man of the thing that ultimately distinguishes men from women: women can give birth. This ability is seen as grounding women more in nature, the processes of her body – menstruation or pregnancy – are mysteries never to be understood by men, and it is her body that also renders her irrational and never capable of fully maturing intellectually. Donovan asserts that there exists a fear in men that their proximity to women can render man a beast. There is a fear that a closeness to woman/nature returns them to “the forest world



where men are turned into animals and held captive in permanent dependence” (180). For it is in nature that women are believed to be closer to their source of power and in this space man is far removed from his. If a man does not maintain his distance and control over women he and society will not evolve: “Western woman – in the guise of the irrational, the unlimited, the bestial, the inferior ‘other’ end of the good/evil duality – had unleashed all the evils of Pandora’s box upon men, and caused males to be flung out of Paradise” (Antonio 216).

This longstanding construction of woman as a mystical, destroyer of man has repeatedly throughout history taken the form of and given the name, *witch*. Victoria Madden cites Carol F. Karlsen, “Only by understanding that the history of witchcraft is primarily a history of women... can we confront the deeply embedded feelings about women... we still live with witches in our culture, however much their shape may have changed over time” (13). Women historians have shown that women were accused of witchcraft due to the “multilayered fears specific to early modern culture about the possibilities and dangers of female power” (Godbeer 475). Witches have become the container for the “ultimate male fear: uncontrollable females who, endowed with unholy powers, threaten to break free of the margins to which they must be confined” (Madden 15). It is imagined that in the twenty-first century that Western culture and society has, via logic and rationalism, moved beyond myth and the supernatural as possible explanations for phenomena in the world. In the age of the “rise of women,” it may perhaps be too plausible an explanation that *the witch is back*.

In a time when female empowerment is inescapable and the “woman question” unavoidable, tradwives represent the potential to direct women into traditional and safe spaces of power. For tradwives, female power is rooted in something old and natural, and takes the form of connecting to the earth via gardening and making jam. The mysterious female body is kept in check by producing (white) babies and continuing a male’s bloodline. Tradwives do not completely diminish or alleviate the anxieties surrounding women’s bodies and their potential power, but rather put those bodies in check in ways that secure and support white patriarchy. These women are “good witches” because they do not engage in masculine spaces or seek to assume or appropriate what has been traditionally defined as male power.

Cordelia is the ultimate good witch because in many ways she embodies the values of a tradwife. Her New Order is a coven of tame and disciplined witches. She represents a form of female empowerment that is not only heteronormative

but consistent with traditional values. This form of female empowerment restores women to what some may view as a lost place of privilege and purpose. Women were once viewed as being the rulers of their own domain, the home, and it is here that women had an important, respected, and even holy function in society (Kaplan 18). Cordelia disrupts the discourse of female empowerment being consistent with radical politics and instead represents a way that wayward and monstrous women can be domesticated and returned to their *natural* place: the center of a *white* home where men can be men and white patriarchy is restored in America.

## Conclusion

This particular season of *American Horror Story* remains relevant in the aftermath of one of the most public witch hunts of our modern times. The presidential campaign of Hillary Rodman Clinton was for many the ultimate rise of women as she sought to break through the most impenetrable glass ceiling by becoming the first woman to secure the Democratic presidential nomination. Secretary Clinton was subjected to harsh scrutiny as well as numerous allegations of questionable, if not illegal conduct, regarding her use of private emails. Other accusations questioned the contributions made to her charity, The Clinton Foundation, as well as, claims that she was complicit in her husband's, President Bill Clinton, sexual harassment and assault of women. A common chant, some might say rallying cry, among Trump supporters, became "LOCK HER UP!" Margaret Talbot writes that Clinton has been criticized and judged in every manner a woman can be: for keeping her maiden name, for her labor intensive career as a lawyer while having a young child, her physical appearance, for not smiling, as well as common fearmongering reserved for women, she is a lesbian, a "Lacy Macbeth," she is responsible for the death of Vince Foster, and that she was not really capable based on her own merit but siphoned power from her influential husband, that cheated on her no less (19). Susan Fauldi wrote in a *New York Times* op-ed piece that Clinton was "cast not just as a political combatant but as a demon who, in the imaginings of the Republicans like Paul D. Ryan, the speaker of the House, and Representative Trent Franks, would create an America 'where passion – the very stuff of life – is extinguished' (the former) and where fetuses would be destroyed 'limb from limb' (the latter)." While Secretary Clinton

did ultimately win the popular vote in the 2016 presidential election, the public discourse surrounding her character and ability highlighted the persisting sexist attitudes prevalent in American culture, society, and politics, as well as, demonstrated the tendency to demonize and vilify powerful women.

Americans continued to witness the rise of women after Clinton's defeat the day following Donald Trump's inauguration as President. The Women's March on Washington incited political mobilization of women across the United States as well as the world. More Americans appeared in D.C. to protest the Trump presidency than to see him become president. The event featured many celebrity speakers from the entertainment and activist's realms. As 2017 progressed the organization E.M.I.L.Y., and others like it, began reaching out to women, offering to train them to run for political office. And at the close of 2017, Americans witnessed a string of sexual predators be brought to justice in the entertainment industry (Harvey Weinstein, Louis C. K., Israel Horovitz, and Kevin Spacey), the news industry (Charlie Rose and Matt Lauer), publishing (Hamilton Fisher V), and in politics (Roy Moore and Al Franken). The courage of the victims to name their violators sparked the social media movement #MeToo. While some may cite the problematic nature of the campaign by perhaps asking too much of victims and survivors to come forward, it has been a source of healing for others. What may prove to be one of the most important outcomes of the movement is that it exposes the ubiquity of sexual harassment and assault and by extension complicating and delegitimizing the trope of woman as seductress (one characteristic comprising the archetype of the witch).

As encouraging as this moment of women empowerment may be, feminists have been forced to confront one of the most contentious and divisive issues within feminist academic and activist circles: race. First, many Americans were puzzled if not disturbed to learn that the majority of white women (53%) voted for Donald Trump. Senior Correspondent for the *New York Times*, Susan Chira, states, "The dream that women would vote for a woman overlooked the seductive pulls and interactions among party, class and racial identity that have long divided women as much as their gender was assumed to unite them." While many were quick to characterize a Trump supporter as a white man from rural America, Senior Culture Writer for BuzzFeed, Anne Helene Petersen, warned of the "Ivanka Voter." The article profiling this particular portion of Trump supporters describe a white, middle to upper-class woman that lives in the suburbs of the Midwest where perhaps the majority of those in her community are viewed as

either liberal or not particularly political. What is significant about the “Ivanka Voter” is that Americans were quick to believe that it would be sexism that would potentially cost Clinton the election when in actuality many argue in the aftermath that race presented the biggest hurdle to securing a democratic win. For many, Hillary Clinton represented the continuation of the America changed by the Obama years and the threat to white centrality and normativity the election of the first black president presented.

The tension between white feminists and feminists of color recently surfaced during and after the Women’s March on Washington in 2017. The moniker “Becky” was used in news outlets and social media postings to refer to the white feminist that was blind to, or may even embrace, her white privilege. The brief tracing of the history of division between white women and specifically black women (but also more generally non-white women) I provide is significant to the analysis of *Coven*. Elisabete Lopes asserts that *Coven* presents a feminist subtext that subverts many fairytale conventions, but this argument should be countered that while this may be partially true, its feminist potential is rendered impotent (np). LeBlanc supports my assertion, “*Coven* is situated within a (pop)cultural landscape that purports to tell stories about strong and resilient women, while collapsing the category of woman into a singular (white) experience” (12). The conclusion of the series robs it of any subversive potential because the brand of feminism that is forwarded and celebrated is one that is patently white and meek. *Coven* render witches no longer monstrous. This diminishes the potential representation of radical politics because it is in their monstrosity that witches are their most powerful and present the largest threat to white patriarchy. It stands to reason the rise of empowered women could increase white supremacy movements because threatened masculinity, as was discussed, leads to an increase in white supremacist ideology, but white women and white feminists should also not overlook how the embracing of their white privilege also contributes to a system of white supremacy and toxic white femininity. Taking this into account could very well offer some new avenues for understanding the rise of the Alt Right and a Trump presidency. This article encourages scholars to tend to the intersections, particularly the connection between American identity, whiteness, and masculinity.

## Works Cited

- Andolsen, Barbara H. "The Adoption of Racism as a Deliberate Strategy" *Women's Suffrage*, edited by B. Stalcup. Greenhave Press, 2000, pp. 92-99.
- Antonio, Diane. "Of Wolves and Women." *Animals and Women: Feminist Theoretical Exploration*, edited by Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan, Duke University Press, 1995, pp. 213-230.
- "Bitchcraft." *American Horror Story: Coven*, written by Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk et. al, directed by Alfonso Gomez-Rejon, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Television, 2013.
- Blazak, Randy. "'Getting It': The Role of Women in Male Desistance from Hate Groups." *Home-Grown Hate: Gender and Organized Racism*, edited by Abby L. Ferber, Routledge, 2004, pp. 161-180.
- Brooks, Kinitra. *Searching for Sycorax: Black Women's Haunting of Contemporary Horror*. Rutgers University Press, 2018.
- Calafell, Bernadette Marie. *Monstrosity, Performance, and Race in Contemporary Culture*. Peter Lang, 2015.
- Chira, Susan. "The Myth of Female Solidarity." *The New York Times*, 2016, p. 7. EBSCOhost, ezproxy.montclair.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsgwh&AN=edsgcl.469881297&site=eds-live&scope=site, Accessed 20 Nov. 2017.
- Clover, Carol. *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in Modern Horror Film*. Princeton University Press, 1992.
- The Combahee River Collective. "A Black Feminist Statement." *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought*. edited by Beverly Guy-Sheftall, The New Press, 1995, pp. 231-40.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 3, no. 6, pp. 1241-1299, 1991.

Daniels, Jessie. *White Lies: Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality in White Supremacist Discourse*. Routledge, 1997.

Davis, Angela. *Women, Race, and Class*. Random House, 1981.

Donovan, Josephine. "Animal Rights and Feminist Theory." *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature*, edited by Greta Gaard. Temple University Press, 1993, pp.167-194.

Faludi, Susan. How Hillary Clinton Met Satan. *New York Times* 30 Oct. 2016. <http://ezproxy.montclair.edu:2048/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.montclair.edu/docview/1833749050?accountid=12536> , Accessed 20 Nov. 2017.

Ferber, Abby L. and Michael S. Kimmel. "'White Men Are This Nation': Right-Wing Militias and the Restoration of Rural American Masculinity." *Home-Grown Hate: Gender and Organized Racism*, edited by Abby L. Ferber, Routledge, 2004, pp. 143-160.

Godbeer, Richard. "'Your Wife Will Be Your Biggest Accuser': Reinforcing Codes of Manhood at New England Witch Trials." *Early American Studies*, 2017, vol. 15, no.3, pp. 474-504.

hooks, bell. *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. South End Press, 1981.

hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: from Margin to Center, Second Edition*. South End Press, 2000.

Johnson, Paul Elliott. "Walter White(ness) Lashes Out: *Breaking Bad* and Male Victimhood." *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2017, pp.14-28.

- Kaplan, Amy. "Manifest Domesticity." *American Studies: An Anthology*, edited by Janice A. Radway, Kevin K. Gaines, Barry Shank, and Penny von Eschen, Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, pp. 17-25.
- Kelly, Annie. "The Housewives of White Supremacy." *The New York Times*, 1 June 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/01/opinion/sunday/tradwives-women-alt-right.html>. Accessed 2 June 2018.
- Kelly, Casey Ryan. "Camp Horror and the Gendered Politics of Screen Violence: Subverting the Monstrous-Feminine in *Teeth*." *Women's Studies in Communication*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2016, pp.86-106.
- King, Amy K. "A Monstrous(Ly-Feminine) Whiteness: Gender, Genre, and the Abject Horror of the past in American Horror Story: Coven." *Women's Studies*, vol. 46, no. 6, Sept. 2017, pp. 557-573.
- LeBlanc, Amanda Kay. "'There's nothing I hate more than a racist:' (Re)centering whiteness in *American Horror Story: Coven*." *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, vol. 35, no. 3, 2018, pp. 273-285.
- Levina, Marina and Diem-My T. Bui. "Introduction: Toward a Comprehensive Monster Theory in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century." *Monster Culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Reader*, edited by Marina Levina and Diem-My T. Bui, Bloomsbury, 2013, pp. 1-14.
- Lopes, Elisabete. "The Season of the Witch: Gender Trouble in American Horror Story-Coven" *At the Interface/Probing Boundaries*, 2017.  
<http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com/content/books/b9789004350816s009>, Accessed 23 Nov. 2017.
- Madden, Victoria. "'We Found the Witch, May We Burn Her?': Suburban Gothic, Witch-Hunting, and Anxiety-Induced Conformity in Stephen King's *Carrie*." *Journal of American Culture*, vol. 40, no. 1, Mar. 2017, pp. 7-20.
- Means Coleman, Robin R. *Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present*. Routledge, 2011.

- McIntosh, Dawn Maire D. "White Feelings, Feeling Straight: Cultivating Affective Attentiveness for Queer Futurities." *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ World-making*. vol. 1, no. 3, 2014, pp.154-158.
- McIntosh, Dawn Marie D. "Victims, Protectors, and Possibilities for Change: White Womanhood and the Violence of Heteronormativity." *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ World-making*. vol. 4, no. 2, 2014, pp.162-169.
- McRae, Elizabeth Gillespie. *Mothers of the Mass Resistance: White Women and the Politics of White Supremacy*. Oxford University Press, 2018.
- Petersen, Anne Helene. "Meet the Ivanka Voter." BuzzFeed. [https://www.buzzfeed.com/annehelenpetersen/meet-the-ivankavoter?utm\\_term=.ofXrKw0mJW#.qprerY0QgX](https://www.buzzfeed.com/annehelenpetersen/meet-the-ivankavoter?utm_term=.ofXrKw0mJW#.qprerY0QgX), Accessed 4 Nov. 2016.
- "The Replacements." *American Horror Story: Coven*, written by Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk et. al, directed by Alfonso Gomez-Rejon, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Television, 2013.
- Roach, Catherine. "Loving Your Mother: On the Woman-Nature Relation." *Ecological Feminist Philosophies*, edited by Karen J. Warren. Indiana University Press, 1996, pp. 52-65.
- Rosin, Hanna. *The End of Men and the Rise of Women*. Riverhead Books, 2012.
- "The Sacred Taking." *American Horror Story: Coven*, written by Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk et. al, directed by Alfonso Gomez-Rejon, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Television, 2013.
- "The Seven Wonders." *American Horror Story: Coven*, written by Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk et. al, directed by Alfonso Gomez-Rejon, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Television, 2013.
- Spretnak, Charlene. "Earthbody and Personal Body as Sacred." *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, edited by Carol J. Adams, Continuum, 1993, pp. 261-280.



Talbot, Margaret. "That's What He Said." *New Yorker*, vol. 92, no. 34, 24 Oct. 2016, pp. 19-20.

Williams, James D. *An Introduction to Classical Rhetoric*. Wiley, John & Sons, 2009.

Williams, Linda. "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess." *Film Quarterly*, vol. 44, no. 4, 1991, pp. 2-13.

## Crafting a Monstrously Queer Space: A Medicalized Gothic Reading of Nathaniel Highmore's *Case of A Foetus found in the Abdomen of a Young Man*

SHANE AARON MILLER

“Whatever falls out contrary to custom we say is contrary to nature, but nothing, whatever it be, is contrary to her. Let, therefore, this universal and natural reason expel the error and astonishment that novelty brings along with it.”

Michel de Montaigne

Historically the Gothic style in literature has positioned itself in opposition to Enlightenment goals and processes. As the Enlightenment project heralded the ascendancy of rationality, empiricism and the scientific method, Gothic works constructed a world where passion refused to be usurped and the supernatural and mystical still held sway. The Enlightenment promised a world that was limited to material reality, controllable, and ultimately knowable. The Gothic world was one of apparitions, long-lost, deadly knowledge, and was doomed to remain unknowable and uncertain. If the Enlightenment promised to dispel the darkness, the Gothic showed that darkness would always lurk in the shadows, and that there was a night to each day. The Gothic, in other words, was the dark side of Enlightenment rationalism (Edwards 1).

The nineteenth century was a critical year for both the nascent discipline of medicine and the literary genre of the Gothic. For medicine, this century would introduce germ theory, anesthesiology, and the introduction of statistics to epidemiology. Gothic literature, on the other hand, would enter a second wave that saw the creation of Gothic classics such as *Frankenstein* (1818), *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), and *Dracula* (1897). In addition, this new period of Gothic development was marked by the increasing presence and role of medicine and science within Gothic narratives.

It was in the midst of these dueling worlds that in 1815 a young surgeon named Nathaniel Highmore, a member of the Royal College of Surgeons in London, published a thirty-page pamphlet about a particular case that he had treated. The pamphlet was titled: *Case of A Foetus found in the Abdomen of a Young Man at Sherborne, in Dorsetshire*. As the title suggests, the pamphlet

The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 6, No. 2 & 3  
Copyright © 2018

relates the story of a fifteen or sixteen-year-old boy named Thomas Lane who, upon falling violently ill, was treated by Highmore. After a month of palliative care, Lane died. Upon performing an autopsy, Highmore discovered that what he presumed to be an inflamed spleen, was, in fact, a large sac or tumor. Further investigation revealed that the sac contained a horribly deformed, yet recognizable human fetus.

The pamphlet comes at an interesting time in the history of medicine, where key discoveries about bacteriology, virology and basic sterility had yet to be discovered, yet as a field, medicine had formalized into a discipline, employing the scientific method to study natural law and the human body, in turn using those insights to diagnose and treat illness and injury. Medical writing had already developed into a recognizable genre employing empiricist writing styles that privileged induction based on observation (Taavitsainen 435) and had adopted the language of materiality and precision. Yet this turn to objective description and causal explanations limited to known natural law did not preclude medical terminology from continuing the longstanding tradition of placing human deformity, especially deformed births and aborted births, within the category of the monstrous. Rather than dismissing such language as holdover terminology that was standard, but devoid of judgment, the continued use of the term demonstrates the blatant association of disability with monstrosity and the accompanying negative valuations it implied, and arguably continues to imply (Bogdan 138).

Highmore's pamphlet was an effort to demonstrate the superior explanatory power of natural law and medical science via its ability to advance the discovery of truth, in turn validating the goals of the Enlightenment project. Yet the strong presence of Gothic stylistic elements in the pamphlet served to forestall this potential closure and instead introduced ambiguity and uncertainty into the public reception of this extraordinary medical case. Highmore's pamphlet, in its effort to privilege medical/scientific explanations, inadvertently presents the alternative Gothic reading as a cold, but ultimately equally preferable, strategy to make sense of the inexplicable and unrecognizable.

In developing my analysis of Highmore's pamphlet, I employ a critical rhetorical framework informed by monster theory and queer theory to examine the ways in which different features of the text work to frame an event that seemingly defies accepted understandings of gender and reproduction. Highmore's monster asks readers to make sense of a seemingly impossible event, but provides them competing resources to work through their sense-making. This tension, fused within a text that itself is a monstrous hybrid, develops a space wherein readers can recognize the monstrous in themselves and others.

This paper begins by demonstrating the ways in which Highmore's pamphlet blends Enlightenment and Gothic elements, creating a hybrid text that uses

elements of each to supplement the other, in particular using the Gothic to finish a narrative that the Enlightenment pieces simply cannot satisfactorily conclude. The final section of this paper explores the ways in which the sublime imagery disrupts comfortable social categories and boundaries to create a queer category or space, home to the monster and non-monster alike.

I wish to argue that *Case of a Foetus* may be read as an example of the queering, and thus humanizing, potential of monstrosity. Neither a medical nor Gothic reading of extreme human difference is sufficient to fully humanize the subject: both have considerable limitations inherent to their constitutive qualities. Medical discourse, by virtue of dealing with patterns of idealized normalcy, risks conflating the unusual with the unhealthy or threatening. The Gothic treats the unusual as supernatural and evil, intentionally or unintentionally malevolent. Yet what I have termed a medicalized Gothic reading can use the materialism and empiricism of science to erase evil or supernatural malevolence while embracing the Gothic acceptance of the unknown, mysterious and unique.

Doing so has tremendous significance for all subjects who reside in abject, monstrous lands. And no less significance for those who do not. For what is at stake in our readings of difference and deviance is nothing less than the question of who we include in our moral community. To whom do we owe the same considerations, the same obligations and duties as ourselves? To whom ought we feel compassion for? For whom should we care? A medicalized Gothic read of monstrosity creates a queer monstrous category that embraces all, for it disrupts the binaries of normal/abnormal and human/monster, and in so doing, reminds us that “We are all of the devil’s party. . . . [all] at least partially monstrous” (Halberstam, *Skin Shows* 27).

### An Ambiguous Hybrid: *Case of a Foetus* as Gothic Medical Science

*Case of a Foetus* is a text that blends stylistic elements of medical empiricism with Gothic narrative tropes, forming a text that is itself liminal and monstrous, straddling the divide between Gothic mystery and Enlightenment knowledge. Highmore’s stated intent was for the pamphlet to have a dual readership consisting of both medical professionals and lay readers.

It has been the author’s care to abstain, as much as possible, from technical phraseology, so as to render the work acceptable to the general reader; to this end, the narrative has been separated from the anatomical description, &c. But, in detailing the circumstances of this extraordinary Case, at once interesting to the naturalist and the philosopher, nothing has

been omitted that could tend to cast a ray of light on any point connected with the subject. . . . (Highmore 11)

To that end, *Case of a Foetus* is divided into six sections: an Introductory Address, Case of the Foetus, Description of the Foetus (a recounting of the initial diagnosis, treatment, and progression of the case), Explanation of the Plates (two vivid, labeled sketches of the anterior and posterior of the fetus), and a series of concluding statements about the boy's health growing up, and Highmore's professional thoughts.

Highmore shifts between objective medical description and personal narrative both from one section of the pamphlet to another, as well as within sections, producing a text that is a hybrid of medical empiricism and vivid, graphic prose. The second section of the pamphlet, "Case of a Foetus," is a straightforward narrative that follows a chronologically linear progression: the mother's request for medical help, the original diagnosis and medical treatment provided, the patient's death, the autopsy and subsequent discovery of the fetus, and the ensuing interest of both the medical community and thousands of members of the general public.

The pamphlet is inarguably medical/scientific in nature. Highmore positions the pamphlet as a reluctant, but necessary, attempt to advance truth. The entire incident is bookended between opening and concluding statements that stress the importance of publicly sharing the details of Lane's case as a means of contributing to human knowledge and progress. Highmore begins the piece by positioning himself as the reluctant narrator<sup>1</sup>:

. . . it is hoped that due allowance will be made for the production of an individual, wholly unaccustomed to the business of writing; and who involuntarily as it were, comes forward in the character of an Author, mistrustful of his power to do justice to the part which has been assigned him. (Highmore 11)

The Introductory Address concludes with Highmore's explicitly stated motive for writing: ". . . feeling actuated solely by the desire of promoting a spirit of inquiry into circumstances but imperfectly known, and of thereby contributing to the advancement of truth" (Highmore 12). The pamphlet concludes by lamenting the potential knowledge lost to the irrational reluctance of family and friends to allow autopsies to be performed. The final sentence of the pamphlet opines: "From the want of these only means of elucidating the real nature of such cases, the proper

---

<sup>1</sup> A move that is strikingly similar to the unreliable narrator at the heart of so many Gothic stories.

mode of treatment is but too frequently lost in obscurity, or left to the operation of mere conjecture” (Highmore 30).

Even the narrative, which Highmore suggests was separated from the medical description for the benefit of lay readers, is laced through with specialized medical terminology. He lists the medicines applied by their Latin names – Potassae Nitras, Pulvis Seillae and Pulvis Opii (Highmore 15) – his narrative of the examination of the body details how:

On dividing the parities of the abdomen and exposing its viscera, a large tumour, of an irregular but somewhat oval form, presented itself. It occupied portions of the epigastric, umbilical and left hypochondrae regions: and was uncovered by the omentum, which was found in a ruffled state, lying above the tumor.

Similarly, the illustrated plates of the fetus are carefully diagrammed and meticulously labeled, identifying such features as “the integuments arising from the neck,” “the funis, 3 ½ inches in length, arising from the abdomen of the foetus, and inserted into the dense part of the cyst,” and “the head of the tibia, denuded” (Highmore 24-5).

While the pamphlet contains numerous stylistic markers recognizable as medical or scientific in nature, it also employs an empirical framework for its analytical work. In the final section, where the nature of the fetus and possible causes are discussed, Highmore presents several possible explanations that have been provided, but ultimately sides with the one most in keeping with understood natural law. ‘However, if we view it somewhat in the light of an extra-uterine foetus, with the difference of a double conception; . . . if, I say, this view of the subject be taken, there seems nothing in the matter which is wholly at variance with the known laws respecting generation’ (Highmore 30). Highmore’s confidence in the scientific method and known natural law unsurprisingly causes him to privilege the explanatory power of an empirically-grounded explanation.

Finally, the fact that the booksellers identified as selling the pamphlet specialized in having medical libraries and that the manuscript was placed into the library of the Royal College of Surgeons in London, demonstrates that the text was conceived of as a legitimate medical treatise (The British Museum; T. Bradley). In addition, the pamphlet was cited in numerous medical publications for over a century after its publication, demonstrating that it circulated and was utilized as legitimate medical discourse (Beck; Burrows; Ogilvie; Tanner). Thus, the stated intent of the author, linguistic style, philosophical orientation, and publication and sales history, all mark the pamphlet as medical discourse.

Yet, while the pamphlet is steeped in medical language and an empiricist worldview, it also contains numerous Gothic elements. One of the most apparent Gothic qualities is the monstrous nature of the fetus itself. Highmore’s first

description of the fetus, upon opening the sac that contained it, exclaims: “. . . I opened the sac, at the contents of which we were amazed! – We found that the substance assumed, in many respects, a completely human form; but in others, it was cramped and mis-shapen” (Highmore 18). In the next section, “Description of the Foetus” Highmore provides more details such as the long, matted hair measuring twelve inches in length; the much-curved spine; and the short, ill-shaped hand with only three fingers. The descriptions are detailed, specific and graphic: “The knee was dislocated; the skin over it had been absorbed, and the joint was exposed. The ankle was also dislocated, and turned inwards; the common integuments had been absorbed, and the bones were exposed and perishing. It had six imperfectly formed toes” (Highmore 22).

This description is accompanied by two vividly illustrated plates depicting the fetus (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). These plates provide graphic visual depictions of the extent of the deformity, in particular allowing readers to see both the human-like qualities of the fetus, alongside the distorted, damaged and unrecognizable elements of the fetus. Human features such as limbs, fingers, toes and hair are all readily identifiable, yet appear alongside exposed bone, warped extremities, and the absence of a recognizable head. We see here the first signs of slippage between medical and Gothic texts. Medical texts were some of the earliest instances of scientific writing being vernacularized (Taavitsainen). Perhaps not unsurprisingly, this vernacular quality in turn drove a sustained interest in freaks and marvels. “In fact, early nineteenth century scientists and obstetricians continued to find themselves drawn into investigating a range of strange reproductive claims, largely because so many of the public embraced wondrous possibilities” (Cody 300).

This juxtaposition of human and non-human in a single form is also a defining characteristic of monstrosity, as is a severe degree of deformity (Asma). The description of the fetus, as well as the illustrated plates, both provide vivid evidence of the excessive deformity and human/non-human qualities. Although human, the fetus is warped, has exposed bone in place of a head, and has a crevassed, flower-like appendage at the base of the neck.

The fetus is also perhaps the most literal embodiment of the doppelganger, the menacing, mirror-other that threatens one’s identity and existence. The nineteenth century witnessed the birth of the doppelganger as a common presence in Gothic literature where “A character’s sense of encountering a double of him- or herself . . . was established as a powerful new Gothic motif” (Mullan). That this encounter often ended badly for one, if not both selves, is a hallmark of the doppelganger, yet even more central to the role of the doppelganger is their ability to act as the human conduit of evil and malevolence. In describing the role of the doppelganger, Botting notes “Evil has a banal, human existence, produced from accidents and circumstance to escalate beyond human control” (107). Even within

the framework of Highmore's medical explanation, the accidental nature of both the pregnancy and twin fetus are evident themes. Yet the doppelganger was also used in Gothic literature to disrupt the accepted understandings of everyday experience. Brown argues that doppelgangers share a key characteristic – "they break down the categories of ordinary experience" (Brown 129). Highmore's fetus is precisely this kind of challenge to ordinary experience, not only in terms of the novelty of the situation, but more importantly, the challenge it presents to natural law and the prevailing gender binary.

The monstrosity of the fetus emerges in large part from the violation of natural law – a fetus had developed inside the body of a male. Foucault has noted how monstrosity is riddled with paradox, involving as it does the combination of the possible and forbidden. Monstrosity, according to Foucault, violates the law, yet leaves the law (both legal and natural) with nothing to say because it is the natural form of the unnatural (Foucault 56-7). The discovery of a human fetus inside the abdomen of a young man is precisely this kind of natural unnaturalness that – by disrupting the uncontested, essentializing assumptions behind the gender binary – Foucault places at the heart of monstrosity. It is also the kind of boundary disruption that lies at the heart of the sublime, a point I will return to shortly.

The monstrous nature of a fetus inside a male is amplified by the description of the circumstances leading up to the boy's death that Highmore provides – the fetus is described as having repeatedly moved inside the boy. Recounting the mother's statement, Highmore relays the following episode:

She observed that a few days previous to that time, he exclaimed, affrighted, 'Mother! do come to me, I have something Alive in my body!' Upon saying which, he almost immediately fainted. She went to him, and found a very considerable motion in the swelling, which was not merely apparent to the touch, but equally visible to the eye; and resembling, as she would have expressed herself, the motion of a child during gestation" (Highmore 14).

Not only is the gestation of a fetus inside a male body monstrous, it also exemplifies the kind of anxiety over sexuality and sex roles that came to dominate Gothic fiction (Botting 3). Gothic terrors are immense in scope, threatening not only the subjects of the fictional world, but threatening the very order which the terms of propriety and honor depend on (Botting 7). By blurring the accepted distinction between biological sexes and the prevailing orthodoxy of how humans reproduce, a story such as this provides precisely the kind of social and natural destabilization that is a hallmark of the Gothic.



## Excess meaning, Ruptured knowledge: The lingering fragility of the Enlightenment

Highmore's pamphlet thus comprises a monstrous text, combining as it does medical, scientific, and Gothic elements into a single document. While the ostensible motive was to advance medical knowledge, the text itself was an excess of possible meaning that disrupted, rather than solidified, interpretation and in turn demonstrated the far-from-settled status of the Enlightenment project.

To begin with, it is worth noting that the pamphlet is bookended between claims about the role that sharing the story and details can play toward the broader goal of advancing truth. Highmore unequivocally favors a causal explanation that is empirical and consistent with known medical science. In addressing the question of conception, Highmore observes:

if we view it somewhat in the light of an extra-uterine foetus, with the difference of a double conception; and that, by some accident which it is not very difficult to imagine, the impregnated ova got connected together, the one forming an attachment to the uterus of the mother, and the other . . . to its twin brother; if, I say, this view of the subject be taken, there seems nothing in the matter which is wholly at variance with the known laws respecting generation. (30)

While Highmore prefers an explanation of conception that is consistent with medical science, notice that he must fill in unknown details: “. . . by some accident which it is not very difficult to imagine . . .” Forced, as he is, to draw upon imagination to make the medical-scientific explanation feasible, Highmore is unable to unambiguously rule out other, non-empirical explanations. The fact that he introduced these competing accounts in the preceding paragraph (an unnatural crime or an impregnated ovum introduced via the intestines) and in turn dismissed them because to accept either account “would require an assumption of so many material facts, not proved, that it seems unnecessary to enter into the discussion” (Highmore 30) works against his intended claim that his preferred explanation is the only reasonable one. Indeed, all competing explanations require that additional facts be supplied via the imagination, and the inventional choice to include what he considers to be discredited theories only serves to either introduce them to the audience, or refresh them as a possibility for the audience. Either way, the superiority of his preferred causal theory would likely not be as obvious to the non-medical readers, reminding us that Gothic stories are “attempts to explain what the Enlightenment left unexplained” (Botting 23).

If Highmore is unable to directly explain away the ambiguity and terror that lie at the heart of his discovery, his use of Gothic elements fills in the lacunae

for him. Indeed, I would suggest that contrary to our presupposition that the Gothic is more inclined to instill terror than the medical/scientific, it is the Gothic that supplies the balm to our troubled minds. Highmore's preferred explanation is of a pregnancy gone wrong. It is a story of a fetus that went undetected inside the body of a living child for over a decade, lurking and growing until it eventually killed its twin in an excruciating ordeal. Rare as the possibility may be, it is nonetheless, in the medical story, a possibility. A possibility that defies detection, that defies treatment, and that denies us the agency to prevent it. A terror. And yet it is precisely such agency that the causal explanations Highmore dismisses offer his readers, for an "unnatural crime" is not an accident. It is, rather, a willful act, and as such, under our control. It is precisely the horror of the Gothic supernatural that displaces the even greater terror of the unavoidable medical condition. Medical science might displace the evil of Gothic imagination, but it substitutes that with the passivity of the patient completely at the mercy of unknown and uncontrollable biological processes.

Thus, the plethora of possible explanations that all required additional supplementation by the imagination (at least for the non-expert reading audience) constituted an excess of meaning that was unresolvable. Educational yet titillating, horrifying yet fascinating, ostensibly human yet disturbingly other, Highmore's pamphlet is riddled with paradox and ambiguity. Indeed, this ambivalence in the face of excess is ultimately one of the endearing qualities of the Gothic (Botting 8-9) and as Cohen reminds us, the monster's body is always a cultural body, something that always signifies more than itself (Cohen 4). In the case of Highmore's recounting of *Case of a Foetus*, the text demonstrates the as yet unsettled authority of Enlightenment reasoning and the ease with which Gothic constructs still inform the construction and reading of an ostensibly medical document.

Intended as it was for dual audiences of medical expert and lay person, the pamphlet was especially prone to be used voyeuristically. The nineteenth century was the culmination of the growth of asylums to warehouse the aberrant. Whereas in earlier times the deformed, the mad, and the crippled would have been visible in most European cities, the advent of asylums made the aberrant invisible which sparked an increase of interest and curiosity in sordid reality (Stiker 110). The pamphlet was thus delivered to the reading public as social interest in deformity and human oddities were fueling the growth in freak shows and side-shows. Indeed, Bates has argued that the famous French physician Pare may have included monsters in his medical accounts because they were popular and would increase circulation even though they were considered beneath serious academic consideration (Bates 75). Highmore's own comments demonstrate that there was already tremendous professional and public interest in the case even prior to the publication of the pamphlet, when he refers to the unspecified number of medical

gentleman who return with him to the Lane household (to verify the body was indeed male) and the “some thousands of persons [who] flocked to my house, wishing to be satisfied of its truth” (Highmore 20). Such interest, both medical and prurient, is in keeping with the Gothic cultivation of fascination which Brown argues is at the core of great Gothic novels (Brown 4).

The full-page illustrated plates would have thus found an eager audience and provided precisely the kind of glimpse into sordid reality that was sought after. Although the plates are accompanied by detailed anatomical description, the images themselves are vivid, and hauntingly beautiful, enough that they do not require any exposition to apprehend that one is looking at the monstrous – at a fundamental deformity that seemingly defies natural law. That such depictions would be simultaneously horrifying and fascinating to audiences is indeed part of the structure of the Gothic itself, or what Halberstam identifies as a “rhetorical style and narrative structure designed to produce fear and desire within the reader” (Skin Shows 2).

### Sublime Disruption: Creating a Monstrously Queer Space

The visual images depicted in the plates have an undeniable sublime quality to them, and this sublime nature of the illustrations demonstrates the disruptive potential of Highmore’s text. To begin with, the illustrations are exquisite. They not only evidence superb technical skills in illustration, but balance a richness of detail alongside an elegance and simplicity. The use of shading, perspective and implied texture imbue the illustrations with an objective realism. His use of varied line width, rich contrast, and scale (through the depiction of recognizable human shapes like fingers and toes alongside unrecognizable, indeterminate features) give the images a sense of mass and proportion. Both illustrations are presented in a way that maximizes their symmetry, and this symmetry, combined with the preponderance of curving and flowing lines, provides the images with mesmerizing beauty.

Yet this beauty and elegance are mitigated by the starkness of the images and the inescapable confrontation with the monstrous deformity they depict. Figure 1, for example, contains graphic, detailed foreground views of the denuded leg and foot where the bone and exposed tissue are clearly visible. The exposed bone of the knee, in particular, uses sharp angles and a thick outline that starkly contrasts with the flow and curves that make up the rest of the image. In Figure 2, the denuded knee and foot are once again visible, this time in the background, and a hand with misshapen, crooked fingers and long, pointed nails, are positioned in what appears to be a beckoning manner.

But perhaps the most disturbing element of the illustrations is the mass at the top of the body as depicted in Figure 1. Highmore's written description of the fetus mentions:

It had no head; but at the basis of a denuded first vertebra, some slips of skin arose, which followed nearly the course of the funis, with some medullary substance, around which was entangled a considerable amount of matted hair, part of which measured twelve inches in length. (21)

Yet Figure 1 depicts a mass that has been cut in half and laid out in such a way that the effect is to create a strong resemblance to a barely-recognizable head. While the shape and comparative size do not resemble a human head, the orientation of the body and placement of the mass at the top of that body locate it where a head should be. The presence of two dark ovals on close to the same plane, roughly two-thirds of the way up the mass, give the distinct impression of eyes. The image as a whole gives a distinct impression of something almost human but distinctly Other.

This blend of harmony and discordance, beauty and horror, visually reinforce the liminal nature of the fetus that Highmore discovered. Both illustrated plates exemplify the simultaneous allure and repulsion, fear and attraction, that constitute the sublime. As aesthetic theory developed in eighteenth century Europe, the sublime came to be understood as a beautiful terror (Monk 87) wherein the terror itself is what provides the pleasantness derived from the representation (Hogle 14).

The sublime is inextricably bound up with the visual. Kant argued that while the sublime lay in apprehension and not the image itself, it was the limits of the image, the image's inability to fully capture what we receive from our encounter with it, that produces the sublime.

For the sublime cannot be contained in any sensuous form, but rather concerns ideas of reasons, which although no adequate presentations of them is possible, may be excited and called into mind by that very inadequacy itself which does admit of sensuous presentation. (Kant 92)

Thus illustrations such as Highmore's are capable of producing an encounter with the sublime, but wherein does the terror of the sublime lie?

The terror that the sublime produces lies in the threat that the representation presents to our sense of self and the categories and boundaries that we rely on to define daily social life. An understanding of the monstrous sublime, informed by Queer theory, demonstrates the ways in which a Gothic perspective can create a category or space that Halberstam describes as celebrating the queer and

dangerous (*Skin Shows* 143). A space where boundaries are blurred, identities merged, and our shared monstrousness is embraced.

Edmund Burke located the terror of the sublime in the threat it posed to self-preservation and for Burke, the natural world was the locus of the sublime threat (Burke 36). For Kant, the sublime was induced by “[t]he apprehension of an object otherwise formless and in conflict with ends. . .” (Kant 134). The fetus of Highmore’s pamphlet is both a manifestation of nature and formless; a stillborn entity incapable of achieving its intended ends. Gothic has long embraced and deployed the sublime, constituting “perhaps the most sublime of all our literary modes” (Brown 11). And it is within this Gothic framework that a more precise nature of the threat posed by the sublime can be found. The terror the Gothic sublime produces is the terror of a loss of a sense of self and the categories that we use to navigate the world. “The great horror in the gothic is a primordial dissolution that can obscure the boundaries between all western oppositions. Oppositions of all kinds cannot maintain their separateness” (Hogle 11). Highmore’s fetus threatens to disrupt boundaries of human reproduction, of sexual dimorphism, of dead and alive, human and Other. The illustrations evoke terror because they threaten to dissolve our most fundamental beliefs about the nature of our world and ourselves. They constitute, in the words of Brown, “a pure metaphysical sublime, epistemological or even ontological rather than merely psychological” (Brown 12).

Such disruption, and the threats it entails, is a hallmark of Queer theory. Indeed, numerous scholars in Trans and Queer Studies have recognized the productive potential of the tropes and motifs of the monstrous, precisely for the fear and terror that the dissolution they provide engenders. Although historically tropes of monstrosity have been used to exclude queer individuals from the larger human community (Nordmarken 39; Koch-Rein 134), queer scholars have begun to mine these tropes for their ability to challenge and destabilize oppressive discourses.

One such challenge has been to the objectification and voyeurism endemic to the modern western medical tradition. In this sense, Highmore’s pamphlet is exemplary. In the name of science and the pursuit of knowledge, the most intimate details of the patient’s life and circumstances are made public. Indeed, the autopsy and illustrated plates literally make visible and public what had been inside, invisible, and private. Beauchamp has noted that pregnant bodies have, in general, been treated as public bodies by the law, media and medicine (7), but the desire to make public these bodies is intensified when the pregnancy deviates from natural law or social custom. Indeed, any reproduction that occurs outside of the female womb is socially disruptive, but male pregnancy presents “a figure feminized in his ability to bear children, queer in challenging traditional gender roles, disabled because freakish and often subjected to medical and therapeutic

care” (Davidson 126). It is thus not surprising that trans bodies are often displayed by others for their shock value and attention-grabbing potential, in part because their bodies are coded as socially disruptive. But this disruption stems from their ability to invoke culturally shared fears of the non-normative and unnatural (Beauchamp 4). Although Davidson and Beauchamp are discussing transgender individuals, note that the social and medical response is identical to what Highmore describes and presents – a case study that he expects to be of great public interest, precisely because of the ways in which the fetus violates social expectations of the natural and normal male body.

The queer monster also challenges the normalizing gaze of medical science. Susan Stryker, in her retelling of Frankenstein’s monster, uses the voice of the monster as a means to combat the normativizing intent of medical science (244) by having the monster challenge the naturalization of normalcy:

I offer you this warning: the Nature you bedevil me with is a lie. Do not trust it to protect you from what I represent, for it is a fabrication that cloaks the groundlessness of the privilege you seek to maintain for yourself at my expense. . . . Heed my words, and you may discover the seams and sutures in yourself. (247)

The queer monster, in other words, insists on its belongingness, demands to be recognized as a part of the natural world that its very existence challenges. In “Becoming Ever More Monstrous” Nordmarken discusses the ways in which his transitioning and transgender status is disruptive precisely because it challenges the very concept of normalcy. “I challenge their conceptions of gender: I shake the foundations of their narrative. I upheave their ideas of Truth and their trusty methods to know it” (40). Nordmarken’s description could just as easily apply to the situation that Highmore presents – the foetus was every bit the shake-up to perceived Truth and Enlightenment methodologies in 1815 as trans bodies continue to be today.

A queer understanding of monstrosity thus offers us the potential of a monstrously queer space within which to rework and reframe our understandings of both our monsters and ourselves. Queer monstrosity uses the challenges that monsters provide to our familiar borders and comfortable categories to both rediscover the humanity of the monster, as well as confront the monstrosity that we all contain, all share, and are therefore all bound by. For Koch-Rein, the promise of such a queer space is that “rather than refuting the attribution of monstrosity, [it] has called for its embrace to restructure the world in such a way that it makes livable what is now deemed monstrous gender” (135).

This queer space not only welcomes the monster, but in so doing, recognizes that separation between ourselves and others, whether monstrous or not, hurts everyone.

We all suffer from this separation from each other. Oppression is a form of collective trauma. It is inside all of us. We are not singular entities separate from each other – we all have multiple selves, and we all form a collective body. Oppression separates us all from parts of ourselves as well as from each other. (Nordmarken 40)

The monstrously queer space is thus an ecumenical space, one where the blurring and breaking of boundaries and the problematizing of normalcy leave room for all.

But it is also a queer space that contains monsters. And monsters, above all else, can be, perhaps must be, a bit threatening. Halberstam, in a discussion of Thomas Beatie's pregnancy, recognizes that when it comes to public displays of gender non-conformity, "the fault lines between disgust and acceptance are remarkably narrow" (78). Too often, queer monstrosity is repackaged to be conformist and safe, using the narrative of shared humanity and universality to displace the queer narrative about difference ("Pregnant Man" 78). In order for the monster to reach its full potential, it must keep its metaphorical teeth. The sense of sublime displacement, of threat to our readily available understandings of the world and our place in it, can only change that world if they remain threatening. A monstrous queer space is one that both affirms our shared connections while simultaneously letting the monster be itself, in all of its marvelous, threatening glory, challenging what we think we know.

If I am correct, then engaging with this case study, engaging with Highmore's pamphlet today, creates not a safe space, but a fertile, frightening, space. A look at the foetus is a look at both a vivid, material reminder that nature is neither tidy nor respecting of boundaries, as well as a glimpse at the monstrous potential lurking inside any of us. Highmore's pamphlet is thus a mirror reflecting back to us our own untidiness, our own blurred and confusing boundaries in terrifying disarray; a portent of what lies inside any of us that might horrify others if it were ever to see the light of day.

My intent has been to demonstrate that a medicalized Gothic reading can generate new possibilities for inclusion. Such a reading creates a space that welcomes the monster and non-monster alike. By disrupting the binaries of normal/abnormal and human/monster, new connections and affinities can be foregrounded, and we can heed de Montaigne's caution to not mistake what is customary for what is natural.



**Figure 1**



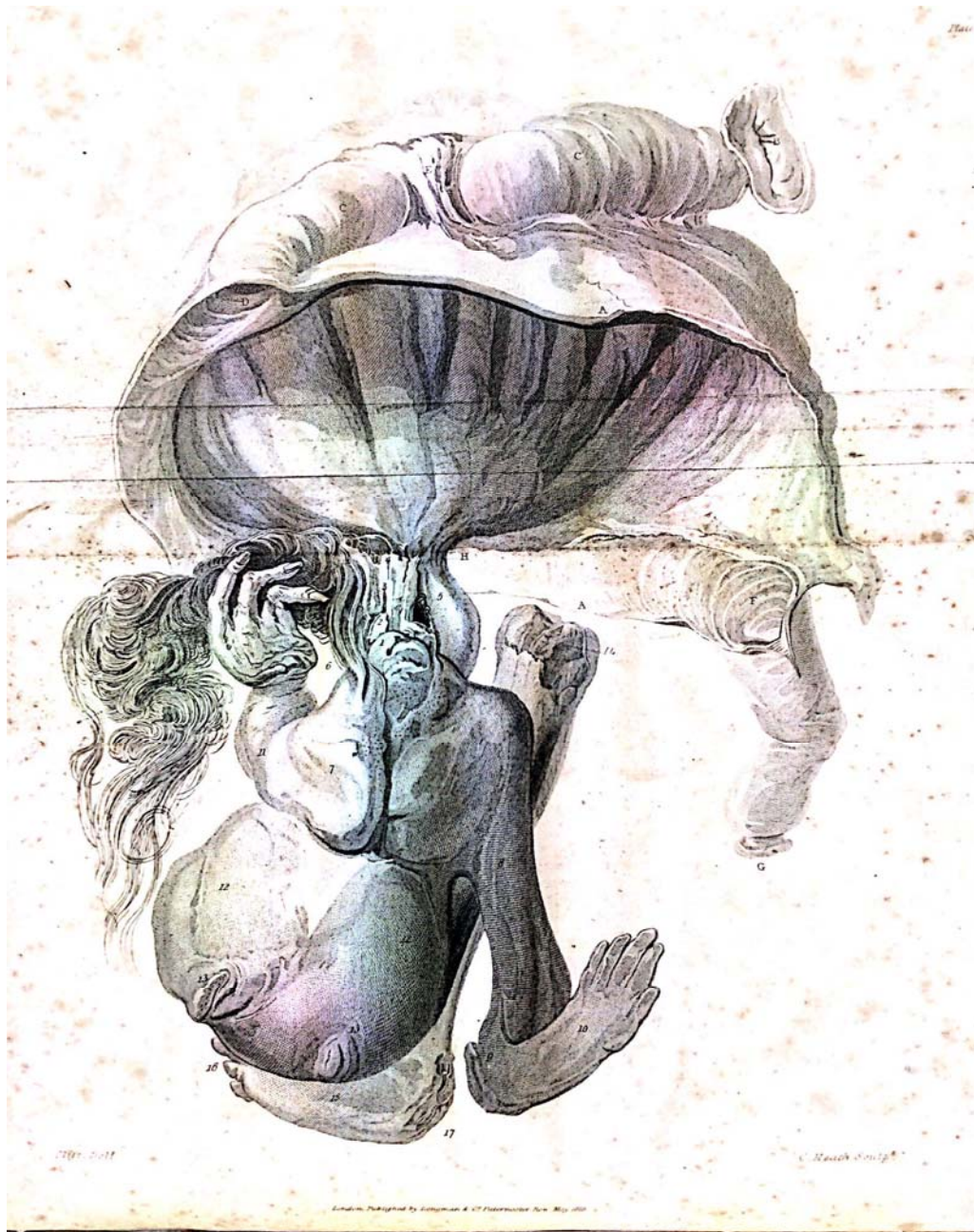


Figure 2

## Works Cited

- Asma, Stephen. *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of our Worst Fears*. Oxford UP, 2009.
- Bates, Alan W. *Emblematic Monsters: Unnatural Conceptions and Deformed Births in Early Modern Europe*. Rodopi B. V., 2005.
- Beauchamp, Toby. "Expectations: Trans Youth and Reproductive Politics in Public Space." *Media Fields Journal*" vol. 12, no. 7, 2013, pp. 1-9.
- Beck, Theodor Romeyn & John Brodhead Beck. *Elements of Medical Jurisprudence*. B. Lippincott & Co., 1860.
- Bogdan, Robert, Douglas Bilen, Arthur Shapiro & David Spelkoman. "The Disabled: Media's Monster." *Social Policy* vol. 13, no. 2, 1982, pp. 32-35.
- Botting, Fred. "Aftergothic: Consumption, Machines, and Black Holes." Hogle, Jerrod E. *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*. Cambridge UP, 2002, pp. 277-300.
- Botting, Fred. *Gothic*. Routledge, 1996.
- Brown, Marshall. *The Gothic Text*. Stanford UP, 2005.
- Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful. Pt I, section VI*. 1990. Oxford UP, 1757.
- Burrows, George Man. *The London Medical Repository Monthly Journal and Review*. D.N. Shury, 1816.
- Cody, Lisa Forman. *Birthing the Nation: Sex, Science, and the Conception of Eighteenth-Century Britons*. Oxford UP, 2005.
- Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome, editor. *Monster Theory*. U of Minnesota P, 1996.

- Connelly, Francis S. *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture: The Image at Play*. Cambridge UP, 2012.
- Davidson, Michael. "Pregnant Men: Modernism, Disability, and Biofuturity." *Sex and Disability*, Edited by Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow, Duke UP, 2012.
- Dolmage, Jay Timothy. *Disability Rhetoric*. Syracuse UP, 2004.
- Edwards, Justin. "Introduction: Technogothics." Edwards, Justin. *Technologies of the Gothic in Literature and Culture*. Routledge, 2015, pp. 1-16.
- Foucault, Michel. *Abnormal: Lectures at the College De France 1974-1975*. Picador, 1999.
- Halberstam, Jack. *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*. Duke UP, 1995.
- Halberstam, Jack. "The Pregnant Man." *The Velvet Light Trap* vol. 65, no. 1, 2010, pp. 77-78.
- Highmore, Thomas. *Case of a Foetus found in the Abdomen of a Young Man at Sherborne in Dorsetshire*. Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme & Brown, Paternoster-Row, 1815.
- Hogle, Jerrold E. "Introduction: the Gothic in western culture." *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, Edited by Jerrold E. Hogle, Cambridge UP, 2002, pp. 1-20.
- Kant, Immanuel. *The Critique of Judgement*. Translated by James Creed Meredith. Vol. Critique of Aesthetic Judgement, Clarendon Press, 1952.
- Koch-Rein, Anson. "Monster." *Transgender Studies Quarterly* vol. 1, no. 1-2, 2014, pp. 134-135.
- Monk, Samuel H. *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England*. U of Michigan P, 1960.

- Mullan, John. "The Origins of the Gothic." *The British Library*, <<https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/the-origins-of-the-gothic>>. Accessed October 13, 2017.
- Nordmarken, Sonny. "Becoming Ever More Monstrous: Feeling Transgender In-Betweenness." *Qualitative Inquiry* vol. 20, no. 1, 2014, pp. 37-50.
- Ogilvie, Heneage. "The Surgery of Conjoined Twins." *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine*, vol. 47, 1954.
- Stiker, Henry-Jaques. *A History of Disability*. Translated by William Sayers. U of Michigan P, 1999.
- Stryker, Susan. "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage." *The Transgender Studies Reader*, Edited by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, Routledge, 2006.
- Bradley, T., R. Batty and A.A. Noehden. *The Medical and Physical Journal*. Vol. VIII, R. Phillips, 1802.
- Taavitsainen, Irma. "Audience Guidance and Learned Medical Writing in Late Medieval English." *Advances in Medical Discourse Analysis : Oral and Written Contexts*, Edited by Maurisio Gotti and Francoise Salager-Meyer, Peter Lang AG, 2012, pp. 431-456.
- Tanner, Thomas Hawkes. *On the Signs and Diseases of Pregnancy*. William Clowes and Sons, 1867.
- The British Museum. *The British Museum*. <[http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search\\_the\\_collection\\_database/term\\_details.aspx?bioId=175835](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database/term_details.aspx?bioId=175835)>. Accessed October 18, 2017.
- Wilson, James C. & Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson. "Disability, Rhetoric, and the Body." *Embodied Rhetorics: Disability in Language and Culture*, Edited by James C. Wilson and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson, Southern Illinois UP, 2001, pp. 1-26.

# Voting Horrors: Youthful, Monstrous, and Worrying Agency in American Films

Derek Lewis

Damien Thorn, the devil's spawn in 1976's *The Omen*, wreaks havoc on the adults with whom he comes into contact. His supernatural powers allow him to control, injure, or kill adults who challenge him and ultimately overthrow established order. Similarly, *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011) chronicles a monstrous youth from birth, through a mass murder via bow and arrow at his high school, to his anxieties about being transferred to an adult prison on his eighteenth birthday. Kevin consistently torments his mother and murders his sister, father, and schoolmates, destroying institutions of education and family. In creating the conditions for patricide or performing it, Damien and Kevin render powerless the symbolic head of the household and family. Tales such as these are common throughout the 1970s and 2010s even if not the *most* popular cinematic feature. Even when monstrous youth recede further into the background of American cinema, they never disappear entirely. Children and teens, monstrous youth, act out, often in violent ways, against structures and embodiments of power.

This essay engages figures of young monstrosity, collectively referred to as monstrous youth and argues that they emerge in American cinema in times of vast uncertainty about youth agency in the American political process. The young monsters engaged in this essay resonate with these anxieties by exercising too much or too little agency. What I am calling young monsters have been analyzed through their connections to guilt (Kord), in relation to various stages of child development (Bohlmann and Moreland), as sites of projections for queer subjectivities (Scahill), and as confirmations of the innocence of children (Renner). Tracing young monsters across the recent and distant past can help us understand cultural responses to anxiety about youth agency in our own time.

This essay argues that agency anxiety defines the resonance between political uncertainty about youth voters and film depictions of monstrous youth. I pursue this argument by first explicating the figure of the young monster and establishing

The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 6, No. 2 & 3  
Copyright © 2018

the similarity in contexts between the 1970s and 2010s in relation to youth political agency. After situating the approach to resonance, this essay then traces three categories of agency anxiety across six films: *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), *The Exorcist* (1973), *The Omen* (1976), *Insidious* (2010), *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011), and *Sinister* (2012).

### Theorizing Young Monsters

Figures of young monsters are popular in horror films such as *The Exorcist* (1973) and *The Omen* (1976), but monstrous youth emerge in other genres as well. For example, *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) also exhibits monstrous youth. While monstrous youth remain present in the 1980s through the 2000s, they resurfaced widely in the 2010s. By comparing films from the 1970s with the more recent films *Insidious* (2010), *Sinister* (2012) and *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011), this essay analyzes resonant political features of monstrous youth. Although other films could fit into this analysis such as *Logan's Run* (1976), *It's Alive* (1974), *Rock 'n' Roll School* (1979), *Hard Candy* (2005), and *The Witch* (2015), focusing on the six films provides a balance between generalized claims and specific details. That said, tracking tendencies across periods sacrifices attention to individual films in favor of representative film fragments.

American film turns to monstrous youth because of their political potential and the collective danger they pose to societies. This turn follows concerns about expanding political agency and cultural authority. Agency, according to Jeffrey P. Mehlretter Drury, is “the *capacity for* action, discourse, invention, response, and resonance” (41, italics in original). Agency, in other words, is not any particular action, but the ability to act and make choices for oneself. When young people begin to wield their agency in the political realm, American films respond with the patterns analyzed in this essay.

While films about monstrous youth speak to many social anxieties, this essay centers on how a particular facet of personal and political agency, voting, threatens American institutions. There is a critical mass of young monsters that display an uneasy relationship to youth political agency. Therefore, this essay argues that monstrous youth in the 1970s and 2010s resonate with attitudes toward young people exercising their agency related to voting. This resonance means that people with apprehension about youth voters saw their fears and

worries on the big screen. Their fears were confirmed. Children, unable to exercise agency proportionally, were to be feared. In this way, resonances such as the ones examined in this essay are powerful tools of the status quo and resistant to change as they reach wide swaths of the American population and reinforce their fears.

## Youth Voting in the United States of America

Both the 1970s and 2010s were periods of upheaval and fallout from massive surges in youth voting. The 1970s saw the swift adoption of the 26<sup>th</sup> Amendment while the 2010s saw the aftermath of the Obama election, which was carried in part by large numbers of youth voters (Lipka and Wiedeman). This section argues that these two periods in American history share anxieties about youth voters and produced films that resonated with that contextual element. Therefore, reading the 1970s and 2010s together is productive for examining the anxieties around youth voting.

The 26<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the United States of America's Constitution lowered the minimum voting age in the country to eighteen in 1971. While the Amendment had wide support and enjoyed the shortest ratification period in United States history, some still harbored concerns about the effects of allowing younger people to vote (Aloi, 286; Rowley). A 1974 poll showed that only one-third of respondents thought the schools prepared young people to "vote intelligently" while 16% thought they were poorly prepared and 18% either did not know or had no answer (Charles F. Kettering Foundation). Change was happening in the United States' voting practices in the early 1970s.

In his book detailing the process of securing the youth vote, Wendell W. Cultice describes an address Richard Nixon gave at the University of Nebraska where he emphasized the agency and power the young people were struggling to garner. He also made an emphatic appeal to "try out 'the system'" (175). Cultice also noted that one fear about extending the vote was the "chance of confusion, delay, and fraud on election day" (178). Another fear given a brief mention in Cultice's book is that "Adults in some university towns feared that if the Supreme Court cut the residency requirements to thirty days in local as well as federal elections, students could take control of the towns" (192). An article by Dan Kubiak published after the ratification of the 26<sup>th</sup> Amendment also listed a variety

of predictions, many of which would read as good or bad depending on a reader's confidence in the newly enfranchised voters. Anxieties permeated the country about what these dramatic changes would bring.

These 11 million new voters were also relatively unpredictable and unintelligible to the political structure making them difficult to predict and manage (Scott). They largely rejected party labels and thus eschewed easy tagging and predictability (Cultice, 217). Cultice provides an additional summary of concerns about passing the 26<sup>th</sup> Amendment including a distaste for tying voting to the age of participation in war, that there would be no increase in feelings of belonging in society, and the need to work and provide for a family before voting (228). What is left unsaid in all this is how those uncertainties tied into other concerns about youths in the voting booths. What were they actually going to vote for?

The potential for dramatic change in "business as usual" was frightening for a significant amount of people. Thomas H. Neale lists lack of maturity, that those under twenty-one are mostly not legally responsible for their actions, and that a flood of college voters could overwhelm residents in college areas taking decisions away from more permanent residents among the arguments against the amendment. Underlying these arguments is a tacit concern about the controllability and predictability of young people as well as a fear of the power they might be able to wield if given the opportunity and what effect that power might have. For example, William G. Carleton wrote an article titled, "Teen Voting Would Accelerate Undesirable Changes in the Democratic Process," in opposition to the Twenty-Sixth Amendment stressing the impressionability and uneducated status of young people. Both of these slights point toward an anxiety about youths' personal agency. Yet, the slogan "Old Enough to Fight, Old Enough to Vote," was a compelling one as it focused on the sacrifices made by a generation of young men and their families (Williams, J.). The change in voting age was literally a bestowing of political agency upon young people and was reflected in American films through the figure of the young monster. Additionally, the practices of the film industry tie the 1970s and 2010s together.

Films in and around the 1970s are being remade in and around the 2010s. *The Omen* was remade shot for shot in a gimmick release on June 6, 2006 (6-6-06), reflecting the "devil's number." Films were remade without a specific gimmick of a release date as well. For example, *Carrie* (1976) was remade in 2013, *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) was remade as a television mini-series in 2014, *I Spit on*



*Your Grave* (1978) (itself a remake) was remade in 2010 with sequels *I Spit on Your Grave 2* (2013), and *I Spit on Your Grave III: Vengeance is Mine* (2015). Finally, *The Exorcist* has reappeared as a Fox television series and Peter Blatty's director's cut of *The Exorcist III* (1990) was released as *Legion* in 2016. These are in addition to those franchises from the 1970s who have a particularly potent staying power such as *Halloween* (ten films from 1978-2009 and another scheduled for 2018), and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (eight films from 1974-2017). In sum, the decades of the 1970s and the 2010s have much to inform us about one another especially related to anxieties about youth in horror films. This essay explores the horrors that emerged during those years through figures of young monsters to better understand how popular culture can repackage and represent anxieties thereby confirming their existence as anxieties that are "reasonable" or "worthwhile" to have.

Anxieties and fears of the political agency of young people are paradoxical. On one hand, worries about the sudden influx of new and inexperienced voters exerting their will on a system that may not be able to handle the sudden shift permeate both discourses of the 1970s and the 2010s. On the other hand, fears that these inexperienced voters might get tricked, fooled, or confused into voting a way that either they might not normally vote or that any individual or group of voters might see as detrimental to the system, country, and general well-being also existed reflecting anxieties that young voters lack the agency to control and decide for themselves.

The worries are illustrated by the same 1974 poll referenced above that showed only one-third of respondents thought the schools prepared young people to "vote intelligently" while 16% thought they were poorly prepared (Charles F. Kettering Foundation). While the number of people thinking youths were poorly prepared was small, it still amounts to a sizable portion, especially considering how quickly this amendment was ratified and the overwhelming favorability it garnered.

The official acknowledgment of political agency was welcomed by the newly inducted electorate. Young people were hungry for political action. Dan Cassino and Yasemin Besen-Cassino begin their book describing this eagerness writing, "In 1968, people under the age of twenty-five were more interested in politics than their parents, knew more about it than older people, and were so politically engaged that the Gallup poll had to add another category, 'radical,' to their list of political views to try and measure the strength of the youth movement" (9).

Overall, voting was an important, and yet understudied context into which monstrous youth emerged in the 1970s and re-emerged in the 2010s.

Barack Obama rode a wave of youth voters to victory in the 2008 election and again in 2012. News headlines such as 2008's "Obama's Youth Vote Triumph" and "The Year of the Youth Vote," both from *Time's* Von Drehle and 2012's "Study: Youth Vote was Decisive" from *Politico's* Robillard were common occurrences in the wake of the elections. These headlines point to the fact that young voters turned out to vote in percentages like they had not done since first being enfranchised nearly forty years ago. These young voters were overwhelmingly in favor of Barack Obama by nearly a 2-1 ratio (Lipka and Wiedeman). Lipka and Wiedeman claim that the youth vote may have flipped some states which would have otherwise voted for Republican John McCain.

While the specific mechanism through which Obama was able to capture those votes is debatable whether it is social media (O'Hara), music (Forman), or generic internet usage among the electorate that exposed them to Obama's message (Garcia-Castañon, Rank, and Barreto), youth voters connected with Obama and turned out to vote for him in record numbers. Compared with older generations who voted in larger part for McCain, and were untrusting of Obama, young voters exercised their political power and rewarded a candidate and campaign who could tap into their desires and mobilize them.

The surge in youth voting for Obama was unmatched at any point in the history of the United States except the first election after lowering the voting age to eighteen. This created a similar context where the uncertainty and unpredictability of the youth vote and their decisions were put under the spotlight. The voting context of 2008 and 2012 encapsulated in what I have been terming the 2010s is similar to that of the 1970s because of the importance of the youth vote and the uncertainty that feature of the political landscape brings with it.

## Film, Youth, and Their Resonances

Films, especially horror, reflect the anxieties of their cultures and times. Scholars such as Carol J. Clover, David J. Skal, Bryan L. Ott and Diane Marie Keeling, and Claire Sisco King examine how film responds to the world and creates responses within the world through a variety of theoretical approaches. However,

these scholars all view film as providing insight into understanding the workings of culture and how culture provides necessary context for understanding films.

This essay draws on the theory of resonance developed by Kendall Phillips that traces connections between the actual and screen world, however large or small that connection might be. In other words, people go see films at particular cultural and historical moments. Those moments are a factor in a film's success or failure with critics, financially, and in public memory. Therefore, the films selected for this essay all enjoyed success in at least one of those areas. Phillips describes the process connecting film and wider culture and lived experiences as "resonance," a way to connect to cultural patterns that ring "somehow 'true'" for audiences (5). This truth is in part a confirmation of fears that this essay briefly addresses directly below. It is also that the audience feels, on some level, that the screen depicts the anxieties that they feel in their lives (5). However, this allegory-like connection is not enough for horror or other shocking films (6). Kord makes a similar argument when she claims that horror films primarily focus on creating guilt in an audience based on violations of preconceived social norms (6). Film, especially horror and other body genres as defined by Linda Williams, works upon the body to create affects, sensations, and feelings (Aldana-Reyes). While this essay takes these authors as foundational, it also expands their work to place two contexts in the same reading. This approach adds a diachronic lens that further exposes the patterns of political life through popular culture. Engaging the 1970s alongside and against the 2010s creates a productive friction that brings light to other aspects of the films that may not otherwise be visible.

Overall, this essay takes up these notions of how films connect to the world and explores their relationship through a lens of resonance to argue that they responded to and fueled anxieties about the agency of American youths. By operationalizing resonance in this way, this essay understands film as responding to the world and in turn offering a world and sets of relations back that can be realized more or less fully. These films did more than simply react to a cultural moment. They helped to create cultural moments. For instance, an unease about youth voting existed in America. Films began to tap into that unease. By so doing, the films presented back to audiences a world where youth agency, when not *just right*, was horrifying. This then fed back into fears outside the theater and in part shaped what was politically possible and expedient regarding youths in America. Even though these films may not have set out to create a work that resonated with voting anxieties (or maybe they did, we can never be sure even if everyone

involved in its creation denies it), they responded to a context and added to it in some ways. Therefore, while these films might serve as a site to work through anxieties for some audiences, they are just as, if not more likely, to confirm and heighten already extant unease.

The remainder of this essay turns then to one of these elements, youth voting, and analyzes how it resonates with some of the films released during the 1970s and the 2010s. These films contributed to the concerns around the voting powers of young people by confirming that youths are indeed dangerous, unpredictable, insufficiently educated, and seeking change on a drastic level.

### Too Much, Not Enough of Youth Political Agency

*The Exorcist* and *The Omen* most obviously display the two central fears about what might happen to young voters: they are manipulated by someone else (Regan and Pazuzu) or they seek a revolution and to tear the system apart (Damien). In both films, the youth of new voters, 18-20 instead of 21 and older, is highlighted by portraying them as literal children who resonate with anxieties about these younger, potentially more radical, and inexperienced voters. This essay, in trying to identify patterns across a broad range of films from two periods, must select representative examples from each of the films analyzed. This produces a more diffuse reading than is traditional, but it allows for the comparison of the two periods in a meaningful way centered on how monstrous youth emerged as powerful and frightening figures.

#### *Threatening the System*

In *The Omen*, Damien seeks to destroy the dominant order altogether. Although he uses the tools of democracy (as evidenced more in the sequel films), he seeks to rule the world himself thus demolishing democratic and republican rule in favor of his own dictatorship. Once the focus is placed on Damien, concerns for democratic and systemic stability present themselves readily. Such concerns are also heightened by the Civil Rights Movement, which occurred immediately prior to the push for youth voting. Damien resonates with concerns that extending the vote to young people, who may be too idealistic or unrealistic in the potential for their candidates or preferred changes, might destabilize the system enough to send the whole thing awry.

Damien spends the entire film devastating those around him through nefarious means. While Damien seldom acts himself, he operates by controlling others and having his minions do his dirty work. The one time he does get directly involved is when he knocks his mother over the railing where she then falls but does not die. Damien's nurse later kills his mother. Damien becomes much more directly sinister in the sequels *Damien: Omen II* where he is a young teenager at military school and *The Final Conflict* where he becomes the American Ambassador to Great Britain. In each of these films, Damien seeks to tear down established institutions and replace them with his own idealized version of ruling.

Damien displays far too much agency. Children and young people are not supposed to be capable of establishing a following like that, especially not of adults such as his nanny. Damien demonstrates the power that older voters were fearful of in the young voters after the passage of the Twenty-Sixth Amendment. If young voters wielded their agency they could take over, especially at the more local levels of government and the districts near universities that some considered extremely vulnerable to the young voters who came in droves with the beginning of every semester.

These fears about the agency of young voters and films that engaged that anxiety also appeared in the aftermath of the 2008 election of Barack Obama to the presidency of the United States. Kevin attacks his school and undermines that symbol of control and socialization in *We Need to Talk About Kevin* in addition to committing patricide and soricide and tormenting his mother throughout his whole life. This behavior marks him as monstrous according to Colin Yeo's definition of monstrosity as patricidal and unnatural.

In *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, the film follows the development of a young boy who is, by seemingly any definition, monstrous in his actions despite lacking any demonic powers. As an infant, he cries all the time, especially at his mother. As a toddler, he refuses to speak and defecates in his diaper specifically to spite his mother well past the average age for wearing them. In his teenaged years, Kevin sets a trap in his school where he kills numerous people with a bow and arrow after murdering his sister and father in the same way. Kevin is, at every stage of childhood and youth development, monstrously evil. Importantly, Kevin pursues monstrous deeds with decided and pointed agency. His actions are premeditatedly monstrous. He chooses to act. He poops himself with a purpose—making his mother clean him up. He kills people with a well-thought-out plan and commits the acts with cold calculation. As a young child, he purposefully splatters

paint all over the maps his mother used as wallpaper to decorate her study. It is no accident, no slip, no coincidence. Kevin acts to upset his mother's life and cause her misery.

Unlike Damien, Kevin carries out his dangerous actions personally. He violates norms of cleanliness by soiling himself far longer than most children are in diapers, he continues masturbating when his mother walks in on him, even making eye contact with her, and he eventually commits several murders. These murders occur near their home and in the school, two supposedly safe areas. By upending supposedly fundamental institutions of American life, family and schools, Kevin resonates with the anxieties felt by some Americans in the aftermath of a youth voting surge for a senator relatively new to national politics. Suddenly, young people exerted their agency in large numbers to elect a President whose ideas seemed radical, especially to those who have historically held power in government and social institutions. These youth votes were crucial to Obama's election and provided a narrative for his election. Kevin confirmed the anxieties of those who felt them by putting youth violence and the destruction of institutions on the screen.

In summary, one way that anxieties over youth voting resonated in film of the 1970s and 2010s is through youths who displayed too much agency. In film, youth sought to destroy existing symbols and institutions. Damien exerted his agency in forcing others to do his bidding and Kevin violated and murdered under his own power. The recognition of the agency of youths is a fraught exercise for some Americans. When confronted with young people wielding their agency, *The Omen* and *We Need to Talk About Kevin* showed us that fear in the form of overly agentic youths. However, youths having too much agency is not the only anxiety displayed by films of these periods related to young people voting.

#### *Manipulated by Others*

In addition to youth who display too much agency and are thus dangerous, anxieties about youth voters who do not display enough agency also permeated films in these two periods. Despite gaining the vote, anxieties about young people's competence in actively sorting through political problems persisted and were resonant with images in film. These characters fell under the control of others and displayed an overall lack of agency or control over their own actions. For example, Regan McNeil in *The Exorcist* plays with a Ouija board. She tells her mother she knows how to use it and plays with it alone, apart from Captain Howdy the spirit, often. In playing with forces beyond her comprehension,

understanding, and control, Regan becomes susceptible to the influence of the demon that eventually causes suffering and sometimes death to her and those around her.

Regan, who has fallen into the web of deceit and lies demonstrates the fear that young people may not be able to logically or adequately parse the political world. This gives new light to Father Merrin's statement to Father Karras in *The Exorcist* that "He is a liar. The demon is a liar. He will lie to confuse us. But he will also mix lies with the truth to attack us. The attack is psychological, Damien, and powerful. So don't listen to him. Remember that - do not listen." While in the film, the referent is the demon possessing Regan, it could refer anyone who might seek to sway young voters: campaigns, friends, and fringe aspects alike, especially for an audience who already held those concerns. Regan must be rescued from these dangerous elements of society or the supernatural by the legitimated power of the Church and its representatives. Regan is eventually brought safely back into the fold and can thus participate "properly" in democracy, that is, in ways sanctioned by the dominant parties.

These features of a lack of proper agency in youths arose again in the wake of Obama's election to confirm the anxieties felt by those worried that young voters were used or tricked. In 2010, Dalton from *Insidious* places his family in danger because he engages with forces he does not understand, and he must be rescued by his father who can, for only a moment, reassert "traditional" order and authority. Dalton is also at risk of being taken over by another entity. His body could be taken over while he is traveling (the film's term for his spirit leaving his body behind and "traveling" in the spirit world), that is, not on guard.

While *Insidious's* main monstrous youth Dalton is not a villain but primarily a victim, he nonetheless maintains the designation of monstrous youth because of the harm his actions cause. He sets in motion the whole film's narrative arc when he "travels" via detaching his spirit from his body. Dalton has some level of control over this event and even must use it to rescue his father in the sequel *Insidious II* (2013) who gets trapped at the end of the first film while rescuing his son. Dalton travels into the Further, a realm with which he is unfamiliar and does not fully understand. This has significant ramifications for Dalton as well as those around him who suffer because of his actions.

Dalton, as the main young character in the films, leaves himself open to possession and control by another. Even though it is his father that is eventually possessed (by a spirit that has followed him since he was a child), it is Dalton's

vulnerability to tricks and others and lack of knowledge about the things he engages that brings the danger to him and his family.

*Anxieties Synthesized*

In the films dealt with so far, the two aspects of youth agency (too much and not enough) have been separated. In the last two films this essay takes up, *A Clockwork Orange* and *Sinister* they find a synthesis and are presented in the same film. Thomas H. Neale describes the synthesis of anxieties above when he lists the arguments against the Twenty-Sixth Amendment. Young people are both too capable and therefore could do serious damage to extant structures and not capable enough in that they might be more easily tricked into doing something dangerous with their newfound voting powers.

*A Clockwork Orange* portrays youth running amok and resisting institutions and traditions. In an early scene where the group assaults a homeless man he says, “it’s a stinking world because it lets the young get onto the old” succinctly demonstrating the dangers of youth wielding agency. The 1970s were a transition moment toward a younger bloc of voters even though their participation has fallen dramatically since then from over half to around a third of eligible votes cast (“The 26<sup>th</sup> Amendment;” Cultice 217-9).

*A Clockwork Orange* follows Alex, a violent teenager, as he commits crimes, gets caught, is subjected to a new treatment, and endures the fallout. Alex chooses to act in violent ways repeatedly and the end of the film seems to imply that the treatment has failed and he will return to his violent ways. On one hand, the violence Alex demonstrates, especially early in the film such as assault, home invasion, and rape, resonates with fears that youth have too much agency and could destabilize the system of governance and order by overthrowing it. Like Damien and Kevin, Alex acts dangerously and causes harm to those around him when left to make his own decisions. This resonates with the anxieties of those who fear youths exercising their political agency through the voting booth to enact radical change.

On the other hand, Alex is conditioned to be sick at the sight of violence later in the film showing he can be controlled. Although the film depicts more of a conditioning than a manipulation, the theory of resonance discussed above posits that even a vague ringing true can be meaningful between the lived world of an audience and the world on screen. The film shows a young adult being controlled by both the system, when he is imprisoned, and by scientists and doctors during the treatment. *A Clockwork Orange*, through the character of Alex, portrays



youths as wildly unpredictable and subject to both rampant destruction and to control by others, thus confirming the anxieties about granting them the right to vote.

A similar pattern emerged in 2012's *Sinister*. Ashley, the daughter turned monster in *Sinister*, kills the symbol of authority in her family along with the rest of them while she is under the influence of the demon Bughuul. *Sinister* thus offers a confluence where both kinds of fears meet. Young people can be unduly influenced, perhaps even controlled, and their power can be used to tear down and destroy the system as it currently stands. Ashley binds Ellison, her father, after drugging his drink and murders him and the rest of her family with an axe before smearing their blood on the walls.

Ashley resonates with both concerns of too little and too much agency similarly to Alex. Since Ashley's only sustained screen time is at the conclusion of the film, she is a difficult character on whom to offer a sustained reading. However, she clearly demonstrates both poles of youth agency. At times, she is influenced to an unclear degree by the demon resonating with the fear that youth voters are too easily manipulated. She turns from a shy girl at the beginning of the film to a murderous child at the end. The only impetus for this radical shift is the demon who follows her once her family moves into the house. At the end of the film, Ashley is literally carried away by Bughuul to become one of the children who live with him and haunt other children who move into the house.

At other times in the film, Ashley appears to act with much more agency. She appears to drug her family and murder them under her own agency. She does it for the demon certainly, but *she* appears to be the one acting. This reading is given additional credence in the sequel *Sinister 2* when we see the abducted children hide from the demon indicating they serve him but are not completely under his control. Children drug, restrain, and kill their families in the service of Bughuul, but under their own agency. *Sinister* presents audiences with youths who are paradoxically displaying too little agency, as evidenced through their being manipulated, and too much agency, as evidenced by their grisly actions.

These films take both forms of anxiety, that youth voters will or did demonstrate too much agency and that they will not assert their own agency enough, and places them into a tension in the same character. Alex and Ashley both act dangerously and of their own volition while also clearly being controlled or influenced by other actors. These paradoxical fears come together in the same film rather than exist together in different films because the anxieties with which

they resonate are not separate. The fear is of the unknown power and consequences of the actions of many young people acting together in voting booths across the country.

Overall, this essay has argued that when youth agency displays itself through voting, film turns to depictions of young monsters to confirm the paradoxical anxieties of those voters being either too agential and likely to overthrow entrenched practices or lacking in agency and likely to be duped or manipulated. This feature of American cinema has not yet fully dissipated and yet it seems as though it might also receive a jolt from massive political actions undertaken by youths in resistance to President Trump and the early effectiveness of the student survivors of Marjory Stoneman Douglas school shooting in organizing against gun violence (Rabin and Vassolo; Jamison, Heim, Aratani, and Lang). Youths can exercise energetic, empowered, and effective political agency. When this agency is directed at change, American film tends to respond to the anxieties provoked in those entrenched in the established order by depicting young monsters.

To conclude, this essay offers three implications from this analysis. First, by refocusing critical attention on the child and assuming those characters can display agency, young monsters emerged as powerful critical artifacts to analyze that can break free of the bounds of dominant characters. Second, this analysis demonstrates the importance of accounting for democratic and governmental power even in the face of smaller family drama and larger apocalyptic struggles. Even the most fantastical films emerge from a particular contextual reality. Third, reading time periods against and across one another can result in surprising and enlightening findings. These two periods, both of which experienced shifts in voting behaviors among young people also resonated with one another in the young monsters present in the cinema.

Karen J. Renner offers a twist ending for her book *Evil Children in the Popular Imagination* saying that there is no evil child. Each instantiation is an effort to reassert the innocence of children. This is similar to an assertion made by Kathy Merlock Jackson that “children who act like monsters are not fully guilty; further exploration reveals that their behavior is not really their fault” (137). That, however, is only part of the story, and it evaporates agency from the young monster in question. Once the characters identify and cure or purify the evil child it can serve that function. But for the majority of the film audiences stare at something, someone, monstrous. Even though innocence might lie beneath the

monstrosity wreaking havoc, there is still havoc being wrought and the innocence might be lying in wait or a lie altogether.

There are monstrous youth. The films analyzed in this essay show that they exist. They cause trouble and they do so because “we” do not understand them and do not know what they will do next. These films confirm the presence of monsters, but not because they are inherently monstrous, but because dominant factions, the old guard, those in power do not understand them and are fearful of what their power can do if youth can only harness it. When youth show their political power, they create cultural anxieties around the potentials in shifting power. These paradoxical anxieties orbit two poles, youth having too much agency and youth not having enough agency to ward off manipulation, sometimes at the same time. Some popular culture films resonate with these anxieties and display monstrous children to confirm the fears of a wary, even if eager, culture. This confirmation steadies resistance to youth political agency by creating clearly demarcated monsters.

## Works Cited

- “26<sup>th</sup> Amendment, The.” History.com 2010. <http://www.history.com/topics/the-26th-amendment>. Accessed 14 Sep. 2017.
- A Clockwork Orange*. Directed by Stanley Kubrick, Warner Bros., 1971.
- Aldana Reyes, Xavier. *Horror Film and Affect: Towards a Corporeal Model of Viewership*. Routledge, 2016.
- Aloi, Elizabeth. “Thirty-Five Years after the 26<sup>th</sup> Amendment and Still Disenfranchised: Current Controversies in Student Voting.” *National Black Law Journal*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2004-2005, pp. 283-304.
- Bohlmann, Markkus P.J. and Sean Moreland, editors. *Monstrous Children and Childish Monsters: Essays on Cinema’s Holy Terrors*. McFarland and Company, 2015.
- Scahill, Andrew. *The Revolting Child in Horror Cinema: Youth Rebellion and Queer Spectatorship*. New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2015.

Carleton, William G. "Teen Voting Would Accelerate Undesirable Changes in the Democratic Process." *Amendment XXVI: Lowering the Voting Age*, edited by Sylvia Engdahl, Greenhaven Press, 2010, pp. 46-55.

*Carrie*. Directed by Brian De Palma, MGM, 1976.

*Carrie*. Directed by Kimberly Peirce, MGM, 2013.

Cassino, Dan and Yasemin Besen-Cassino. *Consuming Politics: Jon Stewart, Branding, and the Youth Vote in America*. Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009.

Charles F. Kettering Foundation. "Gallup/Kettering Poll of Public Attitudes Toward the Public Schools 1974, May, 1974." "Young people who reach the age of 18 now have the right to vote. The question arises as to whether high school courses give students enough information about the Constitution, about government and the political process to enable them to vote intelligently. What is your impression—good a job do the schools perform in this respect—good, fair, or poor?" USGALLUP.74EDUC.Q015. Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, iPOLL. Accessed 12 November 2017.

Clover, Carol J. *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. 1992. Princeton University Press, 2015.

Cultice, Wendell W. *Youth's Battle for the Ballot: A History of Voting Age in America*. Praeger, 1992.

*Damien: Omen II*. Directed by Don Taylor. Twentieth Century Fox, 1978.

Von Drehle, David. "Obama's Youth Vote Triumph." *Time*, 4 January 2008, <http://content.time.com/time/politics/article/0,8599,1700525,00.html>. Accessed 20 Nov. 2017.

Von Drehle, David. "The Year of the Youth Vote." *Time*, 31 January 2008, [content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1708836,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1708836,00.html). Accessed 20 Nov. 2017.

- Drury, Jeffrey P. Mehlretter. "Beyond 'Rhetorical Agency': Skutnik's Story in the 1982 State of the Union Address." *Western Journal of Communication*, vol. 82, no. 1, 2018, pp. 40-58.
- Forman, Murray. "Conscious Hip-Hop, Change, and the Obama Era." *American Studies Journal*, vol. 54, 2010, <http://www.asjournal.org/54-2010/conscious-hip-hop/#>. Doi: 10.18422/54-03. Accessed 21 Nov. 2017.
- Garcia-Castañon, Marcela, Alison D. Rank, and Matt A. Barreto. "Plugged In or Tuned Out? Youth, Race, and Internet Usage in the 2008 Election." *Journal of Political Marketing*, vol. 10 no. 1-2, 2011, pp. 115-138.
- Halloween*. Directed by John Carpenter, Compass International Pictures, 1978.
- Hard Candy*. Directed by David Slade, Lions Gate Films, 2005.
- I Spit on Your Grave*. Directed by Meir Zarchi, Cinemagic Pictures, 1978.
- I Spit on Your Grave*. Directed by Steven R. Monroe, Cinetel Films, 2010.
- I Spit on Your Grave 2*. Directed by Steven R. Monroe, Cinetel Films, 2013.
- I Spit on Your Grave 3: Vengeance is Mine*. Directed by R.D. Braunstein, Cinetel Films, 2015.
- Insidious*. Directed by James Wan, Alliance Films, 2010.
- Insidious II*. Directed by James Wan, FilmDistrict, 2013.
- It's Alive*. Directed by Larry Cohen, Warner Bros., 1974.
- Jackson, Kathy Merlock. *Images of Children in American Film: A Sociocultural Analysis*. Scarecrow Press, 1986.
- Jamison, Peter, Joe Heim, Lori Aratani, and Marissa J. Lang. "'Never again!' Students Demand Action Against Gun Violence in Nation's Capital." *Washington Post*, 24 March 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/march-for-our-lives-huge-crowds-gather-for-rally-against-gun-violence-in-nations->

- capital/2018/03/24/4121b100-2f7d-11e8-b0b0-f706877db618\_story.html?utm\_term=.65b62f6516ee. Accessed 25, March, 2018.
- King, Claire Sisco. *Washed in Blood: Male Sacrifice, Trauma, and the Cinema*. Rutgers University Press, 2012.
- Kord, T.S. *Little Horrors: How Cinema's Evil Children Play on Our Guilt*. McFarland and Company, 2016.
- Kubiak, Dan. "Youth and Their Vote: A New Day is Coming." *Theory Into Practice*, vol. 10, no. 5, 1971, pp. 321-22.
- Legion*. Directed by William Peter Blatty, Morgan Creek Entertainment Group, 2016.
- Levin, Ira. *Rosemary's Baby*. Random House, 1967.
- Lipka, Sarah and Reeves Wiedeman. "Young Voters Overwhelmingly Favored Obama, Swinging Some Battleground States." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 14 Nov. 2008, [www.chronicle.com/article/Young-Voters-Overwhelmingly/26581](http://www.chronicle.com/article/Young-Voters-Overwhelmingly/26581). Accessed 20 Nov. 2017.
- Logan's Run*. Directed by Michael Anderson, MGM, 1976.
- Neale, Thomas H. "Lowering the Voting Age Was Not a New Idea." *Amendment XXVI: Lowering the Voting Age*, edited by Sylvia Engdahl, Greenhaven Press, 2010, pp. 32-40.
- O'Hara, Kieron. "Social Machine Politics Are Here to Stay." *IEEE Internet Computing*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2013, pp. 87-90.
- Ott, Brian L. and Diane Marie Keeling. "Cinema and Choric Connection: *Lost in Translation* as Sensual Experience." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, vol. 97 no. 4, 2011, pp. 363-386.
- Phillips, Kendall. *Projected Fears: Horror Films and American Culture*. Praeger Publishers, 2005.

Rabin, Charles and Martin Vassolo. "A Thousand Students Walk out of Class and March to Stoneman Douglas High School." *Miami Herald*, 20 February 2018, <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/community/broward/article201075414.html>. Accessed 24 March, 2018.

Renner, Karen J. *Evil Children in the Popular Imagination*. Springer, 2016.

Robillard, Kevin. "Study: Youth Vote was Decisive." *Politico*, 7 November 2012, [www.politico.com/story/2012/11/study-youth-vote-was-decisive-083510](http://www.politico.com/story/2012/11/study-youth-vote-was-decisive-083510). Accessed 20 Nov. 2017.

*Rock 'n' Roll School*. Directed by Allan Arkush, New World Pictures, 1979.

*Rosemary's Baby*. City Entertainment and NBC, 2014.

*Rosemary's Baby*. Directed by Roman Polanski, William Castle Productions, 1968.

Rowley, Sean. "26<sup>th</sup> Amendment Lowered Voting Age." *Tahlequah Daily Press*, 25 Aug. 2014, [http://www.tahlequahdailypress.com/news/th-amendment-lowered-voting-age/article\\_20a91b9c-2c80-11e4-9319-001a4bcf887a.html](http://www.tahlequahdailypress.com/news/th-amendment-lowered-voting-age/article_20a91b9c-2c80-11e4-9319-001a4bcf887a.html). Accessed 18 February 2018.

Scott, James C. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. Yale University Press, 1998.

*Sinister*. Directed by Scott Derrickson, Alliance Films, 2012.

*Sinister 2*. Directed by Ciarán Foy. Entertainment One, 2015.

Skal, David J. *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror*. 1993. Farrar, Straus, and Grioux, 2001.

Slator, Jeremy, creator. *The Exorcist*. Morgan Creek Entertainment Group and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Television.

*Standing Tall [Le Tête Haute]*. Directed by Emmanuelle Bercot, Les Films du Kiosque, 2015.

*The Exorcist*. Directed by William Friedkin, Warner Bros., 1973.

*The Exorcist III*. Directed by William Peter Blatty, Morgan Creek Entertainment Group, 1990.

*The Final Conflict*. Directed by Graham Baker. Twentieth Century Fox, 1981.

*The Omen*. Directed by Richard Donner, Twentieth Century Fox, 1976.

*The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. Directed by Tobe Hooper, Vortex, 1974.

*The Witch*. Directed by Robert Eggers, Parts and Labor, 2015.

U.S. Constitution. Amend. XXVI.

*We Need to Talk About Kevin*. Directed by Lynne Ramsay, BBC Films, 2011.

Williams, Joseph P. “‘Old Enough to Fight, Old Enough to Vote’: The 26<sup>th</sup> Amendment’s Mixed Legacy.” *U.S. News and World Report*. 1 July 2016. <http://www.history.com/topics/the-26th-amendment>. Accessed 14 September 2017.

Williams, Linda. “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess.” *Film Quarterly* vol. 44 no. 4, 1991, pp. 2-13.

Yeo, Colin. “‘Doesn’t Everyone Want Their Parent’s Dead?’ Monstrous Children in the Films of Ridley Scott.” *Monstrous Children and Childish Monsters: Essays on Cinema’s Holy Terrors*, edited by Markus P.J. Bohlmann and Sean Moreland, McFarland and Company, 2015, pp. 96-106.



# Zaha Hadid: Spatializing Identity through the Architectural Monster

CATHRYN LADD

Zaha Hadid was one of the world's most influential and memorable architects; she was the first woman to win the highly acclaimed Pritzker Architecture Prize and was also awarded the Royal Gold Medal in 2016. Throughout her career she scattered the globalized landscape with her signature curves and spiraled forms, situating them within both domestic and public infrastructure; unapologetically presenting her vision for our architectural future. She championed ways of creating new spatial experiences and appeared to believe in destabilizing the walls that divide us in order to further our collective architectural journey<sup>1</sup>.

As an Arab woman in a world where architecture is largely constructed and maintained by white men, Hadid was unavoidably positioned as an outsider. Rem Koolhaas, the hugely influential Dutch architect, once described Hadid as 'a planet in her own inimitable orbit' (Seabrook par.29). Hadid has said herself that she was never accepted into the club, never permitted to squeeze unnoticed into the industry; and because of this, she circled above, a planet unto herself, critically looking for opportunities to implant her ingenuity. According to *Zaha Hadid Architects*, these opportunities have been plentiful throughout her long career. She has projects spanning across 44 countries - ranging from cultural centres, governmental structures, towering corporate power symbols and upscale private residences.

Hadid is a symbol of how an outsider can conquer and champion success. She was formidable in her practice, carving out space for her greatness through

---

<sup>1</sup> This idea of community and collective experience is discussed in 'Dame Zaha Hadid in Conversation', filmed for Goldsmiths University of London, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t82U23b71ck> (accessed November 2017).

resisting the oppressive power of normativity that pervades not only in mainstream architectural thinking but also in our wider popular imagination. Hadid was not nice, accommodating nor quiet, and her work mirrors that. Her structures unsettle and confront our ingrained understandings of the built environment; they generate a feeling within their users and viewers that they are extra-terrestrial forms, forms carefully placed among humanity to disrupt the historical and contemporary trajectory of architecture.

The first part of this paper theorizes and visualizes this disruption through the image of the *hybrid monstrosity*. I frame the *hybrid monstrosity* as the ability to locate a feeling of the anti-normal; a feeling created by the uncomfortable relationship between Hadid's built design and its spatial setting. The *hybrid monstrosity* is a flexible identity; the object *becomes a hybrid monstrosity* through its ability to disrupt our human landscape which in turn gives it an alien status. The feeling of the anti-normal strips the object of any neutrality and instead posits it as an outsider, a monster. This feeling of the monstrous is exacerbated within the human viewer or user because of the conscious awareness that the object goes against conventional thinking and aesthetics.

The *hybrid monstrosity* shows parallels with popular understandings of the imagined monster:

A large, ugly, and frightening imaginary creature.

A thing of extraordinary or daunting size.

A congenitally malformed or mutant animal or plant<sup>2</sup>

By combining my definition of the *hybrid monstrosity* with these three somewhat interrelated dictionary definitions, we arrive at the act of Othering; an ideology that is continuously discussed in relation to emerging conceptualizations of the

---

<sup>2</sup> Definitions taken from: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/monster> (assessed November 2017).

monstrous<sup>3</sup>. The capitalized verb *to Other*, is commonly defined as the ability to ‘view or treat (a person or group of people) as intrinsically different from and alien to oneself’<sup>4</sup>. Due to its size, ugliness and ability to create fear, the monster has long been a victim of literary, cinematic and political Othering<sup>5</sup>. Similarly, the architectural monster, the *hybrid monstrosity*, is often Othered due its size, aesthetic and inability to fit within the organic or urban landscape<sup>6</sup>. To become monstrous there is an indication that one must depart from what is considered normal; from what is societally, culturally, aesthetically, politically and spatially acceptable. As Levina and Bui argue in their introduction to *Monster Culture in the 21st Century: A Reader*, monsters ‘represent collective social anxieties over resisting and embracing change’ (1) - they are figures for humanity to Other in opposition to itself, an act which allows us to avoid collectively looking inward and facing the fears we have of the future ahead.

While on the one hand there is something fundamentally unifying between the imagined and the architectural monster, the *hybrid monstrosity* simultaneously offers a departure away from mainstream thought. There is significant scholarship<sup>7</sup> that aspires to draw together the human with the monstrous as a way of producing new intertwining subjectivities. However, with the *hybrid monstrosity*, I focus on establishing a spatial connection between the human and the architectural monster. By doing this, our understanding of the monster becomes less about the realm of the imagined and more about our physical realities. In other words, as the human can be physically contained *within* the architectural monster, there is no gain to be had by Othering the *hybrid*

<sup>3</sup> An example would be the work of Robin Wood. See *American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film*, Festivals of Festivals, 1979.

<sup>4</sup> Definition taken from: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/other> (assessed November 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Examples include *Frankenstein’s Monster*, *Cyclops*, *The Kraken*, *Godzilla*, *Hitler*, *Thatcher*, *Putin*.

<sup>6</sup> Examples could include *The Ryugyong Hotel* in North Korea, *The Antilia* in India, *Aoyama Technical College* in Japan and *The National Library of Pristina* in the Republic of Kosovo.

<sup>7</sup> The work of Michel Foucault and Judith Halberstam are two examples.

*monstrosity*, largely because we exist alongside it and it therefore serves to give value to our urban and rural experiences.

Through looking at two of Hadid's works: *The Bergisel Ski Jump* (2002) and *The Nordpark Railway Stations* (2007), my aim is to expand our understanding of the monstrous and our image of the monster. Through locating the *hybrid monstrosity* within these two projects, I aim to make clear that this tangible architectural identity destabilizes the dominant image of the terrible monster that lurks in our psyche. Its existence encourages us to deconstruct our understandings of monstrous imagery and instead work towards building new representations of monstrous beings and becomings.

The bridge that connects the two halves of this paper is built out of controversy.

Even for those who do not engage with architecture as either a practice or an academic discipline, Hadid's work is often recognizable; numerous projects have gained both popularity and notoriety within mainstream culture and media, fueled by a strong foundation of controversy. Firstly, by examining *The Bergisel Ski Jump* and *The Nordpark Railway Stations*, the paper demonstrates how the *hybrid monstrosity* is an example of the way Hadid mobilized architecture to produce physical and visual controversy among two different topographical sites. Building from this, controversy is then framed as a foundation for the popularized narrative surrounding Hadid's professional identity. Referring back to the image of Hadid as 'a planet in her own inimitable orbit' (Seabrook par.29), it will consider how the media painted Hadid as the industry's unethical monster, a woman prepared to sacrifice lives in favor of her creative vision. Through analyzing this particular media narrative, we can see the extent to which this framing was related to Hadid's personal identity, that of the intersectional outsider. To expand, my use of the intersectional outsider builds off Kimberlé Crenshaw's original notion of intersectionality, whereby social categorizations such as gender, class and race, intertwine to create a mutually dependent system of disadvantage<sup>8</sup>. Relating this to Hadid, I will argue that her intersectional identity, specifically in reference to her gender and ethnicity, contributes towards her position as an outsider in the

---

<sup>8</sup> See Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color'. *Stanford Law Review*, vol.43, no. 6, 1991, pp. 1241-1299.

field of architecture. This section concludes by exploring how Hadid's identity can therefore be posited as a significant stimulus for the hybrid monstrous constructions which were uncovered within the first half of the paper.

By theorizing and visualizing the *hybrid monstrosity* and developing subsequent commentary on identity building, the arguments presented here contribute to the deconstruction of the popular academic narrative which posits architecture as an inaccessible discipline. The aim is to show that architecture and architectural practice can engage with, and contribute to, emerging interdisciplinary cultural conversations.



**Image 1: The Bergisel Ski Jump (2002)**

**Image copyrighted & courtesy of Tirol Werbung / Verena Kathrein.**

*'in the face of such rapid change, the once stable boundaries between time and space, human and machine, self and other have become increasingly uncertain, raising interesting and challenging questions about accepted definitions of space, place and identity'* (Wolmark 1).

Elizabeth Grosz argued in *Space, Time and Perversion* that in order for bodies to be reconciled 'not only must their matter and form be rethought, but so too must their environment and spatio-temporal location' (129). The Bergisel Ski Jump is an architectural example of this bodily re-thinking; it represents a collapse of organic and mechanical environments, the effect of which creates a concrete feeling of the sublime within the user/viewer. This makes it a perfect example of the *hybrid monstrosity*. It is part bridge, part ski-jump, a sort of architectural

revisoning of the historically monstrous conjoined twin. It stands at a vertical height of 50m and transports people from the valley to the mountain through an elevator system. The ski jump's monstrous identity can be discussed in a number of ways, but my focus is on Hadid's use of scale and how it generates a sense of the monstrous sublime.

The structure's interaction with the mountainous landscape shows it literally bursting through the dense foliage, appearing as a concrete symbol of towering strength. Its sheer size invades the alpine sense of calm. It demands attention - particularly in the way in which its curved glass paneling refracts the sun, blinding all those who dare to gaze upon it. The way the slope extends out of the main architectural body, alludes to a monstrous deformity, painting the structure as a deviant experimental subject (Comaroff and Ker-Shing 27). This deviance is exacerbated by the ski jump's size; its alien-ness and removal from our human proportionalized perspective paints the structure as uncontainable and unapproachable.

In *Horror in Architecture* Joshua Comaroff and Ong Ker-Shing discuss the effect of scale, in particular that of the giant, positing it as 'one of the central forms in the historical imaginary of horror and monstrosity' (169). They argue that when architecture adopts a gigantic scale, it taps into a collective anxiety surrounding 'topological instability'(169). In other words, when we come across an object or being of inexplicable size, our individual surroundings suddenly feel unstable - the presence of the Other (a being outside of oneself) collapses what we had previously deemed secure. When we gaze upon the ski jump, its size makes both the forest and the peaks appear dwarfed. This is overwhelming for the human sense of self because we are rendered insignificant by both the man-made form and the natural environment.

The topological setting is further made unstable by the ski jump's structural solidity. Comaroff and Ker-Shing are defiant in their view: 'Solidity is truly horrid thing; an irreconcilable, existential terror. The solid object provides no space, either physically or philosophically, for inhabitation' (176). There is, however, a distinction between exterior and interior solidity which can be explored through the ski jump. When we view the structure externally, the contrast between the landscape and Hadid's use of concrete as a primary material creates a feeling of the impenetrable. It establishes the feeling that we 'cannot properly inhabit the edifice; we can merely beetle about its edges' (173). This forces us to view it as an autonomous solid monster that has power over us - it

blocks our access to the expansive forest, acting as a barrier to the mountains, forcing us to confront our own physical journeys and spatial interactions. Simultaneously, the interior is vastly different. Primarily, it serves to aid, as oppose to hinder human life. It houses a café on the top tower which includes a viewing platform that allows users to engage comfortably and at ease with the surrounding landscape. It is no longer a looming and fearful solid object, instead, by opening itself up to flexible interactions, it becomes a safe haven for us to rest in and recuperate. What I want to emphasize, is that the ski jump as a *hybrid monstrosity* problematizes the often too rigid historical understandings of the monstrous as a solid mass of terror. In reality, monsters are complex beings with both interior and exterior selves which may at times seem at odds with one another. Simon-Mittmann argues that ‘a monster is not really known through observation’, but rather ‘through its effect, its impact’ (6). In the case of the ski-jump, our visual observations and the impact of our spatial experience may give us very different feelings. While I do not agree that we cannot experience the monster through observation, as from an architectural perspective I believe that we can; what Simon-Mittman’s argument does do, is encourage new discussions surrounding the multiplicity of ways of performing and experiencing the monstrous.

Bringing together these ideas of scale and solidity, we can turn to the emotive experience of the sublime. In an attempt to define it, Trachtenberg and Hyman refer to ‘the principal effect of the sublime’ which they specify as the realization or reaction to stimuli which evokes great emotion, adrenaline and astonishment (qtd in MacLean 48). This ‘great emotion’ is often the result of being confronted by a sudden change, which goes back to the previous notion of ‘topological instability’ (Comaroff and Ker-Shing 169). Historically, particularly within the arts, the effect of the change has been to physically surrender the victim of the sublime, rendering them fixed in time and space. Due to this stupefying effect, the feeling of the sublime is often mis-defined as terror.

In *On the Sublime and the Beautiful* Edward Burke raises the point that unlike horror and terror, which connote a sense of danger, the sublime is more closely related to pleasure, largely because the object fails to present an active threat (qtd. in Simon-Mittmann 12). The only emotive sense of threat the ski jump poses is through perspective - it threatens our human scale and dwarfs our existential sense of importance. From an architectural angle, it may threaten our own understandings, meanings and values that we associate with architectural form,

spatial encounters and rural topography. Specifically, its vast concrete and immovable body encourages us to rethink what we deem to be aesthetically valuable.

This binary relationship between the beautiful and the ugly is something that has continuously surfaced within both scholarship and popular cultural manifestations of the monster. Upon closer inspection, it seems they function less as a binary and more as a close partnership; what we may initially perceive as an ugly monster may upon observation and interaction become beautiful (MacLean 49). Upon first gazing at the ski jump, one may see its concrete silhouette as a harsh mutation of the landscape, a deviant alien having migrated from elsewhere. However, upon further inspection perhaps the structure's inherent sense of beauty - its carefully crafted curves and angles, its majestic, monumental stature - starts to unravel. What the *hybrid monstrosity* really does is encourage us to reimagine our interpretations of beauty - the deviant merging of machine and mountain offers us new possibilities of composition and space-making (Comaroff and Ker-Shing 46). This merging can be further explored through *The Nordpark Railway Stations*.



**Image 2: The Nordpark Railways Stations (2007) - Hungerburg Station**  
Image copyrighted & courtesy of Víctor Patiño George.





**Image 3: The Nordpark Railways Stations (2007) - Hungerburg Station  
Image copyrighted & courtesy of Martin Schubert.**

The Nordpark Railway Stations in Innsbruck, Austria are a collection of works made up of Alpenzoo Station, Hungerburg Station, Congress Station and Lowenhaus Station - all four make up a funicular railway system that is situated along Innsbruck's northern chain of mountains<sup>9</sup>. Each one has a unique architectural design, influenced by the topography, altitude and the neighboring ice formations of the site. While all four perform the *hybrid monstrosity* identity, I am concentrating solely on Hungerburg Station.

The station is a symbol of advanced architectural technology; the roof shell structure is organically placed on top of plinths, creating a feeling of lightness, achieved by Hadid's pioneering use of double-curved glass. Hadid designed the original shape on computer software, which was then precisely translated into the final built form through processes of CNC milling and thermoforming

---

<sup>9</sup> Description taken from Zaha Hadid Architects: <http://www.zaha-hadid.com/architecture/nordpark-railway-stations/> (accessed November 2017).

(mechanical processes of shaping material). Further, complex design and manufacturing processes commonly used in the automotive industry were adopted in order to achieve a streamlined aesthetic<sup>10</sup>. In the following section, I discuss Hungerburg Station and how it becomes a *hybrid monstrosity* through its relationship to technology and its embodiment of the cyborg.

The cyborg is the 21st century's technological monster. Its hybrid half human, half machine body has emerged as a site of fear - raising anxieties over the value of our human ontology while simultaneously igniting nervous fantasies over our future environments and bodies. Within popular culture, the cyborg has flourished and has been explored in a variety of mediums. As Simon-Mittman notes: 'monsters do a great deal of cultural work' through the way they 'are able to portray ideas, concepts and notions of culture' (1) and therefore the figure of the cyborg – due to its ability to share human traits and operate within human space and place – offers us the potential to modify and expand our sense of self within a new emerging bio-techno culture.

Alongside culture, the cyborg has also been discussed in academia. Feminist historian, technologist and scientist Donna Haraway has been at the forefront of cyborg theory. Her *Cyborg Manifesto* was first published in 1984 and to this day it remains one of the most intricate and informed academic works on the cyborg. Haraway argues that the cyborg 'is the figure born of the interface of automaton and autonomy' (*Primitive Visions* 139) - by this she means it is representative of the combined existence of technology (as an automated repeated process) and the natural (as having the ability to produce independent and unique organisms).

Hungerburg Station is an architectural cyborg through the way it represents a combination of technology and organic. The structure has a white shelled technological body and what is more, the technological is enhanced by its function and purpose as a station, the passing trains physically enter its interior core on a mechanized track system creating waves of kinetic energy. Simultaneously, it represents the natural through being both a human serving space and a space that mirrors its living environment. Humans occupy the station, shifting the interior spatial dynamics and creating transitory narratives. At the

---

<sup>10</sup> Technical information taken from Zaha Hadid Architects: <http://www.zaha-hadid.com/architecture/nordpark-railway-stations/> (accessed November 2017)

same time, it appears to grow out of the mountain side like a snow-covered stalagmite, harmoniously at one with its surroundings. Like a biological organism, the station has both an interior and exterior life.

Cyborg scholar Jennifer González argues that the cyborg body is ‘imbedded within the real’ (264) which builds off Haraway’s original ideology that the cyborg is ‘a creature of social reality’ (*Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* 149). This harks back to Medieval theorizing of the monster when the common belief was that a monster was merely a creature, it was not required to be imaginary or mythical in any sense (Simon-Mittmann 5). To expand on this idea of reality, I present the railway station as an image of monstrous reality. It is a humble mundane figure consistently and quietly aiding the ordinary act of moving from one place to another. It is not a monster in a deliberate and frightening way - there so sense of drama or impending doom. Instead, its hybrid monstrous identity is formed through its autonomy; it feels like an object that has come from elsewhere, an architectural migrant who has assimilated to its environment. It has an ethereal, unstable, fleeting presence - aided by the movement of the trains and the way it represents the constantly evolving field of technology. Hungerburg station, as a cyborg figure, has found a home within the Austrian mountains, it peacefully pushes the boundaries we have drawn between technological and natural worlds and offers us a new hybrid paradigm in which to exist.

## Identity, Representation and the Making of the Monster

"My work is not within the accepted box. Maybe because I am a woman. Also an Arab" ~ Zaha Hadid, (Elkann q.3).

The second part of this paper continues this notion of boundary pushing as a mechanism for new paradigms of existence but considers it from the perspective of identity. We can begin by returning back to Rem Koolhaas’s metaphor of Hadid as ‘a planet in her own inimitable orbit’ (Seabrook par.29).

Hadid’s inimitability was frequently used as a way of constructing her as the feared *female* genius in the industry. I italicize *female* because it is critical in the making of her own planet in a significant way. By adding *female* to genius, her gender is used as a marker of difference which firmly separates her from her male genius peers. Media taglines make this division explicit, deeming ‘the queen of the curve’ (Moore title) a ‘ball-breaking harridan’ (Jefferies par.2) who trashed

architectural tradition with her ‘vertiginous heels’ (Jefferies par.2). The combined visual effect of the harridan in heels creates a shrew-like sharpness which is clearly emulated in architectural cartoonist Louis Hellman’s caricature of Hadid which was first published in his book *Archi-Tetes: The Id in the Grid*. The image is a close up encounter of her face which is created by layering angular black lines in such a way that it replicates Hadid’s own style of drawing. It constructs her eyes as small slits framed in heavy blue eyeshadow while her painted red lips are positioned into a monstrous snarl. Makeup is transformed from a normative feminine symbol into a visually frightful image, an artistic act which supports this wider media discourse of monstrosity that surrounds her gender. In a similar way, artist Michael Craig-Martin’s portrait of Hadid, which hangs in London’s National Portrait Gallery, reiterates this image of her gendered monstrosity. The portrait is digitally created on a screen and shows the same image of Hadid on a loop, each image showing her skin and facial features in different combinations of garish neon colors. In an interview, Hadid commented on the artwork, saying ‘he made my face green and my eyes purple. I’m not so sure it’s how I want to look’ (Seabrook par.38).

Akram Shalghin makes an interesting argument in relation to gendered representation, stating that Arab women are frequently subjected to misrepresentation and distortion (14). From an intersectional perspective, Shalghin’s argument reminds us that we cannot detach Hadid’s Arabness from her gender. There have been consistent media references to her Arab identity, from micro references to her ‘barking abuse in Arabic’ (Jefferies par.2) to Hadid herself more explicitly discussing her racist treatment during her first project in Cardiff (Seabrook par. 52). The combination of her female-ness and her Arabness intensifies the distortion, whether it be through an artwork or a newspaper article, as through these cultural mechanisms she is marked as different to both her male and white female architectural peers. Hadid herself referred to her intersectional struggle as a ‘double-edged sword’ (Qureshi par.3), a term Nira Yuval-Davis also uses to describe the politics of recognition (2017). As Hadid says, ‘the moment my woman-ness is accepted, the Arab-ness seems to become a

problem' (Qureshi par.3). Many feminist scholars<sup>11</sup> have written extensively on the ways in which women of color have been misrepresented through imagery which seek to serve systems of power. bell hooks would perhaps encourage us to see the symbol of the sword as an object which 'offers one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds' (150), in other words, the foundation for one's own planet. Hadid was a figure who represented a collision of difference and because of that, she personally existed and professionally created outside of the powerful framework which has historically defined western architectural ideologies and practice.

We can consider this intersectional outsider identity in relation to the *hybrid monstrosity* through revisiting Hungerburg station and its connection to the cyborg. As previously discussed, González deems the cyborg body as 'imbedded within the real' (264) and I expand this idea by revealing the station an example of an imbedded autonomous cyborg body. To extend further, Donna Haraway saw the woman of color as a manifestation of a cyborg identity due to the 'fusions of outsider identities' (*Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* 174) present within the multiple realities of non-white women. In other words, she recognized that the intersectional body, by existing on the margins, was representative of the way the cyborg can cut across and transgress dominant social structures (Wolmark 4). She posits cyborg politics as being inclusive and sympathetic to difference and a driving force behind the cyborg mission: to 'both build [ing] and destroy [ing] machines, identities, categories, relationships, space stories' (*Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* 181). Hadid was a builder of architecture and a destroyer of aging spatial ideologies, she took on civic responsibility through investing in public infrastructure and wanted to bring people together through the promotion of inclusion - a desire recognized by UNESCO when she was named the 'artist for peace' in 2010. It therefore does not seem coincidental that the creator of the autonomous cyborg structure may have had her own links to a cybernetic way of being. Both the intersectional outsider and the *hybrid monstrosity*, as identities, share the experience of difference which allows them to mutually support each other in the building of their own territories in which to exist. One cannot help but

---

<sup>11</sup> Scholars include Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Sara Ahmed, Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, Cherrie Moraga, Trinh Minh Ha, Bernadette Calafell.

think that by designing hybrid monstrosities, Hadid located a place of safety for her own intersectional outsider to thrive.

Hadid's intersectional outsidership was a springboard to launch another media crafted identity: Hadid as the unethical monster. Professionally, 2015 was a particularly controversial year for Zaha Hadid Architects and subsequently this was when we see the unethical monster rear its ugly head within popular media. Tabloid news outlets were quick to paint her work within the Middle East, notably Libya, Iraq and Qatar (Bayley par.8), as proof of her professional support of oppressive regimes and personal dealings with 'the backyards of dictators and tyrants'(Bayley par.8). Her stadium project in Qatar, due for completion in 2022, was alleged to have caused the deaths of 1,200 construction workers - a fact which was later dismissed as false as the stadium had not even entered its building phase when the article went to print (Wainwright *Why is Zaha Hadid* par.2). Similarly Hadid's work in Asia in 2015 heralded controversy; her design for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic stadium was accused of destroying Tokyo's sense of cultural community, with Japanese architects deeming it a monstrosity that was a 'disgrace to future generations' (Wainwright *Tokyo Olympic Stadium* par.2,4). This follows claims from the Human Rights Watch about the conditions of Bosnian and Serbian migrant workers in regard to her Heydar Aliyev Center in Azerbaijan (Wainwright *Baku Prize Winner* par.8) and outcries from the Beijing Cultural Heritage Protection Centre, an NGO who claimed that Hadid showed a complete disregard of the legal rights of Chinese citizens when constructing her Galaxy Soho shopping center in Beijing (Wainwright *Zaha Hadid's Mega Mall* par.5).

Not surprisingly, her white male peers who have also had dealings with controversial governmental regimes including Norman Foster in Kazakhstan and Rem Koolhaas in Qatar and China - do not come under the same ethical scrutiny and often harsh and carelessly executed accusations despite evidence existing which would warrant ethical interrogation. There is a strong stench of Hadid's intersectional outsider identity having been mobilized against her in order to produce a targeted narrative of a monstrous figure. This media narrative makes clear that there is a cultural expectation not only of her femaleness, but also of her Arabness, to deliver us an industry image of the good ethical immigrant; a quiet agreeable woman who creates nice normative buildings which do not challenge or illuminate the systemic problems that plague the industry. It is the ethical responsibility of all architects to critically consider the territories, people and

cultures they work in. Yet, as in most industries, the fall out of failure is targeted at those who operate on the margins; those who come to embody difference, difficulty and unapologetic willfulness.

Sara Ahmed makes a compelling argument with regard to willfulness. She theorizes that to be willful is to live a paradoxical life. In other words, 'you might have to become what you are judged as being to survive what you are judged as being' (82). Thinking of Hadid and the many reports of her rudeness and dismissive comments over the years, there may be an element of this playing out - perhaps she nurtured the monstrous narrative in an attempt to take control. This idea of owning your distortion shows parallels with Bernadette Calafell's paper on monstrous femininity which details her numerous experiences of having been Othered in the academy due to her identity as queer woman of color. By being vulnerable through her writing she demonstrates the power that can come from directing the monstrous, using it as a creative tool to disrupt, disempower and deconstruct it (128). In similar way, Ahmed does not construct willfulness as a fixed negative experience. She argues that 'willfulness can be a spark. We can be lit up by it' (82). In the case of Hadid, I think this is true. Through her taking ownership of both the intersectional outsider and the unethical monster, a creative power was sparked which led her to willfully push boundaries, regardless of the disruption it caused. After all, 'monsters do a great deal of cultural work, but they do not do it nicely. They not only challenge and question; they trouble, they worry, they haunt' (Simon Mittman 1).

Simon Mittman suggests that above all, the monstrous calls into question our epistemological worldview, highlighting its fragmentary nature and asking us to acknowledge the failures of our systems of being and becoming (8). It is this ideology which draws together Hadid and her work. Hadid was constructed as a monstrous figure because of her how she performed and embodied the intersectional outsider. This encourages us to interrogate the way popular culture uses the mechanism of Othering to create monstrous figures, and importantly, the extent to which monstrous beings are culturally constructed through racialized, gendered and religious lenses. The way Hadid was positioned as an unethical monster was a failing of the architectural industry and the cultural systems that supported it.

Hadid's willful spark produced the *hybrid monstrosity*, an architectural monstrous identity which can be seen to represent a move away from both the historically feared cultural monster and the marginalized monster of the Other. It

offers us a way of positively encountering the monster through space. These architectural identities are situated among us, intertwined with our everyday lived realities, aiding our human experiences. They too are willful in their commandment and ownership of space, unphased by the controversy they amass. Perhaps, we can unite them with their creator through this image of the planet. Rather than being isolated, hybrid monstrosities function as planetary forms that welcome the diversity of human existence and offer residency to the multiplicity of identities they encounter.

## Conclusion

Zaha Hadid had the ability to hint at the potential for a new monstrous future. Through *The Bergisel Ski Jump* and *The Nordpark Railways* I have located the *hybrid monstrosity* as a way of producing and viewing architecture in relation to the popular cultural image of the monster - an image that continues to shift, expand and develop within both our imaginaries and realities. By looking at architecture through a monstrous lens, I expand our popular cultural understandings and ideas of the monster by stepping beyond the confines of our historical imaginations and entering into our spatial human existences.

By identifying monstrous space as living within the realm of the real; in a railway or a ski jump, I actively deconstruct the common binaries of human versus monster, us versus Other. This deconstruction is important, as only by doing so can we open space for re-imagination and reconstruction. Here, I have demonstrated that we need to consider the role of identity when we go about this process of reconstruction. If we are going to try and collapse the space between human and monstrous existence, we need to consider the tools we have used to create monstrous beings and question their roots and the motives they serve. Architectural monsters represent diverse ways of looking and experiencing; they are inclusive forms with varied aesthetics and territorial situatedness. In essence, their presence symbolizes a path towards 'the utopian dream of a monstrous world' (Haraway *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* 181), a world in which monsters are welcomed and no longer feared.



## Works Cited

- Ahmed, Sara. *Living a Feminist Life*. Duke University Press, 2017.
- Bayley, Stephen. "The Heckler: Architecture Would Be Better Off Without Zaha Hadid." *The Spectator*, August 8th 2015.  
<https://www.spectator.co.uk/2015/08/the-heckler-architecture-would-be-better-off-without-zaha-hadid/>. Accessed March 2018.
- Calafell, Bernadette. "Monstrous Femininity – Constructions of Women of Color in the Academy." *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2012, pp.111-130.
- Comaroff, Joshua and Ker-Shing, Ong. *Horror in Architecture*. ORO Editions, 2013.
- Elkann, Alain. 2015. "Zaha Hadid: It's Tough Being an Arab Woman in the Architecture Business." *The World Post*, March 9th 2015.  
[https://www.huffingtonpost.com/alain-elkann/zaha-hadid-arab-architecture\\_b\\_6811334.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/alain-elkann/zaha-hadid-arab-architecture_b_6811334.html). Accessed March 2018.
- González, Jennifer. "Envisioning Cyborg Bodies: Notes from Current Research," edited by Bill Kirkup, Linda James, Kath Woodward, and Fiona Hovenden. *The Gendered Cyborg: A Reader*, Routledge, 2000, pp. 58-73.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies*. Routledge, 1995.
- Haraway, Donna. *Primitive Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science*. Routledge, 1989.
- Haraway, Donna. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*. Free Association Books, 1991.
- Hellman, Louis. *Archi-Tetes: The Id in the Grid*. John Wiley & Sons, 1999.
- hooks, bell. *Yearning - Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. South End Press, 1990.
- Jefferies, Stuart. "Maybe They're Scared of Me." *The Guardian*, April 26th 2004.

- <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2004/apr/26/architecture>. Accessed March 2018.
- Levina, Marina and Diem-My T. Bui, editors. *Monster Culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.
- MacLean, Sean. *Monstrous Architecture and the Architect's Monster: Discovering Meaning in Architecture Through Critical Engagement and Intellectual Discourse*. Theses and Dissertations, Paper 1234, 2010.
- Moore, Rowan. "Zaha Hadid: Queen of the Curve." *The Observer*, September 8th 2013. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/sep/08/zaha-hadid-serpentine-sackler-profile>. Accessed March 2018.
- Qureshi, Huma. "Zaha Hadid: Being an Arab and a Woman is a Double-Edged Sword." *The Guardian*, November 14th 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2012/nov/14/zaha-hadid-woman-arab-double-edged-sword>. Accessed March 2018.
- Seabrook, John. "The Abstractionist." *The New Yorker*, December 21<sup>st</sup> 2009. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/12/21/the-abstractionist> Accessed November 2017.
- Simon-Mittmann, Ada and Dendle, J. Peter, editors. *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*. Ashgate, 2013 [2012].
- Shalghin, Akram. "Towards Understanding Arab Women's Cultural Landscapes." *International Journal of Comparative Literature & Translation Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2017, pp.14-18.
- Wainwright, Oliver. "Why is Zaha Hadid Given a Harder Time Than Her Starchitect Rivals?" *The Guardian*, September 24th 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/architecture-design-blog/2015/sep/24/why-is-zaha-hadid-given-a-harder-time-than-her-starchitect-rivals>. Accessed March 2018.
- Wainwright, Oliver. "The Troubled History of Zaha Hadid's Tokyo Olympic Stadium Project." *The Guardian*, July 27th 2015.

- <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/jul/17/the-troubled-history-of-zaha-hadids-tokyo-olympic-stadium-project>. Accessed March 2018.
- Wainwright, Oliver. “Wave of Protest over Zaha Hadid’s Baku Prizewinner”. *The Guardian*, June 30th 2014.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/jun/30/zaha-hadid-architecture>. Accessed March 2018.
- Wainwright, Oliver. “Zaha Hadid’s Mega Mall accused of ‘destroying’ Beijing’s heritage”. *The Guardian*, August 2nd 2013.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/architecture-design-blog/2013/aug/02/zaha-hadid-destroying-beijing-heritage> (accessed March 2018).
- Wolmark, Jenny, editor. *Cybersexualities – A Reader on Feminist Theory, Cyborgs and Cyberspace*. Edinburgh University Press, 1999.
- Yuval-Davis, Nina. “Recognition, Intersectionality and Transversal Politics” edited by Yoram Meital and Paula M. Rayman, *Recognition as Key for Reconciliation: Israel, Palestine and Beyond*, BRILL, 2017, pp. 157-165.

# Monstrosity in Everyday Life: Nepantleras, Theories in the Flesh, and Transformational Politics

ROBERT GUTIERREZ-PEREZ

## READER BEWARE

There are nepantleras in the academy! You may think me a blind seer in a Shakespearian drama or a woman in white in a Mesoamerican warning of doom, but I am telling you, nepantleras are queer people of color interlocutors that trouble rigid categories of identity. These iterative hesitations have the potentiality to queer and decolonize spaces by breaking apart binary ideologies (Andrade and Gutierrez-Perez; Gutierrez “Disruptive”; Calafell and Moreman; Muñoz *Utopian*). Further, these disruptive ambiguities agitate places discursively and materially through their embodied performances of the borderlands (Gutierrez-Perez “Disruptive”). In the places constructed to school higher education into the bodies of administrators, faculty, staff, and students (Cooks and Warren), there are multiple interlocking racial, sexual, gendered, classed, and spiritual borderlands that nepantleras trouble, break, and agitate, and—I am not the only one here. For instance, Bernadette Calafell illustrates how her queer woman of color femininity is made monstrous in academic spaces (“Monstrous”). Whereas other examples of nepantilism include thickly descriptive interpretive works that discuss transformations into a nepantlera, the risks and rewards of being a nepantlera, and the personal, political, and spiritual aspects of power operating in academia (Heredia; Koshy). Drawing on (queer) women of color feminisms and popular culture, I utilize theories of the flesh as a metaphorical and material bridge between rhetoric and performance to privilege experiential, subjugated knowledge in order to center the monstrous experiences of nepantleras in everyday life.

In places of higher education, nepantleras must deploy multiple tactics of resistance in order to survive the violence of heteronormativity (Yep). As a queer cisgender man that deviates from heteronormative standards, I’ve deeply felt the

The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 6, No. 2 & 3  
Copyright © 2018

anxiety, guilt, fear, shame, hate, psychological blemishing, and physical threats that come from challenging this system of domination (Yep 21). In fact, Gust Yep calls this phenomenon “soul murder,” and in academia, I enter the slaughter house every work day. Like a shapeshifter (Gutierrez-Perez “A Letter”), I must shift and change quickly from classroom to hallway to department office; I must run and hide at my desk with the door closed or escape to a library corner with book to nose; and, it is exhausting. At times, I disidentify to maintain a space for queer folks in a conversation with a colleague (Muñoz *Disidentifications*), or I enact a “joto passivity” by turning inwards and finding solace in a purposeful and embodied stillness similar to a rabbit wary of some perceived (or real) danger (Martínez). Sometimes, I utilize a Chicano camp to deconstruct ideologies that marginalize and exclude me; however, most times, I can only parody, point out the irony, or satirize the system momentarily to make room for my desires for other men (García 211). However, if I make any mistakes or if I misperform any of these tactics, then I am vulnerable to ridicule, disciplining acts of gossip, or worse—I am that “angry man of color.”

In popular culture, this can be observed in moments such as when cast member Pedro Zamora of *MTV's The Real World: San Francisco*, a gay, HIV+, Cuban-American man, clashed with, was verbally assaulted by, or threatened by his cast mates on the hit show (Muñoz *Disidentifications*). By putting his own body at risk, Zamora mediated the borderlands between the known and the unknown to educate the public on the realities of living with HIV in everyday life. As Carbado discusses, the social construction of raced masculinity limits the performative possibilities of male of color identity and experience, and although discussing black manhood specifically, Carbado notes how “Manhood is a performance. A script. It is accomplished and re-enacted in everyday social situations” (192). For instance, Cuellar explains how the predominance of images and examples of white manhood in popular culture (i.e., Dennis Quaid, Rob Lowe, Josh Hartnett, Chris Klein, Joseph Gordon-Levitt) affected his desires, needs, and wants in a romantic partner as a questioning Hispanic male and led to several unhealthy, one-sided obsessions that ultimately did not provide a roadmap for navigating the complexities of identity and culture. Walking to my building, my heart races. Grabbing the handle of the door, my arm hair stands on end. Looking through the tinted window, I breathe a sigh of relief; there is no one there. This is my life on the fringes. This is my life in academia.

In the following, I briefly delve into Chicana feminist scholarship to answer the question: what is a nepantlera? After defining this positionality as a witness and an agent of change, I further detail the risks and rewards of nepantilism through a combination of personal narrative and scholarly research, which is a well-documented method of connecting personal and popular culture (Cuellar; Manning and Adams; Scott). By moving from the personal to the popular and back, I utilize an autoethnographic approach to the study of popular culture that is “valid, viable, and vital” (Manning and Adams 188) as well as critical in that I “also make arguments about what texts, attitudes, beliefs, and practices should and should not exist in social life” (Manning and Adams 193). However, it is by weaving Anzaldúa and Calafell in conversation with the seven theses of monster theory developed by Cohen that I draw connections between nepantlera/monster theory and theorizing through the flesh. Moving through Aztec/Mexica myth and legend, Mexican and Caribbean history, U.S. American popular culture, and the experiences of queer people of color in the academy, I provide detailed examples of how nepantleras are made monstrous through everyday performances of fear and desire. **READER BEWARE:** Nepantleras are everywhere.

### What is a Nepantlera?

Nepantleras are monsters in everyday life that cross racial, gendered, sexual, spiritual, and classed borders as they mediate multiple worlds, which create understandings that are both feared and desired in cultural places and spaces. A nepantlera is a person who holds a positionality at the crossroads of several different identities and cultures. She is a “type of threshold person” (Keating *Transformation* 12) that lives “within and among multiple worlds” (Anzaldúa *Reader* 322), and because of this location in the cracks, she is “skilled at living with contradiction” and “can see more than one point of view at a time and negotiate the in-between spaces that connect seemingly rigid either/or positions” (McMaster 104). In my own life, I am often asked to speak to the divides between the LGBTQ and Latina/o and Chicana/o community (See Chávez), and utilizing the understandings learned from simultaneously inhabiting these identities, I make all my selves present in that space to facilitate dialogue and help these communities learn how to communicate with each other. A nepantlera is a witness to all sides and is an agent of change for her community.

As a witness, she does not pick sides, and instead, she actively engages both sides by listening, facilitating dialogue, and creating opportunities for reflexivity (Keating “Risking” 144). Ultimately, she is a mediator between worlds, and by utilizing the understandings gained within the cracks, she develops alternative perspectives. Anzaldúa explains that these *conocimientos* are “holistic, relational theories and tactics” that “reconceive or in other ways transform the various worlds” or spaces where the nepantlera dwells (*Reader* 322). For example, at the 1990 National Women’s Studies Association conference, many women of color walked out because of the years of dismissive treatment, ongoing racism, and limited attention to their needs by the organization (*Reader*). Anzaldúa agreed with the perspective of her colleagues, but decided not to fully reject the organization, she chose to stay at the conference and facilitate a dialogue amongst all the those involved in the conflict (Keating *Transformation* 16-17). In her own life, Anzaldúa understood that there is always more than just two sides, and as a nepantlera, she mediated and witnessed all sides to offer a connectionist approach towards transformation (Anzaldúa *Reader* 567-568). Indeed, as AnaLouise Keating notes, “the willingness to witness broadly, to all parties, is a dangerous, often unpleasant task” (*Transformation* 17).

A nepantlera is an agent of change and resistance “who enters into and interact[s] with multiple, often conflicting, political/cultural/ideological/ethnic/ etc. worlds” (Keating *Transformation* 12). By making themselves present (i.e., witnessing, mediating, speaking up), nepantleras “employ liminal states of consciousness and ways of thinking” (Keating “Shifting Worlds” 7) to transform places of strategic domination into spaces of tactical resistance. Nepantleras model how to navigate liminal spaces, which can be disorienting, fragmenting, and confusing states to occupy. For example, Carrie McMaster suggests that people with disabilities “are gifted at coping with liminality and could perform work involving the reconciliation of multiple points of view, altering existing points of view, and/or resolving conflicts” (105). As the ultimate border crossers, nepantleras are often feared and desired in everyday life because of their liminal positions in/between race, gender, sexuality, spirituality, ability, and class.

## Risking/Rewarding the Personal in Nepantla

A condition of inhabiting the borderlands is that you learn how to tolerate and thrive in ambiguity. Ambiguity is a political position because intersectional systems of oppression thrive in binary, either-or thinking, which is antithetical to the nepantlera. As Keating explains, the nepantlera never fully adopts the culture of either side of the (symbolic) border, yet she belongs to both and neither (*Transformation* 12). By identifying with multiple beliefs, groups, and locations, she risks the personal by moving from liminal state to liminal state twisting, turning, switching codes to survive here and then there, and this fluidity and multiplicity opens her up to self-division, isolation, misunderstanding, rejection, and accusations of disloyalty (Keating “Shifting Worlds” 2). These risks are not just words on a page, but they are embodied in the everyday by the nepantlera, which means she is in constant danger.

In my own experiences, I have faced these risks in the classroom, and yes, I have been wounded deeply time and again. As a mestizo with a mixed heritage of Mexican, African American, English, and Dutch, my students and colleagues often do not know what to do with me. In the ocular, my dark skin, large nose and lips, and athletic body interpellate me into the politics of misrecognition—“What are you?” (Calafell and Moreman). If the visual markers of my body do not allow you to ascribe an “accurate” stereotype to my body, how can you interact with me? In the grammatical, my students laugh as I greet them with classed vernaculars (“Wassup!”), explain theory with geographic slang (“Hella”), and wish them farewell in Spanish (“Adios!”). What do they think when I say “Yaaas!” Like Calafell and Moreman explain, “the mestiza/o is not grammatically correct” (410), and in the singular, my presence in the classroom is often misunderstood: “Do we call him Latino? Hispanic? Black? Mexican? Chicano? African American?” Either way, I can never be white, and further, my presence can never be natural or the norm for this academic space. Can you imagine what happens when I claim all these positionalities, when I embrace my grammatical incorrectness, when I own all my ambiguity in the ocular? As Calafell and Moreman make clear: “This middle space causes anxiety, distrust, and fear as our bodies are ‘read’ in ways that seek to locate us in dominant logics and assign an assumed ideological underpinning” (413). These affects tear at me from within and without. It feels like I am walking through the village and all eyes are on me. Doors are closing. Windows shutting. Why are they pointing?



Internally, I do not want to choose one side over the other. As I have written about previously (Willink, Gutierrez-Perez, Shukri, and Stein 304), asking a mestizo to choose a side is akin to asking me which grandparent do I want to kill? Should I destroy my Black grandfather or my white grandfather? My Chicana grandmother or my Mexican grandmother? Externally, I use my American cultural inheritance and nationality to speak perfect English to my students, yet it isn't enough to overcome my ambiguously dark features. So, like a too small turtleneck sweater, I squeeze and restrain my affect to fit the white male cisheterosexual middle class norms expected of my performance of "instructor" (Calafell and Moreman; Muñoz "Feeling Brown"). However, this is not only about the disciplining and exclusionary politics of whiteness. With my Latino, Chicano, or Xicano friends, I am never brown enough; I am a coconut—brown outside and white inside. Additionally, in my Black circles, I am welcomed. We laugh, we cry, and we "get it." Yet, eventually my wavy not kinky hair, my lack of body and facial hair, and my ambiguous oculars begin to exclude me from the conversation. In all these examples, I am torn and divided amongst the "races;" I am isolated as different and rejected from my cultures; I am misunderstood, and my loyalty to the group is questioned because of my impurity. These are the embodied risks of being a nepantlera; however, there are rewards.

Freedom of movement and the visions/understandings that come from border crossing is the reward for nepantlism. By vision, I mean nepantleras view the world from three positions: "the distance of the outsider, the closeness of the insider, and the in-between zone, the space between worlds" (Anzaldúa *Reader* 239). The understandings that erupt from these visions of an event, community, nation, or the world is a "complex interplay among difference, sameness, and similarities" (Anzaldúa *Reader* 239). However, it is the freedom of movement that facilitate the rewards that make nepantleras so desirable and feared. As Anzaldúa clarifies, "when we experience boundary shifts, border violations, bodily penetrations, identity confusions, a flash of *conocimiento* (understanding) may sear us, shocking us into a new way of reading the world" (*Reader* 241). Whether traversing literal geographic borders or symbolic borders of race, gender, class, sexuality, and/or spirituality, the nepantlera is made monstrous by the risks and rewards of her free movement and her understandings from the cracks between worlds. As an assistant professor, I am very aware that I wear the risks and rewards of being a nepantlera everywhere I go.

*Nepantleras as Monstrous Figures*

In the following sections, I weave Anzaldúa and Calafell in conversation with the seven theses of monster theory developed by Cohen to establish nepantleras within monster theory. Moving through these seven theses, I utilize Aztec myth and legend, Mexican and Caribbean history, U.S. American popular culture, and the experiences of queer people of color in the academy to provide detailed examples of how nepantleras are made monstrous through everyday performances of fear and desire. By locating monstrosity in discursive vernaculars and embodied acts, I aim to empower nepantleras with a language and space to discuss, reflect, and act on their oppression with others. As bridge builders, las nepantleras are at risk of violence from both sides of the borders, yet to capitalize on the rewards of nepantilism for all our interconnected communities and cultures, we need a way to explain our experiences in/between worlds to others. Not to relinquish our ambiguity and the power we have cultivated within our liminal positionalities, but we need a language to hold others accountable for the violence perpetuated in the name of dominant cultural norms and binary either-or thinking.

*La Nepantlera as a Cultural Body*

Monsters are a reflection or projection of a cultural/historical moment in time. For example, werewolves are often connected to racist and homophobic ideologies, and the use of monstrous imagery is a way for society to confront and work through their fears and desires of the Other (Calafell *Monstrosity*). Calafell connects monstrosity and monstrous imaging to women of color in how they are dehumanized through contradictory messages in popular culture, such as asexual and highly sexualized, commodified and exoticized, or masculine superwomen (“Monstrous” 114). As Cohen writes, “the monstrous body is pure culture” (4), and nepantleras create and are created specifically by mestiza cultures (Anzaldúa). A mestiza is a hybrid cultural body with a mixed-race, mixed-ethnic, and/or mixed-nation ancestry. By inhabiting such a body, a nepantlera literally *lives* the contradictions between culture/ideology/politics/ethnicity through her interactions with others.

For example, transwoman of color Carmen Carrera through her visibility as a model, TV celebrity, and Latina mediates and actively works to transform multiple worlds (raced, sexed, gendered, etc.) as a nepantlera in popular culture.

Carrera was a drag performer featured on the 4th season of *RuPaul's Drag Race* on the LGBTQ cable channel *Logo*, and although she did not win this competition, she has continued to appear in popular culture because she began transitioning from male-to-female publicly through social media (i.e., youtube, Facebook, twitter, etc.) immediately following the airing of the show. However, it was when fans began circulating an online petition to make her the first transgendered Victoria's Secret model that Carrera moved firmly into the public imaginary. In several televised interviews, Carrera has navigated the borders between sex, gender, and sexuality by interviewers (e.g., Katie Couric) that featured many transphobic questions about her genitals, her on again off again relationship with her husband, and the politics of transgender desire. To be clear, "in most Chicana/o scholarship, transgender or trans\* is treated as the "T" in LGBT. But in fact, transgender cuts across sexualities: for example, many trans\* persons are both trans\* and gay, bisexual, lesbian, or queer" (Galarte 230). As a nepantlera in popular culture, Carrera inhabits a complex cultural body that must stand in for the fears and desires of an insatiable U.S. American public grappling with the emerging visibility of transgender positionalities on film, television, and social media.

Transwomen of color and transmen of color are often viewed as objects of study, tropological figures, or stand-ins for "gender trouble" or "in-betweenness," which is how Carrera has been treated in the popular imaginary (Galarte). Francisco J. Galarte urgently calls on Chicana/o scholars, activists, and artists to acknowledge and value their transgendered *hermanas y hermanos* "as over the last five years the numbers of Chicana and Latina trans\* women who have been murdered has steadily risen" (230). As nepantleras, the border crossings of transgendered women and men of color are often met with murder, discrimination, and marginalization by all races, by cisgender and cissexual men and women, and yes, even by their LGBTQ community members (Bishop, Kiss, Morrison, Rushe, and Specht). Indeed, as Galarte explains, there is a generational divide between LGBTQ Chicanas/os that has created an internal tension (See Moraga 184-190). Galarte, in describing the violent death of trans\* Latina Gwen Amber Rose Araujo, names the risks and rewards of being una nepantlera: "for most Chicanas and Chicanos, our lives as we grow up are very much informed by what we believe to be coherent and stable understandings of race, gender, and sexuality, but when that is challenged, the rupture can be transformative or violent" (231). As a cultural body, the nepantlera operates in the world of the

everyday because their monstrosity is not abstract or imaginary, such as the werewolf, but embodied and made “real” by the dominant ideologies that police the borders of race, gender, sex, sexuality, y más.

*Nepantleras Mediate the Borders of the Possible*

Whereas other monsters *police* the borders of the possible (Cohen 12-16), a nepantlera as a borderlands dweller *mediates* the borders of the possible. Cohen writes that society/culture fears the monster because he/she “prevents mobility (intellectual, geographic, or sexual), delimiting the social spaces through which private bodies may move” (Cohen 12). Further, “to step outside this official geography is to risk attack by some monstrous border patrol or (worse) to become monstrous oneself” (Cohen 12), yet in the case of the nepantlera, she actively and purposefully steps outside of this geography thus making *herself* monstrous. The “monstrous border patrol” is *not* her but the dominant and binary ideologies of the societies and cultures she moves between by her border crossings.

A nepantlera often finds herself under attack from both sides of the border as she uses her faculties to mediate the differences, sameness, and similarities between multiple worlds. For example, Malintzin Tenépal, the indigenous translator of the conquistador Hernán Cortéz, is labeled as a bandida (traitor), puta (whore), or la chingada (the fucked one) by her own people, and by the Spanish, she was deemed uncivilized, soulless, and a savage, which is made apparent when Cortéz gave her to one of his lieutenants when he was “done with her” (Calafell *Latina/o Communication Studies*; Carrasco). Tenépal, also known as La Malinche and Doña Marina, was of noble birth but was sold into slavery by her mother to secure the family’s inheritance for Tenépal’s younger half-brother from a second marriage (Chasteen 54). Chasteen writes that Tenépal was one of twenty females gifted to Cortéz in 1519 (54), and at 16, Tenépal was described as quick-witted, self-possessed, and gifted with language. She spoke Maya and Nahuatl, and in a matter of months, she learned how to speak Spanish (Chasteen 54). Tenépal proved to be an essential mediator during the first contact between the indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica and the Spanish. However, for her role as a mediator between worlds, she has been made monstrous by history. Indeed, there are a myriad of murals, parks, and monuments dedicated to Cortéz the conqueror, yet for Tenépal the mediator, there is no such marking of memorial space to honor this nepantlera (Calafell “Pro(re-)claiming Loss”).

Furthermore, Tenépal's life is often connected to the monstrous myth of La Llorona (the weeping woman) (Anaya). La Llorona is a folkloric monster geographically located in the U.S. Southwest, and she is often told as a cautionary tale to children and men to regulate their behavior. Although versions of this tale change from region to region, the story I was told is as follows:

La Llorona was a beautiful woman with two children from a previous marriage. She was a widow who fell in love with a man that did not want to have kids. Although he wanted to marry her, he refused her because of her children. Desperate, she led her children to the river and drowned them one by one. At the time of her death, she was refused at the gates of heaven for her filicidal sins, and now, she is forever doomed to haunt rivers, lakes, and other bodies of water searching for her lost children. She is the weeping woman in white crying into the night, “¡Mis hijos estan perdidos!” (My children are lost), and if you happen to come across her, then beware because she may just snatch you up to join her in purgatory.

Whether young or old, whether male, female, or trans\*, whether in the U.S. Southwest or Mexico, La Llorona is feared and desired on both sides of the border as she mediates the spaces between the known and unknown. For example, La Llorona has been reproduced in American popular culture through films, television, and theatrical productions, and she is also featured in the annual haunted house created at Universal Studios (Arrizón; Moreman and Calafell).

Recently, on a camping trip at a lake with my husband and his extended family, the children were being *traviesos* (naughty) and kept sneaking out of their tent to go to the lake shore, which they had been playing at all morning and afternoon. In order to keep them in bed and away from the wilderness lake at night, we gathered them around the campfire, and each of us told the version of the La Llorona story told to us. Some tweaked the story to match the narrative of Malintzin Tenépal (“the Aztec princess betrayed by Cortéz murdered their children in an act of revenge”); others retold the story as being an act of revenge towards an abusive, alcoholic, and/or philandering husband; and still others shared a version where a man abandoned his wife for another woman (“He only cared about their children. He no longer cared for her, so she took away the only thing he did care for”). By the end of our storytelling, the children looked up at us with large puppy dog eyes trying to assess whether we were telling the truth or

lying to them; in the end, they did not sneak out of their tents for the rest of the vacation.

*Nepantleras Dwell at the Gates of Difference*

As a mestiza body that defies categorization because of their threshold positionality, nepantleras are “difference made flesh, come to dwell among us” (Cohen 7). As such, nepantleras are often labeled “transgressive, too sexual, perversely erotic, a lawbreaker” (Cohen 16), or as Calafell writes, “I have been animalized, exoticized, tokenized, and sexualized. The ‘excesses’ of my body and my emotional affect mark me as a monstrous Other in the sanitized world of the White academy” (“Monstrous” 112). In academic spaces, (queer) women of color are often made monstrous because of their mestizaje and for their performances of a feminist and queer politics. For example, Calafell recalls a confrontation with a white woman professor that ultimately boiled down to an administrative error that scheduled both their classes in the same room with overlapping times (“Monstrous”). Although Calafell apologized for the confusion via email, this white woman professor spread rumors of Calafell as an “angry woman of color” and gossiped that she is afraid of her and has had several “breakdowns” since their interaction, including claims that students felt they needed to “protect her” from Calafell (“Monstrous”). Citing Davis, Calafell notes how white women crying has historical roots in racist practices where Black men were lynched and murdered for the accusation of rape from a crying white woman. The need to protect white femininity at all costs validates violence against women and men of color.

This strategy of white women crying is often used in classrooms and professional settings to make monstrous women of color by “deflecting blame and guilt, ‘victimizing’ the white woman while centering whiteness and reaffirming the savage Otherness of women of color. It also often functions as an opportunity for white women to reinforce the bonds of their privilege with white men through the role of innocent victim who must be protected from Otherness” (Calafell “Monstrous” 122-123). As a nepantlera in the academy, Calafell’s racialized, classed, and gendered performances of queer professor is deemed “excessive” by the white, heteronormative male structure that polices bodies through the politics of “civility.” These excesses cast nepantleras as “out of control, uncivil, and scary” (Calafell “Monstrous” 123), yet the white female professor is the desired

one because she plays “into a heteronormative performance that desires protection from her white male colleagues in power (reinforcing patriarchy)” (Calafell “Monstrous” 123). Further, Calafell’s appearance (“I am Chicana. I am fat. I am short. I am queer.”) juxtaposed alongside the white female’s appearance (“tall, straight, thin, fair haired, and White”) marks Calafell in the ocular as dwelling at the gates of difference (Calafell “Monstrous”).

*Nepantleras as Harbingers of Category Crisis*

As mestizas, nepantleras are constantly shifting, moving, and crossing borders of race, gender, sexuality, spirituality, and/or class, which makes categorizing nepantleras difficult if not impossible. Cohen explains that monsters are “disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration. And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinction” (6). Indeed, in the previous example, Calafell discusses how “women of color are often read as non-normative, threatening, or violent in their communication because they do not conform to hegemonic standards of white femininity and passive aggressiveness that is so often favored in the academy” (“Monstrous” 124). Additionally, my own story of fitting in everywhere and nowhere resonates with this portion of monster theory. Further, the trope of the tragic mulatto who would sacrifice her life for her white male lover that has propagated through popular culture (i.e., films, television, print media, etc.) is another example of this category crisis, which inevitably is about the difficulties of categorizing hybrid individuals (Arrizón). For the normalized individual, a nepantlera shouldn’t exist because they inhabit bodies and positions that they have been disciplined/schooled/indoctrinated into believing are impossible.

For instance, Coatlicue, the Aztec mother goddess of the earth, is often depicted as a monstrous half-woman/half-snake deity that embodies the spaces in-between creation and destruction. Coatlicue is “the mountain, the Earth Mother who conceived all celestial beings out of her cavernous womb” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 68). She is a monstrous mythological figure because she is the embodiment of birth and death, and as the goddess of duality in life, synthesis of duality, and something more than duality or synthesis, she is a nepantlera that “gives and takes away life; she is the incarnation of cosmic processes” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 68). For those outside of Chicana/o or Mexicana/o culture, Coatlicue

is non-normative, threatening, and violent in her appearance. Anzaldúa explains, “She has no head. In its place two spurts of blood gush up, transfiguring into enormous twin rattlesnakes facing each other, which symbolize the earth-bound character of human life” (Anzaldúa *Borderlands* 69). As a nepantlera in mythology, she mediates the worlds of life and death, and as such, she is a harbinger of category crises as she occupies a “third space” or liminal zone of both/and/neither/or.

Coatlicue smashes and destroys distinction with her very body, and through this hybridization of supposed opposites, she births new understandings forged from this liminal space. Anzaldúa continues her explanation, “Coatlicue depicts the contradictory” (Anzaldúa *Borderlands* 69). For example, Anzaldúan scholars have reclaimed Coatlicue to study identity and society by creating spiritual and psychological theories from her embodied category crisis (Capetillo-Ponce 166). In performance art, the Coatlicue Theatre Company “blends ancient myths with current social and political issues, including racism and sexual oppression” to create staged performances for public consumption (Arrizón 66-68). As a nepantlera in Aztec mythology, Coatlicue is a symbolic figure utilized to theorize, research, and perform the contradictory experiences of nepantleras. She is: utilized as a form of revisionist myth making in the transformational theories of language (Keating *Transformation* 119-120); present in Chicana art (León 247); vital to theorizing the subjectivity of Xicana dykes (Moraga 95); embodied in opposites like the narratives surrounding the “tragic mulata” (Arrizón 83-117); and deployed to theorize resistance and agency (Lugones), mythopoetic thought and spiritual healing (Levine), and female sexuality (Garber). She is a guide for those who are harbingers of category crisis, and Coatlicue is a state of being. She is an ontological archetype to live by.

#### *Nepantleras as Threshold People Who Always Return*

As everyday interlocutors, nepantleras are not restricted to abstract, highly metaphorical, or fantastical characters in fiction. They are mestizas, queer people of color, transgendered persons, and women of color to name a few examples. Throughout history, societies have attempted to destroy nepantleras (e.g., the murder of LGBTQ peoples during the Holocaust), or they have integrated their knowledge into their very understanding of the world (e.g., two-spirit people in the Americas). Either way, nepantleras always return because they are human



beings that are brave and courageous enough to stand in the borderlands of what is possible (Gutierrez-Perez “El Mundo Zurdo”). As a monster, nepantleras are part of your family, your workplace, and your history, and as human beings, nepantleras will always be a part of society and culture.

In everyday life, you have seen what happens to nepantleras as they walk down the street, the hallways, or into your homes. They are threshold people. They are the genderqueer person who as they walk past a group of people at the movies are immediately made monstrous through communication: “Did you see that?” They disturb the boundaries of what society and culture have dictated as acceptable: “Was it a boy or a girl?” With their embodied presence, they challenge our very notions and assumptions of ourselves: “Why would they do that?” As a threshold person, she “ask[s] us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance toward its expression” (Cohen 20). Nepantleras are a unique monster because they exist in everyday life, and unlike other monsters, nepantleras are acutely aware of the fact that they stand on the threshold of becoming:

*I am running a bit late to class because students in my prior course had questions about their upcoming oral history performances.*

*I take a deep breath, smile, and greet my intercultural communication course. I am looking forward to today because I assigned my own work alongside Richard Rodríguez’s article, “Queering the Homeboy Aesthetic.”*

*It is a day dedicated to introducing Jotería Communication Studies as a subdiscipline through a lesson that focuses on how class, race, sexuality, and masculinity operate in the realms of the aesthetic to maintain dominate constructions of culture and society.*

*I open with my usual question: “Let’s get those value judgements out to the way! Did you like the pieces? Did you not like the pieces? Why?”*

*His hand immediate shoots up. He has been waiting for class to start. He is too eager to speak. He says, “I thought it was disgusting. I would never assign something like this in a college class.”*

*I'm disgusting! I'm inept and unqualified?*

*Doesn't he know I will return to this class again and again? I am resisting  
the urge to rage. I am standing*

*on the threshold                      receiving*

*homophobic comments in front of my classroom. I am creating*

*a teachable moment*

*I am a nepantlera. I am bridging to survive.*

*I find out later in my course evaluations  
three students had been stalking me on social media.*

Nepantleras as everyday interlocutors always return, yet as threshold people, we operate in multiple worlds. An example from popular culture is international drag superstar RuPaul who often mediates the borders placed around race, class, gender, and sexuality in the popular imaginary on television, film, advertising, and print media (Carroll, Redlick, and Hanchey). Unquestionably, RuPaul is *the* most well-known drag performer in the world, yet her place in popular culture and her voice as a celebrity has been critiqued by both the LGBTQ community and the dominant U.S. mainstream. As threshold people, nepantleras are not restricted to the examples that I have provided, but others as well can be described as nepantleras, such as Muslim-practicing Latinos, Blacktino interlocutors, and within Filipino mestizaje (Arrizón; Johnson and Rivera-Servera; Martínez-Vázquez). In the end, operating in liminal spaces in everyday life connects monstrosity in popular culture to the experiences one has as one moves through the world. It is a kind of art imitating life imitating art.

## Fearing and Desiring the Other

Liminal spaces can often be disorienting, fragmenting, confusing, and/or violent, and a nepantlera braves this space over and over because of her (multiple) mestizaje—she exists in a vortex of becoming. Coyolxauhqui, the daughter of Coatlicue, is the Aztec goddess of the moon and sorcery, and she is the original

nepantlera that demonstrates with her nightly travels across the sky how to dwell in and survive the in-between state of nepantla. After taking a vow of celibacy, Coatlicue became pregnant by a feather while sweeping the temple at Mt. Coatepec. Coyolxauhqui embarrassed by her mother used her great spiritual powers of communication to convince her 400 brothers to kill their mother. Gifted with the ability of foresight, she saw that the fetus growing within their earth mother was Huitzilopochtli, the Aztec god of the sun and war. Realizing that her mother was about to give birth to the incarnation of war with all its attendant qualities of death, rape, and destruction, Coyolxauhqui led her brothers toward Mt. Coatepec, but before they could achieve their matricidal plans, Huitzilopochtli sprung fully grown and armed from his mother and cut up all 400 of his brothers and threw them into the sky—they became the southern stars we know today. As for Coyolxauhqui, he chopped off her head and tossed her body down the mountain where it was torn apart into several pieces. Placing her head and her body parts into the sky as a reminder to all, she is now the ever-changing moon fated to continuously gather herself together and fall back apart monthly as she travels her path across the heavens. Having experienced violence as the first sacrificial victim, Coyolxauhqui is the patron goddess of las nepantleras as she demonstrates how to manage the confusion and disorientation that comes from living in a state of constant fragmentation.

As a queer, working-class Xicano, I am both feared and desired, and I have often looked towards the heavens to Coyolxauhqui for guidance. Nepantleras are feared for their ambiguity and multiplicity; however, like other monsters, she is desired because of her freedom to migrate where others are afraid to go, for her ability to shapeshift to survive any given context, and for the understandings she creates by inhabiting the cracks/margins. In higher education, there are not a lot of Chicanas/os because systemic structures of oppression continue to hold my community within its grasp. Yosso and Solózano report that out of 100 Chicana/o students that enter elementary school less than one (.02%) will achieve a doctoral degree. Intersect this statistic with my queer identity, and I am an anomaly in academia. I am not supposed to exist here, so I am desired because my presence allows an institution, organization, or scholarly field to claim a tokenized illusion of diversity or inclusive excellence. However, like Calafell, the moment I begin to voice my critically-influenced understandings from the cracks between race, class, sexuality, gender, and spirituality—I am made monstrous. They want me, but they don't know what to do with me.

Desired for their transgressive and transformative potentiality, nepantleras are nonetheless quickly undermined, disciplined, and/or ostracized whenever they voice their expertise or attain any power within an institution. For instance, acknowledging the lack of space for Chicanas/os and Latinas/os in higher education, I co-founded an organization during my time in my doctoral program meant to address the lack of representation and retention of Latina/o graduate students on campus, and I was even officially elected as Navigation Chair for the first Concilio of this nascent student group. However, as we worked together to organize a conference conceived by me that aimed at improving the educational pipeline for Latinas/os, others began to undermine me by accomplishing tasks assign to me without asking, making major decisions without including me, or dismissing my breadth of organizing experience as derivative of an “out of control ego.” As the only queer Xicano in the organization, I was held up as a token of the groups’ inclusivity, yet the heteronormativity of the group remained firmly and aggressively in place. When I mentioned at every meeting that this space needed to encourage, welcome, and focus on women and queer people of color, I felt blamed when the cisgendered and cissexual straight men “visiting” never came back. I came to understand that I was only welcome in this brown space if I sanitized my sexuality to the point of erasure.

The final insult came when I had to leave a meeting early because it had been scheduled during one of my graduate-level courses. As the Navigation Chair, it was my responsibility as outlined in the constitution to create and print out an agenda for every meeting and facilitate the discussion to make sure every point of business was addressed. On this occasion, I moved quickly through the most important parts of the agenda, and after an hour, I turned over my responsibilities to another member of the Concilio, so I could make it on time to a very important course (i.e., Latino Religious Cultures). Later, I found out from multiple sources that several members of the group and the Concilio used my absence as an opportunity to talk about me behind my back. This betrayal by a group of people claiming to be my friends (*mi gente*), claiming to be advocates for marginalized identities, and claiming to offer a “safe space” for all Latinos *broke me into pieces*.

Like Coyolxauhqui, this moment was like having my head cut off and my bleeding body being thrown down the mountain. For weeks and months, I desperately searched for the pieces of me that had been scattered across the heavens. Why did this happen to me? I was confused and hurt that people who

had been to my home and ate food at my table would ostracize me in such a public way. Disoriented by this betrayal, I reached out to colleagues only to face further violence by people who I had called friends. Am I really the person they tell me I am? Looking at the myth of *la hija rebelde* (the rebel daughter), I know these people may see me as a monstrous figure capable killing my own mother, but if they took the time to look at me as a human being, then they would see that my true goal is to protect other women and queer people of color from violence. I rebelled against the heteronormativity and the normalized ways of being in that space because it was not inclusive for marginalized positions. Time after time, I invited the very, very few LGBTQ Latinas/os in my friend circles to attend, and time and again, they felt uncomfortable coming to the space. For voicing my understandings from the cracks and daring to disrupt the patriarchal, heteronormative order, I was sacrificed by my own community. How do you recover after a wound that deep?

### Conclusion: Monstrosity in Everyday Life

In this essay, I have attempted to provide a language created through a non-Western epistemology and ontology to discuss the experiences of *nepantleras* in everyday life. By connecting Cohen's seven theses of monstrosity with Anzaldúa and Calafell, I demonstrate through personal experience, academic research, popular culture, history, myth, and legend how *nepantleras* fit each of these characteristics of the monster. To be a *nepantlera* is to live in constant danger as you continuously move and disrupt geographic, psychological, and symbolic borders between the known and unknown. In popular culture, we can see *nepantleras* operating as ultimate border crossers by the ways in which they mediate multiple worlds, such as with Carmen Carrera, Pedro Zamora, and others. Further, as an always returning monster, *nepantleras* have inhabited space in popular culture for decades, such as in the propagation of the exotic, sensual, and tragic mulatto (e.g., Tongolole a.k.a. Yolanda Montes) in popular mid-twentieth century Tropicana Nightclub shows (Arrizón). The connection between the popular and the personal is often a thin-blurred line.

We, *nepantleras*, brave the risks of this position because the reward is freedom of movement and an alternate understanding of the world carved from our flesh. We are feared and labeled monsters through vernacular discourse and embodied

acts, yet we are desired for our ability to mediate, to witness all sides, and to transform ourselves, others, and the spaces we inhabit. Rather than offer this essay as a tool to translate our ambiguity for the dominant culture, I am whittling out a space where nepantleras can discuss, reflect, and act together towards our transformational vision of the world. We are not monsters because we are actually monstrous. We are monsters because you made us this way. Monstrosity in popular culture is a reflection and a constantly shifting refraction between and betwixt monstrosity in everyday life.

### Works Cited

- Anaya, Rudolfo. *The Legend of La Llorona: A Short Novel*. Tonatiuh-Quinto Sol International, 1984.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, edited by AnaLouise Keating. Duke University Press, 2009.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. 4th ed. Aunt Lute, 2012.
- Arrizón, Alicia. *Queering Mestizaje: Transculturation and Performance*. University of Michigan Press, 2006.
- Bishop, Cj, Mark Kiss, Todd G. Morrison, Damien M. Rushe, and Jacqueline Specht. "The Association Between Gay Men's Stereotypic Beliefs About Drag Queens and Their Endorsement of Hypermasculinity." *Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 61, no. 4, 2014, pp. 554–67.
- Calafell, Bernadette Marie. "Monstrous Femininity: Constructions of Women of Color in the Academy." *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2012, pp. 111-130.
- Calafell, Bernadette Marie. *Latina/o Communication Studies: Theorizing Performance*. Peter Lang, 2007.

- Calafell, Bernadette Marie. *Monstrosity, Performance, and Race in Contemporary Culture*. Peter Lang Publishing, 2015.
- Calafell, Bernadette Marie. "Pro(re-)claiming Loss: A Performance Pilgrimage in Search of Malintzin Tenépal." *Text and Performance Quarterly*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2005, pp. 43–56.
- Calafell, Bernadette Marie and Shane Moreman. "Iterative Hesitancies and Latinidad: The Reverberances of Raciality." *Handbook of Critical Intercultural Communication*, edited by Rona Halualani and Thomas Nakayama. Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, pp. 400–416.
- Capetillo-Ponce, Jorge. "On Borderlands and Bridges: An Inquiry into Gloria Anzaldúa's Methodology." *Bridging: How Gloria Anzaldúa's Life and Work Transformed Our Own*, edited by A. Keating and G. González-López. University of Texas Press, 2011, pp. 165-171.
- Carbado, Devon W. "Privilege." *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, edited by E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson. Duke University Press, 2005, pp. 190-212.
- Carrasco, David. *The Aztecs: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Carroll, Robert W., Madeleine H. Redneck, and Jenna N. Hanchey. "Is RuPaul Enough? Difference, Identity, and Presence in the Communication Classroom." *Communication Education*, vol. 65, no. 2, 2016, pp. 226-229.
- Chávez, Karma. *Queer Migration Politics: Activist Rhetoric and Coalitional Possibilities*. University of Illinois Press, 2013.
- Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. (Ed). "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)." *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*. University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- Cuellar, M. "The Makings of a Boyfriend: Doing Sexuality through Parasocial Relationships." *The Popular Culture Studies Journal*, vol. 3, no. 1/2, 2015, pp. 270-298.

- DeGuzmán, María. "Darkness, My Night": The Philosophical Challenge of Gloria Anzaldúa's Aesthetic of the Shadow." *Bridging: How Gloria Anzaldúa's Life and Work Transformed Our Own*, edited by AnaLouis Keating and Gloria González-López. University of Texas Press, 2011, pp. 210-217.
- Galarte, Francisco J. "On Trans\* Chican@s." *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2014, pp. 229-236.
- Garber, Linda. "Spirit, Culture, Sex: Elements of the Creative Process in Anzaldúa's Poetry." *EntreMundos/AmongWorlds: New Perspectives on Gloria Anzaldúa*, edited by AnaLouis Keating. Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, pp. 213-226.
- García, Ramón. "Against Rasquache: Chicano Camp and the Politics of Identity in Los Angeles." *The Chicana/o Cultural Studies Reader*, edited by Angie Chabram-Dernersesian. Routledge, 2006, pp. 211-223.
- Gutierrez-Perez, Robert. "Disruptive Ambiguities: The Potentiality of Jotería Critique in Communication Studies." *Kaleidoscope: A Graduate Journal of Qualitative Communication Research*, vol. 14, 2015, pp. 89-99.
- Gutierrez-Perez, Robert. "A Journey to El Mundo Zurdo: Queer Temporality, Queer of Color Cultural Heritages." *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2017, pp. 177-181.
- Gutierrez-Perez, Robert. "'A Letter from my Students': Transformative Pedagogy, Borderlands Performance, and the Critical Junctures of Whiteness." *Liminalities: A Performance Studies Journal*, vol. 12, no. 4, 2016, pp. 1-19.
- Gutierrez-Perez, Robert M. and Luis M. Andrade. "Queer of Color World-Making: <Marriage> in the Rhetorical Archive and the Embodied Repertoire." *Text and Performance Quarterly*, vol. 38, no. 1-2, 2018, pp. 1-18.
- Heredia, Jessica. "My Path of Conocimiento: How Graduate School Transformed Me into a Nepantlera" *Bridging: How Gloria Anzaldúa's Life and Work Transformed Our Own*, edited by AnaLouis Keating and Gloria González-López. University of Texas Press, 2011, pp. 39-44.



- Johnson, E. Patrick and Ramón Rivera-Servera. (Eds.). *Blacktino Queer Performance*. Duke University Press, 2016.
- Keating, AnaLouise. (Ed.). "Introduction: Shifting Worlds, Una Entrada." *EntreMundos/AmongWorlds: New Perspectives on Gloria Anzaldúa*. Palgrave Macmillan, 200, pp. 1-14.
- Keating, AnaLouise. "Shifting Perspectives: Spiritual Activism, Social Transformation, and the Politics of Spirit." *EntreMundos/AmongWorlds: New Perspectives on Gloria Anzaldúa*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, pp. 241-264.
- Keating, AnaLouise. *Transformation Now!: Toward a Post-Operational Politics of Change*. University of Illinois Press, 2013.
- Koshy, Kavitha. "Feels like 'carving bone': (Re)creating the Activist-Self, (Re)articulating Transnational Journeys, while Sifting through Anzaldúan Thought." *Bridging: How Gloria Anzaldúa's Life and Work Transformed Our Own*, edited by AnaLouise Keating and Gloria González-López. University of Texas Press, 2011, pp. 197-203.
- León, Luis D. *La Llorona's Children: Religion, Life, and Death in the U.S.-Mexican Borderlands*. University of California, 2004.
- Levine, Amala. "Champion of the Spirit: Anzaldúa's Critique of Rationalist Epistemology." *EntreMundos/AmongWorlds: New Perspectives on Gloria Anzaldúa*, edited by AnaLouise Keating. Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, pp. 171-184.
- Lugones, María. "From within Germinative Stasis: Creating Active Subjectivity, Resistant Agency." *EntreMundos/AmongWorlds: New Perspectives on Gloria Anzaldúa*, edited by AnaLouise Keating. Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, pp. 85-100.
- Manning, Jimmy and Tony Adams. "Popular Culture Studies and Autoethnography: An Essay on Method." *The Popular Culture Studies Journal*, vol. 3, no. 1/2, 2015, pp. 187-222.

- Martínez, Ernesto J. “¿Con Quién, Dónde, Y Por Qué Te Dejas?: Reflections on Joto Passivity.” *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2014, pp. 237–246.
- Martínez-Vázquez, Hjamil A. *Latina/o y Musulmán: The Construction of Latina/o Identity among Latina/o Muslims in the United States*. Pickwick Publications, 2010.
- McMaster, Carrie. Keating. “Negotiating Paradoxical Spaces: Women, Disabilities, and the Experience of Nepantla.” *EntreMundos/AmongWorlds: New Perspectives on Gloria Anzaldúa*, edited by AnaLouise Keating. Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, pp. 101-109.
- Moraga, Cherríe. *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness*. Duke University Press, 2011.
- Moreman, Shane T., and Bernadette Marie Calafell. “Buscando Para Nuestros Hijos: Utilizing La Llorona for Cultural Critique.” *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, vol. 1, no. 4, 2008, pp. 309–326.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. University of Minnesota Press, 1999.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. NYU Press, 2009.
- Muñoz, José Esteban “Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 31, no. 3, 2006, pp. 675–88.
- Rodríguez, Richard T. “Queering the Homeboy Aesthetic.” *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2006, pp. 127–137.
- Scott, Julie-Anne. “Using Celebrities to Teach Autoethnography: Reflexivity, Disability, and Stigma.” *The Popular Culture Studies Journal*, vol. 3, no. 1/2, 2015, pp. 505-519.

- Yep, Gust A. "The Violence of Heteronormativity in Communication Studies: Notes on Injury, Healing, and Queer World-Making." *Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 45, no. 2-4, 2003, pp. 11–59.
- Yosso, T. J. and D. G. Solózano. "Leaks in the Chicana and Chicano Educational Pipeline." *Latino Policy & Issues Brief*, vol. 13, 2006, pp. 1-4.
- Willink, Kate G., Robert Gutierrez-Perez, Salma Shukri, and Lacey Stein. "Navigating with the Stars: Critical Qualitative Methodological Constellations for Critical Intercultural Communication Research." *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, vol. 7, no. 4, 2014, pp. 289–316.

## Erecting and Impaling the Monstrous Social Justice Warrior in *The Green Inferno*

MATTHEW FOY

“I wanted to make a movie about these types of kids: these kids that aren’t really interested in the cause. They want the shortcut. I am so sick of all them, so I’m taking these people and I am baking them and I’m chopping them up and I’m eating them, and I’m laughing at them.”

– Eli Roth, director of *The Green Inferno* (“Eli Roth explains ‘The Green Inferno’”)

“The skeptic, detached and estranged, with no sense of the other, sits alone in an echo-chamber of his own making, with only the sound of his own scoffing laughter ringing in his ears.”

– Dwight Conquergood (“Performing as a Moral Act” 9)

In his essay “Horror Films Face Political Evils in Everyday Life,” John S. Nelson suggests “the genius of horror is subtext: symbolism that creeps beneath surface meanings to assault our dreams and awaken our minds” (382). If genius and subtext are thus intertwined, few will mistake *The Green Inferno*, splatter cinema auteur Eli Roth’s 2013<sup>1</sup> incantation of the notorious Italian cannibal film wave of the 1970s and ‘80s, as a work of horror genius, for it leaves very little of its symbolism beneath the surface.

*The Green Inferno* is the story of a dozen New York college activists who travel to Peru to protest encroaching corporate-colonial encroachment on the uncontacted Yajes village, only to be captured, tortured, and consumed by the cannibalistic Yajes. The film assaults its audience with the on-screen violence and

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Green Inferno* debuted at the 2013 Toronto International Film Festival but did not receive a wide theatrical release until 2015. The majority of discourse considered in this essay centered upon the film’s 2015 release.

abject human misery fans and critics expect from both Roth and the films from which he deliberately borrows, most conspicuously Ruggero Deodato's notorious, oft-censored and banned *Cannibal Holocaust*, from whose film-within-a-film Roth's film borrows its title. But the violence *The Green Inferno* inflicts upon its fictional eco-activists is intended, gleefully and unambiguously so, as an act of symbolic violence against a nonfictional target: so-called *social justice warriors*, or *slacktivists*, or *clicktivists*. Defined as a pejorative in Oxford Dictionaries, *social justice warrior (SJW)* has become shorthand for an unacceptable ethos of progressive or liberal activism characterized by embrace of computer-mediated organizational techniques (e.g., participating in online awareness campaigns and hashtag activism) and affinity for confrontational discursive tactics when engaging others.

Demonized as a fascistic mob obsessed with political correctness, microaggressions, and safe spaces to the detriment of free speech, SJWs draw criticism across political affiliations for being both overly aggressive with their rhetoric and insufficiently dedicated to their causes. "Are they doing it because they believe in it? Or do they just want to look like good people?" Roth lamented to the *Los Angeles Times* (Woerner) prior to *The Green Inferno*'s 2015 theatrical release, suggesting that SJW activism has become sufficiently "out of control" to require symbolic evisceration via feature film.

Critical reception to *The Green Inferno*, though generally lukewarm, reveals a curious dynamic that warrants inspection. Virtually every critic who reviewed *The Green Inferno* recognized its anti-SJW agenda, and most rejected the film's artistic merits in the form of a negative review. Yet, it would not be accurate to conclude that reviewers rejected *The Green Inferno* because of its anti-SJW crusade. On the contrary, there was significant support for the film's agenda from both critics who liked the film and those who did not. David Edelstein ("In Green Inferno") applauded its representation of "Leaders of supposedly grassroots movements [who] are shown to be more devious and self-serving than the companies whose voraciousness they protest." ScreenCrush (Hayes) deemed the film "a blunt indictment of armchair activism, showing us the thick, obnoxious line between naivete and ignorance, and how so very few selfless acts are actually driven by selflessness." Flavorwire (Bailey) concluded, "[Roth's] movie's not against the kind of race and gender activists he's knocking in his promotional campaign; it's just against poseurs who are merely 'acting like they care,' which is something everyone, on either side of these provocative

issues, can get behind.” In sum, it seems critics were receptive if not enthusiastic for the project to symbolically destroy the activists Roth dismisses as slacktivist SJWs but were merely unsatisfied with the (pun unintended) execution.

In periods of cultural anxiety, audiences and critics have long turned to horror cinema to “express in accessible and entertaining popular cultural terms the characteristic fears of their time” (Tudor 458). *The Green Inferno* arrived in theaters during a period of intensifying debate over what constitutes acceptable and effective praxis for public participation. Following high-profile hashtag activism and social media awareness campaigns (e.g., #BringBackOurGirls, #icebucketchallenge, #NotOneMore), the millennial generation entering the public arena in waves, and anxiety over safe spaces, identity politics and political correctness, *The Green Inferno* hails its audience during a period in which activists, scholars, and critics are experiencing consternation over spatial, interpersonal, and corporeal tactics for occupying public space and advocating for political change amidst cultural and technological shifts. The film’s 2013 festival debut followed peak public awareness of the Occupy movement and debate over the social media-propelled Kony2012 awareness campaign. Its 2015 theatrical release followed the dawn of the Ferguson demonstrations against police violence that helped popularize the Black Lives Matter movement. It should come as no surprise that this debate would manifest in the arena of horror, which is at its most potent “in times of gradual cultural shifts when people need some ‘object’ toward which they can direct their anxieties” (Twitchell 41). The SJW serves as that “object”; to recall the Flavorwire (Bailey) review, it indeed seems lashing out at SJWs is something everyone can get behind.

The threat of the SJW may be new, but the marginalization and demonization of social actors through horror cinema is anything but. By creating and devouring a group of doomed activists who embody perceived transgressions and emergent trends driven by young and left-leaning activists, *The Green Inferno* participates in what Michael Rogin terms *political demonology*: the “inflation, stigmatization, and dehumanization of political foes” (xiii). Beneath its brutalized bodies and sensational exploitation of ritual exophagy, *The Green Inferno* is significant as the first noteworthy U.S. horror film—and one of, if not the, first U.S. theatrical films of any genre—to directly address cultural anxieties over what constitutes acceptable activism. Within *The Green Inferno*’s articulation, the SJW looms as a monstrous threat embodying shifting norms over the future of public participation, encompassing collective anxieties over eschewing traditional

models of participation (voting, petitioning, marching, philanthropy, private group affiliation) and the encroachment of progressive and marginalized voices into discursive spaces typified by conservative white masculine cis-hetero hegemony. A close reading of *The Green Inferno* through the lens of extant anti-SJW discourses provides insight into the nature of those cultural trends and attitudes made flesh in the monstrous figure of the SJW.

Marina Levina and Diem-My T. Bui suggest that articulations of monstrosity “represent collective social anxieties over resisting and embracing change in the twenty-first century. They can be read as a response to a rapidly changing cultural, social, political, economic, and moral landscape” (1-2). Bernadette Calafell advocates for “the necessity of understanding the various layers of monstrosity as another formation for unpacking representations of Otherness” (118). This essay seeks to serve as a prism refracting *The Green Inferno*’s distorted imagery to explore how it works to, in Rogin’s terminology, inflate, stigmatize, and dehumanize activists who defy orthodox conceptions of acceptable activism. By suggesting its monstrous SJWs invite their own destruction through their approach to activism, *The Green Inferno* symbolically demonizes tactics associated with SJWs and bestows purifying redemption upon its surviving protagonist, Justine (Lorenza Izzo) for renouncing social justice for a disengaged post-activist existence.

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues, “Monsters must be examined within the intricate matrix of relations (social, cultural, and literary-historical) that generate them” (5). To explore the ways in which *The Green Inferno* renders monstrous and symbolically destroys the SJW, I begin by contextualizing the film’s peculiar combination of two distinct horror genres: the Italian cannibal cycle and the torture porn cycle of the early 2000s. This generic hybridity is significant because it simultaneously frames the narrative that powers the film’s anti-SJW message while revealing its contradictions. I then identify three distinct articulations of the monstrous SJW on which *The Green Inferno* draws—(1) the narcissistic, ill-informed SJW; (2) the authoritarian, confrontational SJW; and (3) the decentralized, leaderless SJW—to construct its doomed activists as necessitating their own destruction.

## #NotAllFlesheaters: Cannibal Cinema, Torture Porn, and the Politics of Exophagy

“Movies are not produced in creative or cultural isolation, nor are they consumed that way,” notes Thomas Schatz (vii). It is clear from sampling critical discourse on *The Green Inferno* that critics interpreted the film through a lens of two horror genres, each of distinct time, place, and ideological undergirdings: the Italian cannibal films of the late 1970s and early ‘80s and the U.S. torture porn films of the mid-2000s. It is poetic that *The Green Inferno*’s monstrous SJWs are given life in an appropriately stitched-together generic crucible, but the genres’ mutual reliance on cultural insensitivity and brutal depictions of human suffering does not mean their ideologies are similarly compatible.

*The Green Inferno*’s evocation of the Italian cannibal cycle is unmistakably intended as homage but also appropriation: an act of artistic cannibalism through which its filmmakers repurpose the genre’s setting and recurring beats and scenarios but leave its politics behind. Italian cannibal films have historically served as “dilemma tales indicative of some form of conflict in the social code, highlighting areas in which a society is not as clear as it might be about what constitutes acceptable or unacceptable behaviour” (Brottman 237). Though it would be a great stretch to call films such as *Cannibal Holocaust* or *Cannibal Ferox* progressive texts—plagued by retrograde racism, sexual violence, and horribly real animal mutilation as they are—their narrative arcs do gesture toward critiques of colonialism and capitalism by depicting the White Westerners falling prey to indigenous cannibals as provoking their fates through their performances of dehumanizing exploitation. These films explicitly implore their audiences to ponder *who are the real savages?* with the answer implied to be White Western colonialism—the savage civilized—rather than the indigenous peoples—the civilized savages. The *who are the real savages?* trope gains its rhetorical power when audience members become aware of their complicity in unreflexively accepting the abstraction of civilization as colonialism when colonialism is ultimately revealed to be the more savage.

Critics simultaneously approached *The Green Inferno* through the lens of Roth’s existing body of work, which is often included in the *torture porn* subgenre of horror. *The Green Inferno*, along with genre forerunners *The Human Centipede*, *Turistas*, *Wolf Creek*, and Roth’s own *Cabin Fever*, *Hostel*, and *Hostel: Part II*, all feature a variation on the theme of attractive, privileged light-



skinned young adults traveling to a remote terrible place and being subjected to torture and death for transgressions ranging from cultural ignorance to exploitation of locals.

The Italian cannibal cycle's gestures toward humanist moralization are largely absent in the 21st century work of Roth and other storytellers operating in the torture porn genre. *Torture porn*, the term popularized by Edelstein in 2006 ("Now Playing") shortly after the box-office success of *Hostel* amidst a wave of "viciously nihilistic" horror films, shocked audiences and scandalized critics with grim scenes of protracted torture and murder. Torture porn is often interpreted as an expression of the U.S.'s conflicted post-September 11 attitudes toward torture and its place in a post-9/11 global world. Written off as gratuitous trash in the press, torture porn's Foucauldian troubling of "the lines between torture, victim, villain, and hero" (Wester 389) found more acceptance among academics, some of whom applauded films such as *Saw* and *Hostel* "for their exploration of morality, social interdependency, and witnessing violence" (Jones 7). Gabrielle Murray observed in a critique of Roth's *Hostel: Part II*: "these films bring us face to face with what is routinely denied in the process of military, state and government sanctioned 'torture': the event is reduced to a cruel, clear dynamic of power relations."

Other scholars noted a distinct conservative slant in torture porn's misanthropic worldview. Christopher Sharrett deemed torture porn a "regressive" moment in horror and lamented the genre's "sense of the worthlessness of human beings, and the horror film's embrace of dominant ideas about power and repression" (37). Films such as *Saw*, *Hostel*, and *The Green Inferno* suggest that those characters who survive their brutal trials (in *The Green Inferno*, Justine) will emerge with eyes wide open to the way the world *really works*, unshackled from the banal hyperrealities of repressive society. But as Mark Bernard observes in his analysis of the *Saw* films, the terms of these virtual becomings, and who is worthy of surviving to experience them, are in fact dictated by powerful, disgruntled white men who prey on women, people of color, and others underprivileged populations. Existing power structures are never threatened.

Though *The Green Inferno* wears the skin of the Italian cannibal genre, its heart and soul are born from the exploitation era of the late 1960s and '70s. Iconic films such as *Night of the Living Dead*, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, and *The Hills Have Eyes* introduced moviegoers to a nihilistic, perpetually and recursively violent postmodern universe in which, "The boundaries between living and dead,

normal and abnormal, human and alien, and good and evil are blurred and sometimes indistinguishable” (Pinedo 20). Whereas *Cannibal Holocaust* and its ilk posed audiences the enthymeme *who are the real savages?* as a crude condemnation of Western capitalism and colonialism, *The Green Inferno* channels the conservative, nihilistic ideology of torture porn to suggest it is the allegedly progressive SJW who has become the true savage, intruding upon civilized savages who reject or are disinterested in pursuing social justice yet are victimized by “dangerous pseudo-progressive authoritarianism” and “speech and culture policing directed at victimless crimes that violate their moral taboos” (Young, “Totalitarian”).

Stephen T. Asma notes, “One aspect of the monster concept seems to be the breakdown of intelligibility. An action or a person or a thing is monstrous when it can’t be processed by our rationality” (10). Similarly, Noel Carroll suggests that the essence of monstrosity lies in the monster’s transgressions of cultural boundaries and natural categories: monsters “do not fit the scheme; they violate it” (34). Unintelligibility is the linchpin to SJWs’ monstrous threat to cultural norms of public participation because they confound not only conservatives with divergent worldviews but also those who understand themselves to be liberal or libertarian who support or claim to support combating racial injustice, income inequality, LGBTQ-plus rights, etc. yet despise the SJW’s organizational or rhetorical tactics.

As musician Billy Corgan lamented in an interview with *InfoWars*’s Alex Jones, it is SJWs’ “weaponized anti-free speech” and embrace of peer pressure, shaming and mocking that renders them monstrous rather than their politics (Lartey). This dual shunning of those branded SJW defies left-versus-right, Republican-versus-Democrat binary antagonism and serves two distinct *countersubversive* (Rogin) functions. First, it empowers critics to dismiss the SJW’s calls for progressive change without the optics of declaring themselves opposed to progressive change itself; for example, one may dismiss as an SJW an activist calling for anti-racist reform without declaring a pro-racism stance. Second, shunning those branded as SJWs from the arena of public participation works to suppress political dissent through policing of “prepolitical institutional settings that have excluded some Americans from politics and influenced the terms on which others entered the political arena” (Rogin 44). To bar or marginalize those bearing the mark of SJW from the public sphere empowers the status quo and reserves cultural capital for those who already possess it, which

aptly summarizes the conclusion of Justine's journey through the stages of SJW consciousness to the film's ultimate endorsed stance of post-activist disengagement.

### *The Green Inferno*: Erecting and Impaling the Monstrous Social Justice Warrior

Roth's *Hostel* films, which center on the shadowy Slovakian Elite Hunting organization through which the rich and powerful purchase disposable youths to torture and kill, are often viewed as the "most self-consciously political phase of torture porn" (Sharrett 36). The *Hostel* films don't ask *who the real savages* (or *victims*) are because they position their doomed youths and the Elite Hunters as both/and. But despite its Foucauldian gesturing, not everyone embraced *Hostel*'s moral equivalencies. Sharrett argues, Roth "wants to show how the young, thoughtless predators become the prey, but the young people, although self-involved and obnoxious, aren't particularly predatory" (36).

This curious lack of malevolence is again at play in *The Green Inferno* in the most glaring contradiction between its anti-SJW articulation and the generic conventions of the Italian cannibal cycle. For representing lazy, uncommitted slacktivist who (to quote Roth) "aren't really interested in the cause" and "just want to look like good people," the film's doomed activists take extraordinary measures to advance a cause that the film seems to accept as worthwhile. In the events leading to their capture by the Yajes, they cross oceans and rivers to trek deep into the Peruvian Amazon, chain themselves to construction equipment at great personal peril, and confront an armed militia with only their mobile phones to protect them from summary execution. In order to partake of the Italian cannibal genre's ironic construction of civilized savagery, *The Green Inferno*'s doomed characters venture to the most remote of terrible places, but discourses essentializing SJWs as motivated not by genuine sacrifice but "to do the things that people do when they are not motivated enough to make a real sacrifice" (Gladwell) are palpably undermined by the characters travelling to the terrible place in the first place.

In their discussion of critical counter-framing of online activism in Kony2012 memes, Kligler-Vilenchik and Thorson note, "the holy grail of good citizenship is 'doing your research'" (2001). If we can't loathe *The Green Inferno*'s activists for

their inactivity, the fallback would seem to be loathing them for their grotesque ignorance of the danger of venturing to dark places they don't belong. This is both a familiar horror trope and consistent with the stereotype of the authoritarian SJW who invades public forums to spout leftist dogma without nuance or concern for the communities into which they encroach. But this also fails dramatically, for the movie explicitly states that the Yajes' village is uncontacted. What accessible research could the group consult to warn them of the danger? Even if such literature were to exist and be readily accessible to college undergraduates—the film's dénouement implies even the United Nations have not confirmed the Yajes were cannibalistic—the activists only encounter the Yajes when their plane crashes (implied through sabotage) on the way home. Had their plane gone down over the Gulf of Mexico, it would be ludicrous to suggest they should have known better than to swim with tiger sharks.

With generic conventions and its own plot working against its anti-SJW agenda, *The Green Inferno*'s capacity as a disciplinary message hinges on its doomed activists being coded in such a way that they deserve their grim fates. They must “by their own horrific actions, abdicat[e] their humanity” (Asma 8). To achieve this, its activist characters are rendered monstrous by “exaggeration of cultural difference into monstrous aberration” (Cohen 7). *The Green Inferno* relies on three distinct characterizations of monstrosity, each representing one anxious articulation over the current and future state of public participation: (1) the SJW as narcissistic and superficially dedicated, (2) the SJW as reckless and abrasively confrontational, and (3) the SJW as easily manipulated by powerful actors with malevolent intentions. By encoding its doomed activists with these traits that render them unintelligible and loathsome—civilized savages who understand themselves to be good but inflict evil—*The Green Inferno* positions its monstrous SJWs as inviting destruction for their transgressions, demonizing their ethic of public participation accordingly.

*“You must be a freshman. Because only a freshman would speak with such insolence.”*

In a review excoriating *The Green Inferno* for racist<sup>2</sup> depictions of indigenous persons, *The Wrap* (Kang) conceded that the film’s script “is at least on point about the superficiality of most campus-based do-gooding.” Narcissism and superficiality are key features of anti-SJW rhetoric. Unequipped to engage any social issue in any but the most cursory and self-obsessed fashion, the SJW is more concerned with optics and self-image than *the cause*, settling for “easy, symbolic online acts over tried and true forms of collective action” (Kligler-Vilenchik and Thorson 1994).

In their research on college students encountering the privilege of whiteness in the classroom, John T. Warren and Kathy Hytten compare such a stance to that of Plato’s torpedo fish and describe students in a torpedified state as “the ultimate ‘deer in the headlights’—the persona of individuals who realize they oppress (and have oppressed their whole lives) and find themselves without the agency to think through that oppression in order to change” (325). *The Green Inferno* depicts the torpedified SJW early in the film when we first meet freshman Justine, privileged daughter of a United Nations lawyer, as she falls in with campus activist group Activist Change Team (ACT), whose doomed straw-activists openly espouse the slogan, “Don’t think: ACT!”

We are introduced to Justine as she is literally awakening to activism: she is stirred from her bed on a Sunday morning by the sounds of students demonstrating outside her window in favor of health insurance for the university’s janitors. Peering out her window, wearing gray in her dimly lit room, she is betwixt and between, politically naïve but desperate to belong, seducible. In stage one of her political awakening, Justine’s engagement is portrayed as superficial

---

<sup>2</sup> Indigenous rights groups Survivor International, (Gell) Amazon Watch, and AIDSESEP (Paz y Miño) criticized *The Green Inferno* for its racist portrayal of its fictional Yajes tribe as bloodthirsty cannibal savages. Film critics also took notice: Flavorwire (Bailey) describes the Yajes as “jungle savages out of a Hope and Crosby movie, their skin painted blood red, screaming and pawing at our white heroines.” *The Wrap* (Kang) criticized the film’s portrayal of the Yajes as “just another echo of dehumanizing depictions of native peoples previously used to justify colonialism and genocide.”

and self-indulgent. She joins ACT's hunger strike for the janitors' insurance (which they obtain) but is shown drinking Starbucks coffee, reminiscent of Bush-era peace protestor Cindy Sheehan's Jamba Juice-fueled hunger strike. The film strongly implies Justine's commitment to ACT is influenced by her unrequited attraction to Alejandro, the group's "Che Guevara wannabe" (Hayes) leader. "Are you sure you're here for the right reasons?" asks Kara, Alejandro's top lieutenant who relishes in flaunting her romantic partnership with him in Justine's presence.

Initial depictions of ACT borrow heavily from the iconography of the Occupy movement. The group's protest signs include the slogans "Janitors are the 99%" and "Janitors clean up after the one percent." Protestors don the traditional garb of the liberal hippie Occupier: stubbly beards and wool caps, acoustic guitars and hand drums in tow. For their direct action in the Amazon, ACT members wear expressionless full-face masks akin to the Guy Fawkes masks associated with Occupy and Anonymous. The audience is cued to dislike and distrust such groups through the dialogue of Justine's roommate Kaycee (Sky Ferreira), who declares "activism's so fucking gay," taunts hunger-striking demonstrators with her breakfast bagel, and wishes them tear-gassed for protesting on a Sunday morning: "None of those girls give a fuck about the janitors. They just don't want to appear anorexic. It's just some weird demonstration to appease their fucking white stupid suburban Jewish guilt." Kaycee, the audience may surmise, is the *raisonneur* through which the filmmakers most directly articulate the film's anti-SJW message. On *The Green Inferno's* DVD commentary, Roth states, "I love how Sky just cuts down everything that everyone believes in. She's kind of the only—the voice of realism." By implication, we may surmise that progressive politics and ethic of direct action embraced by ACT are rooted in unreality. Unlike Justine who exists in liminality, Kaycee is introduced to the audience as impervious to activist seduction, literally in bed with the film's director (Roth voices her unnamed lover), uninterested in politics and interested only in that which impacts her directly.

Roth traces his skepticism of the Occupy movement to a personal anecdote in which he draws a distinction between justifiably dedicated activism and torpefied, narcissistic slacktivism:

[T]here was a relative of mine that had graduated college and wasn't working because he was occupying. I was thinking, "I don't know how the banks fucked him over, and maybe he feels strongly," but I got the sense

that he was going there because his friends were doing it and they were meeting girls and it was fun to occupy. (Juzwiak)

Here, we see two points of consternation over acceptable activism: dismissal of partial commitment and the notion that personal prosperity must be at the root of public participation. The notion that one can participate against institutional injustice without being personally victimized is framed as incomprehensible, replaced by familiar appeals to youthful self-interest. Monstrosity manifests itself as both a lack of rational self-interest and repugnant narcissism: style without substance. When Justine is confronted by Kara over her unrequited attraction to Alejandro, Justine insists she is motivated by ACT's cause but cannot help but glance at Alejandro as he interacts with the other ACT members, hinting at a monstrous id running amuck. In monster cinema, Harvey Greenberg notes, "even the gentlest of [humans] may bare fangs and bay at the moon when [their] passions are kindled" (199). The monstrous SJW, then, "represents the destructive forces unleashed when reason and civilized morality are overthrown by our unruly instincts" (199). As Justine longs for love and acceptance from Alejandro, SJWs pile onto hashtag activism campaigns in pursuit of love and acceptance from their Facebook friends and Twitter followers.

Through this construction of Justine's awakening as a well-intentioned but ignorant SJW, Roth taps into the stereotype of SJWs as motivated by guilt (e.g., white, masculine) and unable or unwilling to grasp the complexities of politics and world affairs. Cathy Young, *Observer* contributor and prolific castigator of SJWs, conflates social justice activism with the anathemas of identity politics, fixation on privilege, and white guilt: "Working to correct inequities is a noble goal.... But the movement in its current form is not about that.... It encourages wallowing in anger and guilt. It promotes intolerance and the politicization of everything" ("Pecking Disorder"). Even when armed with noble goals and justified anger, SJWs are woefully unequipped to do anything beyond click, shout, and swarm. Yale professor and author Stephen L. Carter writes in an article both critical and sympathetic to Occupy Wall Street: "I am not suggesting that the demonstrators have nothing to be angry about, only that their anger is misplaced.... One of the hardest truths to accept is that complex failures generally have complex causes—and require nuanced solutions." By introducing the audience to Justine in her torpedied state, *The Green Inferno* suggests that SJWs

are lashing out not at the true systemic injustice beyond their comprehension but rather their own monstrous egos and feelings of shock, guilt, and complicity.

As Hytten and Warren note, the process of “reconciling feelings about self may be an important developmental step toward changing both ideas about, and actions toward, others” (73). *The Green Inferno*’s portrayal of torpedied Justine suggests this process should remain private, silent, and shameful. SJWs are instead to be locked in the cellar of “doing their research” *ad infinitum*, lest they be allowed out to do real damage to their surroundings.

*“That’s the only way people change their behavior: the threat of embarrassment. You must shame them.”*

In a scene shortly after her awakening to activism, Justine takes in a classroom lecture on female genital mutilation. Wincing at slides depicting FGM in a crowded auditorium, Justine incredulously declares they “should be doing something about this” and impotently marks her privilege as the daughter of a UN lawyer to boost her feminist credibility. Her instructor scoffs, informing her that FGM “is a global problem” and “You’d need every lawyer in the UN to stop it.” We then cut to Justine having lunch with her father in an upscale restaurant and cynically stating that the UN doesn’t care about FGM because oil isn’t involved. “Were it so simple,” her father, amused by her rudimentary knowledge, chides her while eating rare steak and sipping red wine, a hyper-globalized doppelgänger to the flesh consumption to come. “There are procedures. We can’t just go invade a country because we think what they’re doing is illegal or immoral.”

*The Green Inferno*’s second articulation of Justine’s monstrous transformation frames SJWs as reckless, abrasive zealots who rush headlong into confrontation without regard for decorum or civility. The monstrous SJW stalks from forum to forum, motivated only to antagonize and police political correctness, adopting a more-political-than-thou stance instead of pursuing change through respectable, socially sanctioned avenues. SJWs naively insist the world can be saved with a smartphone and have no time for committing to an adequate incubation period of assimilating to the amorphous cause because their default mode of engagement is to rush into combat without adequate knowledge or regard for those they confront, harass, and shame.

The SJW’s delusions of grandeur are exploited by Alejandro in a scene in which he draws Justine and other ACT members into a shared fantasy of colonial



saviordom: “Have you ever had fantasies of saving a dying tribe, of protecting them from encroaching civilization? An opportunity has come up to turn that fantasy into a reality.” As Alejandro sermonizes, the camera cuts to various ACT members hanging on their leader’s every word, eyes glazed over, fully indoctrinated. Only Justine maintains a semblance of rebellion, flippantly asking, “So what’s the plan? March through the jungle and starve yourselves?” When she speaks out of turn, the camera cuts between disgusted glares, creating a feeling of the mob ganging up on her. “You must be a freshman,” Alejandro chastises. “Because only a freshman would speak with such insolence. You can leave now.” Apologies intolerantly rebuffed, Justine is expelled from the meeting in shame.

Driven to insomnia after Alejandro’s rejection, Justine pursues him the next day, declaring her day-old dedication to women’s rights in Africa as her social justice *raison d’être*. Alejandro seduces her by promising her power through social media shaming: “Right or wrong, you need cameras on them. That’s the only way people change their behavior. The threat of embarrassment. You must shame them.” Despite warnings from her realist roommate and affluent father, Justine is easily deluded into believing a “white girl from the suburbs [can] go to Africa and tell a village that FGM is wrong.” Justine settles instead for Peru and the Yajes.

This exchange represents concerns over the monstrous SJW’s intolerance for opposing viewpoints and predilection for abrasive confrontation, particularly through social media. Twitter shaming seems deeply engrained in *The Green Inferno*’s genesis, as in pre-release press Roth offers as inspiration several examples of online awareness campaigns—Kony2012, Free Pussy Riot, Bring Back Our Girls, the Ice Bucket Challenge—and denounces them as at once aggravating and ineffective. On Kony2012, Roth recalls: “my Twitter timeline was filled with people going, ‘How come you haven’t tweeted the YouTube video? Don’t you care about child soldiers? What’s wrong with you?’ Everyone had this very self-righteous attitude” (Juzwiak). The SJW’s reckless dedication to counter-productive confrontation is illustrated in ACT members’ instantly metastasized conviction that injustice can be solved immediately if someone would take action. Upon arriving in Peru, ACT member Amy recoils in disgust at the site of a family riding on a scooter with a small child, deeming it “child abuse” without knowledge of Peruvian culture or its helmet laws. The implication: SJWs not only lack understanding of the phenomena they protest but actively forego pursuit of understanding, instead animalistically lashing out,

spoiling worthy causes and alienating potential allies who would join their cause if they'd only ask the right way.

This construction of the SJW as an abrasive zealot is reproduced regularly in anti-SJW rhetoric. The monstrous SJW is “Fueled by a mix of intolerance and entitlement” (Kaufman), fascistically demanding safe spaces while barring dissent from friend or foe and politicizing everything under the sun. “It’s almost as though they [SJWs] wake up every morning with ‘ruin everyone’s day’ as the first thing on their agendas,” an article on *The Odyssey* (Vesco) laments.

In *The Green Inferno*, smartphones are literally weaponized with public shame as their bullets. Upon arriving in Peru, Alejandro reminds his crew that their self-defense against an armed militia is to shame them before a global audience: “Tomorrow, no matter what, keep streaming. Those cameras are our only defense.” When one ACT member expresses shock that they could be shot and another suggests they, too, should get guns, Alejandro holds up his phone and reminds them, “These are our guns.”

Critical discourse on SJWs is heavily peppered with references to mob-like shaming, anti-free speech, and puritanical obsession with identity politics—all of which are framed as antagonistic harassment or self-sabotaging obstacles to true progress. “Ever the wet-blankets,” *The Federalist* (De Pasquale) chides, “social justice warriors will take any opportunity to demonstrate their virtue and accuse others with tiresome, baseless epithets like racism, sexism, and cultural appropriation.” “Like most fanatics, these enforcers of purity lack self-awareness of the motivations for their own actions,” *Areo Magazine* (Pallardy) argues. “There are real, profound problems visible through the murky rhetoric purporting to solve them. . . . But the gleefully self-righteous tone to some of the mandates issued by these self-styled experts in racial, class, gender, and identity politics betrays a baser motive.” In this characterization, we see the SJW at its most transparently destructive, stalking from encounter to encounter with the intent to harass and harm anyone not sufficiently liberal or anyone who defies their puritanical standards. Embodying a dangerous mix of ignorance and intolerance and roaming free to seek victims, the monstrous SJW lacks malice yet must be destroyed to both extinguish the political correctness that offends the right and the more-liberal-than-thou purity that offends the orthodox left.

*“You knew the risks.” ... “Yeah. I just didn’t know the biggest one was you.”*

Though Justine and the rank and file of ACT represent the self-obsessed and stridently aggressive faces of the SJW, there is no denying their earnestness and willingness to risk their lives for their convictions, which contradicts characterizations that SJWs are not authentically committed to their causes. Creating further disharmony in *The Green Inferno*’s anti-SJW mission is the fact that ACT’s tactical strike, in which they chain themselves to deforestation machinery and use their phones to expose the violent corporate-sponsored militia via mobile satellite technology, appears to be successful. The protest temporarily halts the deforesters’ encroachment on the Yajes’ territory and gains international exposure when their guerrilla broadcast goes viral, appearing on the front page of Reddit and being retweeted by CNN. With the enormous caveat of what happens next (their plane crashes, initiating their capture by the Yajes), it seems reasonable to chalk up an enormous victory for a dozen students with scarce resources and a lot of bravery.

*The Green Inferno* robs its activists of their triumph through its construction of Alejandro and Kara as grotesquely heartless manipulators of their ill-informed flock. Though Alejandro and Kara both corporeally participate in ACT’s direct action, the film’s second act reveals that they are corrupt and cynical to the point that the action is robbed of its virtue and serves to symbolically warn against falling in with grassroots activists who will inevitably reveal ulterior motives.

Though Alejandro is ACT’s lead organizer and tactician, the audience is cued to distrust him immediately: as Justine and Kaycee watch Alejandro lead the demonstration for the university’s janitors, Kaycee deems him “creepy and charismatic: the kind of guy you’ve got to look out for.” Though Justine’s pre-indoctrination encounters with Alejandro are filmed in warmer tones, he is later shown drawing up tactics in a dark, grim corner, a portrait of Che Guevara looming over his shoulder. As ACT members board their plane to Peru, Justine hesitates to board, glancing uneasily at Alejandro, Kara, and their benefactor and funder, Carlos. Though Alejandro vouches for Carlos (“He’s the man: one of us”), Carlos is later shown accepting money from an implied military strongman.

Of course, the audience’s mistrust of Alejandro, Kara, and Carlos is fully affirmed. Alejandro not only sets off a violent explosion at the construction site, but all traces of charisma and courage evaporate after his capture. Alejandro is revealed to have foreknowledge that the action would be futile: “We didn’t stop

anything. We just delayed it by a day or two.” When pressed, he explains that the action was in reality a public relations stunt orchestrated by Carlos (killed in the crash), who was hired by a competing company to stop its competition from reaching the natural gas beneath the Yajes. “Wake up,” Alejandro lectures the surviving ACT members. “These people never really had a chance. There’s too much money in the ground here. The second company’s already on the way. They picked up where the others left off, probably with the same guards.” When Justine lashes out at him for endangering their lives for “a fucking photo shoot,” he digs in: “Justine, I hate to break it to you, but this is how the real world works. Everything is connected. The good guys and the bad guys. You think the U.S. government didn’t allow 9/11 to happen? You think the War on Drugs is something real? You think our plane wasn’t sabotaged? They probably crashed it to kill Carlos.”

When Justine is identified as a virgin and selected by the tribe’s shamanistic leader to be ritualistically mutilated, Alejandro shows no compassion: “More days for us.” When sympathetic ACT member Jonah is brutally tortured and killed, Alejandro expresses relief that Jonah’s fat body will feed the Yajes for days. At last, when the surviving members plot their escape by stuffing Amy’s corpse with “very strong” Peruvian marijuana to intoxicate the cannibals who will consume her, Alejandro masturbates openly, to the horror of the group, to “release stress”; when the pathetic pariah is strangled by de facto leader Daniel, he masturbates more fervently.

Kara is revealed to be as loathsome and manipulative as her partner. When ACT members are chaining themselves to equipment, Kara slips Justine a defective padlock. As black-clad guards rush the scene, they attempt to capture the protesters but move on when they find them to be securely chained. But vulnerable Justine is seized, unmasked, and threatened with a gun against her head. Though Alejandro exploits Justine by taunting her captors with her father’s status with the UN—“You begged me to join, so I created a role for you,” he tells her dismissively afterward—he at least urges ACT to continue filming lest Justine be killed. Kara actively works to have Justine executed: “Kill her and see what happens,” she urges the militiaman.

In isolation, characterizations of the SJW as narcissistic, ineffective or overly confrontational are comprehensible, if exaggerated. The efficacy of clicktivism as an avenue for change is a point of debate on the political left (e.g., Fuchs; Gladwell; Morozov) as well as the right, and destructive conflict is virtually

synonymous with political discourse in the 21st century. But *The Green Inferno*'s suggestion that SJWs are a front for shadowy manipulators is curious. A review of contemporary grassroots activist organizations reveals no SJW pariahs remotely as evil and manipulative as *The Green Inferno*'s deplorable duo. ACT's SJWs may be monsters, but they are not naturally occurring; they are created and set in motion by self-motivated actors, more akin to Frankenstein's monster than irredeemable devils such as Freddy Kruger or Michael Myers.

Who or what social phenomena do Alejandro and Kara represent? Turning to Roth's pre-release interviews for clues, the most likely inspiration for Alejandro and Kara seems to be Jason Russell of Kony2012 fame. Roth cites the Kony2012 campaign, a forerunner of hashtag activism, as a prime example of ineffective slacktivism (Juzwiak), and as explained by Roth on DVD commentary, Alejandro's public masturbation is an homage to Russell, who in the midst of an apparent breakdown was arrested in San Diego for erratic behavior, cursing and ranting while naked and allegedly masturbating. Otherwise, a survey of contemporary social justice or clicktivism campaigns is short on figureheads, manipulative or otherwise. The suggestion that Kony2012 was counterproductive is a supportable thesis and is affirmed in ethnographic research by Finnegan, who criticizes Kony2012 as "a noncontentious form of activism for privileged young Americans that is unlikely to lead to sustainable social change in Africa or the United States" (138). Though critics accuse Russell's Invisible Children NGO of ineffectiveness and white saviordom (Cole), there seems to be no documented malice or premeditated corruption on the part of Russell. Joseph Kony remains at large and Invisible Children's legacy is complicated, but if Russell is an inspiration for Alejandro and Kara, the latter duo has been imbued with sinister motivations that appear to be pure fantasy. This particular fantasy is consistent with Ryan and Kellner's observation of conservative monster cinema, which tends to "demonstrate that in the jungle world of conservative psychopathology no one can be trusted, everyone potentially is a monster" (185).

To the contrary, ACT owes much of its presentation to groups such as Occupy New York and its offspring, which along with Black Lives Matter are known for their collectivist, decentralized approaches to decision-making. Such groups' eschewing of icons and traditional avenues to power (e.g., running for public office, electing formal leadership) is an enduring source of consternation among both conservatives and liberals such as Oprah Winfrey (Somashkhar) and in moderate-left articles on CNN (Linsky) and Huffington Post (Ostroy).

The lack of centralized leadership and an established party platform is a key factor in the SJW's monstrous incomprehensibility: there is no single head that can be cut off to kill this monster or keep it reined in. Conversely and consistent with the civilized savage/savage civilized trope, the Yajes are portrayed as embodying a more traditional communal hierarchy, if not full-blown Reagan-era Family Values. The village is led by two parental figures, identified as The Village Elder (feminine) and The Bald Headhunter (masculine) in the credits, who are portrayed as elite in status: elaborately adorned and painted orange where the rest of the village is painted red, they initiate and carry out the rite of killing Jonah to feed the village while everyone else helps or watches. The village's women season and cook the body, later washing and adorning Justine for public mutilation, while the children watch and obey. When a problem arises or the village is threatened, the alpha male headhunter protects the flock. Whereas the surviving ACT members attempt one ludicrous escape plan after another and get themselves killed one by one, the Yajes are paternally united and can only be defeated by a more violent, united organization: an armed militia.

Returning to Asma's assertion that the breakdown of intelligibility is a key characteristic of monstrosity, the sinister malevolence of Alejandro and Kara seems to function to placate anxiety and confusion over activists' turn away from traditional modernist leadership and hierarchy and toward a decentralized model of organization. Not unlike the conspiracy theorist who insists the 2017 Women's March was bankrolled by George Soros (Bondarenko) and the teenagers protesting the NRA in the wake of the Parkland High School rampage were paid "crisis actors" (Chavez), *The Green Inferno* cannot comprehend the possibility that Justine, ensconced in privilege, would renounce affluence and the comforts of college to risk her life in Peru when her family possesses the cultural capital to participate in more traditional avenues for change.

*The Green Inferno* forecloses on the possibility of genuine engagement without centralized leadership or personal gain by depicting Justine systematically singled out, seduced, and manipulated by an organization rotten to its core with deceit and ulterior motives. Much like Frankenstein's monster or Romero's living dead, the SJW exists not in nature but is created and cast into the world to wreak havoc by masters seen or unseen, loathsome and ultimately doomed by their creators' sins. And like certain among the ranks of Romero's living dead such as Bub from *Day of the Dead* or Big Daddy from *Land of the Dead*, the repentant SJW can also be redeemed by reclaiming that which marked its humanity before

descending into monstrosity. The SJW can be purified by abandoning that by which it once abdicated its humanity: political consciousness.

### Conclusion: *The Green Inferno*'s Copout

By splicing the conservative-nihilist politics of the torture porn genre with an inversion of the Italian cannibal genre's *who are the real savages?* trope, *The Green Inferno* constructs a grotesque, tragically flawed image of the social justice warrior: loathsomely myopic, uninformed, and inauthentic; grotesquely overzealous, narcissistic, and manipulative; and tragically unaware of the consequences of its actions and its own doomed monstrosity. By erecting and destroying its monstrous SJWs, *The Green Inferno* works to demonize direct action, particularly that which is left-leaning and features decentralized leadership, by appealing to social anxieties over the future of public participation. As Ryan and Kellner correctly observe, "Even conservative films ... can yield socially critical insights, for what they designate in a sort of inverse negative is the presence of forces that make conservative reactions necessary" (14). Read generously, *The Green Inferno* highlights three potentially problematic stances that, though exaggerated in the film, are counterproductive when engaging with Others with the goal of enacting social change. To enter into public participation superficially, or stridently, or unaware of the implications of one's actions are all extreme stances that aren't likely to win allies or contribute to lasting change.

Generosity, vulnerability, and reflexivity are recurring themes in scholarship that interrogates engaging with Others. For example, in recognizing the urgency of understanding our own positions within systems of power, Warren and Hytten advocate the stance of *the Critical Democrat*, a liminal position in which we carefully balance commitment to action with self-reflexivity, of speaking out with active listening, of understanding how we are implicated in systems of power with the belief that change is possible through collaboration (331-32). Dwight Conquergood, too, advocates for the liminal occupation between extreme stances when engaging with others. Theorizing along intersecting axes of Identity and Difference and Detachment and Commitment, Conquergood advocates a stance of *dialogic performance*, bringing "self and other together so that they can question, debate and challenge one another" in open-ended, ongoing mutual engagement (9). Though the notion of taking action is by definition at the heart of activism,

both the critical democrat and the dialogic performer embrace self-reflexivity and the spirit of earnest, vulnerable engagement, both qualities that sampled anti-SJW critiques suggest are perceived to be absent from forums in which social justice is discussed. Too often, critics of SJWs suggest, the shaming and confrontation they perceive lacks the essential dialogic nature that divides attempts to teach from *praxis*: “the action and *reflection* [my emphasis] of men and women upon their world in order to transform it” (Freire 79).

This leaves the audience to ponder: if, as so many critiques of SJWs emphasize, social justice itself is an admirable goal, what non-SJW stance ought one adopt when advocating for change? Unfortunately, any potential pedagogical value from *The Green Inferno* is severely undermined by the alternative stance its conclusion advocates: post-activist non-engagement.

In the film’s dénouement, Justine has returned to New York after escaping her Yajes captors. All her friends are killed,<sup>3</sup> and as is customary in torture porn horror, she escapes by inflicting violence on her captor, obliterating the line between the civilized and the savage. Sitting in a sterile, dimly lit library, Justine dispassionately recounts her terrifying ordeal for her father and two officious men investigating the incident. In an homage to *Cannibal Ferox*, Justine lies about her experiences, denying that the Yajes (who were slaughtered by the previously thwarted militia, under new employment) were cannibalistic:

JUSTINE: All the other students were killed in the crash. I stayed by the fire as long as I could. But by the next day it had burned out. If it weren’t for those natives, I’d be dead, too. They heard the crash, and eventually they found me. They fed me and guided me out of the jungle. They knew I was lost, that I accidentally landed in their back yard. I never experienced any anger or hostility. It was the opposite. I never felt afraid even when I was with them. Until the bulldozers showed up and slaughtered them like cattle.”

---

<sup>3</sup> Save for Alejandro, whom Justine abandons as retribution. In the film’s post-credit sequence, Alejandro is shown by satellite video as having survived and apparently having gone native, setting up the possibility of a sequel.



DAD: “We’re all very proud of you, baby. You saved that village.”

DETECTIVE: These natives ...

JUSTINE: The Yajes.

DETECTIVE: ... allegedly headhunters, cannibals. Did you ever see any of that sort while you were there?

JUSTINE: Never once.

Both *Cannibal Ferox* and *The Green Inferno* feature college students in the role of the imperiled. *Ferox* sends anthropologist Gloria and company into the Paraguayan jungle to prove Gloria’s thesis that cannibalism is a myth. They fall in with fugitive American drug dealer/addict Mike Logan, whose psychotic aggression incites the cannibalistic natives to retributive violence. Upon returning home, Gloria lies about her experiences and publishes a book that fraudulently purports that cannibalism is fictional. Unlike Gloria’s shell-shocked cynicism, *The Green Inferno* leaves Justine’s motivation for lying about the Yajes comparatively ambiguous. Her testimony is filmed, and as the scene ends, Justine meets the audience’s gaze through a screen-within-our-screen, which then shuts off, suggesting that her engagement with the incident is officially over.

Though Justine earns sympathy as a survivor, the final stage of her activist awakening is disturbing. Having traveled from self-absorption to reckless saviordom, Justine is depicted as increasingly cynical on the plane ride home—one may argue justifiably so after her cruel manipulation by Alejandro and Kara. But by the end of the film, Justine’s cynicism gives way to complete detachment and discontinued engagement with the people and issues that once attracted her to the conflict over the Yajes village. As she once abdicated her humanity to become an SJW, she abdicates the willingness to engage in that which made her monstrous. The hero’s journey ends in disengagement and acceptance of the status quo in exchange for the privilege of invisibility.

*The Green Inferno* ultimately advocates for a stance reminiscent of Conquergood’s *skeptic’s cop-out*: the “easy bail-out into the no man’s land of paralyzing skepticism” (8):

“The Skeptic’s Cop-Out” is the most morally reprehensible corner of the map because it forecloses dialogue. The enthusiast [characterized by “too facile identification with the other coupled with enthusiastic commitment, 6], one can always hope, may move beyond infatuation to love.... The skeptic, however, shuts down the very idea of entering into conversation with the other before the attempt, however problematic, begins. (8)

*The Green Inferno*’s ideal agent ultimately proves to be not Justine nor Alejandro or any ACT member but rather cynical, sneering anti-activist Kaycee, who immediately forecloses upon the possibility of earnest engagement with others and ridicules others who do attempt to engage.

*The Green Inferno* expends its creative force disciplining activists who are too eager to engage or engage for incomprehensible reasons, saying little about whom, then, is allowed to change the world. Roth asserts that SJWs want “shortcuts” from traditional avenues for change; his ACT members “don’t want to go through the process and the law” (Juzwiak). Justine’s father embodies this privileging of bureaucracy over direct action, but though Justine’s father is presented in a positive light, the film itself admits that such prescribed mechanisms often fail those they are intended to help. Direct action may be futile in *The Green Inferno*, but bureaucratic action is just as impotent. The Yajes were always going to be bulldozed.

In the end, Roth’s own words and actions provide the greatest clue into *The Green Inferno*’s conclusion on what constitutes acceptable activism: not critical democracy, not dialogic performance, but economic privilege. In his attempts to defuse accusations of racism and exploitation through *The Green Inferno*’s retrograde portrayal of the Yajes, Roth points to the fact that he hired native farmers from Peru’s Callanayacu village, compensating them in money and home and community improvements. Roth recalls that communication was limited and the Callanayacu farmers had “never seen a movie before.” To prepare the Callanayacu for their roles, they were shown *Cannibal Holocaust*, a film which itself has been often criticized for its own racist depictions of indigenous peoples. Roth recalls: “So if you talk to the 5-year-old [Callanayacu] kids and say, ‘What is a movie?’ they go, ‘Oh that’s when you get painted red and eat people’” (Juzwiak).

Roth’s rhetoric works to reaffirm the notion of the “false generosity” (Freire) of the philanthropically inclined elite as the kind of activism that, unlike

slacktivism or clicktivism, *actually does something*. But its accompanying demonization of direct action and the everyday performance of struggling for change also serves as a reminder that, in Freire's words, "An unjust social order is the permanent fount of this 'generosity,' which is nourished by death, despair, and poverty. That is why the dispensers of false generosity become desperate at the slightest threat to its source" (44). If the ability to control who and what are worthy of being lifted belongs to the economically privileged, it is no wonder that the SJW poses a monstrous threat to be controlled, a subversive force that must be demonized.

*The Green Inferno* identifies social justice warriors as threats, and the symbolic violence it inflicts on them is impossible to misinterpret. But it also fails to make sense of the activists it finds so unintelligible. Its SJWs exist to assuage concerns that today's activists aren't motivated or informed, yet they make sacrifices unfathomable to much of its audience; they lack information that is also lacking to administrators and diplomats. Its SJWs are symbolically destroyed as an exorcism for anyone whose actions or language have faced unwanted scrutiny from left of the political spectrum, yet their encounters with Others are either justified and successful (versus genocidal corporate colonizers) or unintentional and non-malicious (the Yajes). Channeling critics from the political left and right, *The Green Inferno's* contribution to debates over the future of public participation cannot fathom progress without hierarchy and centralized leadership, or generosity without getting more back in return. It has no idea who the real savages are and doesn't wish to be bothered with the matter any further, hoping the monsters will just quiet down, log off and go away.

## Works Cited

- Asma, Stephen T. *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears*. Oxford UP, 2009.
- Bailey, Jason. "Even Gamergaters Will Be Disappointed by Eli Roth's 'The Green Inferno.'" Review of *The Green Inferno*, by Eli Roth. *Flavorwire*. Flavorpill Media, 24 Sept. 2014, [www.flavorwire.com/539306/even-gamergaters-will-be-disappointed-by-eli-roths-the-green-inferno](http://www.flavorwire.com/539306/even-gamergaters-will-be-disappointed-by-eli-roths-the-green-inferno). Accessed 20 June 2017.

Bernard, Mark. "'LOOK AT ME': Serial Killing, Whiteness, and (In)visibility in the *Saw* Series." *Murders and Acquisitions: Representations of the Serial Killer in Popular Culture*, edited by Alzena MacDonald, Bloomsbury Academic, 2013, pp. 85-103.

Bondarenko, Veronika. "George Soros is a Favorite Target of the Right — Here's How That Happened." *Business Insider*. Business Insider, Inc., 20 May 2017, <http://www.businessinsider.com/how-did-george-soros-become-the-favorite-boogeyman-of-the-right-2017-5>. Accessed 2 Feb. 2018.

Brottman, Mikita. *Meat is Murder! An Illustrated Guide to Cannibal Culture*. Creation, 1998.

*Cabin Fever*. Directed by Eli Roth, Deer Path Films, 2002.

Calafell, Bernadette Marie. *Monstrosity, Performance, and Race in Contemporary Culture*. Peter Lang, 2015.

*Cannibal Ferox*. Directed by Umberto Lenzi, Dania Film, 1981.

*Cannibal Holocaust*. Directed by Ruggero Deodato, F.D. Cinematografica, 1980.

Carroll, Noel. *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart*. Routledge, 1990.

Carter, Stephen L. "Occupy Wall Street is Full of Ill-Informed Protesters Who Should March on Washington." *Daily Beast*. The Daily Beast Company, 2011 Oct. 3, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/occupy-wall-street-is-full-of-ill-informed-protesters-who-should-march-on-washington>. Accessed 20 May 2018.

Chavez, Nicole. "School Shooting Survivor Knocks Down 'Crisis Actor' Claim." *CNN.com*. Turner Broadcasting System, 21 Feb. 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/02/21/us/david-hogg-conspiracy-theories-response/index.html>. Accessed 27 Feb. 2018.

Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome, editor. "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)." *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*. U of Minnesota P, 1996, pp. 3-25.

Cole, Teju. "The White-Savior Industrial Complex." *The Atlantic*. The Atlantic Monthly Group, 21 March 2012, [www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/](http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/). Accessed 15 Aug. 2017.

Conquergood, Dwight. "Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance." *Text and Performance Quarterly*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1985, pp. 1-13.

*Day of the Dead*. Directed by George A. Romero, Dead Film Inc., 1985.

De Pasquale, Lisa. "Is Your Kid A Cowboy For Halloween? Social Justice Warriors Already Hate Him." *The Federalist*. FDRLST Media, 24 Oct. 2017, <http://thefederalist.com/2017/10/24/kid-cowboy-halloween-social-justice-warriors-already-hate/>. Accessed 19 May 2018.

Edelstein David. "In Green Inferno, Eli Roth Honors the Cannibal-Gore Tradition with Bravura." *Vulture*. New York Media LLC, 25 Sept. 2015, [www.vulture.com/2015/09/movie-review-green-inferno-goes-for-the-kills.html](http://www.vulture.com/2015/09/movie-review-green-inferno-goes-for-the-kills.html). Accessed 22 July 2017.

Edelstein David. "Now Playing at Your Local Multiplex: Torture Porn. Why Has America Gone Nuts For Blood, Guts, and Sadism?" *New York Magazine*. New York Media LLC, 28 Jan. 2006, [nymag.com/movies/features/15622/](http://nymag.com/movies/features/15622/). Accessed 15 Mar. 2018.

"Eli Roth Explains 'The Green Inferno'—His New Cannibalistic Horror Movie." *Wired*. Conde Nast, 25 Sept. 2015, [www.wired.com/video/2015/09/eli-roth-explains-the-green-inferno-his-new-cannibalistic-horror-film/](http://www.wired.com/video/2015/09/eli-roth-explains-the-green-inferno-his-new-cannibalistic-horror-film/). Accessed 23 July 2017.

Finnegan, Amy C. "Beneath Kony 2012: Americans Aligning with Arms and Aiding Others." *Africa Today*, vol. 59, no. 3, 2013, pp. 137-62.

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (30th anniversary edition). Translated by Myra Bergman Ramos, 1970. Continuum, 2005.

Fuchs, Christian. *Culture and Economy in the Age of Social Media*. Taylor & Francis, 2015.

Gell, Aaron. "Eli Roth Faces Off With Tribal Rights Campaigners Over Cannibal Film." *Business Insider*. Business Insider Inc., 11 Aug. 2014, [www.businessinsider.com/eli-roth-cannibal-rainforest-controversy-2014-8](http://www.businessinsider.com/eli-roth-cannibal-rainforest-controversy-2014-8). Accessed 28 July 2017.

Gladwell, Malcolm. "Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted." *New Yorker*. Conde Nast, 4 Oct. 2010,

- <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/10/04/small-change-malcolm-gladwell>. Accessed 20 Feb. 2018.
- Greenberg, Harvey R. *The Movies On Your Mind*. Saturday Review Press, 1975.
- Green Inferno, The*. Directed by Eli Roth. Worldview Entertainment, 2013.
- Hayes, Britt. “‘The Green Inferno’ Review: A Proper Throwback to Cannibal Horror Films of the 1970s.” *ScreenCrush*. Townsquare Media Inc., 24 Sept. 2015, [screencrush.com/the-green-inferno-review/](http://screencrush.com/the-green-inferno-review/). Accessed 23 July 2017.
- Hills Have Eyes, The*. Directed by Wes Craven, Blood Relations Co, 1977.
- Hostel*. Directed by Eli Roth, Raw Nerve, 2005.
- Hostel: Part II*. Directed by Eli Roth, Raw Nerve, 2007.
- Human Centipede, The (First Sequence)*. Directed by Tom Six, Six Entertainment, 2009.
- Hyttén, Kathy, and John Warren. “Engaging Whiteness: How Racial Power Gets Reified in Education.” *Qualitative Studies In Education*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2003, pp. 65-89.
- Jones, Steve. “The Lexicon of Offense: The Meanings of Torture, Porn, and ‘Torture Porn.’” *Controversial Images: Media Representations on the Edge*, edited by Feona Attwood et al., Palgrave, 2012, pp. 186-200. Accessed 10 Aug. 2017 ([www.researchgate.net/publication/266393005](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/266393005), pp. 1-12.)
- Juzwiak, Rich. “‘Who Are We To Say That Cannibalism is Wrong?’: Eli Roth Savages ‘Social Justice Warriors’ in New Flick.” *Gawker*. Gawker Media Group, 24 Sept. 2015, [defamer.gawker.com/who-are-we-to-say-that-cannibalism-is-wrong-eli-rot-1732749802](http://defamer.gawker.com/who-are-we-to-say-that-cannibalism-is-wrong-eli-rot-1732749802). Accessed 21 July 2017.
- Kang, Inkoo. “‘The Green Inferno Review: Eli Roth’s Cannibal Horror Flick is Racially Reprehensible.’” *The Wrap*. The Wrap News Inc., 23 Sept. 2015, [www.thewrap.com/the-green-inferno-review-eli-roth-lorenza-izzo-sky-ferreira/](http://www.thewrap.com/the-green-inferno-review-eli-roth-lorenza-izzo-sky-ferreira/). Accessed 22 July 2017.
- Kaufman, David. “Change They Can’t Believe In: If They Really Want Progress, Social Justice Warriors Must Do the One Thing They Hate: Listen to the Other Side.” *New York Post*. NYP Holdings, Inc., 20 Nov. 2016,

- [www.pressreader.com/usa/new-york-post/20161120/282114931166930](http://www.pressreader.com/usa/new-york-post/20161120/282114931166930). Accessed 11 Aug. 2017.
- Kligler-Vilenchik, Neta, and Kjerstin Thorson. "Good Citizenship as a Frame Contest: Kony2012, Memes, and Critiques of the Networked Citizen." *New Media & Society*, vol. 18, no. 9, 2016, pp. 1993-2011.
- Land of the Dead*. Directed by George A. Romero, Atmosphere Entertainment, 2005.
- Lartey, Jamiles. "Billy Corgan Compares 'Social Justice Warriors' to the KKK." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media Limited, 20 April 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/apr/20/billy-corgan-compares-social-justice-warriors-kkk>. Accessed 23 July 2017.
- Levina, Marina, and Diem-My T. Bui, editors. "Introduction: Toward a Comprehensive Monster Theory in the 21st Century." *Monster Culture in the 21st Century*. Bloomsbury, 2013, pp.1-13.
- Linsky, Marty. "Occupy Wall Street is Going Nowhere Without Leadership." *CNN*. Turner Broadcasting System, Inc., 28 Oct. 2011, [www.cnn.com/2011/10/27/opinion/linsky-occupy-wall-street-leadership/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2011/10/27/opinion/linsky-occupy-wall-street-leadership/index.html). Accessed 11 Aug. 2017.
- Morozov, Evgeny. *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom*. New York: Public Affairs, 2011.
- Murray, Gabrielle. "Hostel II: Representations of the Body in Pain and the Cinema Experience in Torture-Porn." *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, no. 50, 2008, <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc50.2008/TortureHostel2/>. Accessed 16 Sept. 2018.
- Nelson, John S. "Horror Films Face Political Evils in Everyday Life." *Political Communication*, vol. 22, 2005, pp. 381-86.
- Night of the Living Dead*. Directed by George A. Romero, Image Ten, 1968.
- Ostroy, Andy. "The Failure of Occupy Wall Street." *Huffington Post*. Oath, Inc., 31 May 2012, [www.huffingtonpost.com/andy-ostroy/the-failure-of-occupy-wal\\_b\\_1558787.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/andy-ostroy/the-failure-of-occupy-wal_b_1558787.html). Accessed 12 Aug. 2017.

- Pallardy, Richard. "Because It Feels Good: Social Justice and the Politics of Shame." *Areo Magazine*. Areo Magazine, 2018, Apr. 3, <https://areomagazine.com/2018/04/03/because-it-feels-good-social-justice-and-the-politics-of-shame/>. Accessed 24 May 2018.
- Paz y Miño, Paul. "AIDSEP Rejects Hollywood's Stereotypes and Prejudices Against Isolated Indigenous Peoples." *Amazon Watch*. Amazon Watch, 5 Aug. 2015, [amazonwatch.org/news/2015/0805-aidesep-rejects-hollywoods-stereotypes-and-prejudices-against-isolated-indigenous-peoples](http://amazonwatch.org/news/2015/0805-aidesep-rejects-hollywoods-stereotypes-and-prejudices-against-isolated-indigenous-peoples). Accessed 26 July 2017.
- Pinedo, Isabel. "Recreational Terror: Postmodern Elements in the Contemporary Horror Film." *Journal of Film and Video*, vol. 48, no. 1/2, 1996, pp. 17-31.
- Rogin, Michael Paul. *Ronald Reagan, the Movie*. U of California P, 1987.
- Ryan, Michael, and Douglas Kellner. *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film*. Indiana UP, 1998.
- Schatz, Thomas. *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System*. Random House, 1981.
- Sharrett, Christopher. "The Problem of *Saw*: 'Torture Porn' and the Conservatism of Contemporary Horror Films." *Cineaste*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2009, pp. 32-37.
- Somashekhar, Sandhya. "Protestors Slam Oprah Over Comments That They Lack 'Leadership.'" *Washington Post*. WP Company LLC, 2 Jan. 2015, [www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2015/01/02/protesters-slam-oprah-over-comments-that-they-lack-leadership/?tid=a\\_inl&utm\\_term=.cc843d527436#comments](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2015/01/02/protesters-slam-oprah-over-comments-that-they-lack-leadership/?tid=a_inl&utm_term=.cc843d527436#comments). Accessed 13 Aug. 2017.
- Texas Chain Saw Massacre, The*. Directed by Tobe Hooper, Vortex, 1974.
- Tudor, Andrew. "Why Horror? The Peculiar Pleasures of a Popular Genre." *Cultural Studies*, vol. 11, no. 3, 1997, pp. 443-63.
- Turistas*. Directed by John Stockwell, 2929 Entertainment, 2006.
- Twitchell, James B. "'Frankenstein' and the Anatomy of Horror." *The Georgia Review*, vol. 37, no. 1, 1983, pp. 41-78.



- Vesco, Genesis. "Social Justice Warriors Are Ruining Social Media." *Odyssey*. Odyssey Media Group, 2017, July 17, <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/sjw-social-media>. Accessed 20 May 2018.
- Warren, John T., and Kathy Hytten. "The Faces of Whiteness: Pitfalls and the Critical Democrat." *Communication Education*, vol. 53, no. 4, 2004, pp. 321-39.
- Wester, Maisha. "Torture Porn and Uneasy Feminisms: Re-thinking (Wo)men in Eli Roth's *Hostel* films." *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, vol. 29, no. 5, 2012, pp. 387-400.
- Woerner, Meredith. "Eli Roth's 'Green Inferno' Devours the Internet's 'Social Justice Warriors.'" *Los Angeles Times*. Tronc, 9 July 2015, [www.latimes.com/entertainment/hero-complex/la-et-hc-eli-roth-green-inferno-sjw-20150709-story.html](http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/hero-complex/la-et-hc-eli-roth-green-inferno-sjw-20150709-story.html). Accessed 22 July 2017.
- Wolf Creek*. Directed by Greg McLean, 403 Productions, 2005.
- Young, Cathy. "The Pecking Disorder: Social Justice Warriors Gone Wild." *Observer*. Observer Media, 11 June 2015, [observer.com/2015/06/the-pecking-disorder-social-justice-warriors-gone-wild/](http://observer.com/2015/06/the-pecking-disorder-social-justice-warriors-gone-wild/). Accessed 14 Aug. 2017.
- Young, Cathy. "The Totalitarian Doctrine of 'Social Justice Warriors.'" *Observer*. Observer Media, 2 Feb. 2016, [observer.com/2016/02/the-totalitarian-doctrine-of-social-justice-warriors/](http://observer.com/2016/02/the-totalitarian-doctrine-of-social-justice-warriors/). Accessed 14 Aug. 2017.

# Something's Not Right: Monstrous Motherhood and Traumatic Survival in *Among the Sleep*

BIANCA BATTI

## Introduction: Defining the Gendered Labor of Motherhood and Mapping Monstrous Motherhood in *Among the Sleep*

Feminist scholars have consistently interrogated the historically fraught cultural contexts surrounding constructions of good and bad motherhood (i.e., O'Reilly; Roberts; Ruddick). A primary aspect of this context is the fact that these constructions of motherhood occur within the confines of patriarchy and patriarchal inscriptions of gendered familial labor, or what Adrienne Rich foundationally defines as “the power of the fathers” (57). Under patriarchy, the concepts of family, property, and ownership are inexorably linked, and Gerda Lerner explains that this “patriarchal family” (216) not only “mirrors the order in the state and educates its children to follow it, it also creates and constantly reinforces that order” (217). The mother, then, becomes a figure used to reinforce this order, and as Rich says, patriarchy needs “the mother to act as a conservative influence, imprinting future adults with patriarchal values” (61). As Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky point out, these gender norms become especially rigidly defined during the Victorian era, during which the “Victorian cult of ‘true womanhood’ defined women as pure, pious, domestic, and submissive” (7). Marilyn Francus argues that this ideology characterized “true” mothers as being “dutiful, religious, economical (but not parsimonious), modest, chaste, well behaved, charitable, and sensitive to the needs of others” (1), and this ideology celebrated women who upheld the ideology of the “true” mother and rendered monstrous those women who transgressed these norms.

However, the pure and pious social positioning of “true women” can be described as fragile indeed, for as Jane M. Ussher puts it, “[t]he pedestal is a precarious place to be: the woman positioned there has to remain perfect, in order to avoid falling into the position of monster incarnate” (3). Thus, when mothers fall from the “true” woman pedestal, they fall into the category of the “bad”

The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 6, No. 2 & 3  
Copyright © 2018

mother, a figure who often “serves as a scapegoat, a repository for social or physical ills that resist easy explanation or solution” (Ladd-Taylor and Umansky 22). In short, the bad mother is utilized as a scapegoat because she is an effective means of distracting from the underlying and more complex problems that reside in social structures and cultural norms—because it is easier to blame the mother and leave it at that than to challenge and change the structures that are predicated on these restrictive normative definitions of womanhood and motherhood. Paula Caplan calls for “a thorough understanding of mother-blaming” (128) because it is only through the careful interrogation of mother-blaming and bad mothers that an understanding of the patriarchal structures underpinning these constructs can be attained.

One way that bad mothers are often narratively represented is through the construct of the *monstrous* mother. As Francus puts it, narratives that represent monstrous motherhood “repeatedly express the cultural fear of maternal agency and authority, which competes with and more often overturns patriarchal power” (170). The perceived monstrosity of the maternal body is often framed in ambivalent ways because this body is “deemed dangerous and defiled, the myth of the monstrous feminine made flesh, yet also a body which provokes adoration and desire, enthrallment with the mysteries within” (Ussher 1). In all these ways, the maternal body is coded as a space of duality—a space that is both dangerous and desired, sacred and corrupt. Yet, it is important to note, the representation of monstrous mothers in horror does not provide insight into female identity but rather sheds light on the manner in which such identity is patriarchally inscribed through the perpetuation of domestic ideologies. When considering such ideologies, Francus explains that, historically, domestic ideologies have not been “uniformly enacted” (5), and yet scholarship on such social phenomena often nonetheless relies on “the archetype of the middle-class domestic woman...as cultural shorthand” (5). As such, as Francus shows, it is important to ensure that scholarship on “the ideology and practice of female domesticity” not be read as “uniform and universal” because patriarchal constructions of family and motherhood can shift depending on intersecting systems of oppression based on experiences like race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability (6). Classifications and narratives of monstrous motherhood must then be read through a more nuanced lens.

One text that provides a particularly generative framework through which to interrogate the complexities of narrative constructions of monstrous motherhood

is the video game *Among the Sleep* (Krillbite Studios, 2014). In *Among the Sleep*, a first-person survival horror game, audiences play the character of a toddler, who has just turned two years old and who lives alone with her mother. The game opens with a birthday celebration of sorts, a celebration in the kitchen between the mother and child, in which the child's mother, putting the finishing touches on a birthday cake, says, "Mommy just has to make sure that the cake is perfect." This celebration is interrupted by a knock on the door, and when the mother leaves to answer the door, players can hear raised, tense voices. The mother returns with a present, which is later revealed to be a teddy bear (one, named Teddy, that talks and accompanies the child on the adventures that later ensue), and takes the child to bed. The child then wakes up in the middle of the night to the house in disarray, and the mother is nowhere to be found. The child and Teddy must embark on a quest for the mother, one that is conveyed in surrealist tones and through nightmare-scapes of broken-down playgrounds and craggy haunted houses.

This quest for the mother takes unexpected narrative and ludic turns, which results in *Among the Sleep* being a game that represents motherhood, monstrosity, and childhood trauma in complex and interconnected ways. What is more, *Among the Sleep*'s location in both the medium of video games and the genre of horror allow for the examination of the ways such maternal representations converse with those occurring across mediums and forms. Representations of *monstrous* motherhood, in particular, occur in a variety of texts and scholars have consistently interrogated the socio-cultural implications and underpinnings of representations of monstrosity (i.e., Almond; Calafell). Such representations are particularly ripe for feminist analyses of motherhood, gendered labor, and patriarchal family structures. As such, the analysis of *Among the Sleep*'s representations of monstrous motherhood allow for the extension of such feminist scholarship, for such an interrogation can work to unpack the ways representations of monstrous motherhood both perpetuate and complicate hegemonic constructions of maternal roles and labor. More than this, *Among the Sleep* is a productive case study through which to consider video game culture's assumptions regarding motherhood and maternal labor, assumptions that are manifested across video game narratives. This network of maternal representation occurs across video game genres, styles, and spaces, and these video game narratives reify the embodied cultural contexts in which they are located. As such, a feminist intervention into *Among the Sleep*'s representation of monstrous motherhood as a case study for video game culture allows for a better

understanding of how the representations embedded within video games reify embodied cultural contexts to center patriarchal constructs of power.

In light of all this, my goal here is to examine the construction of monstrous motherhood in the game *Among the Sleep*. Through the analysis of both the game's mechanics and its narrativity, this paper will reveal the manner in which *Among the Sleep* perpetuates patriarchal definitions of motherhood and (ultimately) womanhood. In doing so, this paper will problematize not only the ways gender and motherhood are constructed in the game but also the ways gender and gender roles are socially constructed in broader systems of representation. Ultimately, my project is to examine *Among the Sleep* in order to enact an intervention into representations of monstrous motherhood in video games because I hope to interrogate the ways video games as a medium reify and complicate narrative constructions of maternal monstrosity. In other words, my project is to demonstrate the use of feminist game studies praxis as an active means of intervening into both video game culture and the narrative reification of gendered labor, family structures, and parenting roles this culture produces.

### Feminist Interventions: Complicating Video Game Narratives through Feminist Game Studies Praxis

The specifically *narrative* iteration of the monstrously constructed mother seems to occur especially frequently in the horror genre of film and literature (Clover; Creed), and such an exploration has extended into the realm of survival horror video games as well. Video games (like film and literature) tell stories, although, as Henry Jenkins posits, “[i]f some games tell stories, they are unlikely to tell them in the same ways that other media tell stories” (120). Interrogating the ways video games tell stories—and, in this case, ways they tell stories that depict monstrous mothers—can be helpful because, in the words of Janet Murray, “[t]he computer allows us to create objective correlatives for thinking about the many systems we participate in, observe, and imagine” (93). Murray argues that video games are a form of *simulation*, and these simulations of the life-systems in which we are embedded are thus “tools for thinking about the larger puzzles of our existence” (93). In other words, because video games simulate living systems, patterns, and existences, they allow players to actively participate in these simulated environments as well as in the representations they manipulate and the

stories they tell. As Adrienne Shaw posits, the examination of such representations in video games and the ways players actively engage with them is vital because “we must contextualize the sexism, racism, homophobia, and other biases of game culture within broader systems of oppression” (2). Such representations “are not unique to gaming” (2), so interrogating video game culture’s location in broader systems of oppression can be a meaningful way of unpacking the conversation between video games and other mediums and forms.

One of the reasons video games are a productive inroad into such conversations is because of some of the defining characteristics of video games and video game culture—characteristics that games scholars have consistently examined (i.e., Banks; Frasca; Juul). From Ian Bogost’s definition of video games as an “expressive medium” (vii) to Alexander Galloway’s examination of games as “material action” (2), from Janet Murray’s assertion that games are “a kind of abstract storytelling” (142) to Astrid Ensslin’s suggestion that “the creative interface” (1) of video games results in the recombination and reinvention of game and story—what many game studies scholars (i.e. Domsch; Koster; Sicart; Zimmerman) seem to be working toward is a way of complicating both our understanding of what video games *are* as well as the ways we might begin to study them, and they do so by blurring the game/story divide. In the preface to her 2005 Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) talk, Janet Murray discusses the “advent of electronic games as a new entertainment and art form” and the ways that perspectives on this advent as “an event divorced from cultural history” have impacted the study of video games. Murray explains that such perspectives contend that the “proper study of games is therefore an analysis of this unique formalism and a comparative study of particular games for their formal qualities.” In other words, many of those entrenched in the field of game studies, as Murray points out, believe that the “focus of such study should be on the rules of the game, not on the representational or mimetic elements” and are “opposed to and even offended by game criticism that makes connections between games and other cultural forms such as paintings, films, digital art, or storytelling.” The discussion of games formalism that Murray provides in her DiGRA talk highlights one of the central conversations occurring within the field of game studies—one in which game studies scholars interrogate what is needed in the study of games. What Murray highlights in her examination of games formalism, here, is the ways that certain modes of study, certain modes of knowledge production, become privileged in game studies, the ways that this privileging

works to separate games from other mediums or modes of study, and the ways this separation results in the erasure and silencing of other disciplinary means of engagement. As such, Murray's comments allow for an inroad into the need for feminist game studies—that is, the need for a mode of games criticism that can work to dismantle the hegemonic knowledge production of game studies formalism and that can create a more inclusive disciplinary space for additional voices in the field.

Feminist scholars in game studies work to create such inclusive disciplinary spaces and blur and disrupt divides in scholarship by interrogating representation and embodiment in video game culture (i.e., Consalvo; Huntemann; Gray). Feminist game studies praxis also makes use of intersectional feminist thought (i.e., Collins; Crenshaw; Lykke; Matsuda; Nakamura) in order to engage with the broader systems of oppression in which video game culture is embedded. Adrienne Shaw argues that such scholarship is needed to contextualize the “oppressive behavior within mainstream gamer cultures” (3). Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea Russworm contend that game studies “would prove itself dangerously out of touch if it did not attend meaningfully to representation in this moment when representation identity, and their intertwined relationship in games and game culture have become (or, rather, have been revealed as) such high-stakes matters.” Shaw argues for the contextualization of representational analysis because failing to do so by treating “representation in games as being just about games... fails to account for the ways in which violence against queers (homo- or bisexual or not), women (cisgendered or queer or not), and people of color (queer or not, cisgendered women or not) exists everywhere, in all media, and in all institutions of power” (3). Thus, the intersectional representational analysis of feminist game studies is needed in order to put video games and gaming culture in conversation with other mediums, forms, and spaces as a means of unsettling the network of oppression that marginalized groups and bodies systemically face in these spaces.

While the representational analysis of feminist game studies requires epistemological and methodological pluralism in order to disrupt video game culture's network of oppression, one methodological approach to such representational analysis is the implementation of a psychoanalytical framework. Feminist psychoanalysis, as a form of representational analysis, can allow for the examination of the ways video games reify and reinforce social systems based on gender inequality. In order to examine such systems, a feminist psychoanalytical

approach to video games should be applied to both game narratives *and* game mechanics in order to assess the ways video games visually and narratively represent these systems as well as the ways the game mechanics require players to actively participate in these systems as they play. By analyzing both game narratives and game mechanics from a feminist psychoanalytical perspective, psychoanalytical methodologies can interrogate video games in accordance with Murray's call to engage with games as simulations of the systems in which we live.

One such system that feminist psychoanalysis attends to in particularly generative ways is the system of the family and the ways patriarchal family structures reproduce heteronormative gender roles and gendered labor. To return to the concept of motherhood, feminist psychoanalysis allows for an understanding of the ways these patriarchal systems of familial and domestic power construct hegemonic definitions of good and bad mothering and especially interrogates the ways mother-blaming and scapegoating function (Stone). One of the psychological concepts that lends shape to the impact of the bad mother as scapegoat is that of abjection (i.e., Batti; Chanter; Monahan), a concept developed by Julia Kristeva (*Powers of Horror*). Imogen Tyler explains that Kristeva "develops the concept of the abject to describe and account for temporal and spatial disruptions within the life of the subject and in particular those moments when the subject experiences a frightening loss of distinction between themselves and objects/others" (79). Tyler also defines abjection as "a concept that describes the violent exclusionary forces operating within modern states: forces that strip people of their human dignity and reproduce them as dehumanized waste, the dregs and refuse of social life" (87). More than this, as Andrew Hock-soon Ng points out, Kristeva's theory of the abject designates "the maternal as the locus of abjection. This is primarily because the maternal confounds (b)orders by externalizing the internal, typified especially by child-bearing and menstruation" (11). This confounding of borders results in the idea that "Kristeva's abject body is fundamentally experiencing a loss, or a deconstruction, of reality. What replaces it is the Void, the origin of the monster" (11). Thus, maternal abjection (or the abject mother) means that "there are only two alternatives for the feminine other: she can either subscribe to the patriarchal order and repress her subjectivity, or challenge the order and risk being deemed transgressive, and marginalised" (12). In short, the psychological concept of the abject mother as a figure who transgresses and is cast out of the Symbolic order of the dominant (in this case,



patriarchal) ideology is a helpful framework through which to consider the ways mother-blaming and scapegoating function. That is, mothers are blamed for various social and physical woes, they are thus deemed transgressive and abject, and they are then cast out of the Symbolic order. The scapegoated mother, the bad mother, is thus an abject figure, and this understanding of maternal abjection provides an inroad into an understanding, too, of the ways this abjection constructs the bad mother as a *monstrous* one.

As such, I will incorporate feminist psychoanalytical representational analysis in my examination of *Among the Sleep* in order to demonstrate one of the ways feminist game studies research can be enacted. My hope is that, in doing so, this project will show that feminist game studies work interrogates the complexity of intersecting systems in order to actively dismantle patriarchal ones through the application of feminist praxis to the field of game studies. In this way, as Alex Layne and Samantha Blackmon put it, feminist game studies scholars have an active role in the ways games are constructed because “[a]s we play, read, interact, discuss, rant, narrate, research, and fictionalize, we change the narrative of the game...By becoming part of the discourse of gaming, feminist reads will be central to how everyone experiences the games themselves.” Feminist reads work as interventions into video game culture in order to make gaming spaces more inclusive by actively seeking to dismantle hegemonic thought in these spaces and by actively seeking to be “cognizant of the ideologies encoded into video games” (Shaw 226). In short, my efforts to engage with *Among the Sleep*’s representations of motherhood in this project function as a means of demonstrating how feminist praxis can be implemented in order to disrupt hegemonic modes of representation in video game culture.

### Banshees and Trench Coats: Interrogating Maternal Monstrosity in *Among the Sleep*

*Among the Sleep* is a game ripe for feminist theorizing because of the ways (to make use of Shaw’s phrasing) ideologies regarding motherhood are encoded into the game. That is, *Among the Sleep* requires the application of feminist game studies analysis because of the ways the game’s representations of motherhood—the true mother, the bad mother, the abject mother, the monstrous mother—are all bound up together and are all made central to the narrative and ludic stakes of the game. As mentioned previously, the protagonist of the game and the character

players inhabit is an unnamed toddler; the only other characters seen throughout the game are the child's newly gifted teddy bear named Teddy (an anthropomorphic character who speaks to the child throughout the game), the child's father (who is heard, but not seen, at the end of the game and whose role I will turn to later), and, centrally, the child's mother. For most of *Among the Sleep*, the mother seems to be framed as the prototypical "good" or "true" mother (albeit a single one). For instance, she is depicted as the kind of mother who bakes birthday cakes, sings lullabies, and kisses her child good night. Such depictions work to frame the mother as one who adheres to the norms of true motherhood. Her good mothering also seems to be predicated on the norms of white middle-class culture (she is a white woman living in a well-apportioned two-story home), and as Ladd-Taylor and Umansky point out, good motherhood is almost always conveyed as being "specific to middle-class culture" (8). When the child wakes in the middle of the night to find that the mother is gone, the sudden disappearance of this good mother renders her a helpless victim, one who needs to be saved at all costs.

The ways the anthropomorphized teddy bear, Teddy, refers to the mother throughout the game underscores her victimhood. When the toddler wakes up in the middle of the night, having unceremoniously tumbled out of an inexplicably overturned crib, she finds Teddy locked inside the washing machine; when she frees Teddy from this prison, he immediately says, "Something's not right, we need to find your mother." The player's objective is based entirely on this mindset—on the need to find the victimized mother who needs our help. Throughout the game, Teddy makes comments like "This place creeps me out. I hope your mother is okay," and "Your mother...She must be so worried about you. But don't be afraid. You and me, we'll work this all out—together. I know we will." Such utterances perpetuate the damsel-in-distress lens through which players view the mother; she will remain a helpless victim, a good mother worrying about her child until players (with the aid of Teddy) are able to find and save her. The entire framework and rule system of *Among the Sleep* is thus predicated on this representation of and reliance on the normative trope of the good, true mother. Teddy's role, in constantly remarking on the need for the child to find the mother, reinforces the damsel-in-distress lens of the game, which means that Teddy's role also reinforces the normative, patriarchal representations of good motherhood that are highlighted through this framework; this framework of good motherhood is also what deems the mother *worthy* of being saved, which

thereby provides players with a patriarchally-constructed justification for moving forward and engaging with *Among the Sleep*'s rule system. However, this framework also underscores the mother's *absence*—she needs to be saved because she is *not here*—thereby rendering the maternal body a site of loss, a Void, a space of *abjection*, which creates the unsettling feeling that all is not as it seems in this game.

Indeed, when players do find the mother at the end of the game, they come to realize that all is assuredly *not* as it seems, and the mother is not necessarily the helpless victim that she was initially made out to be. Rather, the mother is revealed to be an abusive alcoholic who has been the perpetrator of the violence that the toddler has endured throughout the game. At the end of the game, players see the mother, in a series of fragmented and surreal memories, drink from a bottle and slur, "Please, go somewhere else. I'll just...Just one more." During this series, the mother also stands ominously and monolithically over the child as she asserts, "He will not take you from me." In these moments, the mother's representation shifts—from that of the good mother to the bad mother. She is no longer the good mother who bakes cakes, doles out kisses, and sings lullabies; instead, she is revealed to be the bad mother who drinks too much and abuses her child. The mother's alcoholism and her abuse of the child function as representational shifts—they provide a narrative twist for the game's resolution. Because this is a *horror* game, this ending that relies on depictions of violent, bad motherhood is meant to horrify players. Because bad motherhood here is horrifying, it is also represented in monstrous ways. This monstrous representation of motherhood brings to mind Barbara Creed's famous discussion of the idea of "woman as monster" through her examination of the *monstrous-feminine*, a term that "emphasizes the importance of gender in the construction of [woman's] monstrosity" (3), especially in relation to "mothering and reproductive functions" (7). Creed explains that representations of maternal monstrosity are especially prevalent in the horror genre—something that is true as well for *Among the Sleep*. To be sure, the game's mother embodies the monstrous-feminine; she is a mother and a woman, yes, but one to be feared and one who instills horror. What makes the mother monstrous *is* her alcoholism, for her alcoholism is what causes her to act abusively toward her child. The mother's abusive alcoholism is what renders her the embodiment of the monstrous-feminine.

The game's depiction of this maternal monstrosity is reified and made tangible by the two monstrous figures that pursue the child throughout the game.

The game requires players to hide from these monstrous antagonists in order to prevent the child protagonist from being captured and injured. The first monster, a banshee-like figure clad in a torn and dirty nightgown, drinks from a bucket and shrieks as she chases after the child; what is more, if the banshee finds the child, she grabs her and violently shakes her. The second monster is a disembodied trench coat with glowing eyes that attacks the child every time the child knocks over a glass bottle. Both these monsters—through the banshee's constant drinking and the trench coat's sudden appearance at the sound of breaking glass—represent the mother's alcohol-induced violence. Such representations underscore the monstrosity of the mother's alcoholism, abusiveness, and bad motherhood. Such representations also render the mother abject in that these monsters represent the dehumanized nature of her violent transgressions; that is, the monstrous mother, here, is an *abject* one (one cast out of the Symbolic order) because her alcoholism manifests as the abuse of her child, and such behavior is unacceptable, appalling, and horrific. Here, the mother is abject because she is ultimately reduced to her alcoholism; her abusive alcoholism negates all other qualities of good mothering she exhibits at the beginning of the game because her unforgivable abusiveness diminishes all other acts. The mother's abusive alcoholism is the distillation of her monstrosity, and her immediate, unredeemable fall from grace is what renders her abject. She cannot be redeemed because she abuses her child and so she is cast out of the Symbolic order. The child, too, experiences her mother's abjection; as a witness to and victim of the mother's abject monstrosity, the child endures the trauma of her mother's abuse, and the shock of the traumatic experience results in a loss of reality for the child. This loss results in the symbolic collapse of the two distinct worlds the child inhabits—the real world and the dream world—into one surreal landscape, the hybridized, nightmarish gameworld populated by banshees and trench coats. As such, these monsters' representation of abject motherhood highlights the monstrosity of the abusive, alcoholic mother, as well as the trauma such monstrous motherhood can inflict on a child.

Because the game's protagonist is a baby and not an adult—that is, because the violence endured throughout the game is enacted on a child's body—the mother's bad mothering is especially abhorrent. Teddy, in fact, says, "I've never seen anything like it. A child shouldn't have to go through this." Such protestations underscore the fact that the mother's abusive actions are carried out against the especially vulnerable and fragile body of a two-year old, and this traumatic vulnerability renders the mother's monstrous violence especially

horrific and grotesque. As a result, the mother is no longer the helpless victim—the child is. This shift then renders the child protagonist the victim of the mother's monstrosity. This shift also seems to represent a slight shift in *Among the Sleep's* location in the survival horror game genre; as Irene Chien explains, "As the 'survival' tag suggests, an aggressive agency is involved in these games: the emphasis is not on the traumatizing dimensions of fear and violence, but on the hero's perseverance—and sheer brutality—in the face of relentless enemies and seemingly overwhelming odds." The perseverance of the child protagonist in *Among the Sleep* is indeed emphasized; however, because the protagonist in this game is a child and because the monster is her mother—and not, for instance, a horde of zombies to be slain—the traumatizing nature that the fear and violence enacted by the monstrous mother is also centralized. The violently traumatic mother/child relationship is the horror that the child must survive in this game.

However, it should also be said that the relationship between the mother and child in *Among the Sleep* is more complicated than that. Even though the game informs players that the mother has been acting violently toward the child for some time, the child, nonetheless, desires to seek her out and reunite with her. This idea of *returning*—returning to a relationship with the mother—seems especially relevant when thinking about the objectives laid out in the game. In order to find the mother, players are directed to navigate their way through a surreal nightmare-escape in order to collect "memories" of the mother, which take the shape of several objects, including the pendant of the necklace she wears, a stuffed pink elephant, a story book, and the music box she plays for the child before bed; upon locating the first memory (the pendant), Teddy posits, "Maybe, if we can find more memories like this, it might bring us to her!" The quest for such positively framed memories—pretty pendants and plush stuffed animals—reveals the fact that the child longs for the mother, but for a version of her mother that is founded on all the good memories she has of her. Such longing is even manifested in the game's environment, for in order to get to the next location, in order to get to the next memory, and in order to get one step closer to being reunited with the mother, the child must enter and slide through a tube in order to be transported—a tube that brings to mind the idea and imagery of the womb.

This womb-like imagery further reifies the abject nature of the monstrous-feminine in the game because the womb, as the site of reproduction, is thus the site of woman's generative power, and such womanly power is something that patriarchy seeks to control and constrain; patriarchy deems this reproductive

power fearful as a justification for seeking to control it, and so the generative power of the womb is constructed as monstrous. The power of the womb is thus the abject power of the monstrous-feminine, and the womb-like landscape of *Among the Sleep* makes tangible and visible the monstrous-feminine qualities of the abject mother. Because the child uses this tube to slide from memory to memory, regaining knowledge of her traumatic encounters with her mother, the symbolic act of sliding through the tube represents the child's return to her memory, something that results in the child's need to confront her traumatic past in order to move forward in the game. By confronting her traumatic past, the child must confront the terror of abjection, the terror of her mother—as represented by the abject tube-as-womb that the child must slide through in order to confront such things—and the space of the tube thus represents the traumatic journey the child faces in confronting abjection.

Even though the child longs to be reunited with her mother due to these positively-rendered memories, the environment of and other characters in the game seem to constantly work to help the child come to terms with her trauma and thus the fact that these memories might not be entirely reliable. Much of what Teddy says, for example, seems to be able to be read in multiple ways and seems to point to the potentially dangerous side of the mother. Early on in the game, when the child has just met Teddy (and before the mother goes missing), the baby and Teddy play together in her bedroom and explore a closet in the room; while in the darkened closet, Teddy says, "I think something's coming," immediately after which the mother opens the closet door, saying jovially, "You've got to stop hiding from mommy." Such an instance provides a moment of foreshadowing that ominously heralds the bad mother players see by the end of the game—something is coming, and it is the coming knowledge of the mother's transgressions. There is a similar duality in the mother's statement as well; "You've got to stop hiding from mommy" might also signal the onset of such knowledge, in that the child must stop rejecting (or hiding from) the truth of her trauma in order to begin the journey toward understanding and recovery. Such dual meaning is also pervasive in one of Teddy's statements referenced earlier: "Something's not right, we need to find your mother." While, on the surface, this statement may seem to signal that the mother is the victim of whatever it is that is not right, such a statement could also mean that the something that is not right *is* the mother. The duality of meaning, here, harkens back to some of the concepts discussed earlier regarding the manifestations of the monstrous mother in horror texts; these manifestations

are typically ambiguous and represent the maternal body as a space of duality—in other words, the monstrous mother is an ambiguous figure who is both a helpless victim and a powerful monster, a figure who is both sought after and rejected.

This is why the game's resolution is so important to note. At the very end of the game, the child finds her mother slumped on the kitchen floor next to an empty wine bottle and clutching Teddy (whose arm has been ripped off). When the child tries to take Teddy back, the mother pushes her away, shouting, "Stay away from me." The mother then begins to cry and mutters, "I'm sorry. I never meant to. It's too much." At this moment, players have the option to have the child comfort her mother by stroking her hair, which complicates the ways the mother is constructed; she is not a victim, she is not a monster—she is, ambiguously, both at the same time. Her maternal body is a space of ambiguity. However, this ambiguous maternal figure is one from which the child protagonist is ultimately retrieved, for after comforting the (piteously monstrous) mother, the child hears a knock at the front door. The door opens to a blinding whiteness, and players hear a man's voice say, "Hi there, little one! Come here. You'll be safe with me. Did you like your gift? What happened to his arm? Don't worry, we'll fix him up." This man would appear to be the child's father, who comes to save the child from the drunken abuse of the mother. He is someone with whom the child will be safe and someone who has the ability to fix things. In this way, the father is constructed as a savior in that he is the child's salvation from *Among the Sleep*'s monstrous motherhood. The game's motherhood then becomes constructed in opposition to its fatherhood.

### Conclusion: The Cultural Significance of Monstrous Motherhood in Video Games

*Among the Sleep*'s construction of motherhood as being in opposition with fatherhood is something that requires particularly careful consideration, for this representation of oppositionality reveals the game's assumptions about gender and parenting roles. The game's monstrous motherhood lends itself to the representation of traumatic renderings of abusive, alcoholic parents as well as representations of the acknowledgment and processing of childhood trauma experienced as a result of monstrous parenting. The surreal landscapes of the gameworld serves to underscore this traumatic memory and provide spaces in which such traumatic memory might be processed. Of course, monstrosity is not

the sole purview of mothers alone, and so *Among the Sleep* uses its representation of monstrous motherhood as a way to narratively convey the immense risk children face at the hands of abusive parents; the monsters in the game (that is, the banshee and the trench coat) are then utilized as stand-ins for the horror that results when violence is enacted against the exceedingly vulnerable bodies and psyches of children. The game's surreality, its horrific, dark, and nightmarish world, reifies this horror, violence, and trauma, and the rule system of the game makes it so that players passively explore the world, collecting memories as they go, only able to run and hide from the monsters in the game. This passivity is underscored by the father's role as savior and the fact that the father saves the toddler at the end of the game—that is, the child does not make the decision to leave the monstrous mother behind but has these choices made for her—by the father. In this way, the person given agency at the end of the game is not the child-protagonist (and not the monstrous, abject mother) but the *father*. Thus, the game's resolution underscores its patriarchal lens, for the father-as-salvation conclusion reifies the centering of patriarchy as a guiding, normalizing force for the toddler; that is, it recenters patriarchy as law.

This recentring of patriarchy also demonstrates the low stakes patriarchy sets for fatherly success. That is, all the father needs to do for the game to represent him as savior is give his child the gift of a teddy bear and appear at the front door at the end of the game. There is no indication, however, that the father participates in any other caregiving duties or supports the mother or his child in any substantive way. Indeed, there is no evidence that the father has any tangible or meaningful relationship with the child other than his brief appearance at the end of the game. Instead, the focal point through which players make meaning regarding the child's traumatic upbringing is the mother, a focal point that is patriarchal in construction in that it shifts the blame from the larger structure of patriarchy to the body of the mother, a shifting that thus retains patriarchy's centering as law. Further, patriarchy's centering as law means that the mother not only bears the onus of responsibility for blame but also bears the onus of responsibility for the child's parenting and caregiving. The father—the seemingly *absent* father—does not bear such a burden and so receives none of the blame. This is, to return to Adrienne Rich's phrasing, the power of the father; this is the law of patriarchy. The power of the father is the power of the dominant Symbolic order. It is the power of setting the rules of the system it seeks to control, and one of the ways that patriarchal rule is perpetuated is by shifting blame—that is,



shifting the blame *from* the patriarchal system that seeks to control and constrain and shifting the blame instead *onto* mothers who are overwhelmed by and unable to conform to such constraints. This mother-blaming results in the abject positioning of the monstrous mother, and this abjection is used as a way to obscure the ultimate social structure and Symbolic order that creates such problems; in other words, abjection is used to obscure the problems of patriarchy by placing the blame on the mother. In doing so, the power of the father goes on, untouched and unchallenged, in *Among the Sleep*.

Feminist game studies research, however, challenges such simulations and reproductions of power in its efforts to interrogate the ways bodies and selves are transmitted via the medium of games and the ways that games can work to reify cultural assumptions made about such bodies. This idea of the reification of embodied cultural contexts demonstrates the ways the representations embedded within video games shed light on the industry's cultural assumptions regarding motherhood, fatherhood, family structures, and the gendered labor associated with such roles. To be sure, the video game industry's relationship with motherhood is a particularly fraught one (Hepler), and the industry relies on gendered assumptions regarding labor (Cross). The industry's biases against and assumptions about mothers are built into the products game developers produce—namely, of course, the video games themselves. That is to say, the industry's patriarchal ideologies regarding maternal bodies and gendered parenting labor are structurally built into the narratives of video games, thereby impacting the ways mothers are represented in games. These representations thus perpetuate and reify some of the same assumptions regarding gendered labor that the gaming industry structures its culture around. As such, it is productive to interrogate such representations as emblematic of the culture of the gaming industry in order to more fully grapple with, as Elissa Shevinsky puts it, gaming's "gender problem" (9). In doing so, feminist game studies can better understand what it is up against, how to disrupt it, and how we might build feminist games instead.

This is where feminist game studies becomes helpful as a field that explores the complexity of representation in video games. Feminist game studies scholars have an active role in the ways games are constructed, and thus the representational analysis of feminist game studies allows researchers to participate in, problematize, and intervene in video game culture in ways that engage more thoughtfully with issues such as those examined here—that is, representations of monstrosity, parenting, and trauma in games. This examination

of monstrous motherhood in *Among the Sleep* has been meant to serve as a demonstration of the fact that feminist game studies is needed to dismantle and disrupt not only the problems of representation that occur within video game narratives but also the structures of power within the gaming industry. Feminist game studies is needed because it provides the intersectional strategies required to dismantle the hegemonic knowledge production that occurs in the field of game studies. In other words, feminist game studies is needed because it allows for the imagining of new possibilities for representation and new models of existence and futurity in game studies, in video game culture, and in the gaming community.

### Works Cited

- Almond, Barbara. *The Monster Within: The Hidden Side of Motherhood*. U of California P, 2010.
- Among the Sleep*. Krillbite Studios, 2014.
- Banks, Jaime. "Object, Me, Symbiote, Other: A Social Typology of Player-Avatar Relationships." *First Monday*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2015, doi:10.5210/fm.v20i2.5433. Accessed 9 Mar. 2018.
- Batti, Bianca. "Speaking from Beyond the Grave: Abjection and the Maternal Corpses of William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and Suzan-Lori Parks's *Getting Mother's Body*." *Absent Mothers*, edited by Frances Greenslade, Demeter Press, 2017.
- Bogost, Ian. *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*. MIT, 2007.
- Calafell, Bernadette Marie. *Monstrosity, Performance, and Race in Contemporary Culture*. Peter Lang, 2015.
- Caplan, Paula. "Mother-Blaming." "Bad" Mothers: *The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America*, edited by Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky. New York UP, 1998, pp. 127-44.

- Chanter, Tina. *The Picture of Abjection: Film, Fetish, and the Nature of Difference*. Indiana UP, 2008.
- Chien, Irene. "Playing Undead." *Film Quarterly*, vol. 61, no. 2, 2007, <https://filmquarterly.org/2007/12/01/playing-undead/>. Accessed 9 Mar. 2018.
- Clover, Carol J. *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. Princeton UP, 1992.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Routledge, 2000.
- Consalvo, Mia. "Confronting Toxic Gamer Culture: A Challenge for Feminist Game Studies Scholars." *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, no. 1, 2012, doi:10.7264/N33X84KH. Accessed 1 Dec. 2015.
- Creed, Barbara. *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. Routledge, 1993.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identify Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991, pp. 1241-99.
- Cross, Katherine. "Fictive Ethnicity and Nerds." Shevinsky, pp. 71-83.
- Domsch, Sebastian. *Storyplaying: Agency and Narrative in Video Games*. De Gruyter, 2013.
- Ensslin, Astrid. *Literary Gaming*. MIT, 2014.
- Francus, Marilyn. *Monstrous Motherhood: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Ideology of Domesticity*. Johns Hopkins UP, 2013.
- Frasca, Gonzalo. "Ludology Meets Narratology: Similitude and Difference Between (Video)Games and Narrative." *Ludology.org*, 1999. Accessed 17 Jun. 2016.
- Galloway, Alexander R. *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*. U of Minnesota P, 2006.

- Gray, Kishonna. *Race, Gender, and Deviance in Xbox Live: Theoretical Perspectives from the Virtual Margins*. Elsevier, 2014.
- Hepler, Jennifer Brandes. Ed. *Women in Game Development: Breaking the Glass Level-Cap*. CRC Press, 2017.
- Hock-soon Ng, Andrew. *Dimensions of Monstrosity in Contemporary Narratives: Theory, Psychoanalysis, Postmodernism*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
- Huntemann, Nina. "Introduction: Feminist Discourses in Games/Game Studies." *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, no. 2, 2013, doi:10.7264/N37D2S2F. Accessed 11 Dec. 2015.
- Jenkins, Henry. "Game Design as Narrative Architecture." Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan, pp. 118-30.
- Juul, Jesper. "Games Telling Stories? A Brief Note on Games and Narrative." *Game Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2001. Accessed 17 Jun. 2016.
- Koster, Raph. *A Theory of Fun for Game Design*. Paraglyph, 2005.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Columbia UP, 1982.
- Ladd-Taylor, Molly, and Lauri Umansky, editors. "*Bad*" Mothers: *The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America*. New York UP, 1998.
- Ladd-Taylor, Molly, and Lauri Umansky. "Introduction." "*Bad*" Mothers: *The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America*, edited by Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky. New York UP, 1998, pp. 1-28.
- Layne, Alex and Samantha Blackmon. "Self-Saving Princess: Feminism and Post-Play Narrative Modding." *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, no. 2, 2013, doi:10.7264/N3FT8HZ2. Accessed 11 Dec. 2015.
- Lerner, Gerda. *The Creation of Patriarchy*. Oxford, 1986.
- Lykke, Nina. *Feminist Studies: A Guide to Intersectional Theory, Methodology and Writing*. Routledge, 2010.

- Malkowski, Jennifer and Treaandrea Russworm. "Introduction: Identity, Representation, and Video Game Studies Beyond the Politics of the Image." *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*, edited by Jennifer Malkowski and Treaandrea Russworm, Indiana UP, 2017.
- Matsuda, Mari J. "Beside My Sister, Facing the Enemy: Legal Theory Out of Coalition." *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991, pp. 1183-92.
- Monahan, Torin. "Regulating Belonging: Surveillance, Inequality, and the Cultural Production of Abjection." *Journal of Cultural Economy*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2017, pp. 191-206.
- Murray, Janet H. *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. MIT, 1997.
- Murray, Janet H. "The Last Word on Ludology v Narratology." *Humanistic Design for an Emerging Medium*, delivered as a preface to keynote talk at DiGRA 2005, 17 Jun. 2005, <https://inventingthemedium.com/2013/06/28/the-last-word-on-ludology-v-narratology-2005/>.
- Nakamura, Lisa. *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*. U of Minnesota P, 2008.
- O'Reilly, Andrea. "Mothering against Motherhood and the Possibility of Empowered Maternity for Mothers and Their Children." *From Motherhood to Mothering: The Legacy of Adrienne Rich's Of Woman Born*, edited by Andrea O'Reilly, SUNY Press, 2004, pp. 159-74.
- Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born*. Bantam, 1976.
- Roberts, Dorothy. *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*. Vintage Books, 1997.
- Ruddick, Sara. "Maternal Thinking." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 6, 1980, pp. 70-96.
- Shaw, Adrienne. *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture*. U of Minnesota P, 2014.

Shevinsky, Elissa. "Introduction." *Lean Out: The Struggle for Gender Equality in Tech and Start-Up Culture*, edited by Elissa Shevinsky. OR Books, 2015, pp. 9-19.

Shevinsky, Elissa, editor. *Lean Out: The Struggle for Gender Equality in Tech and Start-Up Culture*. OR Books, 2015.

Sicart, Miguel. *Play Matters*. MIT, 2014.

Stone, Alison. *Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and Maternal Subjectivity*. Taylor & Francis, 2011.

Tyler, Imogen. "Against Abjection." *Feminist Theory*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2009, pp. 77-98.

Ussher, Jane M. *Managing the Monstrous Feminine: Regulating the Reproductive Body*. Routledge, 2006.

Wardrip-Fruin, Noah and Pat Harrigan, editors. *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*. MIT, 2004.

Zimmerman, Eric. "Narrative, Interactivity, Play, and Games: Four Naughty Concepts in Need of Discipline," *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance and Change*, edited by Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan, MIT, 2004, pp. 154-64.

## The Literary Zombie in Robin Becker's *Brains*: "How Pop Culture Illuminates and Comments on the Current Zombie Crisis"

T. MAY STONE

Popular attention to the zombie's rise through the twentieth and twenty-first century and scholarly explorations of the zombie as a fantastic figure tend to feature two questions: why zombies and why now? As to the latter, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's study *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* applies: "We live in a time of monsters," he writes in 1996 (vii). Summoning a montage of contemporary culture in the volume's preface, which he sums up as "a commentary upon fin de siècle America," Cohen describes an omnipresent anxiety endemic to postmodern American culture, which creates the impulse behind the late twentieth-century monster zeitgeist (viii). In his 2010 study of the zombie film genre, *American Zombie Gothic: The Rise and Fall (and Rise) of the Walking Dead in Popular Culture*, Kyle William Bishop compares the twenty-first-century zombie "renaissance" to the proliferation of zombie cinema in the wake of George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*. Just as Romero reinterpreted the Haitian zombie of the '30s and '40s, "zombie narratives have been reconditioned to satisfy a new aesthetic, but they have returned to prominence because the social and cultural conditions of a post-9/11 world have come to match so closely those experienced by viewers during the civil unrest of the 1960s and '70s" (Bishop 25). In a monstrous era, a time obsessed with monsters, the zombie in particular is "an embodiment of a certain cultural moment," in *Monster Theory*'s terms (Cohen 4). "American Monsters are born out of American history," cultural historian Scott W. Poole writes in *Monsters in America: Our Historical Obsession with the Hideous and the Haunting*; "they emerge out of the central anxieties and obsessions that have been part of the US from colonial times to the present" (4). But the figure of the zombie has only mounted the world stage relatively recently, out of the United States' occupation of Haiti early in the twentieth century, so it has been perfectly timed to become a monster emblematic

The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 6, No. 2 & 3  
Copyright © 2018

of twentieth- and twenty-first-century anxieties. Additionally, a zombie carries within itself a gap, like a slot waiting to be filled. This makes the figure of the zombie uniquely versatile as a symbol—the zombie’s presence is actually symbolic of absence.

The zombie’s core characteristic is absence, an intrinsic lack, which is concretized by death; what had once been a complete subject when alive has suffered a vital loss. The magic of the zombie—whatever the actual zombification mechanism—is that the absence continues to be present, signified in the literal form of the zombie. A zombie is a present absence. Throughout more than a century of every form of American culture—comics, movies, television shows, literature (prose, poetry, and drama), and even, in the early decades, radio programs—the zombie’s inner emptiness has persisted, arguably the figure’s defining characteristic. Discussing the monster’s varied genealogy in American popular culture, Kevin Boon notes, “zombies do all share a common characteristic: the absence of some metaphysical quality of their essential selves. This may be the soul, the mind, the will, or, in some cases, the personality. But every zombie experiences a loss of something essential that previous to zombification defined it as human” (“And the Dead” 7). Boon’s list of elements that zombies may lack in their various incarnations is not exhaustive, particularly as many zombie creators and critics understand some combination of those terms to be synonymous. Depictions of zombies frequently feature missing body parts, a physical signal that zombies are missing something intangible.

Since the beginning of the monster’s history—the original Haitian zombies—the zombie has participated in Cartesian dualism, a philosophical framework that envisions the human subject as a unity of two fundamental and fundamentally different essences: body and mind. The zombie’s outer rot, its visible deadness, signifies an internal disfigurement that is no less real for being less concrete. Characterizing the zombie as “an antisubject” in which “no trace of the individual remains,” Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry identify the double terror of the undead menace as that of being eaten and that of being assimilated. “Both of these fears,” they write, “reflect recognition of one’s own mortality and ultimately reveal the primal fear of losing the ‘self,’; however, in the figure of the zombie, the body and the mind are separated antinomies. The zombie is different from other monsters because the body is resurrected and retained: only consciousness is permanently lost” (Lauro and Embry 89). To use Jane Caputi’s characterization, many critics define the figure of the zombie as “a monstrosity of consciousness”



(103). In his essay “The Zombie as Barometer of Cultural Anxiety,” for example, Peter Dendle writes, “the essence of the ‘zombie’ at the most abstract level is supplanted, stolen, or effaced consciousness” (47). He explains,

zombification is the logical conclusion of human reductionism: it is to reduce a person to body, to reduce behavior to basic motor functions, and to reduce social utility to raw labour. Whether zombies are created by a vodun master or by a mad scientist, the process represents a psychic imperialism: the displacement of one person’s right to experience life, spirit, passion, autonomy, and creativity for another person’s exploitive gain. (Dendle 48)

Under Dendle’s analysis, ‘consciousness’ unfolds into a cache of qualities, or components: will, life, spirit, passion, autonomy, and creativity. Dendle’s usage demonstrates the ubiquity of ‘consciousness’ as a fuzzy umbrella-term for any number of abstract qualities; moreover, the quality of consciousness can be evoked by the introduction of these associated or subsidiary qualities.

Selfhood, one’s personal identity, has been closely bound to consciousness in the zombie’s formula since its origin in Haitian folklore. In its folkloric form, the zombie is bereft of its *ti bon ange*, or “little good angel,” which encompasses all that had made the former human an individual (Davis 219). This renders the zombie vulnerable to another’s coercion, since it has been left with no identity of its own, though it still retains the *gros bon ange*, the “big good angel,” which is one’s personal share of the greater life force (Davis 219). Certainly the literary zombie retains the link to anxieties about identity. “Ultimately, modern zombie stories reflect our fear of loss of identity,” Margo Collins and Elson Bond propose in “‘Off the page and into your brains!’: New Millennium Zombies and the Scourge of Hopeful Apocalypses” (204). ‘Identity’ is a concept that belongs to the self-consciousness, as Kevin Boon notes in “The Zombie as Other: Mortality and the Monstrous in the Post-Nuclear Age.” He summarizes, “the transformation that the mythological zombie came to represent” is “an absence of conscious self, a person for whom identity, self, personhood, and so on are absent from the body. In lacking consciousness, the zombie is incapable of examining self” (54). Like Dendle’s, Boon’s explanation of the zombie as a formulation of the human skirts the complexity of the immaterial human attributes that the consciousness exemplifies. Boon argues, “the zombie came to represent a loss of internal

reliability, a loss of being, which results in a human shell occupied by nothingness” (55). But the zombie’s internal loss doesn’t necessarily have to be total—the Haitian zombie, for instance, presents a division in one’s immaterial being: the *gros bon ange* that is retained and the *ti bon ange* that is lost. The zombie participates in Cartesian dualism only to disrupt its neat division. A “category crisis,” in the terms laid out in Cohen’s third “Monster Culture” thesis, the zombie “resists any classification built on hierarchy or a merely binary opposition, demanding instead a ‘system’ allowing polyphony” (Cohen 6-7). Both alive and dead, the zombie invites a renewed investigation of ontological paradigms. All monsters, Richard Kearney reminds us in *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters*, “subvert our established categories and challenge us to think again” and “threaten the known with the unknown” (3). In this way, the zombie is not just monstrous because it is incomplete, but also because its incompleteness challenges and discomforts our understanding of the human subject.

What if we have a zombie that retains self-consciousness, who could additionally process its experience and discuss it with us? Chera Kee thinks about such zombies in her study *Not Your Average Zombie*: “Is it still a zombie if it can articulate its feelings, if it isn’t powerless? My answer is yes.” Kee acknowledges the versatility of the zombie as a fantastic figure, one for which “there is no single canonical definition” and so can be repurposed symbolically. She defines a zombie broadly as “a body that appears functionally alive but that has lost those qualities that would otherwise make it human,” which is in “a state of liminality associated with—but not entirely dictated by—a loss of free will” (Kee 15). In a zombie such as Jack Barnes, the intelligent but definitely undead protagonist of Robin Becker’s novel *Brains: A Zombie Memoir*, the absence usually marking the loss of consciousness or personal will shifts, or is displaced. Since the nature of zombiehood is to be robbed of something intrinsic to one’s humanity—the essential quality that in Kee’s definition has been extinguished with life—if conscious identity is present, then something else (besides life, symbolized by life) is missing. The figure of the zombie is something of an unfinished formula, wherein the presence of an essential human element is indicated only by its absence in the performance of the subject, the performing zombie. This is why the figure of the zombie is so versatile as a fictional trope with which to explore the definition of humanity and the human consciousness. Indeed, the latter has been a familiar practice in cognitive philosophy for decades. In his introduction to ‘the

philosophical zombie,' Robert Kirk attests, "the idea of Zombies, fantastic as it is, has useful work to do" ("Sentience" 60).

Studies of consciousness adopted the zombie in the 1970s as a thought experiment intended to explore the possibility of the intangible half of the Cartesian duality. As Kirk explains in *Zombies and Consciousness*,

if zombies are so much as a bare possibility, the world is a very paradoxical place. That possibility doesn't just imply that there is more to us than the behavioural or other physical facts can provide for. It implies that our part of the world involves something non-physical, on top of the molecules, atoms, and subatomic particles that compose our bodies and those of other sentient creatures. If on the other hand zombies are not possible, then if we can make clear why that is so, we shall have solved the hardest part of the mind-body problem. (4)

The philosophical zombie first emerged as such in Kirk's 1974 article, "Sentience and Behaviour," in the form of Dan, whose excruciatingly slow zombification allows him to describe the process in terms of 'qualia,' cognitive science's term for the subjective essence of human experience (43-4). The salient point of the philosophical zombie is that it lacks qualia, although it is in every other way indistinguishable from humans. In "Sniffing the Camembert: On the Conceivability of Zombies," Allin Cottrell summarizes human philosophers' stake in the philosophical zombie as a thought experiment:

The 'real' issue concerns the status of qualia, that is, the subjective sensory states into which we are thrown when (say) looking at a yellow leaf, hearing a musical chord, sniffing a camembert, or running our fingers over a piece of sandpaper. Is it possible to provide a satisfactory account of such states using only the resources of a materialist functionalism? Or is it the case . . . that once we have said all there is to say about the physical basis of, and the functional role of, such states, there remains an uneliminable residue: the brute qualitative matter of 'what it is like' to sniff the camembert? (4-5)

Reviewed in this context, the use of the term 'consciousness' in Zombie Studies has been synonymous with 'qualia'; therein lies the overlap between the philosophical zombie and the monstrous zombie. Philosophical zombies embody

‘absent qualia,’ a feature Kirk first characterized as a mental state within which “all is silent and dark” (*Zombies* 3). The monstrous zombie in fiction likewise embodies absent qualia. In her discussion of zombies in *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds: Ways of Telling the Self*, Marina Warner notes the overlap, commenting, “‘absent qualia’ seems to me a good way of describing what used to be called spirit possession or soul theft, when the bundle of faculties that make a person recognizable—mind, volition, expressiveness, feelings—have been reduced, if not extinguished” (124). Borrowing Warner’s usage to apply to the phenomenon of the literary zombie, the singular form might be useful to describe the quality that Robin Becker’s *Brains* implies to be essential for the successful human formula: the ‘absent quale.’

As an empty subject, a subject that is no longer human because it has been emptied of some fundamentally human essence, or absent quale, the zombie’s presence paradoxically performs absence. Becker captures this quality in *Brains: A Zombie Memoir*, as two (living) witnesses to an apocalyptic plague of zombies discuss why death is so relatively normal, in the regular course of human affairs, despite its tragic and disruptive emotional consequences for those who survive:

“Death is not anything. Death is not . . .” Ros said.

“Life?”

“Death is the absence of a presence. But living death is . . .”

“The presence of absence?” (71)

Ros alludes to the traditional conception of death (pre-zombie), in which even the subject’s absence from the mortal coil continues his presence in the world—e. g. as a corpse, as an occupant of a grave-site, as a memory—continuing as an absent presence. In contrast, the zombie is literally present but figuratively absent, the putrefying-but-persistent presence of an essential absence (of life, at the very least). The zombie’s monstrosity is its present absence, the “third term” that Jeffrey Jerome Cohen describes as disrupting established categories (6).

In a 2010 interview, Robin Becker explains that her novel *Brains* developed out of this seminal idea: “Most zombie movies aren’t about zombies. They’re about humans.” Specifically, Becker’s realization concerns the humans who survive the zombie hoards, at least for the duration of the plotline, and whose

struggles drive the narrative. But Becker's own contribution to the zombie genre develops human interest in a more metaphysical direction. "What makes a person?" Becker writes, listing the questions that led her to write *Brains*. "Who deserves to 'live'? Is consciousness what makes us human?" (Scalzi). To ponder these questions, the novel's narrator is former English professor and postmodern pop culture scholar Jack Barnes, a kind of zombie sport who retains consciousness—and self-consciousness. "I am not your trained monkey," Jack wants to shout at his personal mad scientist, who created the zombie pandemic in an attempt to engineer super soldiers, "I am a PhD!" (Becker 174).

The novel is the record of Jack's posthumous experience. For instance, he transcribes a monologue by a radio DJ broadcasting music and philosophical musing to accompany the apocalypse: "Like it or not, those zombies are us, our true selves. The veil has been stripped away and underneath we are all cannibals" (104). He compares his recent experience to the classic '60s song "She's Not There" (sung by a group named The Zombies!): "I guess Meagan's not there either. And neither is her mother. I mean, they are in that they exist, sorta, but they're not really there. Like their minds aren't there. Just like the girl in the song" (75). The radio jockey's opinion echoes Jack's own in looking for consciousness to indicate authentic being. A human's unique personhood seems implicitly included in the always complex term 'consciousness,' as also in individuality, spiritual essence, or even reality. Both Jack and the DJ understand a zombie to be a human shell housing an essential absence of one or some combination of these qualities. Jack believes himself to be special because his consciousness has been spared in an apparent freak of genetics. But in terms of Jack's monstrosity, he is undeniably undead, so what absent *quale* does he perform?

Forever an academic, zombie Jack reflects, "in life, I would've written an article about the fool and his broadcast. Postapocalyptic stoned DJ waxes postmodern with songs that spit cynically in the face of his life-or-death situation. The title would be: 'The Living Death of Irony: How Pop Culture Illuminates and Comments on the Current Zombie Crisis'" (Becker 75). Jack's title could serve handily as the novel's own. In fact, *Brains* argues that pop culture has become the stuff of humanity. When Jack and his band of zombie followers encounter a roving detachment of soldiers for the first time, Jack tries to communicate with the humans. "Fighting for control" of his newly embraced desire to eat human brains, Jack believes, "this was my opportunity to show the real me, the man

beneath the animal” (46). He is unsuccessful. While there may be a man inside Jack’s human/animal body—Jack’s hierarchical privileging here of animal instinct above human consciousness is revealing—there is nonetheless no ‘real’ beneath Jack’s ‘me.’ There is only pop culture.

In Umberto Eco’s critique of American culture, “Travels in Hyperreality”—one of the academic sources that Jack explicitly cites (Becker 151)—Eco describes the process by which

the “completely real” becomes identified with the “completely fake.” Absolute unreality is offered as real presence. The aim . . . is to supply a “sign” that will then be forgotten as such: The sign aims to be the thing, to abolish the distinction of the reference, the mechanism of replacement. Not the image of the thing, but its plaster cast. Its double, in other words.

Is this the taste of America? (7)

Yes, replies Robin Becker’s zombie novel. Jack demonstrates the blurred lines marking the real from the hyperreal, noting how fake some elements of the real world are in his sensory perception. In one anecdote, a female zombie presses herself against his car window, and Jack comments, “She didn’t look real; she looked like someone dressed up for Halloween” (Becker 132). In a pop culture world, rife with mechanically reproduced zombie replicas and cosplay zombies, the real comes to resemble the fake instead of the other way around. In the next scene, one of Jack’s zombie companions grabs a victim’s heart from his chest, “which looked fake, like an anatomical gummi heart—gelatinous, chewy, and chock-full of high-fructose corn syrup” (141). At one point, Jack witnesses a sunset, but sees only an advertisement trope. Describing his group’s journey by boat, Jack oscillates between reporting the group’s actions and referencing their role models in pop culture:

Ros and I hauled anchor and the boat headed west with the wind, chasing the sun and the Joads and the stars in Hollywood. Our own Manifest Destiny. . . . The sun was setting, turning the shifting clouds orange. It looked unreal, like an orange juice commercial or a glossy ad for a subdivision built around golf. . . . Ros spread his arms apart. ‘I’m the king of the world!’ he yelled. We all got the reference. Titanic. Gigantic. The

future's so bright, we gotta eat brains. Over half-decayed and Ros was still a clever boy. Iceberg of America, here we come. (162-3)

The most natural detail of the scene Jack paints here, the sunset, is the least believable element to him. He even inadvertently denies his own authenticity by explicitly acknowledging two pop culture predecessors: the Joads, John Steinbeck's migrant American family in *Grapes of Wrath*, and the fictional hero of the 1997 film *Titanic* (also named Jack). The allusions reinforce each other: Though both book and film are set in moments of authentic American history, each feature the entirely invented subjects referenced in Jack's mention of the Joads and Ros's reenactment of the scene from *Titanic*.

Jack constantly refers to pop culture artifacts to explain and anticipate his zombie existence. "Shambling," he snorts,

that's what the deplorable Max Brooks calls our gait. His book *The Zombie Survival Guide* was once shelved in the humor section of your local bookstore. Now every redneck and zombie hunter from here to California has a copy in his glove compartment and uses it as an actual survival guide. Every word turned out to be true. How's that for postmodern irony.

We exist in a season born of pulp fiction and video games, B movies and comic books. The word made flesh wound. (Becker 38)

Later, Jack notes that there's a copy of Brooks's *Guide* on the dashboard of a vehicle he commandeers (131). Published in 2003, it was not widely popular until the 2006 debut of its sequel and then Hollywood movie *World War Z*. Zombies, remarks Poole, "perhaps more than any other monster . . . are 'made in America' as commodities for sale and distribution" (196). As Jack's constant allusions to the zombie's proliferation in pop culture reminds the reader, he has been a consumer of the zombie long before he becomes a distributor, in a sense, as he spreads the zombie virus.

Unavoidably, George Romero's seminal zombie film trilogy influences Jack's rendition of zombiehood. Cut loose from the social constraints of life, reveling in the liberty afforded him in death, Jack seeks human prey. About his prospective hunting ground, he speculates, "Wal-Mart or the mall?" explaining,

that's the brilliance of *Dawn of the Dead*, the second movie in Romero's trilogy ... the accumulation of material goods is a panacea, a substitute—it can never fill the void at our spiritual center. *It can never acquire the depth of real meaning.* It keeps us tethered to the material world, with zombies clawing at the double doors, greedy for more. And zombies are never satisfied. (my emphasis, Becker 83)

Jack switches in this reflection from the human condition (seeking fulfillment in consumerism) to describing the zombie condition (“never satisfied”), making an implicit comparison between the living and the dead. Describing living humanity while enacting a hollow simulacrum of humanity as a zombie, Jack diagnoses the postmodern human condition as one fettered to a phenomenologically tangible existence. He acknowledges that the circulation of pop culture inevitably and inextricably influences all. Although in Jack's metaphor from *Dawn of the Dead* one is merely trapped with the zombies, the total novel suggests that to be human in the postmodern era is to be saturated and even determined by popular culture, which is to be zombie. Saturation in pop culture results in a kind of monstrous group consciousness in which all humans participate. In other words, pop culture is the human version of the Romero zombies' hive consciousness.

Even the most elite (or pretentious) of social strata is not excluded from the masses; the academic canon is the Ivory Tower's popular culture. As Jack prepares to take his family underwater to preserve them for the duration of winter, he plagiarizes T. S. Eliot's “Prufrock,” wondering, “when frozen, would we be comatose or conscious? A patient etherized upon a table” (135). Jack also frequently appropriates the words of his favorite author, Walt Whitman, before and after death (“I wonder what Walt would've thought of the living dead,” Jack's wife asks him after he's been bitten and infected with the zombie virus. He replies, “He'd drink the tasteless water of their souls”) (8). Jack plans to write an undead manifesto to present to the leaders of the human free world, reasoning that “with my background and knowledge, I would write an argument as persuasive and historic as ‘Letter from a Birmingham Jail’ or the ‘Declaration of the Rights of Man’” (78), which he would boldly title “A Vindication of the Rights of the Post-Living” (172). He delusionally projects that his posthumous writings will be “as revolutionary as the Magna Carta, the Treaty of Versailles, and *The Feminine Mystique*. The Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights” (167), demanding “life, liberty, and the pursuit of brains” (178). What Jack fails to



anticipate is that his document would evidently be a pastiche of all these sources. As his constant allusions suggest, Jack remains aware of the original sources for the items he appropriates. For example, he lectures fellow zombies on “‘bird’ as a symbol of freedom . . . a preverbal Jungian archetype; it’s ingrained in human consciousness,” he says (61). Jack is unable to generate truly authentic output because he is so stuffed full of allusions. At a later point in his narrative Jack forlornly notes, “only the birds remained, flying out of reach” (113); since Jack certainly has a firm handle on symbolism, perhaps the birds in the latter instance represent the zombies’ and the humans’ inability to reach an authenticity that has eluded both.

Despite his stereotypical pretensions, Jack has always been deeply invested in pop culture. In life, Jack recalls, “I believed that anything with mass appeal was inherently bad, not only [Stephen] King, but Michael Jackson, Harry Potter, and the Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders. In my view, popularity proved inferiority, not worth.” Jack claims that in his zombie state he “had become mainstream, a plebian, the lowest common denominator, and I didn’t care. In fact, it was liberating” (131). Despite his protestations, Jack’s lifetime saturation in popular culture totally frames his experience, in life and in death. Before hungry hoards of zombies breach Jack’s home, his wife reminds him to aim for the monsters’ brainstems, and Jack snaps, “you think I don’t know that? It’s a trope of the genre” (4). In her interview, Becker explains, “I decided that the characters would be aware of zombie mythology. They’ve all seen the movies, and most have read the *Zombie Survival Guide*. In fact, the characters in *Brains* comment on the amazing fact that everything in the movies turns out to be true” (Scalzi). Another way to say this is that cultural archetypes, rather than his authentic experience, generate what Jack experiences as ‘truth.’ Certainly, cultural symbolism persists in both Jack’s conscious reflection and, the text suggests, in his unconscious. Relating his hallucinatory near-death experience, Jack recalls,

the guy from Munch’s *The Scream* was there with his hands on the sides of his face. A child tattooed with the mark of the beast morphed into a stampede of wild horses running away from a gothic mansion that morphed into a laughing fat lady in pearls. The typical horror-movie shtick. Cliché, but true.

And then I was reborn. . . .

Not just zombie but archetype. (Becker 36)

As Becker points out in her interview, her characters remark that what they've seen in pop culture turns out to be archetypally representative of reality—something reinforced by Jack's habit of citing his sources throughout his narrative as “bad movies with cheesy voice-overs,” and “any cliché you can think of . . . every disaster movie or thriller, every horror and slasher flick” (62; 148).

Jack is emblematic of the late stages of an American condition. In a 1943 editorial section of the *Saturday Review*, entitled “The American Folly,” Norman Cousins observed, “there is something curiously paradoxical today in the changed relationship between the book and film world and the everyday world in which Americans live. Once—and not many years ago at that—many of us picked up a book or went to the movies for an hour or two of escape.” But America's folly, according to Cousins, is an obsession with representations of reality that have come to seem to American audiences more vivid and desirable than everyday life. On one hand, Cousins's comments can be construed as a back-handed compliment to American fiction, which lifts the reader “out of the fantastic and unreal world that is America today” and then elevates him or her into a fictional “world of substance and reality” (Cousins 91). The other hand points to what postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard describes as “a world completely catalogued and analyzed, then *artificially resurrected under the auspices of the real*, in a world of simulation, of the hallucination of truth, of the blackmail of the real” (original emphasis, 8). Baudrillard's term “catalogued” recalls Walt Whitman's famous catalogues in *Leaves of Grass*, which Jack Barnes emulates. Cousins creates his own pop culture catalogue in his prescient critique of what theorists now call the globalization of American mass culture in postwar Japan: “Young girls wore tight sweaters, short skirts, and American-style shoes. They chewed gum, went dancing, liked hot music, preferred American movies and Japanese vaudeville to the traditional Kabuki theater. . . . Gum, jive, jazz, tight sweaters, padded bras, yo-yos, comic books, neon lights, dance halls, and chromium trim . . .” (170-1). Cousins goes on to note that freedom to embrace cultural diversity is a fundamental national tenet, but his editorial as a whole emphasizes the troubling aspects of the mass-produced cultural conformity America exports on an international scale. In Baudrillardian terminology, Cousins documents the dawn of the current “world of simulation” (Baudrillard 19). Examining zombie narratives from the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the

twenty-first in his chapter “Torturers, Terrorists, and Zombies: The Products of Monstrous Societies,” Stephen T. Asma discusses an Islamic-fundamentalist conception of America’s cultural tyranny, the idea of Americans as “consumerist zombies” spreading the contamination of soulless consumerism. Asma remarks, “Some fundamentalist Muslims conceive of average Americans as docile cogs in a monstrous secular machine that seems to be grinding forward to subdue every corner of the globe” (241). By the turn of the twenty-first century, America is mired in what Baudrillard describes as “the vicious circle of its irresponsibility and of its fundamental nonexistence, of its already seen and of its already dead” (Baudrillard 19). The world of substance and reality that Norman Cousins describes (or imagines) in American literature no longer exists, in Baudrillard’s estimation, by the end of the twentieth century. Nor does it exist in Becker’s *Zombie Memoir*. Before dying, Jack was already zombified, mired in an unending and unavoidable circulation of zombified culture.

The undead figure of the zombie embodies absent qualia so well because death traditionally robs its victim of a (literally) vital component. Jack assumes that that component is consciousness, looking for signs of mental processes in the decaying eyeballs of his prospective companions: “Some of the more aware zombies appeared to understand that our gestures meant liberty and escape. A dim light shone in their eyes. Others were so far gone, it was useless. Probably dullards as humans as well, they were now catatonic brain-eating machines with no semblance of their former selves” (Becker 61). With his cognitive function somehow spared by death and the zombie virus, Jack initially resists being subsumed in the brute instinct that is all that remains of his fellow zombies. “Trying to ignore the call of the wild” (149), as Jack once refers to his new desire for consuming flesh, Jack reminds himself: “Self-control. Mindful restraint. Denying my instincts, displaying the discipline of an ascetic monk” (26). It is “triumph-of-the-will time,” Jack cheers himself. “Mind over matter. Brain over brains” (125). Death’s enforced disconnection between the body and the soul, and the zombie’s physical awkwardness, suggests that the soul drives the body like a human pilots a vehicle. When there is interference between the control and the engine, side effects such as shambling necessarily ensue.

Jack makes clear his frustration with his deteriorating condition. While seeking her zombie-version replacement, Jack reflects on his wife, “I’m glad I ate Lucy. I’d hate to see her dulled, reduced to an object, a thing. A rabid automaton” (52). If death can be understood to reduce a person to an object, then Jack is

simultaneously object and subject, since he's retained his consciousness. Jack complains, "I was stuck in a body that would not obey me. A stroke victim, I was locked in. A rotting portable prison. A walking putrefying metaphor. I, Robot. I, Zombie" (24). These lines suggest that zombies and humans both navigate an inherent divide between their bodies and their minds/spirits/souls, so that zombiehood as a literary trope is an exaggeration and exacerbation of the human condition. In his own words, Jack is "a walking putrefying metaphor" for humanity. And he is an incarnation of the terms Cohen lays out in his first thesis of monstrosity: "Like a letter on a page, the monster signifies something other than itself"; "the monstrous body is pure culture" (4).

Jack and the rest of Becker's zombies reflect postmodern humanity's own absent quale; they are a judgment of a lack in postmodern American culture. In his cultural critique of American monsters, Scott Poole notes, "undead revenants from popular culture rather than monsters of folk belief, the zombie symbolizes for many Americans the current state of their own society or its eventual destruction" (216). In *Brains*, the state of postmodern American society is the aftermath of its destruction, an illustration of its fatal loss of authentic reality as it is subsumed in an unending swirl of self-referential popular culture. At times Jack seems to suspect that there is a crucial lack in himself ("bear in mind, this is a zombie talking—a supernatural being. What do I know? I might not even be real. Oh, ontology"), but he is unable to recognize it because the absence is of a quality that he lacked also in life (Becker 36). Metaphorically speaking, neither Jack nor his zombie compatriots are at all real, alienated as they are from authentically experienced reality not just by death but by the countless layers of simulacra and simulations that comprise contemporary mass culture (Baudrillard 1). Jack's disingenuousness points to his lack of genuineness, as in his spurious lament: "We were in uncharted territory, and without certainties, without a map . . ." (Becker 100). In truth, he inhabits a kind of full-scale pop culture representation of the American landscape. Robin Becker, and/or Jack Barnes's subconscious, may be thinking of Umberto Eco's satirical essay, "On the Impossibility of Drawing a Map of the Empire on a Scale of 1 to 1." In that context, we might say that mankind has indulged in creating a popular culture map of America on a 1:1 scale. This metaphor has the added serendipity of embodying the reason the map has become, in Baudrillard's phrase, "the desert of the real itself": There is simply no more room for more reality to take the place of the existing hyperreality (1).

“The real” has long since devolved into recirculated simulations, Jean Baudrillard postulates in “The Precession of Simulacra,” resulting in “the characteristic hysteria of our times: that of the production and reproduction of the real. What every society looks for in continuing to produce, and to over-produce, is to restore the real that escapes it” (23). Former English professor Jack Barnes is doubtless aware of Baudrillard’s work. He alludes to it when he imagines a moment with his zombie family as a potential beginning of the “birth of the real.” “We could have been a group of actors pretending to be a normal American family on vacation,” he comments. Significantly, Jack’s first thought is for the simulation, imagining a tableau of a postmodern family the type of which populates the landscape of Eco’s “Travels in Hyperreality.” Jack continues, “. . . or we could have actually been that family, no more simulations or acting, no layers of meaning and artifice sprinkled with postmodern allusion. The birth of the real” (Becker 151). It is unlikely, considering that Jack continues even through the final chapter of his memoir to filter humans, zombies, and his surroundings through a densely layered pop-culture lens. “Oh, gotta love those allusions,” he quips (72). And he does, indulging in a kind of conspicuous consumption of cultural symbols. The child-zombie that Jack affectionately names Guts effectively catfishes victims for the group because “his layers of reality were believable and complex—he ‘acted’ more zombielike than he actually was” (63). How Jack can fathom the true nature of Guts, despite the entirely fictional persona Jack has invented for the miniature zombie, is a puzzle. Crucially, Jack does not perceive these and other obvious inconsistencies. His inability to be real, in Baudrillard’s sense of the term, blinds him to his own condition of simulation-laden unreality; part of the condition is to not notice the condition. Although the professor of postmodern irony himself remains unaware, his audience is invited to see Jack more clearly through his self-reflective narrative.

Jack amply demonstrates his reliance on the “precession of simulacra” (Baudrillard 1). He interprets himself and others through pop-culture-tinted glasses, perceiving Guts as “every black street urchin in every TV show, from Buckwheat to Arnold.” In a brief moment of perspicacity, Jack notes, “of course, for all I knew he was more middle-class *Cosby* than ghetto *Good Times* in ‘real’ life, but he can’t contradict me. And I’m the one writing history” (Becker 59). Note that Jack qualifies the term “‘real’ life” with quotation marks, a subtle acknowledgment of the simulation of life inherent to his undead state. In another situation, a couple of elderly human prey “were poster children for the old and

fearful. A commercial for Celebrex” (85). Annalee Newitz, in her 2006 study *Pretend We’re Dead: Capitalist Monsters in American Pop Culture*, devotes a chapter to analysis of late-twentieth-century films that illustrate “monsters in the culture machine” (153). Featuring bad guys using mass media as a tool of mass control, like *The Matrix*’s Agent Smith or *The Terminator*’s Skynet, in these narratives “the media is both a monstrosity and a manufacturer of monsters,” having “the potential to drain individuals of their subjectivity and replace it with fabricated desires, hopes, and fears” (Newitz 152; 163). The American culture in *Brains* continues the legacy of these narratives, but focuses on the aftermath of mass-reproduced culture and its victims.

Before he learns to hunt, Jack’s remaining consciousness (and self-consciousness) threatens to be a hindrance in his zombie existence. Absurdly, Jack feels uncertain about how to go about the business of being undead. But because the compulsion to feed draws Jack to his human prey, he mentally invokes a monstrous cultural ancestry for emotional support: “I felt a line of monsters behind me as I advanced on Dr. Welk,” he rejoices. “My ancestors: Count Dracula, the Wolfman, Jason Voorhees, Michael Myers, Freddy Krueger, the Red Death in his mask and vestments. Every party has a pooper; that’s why we invited the Boogeyman” (Becker 20). Gaining his stride as a cannibalistic monster, Jack pays homage to his predecessors. He inserts a movie monster into the standard cartoon depiction of an angel on one shoulder and a demon on the other: “Jason on my shoulder was better than an angel. A monster on a monster, the hockey mask confirmed that our historical moment was unprecedented; Legend had become reality, fiction was finally fact.” He observes that zombies, “like Jason Voorhees . . . rise from the dead” (57). The hockey mask that Jack mentions, taped on to protect his shoulder, appears to him as a sign pointing him back to pop culture. Given Jack’s particular background expertise in popular culture as a professor, it might seem strange that he is momentarily at a loss to access its guiding templates when he is remade by the zombie virus into a monster, but the lapse calls attention to the action of referring to simulacra and simulations for behavioral models. “Oh, the signs that delineate our decades!” Jack exclaims. “Our cultural symbols and codes: . . . pop culture and fashion, the British Romantics and deconstruction—it was all I had in life and I clung to it like religion. It used to be enough, but it meant nothing to me now. Dust in the wind. Like Charlie Manson said: Now is the only thing that’s real” (96). Jack is clearly mistaken about his rejection of human culture, as his enumeration of the annals of

monsterhood demonstrates, and he has that last thought turned around—‘the real’ is the *quale* that is fatally absent in ‘the now.’

If zombies can no longer produce or recognize authentic reality, neither can the humans, even before the apocalypse. The presence of the zombies is not the cause but the reification of the loss of the real. As Jack proclaims in his manifesto, which he apparently intends more for a human audience than an undead readership, “we exist in a season born of pulp fiction and video games, B movies and comic books” (38). The ambiguous pronoun “we” implies a universal state encompassing both humans and zombies. While touring his human abode for a last time, Jack describes his wedding photo of “Lucy smearing cake on my face. It’s a scene replayed at a million wedding receptions: The bride shoving frosting at the groom, intentionally missing his mouth, her own mouth opened wide with laughter. The ritual is simultaneously playful and sadistic, combining food and sex, dominance and submission, consumption and power” (14). It is also apparently a persistent and ingrained behavioral meme, a ritual that summons subjects to enact itself over and over again. Jack makes a similar comment about one of his acts of zombie carnage, remarking to his projected audience, “you’ve seen this scene in a million movies” (160). If the Celebrix couple is an example of human behavior during the apocalypse, the living too are still relying on media culture to guide them. Their granddaughter reassures her elders, “the guy on the radio said this is the place and this is the way to get in. They’ll help us, you’ll see. It’s all good” (85). As in this example, it seems that the byproducts of such widely disseminated cultural memes, like stereotypes, are still reliable. When one of the commandos who briefly captures the zombies tells his compatriot that he’s been hunting the undead longer than the younger soldier has been alive (another cliché), the latter points out that this is impossible, given the recency of the zombie outbreak. The commando retorts, “if not zombies per se, the gooks, A-rabs. Same difference. Enemies. Insurgents” (67). The human population, post apocalypse, adheres to established patterns. *Brains*’s zombie hero reappropriates the same patterns, and much of the cultural content. All that is left is the layering of popular culture disguising a central absence of authentic reality.

In many ways, Baudrillard’s diagnosis of the postmodern condition in “The Precession of Simulacra” already reads like a zombie narrative: the proliferation of reproductions overwhelms the genuine like a zombie hoard devouring the remaining human population. According to Baudrillard,

the era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials—worse: with their artificial resurrection in the system of signs, a material more malleable than meaning . . . never again will the real have the chance to produce itself—such is the vital function of the model in a system of death, or rather of anticipated resurrection, that no longer even gives the event of death a chance. (2)

In *Brains*, Robin Becker might as well have set out to literalize Baudrillard's figures of speech. When Jack Barnes dies, he devolves from a professor of pop culture to become pop culture itself. Possibly the distinction has never existed, since as a professor of popular culture Jack has always perpetuated the culture's system of signs.

As sterile shells of their former human selves, lacking the vital *quale* Baudrillard would term the real, zombies cannot generate new material. Jack explicitly confirms this as he watches a burning building:

“any undead in there are toast,” Ros said.

It was just as well. What would they have done? Build cities? Design furniture? Form governments? Make pottery? Zombies are not creators. . . .

Like a Venus flytrap, just give us meat and more meat.  
Feed me, Seymour! (143)

American pop culture will obey, will continue to feed the zombie hoard, continue to replicate monstrous images of itself. But the proliferation of the literary zombie does not have to be sterile; as an embodiment of a present absence, a signification of an absent *quale*, the zombie can accept any number of meanings. It is insatiable.

## Works Cited

Asma, Stephen T. *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears*. Oxford UP, 2009.



Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser, 14<sup>th</sup> Printing ed., U of Michigan P, 1994.

Becker, Robin. *Brains: A Zombie Memoir*. Eos, 2010.

Bishop, Kyle William, and Angela Tenga. "Introduction." *The Written Dead: Essays on the Literary Zombie*. Edited by Kyle William Bishop and Angela Tenga, McFarland, 2017, pp. 2-13.

Bishop, Kyle William. *American Zombie Gothic: The Rise and Fall (and Rise) of the Walking Dead in Popular Culture*. McFarland and Co, 2010.

Boon, Kevin Alexander. "And the Dead Shall Rise." Christie and Lauro, pp. 5-8.

Boon, Kevin Alexander. "The Zombie as Other: Mortality and the Monstrous in the Post-Nuclear Age." Christie and Lauro, pp. 50-60.

Caputi, Jane. "Films of the Nuclear Age." *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, vol. 16, 1988, pp. 100-107.

Christie, Deborah, and Sarah Juliet Lauro, editors. *Better Off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human*. Fordham UP, 2011.

Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome, editor. *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*. U of Minnesota P, 1996.

Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)." Cohen, pp. 4-20.

Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome, "Preface." Cohen, pp. vii-xiii.

Cottrell, Allin. "Sniffing the Camembert: On the Conceivability of Zombies." *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1999, pp. 4-12.

Cousins, Norman. *Present Tense: An American Editor's Odyssey*. McGraw-Hill, 1967.

Davis, Wade. *The Serpent and the Rainbow*. Warner Books, 1987.

- Dendle, Peter. "The Zombie as Barometer of Cultural Anxiety." *Monsters and the Monstrous: Myths and Metaphors of Enduring Evil*. Edited by Niall Scott, Rodopi, 2007, pp. 45–57.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Johns Hopkins UP, 2016.
- Eco, Umberto. "On the Impossibility of Drawing a Map of the Empire on a Scale of 1 to 1." *How to Travel with a Salmon and Other Essays*. Edited by Umberto Eco, translated by William Weaver, Harcourt, 1994, pp. 95-106.
- Eco, Umberto. "Travels in Hyperreality." *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays*. Edited by Umberto Eco, translated by William Weaver, Harcourt, 1990, pp. 1-58.
- Kearney, Richard. *Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness*. Routledge, 2002.
- Kee, Chera. *Not Your Average Zombie: Rehumanizing the Undead from Voodoo to Zombie Walks*. U of Texas P, 2017.
- Kirk, Robert. "Sentience and Behaviour." *Mind*, vol. 83, no. 329, 1974, pp. 43-60.
- Kirk, Robert. *Zombies and Consciousness*. Clarendon Press, 2008.
- Lauro, Sarah Juliet and Karen Embry. "A Zombie Manifesto: The Nonhuman Condition in the Era of Advanced Capitalism." *boundary 2*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2008, pp. 85-108.
- Newitz, Annalee. *Pretend We're Dead: Capitalist Monsters in American Pop Culture*. Duke UP Books, 2006.
- Poole, W. Scott. *Monsters in America: Our Historical Obsession with the Hideous and the Haunting*. Baylor UP, 2011.
- Scalzi, John. "The Big Idea: Robin Becker." *Whatever*, 26 May 2010, <https://whatever.scalzi.com/2010/05/26/the-big-idea-robin-becker/>. Accessed 15 Nov. 2017.

Warner, Marina. *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds: Ways of Telling the Self*. Oxford UP, 2004.

# Hair-raising and knee taking: Colin Kaepernick's Monstrous Persona

SCARLETT L. HESTER

In May 2018, the National Football League implemented a policy that penalizes teams with a fine if any of the personnel (including players) attempt to sit or kneel during the playing of the national anthem (Seifert and Graziano ESPN.com). The revelation of this policy comes after a football season full of protests, name calling, and demands for the firing of players who “disrespect our flag” (Tatum CNN.com). The new NFL policy has been happily endorsed by President Trump. During a segment with “Fox and Friends” Trump stated, “You have to stand proudly for the national anthem, or you shouldn’t be playing, you shouldn’t be there. Maybe you shouldn’t be in the country” (Edelman NBCNews.com). Trump’s enthusiastic support of the policy is not a surprise given his open dislike for NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick and his fellow protesters. Trump expressed his opinion regarding NFL players who knelt during the playing of the national anthem during a campaign rally in Huntsville, Alabama. He stated, “Wouldn’t you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag to say, ‘Get that son of a bitch off the field right now, he’s fired! He’s fired!’” (Tatum CNN.com).

The implementation of the new policy paired with Trump’s comments represent a wide spread attitude toward those who violate the ritual associated with the national anthem. At their core, Trump’s comments reveal the deep-seated xenophobic racism held by the current administration. He conflates civil protest with issues of belonging and patriotism. Through this and the power associated with his office, he adopts the position of a savior. Trump embodies hegemonic white masculinity and he is here to save the United States from any monster who seeks to disrupt, including NFL players who kneel during the national anthem. For all extensive purposes, those who kneel adopt the persona of a cultural monster, unafraid to wreak havoc on the U.S.’s presumed cultural norms.

The leader of this monstrous revolution is none other than Colin Kaepernick. Trump and his supporters are metaphorically and literally leading the hunt against

The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 6, No. 2 & 3

Copyright © 2018

Kaepernick with torches in hand, ready to discipline and extract any individual who does not embody their image of what constitutes an obedient U.S. American citizen. In this article, I argue sports and popular media co-opted Colin Kaepernick's original message regarding his silent protest during the national anthem. Media outlets framed Kaepernick as a threat against patriotism, which cast him as monstrous body and persona. The anxiety Kaepernick sparked highlights the U.S.'s discomfort with outspoken black men who challenge the white hegemonic status quo. Even though Kaepernick enacts nonviolent protest, he is coded as monstrous and becomes trapped in the paradox of violence associated with black masculinity and monsters. Because of this, Kaepernick complicates the perception of his monstrous persona and creates a more nuanced understanding of blackness and monstrosity. Rather than succumb to the disciplinary nature of the NFL and professional sports culture, Kaepernick embraces his monstrosity and decisively creates other monsters to carry on his monstrous legacy.

## Methods

To illustrate my argument, I utilize a combination of rhetorical methods and media criticism. I adopt a critical rhetorical lens to understand the discourse surrounding Kaepernick and his nonviolent protest. I posit both sports and popular media position Kaepernick as a monstrous body who poses a threat to the hegemonic norms of U.S. society. One of my aims is to answer Michael Lacy and Kent Ono's call and engage in a "broad knowledge about how race and racism emerge and function" specifically within sports media (Lacy and Ono 3). Additionally, a critical examination of this discourse seeks to understand "its effectivity, especially the way power operates to constitute subjects" (Lacy and Ono 4). Ultimately, my goal is to reveal how the tension between Kaepernick and media discourse work to disenfranchise *and* empower Kaepernick as a monstrous being. I understand rhetoric and the power associated with it to be fluid, rather than static. Rhetoric is performed and is able to constitute "identity, incite emotion, and motivate action" (Cisneros 6). I adopt a similar approach to rhetorical criticism explained by Darrel Wanzer-Serrano where, "Rhetoric is not reducible to empty verbiage, deceitful speech, or a form of inaction. Instead, I see

rhetoric as both an object of inquiry and a perspective for engaging that object” (15).

Kaepernick’s discourse and his persona serve as both a site of inquiry and a lens to understand black masculinity. Critical rhetorical methodology provides the opportunity to reveal the relationship between Kaepernick’s understanding of his “monstrosity” and his utilization of his monstrous persona to transgress the disciplinary nature of sports culture and advocate for change. Kaepernick’s navigation of his ascribed identity in the media serves as one example of the contentious relationship between professional black male athletes, protest, and media discourse. While Kaepernick is not the first black male athlete to protest social injustice, his case further reveals the power of mediated discourse that obfuscates damaging norms associated with race and racism. The media’s reaction to Kaepernick further exposes the racist ideology associated with monstrosity. I seek to call attention to the influence of these symbols and how they contribute to the “collective beliefs, identifications, and actions” associated with Colin Kaepernick (Cisneros 6).

There is a breadth of scholarship that investigates how masculinity, hegemonic and black, is conveyed in the world of professional sport (Trujillo 292; Butterworth 232; Griffin, 167; hooks 21; Oates 86; Leonard 33; Grano 89; Lavelle 427; Khan 46), to cite but a few. While these scholars provide deep insight into how media often frames athletes in inherent sexist and racist ways, often to achieve economic gain, my goal is to expand the conversation and include notions of monstrosity. I aim to build upon this foundation and critically connect existing scholarship concerning black masculinity in sport with monstrosity. To make this connection, I first analyze Kaepernick’s initial press conference in which he explains his decision to kneel during the playing of the national anthem. Next, I look at mediated responses to Kaepernick’s press conference and continued kneeling through other NFL player’s responses via Twitter. Finally, I examine how Trump and NFL commissioner Roger Goodell demonized Kaepernick, which warrants his being framed as a monster. An analysis of Trump and Goodell’s remarks reveal how Kaepernick’s actions were perceived as monstrous and thus necessitated his ultimate unemployment within the NFL.

## Black Masculinity, Monstrosity, & Sports Culture

The characteristics associated with black masculinity are often conflated and dramatized by the media. Generally viewed as hyper aggressive and violent, black men are repeatedly depicted as “animals, brutes, natural born rapists, and murderers” (hooks 49). Oftentimes, black men are reduced to and signified by their body, which then results in associating stereotypical ideological beliefs with tenets of black masculinity. Seemingly, the implied violent nature of black men negates the ability for them to be viewed as American citizens. It is not shocking then that blackness, in particular black men and black masculinity, has historically been associated with notions of monstrosity. The link between black masculinity and “brute strength and natural instincts” (Collins 152) further explains why black men are overwhelmingly stereotyped and minimized to their bodies and physical prowess. In the case of Colin Kaepernick, and many other professional black male athletes, professional sports serve as a site of particular interest in to interrogate the relationship between the black male body, black masculinity, and monstrosity. Black masculinity correlates with tropes of violence and animalistic, or monstrous behaviors. Stuart Hall writes, “It is the position within the different signifying chains which ‘means,’ not the literal fixed correspondence between an isolated term and some denoted position in the color spectrum” (108). Black men and black masculinity “means” different things at any given time, much like any aspect of any individual’s identity. However, when black men are reduced to their bodies, as they so often are through the white patriarchal gaze, their identity is diminished to the ideological tropes associated with black masculinity. Because black men’s identity is encapsulated in the ideological tropes associated with black masculinity, their bodies serve as the main signifier for how they are categorized.

When black male athletes, and by extension black masculinity, cannot be contained and utilized for capitalistic gains, they must be coded in a way that warrants accurate discipline. According to Patricia Hill Collins, “Athletics constitutes a modern version of historical practices that saw Black men’s bodies as needing taming and training for practical use” (153). It is not a stretch to see how black male athletes can potentially to be monstrous, especially if they are no longer able to be tamed and trained for practical use. The question becomes, is there a gradient upon which cultural monsters are created and measured? (Rai 20). In this sense, black masculinity must be viewed as monstrous, and those who

embody black masculinity must become monsters within the realm of professional sports culture. The violence and “brute strength” often associated with black men is necessary in order for sports like professional football to be successful. However, it is when the monster begins to show itself “in something that is not yet shown” that monstrosity becomes something to be feared “precisely because no anticipation had prepared one to identify this figure” (Rai 23).

For Colin Kaepernick, his monstrosity began to evolve into something unidentifiable, therefore, he was coded as a threatening monster. Kaepernick challenged and made strange “the categories of beauty, humanity, and identity that we cling to,” which further resulted in his monstrous perception (Halberstam 6). The parallel between black bodies and monstrosity or horror is traceable throughout U.S. America’s history. Elizabeth Young explains, “The figure of the monster is consistently intertwined with fantasies and anxieties about masculinity, relations between men, and the male iconography of the American nation” (5). While Young refers to monstrosity in the U.S. generally, monsters in relation to blackness and racism have a deep-seated history in U.S. American culture. If black masculinity chronically links with violence, there is a seeming natural connection between black masculinity and monstrosity or horror. Robin Means Coleman explains, “In many instances violence in Blackness and horror function together to provide important discursive inroads, such as violence as exhibiting a sort of ‘return of the re/oppressed’” (5). According to Means Coleman, the association of violence and blackness does not have to be one that constrains but rather, offers an alternative narrative for black individuals. Horror and monstrous narratives then, have the potential to expand cultural understandings of black bodies and experiences, as is the case with Colin Kaepernick.

While Means Coleman offers an alternate understanding to black monstrosity, it would be remiss to ignore the deeply racist underpinnings that are traditionally associated with black bodies and black masculinity. Metaphorically speaking, monsters and horror represent cultural fears and anxieties. Scott Poole writes, “The link between the metaphor and the reality of horror, the moments when monstrous fascinations become monstrous acts, appears far too often in American historical experience” (24). American culture is both fearful of and fascinated by horror as representations of historical experience. The enduring appeal of the monstrous figure of Frankenstein reveals this obsession. Mary Shelley’s monster from the book *Frankenstein* can be interpreted to signify many things. Yet, Young argues that the consistent presence of the Frankenstein



monster and metaphor associated with it represents its vitality, and more specifically, it's representation of "contemporary language of political dissent" (4). Frankenstein's monster, especially a black Frankenstein monster, is political and "a key figure in the history of monsters as politically charged forms, as well as in the history of monstrosity as a constitutive feature of the language of politics" (13). Michael Lacey asserts the enduring representation of the monster includes one where "he is rejected because of his unnatural or grotesque condition; and, therefore, he suffers, becomes enraged, and goes on a murderous rampage against his maker" (231). The consistent rejection and subsequent murderous rampage justify the surviving correlation between black masculinity, monstrosity, and the need to discipline both. When blackness is embodied as monstrous and used as a tool in American political discourse, black bodies are interpreted as horrifying and dangerous. If black monstrosity is granted too much power or freedom, there is the threat of the monster rising up against his creator.

The fear of black monstrosity has a strong connection to professional sports culture. Black monstrosity or blackness is acceptable as long as it can be contained and controlled. However, when the black athlete or monster revolts against his creator, he must be disciplined. One particular example of this is the 2004 NBA brawl, or "Malice in the Palace." The physical fight involved players from the Detroit Pistons and Indiana Pacers. While this display of violence was certainly worrisome, it was not until the fight spilled into the stands among spectators that it became particularly problematic. Rachel Griffin and Bernadette Calafell explain that when the players entered the stands, "blackness became uncontrollable, spilling into the safety of white space, and the arena became a savage space where the black bodies of the players climbing into the stands were represented as 'violent beasts' going after 'innocent' white fans" (125). The black bodies, or monsters, did not contain their aggression and became "uncontrollable" and posed a threat to the spectators. In the metaphor of the monster, the spectators are the creator and the players are the monsters. The expectations of (white) spectators constrain black masculinity to the performance of sport and further highlight the power struggle between black men and U. S. American society. Black male athletes' control is limited to the arena of competition. Collins further discusses this tension and explains that, "Black men's bodies generate admiration, whereas in others, these qualities garner fear...the bodies of athletes and models are admired, viewed as entertaining, and used to sell a variety of products" (153). Outside of the game, the aggression and violence associated with black male

athletes is coded as dangerous and therefore untrustworthy. Black athletes can be aggressive when it is for the benefit of white spectators. When black male athletes contest the ideological beliefs associated with black masculinity and instead demonstrate modes of monstrosity, ideological struggle occurs.

Black athletes are more susceptible to the breaking down, fragmentation, and disenfranchisement of their bodies, minds, and voices. The presentation of a politicized black athlete who is unafraid to vocalize concern is something that creates discomfort among “the unenlightened white world” (hooks 23). It is within the confines of professional sport that its symbolic power becomes evident. Sut Jhally further explains,

Sport derives its ability to mediate this dialectic from its power as *symbol*, a symbolism that lies at the root of its role as ritual. This allows us to not merely ask the surface questions of *what* values are internalized through sports, but also questions regarding *how* that movement is structured. (52)

For hooks and Jhally, sports culture functions symbolically. When the structures that operate within sports culture are scrutinized and interrogated, the value associated with racial identity and racial politics is revealed. Kaepernick represents notions of black Frankenstein because he is a monster who “revolts against his creator” (Lacy 231) to advocate for racial equality. The discourse that surrounds his nonviolent protests further expose how the NFL values him for his athletic ability, not his politicized voice.

### A Monster is Born

Colin Kaepernick explained his decision to sit during the playing of the national anthem during a locker room press conference following an August 2016 preseason game. When asked if he will continue to sit Kaepernick says yes and explains,

I’m going to continue to stand with the people that are being oppressed. To me this is something that has to change. When there’s significant change and I feel like that flag represents what it’s supposed to represent, this country is representing people the way that it’s supposed to, I’ll stand. (Biderman, “Transcript”)

Kaepernick specifically states what needs to change in order for him to resume standing. He says, “There’s a lot of things that need to change. One specifically is police brutality. There’s people being murdered unjustly and not being held accountable” (Biderman, “Transcript”). Kaepernick’s action of kneeling followed by his answer during the press conference reveal the paradox of his nonviolent actions. He peacefully protests in response to the cultural and literal violence experienced by black communities. Kaepernick physically and vocally calls attention to an issue that persists in U.S. American culture. From his perspective, his acts of nonviolent protest are necessary in order to point out the true cultural monsters, police officers who murder black U.S. Americans.

Certainly, the views Kaepernick expresses are not shocking. However, it is the venue and ways he took action that place him in a precarious position. Professional athletes, especially black male athletes, are meant to be seen and not heard. Kaepernick violates this notion. By openly stating his opinion about police brutality, Kaepernick disturbs the expectations associated with his locale as a professional athlete. Kaepernick sets forth the frame that views him as monstrous. His actions are shocking. According to Phillips, “This level of shock is caused not merely by the introduction of some new monster but through an almost systematic violation of the rules of the game” (7). Kaepernick does both. He introduces himself as a monster who violates the rules and expectations ascribed to black male athletes. Additionally, he evokes the persona of black Frankenstein. Young writes, “With its plot of boomerang violence, Frankenstein is the embodiment of blowback, or as another commentator summarizes the theory, ‘Now the monster as turned on its creator’” (2). Kaepernick is not content standing and honoring a flag that does not honor all of the citizens it presumes to protect. Instead, he turns on his creator, revolts by kneeling, and resists.

Kaepernick’s form of resistance exemplifies what Gorsevski and Butterworth explain as “the paradox is that nonviolence invokes a perception of imminent violence in the short-term so as to gain long-term, nonviolent social change” (51). Kaepernick is seemingly aware of this. However, the imminent, short-term violence is against himself and his career. He explains,

There’s a lot of people that don’t want to have this conversation. They’re scared that they might lose their job, or they might not get the endorsements, they might not be treated the same way. And those are things I’m prepared to handle and those are things that you know, other

people might not be ready for... I've been blessed to be able to get this far and have the privilege of being in the NFL and making the kind of money I make and enjoy the kind of luxuries like that. But, I can't look in the mirror and see other people dying on the street that should have the same opportunities that I've had and say, you know what, I can live with myself, because I can't if I just watch. (Biderman, "Transcript")

Kaepernick states he is willing to invoke short-term violence against his personal career and financial well-being in order to achieve long-term social change. However, Kaepernick would not be financially stable without the NFL, which is something he acknowledges. Through this, he further illuminates his position as black Frankenstein. According to Young, the traditional depiction of Frankenstein is one that is sympathetic. Yet, when interpreted as an allegory for slavery, the monster is positioned "within the slave owning and colonial enterprises, moving him 'toward and away from the master' rather than in a direction entirely his own" (29). Kaepernick is moving in his own direction. Yet, this would not have been possible had he not participated in the colonial enterprise of the NFL. He allowed his body and skill to be commodified and consumed in order to achieve economic freedom. It is specifically because of this that he embodies notions of black Frankenstein. The Frankenstein monster is meant "to signal both monster and monster-maker" (Young 3). The NFL created Kaepernick, and like Frankenstein, he no longer wants to be oppressed, thus he must revolt against his creator. Unlike Frankenstein, Kaepernick's mode of revolt and revolution invites violence upon himself instead of evoking violence upon others. Kaepernick becomes a cultural monster and sacrifices his economic well-being to achieve his goal.

Seemingly, Kaepernick did not initially intend to be cast as monstrous. Yet, he is cognizant of the ways his modes of resistance are perceived. Kaepernick challenges hegemonic notions associated with black male bodies, especially athletic black male bodies. Historically, blackness and black masculinity signify violence. However, Kaepernick offers a version of blackness that Means Coleman describes as, "mature, God-fearing and otherwise resistant to evil, whole and full, wise and aged, in full combat against evil, and at or near the center of constructions of goodness" (10). Kaepernick purposefully enacts nonviolent resistance and performs an alternate form of monstrosity. His actions are perceived as violent because they disrupt ideology associated with the ritual of

standing for the national anthem. His explanation indicates his understanding of the consequences associated with his actions. He counters the presumption that as a black man, he is “naturally” violent. Instead, he thoroughly explains his thought process in a “wise and aged” way. Kaepernick’s embodiment of black masculinity and monstrosity is not violent and is not ruled by brute strength. Instead, he is nonviolently “in full combat against evil.” This is particularly noteworthy since he is a black athlete who was employed by one of the most physically violent professional sports organizations. Yet, Kaepernick refuses to be traditionally tamed and controlled. He uses his embodiment of black masculinity and monstrosity to present a construction of goodness. He demonstrates this through avenues of non-violence by kneeling and further problematizes the understanding of his black masculinity.

Finally, Kaepernick establishes his refusal to conform to the whiteness of the NFL. However, this lack of conformity gives sports media and political pundits the opportunity to frame him as monstrous. According to Cohen, monsters are “disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration. And so, the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions” (6). Through his actions and responses during the press conference it is evident that Kaepernick smashes distinctions. Kaepernick frames himself as a professional football player and a concerned citizen who believes that it is necessary to take a stand. For example, when asked if this will distract him from the Super Bowl he states, “You know, we talk about football. We handle our business there. But, you know, there’s also a social responsibility that we have to be educated on these things and talk about these things” (Biderman, “Transcript”). Kaepernick is able to focus on football *and* the social responsibility he has, which violates the expectations of the NFL. He is a politicized body and mind. As such, Kaepernick embodies black masculinity and monstrosity in order to “horrify the white man,” or in this instance, the NFL (Young 40). He is a monstrous hybrid of professional athlete and activist. Kaepernick’s decision to position himself as a hybrid further creates the opportunity to view his actions and persona as monstrous, especially because he roots his need to protest in political and ideological difference. As Cohen iterates, it is these differences that serve as “a catalyst to monstrous representation on a micro level as cultural alterity in the macrocosm” (8).

## The Monster Lives On

Kaepernick's decision to sit or kneel during the national anthem was to protest the literal and cultural violence demonstrated against bodies of color. He was labeled monstrous and unpatriotic because of his actions and investment in cultural politics. Yet, Kaepernick himself explains his decision to protest the national anthem has nothing to do with patriotism and everything to do with the state of the nation. In a sense, Kaepernick is a monster in the horror film of the U.S.'s current cultural climate. He depicts horror in a way that "captures our cultural anxieties and concerns that our collective fears seem projected onto the screen before us" (Phillips 3). Jeffery Cohen explains specific cultural moments create monsters. Further, he indicates "the monster signifies something other than itself: it is always a displacement, always inhabits the gap between the time of upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received and born again" (Cohen 4). Kaepernick's actions and explanation force the country into a moment of upheaval, which makes viewers of the NFL contend with the monster Kaepernick has become. In order to cope with this horror, fellow NFL players further perpetuated the narrative of Kaepernick as monstrous. Kaepernick's rationale for protesting became re-appropriated by other NFL players. As such, the Twitter responses reveal that *what* is valued in the NFL is patriotism that supports the white status quo. Kaepernick's explicit revolt against this ideological stance warrants his monstrous coding.

Initially, Kaepernick's presentation of his monstrous persona was not well received within the NFL community. A poll taken in September 2016, less than a month after Kaepernick's press conference, revealed that he was "disliked a lot" by 29 percent of those who were polled, more than any of the more than 350 players asked about in the survey (Rovell "Poll"). While Kaepernick did not poll favorably with most NFL fans, his popularity among African-Americans showed an increase. According to the same data, "The poll shows 42 percent of African-Americans now say they like the 49ers quarterback 'a lot,' while only 2 percent dislike him 'a lot'" (Rovell "Poll"). Kaepernick's popularity among the African-American community should not be a shock. His embodiment of monstrosity attempted to call attention to the horror black communities face on a daily basis. Certainly, African-American fans would empathize with this, yet, this was clearly not a narrative most of the NFL fan base wants to be exposed to. Griffin and Calafell further explain that American sport is not intended for viewers of color.

Instead, the gaze of the spectator is meant “to commodify blackness so that it appeals to consumers willing to spend the most money consuming the sport, which tend to be white middle and upper-class people” (Griffin and Calafell 124). It is not surprising then that Kaepernick was not popular among the larger NFL fan base. His monstrous actions directly interfered with the commodification of his blackness.

The NFL organization also poorly received Kaepernick’s monstrous performance. Many players took to Twitter to express their feelings. Justin Pugh, an offensive lineman for the New York Giants tweeted, “I will be **STANDING** during the National Anthem tonight. Thank you to **ALL** (Gender, Race, Religion) that put your lives on the line for that flag” (Pugh). Additionally, fellow quarterback and free agent T.J. Yates commented with, “It blows my mind how many people hate the country they live in” (Yates) and retired player Tyler Polunbus tweeted, “Activists changed USA for better but have to associate Nat Anthem w/ military that die for ur right to protest. Stand up. Find another way” (Polunbus). It is evident the justification for taking a knee was lost among most of Kaepernick’s white peers. The intention behind his protest was quickly correlated with disrespect for the U.S. American flag and military. By shifting the purpose of the protest, Kaepernick’s peers reified the narrative of castigating his acts and persona as monstrous. Kaepernick was not only revolting against his creator through the NFL, but also the creator of the freedoms and liberties those who serve in the military fight to protect.

Perhaps more surprising is that several black players did not whole heartedly support his actions. Russell Okung of the Los Angeles Chargers wrote, “Kaepernick is well within his rights to do what he did. I’m not saying I agree but I do understand why he felt morally obligated in his acts” (Okung). Similarly, Arian Foster stated that he believed Kaepernick was well within his rights to kneel. He wrote, “He has the right to choose not to stand. just as you have the right to disagree with his stance. round and round we go” (Foster). Unlike the white players, Okung and Foster state that they do not agree with his actions but understand that Kaepernick has the “right” to protest. However, in this instance, what is withheld or not said by these two players reveals the tension and power dynamic black athletes must navigate, especially within the NFL. Seemingly, neither Okung nor Foster want to risk being linked with Kaepernick’s monstrosity. Their responses reveal Kaepernick as a monster who is both “the thing that horrifies, or as the victim or that which is horrified” (Means Coleman

8). If Okung or Foster agree with Kaepernick, they risk being labeled monstrous by association. His monstrosity created dissent among his fellow NFL players. What is important to note is the tweets associate Kaepernick's monstrosity with being unpatriotic. By positioning Kaepernick as unpatriotic, it is easier to view him as a monster against the state and cultural politics. His monstrosity becomes a pawn in the horror narrative to further perpetuate a polarized relationship between Kaepernick and those who stand for the national anthem. Means Coleman writes, "Horror continues to propagate an 'us,' 'them,' and 'us versus them' understanding of race relationships in which cross-cultural communication is displayed as difficult to negotiate head on" (213). The horror narrative created by the discourse on Twitter positions Kaepernick as someone who is difficult to communicate and negotiate with. He does not respect the U.S. American flag or the military, therefore he is beyond reason and negotiation.

### (Un)taming Kaepernick's Monster

It is not surprising that a similar sentiment was echoed by the NFL commissioner, Roger Goodell. Goodell released a statement to AP and said, "We believe very strongly in patriotism in the NFL. I personally believe very strongly in that" (Wilner "Goodell doesn't agree"). He goes on to explain, "We have to choose respectful ways of doing that so that we can achieve the outcomes we ultimately want and do it with the values and ideals that make our country great" (Wilner "Goodell doesn't agree"). Goodell concludes his remarks by stating, "I think it's important to have respect for our country, for our flag, for the people who make our country better; for law enforcement; and for our military who are out fighting for our freedoms and our ideals" (Wilner "Goodell Doesn't Agree"). Rhetorically, Goodell further positions Kaepernick as a monster who is unreasonable and who does not understand "our freedoms and our ideals." Goodell furthers the horror narrative of "us" versus "them." According to Goodell, Kaepernick's monstrous persona is one that does not respect the country. Kaepernick then is not only a black Frankenstein, but a bogeyman who "embodies the chaos that exists on the other side of these cultural boundaries" (Phillips 133). By placing Kaepernick in a dichotomous space, Goodell rhetorically positions Kaepernick as a monster who falls outside of the cultural boundary of understanding true patriotism and U.S. American ideals. Instead, Kaepernick is a monster lurking on the other side of



these boundaries waiting to attack. Rhetorically, Goodell asserts himself as the innocent creator. Goodell and the NFL respect the country, flag, etc. He is the voice of the white patriarchal spectators who consume Kaepernick's black body. Because Goodell conflates the purpose behind Kaepernick's protest with notions of patriotism, he is able to further deepen the white ideological stance that saturates the NFL and ostensibly validate the disciplinary action taken against Kaepernick.

This is a stance taken up by Donald Trump. As previously discussed, he whole heartedly supports the new NFL policy that punishes any player or personnel who kneels during the anthem. Additionally, he has openly called players who took a knee "sons of bitches" and indicated that they deserve to be fired (Remnick "The Racial Demagoguery"). While Trump does not explicitly name Kaepernick, he implies Kaepernick's influence and he states, "We put our hands on our hearts for the pledge of allegiance and we stand for the national anthem" (Lincoln, "Donald Trump Implies"). Thus, Trump contributes to and continues the demonization of Kaepernick and his actions. By conflating Kaepernick's actions as anti-American or unpatriotic it becomes easier to frame him as a cultural monster who necessitates and more importantly, deserves disciplinary action. More recently, Trump made the rhetorical shift to not only call for NFL players who disrespect the flag and anthem to be fired, but to also be removed from the country. Calling for this level of action against players, mainly black players, Trump not only frames Kaepernick as monstrous, but also anyone who chooses to follow in his path.

What becomes particularly unsettling about Trump's narrative is that while Kaepernick and his colleagues may be viewed as cultural monsters, a similar shift in Trump's divisiveness is concurrently happening in regard to individuals immigrating from Mexico. In a response to a comment about ICE and MS-13 gang members Trump stated, "You wouldn't believe how bad these people are. These aren't people. These are animals. And we're taking them out of the country at a level and at a rate that's never happened before" (Valverde "In Context"). While Trump does not call immigrants or MS-13 gang members monsters, he refers to them as animals. They are not people and should be treated as such. What is similar between Trump's rhetoric in regard to Kaepernick, black NFL players, and Mexican immigrants is that in both statements, he classifies all as unhuman. They are animals or sons of bitches. They need to be handled or fired. Feasibly what is more revealing is Trump's comments regarding the NFL players

serve as a foreshadow to his quick spiral of framing bodies of color as in-human. Monster or animal, all must be handled in a way that aligns with the measure of disrespect demonstrated against the United States. Trump's comments further reveal the embedded notions of racism sewn into America's cultural fabric. However, like Collins iterates, these racial politics, especially blackness, are rendered invisible (169). By calling bodies of color animals or coding them as monstrous, Trump is able to, albeit poorly, obscure the larger issue of racism from popular discourse.

## Conclusion

Goodell and Trump's responses to Kaepernick are deeply problematic but grant Kaepernick the opportunity to capitalize upon his monstrous persona. Undoubtedly, the violent rhetoric and vitriol espoused by Trump necessitates an emboldened and angered response. Yet, Kaepernick furthers his position as a nonviolent monster by remaining silent. In spite of being in a violent situation, Kaepernick remains nonviolent. He creates a rhetorical slippage between who should be deemed a monster in these specific situations. If Kaepernick is a version of black Frankenstein, he reveals a story that "requires not only the presence of a monstrous slave, but also a way to dramatize ongoing enslavement" (Young 44). The consistent demonization by Trump allows Kaepernick to continuously call attention to the modern enslavement experienced by black U.S. Americans. By accepting his monstrosity in silence, he allows the true monster to rear his head. For example, when questioned further about the NFL policy Trump replied with, "You have to stand proudly for the national anthem and the NFL owners did the right thing if that's what they've done" (Around the NFL Staff, "Donald Trump"). Trump, the NFL, and Goodell, further highlight the modes of ongoing enslavement that necessitates the birth of Kaepernick's brand of monstrosity. He cannot and will not be tamed.

Kaepernick's monstrous persona, predicated upon his embodied black masculinity, is certainly not a new framing strategy from the media. As Calafell argues, blackness and monstrosity seemingly work hand in hand. However, unlike Kanye West, Kaepernick does not purposefully evoke a monstrous vision (Calafell 115). Additionally, Kaepernick does not perceive himself as part of a monstrous race who should remain a remote social outsider (Wright 26). While

Kaepernick may not explicitly perceive himself as a monster, he intentionally and purposefully inserts himself into a narrative that advocates for social justice while encouraging the inner social justice monster in his fans to emerge. Kaepernick urges his supporters to harness their desire for an inner monster as a means to “embrace our own darkness” (Poole 16).

In many ways, his monstrous persona gives birth to baby monsters who will continue to work against the violent and cultural oppression perpetuated against bodies of color. As a version of black Frankenstein, Kaepernick is able to incite “racial rebellion,” but also create vampire-like monsters who will continue his legacy. Kaepernick’s deployment of monstrosity challenges Young’s understanding of vampires, who have traditionally worked “better to depict continuing racial enslavement” (13). However, Kaepernick’s monstrous legacy and creation of vampires does not hint at one that includes racial enslavement. On the contrary, the presence of vampires who carry on Kaepernick’s legacy indicate the hopeful promise of Kaepernick’s monstrous persona. Cohen theorizes that vampires are able to remain a monstrous race that perseveres because they are a monster that takes new shape, and “returns in slightly different clothing, each time to be read against contemporary social movements or a specific, determining event” (5).

Kaepernick has succeeded in returning in slightly different clothing. During the press conference he indicated his plans of resistance were greater than the NFL. He replies, “There are things I have in the works right now at I’m working on to, you know, put together in the future and have come to fruition soon” (Biderman, “Transcript”). According to Kaepernick’s website, “The mission of the Colin Kaepernick Foundation is to fight oppression of all kinds globally, through education and social activism” (“About”). This includes Kaepernick’s pledge, “I will donate one million dollars plus all the proceeds of my jersey sales from the 2016 season to organizations working in oppressed communities, 100k a month for 10 months” (“Million Dollar Pledge”). Additionally, he founded the “Know Your Rights Camp,” which “is a free campaign for youth fully funded by Colin Kaepernick to raise awareness on higher education, self-empowerment, and instruction to properly interact with law enforcement in various scenarios” (“Know Your Rights Camp”). Kaepernick does not have to remain the monster because he is able to *create* monsters who return in slightly different clothing and are able to adapt to varying contemporary social movements.

While Kaepernick may not remain a monster in society, his monstrous legacy will certainly live on. Kaepernick did not create the horrific narrative of racial violence in America. However, he became a monster by vocalizing his concerns. He also promised this narrative will not go away. This is evidenced in recent comments from Trump. When questioned about the NFL protests Trump responded with, “They're all saying, 'Oh, it has nothing to do with the flag, it's the way we've been treated. In the meantime, they're making \$15 million a year. Look, I'm all for the athletes. I think it's great. I love athletics. I love sports. But they shouldn't get the politics involved” (Schad “Donald Trump Says He Doesn't Believe”). By accepting his monstrous persona, Kaepernick allows the monstrous movement to grow beyond him, which was his original purpose. For Kaepernick and his supporters, sports are political, but politics should not remain just in the realm of sport. Instead, Kaepernick and his monstrous politics can infiltrate communities and villages outside of sport. He demonstrates this through his charitable actions. According to Rachel Leah, “the unsigned quarterback was awarded the Week 1 NFLPA Community MVP for his philanthropy and grassroots activism in support of marginalized communities” (“Colin Kaepernick, unsigned, wins NFL Players Association MVP”). He may not be employed by the NFL, but he is not going away. Poole writes, “One of the conventions of modern horror is to portray the death of the monster and the restoration of the social order only to bring the thing horrifyingly back to life in the final frame” (228). Kaepernick is not a defeated monster. It is quite the contrary. He is a monster who encourages other like-minded monsters to embrace their darkness and continue his legacy. Arguably, the demonization of his monstrous persona is the very thing that makes his narrative so appealing. Kaepernick's career in the NFL may be dead, but he is not gone, and he has created a sentiment in the U.S. that is horrifying and still lurking in the final frame.

## Works Cited

Around the NFL Staff. “Donald Trump: NFL Did ‘Right Thing’ with Anthem Policy.” *Around the NFL*. 24 May 2018.  
<http://www.nfl.com/news/story/0ap3000000934197/article/donald-trump-nfl-did-right-thing-with-anthem-policy>. Accessed 21 Sept. 2018.

- Biderman, Chris. "Transcript: Colin Kaepernick Addresses Sitting During National Anthem." *Niners Wire*. 28 August 2016.  
<https://ninerswire.usatoday.com/2016/08/28/transcript-colin-kaepernick-addresses-sitting-during-national-anthem/>. Accessed 21 Sept. 2018
- Breech, John. "NFL Players React to Colin Kaepernick Protesting the National Anthem." *CBS Sports*. 27 August 2016.  
<https://www.cbssports.com/nfl/news/nfl-players-react-to-colin-kaepernick-protesting-the-national-anthem/>. Accessed 21 Sept. 2018
- Butterworth, Michael L. "Race in 'The Race': Mark McGwire, Sammy Sosa, and Heroic Constructions of Whiteness." *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2007, pp. 228-244.
- Calafell, Bernadette M. *Monstrosity, Performace, and Race in Contemporary Culture*. Peter Lang, 2015.
- Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," edited by Jeffrey Jerome. *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*. University of Minnesota Press, 1996. pp. 3-25
- Collins, Hill Patricia. *Black Sexual Politics*. Routledge, 2005.
- Edelman, Adam. "Trump Says NFL Players Who Kneel During National Anthem 'Maybe Shouldn't Be in the Country.'" *NBC News*. 24 May 2018.  
<https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/trump-says-nfl-players-who-kneel-during-national-anthem-maybe-n876996>. Accessed 21 Sept. 2018.
- Goreviski, Ellen W. and Michael L. Butterworth "Muhammad Ali's Fighting Words: The Paradox of Violence in Nonviolent Rhetoric." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, vol. 97, no. 1, 2011, pp. 50-73.
- Grano, Daniel A. "Michael Vick's 'Genuine Remorse' and Problems of Public Forgiveness." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, vol. 100, no. 1, 2014, pp. 81-104.
- Griffin, Rachel A. "The Disgrace of Commodification and Shameful Convenience: A Critical Race Critique of the NBA." *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2012, pp. 161-185.

- Griffin, Rachel A. and Bernadette M. Calfaell "Control, Discipline, and Punish: Black Masculinity and (In)visible Whiteness in the NBA." *Critical Rhetorics of Race*, edited by Michael G. Lacy and Kent A. Ono. NYU Press, 2011, pp. 117-136.
- Halberstam, Jack. *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*. Duke University Press, 1995.
- Hall, Stuart. "Signification, Representation, Ideology: Althusser and the Post-Structuralist Debates." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1985, pp. 91-114.
- hooks, bell. *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*. Washington Square Press, 2004.
- hooks, bell. *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*. Routledge, 2004
- Hoffman, Benjamin, Victor Mather, and Jacey Fortin. "After Trump Blasts N.F.L., Players Kneel and Lock Arms in Solidarity." *The New York Times*. 2017 September 24. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/24/sports/nfl-trump-anthem-protests.html>. Accessed 21 Sept. 2018.
- Jhally, Sut. "The Spectacle of Accumulation: Material and Cultural Factors in the Evolution of the Sports/Media Complex." *Critical Sociology*, vol.12, no. 3, 1984, pp. 41-57.
- Kaepernick7. <http://kaepernick7.com/>
- Khan, Abraham Iqbal. "A Rant for Good Business: Communicative Capitalism and the Caputre of Anti-Racist Resistance." *Popular Communication*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2016, pp. 39-48.
- Lacy, Michael G. "Black Frankenstein and Racial Neoliberalism in Contemporary American Cinema." *The Routledge Companion to Global Popular Culture*, edited by Toby Miller, Routledge, 2015, pp. 229-243.
- Lavelle, Katherine L. "No Room for Racism: Restoration of Order in the NBA." *Communication & Sport*, vol. 4, no. 4, 2016, pp. 424-441.

- Leah, Rachel. "Colin Kaepernick, Unsigned, Wins NFL Players Association MVP." *Salon*, 18 September 2017. <https://www.salon.com/2017/09/18/colin-kaepernick-unsigned-wins-nfl-players-association-mvp/>. Accessed 21 Sept. 2018.
- Leonard, David J. *After Artest: The NBA and the Assault on Blackness*. SUNY Press, 2012.
- Lincoln, Darrelle. "Donald Trump Implies if Kaepernick Had Respected the Flag, He'd Have a Job Right Now." *Total Pro Sports*, 30 April 2018. Web site.
- Means Coleman, Robin. *Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890's to Present*. Routledge, 2011.
- Oates, Thomas. P. "The erotic gaze in the NFL draft." *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2007, pp. 74-90.
- Phillips, Kendall R. *Project Fears: Horror Films and American Culture*. Praeger, 2005.
- Poole, W. Scott. *Monsters in America: Our Historical Obsession with the Hideous and the Haunting*. Baylor University Press, 2011.
- Rai, Amit S. "Ontology and Monstrosity." *Monster Culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, edited by Marina Levina and Diem-My T. Bui, Bloomsbury, 2013, pp. 15-21.
- Remnick, David. "The Racial Demagoguery of Donald Trump's Assaults on Colin Kaepernick and Steph Curry." *The New Yorker*, 23 September 2017. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/the-racial-demagoguery-of-trumps-assaults-on-colin-kaepernick-and-steph-curry>. Accessed 21 Sept. 2018.
- Rovell, Darren. "Poll: Niners QB Colin Kaepernick Most Disliked Player in League." *ESPN*, 22 September 2016. <https://abcnews.go.com/Sports/poll-niners-qb-colin-kaepernick-disliked-player-league/story?id=42263215>. Accessed 21 Sept. 2018.

Schad, Tom. "Donald Trump Says He Doesn't Believe NFL Players Who Protest During the Anthem Have a 'Real Issue.'" *USA Today*, 15 June 2018.

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/nfl/2018/06/15/donald-trump-nfl-national-anthem-protest-players-no-issue/704930002/>. Accessed 21 Sept. 2018.

Seifert, Kevin and Dan Graziano. "New Policy Requires On-Field Players, Personnel to Stand for Anthem." *ESPN*. 24 May 2018.

[http://www.espn.com/nfl/story/\\_/id/23582533/nfl-owners-approve-new-national-anthem-policy](http://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/23582533/nfl-owners-approve-new-national-anthem-policy). Accessed 21 Sept. 2018.

Tatum, Sophie. "Trump: NFL Owners Should Fire Players Who Protest the National Anthem." *CNN*, 23 September 2017.

<https://www.cnn.com/2017/09/22/politics/donald-trump-alabama-nfl/index.html>. Accessed 21 Sept. 2018.

Trujillo, Nick. "Hegemonic Masculinity on the Mound: Media Representations of Nolan Ryan and American Sports Culture." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, vol. 8, 1991, pp. 290-308.

Valverde, Miriam. "In Context: Donald Trump's Comments About Immigrants, 'Animals.'" *PolitiFact*. 17 May 2018. <https://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2018/may/17/context-donald-trumps-comments-about-immigrants-an/>. Accessed 21 Sept. 2018.

Wilner, Barry. "Goodell Doesn't Agree with Kaepernick's Actions." *AP*, 7 Sept. 2016. <https://apnews.com/2218dbbbb0ed4fb7a6b74edae84d6409>. Accessed 21 Sept. 2018.

Wright, Alexa. "Monstrosity." *The Human Monster in Visual Culture*. I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2013.

Young, Elizabeth. *Black Frankenstein: The Making of an American Metaphor*. NYU Press, 2008.



# Latin Horror is Luchagore. An Interview With Luchagore Productions

CALEB J. GREEN

## About Luchagore Productions

Luchagore Productions is an award-winning horror production company, based in Vancouver, BC, Canada. Founded in 2013 by Gigi Saul Guerrero, Luke Bramley, & Raynor Shima for their love of making films in the horror genre. Luchagore has produced over 18 short films and commercials, most notably the *M is for Matador* segment of *ABC's of Death 2.5* and *El Gigante*, which is their company's most successful film, winning the attention and awards of festivals worldwide. The team has most recently created an anticipated horror/action series *La Quinceañera* with Warner Brothers and Stage 13 Network, which has won the Audience Choice award at Morbido Film Fest. I interviewed Guerrero and Shima about the origins of the company, Latin themed horror, and why *El Gigante* is so important to them.

GREEN. So the first question I really have for you is basically how did Luchagore come to be?

GUERRERO. Luchagore started way back in film school. Before it was officially Luchagore, back in 2010, it was just myself and Luke Bramley in film school, here in Vancouver. We were the only horror fans in our class. The only ones interested in killing people on screen. So, it was just such a quick friendship with Luke and myself, so all of our assignments and projects were horror. From there, Luke was like "We should DO this all the time!" I was like, "Yeah!" So, we just started slowly meeting other people. We met Raynor, who actually went to our rival film school. We were the first group with both competitive schools working together. So, Raynor brought some of his friends from his school, and, it was Luke and myself with some of our friends from our school. Then, slowly, we started building a team like that, because everyone had the same passion for genre

The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 6, No. 2 & 3

Copyright © 2018

film. I do have to credit Luke for coming up with the name Luchagore, which I hated at first. Before we met Raynor, it was during film history class, which was super boring, and Luke turned around to me and whispered, “Hey! What do you think of Lucha-GORE?” And I just gave him this look like “WTF, man?” And he looked at me like, “You know? It’s a play on words! So like luchador but it’s Luchagore.” He’s super white. He’s like the whitest man ever.

GREEN. I can tell by the story, actually.

GUERRERO. Right? And I just looked at him like with a straight, Latina face of “No, it’s super shitty.” And then two years later, in our last year of film school, we’re friends with Raynor and we’re making our projects. Our first big project is called *Day of the Dead* and I’m like, “We need a team name for sure now.” So I look at Luke and say “Hey! What was that name you said during history class a couple of years ago? Remember I hated it. What was it?” He’s like “Luchagore?” And I’m like “Yeah! Luchagore Productions! Great idea, Luke! Let’s keep it!” And he hated me for at least two days. And it just stayed. I don’t know why I hated the name. Now I think it’s awesome. It’s just perfect. In short, how it came to be is just in film school you connect with the right people. And we just weren’t afraid to keep making content with no budget and to make a brand. And it was amazing when we met Raynor, and it just kind of came to be with us three, just like “Okay, let’s start something and just make something super special.” Officially Luchagore came about in late 2012, after *Choose Your Victim*, an interactive web series we did in school where people could choose who dies next and how. So that was the project Luke and I wanted to graduate with.

SHIMA. You guys made promo video for it at school.

GUERRERO. So yeah, it was the project for our final year at school. But again, nobody wanted to work on it because it was a crazy horror idea that would last for months to make because we had to keep making episodes for the viewers who were voting who dies next and how. So, that’s how we secretly brought people from the rival film school into our school and our sets. A lot of the teachers thought Raynor and his friends were in the first or second year at our school.

GREEN. And this was a risky thing to do? To bridge the schools?

GUERRERO. Very risky. Here in Vancouver, those schools make fun of each other all the time. And it's just known for those schools not getting along. So, we had to do that to finish our project for *Choose Your Victim* which worked and we finished it. Funny enough, Luke and I ended up getting the graduation award for excellence in filmmaking, which we laughed really hard at. Sometimes you gotta do what you gotta do to finish a project. Because of *Choose Your Victim* we really connected as a team, and, it was then that we were like "Okay, we should be something, we should be a name." And Raynor was super into the name Luchagore. It was just meeting the right people at the right time. If it wasn't for that final project *Choose Your Victim* it wouldn't have formed.

GREEN. I'm interested that this came together in this way across these two rival schools. I'm also interested in the resistance to the name. Because, I can see resistance to it for being on the nose from your white friend being like "Here's what I know about you!"

GUERRERO. Exactly!

GREEN. But in terms of what you were talking about with a brand, so much of your brand and so much of the work that you've put together is about identity in this way. So, I'm interested in the name and how that relates? Were you always interested in doing work that has to do with identity in this way? Or did you feel like "Well, I've picked this name so now we have to do work like this"?

SHIMA. I think, in general, we all have this passion for horror. And I think when Luke mentioned to Gigi way back about the name and then Gigi finally thought it's a great name and this is what we're doing. I think it reflects on what we're passionate about, definitely in the horror community because it's one of the biggest fan bases that are pretty loyal. They're REALLY loyal.

GUERRERO. They're more passionate fans.

SHIMA. Really passionate. More passionate than like comedy or drama. Maybe Sci-fi has a similar fan base. But the horror community is STRONG. It's really, really strong with filmmakers. But, yeah, we never really thought if we were going to do something else. I guess, for instance, carrying the name, we did our

first major series with Warner Brothers T.V., and, it's called *La Quinceañera*, and it's not a horror series at all. It's actually...

GUERRERO. A violent drama.

SHIMA. Yeah, a violent drama, a coming-of-age revenge story that has horror elements in it. So, I think even with the name the way it is, we can really take it anywhere we want to go.

GUERRERO. I think the great thing about not just the name Luchagore, but, how we're branded is it's almost like if you see Luchagore on something now, it's a signature. There are going to be things that people are going to connect and be like "Fuck yeah, that's Luchagore." So, when people see this Warner Brothers show, which is going to be the biggest thing we have coming out this year, it's a very different thing from what our fans have seen. But what the studio saw is that we have a signature element that fans love. So, now it's really up to us with future work, like Raynor says, it's almost like a stamp. Sure, we will make something different for a client or whatever, but you can still tell it's us. You can still tell it's Luchagore. So, to us, it's super important and it just hit me, like, "That's a great name. What am I talking about?" Everyone says "Luchagore, it's so cool." When you hear that, it's super neat. But, yeah, at first, my white friend telling me that, I was like "You are so dumb. What are you talking about." But afterwards, it makes sense. Like Latin horror is Luchagore. And it doesn't necessarily mean that we're Lucha Libre fans or that everything we do is Latin, it just has a cool ring to it, too. Also, what Luke really liked at the time, before we met Raynor, was it just had this element of he's white and I'm Mexican, so let's have a name that's a bit of both. You know, nothing too specific, but it just kind of represents a lot of stuff. So now, it's up to us to keep it that way. Just a brand of life.

SHIMA. Yeah, I don't think anyone's ever really questioned us like "Oh, that's a horrible name, you should change it later on." You know, Warner Brothers was like "We really want Luchagore to be a brand on this." So, I guess it's okay.

GUERRERO. Yeah, that's how they approached us, too. "We just really want the Luchagore brand." And we're like "Okay! Check mark." I love the name.

GREEN. You're like "Warner Brothers just told us we're a brand!"

GUERRERO. Yeah, exactly! Now we just got to make more money.

GREEN. You're always missing that one step before profit.

GUERRERO. Exactly, but it's all worth it.

GREEN. Going back all the way to before you thought about making film, what drew you to horror specifically? Just as a film fan.

SHIMA. Yeah, I think for me, horror films I've grown up with since I was a kid, and, I've always enjoyed it. Even though they scare the crap out of you and they make you feel things and all that. Generally, there is just something unique with horror films that people love to watch. People love to be scared. People love to be afraid, to feel that tension. Almost like they're being threatened but they're not really threatened, the characters on screen are. That's always been something that really enticed me into getting into filmmaking as well. Just that film is really so much damn fun once you get into the swing of things and being able to tell those stories to people. And telling unique ideas, especially with the Luchagore brand having this Tex-Mex feel to it, and having the Latin culture in our stuff was something that we haven't really seen. That was a new breath for us to bring into the horror community, to bring that style of storytelling into the horror world. I just always, always enjoyed wanting to be a part of that. I'm not the kind of person that can be in front of a camera, I'm more or less a good person to be behind the camera and behind the scenes. That was more or less what I wanted to do. It's great to just to be a part of that.

GUERRERO. I agree with everything that Raynor said. A fun story about how I got into horror was that I wasn't allowed to watch any of it, like at all. It was extremely frowned upon in my family. We're Mexican, right? A very Catholic family and household. That stuff is a no-go. Mexican culture is very spiritual. We have a lot of superstitions. You know we have the Virgin Mary and all that jazz. So, that kind of stuff, for my family, was a big no. So, of course, me being me, I was like "Ooh, I wonder why!" So, curiosity just grew to the point where I stole a VHS copy from Blockbuster of Chucky. Like, I stole it. From that moment I was like "Being scared is the coolest thing in the world." I didn't watch much of it, because I was too scared to see it. And, of course, I got in trouble. It wasn't until I was going to turn 10 that I all I wanted to go see *The Exorcist*, because at the time

it came back out. It got re-released. They had deleted scenes added and new color, I think.

GREEN. They added the spider walk in, down the stairs.

GUERRERO. Yeah, exactly, it was in the '00s, or the late '90s because I was going to be 10. I was like "I'm going to be two digits now. I'm old enough." I made this big deal to my mom. I was like "It's not fair!" So, of course, my very Mexican mom was like "*Okay! You wanna get scared? I'll prove you a point!*" So she let me and my cousin go see it, and, I came out crying. I realized how much I loved how scared I was. I thought Linda Blair was in my room for like 2 weeks. No other genre makes you relive it like that. The terror. Like what *Jaws* did to people. Like, no other kind of movie is going to make you be so scared to go into the shower. Or *Arachnophobia*, like being afraid of spiders coming out of the bathtub. No other movies are going to make you relive it in your house. So, that's the ultimate thing with horror.

SHIMA. Yeah, I think the thing with horror, too, is, not that there are always going to be blockbuster hits, but generally the ones we see that are so successful are reaching a younger demographic. I think that's smart, too. You have to adapt to the changing times of this developing, fast-paced world we live in. So, that's a challenge, but it's exciting to try something different and people really resonate with it.

GREEN. I want to focus on some of the work that you all have produced. Do you have any projects that stick out as your favorite or are particularly personal to you and why?

GUERRERO. For me, from our short films, it would have to be *El Gigante*. Because that was the first short that we had a budget for. We did a Kickstarter for it and that was a success. Every short, before and after, has been self-funded and a no-budget kind of deal. What we were able to make with *El Gigante*, still considering it low budget, is just Luchagore. If I have to pick a short that represents us, if someone doesn't know who Luchagore is, I would say watch this and you will know exactly who we are. It would be that one. Although, it's an older one, and all the shorts after *El Gigante* are better from the technical side of

things. They look better and more advanced. Still, *El Gigante* has all the things of who we are with no boundaries.

SHIMA. It's taking everything that we've learned before and putting our blood into that one.

GUERRERO. Now, the Warner Brothers show coming out soon, *La Quinceañera*, that is a very personal project for me as well. There is a lot of my background and culture in it. I think it's going to be the show that will bring, not necessarily more respect to Luchagore, but new doors and new opportunities to show that we don't just do *El Gigante* style gore and horror. We can actually be bigger. So that's a project I'm so excited for the world to see. I'm dying inside. Just release the damn thing, you know! It's going to be incredible when people see that.

SHIMA. Yeah, *El Gigante* is really the one that threw us out there. Even the previous stuff we did before, we weren't as recognized, but we were on that kind of uphill battle. And once we got the funding for it, we were really passionate about the story and the novel. So, once we wrote that first chapter into a short film, the Kickstarter funding just made us really focus hard and just practice our skills and make this solid as possible. Because the intent was to make a full-length feature, so we really wanted to use this as a proof of concept. So, we really wanted to use our skills at the highest level and make it happen. It was just a huge success on our end and a huge success on the festival circuit and helped get us recognized around the world. Which is amazing on that end. And it ran for forever. That's something that we still have in the back of our heads, it's not done yet. We're waiting for the right people to come along and the right timing. Everything takes time. I would say recently, it would have to be *La Quinceañera*. As a team, that's something that doesn't really come along too often. When we were approached to collaborate with this new program, that was a huge opportunity for us to have a bigger budget and be able to work with people from L.A. who are well recognized and have these assets to hand down to you and train to be a better filmmaker. Being able to work on a larger scale was another stepping stone for our careers to be able to look back and be like "Wow!" It really took a lot out of us to make that and to make that happen. Especially the time frame we had to get this done and the ambitiousness of the project doesn't go

unrecognized. I really hope people see that and see we really tried to pour as much as we could in with the amount of time we had.

GREEN. I love what you're saying about *El Gigante* as a proof of concept. I'm sure it occurred to all of you that is very similar to Sam Raimi and *The Evil Dead*. Thinking about wanting to extend it beyond, what was it about the novel and the story that appealed to you?

SHIMA. First off, the story, which was written by our amazing, talented friend, Shane McKenzie, it's kind of like *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* with a crazy Mexican twist. That's what really kind of drew me into it as well. It's uniqueness and not necessarily similarities to *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, but it was breathing new life into that kind of universe. The characters, especially *El Gigante* and the family, they were just so unique on their own. It was almost more interesting when the family was in the picture than the two main characters. I was always like "Fuck! This is great! What's going to happen?" Shane is a very descriptive writer. He's just able to place you in an area and make you envision it. It's engaging and very fast-paced. That's just something I really loved about it and it really grasped me. Just the Latin culture he infused in it, even though it's dark, twisted, and sick.

GUERRERO. Just the book brought back the old school horror that we all fall in love with. *Texas Chainsaw*, Freddy Kreuger, *Halloween*, all of those films. This book really brought those kind of villains back. Like Raynor was saying, when they were in the picture, you were excited. All those horror films back then, it was about the villains. It was about the bad guys, really. We're not going to wear Jamie Lee Curtis on a t-shirt. We're going to wear Michael Myers. Let's be honest, right? It was all about the bad guys. That's what this book is really about. We were like "Holy shit!" *El Gigante* can really be, and still today we want it to be, a new villain. We can see the *El Gigante* family being a part of the horror family, really. People are just going to love that guy. Like, Jigsaw became a new one, and, like you have all these new ones, but, *El Gigante* has this old school vibe to it. The book is atrocious. You just can't put it down. You feel the dirt and the smell in the book. It's so descriptive. Immediately, we were all so into it. And yeah, it's Mexican, it's horror, it's everything we love. It's Lucha Libre. Just the combination was already everything our team loves. So it was a match made in Hell.



GREEN. Both of you bringing up the family and relating it to the family in the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* reminds of some academic work I've seen about *Texas Chainsaw* and how it represents the '70s. When apocalypse culture was huge, and people became obsessed with the idea the world was going to end, and this family is how people are going to survive after the world crumbles. This is what we will be like. So, hearing you say that makes me think about *El Gigante* as this Mexican Leatherface and what that represents. How that family works in terms of culture and how we see the U.S./Mexico border. I don't know if that's intentional.

GUERRERO. No, it totally is. The social commentary of border crossing, I've never seen anybody do it this way where it's not so in your face. I've seen a couple border crossing horror films that were very much on the nose about it. I mean, the first horror film I made was about border crossing and it was called *Dead Crossing*. It was about zombie border guards that eat Mexicans when they cross. The thing about *El Gigante* is even though it touches on that subject, I think it does it a lot more subtly and I think it's a lot more fun. It's not necessarily about that, even though it relates to the cruelty of it. Because it is a problem that we face today, badly. I remember, one of the first things Raynor and I thought was it's subtle, but it's there. We really wanted to showcase that. That whole scene in the beginning with the mom and daughter, and you have the coyote, all of that is not in the book. That does not exist. So, we wrote that just so there is a reality to it. So, there is a connection for the view to understand, yeah, that shit happens. You know? That horrible stuff you just witnessed is true. It is happening today. All that, we added on to it so you can really feel for our lead character, who does not quite escape this situation, unfortunately. But I think that's also what makes *El Gigante* so impactful is that we set it in a reality world, and then brought a new...just kind of built a Luchagore world around it. At the end of the day, what *El Gigante* shows is a lot of tragedy, with a lot of social commentary with it. Including the cannibalism, which has been a problem in Mexico. You know? There have been a lot of stories where people have been fed human tacos, or tacos made out of stray dogs. Stuff like that. Not just in Mexico, but you hear stories from all over the world of people eating people. It was really interesting to us, although *El Gigante* does touch on border crossing, it does not touch on that in such an explicit way. It's not a story where you have one side or the other, the Mexicans crossing who are bad guys bringing drugs and the police who are the good guys, or films where it is the other way. We sympathize with the immigrants

who are trying to cross and the Americans are torturing them. It's always one or the other and you have to pick a side in those films, but in *El Gigante*, it's not really about that. It's just the fun of Mexicans eating Mexicans, and you don't have to pick a side. That was so interesting in the story. There is a corrupt sheriff. There is good people and bad people, and it's all about this creepy-ass border town. It's awesome. The book doesn't have the typical border-crossing elements. So, we try our best to make that feature happen.

GREEN. The end of the movie, with people being served the meat, any time I see that kind of consumption in a movie, it's hard for me not to think of consumption as a culture. I think that's the zombie metaphor that Romero was working with, especially in *Dawn of the Dead*. And Stephen King's *Thinner*, in terms of consumption coming out of 1980s culture. So, it's interesting to hear you point those parts out. Because the beginning with the coyote and the end are the parts that really stick out to me the most. Something I'm curious about, I know you're based out of Canada, but are all of you from Canada originally?

GUERRERO. Everybody is except for myself. I'm from Mexico. The only other people in Luchagore that are not from Vancouver, are our sound designers who are from Mexico City, our composer is from Kansas. But everyone else that works on the sets is from Canada.

GREEN. That's really interesting to me. Denver is not quite the Southwest, but I have lots of friends and colleagues from the Southwest here. I have a close friend who grew up near the border and they were telling me about coyotes, and how they operate in the open and with pretty much immunity. People have written about the border as an important concept in Latinx/Chicanx theory. It stuck out to me as something that was being focused on by this company from Canada. So, I wanted to ask if the border is something that is thought about that much in Canada and the northern part of the continent.

SHIMA. I don't necessarily think...because Canada likes to hide all of that stuff.

GREEN. I'm from the Midwest, so I get the idea of politeness upfront and darkness underneath.

SHIMA. The only stuff we hear about is major breaking news from the U.S. Yeah, all that other stuff you hear, that we were just talking about, it's very rare we hear about it other than general worldwide news. Generally, up here, the media shelters Canadians from what's going on. You really have to do your own thorough research to look into it. I love news, and I love following what's going on in the U.S. For me, it's a valuable source for ideas.

GUERRERO. What I'm used to in Mexico is you see the gore, and the deaths, and the hangings by the cartel in the newspapers on the street corners. I remember taking Raynor and Luke to Mexico and that was the first thing that shocked them was the front cover of the newspaper. The moment we moved here was the first thing we noticed in Canada was the peacefulness. You got to do your research. Even when you watch the news, some of the stuff you watch on the news, if it's not a big thing, the worst thing you will see is a car crash. I agree, with Raynor, a lot of the stuff you go to look up. It's not necessarily shelter from here, but it's not something that is announced.

GREEN. I just have one more question. I know you're all excited for *La Quinceañera*, but beyond that, what do you hope for your future?

GUERRERO. I think we can both say a feature!

SHIMA. I think, yeah, right now, after learning so much from *La Quinceañera*, during that time we were still trying to make *El Gigante* and then we had to put that aside. I threw it to Gigi, let's still make a feature. Even though it's a series, we shot it like a feature over 20 days. We still haven't made something that's ours yet. We've come up with the idea of making a low budget feature, but something that is totally doable with the resources we have. I don't want to say too much about it, but it's something that takes place on a boat and we've been developing it since Summer 2017. We just recently finished the script. So, our next goal is to get this feature funded and turn it around before next year. I'm really excited about it and I know Gigi is excited about it. Just the whole crew because we haven't made anything in a while.

GUERRERO. Yeah, we just made a couple of shorts recently.

SHIMA. No more shorts, right?

GUERRERO. Yeah, we started a hashtag. #NoMoreShorts. We have 18 of them. It's too many, man. *El Gigante* is something that we know, in our hearts, deserves a budget, deserves experience and world-building that the book has. So, if we got to pull a Martin Scorsese and wait 5 years to make something we really want, we will. It's worth it with *El Gigante*. I'm actually glad nobody wanted to fund us originally, because we would have messed that up. Seeing how much we've learned over the last couple years and what we've made since then, we have that skill that we were missing before. Even just developing this new feature, just the timeliness and our commitment is already a different style. We already knew what we wanted to do and where to go with it. Now, we just kind of understand more, even the business side. You need to get funded to make a feature. So, we just need to make something that is low budget, that is super good, still our signature, and it's something we can get funded easier than something as big as *El Gigante*. And we're so pumped.

# If It's Not Intersectional, It's Not Monstrosity. An Interview on Horror and Monstrosity with Marina Levina

MIRANDA DOTTIE OLZMAN

## About Marina Levina

Marina Levina is an Associate Professor of Media Studies at the University of Memphis. Her research is based in critical/cultural studies with the focus on feminist and intersectional theoretical frameworks. She is particularly interested in how mediated cultural landscape constructs bodies, subjectivities and citizenships as a part of techno-scientific, medical, and political discourses. Dr. Levina's current research interests are focused on cultural studies of monstrosity, critical rhetoric of science, medicine, and technology, critical surveillance studies, and affect theory. Her books include the co-edited (with Diem-My T. Bui) volume *Monster Culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (2013) and a co-edited collection (Kelly E. Happe and Jennell Johnson) *Biocitizenship. The Politics of Bodies, Governance, and Power* (2018).

OLZMAN. Did you grow up watching horror? And if so, did you have an all-time favorite and what made it so?

LEVINA. I don't think I grew up watching horror per say because I grew up in Soviet Union. So we had very different. There was no Dracula or Frankenstein or whatever else. Werewolves. You know. But I did grow up reading a whole lot of the Brothers Grimm. And I did grow up reading a whole bunch of Hans Christian Andersen. And just generally the folktales, the Russian folktales; Baba Yaga and the house on chicken legs that she lives in. I guess the joke is that life in Soviet Union was scary enough, was horror enough, you know? But no, I definitely come from a culture where horror is just sort of part of the vernacular. Or at least if not horror, at least the gothic is part of the vernacular, it's part of how you

The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 6, No. 2 & 3  
Copyright © 2018

interpret the world, part of how you relate to the world. You know they talk about the Russian soul or the Russian perspective. And the thing is, I say sometimes things and my American students are completely horrified because it just sounds really depressing but actually it just sounds uplifting. For example, in Berkeley I used to do these talks. Because, around radiation all my students would get really freaked out and I would try to make them feel better. I would say, "Just so that you know, it's going to get worse. Once you leave the college, it's going to get worse. But don't worry about it because eventually it will get better." Yeah. So I definitely, I think sort of the way of relating to the world as the idea that bad things that are just going to happen and it's normal and that you're not entitled to happiness, you know? I think that definitely was part of my upbringing just naturally living where I was living.

OLZMAN. How old were you when you moved here?

LEVINA. I was almost fifteen.

OLZMAN. Oh, so you like really grew up there.

LEVINA. I grew up in Soviet Union yes. I grew up in the Ukraine. I was like three months shy of 15, like two months shy.

OLZMAN. That's such a vast difference to move from there like in your teenager years to just go. Can I ask what prompted the move?

LEVINA. We were refugees because we are Jewish and anyways, and it was hard growing up Jewish in Soviet Union. There was anti-Semitism institutionalized in the system of how many Jews were allowed to get into university. There was a lot of violence in school. Bullying and violence. It wasn't a great place to grow up Jewish. It's also, like Jewish wasn't really a religious identity because no one had religion, because you know religion is the opium of the masses, that's Marx. So Jewish was your ethnic identity. So you were either Russian, so there was actually a line in the passport where it was recorded what was your ethnic identity. And you were Russian or Ukrainian, or Georgian or what the other republics were or you were Jewish which didn't have a republic of your own you know what I mean? So it was just a hard place to be, and my parents they made lives for themselves. But they wanted better for me. My mom hated the whole system very

much so, but she also wanted me to have opportunities and have a life that I just would not be given a chance to have there. So we were refugees. So we have to get rid of our citizenship and be able to fend off and then we lived in Austria and Italy for six months as refugees waiting for United States giving us permission to enter as refugees.

OLZMAN. What year was that?

LEVINA. It was 1989. So started the process of leaving, we left in May and we didn't get to the United States until November of 1989 and by that point the world was a vastly different place because of the fall of the Berlin Wall.

OLZMAN. Did you start watching horror then when you moved here? How did horror come into your life?

LEVINA. When I went to college. So I came here and I didn't speak any English and high school was this like, terrible experience because you know Kansas, terrible human beings, you know. Anyways, high school is just like this disconnect that I experienced and I went on to college. I've said it about being in college, (I) found my people who ended up being queer folks. Even though I identify as being straight myself, I definitely developed an affinity and emotional and cultural and persecution, affinity in some ways with these queer students on my campus. So I started hanging out with them. And then, you know, *Interview with the Vampire* out, came out and *Interview with the Vampire* was sort of my very first like, moment of like, feeling like these are my people, the vampires those are my people. You know?! So I mean, that I think the queer community on campus at the University of Illinois and kind of prompted me to the queerness of monstrosity. I think that has really opened me up and I just thought it was like I embrace the goth lifestyle. I like all trying to be goth, except I am really too short and too cute to be goth. So I couldn't really get scary. So it was just really cute and anyways, it was really frustrating. But I think because I'm really tried to be scary. I shaved my head and people would be like, oh look so adorable. I'm like, "No! I look frightening!" Like a vampire. But, I was just too cute to be really scary. But I tried, you know, the shave, the leather jackets, had Doc Martens, and you know me now. It's a very different aesthetic obviously. But I still have my pair of Doc Martens I had in college. I saved them. You know now, I feel like I'm more intimidating now because I've learned how to channel my accent and my

Russianness into intimidation. So I think graduate students sometimes are, they're not like scared of me, they love me. They're not scared of me, but they also know I mean business and I'm very serious about the work.

So anyway, *Interview with the Vampire* was really the first moment and then when I was in Berkeley, I got interviewed by this public radio station in Louisville about monstrosity on Halloween. Anne Rice was also on the phone and I was fangirling all over, like my students were laughing at me. They were like, you sound like us, and they asked me, "How did you get into monsters?" "Well Miss. Rice, I just love you so much." Like *Interview with the Vampire*. They asked me what vampires mean and I told them my opinion. Anne Rice said the phrase that I wanted on my tombstone, she said, "Marina is absolutely right about vampires." I can die happy. Like I don't need peer reviewed articles. I don't need anything else. I have Anne Rice telling me I am right about vampires.

OLZMAN. What drew you to study monstrosity, horror, and popular culture?

LEVINA. I think the identification with monstrosity came from, a feeling of difference, and a profound feeling of difference that I had my entire life and not just feeling of difference but the systematic exercise of difference against my own body. So it's not like, I mean I don't want to dismiss anything, but it's not like, I dyed my hair or I just felt different. I don't want to dismiss those experiences obviously. But it was also like I was a shy kid. I'm not a natural activist and not a natural radical. I don't consider myself to be a radical in a sense of the word. And I was always a shy kid who liked books. And in some ways I'm still a shy kid who likes books and the exercise of difference against me as a kid was so profoundly violent that I think when I saw the same when we came to the United States, the fantasy was that this is going to be different - that this is the country that things are different. Like there is none of this here, you know what I mean? And my first interaction with the then GLBT community and now queer community has been through hearing stories about the violence that's directed against queer folk in this country. And I was just 18, 19 at the time. And I was like, this is almost exactly what I went through. This is not OK. This is America! You know, and I think that really, I mean that sense that this should not be happening here in some ways. When you've invested as much as we did in coming to this country, when you're a refugee, you have to believe in the myth of America. You've invested so much into it. You know, like people say, whoa



exceptionalism America. We believed in that and I still have to in some ways believe in it. Otherwise, what was it all for? So to me, monstrosity and the study of difference and the political necessity of those two things, that really tied together in college, and I became a very strong ally. I started some organizations; I did educational workshops about queer issues on campus. I started Campus AIDS coalition. I got some death threats. I got some stuff written on my dorm room. You know, stuff that came along with this. But you know like in this year, when I think about this, I keep thinking about Audre Lorde's Poem, "A Litany for Survival". And it's like you're afraid if you speak, you're afraid if you don't, so it's better to speak remembering we were never meant to survive. And I think the study of monstrosity has gotten deeply tied to that, to political, to teaching and scholarship as political activism because I no longer occupied buildings for the union. I'm no longer in the community doing community activism, but I feel like my scholarship and my teaching is my activism and I have to live up to that. How's that for an answer?

OLZMAN. Are there any horror films you refuse to see?

LEVINA. I won't do torture porn genre. I could probably be convinced to watch a movie or two every now and then if I'm in the right mood with the right people. But it's not something I want to watch. I don't need to watch it, I lived it. [Laughs] You know? So there are two things that genuinely scare me that I just don't watch because I just really get terrified watching it. One is snakes. I'm genuinely terrified of snakes. *Snakes on a Plane* is my idea of a personal hellhole. A nightmare. I did not watch that movie. I had to recognize the music that they play at the beginning of the previews so that I could close my ears and shut my eyes and pretend that this is not happening. And with all my love for Samuel L. Jackson, I still didn't see that movie and don't intend to. So snakes let's just interpret that broadly, and second of all, I really have trouble with home invasions. It like freaks me out.

OLZMAN. So like, *The Purge*?

LEVINA. Yeah, like *The Strangers*. Like when they leave the house and they torture those people, I am not ok with this. I mean I've watched some takes of it. Like *Hush* is sort of a take on it. Sort of more of an empowerment take. But if it's like people are taking over the house and then torturing and killing the people

who live there, it just freaks me out. I am a person who, when I was about eight months pregnant, watched, *We Need to Talk About Kevin* and *Rosemary's Baby* as a double feature. And I will say this to you, *We Need to Talk About Kevin* messed me up and I wish I didn't see it because it was messed up. I guess being pregnant was not a good time to see it. It wasn't good for my mental health. So yeah, those are the things I do not watch.

OLZMAN. At the monstrosity preconference at the 2017 National Communication Association convention, you shared some really interesting thoughts about Communication Studies as a discipline, your views of calling it a discipline, and what that can bring to the study of monstrosity. Can you share that here again? And/or what can monstrosity as a lens bring to Communication Studies?

LEVINA. Yes, I said that I don't think of Communication as a discipline. I think about it as a field of study, and this is just generally how I feel about Communication. I get uncomfortable...not uncomfortable, but I just don't think it's a discipline. The reason I went to get my PhD in Communication as opposed to anything else was because it was a field. Because it's a field it doesn't just allow interdisciplinary, it necessitates interdisciplinarity. Like, in order to be a Communication scholar you have to be interdisciplinary. Like there is not real other way to function in the field, especially in Cultural, Critical Cultural Studies, and Media Studies. So my work has been interdisciplinary. It has been allowed to be interdisciplinary and its interdisciplinary naturally because of the variety of the field and I think I said at that time that because of that, to me monstrosity is fundamentally an intersectional and interdisciplinary enterprise. I think I said something like, if it's not intersectional, it's not monstrosity. And I thought about that because you know, it's nice to say big things and then you start thinking whether or not you can support it with any sort of other claims. So it's just the thing to say, but I will, I will do this. I will go on record as saying this and the reason why I will say this and the reason I think that monstrosity is necessary to a field like Communication is because I think interdisciplinarity necessitates intersectionality. Like to me those two things go together. Again, interdisciplinarity that's not intersectional is not interdisciplinary and again, I've using intersectionality in the broadest possible terms right? Like, looking at how these different modes of managing, disciplining, of classifying identity can be

combined or bodies can be combined and studied. And to me, monstrosity, what makes a monster such a powerful object of identification that we talk about this idea that like we watched *Interview with the Vampire* and suddenly things became clear that in our heads, right? It's because they're not one thing. Nor will they ever be one thing. Because if you look at a vampire, I mean, a vampire has been alive for what? Hundreds, thousands of years. Right. And this is what I tell my students. I'm like, imagine you were alive for like hundreds of years, would you who truly care about things like sexuality or gender or even race or age or any of this right? Or would you be like, after the first hundred years, would you be like, you know I guess I'll sleep with men now. Like, you know what I mean, like at some point won't everything get so old that you just like kind of move onto the next thing. Right? And sort of like, yeah, that makes total sense right? I feel like if you're alive for long enough, you start caring less and less. Right? And so, you start exploring and that exploration leads to this necessary intersectionality as a way of life. So to me monstrosity is fundamentally about intersectionality. And any sort of study of monstrosity to me that is worth a damn is a study that acknowledges intersectionality in some way, shape or form. Like not every single study of monstrosity has to be about race, but it can't be just about one thing. It can't be just about sexuality, it can't be just about gender, it can't be just about race, it has to be about something broader. Otherwise you're not capturing everything monstrosity is.

OLZMAN. What are emerging areas you see in the study of monstrosity or areas that you believe we need to delve further into?

LEVINA. I think it's becoming a lot more intersectional. I mean, I think Bernadette [Calafell] is definitely leading the charge on that. I think it's becoming a lot more political. It's always been political. When I was getting my dissertation done, during my dissertation, my dissertation was inspired by *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* Season Four and how Spike was chipped as opposed to staked and so it was these different ways of managing monstrosity through this sort of traditional, like we must kill and there's a stake or we can chip it and the idea of the soul anyway, so this is why. I remember at the time I just wasn't taken seriously at all. At my school, I was the *Buffy* girl. My colleagues would have these panels to which I could have contributed. Never invited me, never anything. It was something, say it was some things that you have to hide, you have work at being

presented as objective. I actually one time submitted a panel on monstrosity to conference that shall remain nameless and I got rejected because I did not quantify monstrosity. Like how do I know there are a lot of monsters? Do I have the numbers for how many monsters there are? I was like, what are you talking about? What?! So anyway, so I think there's a lot more legitimacy to the field because of scholars like Bernadette [Calafell], like Kendall Phillips who are well established in the field and who are doing, you know, who are making full professor while doing this kind of work, and that's what I said that at the monstrosity panel. The preconference was just like this very legitimizing experience in some way, shape or form so I think because it's becoming more legitimate and more people are more invested. And I think that a lot more Internet stuff is centered around monstrosity and that brings it to the forefront. So I think it opens up the possibility of doing more openly political work, openly intersectional work, that you don't have to hide behind. Like I quantify, monstrosity as five monsters this month, six monsters this month I'm like, do you want like a break down? What do you want? So, I think that's where it's going and I'm actually really excited about where it's going. I think it's going in some really interesting directions and I think that the work that is getting produced is just a whole lot more interesting.

OLZMAN. What does your work add to the research in monstrosity and horror?

LEVINA. Well, I think in general, my work, I've always said this, that my work first and foremost in all its shapes in all its iterations is concerned with the question of difference, how do we manage, identify, and classify difference and after we do that, what do we decide to do with that. I believe that science, technology and medicine are, in our society, are some of the most important ways in which we not just manage or classify and produce difference, but also legitimize difference. And therefore it is important, so my work on *Disrupt or Die* essentially talks about how if you move health online, what does it mean about the way you see sick bodies? Because you know the idea is that a body has to be identified as different and one way in which it identified as different is by being labeled ill or sick or able or disabled. There's something about the body that's identified this way and the science, biomedical establishment is very much a leading way in which it gets identified. Now, if you move biomedical establishment online and you personalize health, what does it mean about the way

we see our own body as healthy or unhealthy? As you know, “monstrous” and how do we then proceed on to try “fix them”? So, because I think my work is interdisciplinary partially because I have attention span of a squirrel and so I just go where my interests lead at the time. I am not a very disciplined person by any stretch of imagination and so that's where my head was at that point and that I was really fascinated with that move online and right now my work has gone into a somewhat different direction, but I think the unifying thread about how I sell it for my tenure and promotion files is a work of like critical and cultural studies of difference.

OLZMAN. I know that there can be sometimes projects or things you want to keep under wraps until they come out, but are there any projects you're working on right now that you'd like to share about?

LEVINA. Well, I think this will be out by the time the interview comes out and it gets published, but I just completed. Well, it's like now it's going to through the copy-editing process, a commentary section of *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* journal on cruelty in the age of Trump and essentially I've gotten really interested in the last several years in affect theory and how it can inform against the study and understanding of difference and one of the things that I got interested in is this idea how Trump has been identified as cruel. People really hated Bush and hated Cheney it, but we didn't talk about some culture as being cruel in the same way you talk about Trump and Trump's administration as being cruel. So this idea of trying to tease out what cruelty is. So this was a commentary section. So we did a panel, at NCA 2017, and Rob DeChaine who's the editor of this journal, came and he was really interested. Kumarini Silva, my colleague came on board as a co-editor. This is what I've been working on so crazily for this last month because the deadline was so tight, so it should be out in March. Hopefully. And in it, I actually write about my own, it's part autoethnography, so I write in very deep details about my experiences growing up in Soviet Union and the violence of growing up in Soviet Union. And then coming to the United States and having Russian Jews become very racist and very cruel to people of color themselves and sort of looking at cruelty as sort of like, this attachment to Whiteness that comes with this identity. So that's what I'm working on. That was just completed. I have a book on biocitizenship, an edited collection that's coming out from NYU Press that's going to be cool. But the

newer projects...I'm working with Kyle Christiansen on vulnerability in horror films. I think the next book is probably going to be something about Whiteness and vulnerability because I felt like ever since the 2017 election, I really felt like I had to put my work with new media, digital media on a back burner because I didn't think it really addressed what I needed to say right now at the moment. So I started to transition more to a lot of autoethnographic work. And starting to draw and my own personal experiences as a way of trying to theorize it means to be vulnerable.

# Horror Films Almost Dare You to Come and Watch Them. An Interview With Kendall Phillips

HANEEN S. GHABRA

## About Kendall Phillips

Kendall Phillips is a Professor at the Department of Communication and Rhetorical Studies at Syracuse University. His research and teaching interests include rhetorical theory, criticism, advocacy, monstrosity, controversy, dissent, and public memory. He is the author of *Projected Fears. Horror Films and American Culture, Dark Directions. Romero, Craven, Carpenter, The Modern Horror Film, A Place of Darkness and The Rhetoric of Horror in Early American Cinema*. He is also the editor of *Framing Public Memory*. Phillips has been awarded the Judith Greenberg Seinfeld Distinguished Faculty Fellowship (2009), the University Teacher/Scholar of the Year Award (2008), and the Excellence in Graduate Education Award (2005).

GHABRA. How do you understand the relationship between horror and monstrosity?

PHILLIPS. I would say that the two concepts share a great deal of historical and conceptual ground. Our early conceptions of horror, in terms of folklore and mythology, often seemed wrapped up in supernatural entities. Similarly, some of the most prominent definitions of horror rely on the notion of a monster as in Noël Carroll's famous definition. But, in spite of the overlap, I do think it is important to keep the concepts distinct.

I think of horror as a kind of narrative and affective framework. I have always found it interesting that horror is one of the only genres that takes its name from the feeling we are intended to experience. As others have noted, the horror genre is remarkably elastic. You can have horror films set in the old west, in the future, in urban centers, in rural areas, etc. Horror stories are often based on some

The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 6, No. 2 & 3

Copyright © 2018

monstrous entity – sometimes supernaturally monstrous but sometimes the monstrosity is based more in actions or character. But, horror does not necessarily have to have particular monstrous entity. Consider *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) or the earlier Australian film *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975). In both those films, we never really know the cause of the mysterious happenings so there is never an identifiable monster. But, both films successfully craft an atmosphere of dread and evoke a sense of anxiety and fear.

Monsters, of course, are often used in horror narratives as the source of fear. But even here, I think it is important to recognize the often complicated position monsters occupy. While there are certainly numerous films that portray the monster as simply monstrous and something to be feared, many of the most prominent horror narratives craft a much more complicated monster. Think about the seductive nature of Count Dracula in many of the filmic depictions of the vampire. We fear Dracula but also admire his freedom and, perhaps, desire his forbidden kiss. Or, the sympathetic feelings evoked by Anthony Perkins performance in *Psycho* (1960). By the end of the narrative we learn that Norman is the monster but even in those final scenes I think we maintain a level of sympathy for him as a deeply wounded individual.

So, while they are deeply interrelated, I think it is useful to maintain a distinction. Horror does not always use a specific monster to provoke fear and by the same token monsters are not always just entities to be feared. Each narrative of horror and each appearance of the monstrous deserves its own careful reading.

GHABRA. For centuries now, the horror industry, has been able to do two things: Reflect the anxiety of the American public and reveal ideological biases at certain historical junctures. As hegemonic structures are reflected through monsters, it becomes of great necessity to deconstruct and dismantle these assemblages through the intersections of race, gender, class, sexuality, and so forth. Critically studying the horror industry, not only informs us of these anxiety-ridden ideological and historical junctures, but in turn assists the critical thinker in applying these skills to other forms of rhetoric and media. As someone that has been unpacking the histories of horror in the field of rhetorical theory and criticism, I want to start off with first asking you how we can situate horror within both rhetoric and cultural studies?



PHILLIPS. For me, rhetoric and cultural studies are so deeply interrelated that I'm not always sure where one begins and the other ends. I think of films as, first and foremost, an invitation to a complex set of experiences. I borrow this sentiment from the work of Tom Benson and Carolyn Anderson and I think I've quoted or paraphrased this idea in almost every film related piece I've published. Rhetorical studies has helped me learn to focus on these textual invitations and think deeply about the way a particular text draws an audience towards particular meanings, feeling, reactions. What I would add to this idea is that the way elements of a film invite audiences to share an experience is always situated within broader contexts of history, culture, etc. This is where much of the scholarship described as cultural studies, or critical theory, becomes most useful. Cultural studies helps me understand the cultural context and the ways that ideologies, patterns of meaning, and relations of power help to situate our experience of a film.

If you'll forgive an autobiographical note, my first interest related to film was actually in controversial films. I was initially fascinated by the kind of powerful public reactions that occurred in relation to films that seemed to violate some set of cultural norms or standards. I spent a good deal of time tracing the history of controversial films and examining how people reacted to them, the kinds of arguments they made in condemning and supporting controversial films. It was during this research project that I began to notice how often horror films were promoted as being controversial, even when the particular horror film was not especially provocative. I came to realize that horror was one of the only genres to actively promise to shock and offend audiences. Horror films almost dare you to come and watch them. That was a fascinating rhetorical stance and so I found myself increasingly interested in the genre both in terms of its broad appeal and in terms of the kind of cultural work being done by these films.

In analyzing these kinds of films, I draw heavily on various of bodies of literature. film studies, Gothic studies, feminist theory, queer theory, critical race theory, etc. Each of these bodies of literature has a valuable perspective on notions of horror and monstrosity. What rhetoric brings to the table, at least in my mind, is a deep investment in the way a given horrific text emerges within a particular context. Rhetoric provides a useful point of view for thinking about this relationship between text and context and recognizing the complex interplay between the two.

GHABRA. In your book, *Dark Directions*, you write about how monsters symbolize deep fractures that are emerging in the American way of life. For example, you write that the features and anxieties of the 1950s was a fear of invasion, while in the 1930s and 1940s it was a threat from within. Can you talk about these fractures and how they have changed over time?

PHILLIPS. I've been thinking a lot about this issue lately. In a more recent essay, I argued that we might think of some popular culture texts as circulating around what I called "affective seams." These are points of disjuncture and rupture within the broader culture that encompass not only symbolic and political meaning but also sentiments and feelings; hence, "affective seams." Some texts of popular culture seem to work to stitch together these points of fracture while others seem to work to represent the fractures or allegorize them. Many horror films seem to me to operate differently. They work to unstitch these ideological and affective seams and to invite us to consider the fracture itself.

I find it interesting that many horror films seem to involve a specific moment of cinematic fracture, often as the monster is revealed. Consider that stunning moment in *Frankenstein* (1931) when the Creature's face is first seen. The Creature walks backward through the doorway and then slowly turns. As he turns the camera makes two awkward jump cuts forward towards the grotesque face. For an instant the Creature's face and lifeless eyes fill the screen. It is an odd moment in which the camera suddenly leaps to life, violating the classical dictum that the camera remain largely invisible and serve only to give us a view of the action. For me, this is a wonderful example of the cinematic fracture within the film that also connects to the violation such a scene would have been for the audience.

Much of my work has been to try to connect the ideological and affective fractures with the cinematic fractures and to inquire as to the kind of cultural work this connection performs. I have tried to understand how the cinematic fractures within horror films resonate with the broader fractures occurring within the culture and considering how these resonances invite audiences to a particular set of experiences.

GHABRA. What about actual horror figures, like the zombie or the alien? How do they represent differences from one another through the interstices of race,

gender, class and so forth? For example, what are some of the psychological, sociological and ideological dimensions behind each figure?

PHILLIPS. For me, the key is historical context. In my mind the vampire or zombie may represent horrific otherness but the way they represent and the cultural significance of these representations differs depending on the context within which they emerge. For example, the vampire consistently represents a sense of chaos and this often entails a sexual element. The drinking of blood suggests a kind of libidinous consumption and the mixing of blood a biological connection. But, when Bela Lugosi played *Dracula* in 1931, this mixing of blood was probably viewed in relation to eugenics and, at least in my reading, an anti-Semitic anxiety over immigrants from eastern Europe. Fast-forward to the 1990s and the AIDS epidemic and the mixing of blood and its relation to sexuality takes on a very different significance. So, in a film like *Interview with the Vampire* (1994) you still have the connection between sexuality and biological but its meaning has shifted in relation to queer sexuality and the broader issues of a public health crisis largely being ignored by the governments of the world.

I think a good example of this is in the late George Romero's brilliant "Living Dead" films. Zombies lie at the center of each of these films but their rhetorical function differs. *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) should be understood in relation to racial and political tensions of the late 1960s where the zombies seem to stand in for a nation in conflict with itself. Fast forward to 2005 and *Land of the Dead* is, in my mind at least, a brilliant response to September 11<sup>th</sup>. The zombies are now cast in a much wider, global context and even presented as sympathetic victims of the imperialist tendencies of the surviving humans.

GHABRA. You have a new book coming out soon titled, *A Place of Darkness. The Rhetoric of Horror in Early Cinema*, and I was particularly fascinated by your idea of the language around horror. You state that within language, the genre of horror came into existence. Why were there no discursive frames for horrific elements prior to the existence of language and is this a way of silencing the discursive?

PHILLIPS. This project arose out of a question I had been ignoring for almost a decade. If the term "horror film" did not emerge into public parlance until 1931, what were all the films that used horrific images prior to 1931. So the genesis of

the project was mainly about the discourse – what language did people use to talk about Edison’s version of *Frankenstein* in 1910 or even Méliès *La Manoir du Diable* in 1896. What I found, however, was much more interesting. In America at least, there seemed to be a concerted effort to constrain and discipline the depictions of the horrific, supernatural, and monstrous. From about 1912, American filmmakers crafted what I have labeled the “American uncanny.” In this cinematic frame, what appears to be supernatural or monstrous is almost always a hoax or mistake. So, think of the classic *Scooby Doo* cartoons in which the monster was always unmasked and revealed to be some local swindler. The framing of the supernatural and horrific as always a hoax helped inculcate a particular Western, progressive, and pragmatic viewing perspective. Reinforcing this perspective was the way these films depicted characters who were fooled into actually being frightened by the fake monster or ghost. These were almost always women, people of color, or foreigners. So, the framework reinforced a sense of American exceptionalism, American men were not credulous enough to fall for superstitious nonsense. This framework lasted, more or less, until 1931 when the horror film emerged with *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*.

Of course, with the emergence of the horror genre, filmmakers were freer to engage in depictions of the horrific and monstrous. But, it is also worth noting that the language of horror and the idea of it as being a formal genre of film also constitutes a kind of disciplining; a containing of the horrific and monstrous within a particular set of cultural expectations.

GHABRA. You also state in your book, that you are not only interested in the rhetorical dimensions surrounding films, but also the discourses surrounding audience reception and promotion of films. Can you speak more to this?

PHILLIPS. I think this question really gets at the heart of this new book project. Prior to the emergence of a stable language of horror, the films that engaged with the horrific were less clearly defined. Of course, audiences, critics, and producers talked about these films but the language was much less predetermined. There was almost a kind of search for the right way to talk about films that depicted the horrific and also how to justify them. For me, the archives of film producers and of audience and critical responses provide a rich resource of the struggles to find the right language to frame horrific films.

From a methodological perspective, I also think that these discourses are useful in understanding the context in which films initially circulated and avoiding the potential of anachronistically projecting our perspective onto films from the past.

GHABRA. Where do you see horror studies or the industry in general heading in the next few years, especially now with a change in the political climate? How do you see the industry revealing from within, but also from without, for example the Middle East or other regions?

PHILLIPS. This is the million-dollar question and if I could really answer it, I'd be living in Hollywood and making lots of money! But, on a serious note, I do think that horror, as with all genres, is moving in an increasingly transnational and global direction. We've seen this happening most dramatically in the big-budget action films where there is more and more pressure to appeal to a global audience. Horror, like drama, is not always so amenable to transcultural translations. I mean, a giant robot attacking a city is more or less universal. But ghosts have very particular cultural significance. But, even with this cultural limitation, we are seeing more and more movement of horror across national and cultural lines. There seems to be a new generation of filmmakers who are pushing traditional national and cultural boundaries. So foreign directors like Ana Lily Amirpour, Alexandre Aja, Guillermo del Toro, Andrés Muschietti, and James Wan have produced some of the most impressive horror films of the past decade. I suspect this trend will continue as the global media culture gives us more and more common grounds for thinking about fear, monstrosity, and horror.

GHABRA. What do you see as the new directions that we need to take in our scholarly approaches to horror and monstrosity?

PHILLIPS. Well, I really love the growth in transnational and postcolonial readings of the genre. I am also learning much from the incredible queer theorists who are interrogating notions of monstrosity in various media texts. I think the great thing about horror studies is that there are endless fascinating intersections with other theoretical perspectives. I've found the work on eco-horror to be really provocative and look forward to seeing more integration of posthuman theory and object-oriented ontology into horror studies.

For me, the next area is to focus more on affect theory. I'm interested in the ways that horror films resonate not only with the issues of cultural anxiety but also with the frameworks of feeling. So, at the moment, I'm trying to puzzle through the way that horror films craft structures of sentiment that resonate with the broader cultural moments in which they exist. I'm not sure whether this will be a useful direction for anyone, but it will keep me busy for a while.

# Reviews

## *THE POPULAR CULTURE STUDIES JOURNAL* REVIEWS

### Introduction

Entering my third year as the reviews editor I am reminded yet again of how grateful I am for the job I have. Almost every month a pile of books arrives in my mailbox making this bibliophile giddy. With each package I am given the gift of getting the first glimpse of new ideas and scholarship covering every topic imaginable. Comics, movies, topics in the news, the list simply goes on and on. I must say, if you have been paying attention to the world around us, you will not be surprised to see some very timely and newsworthy books reviewed in the following pages. Topics such as feminisms, politics, even Puerto Rico; nestled between reviews on some of your favorite shows (X-Files), favorite bands (the Beatles and David Bowie), as multiple discussions of comic icons. Admittedly, I am always riveted by the books that come across my desk but those reviewed here include some of my personal favorites since taking this post. This in mind, I want to say thank you to the authors of these books for all the effort you have put forth.

I also want to say thank you to the many reviewers I have had the pleasure of working with. This year, thus far, we have had over 70 books sent out for review. Many are included, and many more will be coming in the upcoming April issue. We cannot have a reviews section without reviewers and I am incredibly grateful for each and every one of you.

In addition to getting to, at the very least, skim over the newest books in our field, and work with great reviewers I have also had the immense pleasure of working with our editor Norma Jones who is entering her last few issues with the journal. She has worked tirelessly to continue to put together a great journal and it has been a delight to work with you.

Lastly, but certainly not least, I have to say a very special thank you to Jessica Benham my assistant editor. You have been my critical eye, support, and friend. I was deeply sad to hear you would not be able to continue in this role, however, the work you are perusing is vitally needed and I am 100% in support. I look

The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 6, No. 2 & 3

Copyright © 2018

forward to following your new path as I know you will be doing great things. One day I will be voting for you I just know it! Thank you so very much for all that you have done for the journal.

Malynda A. Johnson  
Indiana State University

Babic, Annessa Ann. *America's Changing Icons: Constructing Patriotic Women from World War I to the Present*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.

*America's Changing Icons: Constructing Patriotic Women from World War I to the Present* covers the dynamic and ever-evolving use of images to portray patriotic women from World War I to the present. Author Annessa Ann Babic describes this evolution in highly approachable, vibrant, and poignant prose. Babic's analysis and rich contextualization take the reader through icons such as "Rosie the Riveter," the currently very popular in mainstream media Wonder Woman graphic novel, and *The American Girl*.

Static images from advertisements, popular media, magazines, and other various sources are the subject of careful analysis. Oral histories, which further demonstrate Babic's care of the subject, from periods covered are included alongside the more traditional artifacts. The use of "unpublished accounts of wartime service" from individuals living amongst the sources in the analyses add a layer of credibility (8). The visual sources are successfully paired with accounts from Merch Kazmierczak and Rebecca Littlepage to enliven history further. Babic's skill with narrative and intriguing analytical explanations bring the seemingly distant past into a nuanced and directly relevant perspective for the present.

*America's Changing Icons* focuses upon the static visual representations of women in the United States during times of war. Five chapters of deep contextualization and analyses that connect with contemporary relevance—such as politics, the strife of women in the United States, and current complexities involving representations of women. Babic reminds the reader of the importance of the past through keen examples of multi-layered implications from each period



examined. Each chapter focuses in on one particular war, conflict, or period of time marked significantly by war. The first chapter takes on the First World War. Chapter 2 focuses on the World War II era and argues this was the “last great era for her,” the clearly defined patriotic female (2). The patriotic female is explored in her decentralized form in Chapter 3 through the context of the brief Korean War and Cold War era. Chapter 4 focuses on the Vietnam War and protests of the 1960s and 1970s. Chapter 5, *The Gulf Wars and the Changing Light*, explores the fading images of patriotic women. Babic weaves Wonder Woman throughout the delightful tapestry of history, public memory, and exciting artifacts from the past.

Babic submits in her introduction: “this discussion will place standard and accepted female patriotic images next to issues of social contention to show how and why female patriotic imagery declined in US culture in reaction to the evolving role of women” (19). *America’s Changing Icons* delivers a definitive contribution to the scholarly pursuit of understanding the gendered dynamics of war, nationalism, and collective identity.

Chapter 1, *Columbia and the American Girl During World War I*, sets the stage well for the rest of the book. Each chapter begins with a fitting narrative or persuasive hook. Chapters unfurl to expose the core of US societal perceptions of both females and war during the wartime era covered. *American Girl*, *Ladies Home Journal*, “The Gibson Girl,” and other artifacts particular to the World War I era give detail and a nexus point from which the patriotic female image in the US grows from is explored in immense detail and layers of context (35). Gender, politics, society, technology, and other facets are given clear attention that connects back to the promise of the introduction.

Chapter 2 *Wonder Woman Fetishes and Fantasies* digs into icons that have clearly stood the test of time, such as Rosie the Riveter and Wonder Woman. Babic argues in a compelling fashion those icons have transformed significantly since their first iteration. There is a careful balance of new information in each chapter and making meaningful connections to the preceding analyses. The patriotic female image from World War I is referenced and pivots clearly into the transformations Babic develops the particular demands placed upon women to leave their roles in the home to cover work that had not previously been available. At first blush the symbolic and direct messages from advertisers, for example hygiene products we still see today like Listerine and Kotex, place women as consumers and bastions of US tendencies similarly to advertisements in World War I. Babic supplies valuable nuances and neatly articulates the development of

the female patriotic image the unique demands of the period bring about. This trend develops throughout the book, provides a clear delineation between the needs of each era, and forwards the dynamic advances of static images of the patriotic female over time.

The chapters that follow the World War II era include Wonder Woman as a familiar touchstone to evaluate the period explored. The Korean War and Cold War era are combined, Vietnam War and prolific protests during the 1960s and 1970s, as well as the Gulf Wars era, each have their own versions of Wonder Woman and her mediated lore. This is a useful heuristic for the reader, especially given the resurgence of popularity in recent years due to Warner Bros. 2017 film release and serves the purpose of the book well. The postscript offers Babic's personal take on Wonder Woman as well as how her study relates to the current societal, cultural, and wartime demands placed upon women today.

The development and dynamism Babic argues the female patriotic image undergoes over time is justified, well-explained, and brought to life through careful research and rich descriptions. The book is a valuable source and starting place for scholars interested in history, public memory, politics, war protest, the collective identity of the United States, or the power of rhetoric generally. Though a specific mode of analysis is not specified, the book clearly contributes to scholarly conversation and would be an enticing read for a non-academic as well.

Tiara Good  
Lewis-Clark State College

Womack, Kenneth, and Cox, Kathryn B. *The Beatles, Sgt. Pepper, and the Summer of Love*. Lexington Books, 2017.

In celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the spectacular international success of Beatles' Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band, Kenneth Womack and Kathryn B. Cox lead a group of 'Beatlemaniacs' in offering eminently readable analyses on the group's sociocultural influence at this pivotal point in Western popular culture. This anthology attempts a close analysis of the Fab Four's role in fomenting the Summer of Love in 1967, when more than 100,000 'wild' youth converged on San Francisco and when wearing flowers in your hair became a

mark of identity. While the book is divided into three sections dedicated to avant-gardism in Sgt. Pepper, commercial strategies and the fiasco of 'Magical Mystery Tour', this review seeks to glean the eleven essays into three overarching themes.

In 1967, indeed many other times in their career, the Beatles took many an enterprising decision both in terms of art and business. These moves were then seen as mis-steps, but subsequent historians now consider them as pioneering. For instance, calling it a "golden blunder", Joe Rapolla chronicles the saga of Apple Corps, the band's pioneering publishing arm for monetizing their intellectual property. At one point Apple looked set for burial, but has since become a textbook for several musicians (think the Carters) trying to have control over their art. In a similar vein, Robert Rodriguez traces the troubled production history, and subsequent presentation to a wrong audience, of the experimental movie *Magical Mystery Tour*. Over the past fifty years, the musical film's assessment has changed from that as a fiasco to as the seed of a 'midnight movie'.

Other essayists in this volume are interested in the third space that the band sought to evoke between the binaries of creativity and commerce. Jacqueline Edmondson argues that the dialectical relationship of discord and harmony in Sgt. Pepper (both in terms of band's creative collaboration and aesthetic value of their experimental music) provides opportunities to understand how the Beatles were "both a product of their experience and simultaneously produced themselves" (89). Borrowing the postcolonial studies concept of an ambivalent third space, she argues that the Beatles as "product-producer" brought new meaning of and to themselves and their world. They translated their experience, imitated it, and in the process found a third space of freedom, she writes. Also consider that despite being an inseparable part of the 60s counterculture, the band never explicitly got involved in the global politics of the 1960s - from Civil Rights to Vietnam, from women's lib to Cold War escalation and the threat of nuclear annihilation. While charting out the history of *Revolution*, Kenneth L. Campbell notes that John Lennon included both the phrases "you can count me out" and "you can count me in" in different versions and in different verses of the same version of the song. Writing in the 'girl studies' tradition, Katie Kapurch argues that Sgt. Pepper appealed to female youth, especially those navigating the new possibilities of work and sexual freedom in the 1960s and beyond. She draws on the memoirs of Ann-Nancy Wilson (*Heart*) and Chrissie Hynde (*The Pretenders*) to establish the indelible role of Sgt Pepper in their early music. She summarizes: "Sgt. Pepper may have appealed to girls and young women of the time because it continued to

articulate freedom in androgyny while reflecting contemporary contradictions of 1967: the celebration of mind expansion without explicitly sexual orientation; the celebration of autonomous women who are still objectified.” (157)

Another keystone of the book is the idea that the Beatles’ experimentation during this era helped them reach transnational audiences and lent their music a very ‘global’ character. Kit O’Toole offers a close analysis of polysemy in the simple lyrics and production history of *All you Need is Love*. She situates its encapsulation of the “utopian desires” of the Summer of Love in Marshall McLuhan’s notion of technology – in this case, music – creating a new “global village” comprised of worldwide participants. Kathryn B. Cox explores the role of Indian classical music and philosophies in the evolution of the band, reading it as a product of globalization in the 20th century. “The Beatles road to Rishikesh was a convergence of many paths forged globally by artists, scholars and spiritual leaders functioning within the communicative networks that opened up in the twentieth century”, she writes (84). Jerry Zolten provides a fascinating account of how the Beatles incorporated avant-garde influences in their music and thus helped redefine rock and roll music as an intellectual enterprise. Like sampling became a leitmotif of the global avant-garde, the tape recorder became central to the Beatles creative success as they progressed from *Rubber Soul* to *Revolver* to *Sgt. Pepper* and *Magical Mystery Tour*, he writes.

Scholarship on the Beatles is voluminous and can combine elements of social history, journalism, biography, lyrical study, musical criticism, commercial practices and so on. This collection uses the lens of 1967 in the Beatles’ oeuvre to study the band’s wider impact on popular culture ever since. The extensive trivia and details can at times be jarring, but it is only a tribute to the overall industry involved in the writing. The volume will serve as an excellent reference point for social and music historians studying the relationship of Beatles to the tumultuous sixties. The book presents 1967 as the band’s ‘coming of age’ given that they left behind their childish adventures and moved on to a braver path. We could say that a whole generation came of age along with them, as the Summer of Love in 1967 paved the way for a violent period of political, social and cultural upheaval in 1968.

Gaurav Pai  
University of Washington

Olson, Liesl. *Chicago Renaissance: Literature and Art in the Midwest Metropolis*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013.

Cultural historians and literary scholars often locate early twentieth-century modernism in the elite art and literary circles of Paris, London, Vienna, and Berlin. For Americanists, modernism is said to have begun in the United States with the 1913 Armory Show in New York, an event which brought the European avant-garde styles of cubism, fauvism, and futurism to a nation whose art centered primarily on realist modes. In *Chicago Renaissance: Literature and Art in the Midwest Metropolis*, Liesl Olson challenges these assumptions, arguing that scholars must examine modernism in other locations and across a greater span of time to fully understand its complexities. Referring to modernism as “brash and unstable” (11), Olson, the current Director of Chicago Studies at the Newberry Library, seeks to understand the multiple modernisms at play in early twentieth-century Chicago’s various cultural communities. Employing rich archival material, including many collections from the Newberry Library, Olson weaves a fascinating narrative of literary lives, texts, relationships, and communities. Olson’s book is a refreshing look at a cultural movement that has been analyzed for decades but has since received no full-length study.

Instead of locating Chicago at the periphery of American modernism, as previous scholarship has done, Olson argues for its centrality. Not simply a reading of texts by Chicago-based authors, *Chicago Renaissance* seeks to contextualize and localize the phenomenon of modernism. One of the major contributions of Olson’s work is its ability to contextualize her subjects and their writing, addressing both the macro and micro elements that contributed to the shape and history of Chicago’s art and literary renaissance. Specifically, Olson is interested in putting the modern literary histories of white and black Chicago into conversation with one another. In so doing, she interrogates the multiple meanings of the term “renaissance,” concluding that the label meant very different things to the city’s black and white art and literary communities. For African American artists and writers, renaissance promised cultural liberation and communal bonding. In contrast, for the city’s white *avant-garde*, renaissance meant financial stability and opportunities for alternative lifestyles.

In *Chicago Renaissance*, Olson surveys familiar Chicago-based authors, such as Ernest Hemingway, Richard Wright, and Carl Sandburg, as well as lesser-known but no less important voices, including Margaret Walker, Harriet Monroe,

and Margaret Anderson. Significantly, Olson argues that authorship was just one side of Chicago's literary renaissance, choosing to grant an equal amount of space in her study to editors, patrons, bookstore owners, and general readers. Rather than characterizing the Chicago renaissance as a "highbrow" cultural movement, Olson employs the term "middlebrow" to describe the collection of authors, artists, and poets she examines. The book contains a somewhat unusual organizational structure. It is broken up into five chapters with interludes between them. The interludes are short vignettes about specific figures like Sherwood Anderson and Fanny Butcher or important events such as the Chicago World's Fair of 1893 or Gertrude Stein's arrival to the city in 1934. The five chapters are chronologically ordered and concern the impact of historical developments on the city's art and literary communities. During the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century Chicago underwent dramatic transformations fueled by increasing industrialization, urbanization, and commercial enterprise. These transformations, Olson argues, led to the rise of a new literary mode, one which expressed the anxieties, frustrations, and inequalities wrought by industrial capitalism in a clear, less sophisticated style. As Olson explains, "rebellion is less evident in the literary styles of Chicago because it is more palpable through the ways that writers often uphold a mirror as a means of social protests. The revolution was to speak straight" (19).

There are some issues with the book. First, Olson struggles to link together the various figures, texts, and events into a guiding argument. A more clearly stated thesis in the introduction would have been useful in framing the volume's disparate parts. Second, in this reviewer's opinion, Olson occasionally focuses too much on biographical details. This is not necessarily a negative, but I wondered at times how these details contributed, if at all, to the larger story of Chicago's cultural renaissance. Finally, the interludes between each chapter, while offering interesting anecdotes, often feel like unnecessary asides and often operate awkwardly beneath the book's central themes. One wonders why Olson chose not to integrate these profiles and stories into the chapters themselves.

These are minor issues, however, and do not take away from Olson's remarkable contribution to the cultural history of American modernism. Like her 2009 study *Modernism and the Ordinary*, Olson's *Chicago Renaissance* strives to recover lost literary modes and place authors in their historical contexts. By placing Chicago front and center, she challenges conventional thinking about the phenomenon of modernism in the United States. One of the book's greatest

strengths is Olson's recovery of the crucial role played by women and African Americans in the development of literary community in early twentieth-century Chicago. Most remarkable perhaps is Olson's ability to engage with several different fields and genres, including literary studies, cultural history, and biography, to create a unique and compelling narrative. *Chicago Renaissance* is an engaging, thought-provoking, and original study that will prove accessible to both scholars and general readers.

Adam Q. Stauffer  
University of Rochester

Garcia, Vanessa, and Arkerson, Samantha. *Crime, Media, and Reality: Examining Mixed Messages About Crime in Popular Media*. Rowman and Littlefield, 2018. Print.

When the average person thinks of crime and justice, and subsequently, criminal justice, these topics are likely associated with black and white formulaic calculations or a specified range of consequences for actions committed outside of the law. In recent years, Americans have binge-watched enough crime series to conclude that no case is too cold to solve, forensic evidence almost always exists, and that law enforcement agencies have the resources and training to collect and readily analyze it at the drop of a hat. With the onset of sensationalized true-crime docuseries such as *Making a Murderer*, *The Jinx*, and *Evil Genius* as well as podcasts such as *Serial*, the passive viewer or listener has evolved to fill the role of an active appellate, bringing new life to closed cases depicted in the media. Though audiences become captivated by popular media portrayals of crime, rarely do we become interested in or literate in the deeper meanings of how conceptions of crime and justice develop through media portrayals. In *Crime, Media, and Reality: Examining Mixed Messages About Crime in Popular Media*, authors Garcia and Arkerson explore the social constructions of crime and justice, how these social constructions differ from reality, and how they are depicted through various forms of media.

Social constructionism asserts that "nothing is known as fact until it is created through culture" (6). In the first chapter, the authors lay the foundation that crime and justice are socially constructed by discussing the rise of infotainment, which

“blurs the line between information and entertainment,” resulting in widespread distortion between news and amusement (9). Though the United States houses one-fourth of the world’s prison population, what most Americans know of crime and justice are not based on direct or even indirect experience, but rather, through brief news bits that are continuously replayed due to convergence and corporate consolidation of the media. The second chapter discusses social media, the 24/7 news cycle, and fake news, reinforcing societal role expectations and stereotypes of race and gender in crime news. Why does the public perceive that violent crimes committed by black males are rampant and costly? Despite the numbers demonstrating that property crime is most common and that societal debt is mostly accrued by white-collar criminals, this is not what we see. The manipulative model determines what is newsworthy based on subjective motives of the media source, motives that center on profit and attempt to sway public opinion. In other words, perception becomes what Garcia and Arkerson refer to as ‘symbolic reality.’ Why do media portrayals such as this matter? Perception of this symbolic reality contributes to policy.

In the United States, a ‘tough on crime’ attitude has been adopted and supported by the public, with the prison industry growing and continuing to disproportionately affect people of color. Chapter 3 discusses Sasson’s framing typology, where the authors give voice to the racist system frame and blocked opportunities/faulty systems frames largely ignored in mainstream media. In contrast to these frames, which emphasize structural oppression, the media emphasizes the social breakdown frame, attributing minority convictions to a lack of familial or community support, perpetuating stereotypes of welfare queens and absent fathers while ignoring policies such as stop-and-frisk that target black Americans. These frames are also present in the fourth chapter, in which the authors argue violence is the main frame of crime movies where heroes can defend against violence or be revered for perpetuating violence in a faulty system or for overcoming their personal pasts, reflective of the social breakdown frame. In Chapter 5, second-order cultivation resulting from crime television viewership presents an unrealistic, flawless criminal justice system where police are solely responsible and capable of responding to and solving all crime, providing further evidence of the harmful effects of infotainment discussed in previous chapters.

While concern over police brutality remains present in the media, Chapter 6 provides ample evidence that media positively regards law enforcement as the ‘good guys’, with rare exceptions to the rule. While police are often the central



focus of the criminal justice system in the media, Chapter 7 highlights the superiority of the courts to uphold law and order, where prosecution works to defend greater society against inherently troubled criminals. Throughout the text, the authors refute the first-order cultivation perpetuated by the media that convictions occur by trail. In contrast, in a 'tough on crime' society, defense attorneys commonly negotiate guilty pleas and ramifications as opposed to proving innocence. The average media consumer is likely to correlate a conviction with institutionalization, though parole and probation are more likely to occur. While prisons are thriving in the United States, the final chapter conveys that they are seldom the focus of media, and if they are, television shows and movies rely on stock plots and characters that reinforce the idea that all criminals are violent threats to society. Regardless of the media type or subset of the population, much of what we see of crime and justice is inaccurate.

Throughout the text, the authors present a wealth of theoretical concepts and data in an accessible manner. Though there is no shortage of empirical evidence to support the main argument, *Crime, Media, and Reality* remains readable beyond the world of experts and academics. In addition, the authors provide a comprehensive approach to analyzing all players involved in such encompassing social institutions, including citizens, judges, lawyers, and police as well as accounting for the evolution of print, audio, and digital media sources. As a critical sociologist and educator, I found that the authors successfully address the intersectionality of race, social class, and gender and how media sets and reinforces expectations of individuals who occupy complex identities. While the authors briefly account for corporate influence on crime and media, explicitly stating that this is not the main purpose of the book, this phenomenon may be a timely and significant focus for future research as the prison industry continues to develop. Media continues to impact our perception and understanding of crime and justice, and while the authors effectively demonstrate changing depictions over time, perhaps a future opportunity is an expanded discussion of how social media exposes America to counternarratives of historically marginalized groups. *Crime, Media, and Reality* is a timely addition to research on media and public perception, providing a factual counternarrative and disabling the fake news about crime and justice that continues to thrive in this era.

Monica Klonowski  
The University of Toledo

Natoli, Joseph. *Dark Affinities, Dark Imaginaries: A Mind's Odyssey*. Albany, State University of New York Press, 2017.

As a cumulative retrospective of his writing, Joseph Natoli's *Dark Affinities, Dark Imaginaries* is a captivating journey across mind and culture; a tracing of the American cultural imaginary that embraces the backwards gaze of self-reflexivity in search of post-truths within the personal and mass psyches. What results is an equally mesmerizing and unnerving cautionary tale that warns against the burgeoning reality of alienation and exploitation of the American people in an unbridled plutocratic regime. Navigating freely between poles of psychology, politics, philosophy, and the synergies and breakages in-between, Natoli's work is equally as literary as it is critical, with his theoretical underpinnings as scaffolding for a grander narrative that weaves the personal into the political just as it does the political into the personal.

In line with Raymond William's sense of culture as a whole way of life, Natoli is refreshingly candid and boldly vulnerable in sharing his personal history, embracing an intellectual and political practice that is partially, if not wholly, informed by the saturation of surrounding cultural forces. Undoubtedly, this position informs what Natoli cites as a lifelong meditation on William Blake and Martin Heidegger, wherein imagination is the only recuperative for our culture's sunken one-fold vision. This dark and blindingly tragic condition is the short answer to Natoli's inquiry as to why we are rarely roused to action: "[W]hat we hear others say is only what ourselves would say—that what challenges our own perceptions never reaches us" (14). To change this phenomenal reality is not to change condition but rather perception; that is, to reconnect the experiences of everyday life with what we take from them. We live deeply immersed in rival factions—fabrications that misconstrue the "nature of things" and our relationship to them, so we can only evoke democracy when we correct our societal norms to break with illusions of wealth, power, and status. As Natoli warns, "You cannot stage a revolt against plutocracy when you identify with the plutarch and share a fear of the revolutionary" (17).

Citing the ways in which texts, images, and objects act as intelligible symbols of a re/produced cultural imaginary, Natoli effectively articulates a postmodern narrative despite its ubiquitous buzzword status. He explains that market rule has eroded postmodernity into a destructive force that reifies subjective supremacy as an ontological status of merely *existing* rather than *being* within a larger world: a

resultant YOUiverse (67) that makes it increasingly difficult to break from the capitalist confines that position you, the consumer, as designer of your own reality. Thus, the opening chapters of *Dark Affinities*, *Dark Imaginaries* read as a strategic playbook, a critical reading of the world as text and a mapping of disorder onto these literary realms. If, as Natoli claims, we see the world through story frames and hear through other voices, then we can, in fact, embrace popular culture as a pathway upon which we interact with the world, breaking free of the binding notion that we all share, to some degree, the same, one reality.

Natoli's reading of *Citizen Kane* and *Inglorious Basterds*, for example, exist as somewhat representative texts to understanding the dark, deep morals of a culture's discourse mapped onto its imaginative qualities. Such disruptions to the "Master Voice" (96) reveal the world in full imaginative form—a carnivalesque interpenetration of voices that uphold the interweaving of intertextuality. In fact, Natoli's attention to literary and film criticism is perhaps the brightest spot within his otherwise dark tale. His insights from the O.J. Simpson trial to *The Big Lebowski* point to reality frames and cultural climates that reveal the radical potential (both good and bad) of cultural imaginaries at work. Here, the brilliance of *Dark Affinities*, *Dark Imaginaries* resides in Natoli's ability to connect these buffering screens to a larger moral and economic narrative at work. In absorbing these cultural texts, we sit precariously waiting for an epiphany—a transformative moment—that might provide new insight into the ever-changing relationship between us and reality; meanwhile, democratic egalitarianism is overturned by a plutarchic disorder that transforms our cultural imaginary into a new-yet-unrecognizable form of demonization and destruction. In short, culture and order are inherently tied. For Natoli, it is our role as critic to find the connection.

It is this imperative that anchors the concluding chapters of Natoli's work as one grounded in the cultural dimensions of our political dynamics. By discovering alternative narrative framings of the world, you observe the processing of an individual's life-world that precedes views and opinions, reflections and arguments (243). If we are able to free ourselves of the American neoliberal social unconscious, from our cross-party shared fixations and antipathies, then we may see clearly that our economic system is controlled by a legislatively overpowered and dividend-fed elite. Yet, reform is already corrupt when people are leveraged like a product or service to be branded. The deflation of our present plutarchic order thus resides in the realization of a fluid and flexible class structure, rather than a revolution for lower and middle classes that aims to stay afloat in an

already disadvantaged economic system. In our now millennial age, this means we must orient our cultural imaginary to solidarity working for the public good, rather than individual self-actualization.

Both within and beyond this latter proposal, Natoli's work is clearly detailed in theorization and riveting in connection to surrounding cultural domains (such as his final critique of the Occupy Wallstreet movement). As a whole, *Dark Affinities, Dark Imaginaries* provides a uniquely informed approach to the realm of cultural studies and critical theory. The interweaving of personal narrative with political philosophy makes present the visions and representations of a dangerously active American imagination while still recognizing its potential for revolutionary transformation—a substantial contribution to critical educators, concerned citizens, and beyond.

Rachel Presley  
Ohio University

Theodore G. Ammon, editor, *David Bowie and Philosophy: Rebel Rebel*. Open Court, 2016.

Who is David Bowie? What does he stand for? And how can something true pierce through his many ambivalent personalities? These questions among others are addressed in *David Bowie and Philosophy: Rebel Rebel*, but perhaps the question above all is: how can we even know ourselves? There is no better centerpiece for a conversation on identity and authenticity than David Bowie, the creation of David Robert Jones, and the alien who invented Ziggy Stardust, Aladdin Sane, and the Thin White Duke. In this edited volume by Ammon, academics, writers, and travelers take into consideration the entirety of David Bowie's catalogue – from his debut album, *David Bowie*, to his final album, *Blackstar*, released just days before his death – and give perspective on what can be learned about self and sincerity, reality and madness, and performance through a philosophical investigation of his work.

The book opens with a foreword, *A Farewell to David Bowie*, proclaiming his death as another day in which the proverbial music died. *Blackstar* was released a few days prior to his death as his final living performance and message for the

world, bringing an end to a career of constant transformation: Bowie the artist seemed to not have an underlying self. Ammon writes in Chapter 3, “I make a case that our Bowie is many Bowies and that his essential nature is flux” (27). Nonetheless, throughout all of his creations he was always undeniably Bowie. In Chapter 1, Reisch writes that somehow Bowie was able to “subvert the idea of *artistic authenticity*” (6). He was a faker, yes, a poser and a mime, “he had managed to control his body, to stylize it, to aestheticize it” writes Botz-Bornstein in Chapter 2 (11), but according to Cooper in Chapter 12, “the clash between the overt fakery in play and the believability of his vocals” broke the connection between authenticity and truth (142). In other words, if the social world is a construction then choices have to be made, and Bowie helps audiences see the production, the costumes, the (necessary) lies, and he does so from the perfect stage, the perspective of the music industry, an industry that trades in plastic authenticity. In Chapter 13, Lampert suggests that Bowie’s “knowing, ironic, winking performance” is him being honest about being a faker (154). The message is that everyone is a faker; Bowie is urging the world to be honest about it.

Interestingly, nonetheless, Bowie, while constructing characters, was attempting to disavow notions of a true self. The Buddhism present in his attempts to free himself from the “delusions of ego” is noted in Chapter 6 by Muchall (69). However, his attempts at achieving nirvana came with a cost: the speed at which he became and unbecame characters – in the words of Cooper, “from queer extraterrestrial to synth-laced aesthete to blond and boppy hitmaker, all in just one decade of a half-century career (139) – left him, as the song goes, oftentimes sinking in “Quicksand.” Moreover, points out Michaud in Chapter 8, Bowie and his characters have always been aliens, hybrids of fantastic creatures and real-world men, and sometimes even, according to Piven in Chapter 11, “suffused with uncanny and salacious images of demonic couplings, possession, and alienation” (127). Bowie, in his journey of eliminating the ego, was forced to confront the evil parts of his identity, which he embraced, whereas most people pretend they are not there. The result was sometimes something akin to chaos and madness. Lampert brings up an interview in which Bowie remarks that sometimes he has his “heads” in the clouds before laughing and saying, “now there’s a sign of a schizophrenic” (151). A joke perhaps, but Bowie’s struggles with instability and drug addiction are well known.

Ultimately, Bowie's final message to the world is that everyone is a "Blackstar," the opening track on *Blackstar*. According to Potter and Cobb in Chapter 10, *Blackstar* is a metaphor for the inadequacy of our language and symbols. True expression is impossible, yet somehow it can transcend through performance. "All that exists are performances in a social context," writes Hill in Chapter 7, and performance is Bowie's art, even if, according to Littmann in Chapter 5, it sometimes fails to make sense, or maybe better yet, *because* sometimes it fails to make sense.

Overall, this book is both entertaining and enlightening, offering short essays that are neither dense nor cumbersome, but would be recommended mainly for Bowie fanatics and music fans in general looking for a quick and light read. Despite the title, and aside from a few chapters, the book is rather thin on philosophy, although it does touch upon the philosophies of aesthetics, self, art, ambivalence, and death. Academic uses of the book could include any class or research that focuses on identity, authenticity, communication, performance, and/or the history and critique of music and art.

Noah Franken  
West Texas A&M University

Steven Shaviro. *Digital Music Videos (Quick Takes: Movies and Popular Culture)*. Rutgers University Press, 2017.

Music videos commonly escape definition and genre categorization, as their structure not only deviates greatly from the narrative structure often central to film and television, they are also difficult to compare and/or define even within the scope of music videos themselves. Music videos follow a unique production and distribution process, as they are created to be a marketing tool subservient to a song that has already finished its production cycle. In turn, music videos make for a fascinating topic for both study and discussion, even through its seeming defiance of definition. Additionally, contemporary music videos, which are most often created utilizing the latest digital technologies, gives its audience a richer audiovisual experience, while also offering scholars an object well suited for academic analysis.

Despite the allusiveness to defining and discussing music videos as stand-alone art pieces, Steven Shaviro successfully provides the reader with a rich description of twelve digital music videos, which are subsequently (loosely) divided into four unique categories. The videos selected reflect around nine years of contemporary music video releases, with the oldest piece having been released in 2007, and the newest in 2016. He offers the reader a detailed, informational description of each music video, followed by his personal analysis of the video's meaning and its technological significance. Shaviro's description and analysis of each music video is also fused together with thoughtful connections made to various other authors, directors, film, or music videos. For example, the comparison he makes between the camera placement of Janelle Monáe's "Cold War" video to that of Sinéad O'Connor's "Nothing Compares to You" (68), or describing Animal Collective's psychedelic "Applesauce" video as replacing the "critical vigor of modernism with a postmodern aesthetics of opportunistic hedonism" (84).

In the introductory chapter, Shaviro provides the reader with a historical contextualization of music videos along with the development of motion pictures, starting his discussion with the 1927 talkie, *The Jazz Singer*, then moving the discussion to Queen's 1975 music video for "Bohemian Rhapsody" and The Buggles' "Video Killed the Radio Star" (the music video that ushered in the age of MTV), all the while tying his argument together by addressing the theories of heavy weights like Marshall McLuhan, Michel Chion, and André Bazin. Shaviro directly addresses the question behind the need to analyze and discuss music videos in the first place, as aside from his personal like and fascination for them, music videos "almost never have a status of independent, self-subsisting works" (7). Music videos are often "subject to the whims of marketers and publicists" for the purpose of advertising the song, as they are "generally based on preexisting material, which was not created with them in mind" (7). Additionally, and perhaps most importantly to academic/artistic inquiry, music videos "frequently remediate older media contents: alluding to, sampling and recombining, or even straight-forwardly plagiarizing materials from movies, television shows, fashion photography, and experimental art" (7).

The book's four subsequent chapters each discuss three music videos divided into the following categories: *Superimpositions* (Ch. 1), *Glitch Aesthetics* (Ch. 2), *Remediations* (Ch. 3), and *Limits* (Ch. 4). These four categories work as general descriptors for the visual qualities and technological effects shared by the respective videos, where Shaviro notes the artist (who is often the main character in the music video itself), as well as the video's director. Consequently, *superimpositions* loosely refers to videos that utilize multiple images imposed onto/around one another to create a more complex visual composition, such as the 2007 video for Rhianna's "Disturbia." *Glitch aesthetics* can feature image loops, non-synchronized audiovisuals, and violent camera movements, the latter of which is seen in the video for Allie X's "Catch" (2015). *Remediations* functions as a visual transformation/reinterpretation of high art (like Kylie Minogue's "All the Lovers," 2010), and lastly, *limits* "is concerned with three videos that explore extreme physical and emotional conditions" (18), a brilliant example can be seen in the video for Kari Faux's "Fantasy."

As Shaviro explains, "We do not *hear* the music of "Disturbia" in the same way when we watch the video as we would without it" (35, emphasis in the original), and this statement can easily extend to encompass the viewing experience of pretty much all music videos, as it differs greatly from listening solely to the musical album. Thus, in preparation of reading *Digital Music Videos*, I began by watching all twelve music videos discussed in the book, which are freely available online. Then, after reading each chapter, I re-watched the videos. I decided to view each of the music videos before and after reading the book, in order to obtain a more robust perspective regarding the works discussed. Although Shaviro offers detailed, well written descriptions of the music videos he highlights, I highly recommend readers to also view the videos (before and/or after reading the book). Otherwise, the reader misses out in the rich nuances of the visuals (and the music) that is discussed and described throughout the book.

*Digital Music Videos* is a valuable resource for anyone with a personal and/or academic interest in learning more about contemporary music videos. At 140 pages, the book offers readers a quick, easy read while still providing an in-depth and meaningful analysis into the making and meaning behind music videos in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The book contains numerous references to various artists and theorists, and also provides further reading suggestions (in addition to the works cited). While the book has a limited scope, in that it only addresses twelve music videos spanning less than a decade, (a fact that Shaviro does acknowledge), the



book nonetheless provides a solid and intelligent overview of the contemporary music video world, while keeping the door wide open for further discourse and exploration on the topic.

Marci Mazzarotto  
Georgian Court University

Wills, John. *Disney Culture*. Rutgers University Press, 2017.

*Disney Culture* explores the respected Disney Company, examining the influence and success of Walt Disney's legacy. John Wills' text is a vital contribution to Rutgers University Press' *Quick Takes: Movies & Popular Culture* series, each sentence sophisticated, intelligent and well written. The author's study has depth, venturing beyond the child-like innocence often synonymous with the brand. This remarkable book separates reality from idealism, revealing the Disney Company as a well-oiled machine, appealing to traditionalism, family values and wholesome Americana.

John Wills is a senior lecturer in American history and the director of American studies at the University of Kent in the United Kingdom. His credentials make his voice as author credible, especially following his 2005 publication *Invention of the Park: From the Garden of Eden to Disney's Magic Kingdom*. Wills brings mundane facts to life, sparking reader interest by addressing the cultural atmosphere integral to forming the popular Disney brand. For instance, harsh political climates welcomed the distraction of Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck; these loveable characters reinforced traditional American values and ideals. The author relies on description, narrative and comparisons to structure the text, making for an easy and thought provoking read. Quotes from Disney's employees, scholars and critics are spread throughout the work, anchoring the arguments and creating depth to the text as a whole.

*Disney Culture* is organized sensibly, resulting in a thoughtful and in-depth analysis that is a pleasure to read. The text is organized into four distinct categories, *Making Disney Magic*, *The World According to Disney*, *Disney Dollars* and *Disney Values*. These segments encompass Disney's growth and vast history, from a smalltime animation workshop to an international media

enterprise. The Disney ethos is the central focus, a welcomed theme woven throughout the four chapters. The text traces Disney's progress over a century, documenting its successes and its failures alike. Wills captures the dedicated Disney community pivotal to the brand's success, manifested through consistent and wholesome attitudes and the enchanting animated characters its global fan base has grown to adore. This book is all about impact, how affect is elicited through entertainment, merchandise and the infamous theme park experience.

The first chapter, *Making Disney Magic*, focuses on the history of the company, beginning with Walt Disney's first creative venture when employed by the Pesmen-Rubin Art Studio, and later the Kansas City Film Ad Company. The author uses this chapter to discuss the creation of Mickey Mouse, the celebrated cartoon character that has become the iconic mascot of the brand. Wills quotes Disney, "it all started with a mouse", using these words as the foundation for the chapter. The author seems to agree that Mickey Mouse set the precedent for the family oriented, playful and child-like brand, strongly influencing Disney's business decisions, vision and culture. This chapter is perhaps the most significant for the reader who aims to relive the nostalgia of a Disney childhood. Although the text does not focus on animation techniques or technical innovation, Wills provides an exquisite insight into one of America's most lucrative brands. The entertaining anecdotes and significant histories offered throughout the chapter prepare the reader for the extensive cultural analysis to come.

*The World According to Disney*, the second chapter of the text, analyzes Disney's influence on a global scale, exploring perceptions of the Disney brand throughout the United States and Europe. Wills unpacks the disneyization of European folklore, challenging theorists to consider that European story was being transformed and Americanized rather than being duplicated. The author attributes this Americanized storytelling to a rise in American culture globally, touching on the commoditization of western goodness and traditional family values. This commoditization, particularly in the case of Disney's theme parks, has unintentionally elicited a fear of American capitalism. This analysis proves vital to the text as it addresses the successes and conflicts surrounding the Disney brand. Rather than approaching the Disney Company as an unconditionally loved universal brand, Wills' strength as author is his objective approach, recounting the problems associated with the sale of nostalgic and idealized American entertainment. This chapter, along with the section following, provides excellent

insight into the Disney theme park enterprise, reinforcing Disney's culture and the business decisions that have resulted in both success and controversy.

The third chapter, *Disney Dollars*, explores the merchandising practices that Disney is famous for. Disney currency is also examined, reinforcing the brand as truly unique. The more recent procurements of the Marvel and *Star Wars* franchises are also discussed as strategic purchases, honing Disney's appeal to an older and perhaps new, dedicated audience. Again, Wills is faithful in his pursuit for truth, examining praise and criticisms of the Disney brand in a corporate and capitalist arena. *Star Wars* and Marvel seem to exist independently from the Mickey Mouse empire, with the author perceptively assessing the company's dedication to future growth.

*Disney Values*, the last chapter of the text, offers a unique examination of Disney's relationship with fandom, fanaticism, environmentalism, race and sexuality. The author looks to the future, situating the company as a global media presence. Wills raises the fascinating argument that there is an absence of new Mickey Mouse content from Disney. This iconic figure seems to lack a contemporary media presence, veering from the brand's powerful nostalgic influence that appeals to its older audience. This refreshing argument elicits thought of the niche nostalgic market Disney can accommodate, and whether such needs will be met in the years to come.

*Disney Culture* is an exceptional scholarly text, its evocative arguments and significant research are second to none. Each of its chapters explores Disney's successes and weaknesses, and at times daring to expose the controversies surrounding the utopic brand. John Wills has produced a brilliant cultural examination of the Disney Company, exploring its past, present and future. *Disney Culture* is a bold and honest text, effectively proving that the Disney Company is the ultimate media powerhouse, successfully commoditizing the American dream.

Anna Halipilias  
Curtin University

Matthews David, Alison. *Fashion Victims: Dangers of Dress Past and Present*. Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2017.

The history of fashion has some low points, where aesthetics were placed above health and safety. *Fashion Victims: Dangers of Dress Past and Present* by Alison Matthews David explores some dangerous processes and materials used in the creation of fashionable goods, focusing on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The author details various ways fashion has been detrimental to one's health over seven chapters and a conclusion. An abundance of illustrations clearly provide visual examples, so there is no misunderstanding her research, with engaging text that both draws in and horrifies the reader. Some interesting elements are addressed below.

The first chapter discusses how sickness was transferred from clothing to the wearer. For example, in the late nineteenth century, Sir Robert Peel's daughter was given a riding habit that a seamstress worked on at home and used the large, wool material to provide warmth to a sick family member (77). Peel's daughter ultimately died from typhus, illustrating that germs do not discriminate against wealth through fabric transfer. Matthews David even notes how the fashionable silhouette was affected in response to germs and the panic they caused as hemlines rose in the 1920s, as this shift is widely attributed the women's suffrage movement and participation in sports.

In the next chapter, mercurial hats are explored. Originally, men's top hats were made from beaver fur which naturally felted nicely, yet it became easier and cheaper to acquire other animal furs, although they required mercury to achieve the proper conditions for shaping. The workers' mercury exposure led to paranoia, suicidal thoughts, worrying and trembling (139). Additionally, the idea of a rabbit being pulled out of a hat is discussed; the rabbit's pelt is used as inexpensive fur for hats and pulling a live rabbit out of a hat metaphorically brings the rabbit back to life. Repeated exposure to the toxic chemical was life-altering for hatters as their physical and mental health was affected, thoroughly explaining the use of the phrase "mad as hatter" that was popularized by Lewis Carroll.

The next two chapters focus on dyes and the harm they caused. Hat makers placing faux flowers on women's hats were exposed to high concentrations of a copper and arsenic trioxide mixture that was used to produce a brilliant green

color. The arsenic trioxide, also known as white arsenic, was the harmful culprit, and when used in powder form the workers would get it under their fingernails, in their eyes, and accidentally ingest it. As news spread about the awful symptoms and deaths faced by those exposed, women who wore green were called out for harming others. Although upper class women would condemn their peers for donning the harmful color, it was actually lower class workers who were in contact with the chemicals daily that truly suffered. Other dye colors were equally harmful, and Matthews David continues in the next chapter with examples. There are accounts of socks causing problems, which might be unexpected as they are a rather unassuming garment. Some were knit in bright colors to excite the eye, yet dyes used to create these festive foot coverings were not healthy for all. As dye rubbed against the sweaty feet of the wearer, eczema and rashes appeared, often in the same striped pattern as the knit sock. Chromophobia then became a real condition and some promoted undyed garments as being healthiest (229).

Strangulation and flammable fabrics came next. Unfortunately, working conditions were not originally regulated, and machinery often caused accidents within factories, resulting in clothing that was later designed for workers to diminish the chances of bodily harm. As seen in other examples, the working class was able to create goods quickly and cheaply, but were then prone to occupational hazards that were detrimental to their health. Matthews David notes, "In fact, for much of history, to be fashionable meant consciously sacrificing comfort and mobility for visual display" (301). As if entanglement was not worrisome enough, the following chapter focused on flammable fabrics, which was particularly gruesome as children were often burn victims while wearing a cotton imitation of wool flannel known as flannelette. As one may guess, it was cheaper and easier to make than wool flannel, yet unlike wool, it ignited almost instantly.

The final chapter discusses other flammable accessories and fabrics. Celluloid, a nineteenth century plastic, was used for items such as decorative combs, as its creation saved the lives of animals who had previously been killed for materials such as ivory. Yet, once again, more risks were bestowed upon workers as early plastics were very volatile and had the ability to combust as quickly as gunpowder. Artificial silk was also studied, and this innovation never quite reached the beauty of silk. Matthews David comments on the imitation fabric: "It was worn by the Duchess of Windsor, a woman who led a king to

abdicate but who, like Rayon, could not be queen herself” (429). Modernization and technological advances are not always best.

The recurring theme throughout the book is that workers making fashionable items can experience health issues as a direct result. Matthews David notes, “As the case studies in this book have proven, the democratization of luxury goods was seen as a triumph of science and industry, but it came at a steep cost to the health of humans, animals, and the environment” (440) and this thesis is directly understood.

As seen, the information covered is fascinating and thorough, and the reader is engaged and open to learning more about past hazards. The methodology of research includes reviewing primary sources such as magazines, newspaper articles, fashion plates and journal articles. Additionally, quantitative analysis was done to show existing levels of toxins in surviving clothing. For example, green shoes from the Bata Shoe Museum were tested for arsenic levels, proving the research for the text was careful and complete. Although leather tanning and the effects of chromium exposure were briefly mentioned, more research could have been dedicated to this area as the process of tanning leather is detrimental to both the environment and workers and this inclusion would have fit well within the scope of the book.

Since all examples were from the past, one can only hope that things have gotten better but this is not necessarily the case. The book ends on a bit of a downer as old risks have been removed but new ones are present. It is then that Matthews David rallies the reader for change, stating, “We need to start questioning how the inequalities of the global economy can, like the dead Victorian seamstress in the mirror, come back to haunt us in new incarnations” (451). She continues, “In filling our wardrobes with deliberately disposable clothing, we have perhaps unwittingly caused pain, suffering, and even sometimes death in developing countries” (454). Hopefully, education on this social justice issue will engage readers to rethink their own purchases to make smarter decisions and we can only hope the industry does better in the future, and information is a first step for this revolution.

Alexandra Jordan Thelin  
Drew University

Engstrom, Erika. *Feminism, Gender, and Politics in NBC's Parks and Recreation*. New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2017. Print.

*Feminism, Gender, and Politics in NBC's Parks and Recreation* is a slim volume with valuable applications for instructors of gender and women's studies, and media criticism courses. Each of the six chapters in Erika Engstrom's feminist textual analysis examines a different aspect of the unapologetically feminist hit sitcom that aired for seven seasons on NBC (2009-2015). The book's central argument is that *Parks* broke new sitcom ground by normalizing feminism while satirizing patriarchy, and also by showing feminism unbound by gender and able to affect change in fictional Pawnee, Indiana, and beyond. Engstrom illustrates her thesis with an impressive and comprehensive reading of more than 120 episodes across the series' seven-season archive.

Engstrom's book effectively grounds her analysis in feminist theory, but equally commendable in her analysis is her knowledge sitcom history and an appreciation for the humor and conventions of the genre. Engstrom places feminist icon Leslie Knope appropriately in the lineage from television comedies *I Love Lucy* to *Gilmore Girls*. The book fully appreciates and accounts for the "mockumentary" conceit of the show while focusing on the more subtle ways the show broke new ground on portrayals of both female and male characters and the institutions they inhabit. The result of this understanding of genre conventions, sitcom history, and feminist theory, is a compelling argument for the persuasive power of televised feminism by Engstrom, who has authored two other books on television's treatment of women getting married (*The Bride Factory: Mass Media Portrayals of Women and Weddings*, Peter Lang, 2011) and in the workplace (*Mad Men and Working Women: Feminist Perspectives on Historical Power, Resistance, and Otherness*, Peter Lang, 2014).

The book deconstructs the themes of *Parks*' treatment of gender and feminism, beginning with an analysis of the historical and codified patriarchy of Pawnee, Indiana. Engstrom wisely highlights the sometimes subtle ways the sitcom's visual set pieces and props reinforce the feminist agenda of the scripted dialogue and storylines. The second chapter analyzes the fictional city's government-funded murals as a site of comedic critique of historic racism and sexism, and episodes centered around archaic laws still in the city's codes provide a narrative of resistance and change through political action. Engstrom's analysis

benefits from the persuasive power of incorporating the visual, scripted, and performative aspects of the show.

Chapter three of the book examines the “new men” characters that inhabit Pawnee’s city government, and the various ways they expose the false binary afforded by hegemonic masculinity. Engstrom deconstructs the gender performance of Ron Swanson, the manly man; Tom Haverford, the metrosexual; Chris Traeger, the pretty-boy athlete; his best friend and Leslie’s love interest, Ben Wyatt, the nerdy intellectual; Jerry Gergich, the hapless family man; Andy Dwyer, the goofball manchild. She finds in all the characters androgynous and counter-hegemonic masculine traits – especially in each character’s emotional expressivity.

The male allies of the feminist Leslie Knope are not one dimensional; they all exhibit some form of androgyny that combines their masculine and feminine side. (64)

As Engstrom argues, the friendships and open communication among the male characters on *Parks* distinguish it from other sitcoms by showing “what men *can* be like – and that they can be liked by other men” (64).

Chapters four and five center Leslie Knope’s feminist philosophy in action, as she interacts with other women in the show and launches a political campaign for Pawnee City Council. Engstrom notes the subversive but also ambivalent attitude Leslie demonstrates in her encounters in controversial spaces for women, including as a beauty pageant judge and at a strip club. Engstrom argues that Leslie’s predominantly second wave feminist philosophy, while willing to acknowledge sex work and porn culture’s unavoidable place in society, appears to take a radical feminist view of sex work as a patriarchal sphere that degrades women. The feminism of Leslie Knope finds a more effective avenue for equality in her interaction with girls as leader of the Pawnee Goddesses – a Girl Scouts-type youth group that celebrates girl power and ultimately welcomes boys to the party.

Engstrom delves more deeply into the feminist portrayal of romance and power demonstrated by Leslie Knope in both her personal romance with Ben Wyatt, and in both characters’ approach to her run for political office. Her analysis of the characters’ wedding, notes that every aspect from the dress to the planning to the vows illustrates mutuality and equality among the male and



female characters. In examining the political career of Leslie Knope, in which her husband serves as her campaign manager, Engstrom pays special attention to the visual aspects of the show's feminist message, contrasting the "wall of inspirational women" behind Leslie's office desk to the wall of City Council men that hangs in the hallway outside her office, and contextualizing Leslie's campaign poster featuring her face superimposed on the Rosie the Riveter icon, using the slogan, "Knope We Can!" Again, Engstrom's argument benefits from its attention to multiple sites of analysis, as she notes that the show also features guest appearances by groundbreaking women in politics. Even after being recalled as a city counselor, Leslie bounces back with the help of her community of support.

In contrast to the personal feminism in other contemporary television offerings that featured a woman main character who identified as and uttered the word 'feminist' itself, the feminism extolled by Leslie Knope in small town Pawnee promotes the power of collective action... (93).

Engstrom's book offers scholarly recognition and appreciation for what she calls the show's depiction of "cooperative feminism," as unapologetically as Leslie Knope would.

The palatable feminism and almost heroic portrayal of Leslie Knope combines with the camaraderie evidenced by her female and male friends to create a vision of a gender-equitable feminism, one that promotes cooperation between men and women (132).

Even scholars who are not *Parks* fans will find this book a useful tool in illustrating for students feminist concepts and textual analysis in contemporary media.

Lori Henson  
Indiana State University

Darowski, Joseph J, and Kate Darowski. *Frasier: A Cultural History*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2017.

From two siblings comes a brief history of one of the best television shows about two siblings. As the authors explain in the introduction, Joseph J. Darowski introduced his younger sister, Kate Darowski, to *Frasier* in 2006, two years after *Frasier* went off the air. The viewing public has not forgotten the show since then, as one of television's most successful spin-offs lives on through various streaming services, a few clicks away from its forebear, *Cheers*. The authors are unabashed fans of *Frasier*, and their writing style is warm and informal. The book resembles a well-researched, well-polished series of blog posts, and this, in fact, is precisely what makes it so useful. It is evident that the authors had fun thinking and writing about the series, and fans will enjoy this lively, intelligent, and readable overview. *Frasier: A Cultural History* can serve both as a companion for long-time viewers re-watching the show and as a quick introduction to the series for students and scholars.

To clarify the subtitle, this is not a book about the entire history of the culture surrounding and influencing the show during its run through the nineties into the early 2000s. Instead, the book is about some of the culture within the show, how *Frasier* came together, and how the show's production informs its stories and themes of family and class. The authors synthesize several decades of published writing from critics and journalists. They also consulted the published remembrances of industry insiders, including NBC's former president Warren Littlefield and longtime television writer Ken Levine, who worked on both *Cheers* and *Frasier*.

The main body of the book comes in at just under 150 pages and is divided into two parts. Part I describes the building blocks of the show: its creators, stars, and characters. Chapter one explains the gradual and somewhat unexpected emergence of Frasier Crane as a leading character on *Cheers*. Chapter two recounts the top-down development of the spin-off; *Frasier* was conceived by a network fearing the end of its signature sitcom and the idea was initially resisted by star Kelsey Grammer as well as creators David Angel, Peter Casey, and David Lee. The book observes how hard the show's creators worked to differentiate *Frasier* from *Cheers*—setting it on the opposite coast, for example—though that is a story that has been discussed many times before. Still, the chapter recounts many interesting nuggets, from the decision to fire future *Friends* star Lisa

Kudrow from the role of Dr. Crane's radio producer four days after she was hired, to the meaning of the show's inscrutable theme song, "Tossed Salad and Scrambled Eggs." Chapter three offers brief character analysis of Frasier, his brother (Niles, played by David Hyde Pierce), and his father (Martin, played by John Mahoney). Chapter four similarly examines the two female leads, Martin's live-in therapist (Daphne, played by Jane Leeves) and Frasier's producer (Roz, played by Peri Gilpin). The dissection of Niles, a character constructed to be almost identical to the show's lead, is particularly noteworthy. Pierce himself balked at the design of a supporting character so like the titular character, but as the authors' persuasively point out, both the show's writing and Pierce's acting made the Crane brothers one of television's funniest pairs.

Part II of the book analyzes some of the show's main themes. Chapter five traces the evolutions of the characters through the course of the show's eleven seasons. Chapters six and seven discuss, respectively, *Frasier's* standout set design and decoration. These are the richest chapters in the book, as Kate Darowski's expertise in the history of art and design comes to the forefront. The authors carefully ponder the space of *Frasier's* apartment set and explore how it contributes both meaning and comedy to the show. They also offer rich analysis of the objects and furniture selected for the apartment, from the Chihuly sculpture that appeared in season five as an homage to Seattle to Martin's incongruous but beloved Barcalounger. The final chapter offers a comparatively cursory analysis of gender in the show, but of course others have already discussed such issues in greater depth; the authors do introduce their readers to several penetrating studies of *Frasier* in the text as well as the bibliography.

The appendix includes "An Opinionated Compendium" of every episode of the show, listed in chronological order, each with a very brief description and the authors' rating out of four stars. Fans might be interested in the authors' argument that seasons six and seven were among the best of the series, contrary to typical critical appraisals that observe a decline in quality following season five. The point is a subjective one, but here, as throughout the book, the authors are not shy in sharing their opinions. Again, this highlights the book's approach, as well as, depending on the reader's needs, one of its potential strengths. *Frasier: A Cultural History* does not attempt to offer the definitive scholarly analysis of *Frasier*. This is a handy guidebook that illuminates the show's backstory, invites further consideration of the show's production, and encourages a closer look at a classic show. Undergraduate courses teaching *Frasier* may find this book to be a

useful reference. Overall, the authors have crafted this book for a general audience rather than an academic one, and it will appeal to both casual and die-hard fans of the show alike.

Paul Arras  
SUNY Cortland

Condis, Megan. *Gaming Masculinity: Trolls, Fake Geeks, and the Gendered Battle for Online Culture*. University of Iowa Press, 2018.

Many who has ventured into the online world of video gaming have their horror stories: from someone screaming epithets on Xbox Live chat to receiving horrible comments on reddit or twitter for their gaming opinions. Many times, these insults or epithets are gendered. In their new book, *Gaming Masculinity: Trolls, Fake Geeks & the Gendered Battle for Online Culture*, Megan Condis explores the gendered nature of gaming culture and how that culture interacts with politics and societal movements writ large. Specifically, Condis' main thesis surrounds an examination of "how gender politics are being filtered through and produced by the logic of video games" (3). Condis shows "that despite the supposedly disembodied nature of life online, performances of masculinity are still afforded privileged status in gaming culture" (9).

The book begins and ends with the #Gamergate controversy, where a disgruntled ex-boyfriend decided to use online platforms like 4Chan and reddit to target Zoë Quinn. Quinn—a video game developer—was attacked relentlessly in gendered and sexualized ways, exposing the misogyny that pervades gaming culture. While not everyone who participates in gaming culture took part in the #Gamergate attacks or ones like it, it provides an "exaggeration of the normative rhetorical practices of hardcore online gamers" (3). That rhetoric, which is centered around the privileging and continued domination of masculinity, also operates as an extension of current backlash-oriented right-wing politics that includes antifeminist, anti-social justice discourse.

In chapter one, Condis analyzes the role that trolling plays in gaming culture. Trolling serves as a way for members of the gaming community to police masculinity. As the logic of trolling goes, there are two ways that one responds to

a troll: those who respond directly to the troll—and thus ‘lose’ the gendered metagame at play with trolling—are viewed as more feminine based on their perceived overly-emotional response. On the other hand, those who do not respond to the troll are seen as more masculine: they maintain control of their emotions, are rational, and are competent users of the internet. The typical characteristics of those who do not respond to the troll are connected to ideas that are traditionally masculine. Thus, trolling becomes not only a way to fetter out those who are not acting appropriately masculine for this community, but to troll is to assert one’s masculinity because clearly the troll is not exhibiting overly-feminine traits by engaging in trolling.

In chapter two, Condis explores another main facet of online culture in which gender policing occurs: memes. Many of the memes that were circulated further the gendered discourse within this online community. Condis found three meme themes that operated to solidify the gaming community as a masculine space where performances of masculinity are valued: the “sexy sidekick,” the “casual girl gamer,” and the “fake nerd girl” (46). Each of these themes played on tropes of femininity to communicate the idea that if women are present in the gaming community, they are either not as capable or are using their appearance to unfairly corrupt the gaming space.

Chapter three examines the ways in which the title of ‘gamer’ or ‘fan’ are highly politicized and contested within the gaming community. Specifically, Condis uses a rather famous episode from the online message boards associated with the game *Star War: The Old Republic*. In the now-famous message thread, fans of the online game discuss the decision by the game’s developer to ban the use of the words ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ from the message boards themselves. The logic behind this decision, Condis argues, lies in the idea that the only reason that members of the message boards would only be using those words in a derogatory way rather than acknowledging the fact that gay or lesbian gamers may exist and want to talk about their identities on the message boards. Moreover, Condis found that a good number of comments in this particular thread followed a theme of wanting to ‘just play the game’ and leave one’s politics at the door. This chapter highlights how the politics of privilege—with games being apolitical at default—operates in the discourses and feelings of those who consider themselves ‘gamers.’

In the final and fourth chapter, Condis more explicitly connects the politics of online gamer culture to the current iteration of culture war politics that

culminated in the election of Donald Trump. Trolling and meme usage are not only tools of online gaming culture to police masculinity, but tools of the Trump presidency itself. Condis argues that Donald Trump is the first troll president (106). Not that we should not take his presidency seriously, but rather Donald Trump uses “unserious, insincere rhetoric toward serious...aims, an art that is the hallmark of Internet discourse” (106). Condis makes arguably one of the more interesting points of the book in this discussion: while many claim to use memes, shock-jock-esque humor, and engage in trolling behavior ironically or to get laughs, if the irony or humor cannot be deciphered from the actual ideologies of bigotry and hatred, then the distinction ceases to matter (105). In other words, if one evokes a racial or xenophobic discourse ‘for laughs,’ but that discourse is side-by-side with actual hateful discourse, then ultimately one’s intentions do not matter. Taking this perspective would help fight against the toxic online environment as well as our current political landscape.

Throughout the book, Condis employs what she dubs “game breaks:” chapter breaks that serve as short commentaries on specific games or facets of games that have heavily gendered aspects. This writing style is not only interesting for the reader but also allows the author to explore a specific idea or concept that fits with the overall theme of the book. *Gaming Masculinity’s* flaw is one that plagues many books in the popular culture field: some of the popular culture references are now presently a bit outdated. Overall, Condis’ book is a useful and timely read that asks all of us to take gaming and gaming culture a bit more seriously.

Kyle Robert McMillen  
The University of California, Riverside

Gunkel, David J. *Gaming the System: Deconstructing Video Games, Games Studies, and Virtual Worlds*. Indiana University Press, 2018.

Ten years after Ian Bogost argued that video game studies should focus not on the narrative operation, but the arguments contained in the operation, hyper-prolific scholar David J. Gunkel presents another shift in the field of video games studies, arguing that one focus on “*the game in the argument*” [emphasis original] (ix) in

his latest publication, *Gaming the System*. The text's title refers to moving beyond simply playing by the rules, and "to learn[ing] to manipulate the rules in such a way as to gain an advantage or to modify the program to make the system function differently and otherwise" (1). Gunkel elaborates across four chapters, focusing on virtual worlds, avatars and the governing documents thereof.

"Terra Nova 2.0" examines how scholars from Castronova onward regard virtual worlds as a frontier that is "in terms of its social structure [ . . . ] a very real [ . . . ] alternative to our physical realm" (29). Gunkel notes how "frontier" and "new world" remain loaded terms, with the same sins of colonization and genocide being replicated in historically-based games (35). Additionally, while it might seem no *real* victims exist, depictions of African-Americans and Latinos in the likes of *Grand Theft Auto* and the overgeneralization of "Arabs" in first person shooters continue to reinforce racist stereotypes. The graphics may have "improved" since *Custer's Revenge*, but the stomach still turns. Adding further insult to injury, a large number of victims of colonialism continue to fall on the "have-nots" side of the digital divide (52-53). Gunkel ends on an ironic note, noting that the "virgin territory" of video games studies stands in danger of being colonized by other disciplines such as literature and film studies (56).

Chapter Two, "The Real Problem," progresses logically to avatars in this new world, with users "trying on" race and gender as a positive aspect, but in a different light, potentially crying havoc and letting slip the (online, no one knows you're a) dogs of war (62). He provides historical context, citing "Sanford Lewin"'s online masquerade as the disabled woman Julie (65) as well as the Goodson/Todman panel show *To Tell the Truth* (65), explaining that reality may be realized either *a priori* via one's Facebook profile, or *a posteriori*, using the infamous example of Notre Dame linebacker Manti Te'o's nonexistent girlfriend succumbing to leukemia, as well as *Wired*'s online interview with "Marshall McLuhan" over a decade after his death (74-75). In his exploration of "the real," Gunkel examines the concept over increasing levels involving Plato, Kant, and Žižek with the "real" becoming ever more amorphous and unattainable. Gunkel concludes that the problem rests not with our understanding of virtual environments. Rather, "[t]he real problem has to do with the real" (88).

At first blush, the premise of the third chapter, "Social Contract 2.0" might seem absurd. Gunkel believes that the most important political documents of the twenty-first century resulted not out of the reorganization of nations after the fall of the Soviet Union, but the manifold Terms of Service (ToS) and End User

License Agreement (EULA) documents one must “sign” in order to participate online (92). Gunkel situates the argument in the dueling definitions of social contract theory of Locke and Hobbes, citing LambdaMOO’s wizards’ initial abdication intending to favor a “state of nature” resulting in the infamous “rape” by “Mr. Bungle” and subsequent restoration of submission to the wizards’ rule (95; 97). No matter which name the social contract might go by, said documents address matters such as data sharing and intellectual property in relation to user content (99). Of no surprise, these agreements favor the organizations over the users with the latter party having no choice but to submit to take part (100-01). So ready are the majority to submit, few bother to read the ToS/EULA, as illustrated by GameStation’s 2010 April Fool’s joke claiming right to the user’s immortal soul for eternity (101). With their seeming emphasis on users’ rights in contrast, Facebook’s EULA/ToS provides the best example of Gunkel’s initial thesis, though Facebook’s ability to pass along personal data to law enforcement agencies taints Zuckerberg’s utopia. Gunkel sees this as an opportunity to engage in activism in the virtual world. “Occupy: Cyberspace” as it were (120).

For “In the Face of Others,” Gunkel returns to online identities, building upon the possibility that a user might be neither male, female, nor dog, but a bot (125). Citing the historical examples of Turing’s Imitation Game (126) and ELIZA (129), Gunkel leads up to one of his favorite subjects: machine ethics. What happens when computers, such as the example of AlphaGo, exceed the learning implemented by the creators and are arguably no longer instruments of their creators? What if machines are implemented with emotions eventually? Who should be held responsible when, inevitably, the machines revolt? To draw on cinematic examples, ignoring the all-too-easy allusions one could make to *Blade Runner*, would Charles A. Forbin and Stephen Falken face international tribunals for committing war crimes, or their creations, Colossus and JOSHUA? Does Bomb Number Twenty’s detonation which kills the crew of *The Dark Star* (excepting already dead Commander Powell) constitute mass murder-suicide or a potential wrongful death suit to be filed against NASA?

As Gunkel explained initially in his employment of deconstruction in its purest form in carrying out this discussion, he arrives at no definite answers. Any reader taking issue with this failed to pay attention. Gunkel remains impeccable in his research, situating his argument among varying philosophical viewpoints and giving an impressively thorough historical background leading up to the current discussions in each chapter. The *only* shortcoming rests with the print



nature of the text in relation to its faster-moving subject matter. However, given the fact that Gunkel and fellow series editor Robert Alan Brookey got their respective scholarly surfboards on top of the wave early on, wipeout does not appear imminent.

Scott R. Stalcup  
Northern Illinois University

Rabinowitz, Aaron and Robert Axp editors. *Hamilton and Philosophy: Revolutionary Thinking*. Open Court Publishing Company, 2017.

A scholarly series of more than 125 books with each book dedicated to analyzing a single popular culture topic with varied philosophical approaches is no small mandate but the Popular Culture and Philosophy series rises to this challenge. Each book independently targets diverse popular culture phenomena that include television programs (e.g., *The Americans*, *The Sopranos*), films (e.g., *The Princess Bride*, *The Matrix*), and other popular culture topics (e.g., David Bowie, iPod). It is the exception for the series to tackle a Broadway play and this is what is accomplished with *Hamilton and Philosophy: Revolutionary Thinking*.

With this 110<sup>th</sup> volume in the Popular Culture and Philosophy series, *Hamilton and Philosophy: Revolutionary Thinking* Editors Aaron Rabinowitz and Robert Axp investigate how multiple philosophical approaches can inform readers and/or the *Hamilton* musical viewing audiences about Alexander Hamilton the man and *Hamilton* the award-winning musical. The two editors' achieves the goal. This book review will advance three strengths and a caveat before concluding with the overall assessment that the contribution the book makes is noteworthy.

To say Alexander Hamilton led a colorful life only begins to describe the unique adventures he faced. The orphan grew up to assist General George Washington in leading the Continental Army before becoming the first United States Secretary of the Treasury and later dying in a duel with Vice President Aaron Burr. Add other milestones like creating the *New York Post* and the United States Coast Guard as well as publishing an apology for being an adulterer and

extremely colorful seems to be a more appropriate description. Such an interesting life makes for a fascinating protagonist in Lin-Manuel Miranda's hip-hop musical *Hamilton*.

Lin-Manuel Miranda created the Broadway musical *Hamilton*'s book, music and lyrics that spotlight the complex and colorful life of United States Founding Father Alexander Hamilton. Having this production embrace rap changed the paradigm on Broadway but Miranda took it a step further by changing the paradigm by not matching the race of the actors to the race of the historical figure they portrayed. These paradigm shifts from traditional musicals demonstrate how Miranda is a visionary whose innovative work resulted in the show winning 11 Tonys in 2016.

No question then but that *Hamilton* is a deserving popular culture topic for the Popular Culture and Philosophy series. *Hamilton and Philosophy: Revolutionary Thinking* analyzes the lyrics, acting, rapping, storyline and overall performances from many different lenses. The book meets this challenge successfully overall but limitations emerge as well.

One of the strengths of the edited book by Rabinowitz and Axp is that *Hamilton* is viewed with refreshing perspectives that are not typically found in a popular culture and philosophy book. The text provides creative and thoughtful ways for assessing both Alexander Hamilton the man and for the musical. Specifically this unique book delivers multiple facets of the *Hamilton* production being reviewed with an array of philosophical approaches with rigor and imagination. For example, *Hamilton*'s key characters are compared to Cyborgs, MacBeth and Buddhists to name just a subset. The chapter authors provide engaging images, humor and irony with effective juxtapositions. Philosophical frameworks applied in original ways to offer insights into *Hamilton* and into Alexander Hamilton's life is the first strength of the book.

A second strength is that the majority of the chapter authors were considerate of the spectrum of readers in terms of having seen the play when reading the book. Without a doubt having seen the theatrical production makes for an interesting experience when reading *Hamilton: Revolutionary Thinking* but the majority of the 24 chapters' scholars write so that it is not necessary to have seen the production to understand the authors' philosophical approach for analyzing the theatrical messages. This is a significant accomplishment when philosophical tenets, frameworks and concepts are directly linked to the musical but what is helpful is that the elements are so clearly explained that attendance is not

required. The book as a reading experience can stand alone. Put simply, *Hamilton: Revolutionary Thinking* can be read before or after viewing the production and it can be equally enjoyed without seeing the biography.

A third strength is how the musical production is linked to a host of philosophies. The linkages offer rich conceptualizations and operationalizations of key concepts and tenets that are highlighted in each chapter. The aha moments are numerous. “To Throw Away Your Shot or Not” by Tim Jung and Minerva Ahumada, “Eliza Hamilton, Buddhist Master” by Benjamin Ross and “Casting in Living Color” by Adam Barkman and Rachel Wall are three of the strongest chapters with this technique of providing detailed descriptions of the show being viewed from a specific philosophical lens. The symbolism of redemption, seeking one’s legacy and family loyalty, pops with the philosophical approaches selected.

Despite its strengths, a caveat that emerges quickly is the significant variance in the quality of the chapter authors’ writing across the chapters. The variance appeared quickly with the two first chapters. Unfortunately the first chapter by Christopher Ketcham entitled “I, Hamilton, Confessions of a Ten-Dollar Bill” promises excitement only to disappoint. The text is repetitive, vague and reads as if the author wrote general observations at the top of his head without correlating the content in a meaningful way to the musical nor even to Hamilton’s life. A conversation with the ten-dollar bill could have been creative but instead the link with the bill of today advancing numerous rhetorical questions. This slow start rebounds with Joe Chapa’s second chapter “Who’s the Hero?” but one can not but think that the book would have benefited from another revision to increase the consistency of the quality of writing across the chapters.

In conclusion, *Hamilton and Philosophy: Revolutionary Thinking* provides an innovative read. Overall the authors’ creativity and expertise makes this well worth the read in terms of time and money.

Melissa M. Spirek  
Wright State University

Flanagan, Martin, Andrew Livingstone, and Mike McKenny. *The Marvel Studios Phenomenon: Inside a Transmedia Universe*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2016.

The release of Marvel Studios 2018 film, *Ant-Man and the Wasp*, marks the 20<sup>th</sup> cinematic installment of a transmedia universe that is unrivaled in the contemporary entertainment landscape. Marvel's approach to content creation spans multiple films; it is emulated by other studios and has yet to be duplicated and perhaps might never be. With the advent of Marvel Studios (MS) and their first feature film, *Iron Man*, audiences were given just the change they apparently wanted, as demonstrated by the continued worldwide support of multiple films each year. Marvel truly has built a unique transmedia universe that generates massive amounts of money, delights audiences, and sets standards rather than following them. Flanagan, McKenny, and Livingstone offer a clear picture of Marvel's history that uniquely positioned them as a company to capitalize on an entertainment climate that was ready for a change, and thus warrants reading.

Chapters one and two focus on the history of Marvel coupled with the entertainment industry in the late 1990s and early 2000's that provided the fertile grounds necessary for the seeds of a successful new film company, Marvel Studios, to flourish. Beginning with the 2005 production of the critically acclaimed and financially successful film, *Iron Man* (released in 2008), Marvel Studios caught the eye of Disney for an unprecedented \$4 billion purchase of a company with only one successful film under their belt and several products in the pipeline. With a broad spectrum of source material from a 50-year history of panel-packed Marvel Comics pages, the studio made bold steps to generate contemporary iterations of classic characters such as Iron Man, Captain America, Thor, Hulk, and many more. The authors draw readers attention to the unique position that Marvel found themselves in: continuing to produce new comics in tandem with the rigorous release-schedule of Marvel Studios; here executives experimented with the strategies to maintain cohesion across multiple films as well as comics to produce a unique transmedia narrative. Marvel maintained a "movies-first" approach that placed the characters of their films (Iron Man, Thor, Captain America, Hulk, etc.) as the point of convergence for their multiple forms of revenue such as toys, television series, comic books, etc. Chapter two poses a question that is at the heart of the entire book: *Does Marvel succeed at business in*

*order to tell great stories? Or does it tell great stories in order to prosper in business (60)?*

The authors leave little doubt that Marvel tells great stories, and Marvel Studios works to construct provocative narratives that expand and reframe the genre of big-budget action-adventure superhero movies. Chapter three calls forth the question: what is a superhero movie? The authors explore the many ways Marvel Studios subverts the genre of superhero films (and television) by allowing their properties to cater to different audiences. Audiences likely perceive the stark contrast between the structure of *Iron Man* about the son of an arms dealer with a change of heart set in contemporary society compared to *Captain America: The First Avenger* as a period piece set primarily during the events of the Second World War. Equally so, *Ant-Man* and *Thor* extend the genre to include family-friendly heist films and Shakespearean drama. The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), and its corresponding television properties, is populated by superheroes and non-powered individuals alike, but it is allowed to flourish by the varying degrees of connectivity between properties. Chapter five explores this convergence of storytelling through discussing the ways in which MS uses teams of multiple superheroes in ways that echo the efforts of Stan Lee's efforts in the 1960s to use existing properties to herald new faces into canon. Using Easter Eggs and Post-credit scenes as connective tissue from the very first MS film and the original appearance of Samuel L Jackson's Nick Fury, the audience is told simultaneously with Tony Stark that he has become part of a bigger universe and he just doesn't know it yet. From that moment on, the Avengers lead the charge as Marvel Studios' flagship property and pinnacle of transmedia franchises and carrying with it the culmination of the heroes finally united as well as the studios efforts to create a multi-billion-dollar juggernaut. Chapter six continues the discussion of broadening genre boundaries with a focus on a different team, the alternative to the Avengers and tenth installment of the MCU, *The Guardians of the Galaxy*. The film expands the superhero genre again by extending the continued narrative to the cosmos: the space-opera brings an Avengers B-list to the screen and takes a lot of risks cinematically as well as from a marketability standpoint along the way. The cosmic anti-heroes were among the most obscure properties in the breadth of protagonists to which Marvel Studios had access, and here readers are reminded that Marvel is becoming synonymous with big-budget cinema in new ways by widening what constitutes a superhero film and limiting the potential of competition (148).

For media scholars, movie aficionados, and people that just like taking a glance behind the curtain, this book offers a clear and cohesive exploration of the complex history that created some of the most popular films of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. The book is an interesting read, that asks provocative questions about how Marvel both creates and reflects culture, often simultaneously. The book's organization is at times somewhat repetitive; much like some comics from which the stories draw, readers revisit history and themes about the content from different vantage points. Nonetheless, this book advances our understanding of how Marvel serves as an exemplar for aspiring transmedia entertainment empires in a time when more movie studios try to build expanded and interconnected shared universes for their properties. Most importantly, this book points out the complexities of creating a consistent and convergent universe for the characters to inhabit together and calls into question why Marvel and audiences continue to refer to this empire as the Marvel Cinematic Universe rather than the more appropriate Marvel *Transmedia* Universe (181).

Curtis Sullivan  
North Dakota State University

Auxier, Randall E. *Metaphysical Graffiti: Deep Cuts in the Philosophy of Rock*. Open Court, 2017.

There's a fine line between irrelevance and death in the culture industry. And despite the optimism of an aging, devoted and often cultish fan base, it's clear that in our era of unmitigated digital servitude, rock and roll stands on the precipice between the clearance bin and the mortuary.

As goes rock music, so go its fans, whose aging aesthetic passions reflect the continuous decline of a once-dominant cultural institution, foreshadowing the social obsolescence of its disciples in short order. For this reason, Randall Auxier's *Metaphysical Graffiti* reads less like a compilation of high-minded music criticism—which is occasionally what it strives to be—and more like a philosophical ode to a cultural enterprise that's well into its sunset years.

Despite the reference to deep cuts in the book's title, Auxier's playlist is mostly familiar and radio-friendly: Led Zeppelin, Pink Floyd, David Bowie,

Bruce Springsteen, The Who, and other bands whose ten songs you hear over and over again if you still listen to FM stations in your car during rush hour. The greatest rock bands of all time, as declared by DJs, suburban dads, and VH1 documentaries that have been playing the same songs on repeat for the past five decades—convincing the public through sheer dogmatic force that this stuff is, like, classic, man.

Like these dads and DJs, Auxier dates himself early in the book. “I think there is a lot of philosophically interesting stuff going on in the music that was made from the onset of the rock era and up through the 1980s,” Auxier says. “I sort of checked out in the 1990s, but then, so did the good music” (xix). It’s an old man joke, dismissing the entirety of the grunge movement and the subcultural explosion of rock-driven sub-genres in the 1990s - post rock, punk rock, desert rock, riot grrrl, hardcore, and all the other counterculture sounds that never made it past college radio. Of course, Auxier is philosophically accomplished enough to recognize and admit that he’s being tongue-in-cheek, but the joke nonetheless winnows down his audience straight out of the gate. He’s a classic rock fan writing for other classic rock fans, period.

Though rock is Auxier’s medium, philosophy is his mode. And unlike his music selection, his philosophical referents are refreshingly diverse: Susanne Langer, Alfred North Whitehead, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Giambattista Vico, Ernst Cassirer, Arthur Danto (and of course the regular western canon of Sartre, Kant, Kierkegaard, Plato, Augustine and the others). This range of philosophical composition also underscores Auxier’s more visionary intentions for this book. “Philosophy is often practiced as a kind of literature,” he says. “You are reading such an exercise” (Auxier 235).

In this way, *Metaphysical Graffiti* is an attempt at original philosophical literature. And at times, it works. The eighth chapter of the book, “It’s All Dark: The Eclipse of the Damaged Brain,” is one such example where Auxier’s philosophy meets the road. Here he’s positing a phenomenology of musical appreciation, with Pink Floyd as the subject. Even if you’re not a fan, the exercise works, because Auxier is not just talking about music; he’s talking about how we experience it. So for the classic rock fan, what better band than Pink Floyd to represent the soundtrack of subjective experience?

“We are in awe of this music, we respect it, we appreciate it, but it has not been made for love or fondness or affection,” Auxier writes. “[Pink Floyd] is about black holes and dark sides and shadows; it’s about hanging on in somewhat

noisy desperation, but the noise has to be closely arranged for maximum effect” (131). The understanding of this arrangement forms the basis of Auxier’s phenomenology, putting in sober, contemporary philosophical terms what was the psychical and mildly hallucinatory experience of his first encounter with the *Dark Side of the Moon*. He’s talking about Pink Floyd the way his younger self thought he sounded like when he was talking about Pink Floyd.

Auxier’s chapter on Paul Simon, “Emptiness in Harmony,” also has rings of originality. “This isn’t exactly an essay,” Auxier says at the opening. “It’s several vignettes that trace connected themes in and through the music and life of Paul Simon [...]. When you finish the first vignette, you’re going to think I don’t like Paul Simon. That isn’t true” (253). And it continues from there, in that self-reflexive way. This might have something to do with how Auxier perceives Paul Simon’s musical canon, which he describes as “immense,” but it also has to do with Auxier’s own style. He’s figuring it out as he goes, at one point venturing into a self-described Zen moment, via American philosopher Crispin Sartwell, while at the same time admitting that he knows next to nothing about Zen philosophy.

“Sartwell knows way more about Zen than I do, but I think neither of us lives in a Zen life,” Auxier says. “Still, the world may forgive a hopeless dilettante who confesses his ineptitude in advance. Even Goethe said ‘the dilettante’ is what he wanted to be. Well, then, damn the torpedoes” (257).

Maybe Auxier doesn’t know much about Paul Simon, either, which is why he approaches his music so broadly and haphazardly. Or perhaps it’s because Simon’s work as an artist is indeed so immense and vast that it takes more than essay to summarize its supposed significance. Either way, Auxier’s haphazard method works as a way to do philosophy-as-literature. There are no answers here, only process. It’s something curious philosophers may have patience for, just as musicians have the interest be able to stand through warm-ups, sound checks and opening acts. But for a general audience, Auxier’s motley approach may be just a little too heterogeneous to stimulate profound conversation. Sort of like how Paul Simon makes some people want to plow a heel into their car’s radio.

Despite the occasional hit from Auxier, *Metaphysical Graffiti* has more in common with other philosophy-and-pop-culture books currently dominating the contemporary philosophy scene; *The Ultimate Game of Thrones and Philosophy*;



*The Avengers and Philosophy; The Simpsons and Philosophy; ad infinitum.*

Usually the “Philosophy of [Cool Thing]” model plays like a bait and switch—teasing something commercially relevant for and swapping it out for something commercially unviable—which is why most books in this genre fail.

What sets Auxier’s book apart from other works in this nascent genre is that he’s not using pop culture artifacts to teach about philosophers’ interesting ideas. Instead, he’s using the music to work out ideas of his own. With a different editor and more creative publisher, *Metaphysical Graffiti* could actually stand a chance at broader appeal. It has the necessary humor, self-awareness, and plain speak that’s necessary for bringing philosophy down to ground level. But then, this book could never have been pitched as philosophy. And it’s too heady to stand alone as music criticism, thus becoming a deep cut of its own.

Benjamin van Loon  
Northeastern Illinois University

Kee, Chera. *Not Your Average Zombie: Rehumanizing the Dead from Voodoo to Zombie Walks*. University of Texas Press, 2017.

Popular culture conventionally presents zombies as a collective horror comprised of humans that have been stripped of their identity. Whether the kind of zombie a piece of media portrays harkens back to the monster’s Haitian roots in Vodou or the George Romero inspired flesh-hungry ghoul, the abject aesthetic of “ordinary” conventional zombies treats these monsters as “little more than empty shells, waiting for someone to project fears onto them” (Kee 2). While the zombie’s openness to a variety of critical interpretations might appear to account for the monster’s popularity in American pop culture, Chera Kee suggests instead that “The somewhat seductive pull of the zombie may have something to do with the fact that US pop culture is full of... *extra-ordinary zombies*... zombies [that] go beyond expectations of ordinary zombies” (3).

To extrapolate the earliest incarnations of the extra-ordinary zombie, Kee begins Chapter 1 by focusing on the zombie’s Haitian roots. Kee constructs a history that culminates out from Columbus’s colonization of Hispaniola in 1492 into the Haitian Revolution and the US occupation of Haiti. Although brief, Kee

uses this history to articulate the interconnected legacy that zombies share with Vodou and institutionalized slavery before the zombie migrated through to the United States through such films as *White Zombie*, *Ouanga*, and *King of the Zombies*. Kee observes that “Early slave-style zombie narratives [such as the ones that appear across the aforementioned films] are predicated on the idea that zombification doesn’t have to be permanent- especially if one is a young white American” (26). With this observation, Kee comes to an early conclusion that from the beginning of American zombie media, extra-ordinary zombies have existed, although the context that these zombies emerge from is haunted by a lingering sense of racism and a nostalgia for colonialism.

Although Chapter 1 explores how zombies have been racialized since their initial appearances in American pop culture, Kee uses Chapter 2 to interrogate how apocalyptic zombies occupy a liminal space that is both raceless and racialized. Per Kee, Zombies are raceless in a sense that they evoke a coming new world order that itself is post-race, yet zombies are racialized by human survivors and consumers of zombie media. Surveying such works as the original *Night of the Living Dead*, *Land of the Dead*, and *Ugly Americans*, Kee is especially interested in re-reading conventional cannibal zombie narratives to articulate how this liminal space lends itself to the creation of extra-ordinary zombies. Kee notes that although zombies are almost always black in the slave-style zombie narratives, in cannibal-style texts, zombies “are almost always white” (52). In cannibal-style zombie narratives then, what makes a zombie extra-ordinary is not a zombie’s white skin, but that a zombie has been humanized. Kee identifies two ways that this humanization commonly occurs in these texts: one) “the zombie is a person that living people knew, such as a friend or family member” and two) “the zombie exhibits human qualities... it tries to answer the phone or play the trombone, anything that marks it other than mindless” (65).

Kee utilizes Chapter 3 to interrogate the role of white women in zombie films. Kee returns to *White Zombie* and turns to other texts like *Chopper Chicks in Zombietown* and *Revenge of the Zombies* to articulate a feminist critique of zombification in film. Regarding slave-style narratives, Kee notes zombification makes white men “behave according to dictates similar to those placed on idealized white womanhood: they will become docile, passive, and willing to follow the orders of a (white) man” (79). Should a white woman control a white male zombie in this kind of narrative, she gains the ability to assert her own agency and resist hegemonic norms. As for cannibal-style narratives, Kee notes

that these texts “largely leave it to a white female to decide what her ‘civilization’ will now look like” (90). Yet while the zombie apocalypse might allow white women to perform extra-ordinary acts of heroism, zombification of white women, as Kee observes, also can allow white women to seek their revenge against the patriarchal system that oppressed them while they were still alive, transforming them into extra-ordinary zombies (95).

Kee shifts to women of color and Hollywood contrived voodoo in Chapter 4. Although this chapter does not further reinforce Kee’s claim that extra-ordinary zombies are ubiquitous in American pop culture, her interrogation of *The House on Skull Mountain* and *Ouanga* explores how voodoo/zombification empowers women of color across slave-style zombie narratives.

Kee returns to extra-ordinary zombies in Chapter 5, which surveys videogames such as *Stubbs the Zombie*, *World of Warcraft*, and *Planescape: Torment*. Kee notes “games that rhetorically justify the killing of ordinary zombie hordes reinforce the notion that there are beings who lost their rights to life” (128-129). The video game version of the extra-ordinary zombie, however, “emphasizes the idea that some [zombies] have full claims to human status” (129). This is because the player often controls the zombies in these games. Kee also identifies another type of extra-ordinary zombie as zombies in games, e.g. *Left 4 Dead*, that have unique characteristics that set them apart from the ordinary undead, but these zombies do not challenge the notion that zombies have lost their rights to life (135).

Kee’s final chapter turns to the phenomena of zombie walks and how they represent a gathering of inherently extra-ordinary zombies (157). Kee argues that this is because participants in zombie walks create/perform their own unique zombie personas.

Although I found myself initially skeptical of Kee’s initial thesis about extra-ordinary zombies’ ubiquity in American pop culture, Kee provides a compelling synthesis of theory and criticism in the first four chapters that I think is useful for horror scholars interested in how portrayals of zombies intersect with race and gender. The final chapters are relevant to a more niche scholarly community concerned with zombies’ ties to ludology and performance respectively.

Matt Sautman  
Southern Illinois University Edwardsville

Christian, Aymar Jean. *Open TV: Innovation Beyond Hollywood and the Rise of Web Television*. NYU Press, 2018.

Emergent technology has not only impacted how Americans consume television, it has also changed the content seen on the landscape of the medium. In *Open TV: Innovation Beyond Hollywood and the Rise of Web Television*, Amar Jean Christian historicizes the shift from what is labeled closed TV (an oligopoly of television controlled by the Big 3 Networks - NBC, ABC, & CBS - in which diversity is limited) to what is labeled open TV. The term “open TV” describes a marketplace in which producers of television are able to distribute their work independently from the traditional, or legacy, media; this is typically associated with distribution through the Internet. Each chapter explores a different aspect of the tension between open TV and closed TV.

Chapter 1 reviews the role the Internet played in distributing television between the ten-year-span of 1995 to 2005. Legacy media outlets were the first to capitalize on the advent of the web by creating new shows explicitly for this new medium. Since niche audiences had been established through numerous cable television stations during the 1970s and 1980s, legacy media continued to target these audiences online.

Chapter 2 discusses the infrastructure and labor practices of television. Legacy TV has the resources to hire labor for one specific job: a grip, a writer, an actor, etc. Open TV offers creative freedom, yet this freedom comes at the cost of problematic labor conditions. Open TV demands someone, such as a writer, adopt multiple roles without compensation; this person may also be an editor, a caterer, a talent scout, and a camera operator.

Chapter 3 examines the identities portrayed on television. Because open TV allows creative freedom, it can feature character identities that are too niche for legacy TV and, hence, not profitable. Hundreds of web series have existed that feature Latino, black, gay, transgender, Asian, and lesbian characters that defy stereotypes. However, such programs disappear quickly because they target niche audiences and do not have the resources to produce, distribute and promote.

Chapter 4 explores the struggles producers of open TV have when distributing their work. Legacy TV has been, and remains, the most powerful distributor of television whether on traditional devices (an actual television) or emerging forms (a tablet or phone). Even if an independent web program is able to distribute on a major site, such as *YouTube*, there are often restrictions that hinder distribution

through other venues. Those programs that are able to secure funding and distribution must often relinquish creative control to their sponsor or platform.

The final chapter investigates how distributors of web television can only compete with legacy TV through an increased scale of audience. Larger open TV resources, such as *Buzzfeed*, attract sizeable amounts of traffic by offering both cheap space for advertisers (funding) and an easy way to navigate content for consumers. Despite this model, it remains difficult for independent creators of programming to gain audience attention on sites like *YouTube* when competing with programs on this platform supported by the resources of legacy TV.

In most of the chapters, Christian opens with an autoethnographic account of his experience producing a web television series entitled *She's Out of Order*. For instance, in Chapter 2 Christian details the lack of resources independent TV producers have, when he used a friend's apartment as a filming location rather than building a set explicitly for the production. The use of personal experience ensures the reader, even if they have no prior knowledge of television production, has a detailed blueprint of the realities that exist in the industry. The qualitative method of research also helps to guide the reader through the emerging narrative of producing content for an online format.

The story of open TV is, indeed, emergent in that one of the central technologies people use to consume TV, a cell phone with the capacities of a computer, has only really existed over the past 10 years. The history of online programming is just starting to be told, unlike the traditional television set that has existed for nearly 100 years and has a defined and structured history. Christian reflects on this ongoing materialization of open TV in his writing by maintaining elusiveness to the term. The very word "open TV" can be used to refer to character development, production methods, or distribution techniques, among other things. However, it is precisely the elusive nature of the term open TV that allows for a variety of perspectives and a variety of entry points into the discussion on the subject, much like the entity of open TV itself.

Christian has produced a text that serves as a talking point about the history of television developed for the web and its current state. The work conducted also gestures towards the not-so-distant future of television. As more legacy corporations unite to form major conglomerates, it will be interesting to see how management of independent programming materializes. In addition, the work offers an outline how to potentially merge the practical application of autoethnography and a critical theoretical framework to eventually alter the

landscape of television and position independent programming and legacy programming on equal footing. Further reading: *A Future For Public Service Television*, Des Freedman and Vana Goblot (Eds.), MIT Press, 2018.

James Perez  
Colorado Mesa University

Heyrman, John. *Politics, Hollywood Style: American Politics in Film from Mr. Smith to Selma*. Lexington Books, 2018.

In May 1973, at the age of six, I watched the first Watergate Hearing on television. This event marked the beginning of a long fascination with politics and what I knew of “political theatre.” From then until now, I have viewed countless hours of political drama in the form of news coverage, personal and professional interaction and literature. And yet, my actual consumption of political film is oddly and embarrassingly sparse. But after reading John Heyrman’s *Politics, Hollywood Style: American Politics in Film from Mr. Smith to Selma*, I’ve gained a deeper understanding, affinity and respect for the genre of political film and its influence and reflection on American culture writ large.

Before tackling the analysis of a variety of films in their corresponding political eras, Heyrman lays out an important and convincing defense for the examination of political films. The author asserts media consumers do not neatly divide news sources and entertainment into what is “true” and what is “fiction.” Indeed, in this current age of the overt extoling of “fake news,” many consumers find it difficult to even understand news at all.

Heyrman concedes his overall approach to analysis is more political scientist than film critic, but he nonetheless deftly categorizes each film’s approach through the lens of four broad categorizations. These are: idealistic/cynical, completely cynical, paranoid, and heroic. In short, an idealistic/cynical film is one in which an ethical/moral individual finds themselves up against a corrupt, even evil system and yet prevails. Heyrman defines a completely cynical film as one in which both individuals and political enterprises are so corrupt that no hero can fix it. Paranoid films feature extreme distrust of government and/or politicians and fear plays a starring role. And heroic films feature the struggle of the

protagonist against problems or obstacles not necessarily caused by politics or government corruption. Once the author lays the ground rules, he then divides films into a “political era.”

In the first chapter we become acquainted with The Depression Era. It is here that Heyrman unpacks classic political films such as *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* along with lesser known works such as *Gabriel Over the White House*. The author considers each film and weighs them against culture norms of the time period. We learn that women are unsurprisingly shown only in “behind the scenes” roles, and minorities are nearly absent with few minor exceptions. Heyrman categorizes the political ideology of the time “mildly liberal” and explains his rationale as it relates to the actual unfolding of political events of the time. He follows this same prototypical approach throughout the text.

In the Postwar and Cold War era, Heyrman introduces us to such diverse films as *All the King's Men* and *State of the Union*. In this era, women fare better than the previous. In one instance, a female is even elected to Congress. However, the position of minorities does not improve which is indicative of the times in which the films appear.

The Height of the Cold War era covers the late 1950s and early 1960s. And, Hollywood itself is changing rapidly along with the political landscape. Heyrman reviews eight films including *The Manchurian Candidate* and *The Best Man*. Given the tumultuous time frame in which these films appear, it isn't surprising they take quite a skeptical view of McCarthyism and inject concern over the prospect of nuclear war.

The assassination of John F. Kennedy, the Vietnam War and Watergate feature prominently in the Challenging Political Powers chapter. In this era, *All the President's Men* is juxtaposed against *The Candidate*. While small in number, the films analyzed in this section are categorized by Heyrman to be completely cynical or paranoid – as reflected in the culture. Additionally, passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 provide actual progress for minorities and this progress begins to show up in the films.

Chapter five takes us into the Me Generation of the late 1970s and 1980s. Heyrman introduces a documentary for the first time – Michael Moore's *Roger and Me*. Films in this time period are considered by the author to be largely cynical, and yet, he characterizes them overall as “tame” even “dull.” Women make more progress here, but minority representation lags the reality of greater progress and gains in positions of power and elected office.

The next political era analyzed is dubbed the Return of the Political Film. And indeed, Heyrman walks us through 21 films produced from 1990 to 2001. In this analysis every category includes one or more films. From *Thirteen Days* to *Dave* to *Wag the Dog* and *Enemy of the State*, the author takes on a wide range of cinematic offerings. We finally witness significant progress for women and minorities on the screen - both are found in leading roles and prominent supporting roles. Heyrman notes the increase in the number of films and progress for women and minorities, and points out that the political ideology remains staunchly liberal.

The final chapter considers the post 9/11 era and is titled The War on Terror and Beyond. Twenty-four diverse films are analyzed including: *Lincoln*, *White House Down*, *Selma*, *Thank You For Smoking* and *Legally Blonde II*. In this era, we notice a new theme rise in the form of a debate between security and freedom. Heyrman attributes the continued interest in politics as an outgrowth of the dominance of Baby Boomer directors and writers. He also discusses the corresponding political ideology of the films overall remains liberal.

Heyrman's review and analysis of 80 years of political films is an ambitious and worthy work. In any book about film, there is tension between appropriately capturing and analyzing a film's nuance while remaining a compelling read. This text is no exception. As a film novice, this book could be quite tedious to read on its own, but as a companion to a film course or a political movie binge, it would be an asset.

As world events continue to unfold at a furious pace, filmmakers will have an abundance of fodder for more works. And, as the media and entertainment space continue to merge and converge, making sense of the state of American politics and its effects on the American culture will remain an important enterprise. John Heyrman's *Politics, Hollywood Style: American Politics in Film from Mr. Smith to Selma* lays important groundwork for the analysis of political films now and into the future.

Katherine R. Fleck  
Ohio Northern University



Santino, Jack. *Public Performances: Studies in the Carnavalesque and the Ritualesque*, Utah State University Press, 2017

*Public Performances: Studies in the Carnavalesque and the Ritualesque*, is a collection of articles and the latest in series of volumes on *Ritual, Festival and Celebration*. Jack Santino acts as editor of these works as well as providing the theoretical groundwork for why and how to study these acts of public displays. To further delve into the carnival, ritual and material cultures of public performances, the anthology is loosely divided into three sections dedicated to each, though the purpose of this book is often to show how interwoven all three types of performances are.

Included in the definition of public performances for this work are things as small and intimate as a roadside memorial, to traditional carnivals, protests, Pride parades, even to material culture such as the impromptu leaving of tokens at memorials after tragedy or attacks, displays of country flags and so on. Nearly anything done in public with an intent for display, whether by a single person or a group, a large or small display, is included in the working definition (Santino x-xi).

Santino divides the performances between ritual and carnival based on the intent of the act. Ritualesque is a public performance done in an effort to make lasting changes to the “real world” outside of the performance, while the actions done during the carnivalesque are outside the rules and regulations of the real world. Just as it is in any Pre Lentian festival, rules of society are temporarily suspended in the carnivalesque. But these are only idealized constructions and often a single event will hold aspects of both ritual and carnival within it (Santino 5). The goal of the collection is to explore these gray areas as well as the political dimensions of public displays. Santino theorizes when a public performance is organized from the ground up that the very act of performance is a political act and this assertion of power from below and thus, will cause a certain amount of resistance from “above”. And of course, when it is organized from the top down, there can be insidious intentions, though the nature of these intentions are never fleshed out in any of the works. Given the trying times in the US currently with protests, social media efforts and other public displays being revamped and reprioritized, from the ground and the top, this theory is of particular interest and current importance.

The theme of ground up creates power and top down diminishes it is carried out in every section regardless of location or time period. In the exploration of traditional carnival we first delve into comparisons of a modern Caribbean (20<sup>th</sup> century Port of Spain) and more ancient European (1450s and 1540s Nuremberg) carnival traditions and find that the crux for each was top down interference. For Port of Spain it was the from governmental control to create a safe and profitable carnival for tourists while for Nuremberg the loss of self governance in favor to larger governments restricted the liberating sides of the carnival (Kisner 16-17; 41). Furthering the importance of community involvement, we explore the mixture of African and European practices in the New World and how this has shaped and continues to influence local praxis (Abrahams 49).

Moving towards more ritual performances, we are taken to Indonesia to explore the varied use of processions for everything to personal mourning to religious or government sanctioned festivals. As to be expected, government sanctioned events can be met with tension as displays of power are felt and sometimes unappreciated. Though even in these top down processions part of the goals, according to Harnish, is to subvert social order as in the traditional carnival, not just to push some sort of agenda (Harnish 148).

The use of ritualesque behavior by governments is further explored in Gilman as agreed upon concepts of Mzimba heritage are now being intentionally promoted and remembered in a new festival, the Umthetho Festival, which was created to combat fears of “losing” the culture to dilution from European interactions and intermarriages. The insidious sides of this cultural promotion is explored as Gilman reveals the political effects this festival, and the act of combining so called cultural preservation with politics of macro powers has (Gilman 185). Though not explicitly stated, one can see how the specific concepts of culture being promoted in the Umthetho Festival means certain other aspects of history as well as marginalized groups are being silenced as an official narrative is being formed. Though the ultimate motive of the government’s intentions is left unexplored, perhaps because it has not been realized in real time yet, the feeling of unease is expressed by the author and the subjects.

Moving towards protests and activism, we have several case studies that show the power of public performance as a form of protest throughout locations and history with references to Cork Brass Bands (Borgonovo 93) and roadside memorials (Graham 239) in Ireland , displaying of Puerto Rican flags for a variety of personal and political needs in New York (Martinez 113), the use of

Shakespeare to protests Big Oil in England (Magelsson 222) and the use of material culture to remember and protest in United States (Wojcik 254).

This collection gives a great introduction to the varied forms of public performance across space and time and drives home its thesis very well. The only thing I wish I saw more of was a fleshing out as to why top down public performance is, by its nature, so damaging to the people. Of course we all can come up with our own theories based on our own research as to why, be it for political or monetary gain, but the lack of exploration made some pieces feel like there was more that could be gained through additional research. But if the effect of an anthology is to inspire more research, then it is likely a very good project indeed.

Lauren Cheek  
University of Florida

Lopez, Marco, Hazel Newlevant, Desiree Rodriguez, Derek Ruiz, and Neil Schwartz, editors. *Puerto Rico Strong: A Comics Anthology Supporting Puerto Rico Disaster*. Lion Forge. 2018.

In the fall of 2017, the passage of Hurricane Maria pulled Puerto Rico into an unprecedented humanitarian crisis that left an estimated death toll of more than 1,000 people (Fink), many more homeless, and almost 1 million households without electricity (Goodkin). To further complicate matters, Puerto Rico's legal status as an unincorporated United States territory forced its people to face numerous bureaucratic, partisan and ideological roadblocks to initiate recovery efforts. Thus, the specter of Hurricane Maria elicited public contestations about the island territory's national identity and centuries-old struggle for sovereignty. *Puerto Rico Strong*, which was published to raise funds for post-Hurricane Maria disaster relief, meticulously captures many of these discourses and immerses readers in the contemporary Puerto Rican state of mind.

The book is a collection of 41 comics stories that unpack Hurricane Maria's psychological impact on Puerto Ricans' collective consciousness and their perception of national identity. The editors have assembled a cadre of incandescently talented writers and artists, many of them Puerto Ricans living in the island, who deconstruct the concept of "Puerto Ricanness" using a mélange of

idiosyncratic aesthetic styles and deeply intimate personal stories. In turn, the comics elucidate discussions about Puerto Rico's most pressing problems, such as post-colonial cultural shock and the sense of public despair in the face of a natural disaster, incorporating testimonials from people who experienced some of the particular situations first hand.

What feels most refreshing about *Puerto Rico Strong* is that it is not merely an overview of Puerto Rico's history and current plights. Rather, it harnesses and even harmonizes the emotional chaos that emerged from the uncertainty, confusion, and anguish caused by Hurricane Maria. The book's mission is to provide a voice to Puerto Ricans on the margins, to humanize their struggles, and to document and reinforce their sense of resilience. This is accomplished with ease because the writers and artists often invoke their own memories and experiences to craft their stories, articulating a vivid sense of reality, as a result.

The book arranges its comics collection without the bias of a chapter-driven structure, leaving navigation entirely in the readers' hands. Although this decision may prove slightly inconvenient for those seeking to browse the tome using clearly defined categories, the stories still connect to one another with common themes, events, and even historical characters. As a Puerto Rican versed in the island's history and culture, I linked some of the stories—consciously and subconsciously—using the following categories: “native heritage (Taínos)”, “folklore”, “nostalgic diasporas”, “second class citizenship”, and “post-hurricane trauma”. It is likely that other readers may find different interconnecting themes based on their knowledge of Hurricane Maria, and Puerto Rican history and culture.

The “native heritage” category features the “Taínos”, an indigenous tribe inhabiting the pre-Colombian Caribbean region, including Puerto Rico. Some of the book's stories tend to highlight their heroic yet futile efforts to resist imperial conquest, assimilation, and eventual extermination. For example, “A Taíno's Tale”, “Taínos Online” and “Areytos” unfold like brisk yet robust school lessons about the tribe's traditions, history, and enduring contributions to Puerto Rican and world culture, like the word *huracán* (“hurricane”).

Stories in the “folklore” category explore modern Puerto Rican mythology, romanticizing infamous characters like the Chupacabra in “Of Myth and Monsters” and a local vampire-like creature in “El Vampiro de Moca” (The Vampire from the Town of Moca). These chronicles unfold as aesthetically

macabre yet innocuous adventures, with entertainment and educational value for readers of all ages.

Puerto Rico has experienced various economic collapses, which produced two major diasporas to the United States, with the first one occurring between 1940 and 1960, and the current one, which began about a decade ago. As a result, a transnational sense of identity connecting those in the U.S. mainland with their compatriots who remain in Puerto Rico has manifested. Stories in the “nostalgic diasporas” category capture intimate aspects of family dynamics typically associated with demographic displacement. “Stories from My Father”, where characters recall Puerto Rico’s seemingly simplistic and community-oriented lifestyle, perfectly illustrates this vicarious connection, in which Puerto Ricans living in the United States contend with two paradoxical identities: Puerto Rican national and American citizen.

Several years after acquiring Puerto Rico, the U.S. government granted citizenship to its inhabitants with a few caveats (Trías Monje, 77). Among them, Puerto Ricans would receive limited federal benefits, no meaningful representation in Congress, but would be able to travel freely to the U.S. mainland. The unveiling of this “second class citizenship” occurred in the dawn of World War I, forcing thousands of Puerto Ricans to enlist in the armed forces. “Macondo, Puerto Rico” and “La Casita of American Heroes” astutely direct the readers’ attention to this “coincidence” (Lopez 157). These comics stories, inundated with nostalgic images of Puerto Rican veterans of various wars, quietly advocate for a more dignified relationship with the U.S., the nation many Puerto Rican soldiers gave their lives to defend.

Lastly, stories exploring issues directly connected with Hurricane Maria’s aftermath in *Puerto Rico Strong* seem to operate as coping mechanisms, articulating a spectrum of contradicting emotions. In “Resilience by Lamplight”, various Puerto Rican families gather in overwhelming darkness after a massive blackout, seeking to guide their paths forward with candles and a rekindled sense of community. “Fajardo” shows us a family on their way to their *abuelito*’s place, days after the hurricane. After driving through the debris and rubble, they find the house in ruins. While inside, they reminisce about their grandfather’s service in the U.S. military, echoing the themes of second-class citizenship exposed in stories like “Macondo, Puerto Rico”. Lastly, “Thanks for Nothing” satirizes President Trump’s disastrous visit to the island territory days after the hurricane’s passage with ferocious cynicism and farcical energy. The story mocks the

President's dismissal of the natural disaster, linking it to some of his previous xenophobic propositions, like the "Muslim travel ban". The stories in this category depict a community drowning in despair yet focused on enduring, never missing an opportunity to rationalize and criticize their situation with humor.

In short, *Puerto Rico Strong* delivers on its mission to immerse readers into a journey of discovery through a mixture of distinctive aesthetic and narrative comics styles and authentic personal stories. Its portrayals of Puerto Ricanness, and the plethora of identities it encompasses, from historical, ethnic, political, and economic perspectives, feel both intimate and universal. In particular, using Puerto Rico's post-Hurricane Maria reality to teach unsuspecting readers about Puerto Rico's identity crisis, as it manifests in the shadow of colonialism and a post-hurricane reality, sets the stage for important contestations to take shape. The book bestows a voice to a group of people who exist perennially at the margins of mainstream American discourses. This is fulfilled thanks to the restless efforts of a creative team who understands the "power" of comics (Lopez 3) and wield it as both a pedagogical resource and an instrument of empowerment.

Joe Cruz  
Pennsylvania State University

*Works Cited*

- Fink, Sheri. "Puerto Rico's Hurricane Maria Death Toll Could Exceed 4,000, New Study Estimates." *The New York Times*, 29 May 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/29/us/puerto-rico-deaths-hurricane.html>. Accessed 27 July 2018.
- Goodkin, Nicole. "Puerto Rico's Hurricane Maria Power Outage Is Now the World's Second Largest Blackout." *Newsweek*, 12 Apr. 2018, <https://www.newsweek.com/puerto-rico-power-hurricane-maria-blackout-882549>. Accessed 27 July 2018.
- Lopez, Marco, Newlevant, Hazel, Rodriguez, Desiree, Ruiz, Derek, and Schwartz, Neil. *Puerto Rico Strong: A Comics Anthology Supporting Puerto Rico Disaster*. Lion Forge. 2018.

Trías Monge, José. *Puerto Rico: The Trials of the Oldest Colony in the World*. Yale University Press, New Haven, Conn, 1997.

Pugh, Tison, *The Queer Fantasies of the American Family Sitcom*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018.

Reading Tison Pugh's *The Queer Fantasies of the American Sitcom* is like watching familiar television programs with a perceptive pop culture junkie whose witty commentary reshapes the familiar in a new, queer, form. Each chapter of Pugh's survey of US family sitcoms is devoted to a specific series popular in subsequent decades of US television history beginning with *Leave It to Beaver* and ending with *Modern Family*. By cleverly conjuring the specter of queerness in the seemingly straightest of television genres and communicating his findings in a humorous and accessible manner, the author produces a text likely to appeal to gender and sexuality scholars as well as students of popular culture in undergraduate and graduate classrooms.

Pugh works from the assumption that television is a rich historical archive as well as a powerful socializing force. He produced a complex archive to contextualize each program he explores demonstrating that sociological and psychological theory, political policy, audiences, and television creators are part of a complex tapestry of meaning making. However, the focus of his study is identifying the queer potential of the family sitcom. Pugh theorizes three sites of queerness intrinsic to the genre: 1) the queer fantasy of the family sitcom as a stable genre with clear boundaries, 2) the queer fantasy of family friendly programming with clear points of identification for all, which he suggests fails to account for "multiple and contradictory viewing positions" (8), and 3) the queer fantasy of innocent children. Each chapter engages these specters of queerness while also generating claims specific to the individual programs analyzed.

In chapter one, "The Queer Times of *Leave It to Beaver*," Pugh focuses on the queer temporality of characters' pasts and futures. He suggests that Ward Cleaver's abusive past resurfaces in the text's present and that Barbara Billingsley's later work retroactively camps her portrayal of June Cleaver. Additionally, Pugh identifies and explores Beaver Cleaver's queer textual present

though his homosocial relationships and preference for feminized pastimes throughout much of the series' run.

The second chapter, "Queer Innocence and Kitsch Nostalgia in *The Brady Bunch*," explores the program's "impossible and ultimately queer innocence" (51). Pugh suggests that throughout the sitcom's original run the presence of six children regulated the sexuality of the adult characters. Pugh also notes that queerness makes its way into the series' subtext through flamboyant characters, the erotic possibility of step-incest, and the inadvertent sexualization of child stars. According to this reading, queerness is present and available to the Brady's and the program's audience even as it hovers below the show's surface.

Pugh's third chapter, "No Sex Please, We're African American," is a study of *The Cosby Show* that highlights shifts in the gender dynamics of parenting. He suggests Cliff Huxtable performs "parenthood as an androgynous role" but observes patriarchy reentering the sitcom through Cliff's policing of his daughters' sexuality (80). According to Pugh, queerness emerges in the impossibility of representing black sexuality normatively, which suggests the failure of normativity and the lie of universality intrinsic to the genre's conventions.

The fourth chapter, "Feminism, Homosexuality, and Blue-Collar Perversity in *Roseanne*," explores the original series, not its 2018 reboot, and certainly not its 2018 cancellation due to Barr's racist outbursts, both of which occurred after the book was published. Instead, chapter four explores the shift from androgynous parenting to a family clearly headed by a matriarch. Pugh's generous reading of *Roseanne* characterizes the program as: "Defiantly queer in its treatment of economics, sexuality, and their numerous points of intersection" (108). Interestingly, this chapter celebrates *Roseanne*, the program, character, and actresses', commitment to feminism, economic justice, and queer representation but omits a discussion of race. It likely would not be the same chapter if written now but the limits of the program's progressive storyline could have been identified prior to recent controversies. Importantly, for Pugh, *Roseanne* brought representations of queerness to the surface of the sitcom genre by exploring queer themes and characters.

Pugh's fifth chapter, "Allegory, Queer Authenticity, and Marketing Tween Sexuality in *Hannah Montana*," departs from other chapters by focusing on a subgenre of the family sitcom, the tween sitcom, which focalizes a teen character and envisions its primary audience as preteens. In this chapter, Pugh synthesizes



two themes: consumption and authenticity. He demonstrates that the idea of authenticity is intrinsic to the financial success of tween programs. The queer potential of the program emerges through audience identification with Miley Cyrus the actress/singer as well as the character Hannah Montana, whose fictionalized life mirrored Cyrus's. Cyrus's personal and professional life took a queer turn, which, paired with the moral of authenticity embedded in the program, can have a queer influence on its tween/no longer tween audience.

The sixth chapter, "Conservative Narratology, Queer Politics, and the Humor of Gay Stereotypes in *Modern Family*," explores the queer possibilities of the sitcom genre's narrative structure and conventions. Pugh argues that both structures and conventions can be bent to queer ends. He does not look exclusively to the program's gay couple, Cam and Mitch, to make an argument for the show's queerness, but instead focuses on the availability of perversity to heterosexuals through anal eroticism and incest. Even more, he explores the queer potential of stereotypes through smart and original interpretive readings of the sitcom.

In his conclusion Pugh succinctly sums up the project: "Family sitcoms, whether they dramatize erotic normativity or its subversions, open inherently queer spaces for spectators to query the presumed limits of the American family and thus to create a praxis of spectatorship unmoored from the erotic discipline implied throughout America's history of heteronormativity" (193). Pugh's impressively researched and compellingly argued take on family sitcoms provides a fresh look at content too frequently dismissed as simplistic and moralistic. He makes a compelling case for the genre's complexity and demonstrates the queer potential of its moralism.

*The Queer Fantasies of the American Family Sitcom* is a smart and humorous text that does a wonderful job turning a queer eye to American family sitcoms. However, I am disappointed in Tugh's lack of commitment to intersectional analysis throughout his discussions. Although his reading of *The Cosby Show* engages interconnections between race, gender, sexuality, and class, he fails to read the ubiquitous presence of whiteness and subsequent absence of racial difference in the other programs he analyzes. As mentioned in my chapter descriptions, Pugh's lack of engagement with race in *Roseanne* is a glaring omission considering his otherwise thoughtful discussion of identity categories and hierarchies reinforced or challenged on the program. The absence of racial difference, present on most American family sitcoms, is integral to the genre, and

I would suggest, likely intersects in meaningful, and underexplored ways, with their latent queerness.

Jennifer Miller  
University of Texas at Arlington

Brown, Simon. *Screening Stephen King: Adaptation and the Horror Genre in Film and Television*. University of Texas Press, 2018.

Assembling over 34 years of constant reading, watching, and analyzing, Simon Brown has provided fans and scholars of Stephen King with a seminal text in his recent publication, *Screening Stephen King: Adaptation and the Horror Genre in Film and Television*. Thoroughly researched and engaging, this book follows King's works from literature to cinema, home video to television, and finally concluding with streaming platforms. Brown's access to numerous boxes of King's original manuscripts (housed at The Raymond H. Folger Library of the University of Maine, Orono), including unpublished screenplays, add an exciting element to the book itself. Access to these archival works, which Brown both consulted and cited for his project, allowed him to examine the relationship that "King adaptations have had to the horror genre" while also assessing "the impact of these works on the genre in film and on TV since the mid 1970s" (2), providing readers in both academic and popular circles with a clear understanding of the striking influence King has had within what is sometimes considered a "niche" genre "that exists largely on the periphery of popular culture due to its 'social unacceptability'" (25). Brown introduces his text with an overview of the plethora of scholarship previously devoted to King, but sets his own work apart from these by considering the concept of "Brand Stephen King" (author's capitalization) throughout his analysis of the many adaptations of King's works, beginning with Brian DePalma's *Carrie* (1976) and concluding with Hulu's *11.22.63* (2016). This book is, therefore, more than a work about the texts and films; it is about King's name itself and how this "Brand" can be traced throughout the genre of filmic and televisual horror.

Brand Stephen King, as Brown points out in his first chapter, begins with King's literary accomplishments in his early novels, which set the tone for the

establishment and eventual emergence of this “Branding.” Brown notes that King is best known for hybridity in his writing, which is usually demonstrated through a “conflict between good people and a bad force” (163). In other words, King’s literary brand – first and foremost – is about realistic and relatable “American” characters with whom the audience can identify. According to Brown, one of the keys to King’s literary success – and to his eventual “Branding” – is his ability to be the “chronicler of America” (90), further observing, “His characters don’t drink a soda, they have a Coke or Pepsi. They smoke Luckies or Camels or Tareytos, and they relax with a Pabst or a Narragansett” (39). King’s emphasis on character development is essential to his Brand, as these characters are then placed into unforeseeable supernatural circumstances. King often downplays gore and body horror, and tends to be serious in his tone, allowing his audience become more involved with the psychology of the humans involved in narratives dealing with rather un-human circumstances. What Brown has noticed throughout the years is when adaptations are “divorced from those consistent stylistic and thematic traits...relying mainly on King’s name as a specifically cinematic or televisual brand” they often “[struggle] to find a place within horror on film or TV” (192). Therefore, King’s original sources, which established his literary Brand, are essential to consider before discussing the screen adaptations.

Once the literary Brand Stephen King was established through his early novels, Brown chronologically traces the screen adaptations in four subsequent chapters, each focusing on early, mainstream, low-budget/home video, and television adaptations (in that order). Every screen adaptation produced until the publication of this book in 2018 is represented within the chapters, including obscure sequels and films associated with King through title or name alone. Though it would be simple to only compare and contrast the adaptations and their original source material, Brown does not merely rely on this technique. He provides concise and useful summaries of each text/film he discusses, and then seamlessly blends these summaries with adept critical and cultural analysis, including considerations of the film theories and techniques which make a horror film successful (or not, as the case may sometimes be).

What makes this book remarkable is that, although King is the primary focus in the text, this is not just a book about King’s work. More broadly, Brown’s book can be deemed an overview of the history of horror films and television and the genre’s relationship to its audience, positioning King within this history to better understand why and when his adaptations might succeed or fail. In fact, the

term “adaptation” in the book’s subtitle largely carries a double meaning. *Screening Stephen King* is not just about text-to-screen adaptations, but also how Brand Stephen King has adapted and maneuvered itself within the horror film genre and its “mainstream audience” through viewer demand, viewing habits, industry practice, and even format. Brown often focuses on how socio-historical context can change both the adaptation of King’s works and their reception. He also notes that King has had a tenuous relationship with the horror genre over time, as directors/producers will often either “use” Brand Stephen King to legitimize their projects, or they will “avoid” King’s affiliation with their film(s) to save their reputations. This largely depends on the works, the times in which they were/are adapted, and the target audience. *Screening Stephen King* shows how Brand Stephen King was essential in establishing what is considered “mainstream horror” while he simultaneously divides what is mainstream is based not on King’s writing (the original source material), but on his name alone (his “Brand”).

Michelle Kay Hansen  
Al Akhawayn University – Ifrane, Morocco

Cavalcante, Andre. *Struggling for Ordinary: Media and Transgender Belonging in Everyday Life*. New York University Press, 2018.

*Struggling for Ordinary* paints a detailed picture of the ways in which transgender individuals utilize media to navigate the complex, often violent reality that they are thrown into because of their non-normative gender identities. Importantly, Cavalcante sets out to detail not only the sensationalized aspects of these people’s lives that theorists tend to focus on. Instead, Cavalcante details the everyday, ordinary parts of the lives led by transgender people. Through his analysis of ethnographic interview data, Cavalcante argues that media sources such as the Internet and television shows mediate the ways in which transgender people navigate their everyday lives. Readers interested in transgender and queer theory will find *Struggling for Ordinary* fascinating because of this different approach to the topic at hand.

Additionally, readers will find this book a valuable source in learning about the “queerly ordinary,” Cavalcante’s take on queerness in the everyday, ordinary space occupied by people with non-normative genders and sexualities. The author argues that because queer and transgender theory has historically isolated the ways that queerness acts contra normativity, there is a dearth of research discussing how queer and transgender individuals act within normal society. Queer and transgender theorists have primarily sought to theorize queerness as oppositional to normativity instead of theorizing the everyday lives these people live. Cavalcante seeks to answer a different question: how do transgender people navigate their gender identities within their everyday lives? This focus on the mundane is important, as the author argues, for taking the (oftentimes) overly ivory tower fields of queer and transgender theory and better applying them to the everyday lives of real transgender and queer people. Detailing how the everyday lives of queer and transgender people exists somewhere between the individual and the larger society that determines these people are abject, Cavalcante provides a rich defense of this focus on the ordinary nature of the people involved in his research study.

Cavalcante lays out the details of his ethnographic study in the introduction and his first chapter. Here, he develops the theoretical background for his study, focusing mainly on the ways that media sources such as the Internet, movies, and television shows influence people’s identities and everyday lives. He describes the theoretical necessity of his study here, drawing from Butler (2004)’s theory of possibility to argue that transgender lives need methods to navigate the anti-transgender ideology prevalent in modern-day society to survive; transgender people need to be *understood as possible* to even exist. Cavalcante isolates media as one of the primary methods by which transgender people strive to survive.

The author’s second chapter details the violence transgender people navigate in order to survive and the ways in which the media portrays sensationalized, problematic images of transgender people are portrayed by the media. Arguing that transgender people are commonly seen as the brunt of the joke, as insane serial killers, or as homicide victims, Cavalcante aptly lays out the sensationalized images of transgender people in the media.

In the third chapter, Cavalcante lays out the ways in which the media helps shape positive images of the “possible selves” lived by transgender people. Several of his interviewees drew from comic book characters and websites about transgender people to achieve their “wow moment” when they started recognizing

their own transgender identities (102). In doing so, Cavalcante shows the ways that the media can act as a care structure (Scannell, 1996) to help transgender people come to grips with their gender identities.

In chapter four, Cavalcante discusses the adaptation and survival mechanisms the participants in his study adopted to deal with negative images of transgenderism in the media. He does this through a discussion of the embodied, affective experiences of his interviewees. Affect is frequently discussed throughout this chapter, becoming an important aspect of the strategies of resilience adopted by the author's research participants. Importantly, Cavalcante argues here that discussions of affect and resilience, prominent in numerous academic fields, is largely missing in media studies. As such, he uses this chapter as a way of supporting the budding conversation regarding affect and resilience in media studies.

In the fifth chapter, Cavalcante isolates the ways in which his interviewees use media as a tactic to achieve ordinary lives. This action is not easy, as Cavalcante reminds the reader, because transgender people are constantly reminded that they are not normal. As such, the research participants oftentimes had to figure out creative ways to find their everydayness. For example, a lengthy discussion of the websites [safe2pee.org](http://safe2pee.org) and [refugerestrooms.org](http://refugerestrooms.org) is included here. These websites were integral for several of Cavalcante's interviewees to find safe spaces to use the bathroom in public, an action that cisgender people frequently take for granted.

Readers interested in the homonormative will find Cavalcante's conclusion particularly valuable, as he lays out his theory of the queerly ordinary in detail here. Explaining that the queerly ordinary is "a hybrid form of self- and life-making that combines components of queerness and ordinariness," Cavalcante highlights how queer theory tends to create an ideal form of queerness that always acts in opposition to normativity (171). Arguing that this completely oppositional stance belies the lived experience of transgender and queer people, Cavalcante challenges this "either/or" stance in favor of a "both/and" stance whereby queer and transgender people are understood as *both* ordinarily normal *and* queerly oppositional.

Overall, readers of *Struggling for Ordinary* will find this book to be an excellent investigation into the everyday lives of transgender individuals. Media scholars interested in the ways that things such as the Internet, television shows, and movies mediate people's identities will find this book an important read.

Researchers interested in the operationalization of transgender and queer theory outside of the academy will also find this book a fascinating read. By pushing the boundaries of queer theory and analyzing the oftentimes contradictory ways in which the media influences transgender people's lived realities, this book is sure to uncover new ways of thinking about media studies and queer theory.

Nicholas Lepp  
The University of Nevada, Las Vegas

*Works Cited*

Butler, Judith. *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

Scannell, Paddy. *Radio, Television & Modern life: A Phenomenological Approach*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1996.

Boudreaux, Armond, and Corey Latta, *Titans: How Superheroes Can Help Us Make Sense of a Polarized World*. Cascade Books. 2017.

Armond Boudreaux and Corey Latta argue in *Titans* that, much in the same way that ancient mythologies provided people guidance for understanding their lives, so too do superheroes act as a modern mythology through which we can “understand our lives and our world” (xiv). Superhero myths “turn the things we care about the most into *story*” in a form that grants a lot of freedom for fantastical storytelling steeping with philosophical ideas (xiii, xxiv). Boudreaux and Latta have written this book with a contemporary problem in mind: the political polarization in the United States. In a deliberative democracy, the authors are concerned with their readers grasping “the possibility that people [with whom they disagree] might be convinced that they have good reasons to believe what they believe” and that those reasons consist of more than “irrational fear, sinister prejudice, an unforgivable bigotry, [or] a willful stupidity” (xx). Given that this book was being written during the 2016 election season, Boudreaux and Latta have in mind the political partisans arguing that either Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton would destroy the U.S. if either of them were elected. Boudreaux and

Latta want their readers to consider that good people are capable of taking different sides on the same issue for good reasons, and they provide a number of examples from the comic book medium to illustrate their point.

The main body of the book is divided into two sections: 1) heroes on the page, and 2) heroes on the screen. Section one, written by Boudreaux, is divided into six chapters. Chapter one begins with an analysis of how Captain America's historical portrayal in comic books has been a site of contest, reflecting the "disagreements over the basic values that define America" (4). Boudreaux ends this first chapter with a reference to the since-resolved Hydra Cap storyline in order to indicate that Captain America's transformation into the leader of this Nazi sect indicates a fundamental change in the fabric of American public discourse itself.

Chapters two through six unpack a number of famous DC and Marvel comic book storylines for their relevant political content. Chapter two discusses the storyline of *Kingdom Come*, the famous apocalyptic tale by Mark Waid and Alex Ross about a dystopian future in which metahumans run wild across the earth. In this story, Superman returns from a ten-year exile to set the world right through increasingly fascistic means. Boudreaux weaves an argument through Isaiah Berlin, Thomas Hobbes, and René Girard to discuss disagreements about the nature of freedom and the cycle of violence that results from disagreements between good people concerning what exactly it means to be free. Chapter three looks at Mark Millar's *Civil War* story arc and the disagreement between Iron Man and Captain America over the Superhero Registration Act, inquiring about the limitations and necessity of government regulation. Chapter four addresses the less-popular *Civil War II* that finds Iron Man again in conflict with a fellow hero, but this time, it is Carol Danvers, aka, Captain Marvel. The dispute concerns Danvers' use of an inhuman, who can apparently predict the future, to prevent crimes before they happen. Boudreaux uses this arc to explore the ethics of data-mining and predictive policing. Chapter five explores Frank Miller's classic *The Dark Knight Returns* and inquires about the legitimacy of the state's monopoly on violence and the individual's right to assert themselves and act in the face of the state's inaction and the need for a proper ethical framework in taking such action. Finally, chapter six addresses the 2012 story *Avengers vs. X-Men* and the fear of and use of power in shaping a better society.

Chapters seven and eight are included in section two, written by Latta, and look at two on-screen portrayals of heroes coming to blows: Daredevil vs. the



Punisher in the *Daredevil* Netflix series, and the movie *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice*. In chapter seven, Latta takes advantage of the religious imagery in *Daredevil* to frame the conflict between *Daredevil* and the Punisher as a conflict between the younger brother and elder brother in the Jesus' famous parable of the Prodigal Son while chapter eight looks at the role the understanding of the divine and the problem of evil play in forming political reality in *Batman v. Superman*.

Boudreaux and Latta have put together a fine book that fans, students, and professors teaching introduction or popular culture classes will appreciate. As a fan, I found their story choices were perfect for engaging with the ideas they discussed and found myself wishing that they had included more stories. While some of the arguments they engaged will be familiar to those who are acquainted with this kind of popular culture and philosophy literature (i.e., comparisons of Kantian, utilitarian, and virtue ethics), I am excited that René Girard's mimetic theory and discussions about the sociopolitical implications of the familiar Prodigal Son story will reach a larger audience.

There are a few structural problems with the book. Many of the chapters have a lot of set up with too little pay off, and it can seem like some of the chapters are cut short. Another structural issue revolves around the fact that only two movies are addressed while 5 comic events were addressed. I would've preferred these two sections to be a parallel. At the risk of redundancy, *Captain America: Civil War* might have been good, along with *Captain America: Winter Soldier*. Perhaps there was a fear that some of the movies too closely resembled their comic book counterparts, as least as far as *Captain America: Civil War* is concerned. Maybe *Winter Soldier* would've worked, although that may have mirrored *Civil War II* too closely in terms of theme.

While I do find myself in agreement with Boudreaux and Latta on the importance of rational persuasion over labeling those we disagree with as bigots, I nevertheless believe that some important qualifiers need to be made about this argument. It is true that in our culture of outrage some of the rhetoric can be quite polemical and abrasive, but while all may be equal under the law, not everyone one is equal based on cultural power dynamics. There are still real disparities, which means that not all disagreements are between two good-natured sides that need to talk things out. Sometimes one side has the moral high ground, and the cost of ignoring that fact has real material consequences for people. This makes

me a little nervous about Boudreaux's dismissal of the X-Men-as-minority metaphor in favor of a lesson about the universal temptation of power to corrupt.

Overall, Boudreaux and Latta have produced a fine work that could make a good introductory text for comic studies or philosophy, highlighting the significance of superheroes in our culture and what they show us about ourselves.

Matthew Brake  
George Mason University

Mafe, Diana Adesola. *Where No Black Woman Has Gone Before: Subversive Portrayals in Speculative Film and TV*. University of Texas Press, 2018.

Diana Adesola Mafe, associate professor of English at Denison University, sets up her book with the *Star Trek* (1966-1969) character, Uhura and her modern counterpoint. Although not part of Mafe's deeper analysis, this is an important bookend because it points to the larger purpose of the book, which is to fill a gap in the discussion about black women in film and television in general, and speculative film and television in particular. This book brings together several postmodern feminist theories while paying attention to other potential readings of speculative fiction. Mafe's approach to five case studies brings depth to the gap she aims to close in this under-deliberated area by focusing on close reading and textual analysis. The choices of films and television shows make for an interesting mix of well-discussed pieces and those that have largely been ignored by scholarship in the past. To her credit, Mafe builds on existing scholarship even in areas largely ignored by others.

Mafe's first two case studies, *28 Days Later* and *AVP: Alien vs. Predator* exemplify the book's purpose of filling a gap in scholarship on black women in speculative fiction. These two films cover a range of under-discussed topics with one film produced in the United States and the other film produced in the United Kingdom. In *28 Days Later*, the character of Selena, while not the lead character, plays an important role in expanding representation of black women in the horror genre. Mafe points out that the film does not create an entirely new horror heroine, as many of the classic horror movie tropes are still present. What

*28 Days Later* does for representation according to Mafe is avoid the trap of confirming stereotypical gender roles, as is typically the default in horror films. *28 Days Later* does not conclude reestablishing order, as is the cliché of many horror films. Order is typically around male dominance making this choice subversive in nature.

*AVP: Alien vs. Predator* is an interesting choice of case study in the book. A film with little acclaim or popularity, *AVP* has not received attention from academics. Mafe's examination of the character of Lex makes for a provocative new look at a black female character that has been overlooked or ignored. Mafe begins by establishing the common themes of both the *Alien* and *Predator* franchises. The focus on the Law of the Father in both franchises helps establish the importance of the divergence present in *AVP*. Prior films in the franchises have had a strong focus on fear of the feminine. This backdrop makes the character of Lex, played by Sanaa Lathan, fascinating to evaluate as a black female heroine in franchises that have never had those roles. Lex is the epitome of a subversive portrayal in this type of film. Mafe demonstrates Lex's rejection of patriarchal authority and the film's denunciation of the male gaze in total. Lex as the lone survivor is also a powerful example of the subversive nature of this black female character in a horror action thriller.

The following two case studies, *Children of Men* and *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, focus on films that have received more critical praise and attention. Mafe is able to explain previous research while adding to the understanding of these films' importance. In *Children of Men*, Kee played by Clare-Hope Ashitey has been viewed as a problematic representation of a black female body as controlled by white male society. Mafe is able to find more in Kee than is readily apparent on the surface. Kee's subversion of the status quo is subtle but still an important consideration in the evaluation of speculative film. *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, introduces a more obviously empowered black female character in the main protagonist Hushpuppy played by then six-year-old child actor Quvenzhané Wallis. Mafe's in depth analysis is an interesting addition to scholarship on the role black women play in speculative film and how that likewise impacts black girls.

Mafe's final case study and conclusion again solidifies the book's focus on filling an obvious gap. The addition of speculative television to this analysis is an important opportunity for scholarship looking at television from a non-social science point of view. By analyzing two speculative television shows, *Firefly* and

*Doctor Who*, Mafe connects her opening discussion of *Star Trek* while laying out some of the growth television has allowed in representation. Overall the book lays out an interesting case for both the growth and remaining shortfalls in the roles played by black women in speculative media. An examination of the rebooted Uhura from *Star Trek* (2009) served as a good bookend to understand that while much has been improved in the representation of black women it is not a linear path. Mafe's coda strikes a good balance between reflection and optimism while pointing to possible future directions black women in television and film may go. Mafe's goal of bringing light to subversive portrayals in speculative film and television is laudable and well executed.

Christopher R. Ortega  
SUNY Cortland

Leonard, Suzanne. *Wife, Inc.: The Business of Marriage in the Twenty-First Century*. New York University Press, 2018. Print

I am an avid consumer of wedding reality television. If you can judge it, I will watch it. So when I got the opportunity to read this book I leapt at the chance. While there has been much written about whether marriage as an institution is still relevant or valuable, the role of the wife is potentially more central than it has ever been in popular culture. Suzanne Leonard's book discusses neoliberal feminism and how ideas of pragmatism and self-interest are normalized and promoted for women in choosing partners. Notions of practicality and labor are intertwined with contemporary wifedom. Her book is particularly concerned with looking at the work of wifedom in public spaces and how that relates to the logics of the workplace. Leonard's five chapters progress chronologically, following women as they date, prepare to be married, and work as wives.

Her first chapter concerns dating, particularly online dating. Leonard opens with a reflection on the infamous Princeton mom letter of 2013. Her letter aligns with neoliberal requirements of agility, self-reliance, and entrepreneurship. Marriage is understood as being deserving of effort and calculation. Women are expected to brand themselves and be self-starters in their quest for a marriageable man. Online dating is gendered, and women are encouraged to brand themselves

in appealing ways. Conceptualizations of the self as brand parallel that of the notion of dating as a quest for a soulmate. In fact, Leonard argues that online dating may have revitalized the rhetoric of soulmates.

Dating is presented as serious work that is assumed to lead to marriage. In chapter two, the focus is on wedding-themed reality programming. Leonard uses the programs *The Bachelor*, *Millionaire Matchmaker*, and *Bridezillas* as case studies. In the logic of reality television, the wedding serves as the reward of the emotional, physical and psychological labor the bride-to-be has undergone. Women should, and must, make choices, but can only do so from a prescribed set. Only when a bride has proven herself responsible as a citizen by being able to regulate her emotions, manage her body, and discipline her desires does she become eligible to be a wife.

Where the previous chapter looked at brides-to-be, the third chapter focuses on the housewife. The term has always been as much of a media construction as a representation of the actual lives of women. *Desperate Housewives* and *The Real Housewives* franchise are used to consider how the term housewife has been reconceptualized. No longer does the term refer to a married woman who does not work outside the home. Now, the term serves as a signifier for all things feminine. While the housewife has historically been placed as the feminist's other, the term has today become the aspirational every woman. *Wife, Inc.* chronicles the rise of "wife" as an occupation. The professionalization of the wife hinges on this notion of the housewife.

In chapter four Leonard returns to reality television to focus on wifely programming. More industrial than the previous chapters, the focus here is on networks and branding. Bravo, VH1, and TLC are examined in regards to their lineups and how each network understands and promotes visions of wifedom and marriage. Leonard argues that to be a professional wife entails a willingness to sell and commodify one's own intimate life and a plethora of products. This chapter also brings to the fore how these programs work to maintain current relations of power. While wives make money and may gain cultural rewards for their participation, at the end of the day they are all working for and providing profit to the networks, which are all run by men.

The fifth and final chapter focuses on public infidelity and the politics of being a spouse. For public figures there are many benefits to having a good marriage and dangers to not having one. Political wives have opened up a space in which to talk about marriage as a platform for female achievements and

professionalism. The political wife as a figure has evolved in such a way that now provides insight into how marriage can operate as a business. Leonard mixes real-life examples in with popular culture. Talking about figures such as Huma Abedin, Jenny Sanford, and of course Hillary Clinton, alongside characters like *The Good Wife*'s Alicia Florrick and *Scandal*'s Mellie Grant, she considers how rage and anger are new additions to the conceptualization of the scorned wife. There is also a clear power and culture hierarchy between the wives and mistresses. While there are fewer spaces afforded to wives to tell their stories, avenues like the memoir are more respectable than those offered to mistresses. First-person accounts from wives can be marketable and profitable opportunities. Blurring the lines between work and marriage, scorned wife media reveals the slippages between the intimate labor and public efforts. The wife plays an integral role in presenting the family as a whole but also holds incredible power to rehabilitate or tank the family brand.

*Wife, Inc. : The Business of Marriage in the Twenty-First Century* offers a critical examination of how terms like wife and housewife gain meaning and maintain relevancy. Factual and fictional representations come together to support the claims made in this book. Throughout, Leonard argues that wifedom continues to serve as a structuring conceptualization of American women's lives despite the fact that marriage as an institution is roundly considered to be in decline.

Andrea Ruehlicke  
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

Parkin, Katherine J., *Women at the Wheel: A Century of Buying, Driving, and Fixing Cars*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017. Print.

Replete with examples and data supporting the notion of women as safe, responsible drivers who are also capable of maintaining a car while advertisers, corporations, and salespeople pander or reinforce stereotypes, *Women at the Wheel* is a book full of laugh or cry moments for people interested in gendered pop culture depictions, consumer behavior, the intersection of cars and identity,

and the history of auto driving and buying in the United States. Parkin's writing engages the reader by using vivid stories, quotes, and examples of advertising from the dawn of automobiles in the 1890s through the 2010s. *Women at the Wheel* is an enjoyable journey through history and identity with Parkin sitting literally at the figurative wheel.

*Women at the Wheel* includes five chapters. First, Parkin writes a historical account of the challenges women faced in becoming licensed drivers. Chapters two, three, and four detail the experiences of women as they buy, drive, and care for a car. The final chapter, "The Car and Identity" explores naming, sexualizing, and objectification of women as cars. The Preface and Epilogue are brief yet apt descriptions of the information in the book and the social implications of that information.

The women featured in Parkin's opening chapter, "Learning to Drive," encountered legal and social challenges as they defeated naysayers while navigating roads and inconsistent driver licensing processes. Two recurring themes throughout *Women at the Wheel*, gendered reasons for driving and marketers' presentation of women as fundamentally different from men, emerge in this first chapter of the book. However, even those messages are often contradictory. Young men are taught that their role is to protect women by driving carefully (7), while marketers of driving schools tell women that their husbands are incapable of teaching them to drive (9). Teaching women to drive was viewed as a moral victory and a safety accomplishment (8), but the licensing process limited women to being named as extensions of their husbands, even if they did not use his surname (21-22). Instead of cars achieving their touted possibility as purveyors of freedom, they were steeped in patriarchal social systems and gendered expectations that followed women from their schools and homes to driving schools and the legal system.

Chapter two, "Buying a Car," analyzes advertisers' incorrect assumptions about women's reasons for buying a car, knowledge about cars, and a desire for safety over all other car features. Partly in response to these assumptions, car manufacturers identified women as a "special group" (31). As such, they were targeted using a miniscule advertising budget (47) and messages focused on the car's physical appearance and added safety features. Advertisers displayed a complete lack of understanding about women's car purchase motivations and enhanced that with an unwillingness to understand. In tandem, manufacturers installed air-conditioned glove compartments to preserve lipstick in high

temperatures (59). These gendered and assumption-filled experiences didn't end with the car purchase.

Driving offered yet another highly gendered and assumption-filled experience for women. In chapter three, "Driving a Car," the themes of women as incompetent drivers and gendered reasons for driving are revisited. Writers of newspaper opinion pieces questioned women's mental fitness for driving (65), and magazine writers claimed that women could be deemed fit for time behind the wheel of a car based on their physical appearance (67). Men were not categorized in the same manner. Women as bad drivers were featured in comedy routines and this persists today. In 2016, Ricky Gervias used the stereotype of bad women drivers as a way to make fun of Caitlin Jenner (73). The obsession with women needing and wanting protection distinct from that desired by men presents itself in Parkin's exhaustive examples from popular media and public campaigns about imagined terrors that could be alleviated by new cars or proper behavior while driving. *Women at the Wheel* counters this ostensible emphasis on safety with details about real crimes that are dismissed in the same media and public organizations via victim blaming or failed investigation and reporting. Contradictions and gendered expectations continue as themes even as women become responsible for arranging for or providing car maintenance.

The belief that women could not and should not perform maintenance on cars is well-explored in chapter four, "Caring for a Car." Women were expected to be ignorant about car maintenance, but to arrange for those services. If women worked on cars, their adherence to other gender norms became a primary concern. During wartime, these social pressures functioned to both maintain traditional gender roles through the expectation of temporary service and to provide a necessary driving and mechanically literate workforce (118-122). *Women at the Wheel* concludes chapter four by observing that although there were glimmers of gender neutrality as women learned to work as mechanics in specific time periods, fixing and maintaining vehicles exists firmly in the male identity with little or no crossover.

In the final chapter of *Women at the Wheel*, Parkin tackles "The Car and Identity," in a historical, psychological, and anthropological look at the relationships between men, women, and cars. Advertising sold cars as sexualized objects and objectified women to do so. In naming cars with generally female-sounding names, consumers personified inanimate objects and objectified women. This final chapter wrapped up the overall messages in the book. Cars are an



important part of our identities in the United States and the process of driving, buying, and owning cars is deeply gendered and steeped in patriarchal structures.

Katherine J. Parkin's *Women at the Wheel* alternately encourages the reader's heart and mind to sing and seethe with stories, examples, and data about the intensely gendered world of driving and cars. The content is appropriate for and interesting to anyone interested in cars, gender, and advertising. The writing is well-researched and includes photos of advertisements to enhance the reading experience. Parkin has a firm grasp on the metaphorical wheel and the reader will be happy to let her drive.

Amy Jo Ellefson  
The University of Southern Mississippi

Arp, Robert, editor. *The X-Files and Philosophy: The Truth is in Here*. Open Court, 2016.

Since 1993, Chris Carter's television series *The X-Files* has captivated audiences by exploring broad cultural curiosities: Government secrets, paranormal activity, conspiracy theories, and the fear of alien colonization of planet Earth. Such interests and fears are passionately uncovered by the series' main characters, Fox Mulder and Dana Scully. Robert Arp's edited volume, *The X-Files and Philosophy: The Truth is in Here*, creates a case construct that creating a triangulation of popular culture, philosophy, and science helps answer questions related to the series and human positionality in the wider world. In the edited collection, Arp posits that "*The X-Files* is great story-telling. And there are some great philosophical topics found in and through those stories" (xv). Arp's edited volume operates on two levels: On one hand, the collection suggests that there are pockets of rational thought where "philosophy can help clarify ideas in science" (xii). In the second level, the text attempts to break down the ideological 'dichotomy' that made Fox Mulder and Dana Scully so well known on television; such deconstruction suggests that the philosophical and scientific complexities of the main characters are deeper beyond an initial glance.

Although the relationship between science, philosophy, and popular culture appears daunting, the structure of the edited volume consistently bridges such

conversations back to the television series as a base of understanding. The collection contains 35 unique chapters across 10 sections, with almost all section and chapter titles inspired by common themes and catch phrases used throughout the series. Nearly every chapter poses broad questions that utilize a theme from the series as a launchpad to answer a larger philosophical question. Examples include Chapter 1: “Why is Scully usually wrong? What’s the point the writers of *The X-Files* are making in continually debunking her scientific explanations in favor of Mulder’s paranormal theories?” (4), Chapter 9: “But what exactly is a conspiracy theory? What is the difference between a theory about a real conspiracy and one that turns out to be fantasy? (74), Chapter 24: “If the truth is out, shouldn’t we believe it? Isn’t it virtuous to believe only the truth?” (225). As such, the balance of scholarly rigor and passionate homage to the television series serves as a major strength in the edited collection. Because philosophy, science, and *The X-Files* offer several interpretative paths, Arp’s volume reflects such diversity. For example, section nine (“The Ghost Within”) utilizes Descartes’ notion of Key highlights from Descartes’ notion of mind-body dualism in section nine (“The Ghost Within”) when discussing the relationship between man and machine. In Chapter 35, Frank Scalabrino employs Heidegger’s *Time and Death* as a philosophical lens for episode “Sein and Zeit” (season seven, episode ten), a cumulative story arch concerning Mulder’s mother and sister (321). , and Heidegger’s *Time and Death*, which draws connections to the season seven, episode ten “Sein and Zeit”, a cumulative episode concerning Mulder’s mother and sister (321).

The notion of truth through the lenses of pragmatism is considered when analyzing Mulder and Scully’s (broad) ‘schools of thought’ and reasoning processes. If such topics don’t appeal to readers, the edited volume offers other avenues of thought, including the connection between the series’ ‘Monsters of the Week’ episodes and the ‘The Post-Modern Prometheus’. The volume also offers analyses on the relationship between ‘truth’ and The Syndicate, a secretive government organization with strong connections to Mulder, Scully, and their search for ‘the truth’. Each contributor to the text is clearly passionate about the television series, creating an underlying enthusiasm to create the bridges between philosophy and the cult classic.

A particular standout chapter within the volume is Dennis Loughrey’s “Dilemmas for Prisoners” (Chapter 19). Loughrey takes the cultural stereotypes of The Syndicate (i.e., mysterious men in high power positions wearing dark

clothing and sitting in quiet rooms), and pushes readers to consider their (and in turn, Mulder and Scully's) decision – making strategies. Loughrey takes the series knowledge and applies it to the Prisoner's Dilemma game, which reveals the “tough minded lesson...that, from the perspective of each person, ratting is better, no matter what the other does” (105). Prisoner Dilemmas are oft based on repetition; when considering the frequent meetings between Mulder, Scully, and The Smoking Man Loughrey posits that ratting in one episode heightens a risk of receiving payback in a future instance. Loughrey's parallel of the Prisoner Dilemma and the relationship between the main characters and The Syndicate suggest that truth and information are commodities, and every character in the series must pay a price. However, the edited volume does run the risk of offering too many chapters that cover extremely similar material and suggest similar conclusions; as a consequence, the text can be read as repetitive.

Overall, Arp's edited volume on *The X-Files* takes the high-brow nature of philosophy to a lens and framework that allows readers to create connections between the analysis of human nature and popular culture. The strength of Arp's volume – and *The X-Files* – is that the underlying conversations occurring are timeless. *The X-Files and Philosophy: The Truth is in Here* holds readers responsible for drawing their own conclusions and actively seek their own interpretations of the truth. One doesn't need to be an FBI agent or a member of The Syndicate to utilize the reasoning strategies of Mulder, Scully, or any other character in the series. However, in keeping true to the series, the volume warns about the consequences and possible philosophical changes one might experience in their quest for the truth. As Fox Mulder puts it, “The answers are there. You just have to know where to look” (3).

Christina Blankenship  
The University of New Mexico

# THE **POPULAR** CULTURE STUDIES **JOURNAL**

**VOLUME 6**

**NUMBERS 2 & 3**

**2018**

## **ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS**

**MICHAEL MARIO ALBRECHT** is Assistant Professor of Media Communication at Eckerd College. His research interests include media studies, cultural studies, television studies, politics, gender, sexuality, tourism studies, themed spaces, and postmodernity. His first book *Masculinity in Contemporary Quality Television* is published by Routledge.

**ROBERTO AVANT-MIER**, Ph.D. is Associate Professor and Research Fellow in the Department of Communication at The University of Texas at El Paso. He is also affiliated faculty in Chicano Studies, and his main research interests are popular music and film. He is the author of *Rock the Nation: Latin/o Identities and the Latin Rock Diaspora*, Continuum (2010), and co-author of *Cine-Mexicans: An Introduction to Chicano Cinema* [with Mike Lechuga], Kendall Hunt (2018).

**BIANCA BATTI** is a PhD candidate in Literary Studies in the department of English at Purdue University. Her current research engages in discussions of feminist methodologies for feminist games studies as well as feminist analyses of representations of gendered labor and family structures in video game narratives. Her work has been published in *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy*, and also in *Haywire Magazine*, *Not Your Mama's Gamer*, and edited anthologies.

The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 6, No. 2 & 3  
Copyright © 2018

**BERNADETTE MARIE CALAFELL** (Ph.D., University of North Carolina) is Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Denver. She is author of *Latina/o Communication Studies Theorizing Performance* and *Monstrosity, Performance, and Race in Contemporary Culture*. and co-editor of *Latina/o Discourse in Vernacular Spaces: Somos de Una Voz?* She was the recipient of the Lilla A. Heston Award for Outstanding Scholarship in Interpretation and Performance from the National Communication Association (NCA), the Córdova-Puchot Award for Scholar of the Year from the Latina/o Communication Studies Division and La Raza Caucus of NCA, the Lambda Award from the Caucus for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Queer Concerns of NCA, and Francine Merritt Award for Outstanding Contributions to the Lives of Women in Communication from the Women's Caucus of NCA.

**MATTHEW M. FOY**, Ph.D. (Southern Illinois University-Carbondale) is an assistant professor of communication at Upper Iowa University. He conducts scholarship at the intersections of rhetorical, cultural, and performance studies.

**LAURA GARRISON** earned her Ph.D. from The Catholic University of America in Washington, DC, in 2016 with a dissertation on spiders in American literature. She is currently an adjunct lecturer at Roanoke College in Salem, Virginia.

**HANEEN GHABRA** Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor at Kuwait University's Department of Mass Communication and author of the upcoming book, *Muslim Women and White Femininity: Reenactment and Resistance* (2018). She has won top paper awards numerous times, and publishes frequently on the topic of intersectional feminism. Her specialization includes Rhetoric and Cultural Studies with a focus on Muslim Women and Intersectionality. She also explores hegemonic

narratives (especially of Whiteness) via text, images and bodies and how they are embodied by Women of Color and Third World Women. Through Intersectionality and an Intersectional Feminist Ethic she focuses on systemic privilege such as class, gender, race sexuality and so forth.

**CALEB GREEN** is a Ph.D. student of Communication Studies at the University of Denver. His research examines performances of mental health, disability, and the sociocultural factors structuring both at various intersections. He is an avid fan of professional wrestling and horror.

**ROBERT GUTIERREZ-PEREZ**, Ph.D., is a queer of color scholar, activist, and performance artist from San José, CA who currently resides as an Assistant Professor of Culture and Communication at the University of Nevada, Reno. His research and life revolves around the goal of empowering, remembering, and advocating for queer people of color with a particular focus on the LGBTQ Chicanx and Latinx community. Research interests include critical intercultural communication, performance studies, critical communication pedagogy, and queer of color critique.

**MAROUF HASIAN, JR.** is Full Professor of Communication in the Department of Communication at the University of Utah. His areas of interest include critical cultural studies, critical rhetoric and law, humanitarian discourse, security studies and critical medical work.

**SCARLETT L. HESTER**, Ph.D. (University of Memphis) is a current Perry-Williams postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Communication at the College of Wooster. Her research focuses on intersectionality and whiteness within professional sports culture at the intersections of critical media and critical rhetoric. Her research explores how Western professional sports culture operates as an apparatus of discipline against bodies of difference and how athletes navigate this disciplinary power.

**ALENA KIEL** is a second year PhD student at the University of Limerick in the department of English. Their research centres on queer theory and Irish and American Gothic literatures, focusing in particular on the gender identities and queer sexualities of characters in fin de siècle Irish Gothic texts and American Gothic texts from the 1990s. This is a continuation of their MA, in which they conducted a queer reading of the Hannibal Lecter novels, films, and TV series. They also work as a tutor at University of Limerick, both in English and Sociology, and have been developing several projects with the Student's Union to improve their understanding of and accommodations for transgender students.

**CATHRYN LADD** is a PhD candidate in the School of Architecture at the University of Sheffield in the UK. Her current research is looking at architectural identity in Tokyo through sensory ethnography and feminist art practice. Other areas of scholarly interest include locating and constructing queer microcosms in urban space, decolonizing place-making, and considering cybernetic and monstrous approaches to our urban futures.

**SEAN LAWSON** is Associate Professor of Communication at the University of Utah. His research focuses on the relationships among science, technology, and the development of military theory and discourse. He is author of *Nonlinear Science and Warfare: Chaos, Complexity, and the U.S. Military In the Information Age* (Routledge, 2014).

**MICHAEL LECHUGA** is an Assistant Professor at the University of Minnesota, where he teaches Rhetoric, Migration, Latina/o/x Studies, and Affect Studies. His current research focuses on the role that technology plays in border security mechanisms and the ways alienhood is mapped onto migrant bodies. In addition, Michael is interested in Latina/o/x Futurism, Surveillance Studies, Affect Studies, and Film. Together, Avant-Mier and Lechuga are co-authors of the book *Cine-Mexicans: An Introduction to Chicano Cinema*, Kendall Hunt Publishing (2018).

**BENNY LEMASTER**, Ph.D. (Southern Illinois University, Carbondale) is Assistant Professor in the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at Arizona State University. They identify as an intersectionality scholar and their research and pedagogy engages performances of critical/cultural communication both on and off the stage. Their research has been published, for instance, in *Women's Studies in Communication*, *Liminalities*, and *QED: A Journal of LGBTQ Worldmaking*. Special thank you to the Torrey Peters without which this project could not be possible. The author would like to extend special thanks to the anonymous reviewers as well as to the editor of this special issue, Dr. Bernadette Calafell, as their individual and collective feedback helped to develop this essay in important ways. Moreover, special recognition and thanks to Greg Hummel, Kavitha Koshy, and Meggie Mapes for your critical feedback. Special recognition to my fellow trans monstrosities.



**KRISTINE LEVAN** is an Associate Professor in department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Idaho. Her research focuses on media portrayals of crime and punishment and public perceptions of crime, as well as prison culture and prison violence. Her research has appeared in journals such as *Games and Culture*, *Justice Quarterly*, and *Contemporary Justice Review*.

**DEREK LEWIS** is currently a PhD student in Pennsylvania State University's Communication Arts and Sciences Department in State College, Pennsylvania. His interests center on examinations of everyday life through film, especially horror, and the built environment.

**DAWN MARIE D. MCINTOSH** is an independent scholar. She would like to thank Dr. Bernadette Calafell for her labor in our field and putting together this timely special issue.

**EMILY MIDKIFF** holds a PhD in children's literature and literacy from the University of Minnesota and a MA in English literature from Kansas State University. Her research interests include speculative fiction, mythology, picturebooks, comic books, and graphic novels. She ranges across research methodologies from cultural studies to empirical research designs, depending up on the topic at hand. Uniting several of these interests, her next large research project focuses on young children's science fiction literature.

**SHANE AARON MILLER** is a professor in the Communication department at the College of St. Benedict and St. John's University. This paper emerged out of a larger project based on a NEH Enduring Questions grant that examined the question: What is a Monster? (And was subsequently presented as an object of ridicule on the Senate floor by the honorable Jeffrey Beauregard Sessions.) This piece was made possible by the support of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia.

**MARYLOU R. NAUMOFF** earned her PhD in Communication at Wayne State University. Her areas of specialization include Rhetoric, Critical Cultural Theory, Race, Gender, and American identity. Dr. Naumoff is an assistant professor of Communication in the School of Communication and Media at Montclair State University where she also serves as the Coordinator of the Fundamentals of Speech Program.

**MIRANDA OLZMAN** is a PhD student at the University of Denver. She is a/an scholar/artist/activist invested in using her body, voice, and privilege to form lasting impacts within and beyond the academy. Her research blends autoethnographic, performance, and critical scholarship in a fusion of critical inquiry around body type—with an emphasis on fat bodies, body image, and mediated representations as well how those entities inform the way we insert ourselves and our bodies in various spaces.

**KATHERINE ALANIS RAMÍREZ** is a Master's student (M.A. candidate) and Graduate Teaching Assistant in Communication at The University of Texas at El Paso with research interests in zombies and other monsters in popular culture.

**CLAIRE SISCO KING** is Associate Professor of Communication Studies at Vanderbilt University, where she also has an appointment in the Cinema & Media Arts Program. She is the author of *Washed in Blood: Male Sacrifice, Trauma, and the Cinema* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011) and has also published articles in such journals as *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, *Feminist Media Studies*, *Text and Performance Quarterly*, and *Quarterly Journal of Speech*.

**T. MAY STONE** is gleefully watching the rise of Zombie Studies. Since her Master's degree in American and British literature at Florida Atlantic University, alongside FAU's fantasy literature program, Tracy has been interested in the fantastic, particularly the horror and science fiction genres, through her Ph.D. from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Currently, Tracy teaches fantastic literature as an Assistant Professor of English at the New Mexico Military Institute in Roswell, New Mexico.

**NANCY D. WADSWORTH** is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Denver, and a scholar of race, religion, political theory, and political culture. In *Zombie Studies*, she has authored "Awakening the 'Walking Dead': Zombie Pedagogy for Millennials" in *Radical Teacher* (2016) and "Are We the 'Walking Dead? Zombie Apocalypse as Liberatory art" in *New Political Science* (2016).

# THE **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 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

Norma Jones, Ph.D.  
pcsj@mpcaaca.org

## FOR SUBMITTING ARTICLES

*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.

### 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

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 Popular Culture Studies Journal's* Editorial Board.

Submissions (three documents, MS WORD, MLA) should be submitted via our [PCSJ Google Forms](#)

1) Short Bio: On a separate document, please also include a short (100 words) bio. We will include this upon acceptance and publication.

2) Title Page: A single title page must accompany the email, containing complete contact information (address, phone number, e-mail address).

3) Manuscript: On the first page of the manuscript, only include the article's title, being sure not to include the author's name. The journal employs a "blind review" process, meaning that a copy of the article will be sent to reviewers without revealing the author's name. Please include the works cited with your manuscript.

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.

For documentation, *The Popular Culture Studies Journal* follows the Modern Language Association style, as articulated by Joseph Gibaldi and Walter S. Achtert in the paperback *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (New York: MLA), and in *The MLA Style Manual* (New York: MLA). The most current editions of both guides will be the requested editions for use. This style calls for a Works Cited list, with parenthetical author/page references in the text. This approach reduces the number of notes, which provide further references or explanation.

For punctuation, capitalization, hyphenation, and other matters of style, follow the MLA Handbook and the MLA Style Manual, supplemented as necessary by *The Chicago Manual of Style* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press). The most current edition of the guide will be the requested edition for use.

It is essential for authors to check, correct, and bring manuscripts up to date before final submission. Authors should verify facts, names of people, places, and dates, and double-check all direct quotations and entries in the Works Cited list. Manuscripts not in MLA style will be returned without review.

We are happy to receive digital artwork. Please save line artwork (vector graphics) as Encapsulated PostScript (EPS) and bitmap files (halftones or photographic images) as Tagged Image Format (TIFF), with a resolution of at least 300 dpi at final size. Do not send native file formats. Please contact the editor for discussion of including artwork.

Upon acceptance of a manuscript, authors are required to sign a form transferring the copyright from the author to the publisher. A copy will be sent to authors at the time of acceptance.

Before final submission, the author will be responsible for obtaining letters of permission for illustrations and for quotations that go beyond “fair use,” as defined by current copyright law.

## FOR SUBMITTING REVIEWS

*The Popular Culture Studies Journal* is seeking authors to review works on any aspect of U.S. or international popular culture. In particular, we are interested in books, films, videos, websites, or any other works that critically engage popular culture that have been published, released, or posted in the last two years. We will also consider older seminal pieces that deserve a second look. If you submit a review of the latter, a rationale for the relevance of the review today will be expected.

Reviews should adhere to the ethos of *The Popular Culture Studies Journal* and be largely positive with any criticism of the work being constructive in nature. For more information about this journal, please visit: <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.

Reviews should be sent electronically to Malynnda Johnson at [malynda.johnson@indstate.edu](mailto:malynda.johnson@indstate.edu) with **PCSJ Review and the author's last name in the subject line**. Reviews should include both the review and the reviewer's complete contact information (name, university affiliation, address and email). Reviews should be sent as Microsoft Word attachments in .doc or .docx format, unless an alternative format has been approved by the editor.

If you are interested in reviewing for *The Popular Culture Studies Journal* or if you are an author or publisher with a work you would like to have reviewed, then please contact Dr. Johnson at the following address or email:

Malynnda Johnson, Reviews Editor  
Email: [malynda.johnson@indstate.edu](mailto:malynda.johnson@indstate.edu)



## **FOR REVIEWING ARTICLES**

Our reviewers are important to us. We appreciate their service as well as the significant role our reviews play in ensuring quality of our publication.

If you are interested in being part of The Popular Culture Studies Journal as a reviewer, please complete our online form (<http://mpcaaca.org/the-popular-culture-studies-journal/for-article-reviewers/>)

For our reviewers, who would like a certificate for service, please fill out our online form (<http://mpcaaca.org/the-popular-culture-studies-journal/for-article-reviewers/>)

## **UPCOMING SPECIAL ISSUES**

In addition to *PCSJ* calls for ongoing journal and reviews submissions (above) we are also planning for three special issues. In other words, the special issues will appear alongside *PCSJ* articles and reviews in upcoming volumes.

### **MAY 2019 - ASIAN AMERICAN WORLDS AND PACIFIC WORLDS**

Guest Editor: Rona Tamiko Halualani

*Rona.Halualani@sjsu.edu*

Call for papers closed

# 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.

We look forward to seeing you next year in Cincinnati!

midwest popular  
culture association

american popular  
culture association

**2019 CONFERENCE  
CINCINNATI, OHIO**

**October 10-13, 2019**

[mpcaaca.org](http://mpcaaca.org)



# THE POPULAR CULTURE STUDIES JOURNAL

VOLUME 6

NUMBERS 2 & 3

2018

## Editorial: Six Years!

NORMA JONES

## ARTICLES

**Cylons, Dolls, and Hosts: The Cyborg Plot Twist in Science Fiction Television**

EMILY MIDKIFF

**“I’m too Drunk to Taste this Chicken”: The Hidden Poetry of Will Ferrell’s Comedies**

LAURA GARRISON

**“Look at the Flowers”: Utilitarian Themes in the Post-Apocalypse**

KRISTINE LEVAN

**“I’m into this Woodworking Stuff”: Hipster Masculinity and Adam Sackler on HBO’s *Girls***

MICHAEL MARIO ALBRECHT

## SPECIAL ISSUE

### Monstrosity

**Introduction to the Special Issue**

BERNADETTE MARIE CALAFELL

**Transing Dystopia: Constituting Trans Monstrosity, Performing Trans Rage in Torrey Peters’ *Infect Your Friends and Loved Ones***

BENNY LEMASTER

**Removing Racism from White Bodies: Peter Cvjetanovic’s White Masculine Monstrosity**

DAWN MARIE D. MCINTOSH

**Preparing for the Zombie Apocalypse and other Neocolonial Monsters During the Endless Global War on Terrorism**

MAROUF HASIAN, JR. AND SEAN T. LAWSON

**“If It’s in A Word”: Intersectional Feminism, Precarity, and *The Babadook***

CLAIRE SISCO KING

**Awakening the Civic Dead: Political Mobilization of the Zombie in Real Time**

NANCY WADSWORTH

**A Very Well Tailored Person Suit: Hannibal Lecter, America Gothic and Cannibal Neoliberal Capitalism**

ALENA KIEL

**ChicanX “Monsters” and ChicanX/LatinX “Futures” in Film (Or, Searching for LatinXs in Sci-Fi Movies)**

MICHAEL LECHUGA, ROBERTO AVANT-MIER, AND KATHERINE ALANIS RAMÍREZ

**Resurrecting the Witch: The Reanimation of the Witch Archetype and Toxic White Femininity in American Horror Story: Coven**

MARYLOU R. NAUMOFF

**Crafting a Monstrously Queer Space: A Medicalized Gothic Reading of Nathaniel Highmore’s *Case of a Fetus Found in the Abdomen of a Young Man***

SHANE MILLER

**Voting Horrors: Youthful, Monstrous, and Worrying Agency in American Film**

DEREK LEWIS

**Zaha Hadid: Locating the Monster Within Architecture**

CATHRYN LADD

**Monstrosity in Everyday Life: *Nepantleras*, Theories in the Flesh, and Transformational Politics**

ROBERT GUTIERREZ-PEREZ

**Erecting and Impaling the Monstrous Social Justice Warrior in *The Green Inferno***

MATTHEW FOY

**Something’s Not Right: Monstrous Motherhood and Traumatic Survival in *Among the Sleep***

BIANCA BATTI

**The Literary Zombie in Robin Becker’s Brains: “How Pop Culture Illuminates and Comments on the Current Zombie Crisis”**

T. MAY STONE

**Hair-raising and knee taking: Colin Kaepernick’s Monstrous Persona & Nonviolent Civil Disobedience**

SCARLETT R. HESTER

## SPECIAL ISSUE: INTERVIEWS

**Latin Horror is Luchagore: An Interview With Luchagore Productions**

CALEB GREEN

**If It’s Not Intersectional, It’s Not Monstrosity: An Interview on Horror and Monstrosity with Marina Levina**

MIRANDA OLZMAN

**Horror Films Almost Dare You to Come and Watch Them: An Interview With Kendall Phillips**

HANEEN GHABRA

## REVIEWS

## ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS