

Boudreau, Brenda, and Kelli Maloy (eds.). *Abortion in Popular Culture: A Call to Action*. Lexington, 2023.

Abortion in Popular Culture: A Call to Action, reveals in three parts how media reflects, rejects, and/or reinvents the narratives surrounding the people, places, and sociocultural codes inherent in the exercise of reproductive choice. With an interdisciplinary collection of essays, editors Brenda Boudreau and Kelli Maloy delve deeply into the historical and present-day circumstances of onscreen characters contemplating and participating in this reproductive decision. More importantly, the closing chapters serve as a call to action for the networks, writers, and consumers of media to normalize abortion as a private health care decision. This book could not have been published during a more opportune time than with the overturn of *Roe V. Wade* in the summer of 2023, and the fallout from that decision now resting directly at our doorsteps in America.

Part 1 of the book includes an essay from Karen Weingarten acknowledging how the home pregnancy test changed the landscape for discussion about abortion in American television and film. Weingarten suggests that the test opened the possibilities, if not the onscreen discourse, surrounding this choice. Caryn Murphy's essay reviews the role of the doctor in 1960s television dramas and notes that oftentimes the fundamental discourse centered around the male physician's absolute control over choice rather than accounting for the needs and wishes of his patient. Murphy insightfully concludes that our modern-day onscreen representations of individual circumstance colliding with institutional forces may begin to seem eerily familiar to those pre-Roe episodes as we are faced with the legal, medical, and personal impact of Roe's overturn.

Any analysis of current social views in popular culture surrounding reproductive choice would be exceedingly remiss in neglecting to consider the effects of social media content on socially divisive issues like reproductive freedom, which is why Kelli Maloy's essay is the perfect resolution to Part 1. Maloy analyzes social media content along with the content-providers who tweeted, instagrammed, and facebooked opposition to the repeal of Ireland's eighth amendment. As Maloy explains, the repeal was successful, even with constant, sometimes contemptible messaging from both the Catholic church's religious majority in Ireland as well as the evangelical churches in the United States. Maloy frames the resistance to anti-repeal social media messaging in

Ireland as a road map for U.S. citizens to follow to regain the rights *Roe* once provided pregnant people in America.

Part 2, "Creating Spaces for Alternative Narratives," engages the reader in reflections of reproductive choice viewed first through the genre of dystopian reality in Heather Latimer's essay "Abortion Politics and the Dystopic Imagination." The section takes readers through the elements of time and place for pregnant people compelled to travel across state lines to avail themselves of reproductive healthcare in Jaime Leigh Gray's essay, "The Labors of Abortion Access." Finally, Part 2 explores how cable networks form symbiotic relationships with popular culture in Laura S. Witherington's essay "I'm Offended by All the Supposed-To's: HBO's Pro-Choice Influence." Gray adroitly suggests that cable networks both feed from and directly influence popular culture to offer a much broader representation of abortion. While this reflection and cultivation process may result in a more honest portrayal of this choice by cable networks like HBO, it perhaps more importantly frames abortion as a personal healthcare decision rather than an angst-ridden plot point so common in abortion episodes on regular network TV.

The final part of this comprehensive view of the representation of abortion in popular culture begins with a historical reckoning of race and (lack of) reproductive freedom in Patrick Allen's essay "'I Gave Her Life:' Black Women, Abortion and Healing in Brit Bennett's *The Mothers*." It continues with a discussion about the role of television storytelling in a post-Roe world. Stephanie Herold and Gretchen Sisson explore the ethical responsibilities as well as the storytelling opportunities popular media can extrapolate from the re-criminalization of abortion in "When Stories Are All We Have, The Role of Television when Abortion is Illegal." Meanwhile, in "The Abortion Pill and Other Myths, Medication Abortion on Screen," Cordelia Freeman notes the prominence of abortion on screen but questions its portrayal as a surgical process on television while most real-world abortions are accomplished with medication. Brenda Boudreau extends this analysis of how TV can change the socially constructed "good vs. bad" framing around abortion by including characters who more resemble those who typically make this choice: those who are already mothers; those who are not financially stable; those who do not have the resources they need; and, finally, those who do not want to be mothers to one (or more) children. Boudreau suggests that TV's ability to show abortion as a decision made by a

woman for her family's sake and for her own, is paramount to cultural understanding of reproductive choice.

The collected essays in this book seem to strategically coalesce, exposing popular culture as a conduit for media creators, producers, and consumers to reflect and act upon the ways abortion is represented, portrayed, and threaded through our personal narratives on screen. *Abortion In Popular Culture, A Call to Action* is perhaps the genesis of a changing social consciousness regarding reproductive freedom. With the overturn of Roe, these changes will continue to prove essential to framing the public narratives concerning abortion and reproductive choice to a more realistic representation.

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Donner, Claire. *Splice: The Novelization*. Encyclopocalypse Publications, 2024.

Movie novelizations, or novels based on films that flesh out the narrative “with a greater attention to character backstory and more descriptive action sequences,” date back to the early years of cinema (Suskind). Silent films such as *Sparrows* (William Beaudine and Tom McNamara, 1926) and *London After Midnight* (Tod Browning, 1927) and early talkies like *King Kong* (Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1933) all spawned tie-in novelizations. The visibility and popularity of movie novelizations declined somewhat in the 1980s and 1990s, likely due to the advent of home video, which radically altered how films were watched (and re-watched). Prior to the development of home video, “films were released in the theater and often not heard from again,” meaning that the “best way to relive those original memories was to read them in book format” (Suskind). Home video technologies such as Betamax and VHS – and later DVD, Blu-ray, and 4K – changed all that, as they allowed viewers to repeatedly revisit films from the comfort of their own homes. Streaming technologies, which provide users with instant access to a wealth of films produced throughout cinematic history, have only pushed movie novelizations further into the realm of niche media. Yet, as Alex Suskind of *Vanity Fair* points out, authors continue to

write movie novelizations, publishers continue to publish them, and readers continue to purchase and read them well into the 21st century.

Encyclopocalypse Publications is one publisher devoted to keeping movie novelizations alive in the streaming era. Over the years the company has released books based on the screenplays of low-budget genre films of the past, including *Re-Animator* (Stuart Gordon, 1985), *Vamp* (Richard Wenk, 1986), and *Creature aka Titan Find* (William Malone, 1985). Encyclopocalypse continues this tradition with a novelization of director Vincenzo Natali's *Splice* (2009), a throwback of sorts to the gonzo sci-fi horror flicks of the 80s and 90s. Featuring a screenplay co-written by Natali along with Antoinette Terry Bryant and Doug Taylor, the film follows Clive (Adrien Brody) and Elsa (Sarah Polley), a pair of romantically entangled punk-rock geneticists who specialize in splicing the DNA of different animals to create hybrid creatures intended for medical experimentation by the corporate laboratory Nucleic Exchange Research and Development aka N.E.R.D. The two fame-hungry scientists announce their plan to create a revolutionary human-animal hybrid, but their superiors at N.E.R.D. forbid them from moving forward with the experiment. Undaunted, Clive and Elsa secretly develop a viable hybrid that Elsa refuses to terminate. She convinces a reluctant Clive to spare the creature, which develops much faster than a human and soon matures into a humanoid female that Elsa names Dren ("nerd" spelled backwards). To keep their illegal experiment from being discovered, Clive and Elsa clandestinely transport Dren (played as an adult by Delphine Chanéac) to the abandoned farm where Elsa grew up. There, they continue monitoring Dren, who quickly proves far more inscrutable and dangerous than Clive and Elsa could have ever imagined.

Despite earning critical praise, *Splice* flopped at the box office, earning just \$27,127,620 worldwide against a \$30,000,000 budget. Yet the film has since garnered a cult following thanks to its quirky lead characters, unconventional narrative, convincing effects, and shocking climax. The novelization by author Claire Donner adapts all these elements, but it also gives readers more insight into the interiority of the characters, most notably Elsa and Dren. More importantly, perhaps, it shines a light on Elsa's neurodivergence and on Clive's efforts to understand and accept his partner's cognition. Donner, who serves as the New York City branch Director of the Miskatonic Institute of Horror Studies, offers readers an unfettered glimpse into Elsa's thoughts in a way that the film cannot – or, perhaps more accurately, does not. She illuminates Elsa's internal struggles with what is likely autism, which impacts every aspect of the character's life as

she attempts to navigate an overwhelmingly neurotypical world that often leaves her feeling alone. Donner posits that Elsa created Dren – who contains elements of Elsa’s own DNA – largely out of a desire to bring into the world someone who might comprehend her. As Donner writes:

Maybe she was playing God in the grandest sense, creating life in her own image. Or maybe it was all just a matter of loneliness, pure and simple. A strange, irresistible compulsion to bring another Elsa into the world, someone who could understand her. Would make her feel not so different anymore. (135-36)

Donner emphasizes this theme throughout the book, and it helps to flesh out Elsa’s character beyond what was seen in the movie.

Similarly, Donner pulls back the curtain on Dren’s thoughts and feelings as the hybrid learns about the world, which often leaves her feeling perplexed, frightened, and infuriated. Throughout the novel, readers gain insight into Dren’s inner monologue as she strains to make sense of the disciplinary punishments imposed by Clive and Elsa, her ersatz parents, or marvels at everyday objects that could easily be taken for granted, such as wooden building blocks. Doing so reveals even more starkly Dren’s differences and subsequent sense of isolation. In the book, Dren’s discovery of a cat, a totally alien creature in her eyes, becomes an exercise in wonder as Dren tries to understand this tiny being that is the same size as the rabbit she killed and ate the night before but is completely different in appearance and attitude.

At the same time, readers are also given a greater window into the primal instincts that drive Dren, instincts that cause her to spurn Elsa’s affections following a bout of punishment and send the hybrid running into Clive’s arms as she succumbs to biological urges. Here, Dren’s journey through the world echoes that of Elsa, just to a greater degree. According to Donner, “Patterns helped Dren learn patience” (94), an idea that will likely resonate with anyone who views the world through a neurodivergent lens and relies on familiar and comforting repetitions to deal with the chaos of everyday life. As such, Donner’s expansion of Elsa’s and Dren’s efforts to make sense of their surroundings provides a valuable contribution to contemporary discourses on neurodivergence and mental health.

Splice: The Novelization is well-written and does an exemplary job of translating the story from the screen to the page. In fact, if one complaint could be leveled against Donner’s novelization, it could be that the book hews a bit too

closely to the film and fails to deviate in significant ways, even as it gives readers a deeper peek into Elsa's and Dren's thoughts. Sometimes when novelizations diverge from the films on which they are based, they can provide a richer experience, one that exists separate from but alongside the primary text. Such is the case with Orson Scott Card's novelization of *The Abyss* (James Cameron, 1989), which not only develops intricate backstories for the characters but also fleshes out the motivations and societal structures of Cameron's aquatic aliens, known as NTI's in the film. *Splice: The Novelization* flirts with such ambitious world building but more often plays it safe and presents a one-to-one adaptation of the film.

Of course, this is a minor complaint, and the novel gives fans of *Splice* what they no doubt want: a direct translation of the film with the occasional glance into the characters' interior worlds. Overall, *Splice: The Novelization* would likely prove useful in a class on adaptation. It might even be of interest to those teaching psychology courses, as the book could help students better understand how people living with autism or other forms of neurodivergence think about and interact with the world around them. To paraphrase Donner's words, *Splice: The Novelization* could help to reveal an explanation, an exhibit A, that might decode the unspoken thoughts and feelings of those living with neurodivergence.

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Duong, Paloma. *Portable Postsocialisms: New Cuban Mediascapes after the End of History*. U Texas P, 2024.

In *Portable Postsocialisms*, Paloma Duong traces and articulates gossamer Cuban social and political realities imagined through media. Duong demonstrates how

competing international and intranational discursive claims about what constitutes Cuba as a nation-state as an imaginary political projection, and as a postsocialist context all animate shared meanings of Cuban media. Duong's work is complex, as parsing through the layers of representation, double-speak, and lived experiences projected onto Cuban mediascapes is oftentimes convoluted. Yet in pulling disparate strings of shared meaning together, Duong provides a timely and necessary conjunctural analysis of postsocialist Cuba. Duong uses Cuba as a case study of "actually existing socialisms" and postsocialism to reinvigorate critical studies of capitalism, Cuban and Latin American studies, and leftist theory (4).

Postsocialism as a term is a geopolitical marker that has evolved into a field of study to critique inequity and precarity produced by socialism and capitalism. Duong situates postsocialism as a shared condition of global capitalism wherein a lack of imagination outside the socialism/capitalism binary traps humanity. This argument is not new, but Duong's focus on Cuba and the failures of the Cuban state is an apt critique of New Leftist socialist imaginaries. Contemporary anti-capitalist desire provides Duong justification for the book and both Cuba and Cuban popular culture provide the vehicle to enter Old Left/New Left debates. Duong delineates the debates by analyzing forms of red-washing and red-baiting that define and distribute Cuban representation for production and consumption. Leveling critique on idolization of Cuban socialism (red-washing), Duong explains how Cuban socialism was a patriarchal and militaristic project that relied on capital-determined modes of production underwritten by foreign governments. Duong simultaneously critiques the demonization of Cuban socialism (red-baiting) as a system of inevitable corruption and state-mandated poverty by pointing to foreign embargos and extractivist capitalism.

Duong straddles temporal, economic, and geographic mediascapes as they contend with the reverberating effects of the 1959 revolution, economic embargoes, the birth of the internet, the fall of the Berlin Wall, privatization, and Cuban diaspora. Through these mediascapes, Duong analyzes Cuban socio-political ruptures that shape material ways in which folks interact with, access, and form positionalities within media used individually and collectively. Portability, the book's main theme, describes the ability of the Cuban image (as floating signifier) to be made relevant in relation to those who construct the sign, often rendering meaning contradictory in international and intranational screens.

To describe this mediated reality as it travels, Duong grounds the analysis in numerous representative examples: travelogue writing, Cuban music, women's

fashion, and screens. Chapter 1 analyzes how travel writing about Cuba becomes an export for international consumption imagined as a trip to the socialist past. Noting how tourists travel to Cuba to see it before it changes, Duong outlines Cuban socialist exceptionalism in New Left travel writing and Cuban fetishization in shows like *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. Cuban revolution rhetoric is seductive because it does not challenge socialist idealism like failed Eastern Bloc Socialism. However, this writing often fails to account for the lived experiences of actual Cubans. Focusing on two expat travelogues, Duong explores this contradiction.

Chapter 2 asks what is and was the sound of Cuba? Duong traverses time and space to locate the portability of this sound by comparing independent and state-sponsored music as it is heard transnationally. Focusing on the popularity of reggaeton and punk, Duong explains how these genres agitate against state-sponsored music and nationalist narratives by comparing two songs, “Sucky Sucky” and “Don’t be such a cocksucker, Commander” (89). While Duong notes the misogynistic and racialized undertones of these songs, there is not adequate analysis of the racist, sexist, and homophobic conditions that produce them. In imagining a world beyond the socialist/capitalist binary that does not reproduce sexism or racism, feminist critiques of patriarchal postsocialism are warranted. Yet this might be space for other scholars to delve deep, given the extensive examples Duong provides. Duong contends that the flawed mediascape allows individuals to resist state-controlled media and potentially author voices from below. Lastly, demonstrating the portability of Cuba as an object of desire, Duong notes how punk critiques of the Cuban government are co-opted by the political right and deployed against socialism in general.

Chapter 3 takes up women’s fashion to discuss consumption and portability of images of femininity. Providing the Cuban woman of fashion and the Cuban woman entrepreneur as the two major archetypes offered to Cuban women in the postsocialist context, Duong notes how these images fail Cuban women. The concept of “poor images” illustrates how neither role fits cleanly into state-represented propaganda nor liberatory politics, rather these consumable images of women appease neoliberalism (66). Building on poor images, Chapter 4 analyzes images in the public sphere on screens in pockets, in art, and in TV. Duong understands screens metaphorically and literally to reflect, project, and construct Cuban reality. Screens open portability as they invite connectivity and surveillance and point to the messy ways in which binaries such as private/public

and contradictions of postsocialist/capitalist are obscured and enacted. Duong critiques state-sponsored digital networks that regulate Cuban expression while offering promises of liberation. Alternatively, non-state-sponsored digital networks provide Cubans a form of agency but not liberation nor the promise of liberation from cultural contexts.

The conclusion sees Duong ask what postsocialism is; here she aims to demystify Cuban representation to reimagine the future by redefining the past. In doing so, Duong urges that there is no anti-capitalist or anti-consumer center which holds in Cuba, there is no longer a viable socialism/capitalism binary to rest leftist theory upon, nor a utopian socialist Cuba on which to base it. Critically looking back can restructure how people symbolize and talk about these realities. Duong offers reprieve for Cuba's overdetermined position by pointing to how Cubans have engaged with digital media to narrate themselves as postsocialist subjects within the capitalist condition of the world. As such, Duong's book offers rich conceptual analysis from which to build.

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Ferchaud, Arienne, and Jennifer M. Proffitt (eds.). *Television's Streaming Wars*. Routledge. 2024.

Television's Streaming Wars, a new collection edited by Arienne Ferchaud and Jennifer M. Proffitt, opens on the "streaming wars" which, not unlike true wars, are grounded in struggles for power. Setting the stage for the warfare to follow, Ferchaud and Proffitt's introductory chapter provides a succinct summary of the history of television in the United States, bringing the reader up to the present-day streaming wars. This historical foundation provides a strong background against which the text projects the current unfolding reality as continued by Helena Vanhala who, in the second chapter, analyzes streaming through the lens of critical political economy. Grounded in the oligarchical history of U.S. television, Vanhala takes a deep dive into the ever-evolving current period in which big-name streaming power players continue to dominate the U.S. markets.

With the battlelines drawn, Krishna Jayakar and Euna Park outline in Chapter 3 the military-esque tactics taken by media companies in response to the advent and popularity of audiovisual over-the-top (OTT) services with actions centering around curtailment, competition, and collaboration. In providing this structure, Jayakar and Park juxtapose the current landscape against those that preceded, when providers “controlled both the content and the channel” (27). While holding a solid place in this book, the chapter could also be an excellent stand-alone primer for those seeking to get a strong fundamental understanding of current OTT media, as it provides a solid overview of content, delivery method, revenue, and business models, as well as ownership structures.

Framed by its preceding chapter, Rangga Saptya Mohamad Permana, Jimi Narotama Mahameruaji, and Sri Seti Indriani provide the details of a specific streaming media battle in Chapter 4. The authors outline a case study of strategies taken to adapt to current trends in media usage and developments in Indonesia with a focus on media power-player NET.TV. As Indonesian society has moved away from broadcast media (closing its analogue nationwide television in only 2022) and toward a more cellphone-based new-media landscape, privately owned television companies like NET.TV have had to adapt to stay afloat. The chapter’s case study is grounded in refinement theory and highlights the history of NET.TV through the larger lens of media convergence and technology growth in Indonesia, an interesting approach when following the more theoretical preceding chapters.

Closing out the first part of the book, Sunah Lee and Jennifer M. Proffitt frame Chapter 5 in a more covert battle, as their chapter title queries, “Netflix in South Korea: Patron of Creativity or Imperialistic Conqueror?” Here, the authors argue that U.S.-based streaming platforms are creating a new era of imperialism, beyond just cultural imperialism into that of “platform imperialism” (55). Using a critical political economic approach, Lee and Proffitt suggest that imperialism has intensified due to the market saturation on OTT platforms, and they delve into specifics regarding Netflix’s presence in South Korea to illustrate the point, drawing unique and refined attention to the local content being acquired by Netflix – content that, reflecting the voice of modern South Korean media, is critical of current political and capitalistic structures (e.g. *Squid Game* and *Hellbound*). While the chapter notes that certain scholars find this to be a contraflow of South Korean ideas and content, the authors posit that the imperialistic practices bring both “opportunity and threat to local TV industries”

and aptly call it “imperialism under the guise of transcultural community and flow” (62,64).

Following this unique and well-constructed narrative, Parts 2 and 3 of the book go beyond the power players and tactics of the streaming wars to the human aspects of these battles. While the first part discusses theories and paradigms in streaming media distribution, the latter portions focus not on the companies and infrastructures, but rather on the content and people affected, covering topics of representation, nostalgia, and user experience.

While streaming media may have caused imperialist conquering in the eyes of Lee and Proffitt, in Chapter 6, Meghan S. Sanders finds such technologies a tool to facilitate representation, social transformation, and social justice, specifically among and in support of those in the Black and Asian communities. Similarly, Victor Evans’s work in Chapter 7 positions the diversity of content available in the new streaming landscape to allow for LGBTQ+ individuals as a “sacred space to explore their identity and feel a connection with the community in the comfort of their own homes” (100). Significantly, one’s identity does not need to be limited to sexual or racial; in Chapters 8-10, Leigh H. Edwards, Colin P. Kearney, and Kyle Moody each speak of the power of, and intentionality behind, streaming platforms’ use of nostalgic content to connect with identities and memories of viewer, be it nostalgia of the MTV generation, rerun watchers, or horror lovers.

From the fictional horror cited by Moody, the text goes on to highlight eerie truths about streaming’s influence on culture and humanity as the final part of this book focuses on the impacts and effects that streaming has on those who consume said media.

Upon initial review, the structure of the text seems disjointed, with parts, subsections, and chapters, but the strength of the narrative that ran through the volume makes more sense once completed. From the macro of political theories to the granularity of how media companies are intentionally crafting nostalgia among their viewers, the book provides a holistic view of the current media landscape. While the “streaming wars” do not have the bloody battlefields of true wars, this text illustrates that they have made and will continue to make strong marks on the political, technological, and human experiences of those living through this time.

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Fizek, Sonia. *Playing at a Distance: Borderlands of Video Game Aesthetic*. The MIT Press, 2022.

As the field of game studies begins to emerge, it is significant that those who choose to study media arts (including but not limited to cinema) must reckon with gaming and the ways it positions the player/spectator. In fact, gaming has the potential to change how we consume content. In her book *Playing at a Distance*, Sonia Fizek discusses how the player interacts with computers in the form of play. Focusing specifically on the ambient aesthetics and formats, Fizek determines that the agency games appear to give the player does not, in fact, exist as is commonly thought.

Fizek carefully examines different types of interaction with games. She argues that while gaming activity can appear in everyday scenarios, they have the power to greatly impact society. Fizek begins by debunking interactivity as the pivotal concept to understand in gaming. She demonstrates examples of games that continue to be played despite player absence. These games can run easily on a desktop while the player completes other tasks, returning to the game when convenient. Meanwhile the game plays itself with no change in the gameplay. These include *FarmVille* (2009), in which the player is responsible for planting and harvesting crops, but the crops continue to grow while the player is away. Fizek uses independent games as examples when discussing other types of play, including but not limited to spectator play (such as game streaming on Twitch, etc.) and automated play (games that play themselves), but mentions mainstream games like Nintendo's *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* in her discussion of ambient play, which is meant to be generally peaceful. Like other ambient games, the popular title is full of calming sounds and beautiful depictions of lush environments, and it includes options for players to easily avoid combat along with other narrative features.

As the field of game studies continues to expand and is thereby forced to reckon with cinema studies, Fizek's concepts of inter- and intra-activity are especially important, as she clarifies that "what games offer is the *illusion* of freedom" (5, italics in original). Fizek notes that interactivity is often predicated upon rules that "do not necessarily empower all human beings" but instead privilege certain identities over others (12). Fizek's ideas are significant in that

they reveal an important and new way of looking at identity politics in game studies.

Regarding intra-activity, Fizek states that “games change us as much as we change them” (78). She entreats the philosophy of Karan Barad to further drive home her point that the game and player are not externally separate, but they are rather two things that are constantly changing and “becoming” (80). For instance, a player working with a flying simulation/game may be overtaken by a cutscene that presents the game’s narrative arc when, say, crashing, at which point the player is no longer the “acting subject” (73). Essentially, Fizek contends that game systems, in their design and record of measurements (most games capture some version of game analytics) also play the player.

Throughout *Playing at a Distance*, Fizek’s discussion of ambient gaming adds further significance to the conversation. Those unfamiliar with this style of gaming will find it in games intended for ambience like *Everything* in which the player lives in an aquarium of sorts, where they are allowed to inhabit any creature or object. Likewise, *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* utilizes ambient aesthetics in creating a beautiful, walkable, and playable world that allows the audience to simply relax. Fizek writes that because ambient play is usually slow (as compared to traditional games), these games can usually be played in the background and therefore function as part of the player’s “daily rhythm” (xx). Thus, ambient games highlight both the computational processes by which games are made and “encompass all other artforms” (49).

Fizek’s thoughts on ambient games are significant to cinema studies in that they demonstrate how traditionally passive forms of entertainment are used (keeping a “comfort” show on in the background), but also note that ambient games add a new, more immersive element in that they require more player interaction. These games can bring a heightened sense of the comfort many have previously garnered from television. Since many ambient games do not require the player’s complete attention all the time, ambient gaming has a strong potential to become the dominant source of relaxation entertainment. As we have seen in the success of Netflix’s casual programming and the merger of HBO and Discovery brands to eliminate some of the former’s notion of prestige as a way of attracting casual viewers (see Brandon), the desire for relaxing/ambient entertainment is prominent.

Overall, Fizek’s analysis provides an imperative viewpoint for how we should be looking at both game studies and cinema. I was compelled by the fact that, in

addition to other concepts like ambience and spectatorship, Fizek's perspective on gaming points out that cinema is more like gaming than we think. Both media engage with the spectator in inter- and intra-active ways. Fizek's conclusions about the relationship between audience and media will likely be used as an important framework in the future, especially as cinema becomes more interactive. Early film games like "Bandersnatch" and "The Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy Vs. The Reverend" and game films like *Until Dawn* and *The Quarry* are evidentiary of a future of the blurring of lines between cinema and gaming. As games become more like movies and movies become more like games, the spectator/consumer deserves to know how and when they are being manipulated, especially if it is the mechanism doing the work, rather than the narrative.

In *The Imaginary Signifier*, Christian Metz theorized that the fetishism of cinema is in its "physical state" (17). If this is true of cinema, it is even truer of gaming. The physical state of gaming requires its patrons to be aware of its mechanism, which only serves to immerse them even more. Fizek's argument in relation to Metz's leads to the conclusion that gaming, especially ambient and the like, not only functions similarly to cinema but also has even greater potential to convey messages and emotions.

If there were any criticism of this book to be had, it is only that it would be useful to hear Fizek expound her thoughts on cinematic interactivity to a greater extent. She does briefly mention the topic's broad scope and even discusses some of Netflix's interactive work like the *Black Mirror* episode "Bandersnatch," but given the gravity of her research a little bit more would have been a fantastic addition to the book.

Fizek's research is not only extremely interesting, but also appears to be on the cutting edge of new technologies and the ways we think about gaming. If Plato's age-old allegory of the cave tells us anything, it is that we should certainly be aware of what we are playing, watching, and consuming, even if it is just a game.

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Heiser, Jörg. *Double Lives in Art and Pop Music*. Sternberg Press, 2019.

Throughout *Double Lives in Art and Pop Music*, Jörg Heiser traces the multidisciplinary relationship between art and pop music to demonstrate an essential fulfillment within cultural production. When it comes to artistic careers, there is often a merging of disciplines that develops the career and/or social status of the artist. The necessary blend of talents is frequently met with a mutual understanding of a crossover between the artist and the musician. Whether that boundary is blurred or distinctly separated, Heiser defines the process as "context switching," a term that concerns *Double Lives in Art and Pop Music*. As the title implies, the career of an artist has an inherent doubleness in the remit of cultural production. Heiser's research explores how this duality is fulfilled against historical contradictions. He explores whether the drive is for a sociopolitical need or a requisite for creative longevity.

Heiser's research examines the overlap with examples from the 1960s to the beginning of the twenty-first century, uncovering the historical connection between art and pop music. This appears as an anticipatory project for the survival of the arts today with the increase of hyper mediatization. Heiser hypothesizes: "facing aesthetic, social, and economic contradictions in one context of production, circulation, and reception, an artist or musician attempts to look for solutions of these contradictions in another context" (21). In presenting this research, Heiser distinguishes that in adhering to this duality, the forms remain distinctive. Through a global understanding, Heiser provides evidence for how the context switching was achieved with detailed examples from Andy Warhol's Factory to Fatima Al Qadiri's contemporary continuation – with the latter

advancing the contemporary relevance of the author's study and exemplifying the recurrent relationship between art and pop music.

The introduction is essential in describing what the "context" is, suggesting that the variability of definition follows an oscillated continuum of societal development with the reception of art and pop music. Thus, it sets up the essential framework to organizing Heiser's research in a thematic and chronological approach. This is an endeavor that is placed against the backdrop of Thierry de Duve's "whatever," facilitating the double life within artistic activity, coinciding with the notion that art is arbitrary, "breaking through any kind of tautological justification of art to arrive at a third position" (13). The third position involves alternate contexts to bring art to the audience, aligning to the reception of music. Heiser is thorough in introducing the research and switches himself from present to past tense at the beginning of the first two chapters to transport the reader into the contexts he describes. Initially, the reader will find themselves on Kai Althoff's *Ashley's* (1996) LP cover before moving to Warhol's Factory in the 1960s; a creative context switch in and of itself to present the research.

The next two chapters provide concrete evidence to assess how an artist switches between art and pop music, exploring the varying necessity for why this was enacted among artists. For Warhol, he provides the physical embodiment of context switching, while consistently ensuring that it was achieved on his own terms, enriching his personal agency in swapping between art and pop music to essentially become the pop artist in a more literal sense and making it "a *social technique* of art" (Heiser 56, italics in original). The Factory, being an expressive, anti-mimetic utopia, displayed Warhol's independent need to context switch for personal attainment of combining the pop persona with his art, leading to the acquisition of managing The Velvet Underground.

For Yoko Ono and John Lennon, Heiser rethinks the dogmatic attitude that perpetuates the history of examining Ono's influence over Lennon and thus "remove[s] the layers of reception that obscure our view of Ono's artistic and musical oeuvre" (22). The author rightly establishes Ono's artistic entity as an avant-garde artist within her own right before the relationship with Lennon began, allowing the context switching to be evidenced. The couple appeared to oscillate into each other's discipline as Heiser quotes Ono: "we crossed over into each other's fields [...] from avant-garde left field to rock 'n' roll left field" (93). Heiser argues that in doing so Lennon and Ono "developed the utopian potential of context switching" (108) and explains that the political repercussions of their

role reversals became their main success, which exposed the socialization and stigmatization of their status as celebrities.

Continuing the chronology, in Chapter 3 Heiser examines the dissonance between art and pop music in 1960s West Germany, finding an inability to context switch within the society as “there was no absolute necessity for a simultaneity of art and pop music” (117). Although not as compelling as the previous examples, Heiser globalizes his concern and continues to conceptualize how the eventual context switch found its way into society in the 1980s. This demonstrates the importance of the given contexts as being enablers of the switching. The motive behind the examples of double life within this chapter exposes the political provocations that hindered immediate “simultaneity” but paved the way for the likes of Michaela Melián to do so, albeit with a continued attitude of “conceptual segregation between art and band activities” (173). Then, finally, bringing the research up to date in Chapter 4, Heiser explores the development of technology to advance (or hinder) the creation and consumption of art and pop music, identifying a utopian and dystopian discourse with application to Brian Eno, through to Fatimi Al Qadiri.

When concluding the research, Heiser admits the direction of his research was different from conceiving the idea in 1995 to publication in 2019, due to the changing attitude toward art and pop music “in economic terms” (261). Technological advancements posed a threat to the decline in pop music, enabling a boom in the art market, which further prolongs the relevance of the authors’ research for our current society. With the rise of artificial intelligence, Heiser’s assessment is more than evident of suggesting the “constellation of art/pop music thus anticipates that of art/neoliberal economy” (273), with the need for “artists and musicians to combine the power of aesthetic judgment with sociopolitically aware action” (280). Heiser’s work sets a firm foundation for others to follow, and the continued relevance opens new avenues for research to assess double lives within growing societal contradictions.

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Hilton, Paris. *Paris: The Memoir*. Dey Street Books, 2023.

As a teenager, Paris Hilton tried to explain to her worried parents that she felt safe when the paparazzi were following her. Hilton's parents should have asked why she felt so unsafe, but they did not. In *Paris: The Memoir*, the world-famous socialite explains how the paparazzi were a guarantee that she would not be raped. *Paris: The Memoir* is not the average celebrity tell-all. Instead, it stands out because Hilton builds off her experience with abuse to create an argument-driven work that critically analyzes American popular culture and concludes that the cruelty that happens to the "It Girl" happens "to all girls" (262).

Hilton organizes her memoir in a personalized, pop culture-spinning timeline. At the center is her girlhood entrance into the popular culture framework through the sexuality expressed in *Beverly Hills, 90210* and Calvin Klein commercials. From there, the line spins into an ADHD-affected adolescence and the darkness of a middle school teacher grooming her to become his secret girlfriend. To deal with her sneaking out and their fears, Hilton's parents shipped her off to live with various grandparents. Pushing her away made Hilton feel blamed for the teacher's actions and contributed to her urge to sneak out, which ended up with her being roofied and raped. From there, she turned toward parties and the need to be recorded by paparazzi. In the ultimate blaming of the child, her parents chose to have their then high school-age daughter sent to a lockdown CEDU (pronounced Cee-doo) facility, a daytime-talk-show-promoted corporation that made millions pretending to run schools and correction facilities for "troubled teens." Matriculation into the CEDU system began with Hilton being abducted in the middle of the night from her own bedroom. She screamed for her parents to save her, but they did not. Hilton's book joins many others about this type of child abuse, such as journalists Janet Hemlich's *Breaking Their Will* as well as books by survivors, including Alex Cooper's *Saving Alex*.

Hilton went through a sham CEDU graduation and re-entered a society filled with flip-phones, paparazzi, and selfies. It is no wonder that she only felt safe when the paparazzi were following her: if they were recording her every move, she knew nothing like the CEDU abduction or rape could happen to her again. Hilton's narration explaining the significance of phones, films, and music serve as compelling examples of how she can marry her life story to the popular culture landmarks that altered the way everyone saw themselves and lived their lives, adding strength to her argument about the "It Girls" being "all the girls." The use

of popular culture as the book's timeline also permits her to explain how she became an icon in a culture that wanted to turn her life (and the lives of others like Selena Gomez, Britney Spears, and Lindsay Lohan) into a national pastime of girl shaming. It was in this culture defined by multi-platform storytelling, a concept discussed by Leigh Edwards in the Spring 2023 issue of this journal, that Hilton decided to become a brand by turning "Paris Hilton" into a business.

Hilton's book contributes significantly to a long history of the abused "It Girl" that chronicles how a society elevates and then devours young women. Hilton cites Marilyn Monroe's *My Story* (1974) as a cornerstone of this bibliography. More recent memoirs include Pamela Anderson's *Love, Pamela* (2023), which is framed by a biographical narrative poem, Britney Spears's prison memoir *The Woman in Me* (2023), and *Glimmer* (2023) by Kimberly Shannon Murphy, stunt woman and body double for Cameron Diaz. Murphy's book explains that surviving abuse requires a "glimmer," a deeply rooted self-worth. It is the glimmer deep down inside that saves Anderson, Spears, and Murphy. For Paris Hilton, she knew she was valuable. Her grandmother always said she was not a cheap knock-off handbag, she was a Birkin. In other words, she is a commodity, but she is the best commodity.

What were these blonde icons surviving? In her writing, Hilton identifies the elements of the masculine gaze and the patriarchy, because her rapes always had an audience. Hilton outlines the backlash against the successful women, which Susan Faludi wrote about in 1991 and Molly Fischer, writing for the *New Yorker* in 2022, argued never went away. She explains how and why onlookers distrust the "It Girl" because of the circular logic that commodities consent to being commodified, to build off Kyle Hammond's argument in his Spring 2023 article for this journal. Hilton argues that if the "It Girl" is blamed for being raped, be it in-person or virtually, like the recent AI photos of Taylor Swift, then so too is the every-girl.

Because the blonde memoirs concern a white, golden-haired, and, in Hilton's case, wealthy experience, it may seem they do not matter in a world where women of color are imprisoned at a rate of 1.6 times more than white women, according to Monazzam and Budd writing for *The Sentencing Project* in 2023. Moreover, as Morgan Jenkins argues in *This Will Be My Undoing* (2018), when a human is both black and a woman the mostly white mainstream feminism is one of the perpetrators of silencing and devastation. Hilton agrees there is power in a "glimmer" born from the pop culture value of skin color and blonde hair, be it

from a bottle or not. Hilton purposefully adds that her “glimmer” originated in the grandmother who partly raised her: it is a generational inheritance. Yet being blonde did not save Hilton from abuse. She asks the reader to consider the pervasiveness of that abuse.

Hilton did not invent the paparazzi or the selfie. What she did was demand that the rise of “selfie culture isn’t about vanity; it’s about women taking back control of our images – and our self-image” (249). The selfie is about them feeling safe in their own bodies.

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Lee, SooJin, Korroch, Kate, and Khiun, Liew Kai (eds.). *Women We Love: Femininities and the Korean Wave*. Hong Kong UP, 2023.

Although I loved my (academic) year living in Korea and have a great affection for its culture, I confess that I have not been able to get into K-Pop, K-drama, or other aspects of Korean popular culture, despite the concerted efforts of friends and students both within Korea and abroad. That said, I find the Hallyu (Korean Wave) to be absolutely fascinating as a subject of study, and the edited volume *Women We Love: Femininities and the Korean Wave* provides readers with a good introduction to Hallyu specifically and feminist media studies more generally. All the chapters in this collection are strong and offer different insights to the reader. My focus is drawn by my own interests in representation and transnational popular culture, especially under repressive regimes.

Part 1 of the book is titled “Characters We Love” and it focuses on analyzing specific characters from Korean series. Kate Korroch’s chapter examining representations of female embodiment of “soft” masculinity in K-dramas in the context of problematizing hegemonic femininity is quite thorough, as is Maud Lavin’s examination of transnational reception of *Coffee Prince* and its lead “tomboy.” However, SooJin Lee’s chapter on the satire *God of the Workplace*, which analyzes the series’ representation of women as temporary workers, is one of the strongest chapters in the book. Miss Kim, the titular god, works solely to make a living rather than because she enjoys her work or believes in any long-term benefit. Lee contextualizes the series within Korea’s wider labor market, especially regarding ingrained Confucianist hierarchies and the change from expected lifelong employment prior to the 1997 monetary crisis to a more casualized form of employment following the crisis, something still very much in evidence today. Lee then moves from the general context of work to how the series plays with gender and gendered performance, observing that Miss Kim’s office attire is drab while her outside attire is exceedingly bold. As Lee notes, the character “thoroughly minimizes her gender and sexual identity to emphasize her

efficiency and productivity as an office worker” (63). Yet the playing with gender culminates in Kim saving her male nemesis from an explosion “aimed at unraveling and exposing irrationalities in contemporary Korean society and workplace culture” (65). Lee’s textual analysis is extremely thorough, which makes it a valuable resource not just for researchers looking at Korean media but also as an example that teachers could show students who are learning how to analyze a text.

Part 2 of the book, “More Than Girl Groups,” shifts the focus from characters to the trainee idol system and its impact on mixed-race representation and controversies (Lee and Abidin), as well as the turn toward strong female roles (“strong sisters” in K-Pop; Lee and Yi). Though the chapters in this section cover a wide range of critically important topics – one follows a child influencer through to adulthood while another traces the history of strong women in K-Pop – Douglas Gabriel’s chapter on North Korean pop band Moranbong Band stands out, as he analyzes both the pop group and its Japanese fans, the “Military-First Girls.” Gabriel argues that, rather than lacking in critical thought, the band’s fans demonstrate a nuanced engagement with the group that contrasts the “oversimplified conception [of the band that] ignores the unruly ways in which North Korean popular culture has proliferated domestically and globally” (96). The amount of material that Gabriel includes could easily fill a book in its own right; that is not meant as a criticism of the chapter’s breadth but instead as an appreciation of how he brings together these seemingly disparate strands as a starting point for other scholars looking to study NK-Pop in all its nuances rather than as a monolithic propaganda arm of the DPRK.

The final part of the book focuses on “Fans and Fan-Producers.” Of great importance are Stephanie Jiyun Choi’s chapter on how homoerotic performance is used to support heteronormativity; Liew Kai Khiun, Malinee Khumsupa, and Atchareeya Saisin’s chapter on Hallyu fans as activists protesting the Thai government (another topic deserving more academic work); and Erik Paolo Capistrano and Kathlyn Ramirez’s chapter on moving from objectification to empowerment of girl groups in K-pop. However, I find myself most interested in Gi Yeon Koo’s chapter looking at Iranian fans. Koo links the increasing use of social media as an “alternative public sphere” (176) for women to the engagement of Iranian fans with Korean dramas; as Korean culture is non-Western and, consequently, has been the subject of less study, Koo’s chapter provides a much-needed reminder that social-media-driven social empowerment and

autonomy for women is not an exclusively Western purview. Through qualitative and ethnographic interviews, Koo finds that the openness of K-dramas, especially about love and gender relations, are major draws for Iranian fans because such topics are heavily constrained and censored in Iran. According to Koo, online fan spaces also allow Iranian women to take positions of authority (literal and subcultural) that they are denied offline. Her point about Korean culture as being perceived as more “neutral” than Western culture is important and serves as a valid point of entry into research on Hallyu in other regions as well.

The brief span of a book review can rarely do justice to an edited volume and this review is no exception. Lee, Korroch, and Khiun have done a masterful job at collecting important, well-theorized, and incredibly interesting chapters and combining them into a valuable resource for scholars looking to understand and expand academic studies of Hallyu, regardless of whether they are fans of K-pop, K-drama, or other aspects of the Korean Wave. I think we can all love that.

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Millsap-Spears, Carey. *Star Trek Discovery and the Female Gothic: Tell Fear No*. Lexington, 2023.

Numerous analyses of how popular television fits into the literary Gothic form have been published in recent years. *Hannibal* (2013-2015) has been re-read as an adaptation of *Dracula* (Bacon 213), *Supernatural* (2005-2020) was picked apart for Gothic influences (Edmundson), and even the *Star Trek* universe’s Borg were examined as a Gothically twisted mirror of the kind of imperial domination generally accepted as normal (Mousoutzani 67; Millette 1202). Carey Millsap-Spears’s *Star Trek Discovery and the Female Gothic: Tell Fear No* is a timely addition to this literature. *Star Trek: Discovery* (2017-2024), the first of the most recent wave of *Star Trek* series, is set to end this year. Given the cultural power of the *Star Trek* franchise, a monograph like this one is an appropriate sendoff.

Millsap-Spears grounds her argument in Ellen Moers’s “Female Gothic” (1974), and in comparisons with works of Female Gothic literature, mainly the works of Ann Radcliffe, as well as *Frankenstein* (1818) and *Jane Eyre* (1847).

Millsap-Spears distinguishes Female Gothic as a genre defined by specific conventions and tropes: the courageous Gothic Heroine; the mysterious elements that Heroine must rationalize (the Explained Supernatural); the duplicitous and sexually threatening Gothic Villain who menaces the heroine; the fantastically heightened version of patriarchal confinement which the Heroine must escape from (the Escape Narrative); the Sublime experiences that sweep the Heroine up in emotion; the Ineffectual Gothic Hero who attempts to save the Heroine but fails, leaving her to save herself; the final reintegration back into patriarchal normative society (the Circular Narrative); and others. Millsap-Spears successfully argues that *Star Trek: Discovery* contains and relies on these tropes to the point of itself being an example of the Female Gothic genre.

The first season of *Star Trek: Discovery* has its main character, Commander Michael Burnham, experiencing confinement (in literal incarceration after being stripped of her rank) and then escaping, first being mentally seduced by then being forced to escape from a devious villain who is sexually obsessed with her (Captain Lorca), saving herself from that villain (rather than her love interest saving her), and finally returning to her place in the patriarchal order (being pardoned and having her rank restored). All this happens against a backdrop of traditional Gothic elements such as cannibalism, incest, labyrinthine places filled with secret rooms, awe-inspiring nature, and dark secrets. Millsap-Spears rightly points out that despite the *Star Trek* title, these elements clearly mark *Star Trek: Discovery* as a Female Gothic story, according to her framework.

Nearly every element of the show can fit into this framework, according to Millsap-Spears. She reframes the secrecy and conspiracism that permeates *Star Trek: Discovery's* first season as a Supernatural element that Burnham must use rationality to explain. She shows how bright lights are used in the visual language of *Star Trek: Discovery* to denote the Sublime. She discusses how the first scene of the series – Burnham, along with her mentor and commanding officer Captain Philippa Georgiou, escapes from a desert planet – sets up the themes of an Escape Narrative. Dozens of small examples like this act as pillars of Millsap-Spears's persuasive argument.

Millsap-Spears also situates all of *Star Trek* inside the Female Gothic tradition. The franchise is science fiction, and therefore, she argues, inherently exists within the literary bloodline of *Frankenstein*, the first science fiction novel and a landmark Female Gothic text. Yet the franchise also contains many Gothic elements. Millsap-Spears plucks examples from fifty years of film and television,

showing how Khan, *Star Trek*'s most iconic villain, is a Gothic Villain whose portrayal fits into a tradition of literary nineteenth century Orientalism, and how Counselor Troi displays the bravery of the Gothic Heroine in the face of sexual danger in both *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-1994) and *Star Trek: Nemesis* (2002). In this way she positions *Star Trek: Discovery* as a kind of realization of the franchise's genre destiny.

Although Millsap-Spears's argument is well-supported, there are places where I would like to see more depth. Specifically, in discussions of race and colonialism, Millsap-Spears rarely goes beyond mentioning that Burnham is breaking ground by being *Star Trek*'s first Black female protagonist. She discusses *Star Trek*'s colonialist roots as a connection to the Gothic genre, but she never fully explores the colonialist roots of the Gothic genre itself outside of arguing that some Gothic works "problematically deal with race" (72). Furthermore, while Millsap-Spears is aware of issues of race in *Star Trek*, she fails to develop this theme to its full potential. Race is not completely ignored, however; the author does discuss how Burnham's incarceration at the beginning of the series racializes her in contrast to *Star Trek*'s theoretical post-racist ideals. She also mentions how Lorca's obsession with possessing Burnham sexually is inflected not just by the gender power dynamics between them but also by the racial ones, and how his behavior towards her calls to mind slavery. Yet there is less analysis on this topic than one might want. For example, Millsap-Spears does not present the fact that *Star Trek: Discovery*'s Klingons, played by (mainly) white actors in racially coded makeup, cannibalize human characters as anything other than an example of a Gothic trope.

At this point, more than fifty years after its debut, *Star Trek* is a scholarly discipline unto itself. *Star Trek Discovery and the Female Gothic: Tell Fear No* draws attention to a newer element of the franchise and robustly connects *Star Trek* scholarship to the Gothic tradition. Those with a research interest in *Star Trek* or in the Gothic in popular media would do well to read this volume. Pedagogically, a chapter of this work would help situate modern science fiction in broader literary traditions, as well as explaining basic Gothic tropes.

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Sharlet, Jeff. *The Undertow: Scenes from a Slow Civil War*. Norton, 2023.

The Undertow takes readers on a tour through some of the darkest corners of contemporary American culture. Sharlet has written extensively on the American far right, on religion, and on their often-perverse convergences, and that experience shows in this timely gem of literary nonfiction. The book begins in a surprising way: with an essay about singer, actor, and civil rights icon Harry Belafonte. This opening reflection draws on the author's personal acquaintance with Belafonte to bring him vibrantly to life by flashing back and forth between a portrait of him shortly before his death in April 2022 – "this still-beautiful, still-raging old man" (29) – and an ode to the underappreciated artistic genius and unflappable freedom fighter he was in his prime.

Sharlet leaves it to the reader to figure out why this book about the American far right today begins with a portrait of a singer and actor who was most politically active in the mid-20th century. Part of the answer, I think, is that a civil war must have at least two sides, and Sharlet wanted to tarry with the "good side" – to remind us of the good worth fighting for – before commencing the self-imposed nightmare of trying to understand the other side. To the same purpose, the short second chapter nostalgically recounts the author's experiences mingling with the Occupy Wall Street protesters in 2011, leaving the reader with

the image of a streetlamp's mellow light filtering through the leaves above a sleepy, smelly huddle of good intentions.

Yet Sharlet could have chosen more obvious, more current protagonists of the fight for social justice. Why Belafonte? Two reasons come to my mind. First is the embodiment of stubborn political militancy Sharlet finds in Belafonte. As the invocation of the Occupy movement also exemplifies, Sharlet is wary of identifying himself with – and thereby of comparing his far-right subjects to – the centrist, multiculturalist liberalism of the Democratic Party's mainstream. The book does not make clear where the author's specific political allegiance lies, and perhaps doing so would have diminished its literary value, but its framing division is not between, for example, Obama/Clinton/Biden and Donald Trump. It is between an astonishingly diverse array of characters whom Trump managed to coalesce into a unified movement and what Belafonte represents. That, in Sharlet's portrayal, is not so much the nonviolent progressivism popularly (though problematically) associated with Belafonte's close friend, Martin Luther King, Jr., as it is the seething desire to fight oppression that was instilled in Belafonte as a boy – a child of poor Jamaican immigrants to New York City – and never ceased animating his art and activism.

The second reason Sharlet chooses Belafonte as his emblem of righteousness is precisely Belafonte's seeming anachronism, or, to put the same thing more generously, his survival. Sharlet movingly depicts Belafonte mourning his friend, Reverend King, whose death still pains Belafonte more than half a century later (28-29). Yet the image also communicates that Belafonte survived and kept fighting: through bottomless pain and against ever-renewed opposition, his artistry largely forgotten except for one misunderstood song, he remained tough, stubborn, and militant. His person connects the struggle against today's far-right white supremacy with the struggle against yesterday's mainstream white supremacy, reminding us of how little time separates them and making us question, as the book does throughout, whether white supremacy ever really was relegated to the fringes of American culture, as the progressive historiography underlying centrist liberalism nervously implies.

The structure of *The Undertow*, to substitute one aquatic metaphor for another, resembles a whirlpool, at its center the "Slow Civil War" (not a metaphor) identified in the subtitle. For seven chapters, Sharlet bobs around the whirlpool's edges, guiding readers in a sometimes Gonzo-esque first-person voice through Trump rallies, a men's rights convention, and a "mini-mega" church in Miami

where wealthy Christian hipsters rock out for a savior who is, they repeatedly affirm, “so good” (71-72). (The latter chapter, called “Ministry of Fun,” is in my view the book’s most entertaining.) Along the way, readers meet QAnon “researchers” and disgruntled war veterans, self-justifying sex offenders and devoted couples whose love warms in the exhaust of Donald Trump’s private plane. Finally, of course, readers encounter many, many people with guns.

Then comes the plunge: the book’s central chapter, also called “The Undertow” and occupying nearly half of its length, recounts a solitary road trip from California back to the author’s home in Vermont, beginning at a rally in belligerent memorial of Ashli Babbitt, the 35-year-old woman who was killed by U.S. Capitol police on January 6, 2021. At the periphery of the rally – which features, on stage, Babbitt’s tearful, furious mother – participants and sympathetic local police fight off Antifa activists, one of the few times in the book when we see the left side of the “Slow Civil War” assume any agency. As he drives from west to east, Sharlet attends several homegrown churches, where he finds charismatic preachers spreading the gospel of liberal pedophilia. He visits the restaurant owned by Colorado Congresswoman Lauren Boebert, “Shooters” (like Hooters but with guns). He meets heavily armed militia members whose whole personalities seem to be consumed with the threats to their way of life they perceive lurking around every corner, even when they live in the desert, hundreds of miles from the cities they believe are the malignant sources of such threats.

Sharlet says that this cross-country journey is guided by the pursuit of “the ghost of Ashli Babbitt” (200), but this is a literary conceit he cannot, and does not try to, sustain. It is a useful way of imposing an imagined unity on what was really a task too diffuse and open-ended to be clearly defined at the outset: to find out what’s wrong, to articulate, from a position of deep personal investment, the pathologies of a big, complicated nation at a perilous point in its history. Sharlet’s tone, which lingers with the reader to darken their outlook and depress their mood, conveys mourning, bewilderment, and insomniac paranoia. But is it paranoia or not? How much danger are we really in? That is the overarching question Sharlet leaves open, seeming implicitly to recognize that it is still possible to ignore all this ugliness if one chooses to, and that he has found it because he looked for it, driven by a fevered curiosity that he never really interrogates, which he presumes as the spirit of the age.

The Undertow begins with an unexpected profile of an American musician and civil rights activist, and it ends in just the same way, though the closing

chapter features not Belafonte but 20th century folk singer Lee Hays. While Sharlet's portrayal of Belafonte is triumphant, celebrating his artistic prowess and the defiant strength of personality he maintained into old age, the concluding discussion of Hays is deeply sad. His story is not that of someone, like Belafonte, who overcame injustice to become exactly who he wanted to be but rather of a talent that crumbled under the weight of lonely self-denial: Sharlet strongly suggests a connection between Hays' decline and his unacknowledged homosexuality. Hays is best known for his rendition of "Goodnight, Irene." He collaborated with Leadbelly, Paul Robeson, Pete Seeger, and Woody Guthrie. Yet the image with which Sharlet leaves us shows Hays as old and alone, both legs lost to diabetes, wiling away his last days with liquor and cigarettes. Just as with the opening essay on Belafonte, readers are left to their own resources to answer various questions: Why this? Why this person? Why this portrayal of him? Why this mood?

One answer is that what Sharlet has found to be most deeply wrong with American society, beneath the many eddies of discontent through which he has been drifting, is a refusal or an incapacity on the part of the nation to look at itself honestly, at its history and at the true extent of violence and division therein – an insistence on ignoring the ugliness. Several times in the book Sharlet invokes the analogy of a "body-politic" to a human body, asking, "How does a body come apart?" (237) He leaves us with a specific body that answers that question: how did Lee Hays' body come apart? Most immediately, it succumbed to addiction and disease. More fundamentally, in Sharlet's telling, it disintegrated because of Hays' inability to look at himself honestly and because of his society's refusal to let him.

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