

STUDIES
IN
POPULAR
CULTURE

38.2
SPRING 2016

STUDIES IN POPULAR CULTURE

Studies in Popular Culture, a journal of the Popular Culture Association in the South, publishes articles on popular culture however mediated through film, literature, radio, television, music, graphics, print, practices, associations, events—any of the material or conceptual conditions of life. Its contributors from the United States, Australia, Canada, China, England, Finland, France, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Scotland, Spain, and the Turkish Republic of North Cyprus include distinguished anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, cultural geographers, ethnomusicologists, historians, and scholars in comics, communications, film, games, graphics, literature, philosophy, religion, and television.

Direct editorial queries and submissions by email to editor Lynnette Porter, porterly@erau.edu; mailing address: Humanities and Communication Department, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, 600 South Clyde Morris Boulevard, Daytona Beach, Florida 32114. *Studies in Popular Culture* accepts submissions on all forms of popular culture (American or international) studied from the perspective of any discipline. Submissions relating strictly to American culture may be sent to the editor of *Studies in American Culture*, Robert L. Coleman, University of South Alabama, rcoleman@southalabama.edu.

Queries are welcome. Manuscript submissions should be sent via email as Microsoft Word attachments (author's surname in the file name). Submissions typically total 5000 to 7500 words, including notes and bibliography. Manuscripts should be double-spaced, using 12-point Times New Roman font. Please note that the editing process may result in revisions that lengthen the essay. *SPC* is indexed in the annual MLA International Bibliography, and MLA documentation is required. Authors should secure all necessary copyright permissions before submitting material. *SPC* uses blind peer review. The editor reserves the right to make stylistic changes on accepted manuscripts. A multidisciplinary journal, *SPC* gives preference to submissions that demonstrate familiarity with the body of scholarly work on popular culture but avoid the jargon associated with certain single-discipline studies.

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IN THE SOUTH**

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2015 Whatley Award

In memory of George Whatley, a founder and early president of the Popular Culture Association in the South, the editor and editorial board of *Studies in Popular Culture* annually recognize the article published in SPC that in their view best represents the scholarly values Professor Whatley sought for the organization and the study of popular culture.

The 2015 Whatley Award winner is

**Beautiful Friendship:
Masculinity and Nationalism in *Casablanca***

by

**Peter Kunze
University of Texas at Austin**

From the Editor

“The end is where we start from. And every phrase
And sentence that is right . . . where every word is at home,
Taking its place to support the others,
The word neither diffident nor ostentatious,
An easy commerce of the old and the new. . . .”

T. S. Eliot, “Little Gidding”

Perhaps the words of T. S. Eliot best summarize this issue, and the ending of one editor’s work on this journal and the beginning of another’s. As former editor Rhonda Wilcox ended her decade-long tenure as editor of *Studies in Popular Culture*, my role as editor began. This issue combines our work during the transition, with Rhonda guiding some authors and I working with other contributors throughout the editing process leading to publication.

Rhonda and I likely agree that we strive to ensure that every word, phrase, and sentence is right, supportive, and “at home” not only on the journal’s pages but within the many disciplines comprising popular culture. With this, my first issue, I also hope that it helps to create that easy commerce between the old and the new, just as its articles reflect our cultural past and present.

This issue’s articles cover a wide range of topics, some reflecting bygone eras, with others taking topics from recent headlines. Michael Wentworth illustrates how to “dig the past” through a comparison of Jean Shephard’s works reflecting upon the pop culture artifacts of his youth. Anyone who has identified with Ralphie in *A Christmas Story* should understand the personal and cultural significance of memorabilia like the smiling Wimpy doll or Flash Gordon zap gun. Michelle Napierski-Prancl takes us forward a few decades to music from 1965 to 1985 and explores the connection between popular baby names given to girls and the pop hits like “Brandy” that may have increased their popularity. Analyzing recent sports news, Chris B. Geyerman discusses the NFL’s “violence against women problem” and provides a rhetorical study of the public language used to discuss the perpetrators and victims of domestic violence.

The time periods covered within this issue’s articles are matched by the variety of cultural artifacts being considered in light of specific interpretations of identity. Mark C. Hill evaluates the alternative

masculine performances in American comics by investigating Brian K. Vaughan and Pia Guerra's *Y: the Last Man*. Asking what it means to be human, Juliet Kitchens explores the nature of hybridity and humanity in Joss Whedon's *Dollhouse*. Sarah Gregg Minslow takes a close look at the values embedded in Chik-fil-A's classic stories series and the social roles for which children are being prepared.

Popular culture stretches across time, presenting us with a wealth of artifacts to study and from which to make meaning of our lives. Although individual artifacts—whether a comic book, television series, radio serial-based toy, online headline, song, or fast food restaurant prize—may harken to a specific time and place, they also reflect our humanity and cultural identities. They indicate that, although a style goes out of fashion or a television series is canceled or news is quickly supplanted by the next headline, there is continuity among times, places, and people. The end of one era or phase gives rise to the next hot topic or product in a continuous cycle. Perhaps this is what makes studies in popular culture—and, I hope, *Studies in Popular Culture*—significant to us personally and professionally. As this issue exemplifies, I encourage the submission of articles about any area of popular culture and look forward to working with authors, whether first time or seasoned, to find just the right words to express the beauty and significance of a wide range of subjects.

Thanks go to former editor Rhonda Wilcox, Associate Editors Jennifer Wojton and Dawn Heinecken, and Book Reviews Editor Clare Douglass Little, who greatly assisted with the production and publication of this issue. I especially thank Tom Appleby, who patiently worked on my behalf to create the format for and print this issue, and my colleagues in the Humanities and Communication Department, who support this endeavor.

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Book Reviews

An invitation to potential reviewers and authors

Any scholar who wishes to review a book should contact the Book Reviews Editor, Clare Douglass Little, at

DOUGLAC2@erau.edu

Those whose work is unfamiliar to the editor may wish to send a CV or describe relevant reviewing experience within a discipline. Reviewers may suggest a book to be reviewed or request to be assigned one from among those sent to the editor.

Members of the Popular Culture Association in the South who have recently published a book are also invited to inform the Book Reviews Editor.

Reviews should be approximately 500-700 words and should be emailed as a Microsoft Word attachment. The contributor's surname should be in the file name. In some cases, review essays of 1,000-1,200 words may be assigned. Queries are welcome.

Object Entanglements: From Postmodern Subjectivity to Posthuman Thingness in Joss Whedon's *Dollhouse*

Juliette Kitchens

Joss Whedon's *Dollhouse* (2009-2010) positions subjectivity in direct confrontation with posthuman hybridity by situating viewers to question what it means to be human—how much technological integration occurs before we cease to be ourselves and become something *else*? Does that transformation require moral complacency? Are we a singular self, or are we many selves? Are we autonomous subjects, or interrelated objects, or something in between? Wrestling with sociopolitical issues common among Whedon's works, such as identity in the face of technology, politics in the belly of industry, and commerce on the backs of the proletariat, *Dollhouse* creates a metanarrative of these themes unlike any other Whedonverse. For example, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) complicates gender identity through technology, specifically weapons, by situating modern weaponry and warfare as masculine “while Buffy and the Scooby Gang routinely rely either on non-violent strategies, or on arcane weaponry and magic” (Simkin par. 2). *Angel* (1999-2004) offers one of the more pronounced studies in the Whedonverses of moral politics and industrial corruption, particularly in the final season when Angel's team find themselves in charge of the Los Angeles branch of the law firm Wolfram and Hart. In *Firefly* (2002-2003), Whedon provides dissonant representations of the prostitute that range from points of traditional patriarchal commerce to postfeminist empowerment (Amy-Chinn). However, while issues of identity, agency, and subjectivity weave themselves into all of Whedon's productions, *Dollhouse* is the series that brings them into focus. The scholarly attention paid to exploring subjectivity, bodies, and technologies in *Dollhouse* offers a range of critical readings that complicate identity processes and constructions (Ginn, Buckman, and Porter; Espenson; Wilcox; Calvert; Hawk, “More Than the Sum”; Randell-Moon). Regardless of the subjectivity's construct—doll, creator (within and around the narrative), performer (actor), consumer, audience, location, etc.—*Dollhouse* posits that

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identity requires complicity and moral ambiguity (Wilcox). *Dollhouse* also situates human subjectivity in relation with “not-so-human beings who can create the histories of the world” (Strayer 187), forecasting a near-future in which human, machine, and hybrid are interrelationally subjectivized (Hawk, “Hacking”). Moreover, while exposing the strata of identity and questioning the purpose, processes, and sustainability of agency in an environment rich with commodification and technology, *Dollhouse* offers alternatives to humanist subjects, positioning audiences to transform our understanding of the cyborg machine into the post-humanist object.

Dollhouse's premise centers on a powerful medical research and pharmaceutical company, Rossum Corporation, that recruits and contracts specific employees to work for its underground subsidiary known as “The Dollhouse.” Rossum has Dollhouses throughout the world, but the show's narrative takes place predominantly in the Los Angeles Dollhouse. Once recruited (contracted) to the Dollhouse, “Actuals” are “mapped” and physiologically prepared for the initial personality extraction, which turns them into “Dolls.” The extracted original personalities are stored on “wedges,” portable storage devices akin to hard drives, until a Doll's contract expires and the personality is then re-installed. While under contract, Dolls receive expert medical care and physical conditioning, as well as artistic outlets such as painting and bonsai cultivation. When a Doll is selected for an interaction with a Dollhouse client, or an “engagement,” he or she receives a personality imprint and is now an “Active.” Engagements are designed to fulfill a client's fantasy and desire, so while the imprinted personality is a “complete” person with memories, ideas, politics, dreams, goals, etc., it also reflects specific parameters designed for the engagement. Once an engagement concludes, “handlers” return their Actives to the Dollhouse for a “treatment,” which extracts the personality imprint and returns an Active to a Doll-state.

With its emphasis on imprinting and extracting personalities through technology-rich interactions, *Dollhouse* dismantles subject-agency while simultaneously constructing object-agency. Generally, subject-agency is humanist, or anthropocentric, suggesting that all interaction is in reference to human awareness. As such, subject-agency asserts the biological human as superior to the technological or hybrid being, yet this premise fractures under the strain of evolving artificial intelligences. *Dollhouse*'s posthuman lens interrogates the human-technological interface, critically examining the complications identity construction endures in our cyborg culture.¹ The show pushes

us toward an object-oriented philosophy, which embraces the broad scope of hybridity that posthumanism presents and decenters the importance of the anthropocentric subject without erasing subjectivity.

Posthumanism is grounded in the concept of hybridity, which exists environmentally, physically, and arguably metaphysically. Hybridity, most commonly considered the relation of biological and technological agents, disrupts the binary structure of subject/object without fully dismantling it. Thus, posthuman subjectivity “is emergent, rather than given, distributed rather than located solely in consciousness, emerging from and integrated into a chaotic world rather than occupying a position of mastery or control removed from it” (Hayles 291). Whereas postmodernism emphasizes subjectivity’s alienation, posthumanism emphasizes its (re)integration.² In part, when considering posthuman identity formation, the value placed on fragmentation in postmodern subjectivity creates limitations for hybridity’s object entanglements.

Hybridity creates an ecology in which “humans are no longer the monarchs of being but are instead *among* beings, *entangled* in beings, and *implicated* in other beings” (Bryant 40). The interrelatedness of subject and object in posthumanism necessitates a framework that is capable of acknowledging not only the subject’s displacement, but also the systemic connectivity occurring in the emergent *thingness* that is the posthuman object. This connectivity is not the same as the unity that postmodern subjectivity tends to desire (Howell 94). Rather, hybridity’s connectivity suggests that objects exist within and among other objects, rendering the disruption in an object’s subjectivity as an inherent characteristic of it rather than a symptom of external forces and (un)sated desire. Moreover, posthumanism’s hybridity demands that empowerments such as agency, exigency, and autonomy belong both to human and to non-human actants. Posthuman agency, then, is not simply acknowledging the potentiality of objects from an anthropocentric position. Rather, we must “formulate new ways of thinking about objects, and revise our ideas about the subjects that think about them” as we critically examine our relationships with and our identities as hybrid objects (Morton 167). Through *Actuals*, *Dollhouse* exposes the postmodern fragmentation in the anthropocentric subject-object binary system and, through the Dolls and doll-making process, exposes the posthuman reckoning afforded in the object-oriented relational network of hybridity.

Hybrid environments lessen anthropocentric subjectivity’s sustainability because these locations engage, if not also enhance,

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object agency. As hybridity becomes an increasingly dominant way of life, our posthumanism inches us toward object orientation. Object-oriented philosophy moves away from the preoccupation of human access to objects (what we might consider anthropocentric superiority) that saturates most contemporary theory in order to examine the object-object relations. This framework “holds that the relation of humans to pollen, oxygen, eagles, or windmills is no different in kind from the interaction of these objects with each other” (Harman 1). Object-oriented philosophy doesn’t erase the subject or subjectivity; instead it situates all potential subjects as objects, which dismantles the subject-object binary that postmodernism requires and that posthumanism disrupts. Whether the object is a motherboard, a mothership, or a mother, object-oriented philosophy claims that “all things equally exist, but not all things exist equally” (Bogost 11). By this maxim, object-oriented philosophy ceases to reduce objects to their human encounter, focusing instead on objects’ entanglements, or relational encounters in an effort to understand object agency, subjectivity, and identity.

Postmodern Subjectivity: Fragmenting the *Self*

Within the scope of postmodernity, subjectivity is predominantly sketched as fractured, unable to reintegrate or suture itself into a whole. As a result, “postmodern theory de-emphasize[s] community and intersubjectivity in favour of highly individualized modes of being” (Best and Kellner 289). In turn, this creates a subjectivity that identifies as decentered or othered and is steeped in personalized desire. Thus, Actuals maintain the potentiality for postmodern subjectivity, but the Dolls cannot because they are wiped of desire and individuality during the doll-making process. Moreover, particularly vital to feminist postmodern subjectivity is its inseparability from the physical body, which reinforces individualism and the diversity of experience located in the fracture (McLaren 214).³ However, while some schools of postmodern thought find this fracture liberating, the emphasis on individuation prohibits a sustainable or consistent theory of agency, which is a shortcoming posthumanism works to correct. Also problematic in relation to posthumanism and to object-oriented philosophy, postmodern subjectivity’s embodiment necessitates anthropocentrism.⁴ Emphasizing the waning authority of postmodern subjectivity in our posthuman paradigm, only two main characters retain their status as Actuals, or “natural” humans, throughout *Dollhouse*’s two-season run. As such, Adelle DeWitt and Topher Brink

provide direct access to anthropocentric subject-agency and represent the postmodern fragmentation that desires unification.

Adelle and Topher suffer implicitly from the strain of a god-complex (although, more often than not, Topher's complex is more explicit than Adelle's) and ultimately develop a familial interrelatedness; without one, the other is rendered incomplete within the Dollhouse. To illustrate, Adelle oversees the Dollhouse and is responsible for recruiting new Dolls and establishing new clients. She determines what others need to know about the function of the Dollhouse, sets the parameters for their interaction with the 'House, and welcomes them as patrons or as employees. Adelle determines who will participate in the Dollhouse community and what his or her role can and will be within it—who will call it “home” and who will call it “business” (cf. Nadkarni 81-95). She is the quintessential host. Topher, on the other hand, keeps the home wires burning. He creates and manages the technology necessitated by the Dollhouse. Among his many responsibilities, his most prominent roles are to control the imprint uploads and subsequent neural wipes for the Actives/Dolls, ensure personalities are safely stored on wedges and on the mainframe, and compose new personalities for various client engagements. Without Topher, the tech does not function; without Adelle, there is little need for the tech. This reliance bonds both characters in a shared responsibility for the Dolls and, as the post-apocalyptic episodes “Epitaph One” (1.13) and “Epitaph Two” (2.13) reveal, the “thoughtpocalypse.”⁵

Adelle and Topher's desire for unification is further evidenced by their personal use of two Dolls, Victor and Sierra. In “Spy in the House of Love” (2.9), Adelle engages an Active (Victor) in a recurring romantic engagement. The sexual aspect of Adelle's fantasy might align her with the more tawdry fantasies of the Dollhouse clientele except that she clearly seeks an emotional connection throughout the engagement. We see Adelle and Roger (the personality imprinted in Victor) mutually fantasize about running away together and talk about her professional life, her inner turmoil, the challenges she faces. While Adelle's engagement involves sex, the encounter reflects her emotional need to connect with another more than it does her physical desire. In the next episode of the series, we learn that Topher annually uses a Doll for a diagnostic imprint-systems check that coincides with his birthday. He connects with the Active (Sierra) through conversation, playing laser tag and video games, and eating a variety of “inappropriate starches” (“Haunted” 1.10; “Echoes” 1.7). Topher is more interested in having a friend for a day than a romantic or sexual encounter. Adelle points out

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Topher's reason for using an Active, explaining, "Loneliness leads to nothing good, only detachment. Sometimes the people who are in most need to reach out are the people least capable of it" ("Haunted" 1.10). She suggests that Topher's incapability of interrelating with another is not only potentially dangerous for the Dollhouse, but also for Topher (we could also read this as Adelle self-identifying even though she is directly referring to Topher). Adelle "permits" Topher his birthday present to promote a greater sense of unity within him, even if for just one day a year. Adelle and Topher each use Dolls to momentarily engage their unfulfilled desires, feel a sense of wholeness, and let it wash away when the engagement concludes. Their acceptance of transitory connections indicates that they have resigned themselves to the disconnection, the self-alienation, that characterizes postmodern subjectivity. They feel the fracture, momentarily suture it, and return to isolation.

Although Adelle and Topher neither receive "active architecture" (the neural tech that permits imprinting) nor endure imprints or wipes during the thoughtpocalypse, both of their personalities are used as imprints, which further signals their fractured subjectivities. Their personalities are mapped, stored, and used as needed, but they as subjects retain their natural-born state and remain embodied. Adelle's imprint is uploaded in "Epitaph One" (1.13), but never as a full persona, and she is never face-to-face with her other *self*. Adelle (Actual) maintains the illusion of her autonomy as a "whole" biological being, but her imprint suffers overt fragmentation when she is parsed into individual memories. These defining moments are used as part of a narrator-collective, a series of snippets provided by key individuals within the Dollhouse whose memories paint the landscape of actions that culminated in humanity's tech-infused downfall, which is the world we see in "Epitaph One" and "Epitaph Two" (1.13; 2.13). For Adelle's imprint, fragmentation provides necessary and useful, albeit painful, information that will help lead others to safety, but more importantly her pieces become chapters in what might be considered the most accurate history book never created.

Topher, on the other hand, interacts with his other *self* when he is uploaded into Victor in order to be in two places at once. In "The Left Hand" (2.6), Topher (Actual) and Topher 2.0 (Victor) collaborate in order to help Adelle regain control of the L.A. Dollhouse in the midst of an attempted coup by the D.C. Dollhouse. Topher 2.0 is a material product of Adelle's need for assistance. Topher and Topher 2.0 function as a collective unit, and neither seems fazed by the reality

of the other. The materiality of Topher 2.0 provides an anthropocentric, postmodernism-approved replication that Topher (Actual) has little difficulty reconciling as “other.” That is, Topher understands he is the foundation for Topher 2.0, but 2.0 is inherently an object because only Topher can be a subject—the original, the Actual. Moreover, Topher 2.0’s ambivalence to his objectness is complicated by both Tophers’ complacency in their newfound freedom to finally engage with an “equal.” Topher’s perceived unified subjectivity, which is enabled by his god-complex as the creator of Topher 2.0, prevents either version from suffering from the fragmentation they are relationally experiencing.

Disembodied fractures do not disrupt either Adelle or Topher’s subjectivity. Both imprints are established as a tool of benevolence—Adelle’s, for those seeking safe harbor in the midst of apocalyptic chaos, and Topher’s, for the safety of everyone and everything in the L.A. Dollhouse. However, both imprints are always already separate from the Actual. Adelle’s exists outside of her gaze, her awareness, whereas Topher’s awareness of his imprint determines the course of their interaction. Because both believe that they remain in control of their bodies, they are vestiges of postmodernity in the throes of posthumanity. To point, Topher’s fragmentation does not occur as a result of the hybridity witnessed as Topher 2.0 because he created and controls this integration; rather, his break manifests as a reaction to his pivotal role in the thoughtpocalypse. When Topher designs the tech that nullifies the need for active architecture in order to wipe and imprint personalities, he relinquishes his perceived control of the doll-making process. His “remote wipe” system puts Rossum Corporation in control of global environmental hybridity. Anyone, at any time, can be erased and recreated as Rossum wants or needs them to be. The strain of this reality on Topher’s subjectivity manifests in the postmodern tradition of marked psychosis and self-alienation. Embodied hybridity does not fracture Topher’s subjectivity; rather, environmental hybridity annihilates it.

Posthuman Technodomicity: Constructing Object Thingness

Technodomicity, my neologism for the environmental hybridity emergent in contemporary home spaces or domains, is the increasing integration of and reliance on technology in a domestic system in which the evolution of non-human actants revises how personal

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and public discourses and actions are understood. As one of many possible manifestations of environmental hybridity, it affords agency to domestic objects and provides an alternate framework through which we understand posthuman object relationships. While both postmodernism and posthumanism locate the body as a central figure, particularly in relation to subjectivity, “Posthuman theory extends the cyborg metaphor beyond the body and into the built environment, imagining designed space itself as a prosthetic and producing new understandings of a ‘nature’ that itself can no longer be conceived as an originary or neutral ground” (Harrison 8). The interrelation between biological and technological objects and bodies with the built and/or (pseudo)natural environment, then, creates an environmental hybridity in which “agency becomes increasingly distributed among human and non-human life forms (including the digital),” resulting in “an ecological sphere of action rather than a static geographical unit” (Harrison 24). Through agencied spaces, objects, and bodies, technodomestic locations cast the public and private systems (domains) as interactive, promoting an approach to actant-identity formations that challenges anthropocentric privilege. Offering phenomena through which environmental hybridity materially and discursively marks its relation to and impact on posthuman entanglements, technodomesticity bridges posthuman subjectivity and post-human thingness.

Adelle and Topher, as postmodern subjects in a posthuman world, provide critical perspective on both the commodification of technodomestic locations and hybridity’s agency. They create, inhabit, and manipulate a variety of technodomestic representations. While Adelle and Topher function as parts of the Dollhouse, they believe theirs is a position of control. Specifically, the objects they interdependently create, the Dolls, are explicit cyborgs, “theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism” (Haraway 150). For Adelle, each Doll is a constructed piece of Rossum property until his or her contract expires, a technodomestic object of the Dollhouse. She allows them no agency; they must be protected by the Dollhouse, and they act only as the Dollhouse instructs. She recognizes that the Dolls, as objects, remain human, but she is capable of separating the human subject from the human object. Topher, conversely, appears initially incapable of seeing human subjects—both Doll and Actual, alike—as anything more than motherboard objects, waiting to be crafted, manipulated, and controlled. It is not until he realizes that the Doll may be *more* than he programmed it to be that he begins wrestling with the complexities of human, subject-based, emotions for

and connections with various Dolls. In her article “We Are Not Just Human Anymore,” Meg Saint Clair Pearson pairs Haraway’s cyborg with Baudrillard’s environmental posthuman to deftly argue that while the Dolls represent Haraway’s cyborgs, Topher—and I would add Adelle—represents Baudrillard’s posthumanity, which positions hybridity as a reliance on machines in order to sustain life. They need the technodomestic environment of the Dollhouse to survive—Topher for the technological freedom, Adelle for the power of controlling her domain. Pearson notes that Topher’s techno-soluble existence introduces him as “abnormal,” postulating that “Perhaps the writers intentionally chose to create Topher as monstrous, as a way of almost forcing the viewers into creating a stronger bond with a human-machine hybrid than a seemingly human character” (Pearson 30). This advances the idea that perhaps *Dollhouse* is not merely asking us to examine the importance of subjectivity or of hybridity in posthuman critique, but that it is also asking audiences to question sustainable anthropocentrism in a *post-* world. *Dollhouse* may play as science fiction, but that is not its reality. In presenting both the postmodernist and the posthumanist perspectives as cruel manipulations of hybrid locations, the narrative positions viewers to seek an alternative to humanist subjectivity.

As an agenced object, the environmental hybridity of the Dollhouse, itself, blurs the lines between technodomestic subject and object. Because its purpose is to fulfill clients’ desires, the Dollhouse is the catalyst for subjectivity realized (Hawk, “More than the Sum”). In essence, the Dollhouse helps its clients realize a *whole* subject. From its perspective, the Dollhouse does not create an illusion or imitation of unified subjectivity; rather, it produces material objects (Dolls/Actives) that satiate the subject’s (i.e., client’s) desire. To accomplish this, the Dollhouse takes an anthropocentric subject (an Actual), dismantles it into its very *thingness* (a Doll), and reshapes it into whatever is needed to suture the lack expressed by the client (an Active). Whether it is a client who needs a mother for his newborn child, an Actual who needs time to escape the loss of her own infant, or a corporation that desires to control life-everlasting, the Dollhouse provides for an other’s desire by creating an ecosystem of interchangeable, interrelatable, individual *things*. To the Dollhouse—itself a thing—every component, human or non-human, is an actant, an object, equally. Objects are deconstructed by and within their most basic elements as needed by the Dollhouse to sustain its system. For example, the doll-making process fractures the human body-object into bioscans and displays, tests and procedures,

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and medical files illustrating the parts that create the whole. This process calls into focus the atoms that create the cells that create the tissues, fluids, and electricity that create the body. Each part is an object, agencied within its environment.

In “The Attic” (2.10), the perceived body is the domestic space for subjectivity without the anthropocentric sense that the human is subject. The Attic is an independent object that also functions as a unit of the Dollhouse; it is Rossum’s mainframe computer, a virtual environment separate from that of the actual Dollhouse(s) but also implicated in the Dollhouse’s needs. As an independent non-human actant providing a contained environment, it feeds itself by deconstructing the human subject—specifically its physicality and its subjectivity—into system-necessitated objects. As the mainframe, the Attic serves Rossum’s computational needs by storing personalities, schematic data, personnel files, etc. Each object within the Attic (every person who has ever been sentenced to it) exists within its own deepest fear or nightmare. This creates the physiological reaction within the object’s body (specifically, the brain) needed by the Attic to sustain its system as Rossum’s mainframe. Similar to the effect of the fractured physiological body produced by the images of the medical scans and reports, the Attic presents the idea that we are not a singular neural part or object, not a singular subject or “I”; we are many parts, many “I”s, that can be individually extracted, used, replaced, and restored. As Rossum’s mainframe, the Attic translates the neural data into usable objects that facilitate data transference, which, among its many uses, alters the biological domestic space of the Dolls/Actives. The object entanglement created within and through the Attic maintains both the embodiment central to feminist postmodern subjectivity and the emergent nature of posthuman subjectivity. In fulfilling these roles, the Attic moves us toward realizing *thingness*.

Clyde Randolph, the first person sent to the Attic and one of Rossum’s two original founders, illustrates this when he explains his actions as Arcane, his shadow-like counter-persona who nightmare-hops to kill the subject/person controlling individual fear-spaces in the Attic. Clyde explains to Echo and her crew that there are many people within many networked Attics that create the Rossum mainframe. He tells Echo that he is “trying to put them out of their misery, freeing them from an eternal hell. But mostly, I was trying to take out Rossum’s number of CPUs” (“The Attic” 2.10). Clyde’s sympathetic urge to destroy the suffering of the subject works cooperatively to serve his goal of eliminating the objects used by Rossum’s system

to sustain itself. Object-oriented philosophy holds that all objects are unit systems, comprised of multiple objects that may be encountered individually and collectively (Bogost 27). Even though Echo still frames these objects as “people,” Clyde makes clear that everyone in the Attic is a *thing*, a unit, that functions collectively as part of the system through their individual contributions. He is not devaluing the objects’ subjectivity, however, when he prioritizes the potentiality and power of the object within its environment. For Clyde, the CPUs are both objects and subjects.

As the Attic represents the Dollhouse’s object-construction in an abstract space, Topher’s imprint chair is a concrete, physical example of technodomesticity that functions similarly to deconstruct anthropocentric subjectivity and establish object-oriented agency. That is, the chair alters how an agent relates to public and private systems by extracting the subject properties from the Actual’s body in order to insert new properties into the Doll-body. The first time an Actual sits in the chair, she or he is transformed from subject-Self to object-Doll. Stripped of her or his personality, the properties that make the person subjectively-oriented, the Doll arises at its most basic construct. Dolls have properties such as agency and autonomy, but the presence of these is generally limited, determined by outside forces (e.g., the chair, the mainframe, Topher, Adelle, Rossum Corporation, the Dollhouse client). Dolls are capable of feeding themselves, bathing on their own, exercising, and creating arts and crafts, but the Doll-state does not encourage reaching beyond the desire to please. To wit, Dolls commonly respond “I try to be my best” and commonly ask “was I my best?” The chair translates the Actual into the Doll and then into and out of Active-status. Adelle determines the client need and communicates it to Topher, who then builds the imprint. Topher uploads and removes the imprint through the chair, the vehicle that transitions the object across subjectivities. The chair, then, is a material representation of the moment of hybridity, or the subject/object [de] construction that occurs in the fracture of the subject binary (i.e., self is to subject as other is to object) and creation of the object system. Both the chair and the Doll objects have relatively little, if any, agency in this process; it is simply their purpose. Theoretically, the object units within this process have programmed parameters they must function within, and neither has the ability or justification to reach outside of those limitations. Yet, existing program deviations within the narrative suggest that hybridity does not exist without object agency.

Object-Oriented Hybridity: Accidents and Intentions

Object-oriented philosophy contends that humans desire to be objects “not as a means to an end like paper or oil, but in the sense that we want to be like the Grand Canyon or a guitar hero or a piece of silver: distinct forces to be reckoned with” (Harman 140). The human object desires agency and autonomy, power and potentiality. In relation to the human subject, thingness is desirable because it allows freedom from the “infinite flexible subjectivity within” (Harman 140). Whereas the fracture of postmodern subjectivity desires suturing and the hybridity of posthuman subjectivity desires integration, object subjectivity desires agency and the emancipation from the self-other construct. The “infinite flexibility” of *post-* subjectivity is not emergent, but rather dependent on an antiquated human-centric binary that cannot function, or even maintain itself, in the environmental and social wake of posthuman hybridity. Inasmuch as postmodernism’s self-alienation is a response to modernism’s industrialization and posthumanism’s integration is a response to postmodernism’s self-alienation, object-oriented philosophy’s thingness can be argued as a response to the *post*-subject, itself—the anthropocentric ideation of subject-centric identity.

Clyde, Alpha, and Echo showcase the complexities of the hybrid object. We could consider Clyde the original agencied object in the *Dollhouse* narrative. As a subject’s object, the Attic reduces him to his nightmare in order to produce power for the mainframe. Clyde continuously runs the statistical probability of the apocalyptic outcomes catalyzed by the biotechnology he created as his subject-self (before becoming the founding member of Team Attic). The nightmare produces a physiological fear-response in his body that the mainframe then translates into processing power. However, Clyde has developed the ability to “jump” nightmares and enter other objects, or CPUs. He can insert himself anywhere within the mainframe’s networked construct and attack its components; Clyde, more specifically Arcane, is akin to a system virus, an irregularity in the program. Only when Arcane is pushed into Clyde’s fear-space within the Attic does he *become* Clyde, a unit within the Attic functioning without agency or autonomy. However, the moment he created his split-apart Arcane, Clyde became an agencied object: aware of and intentional with his environment, able to interact with it in ways that alter and revise it for his own purpose (to bring down the Dollhouse by disrupting its network from within). As a virus in the system, he is an object-aware. Unlike the composites Alpha and Echo, whose object-aware

emergence is a primary element of the unfolding narrative, Clyde is ambivalent to his object-Self. When offered an escape from the Attic, Clyde dismisses the possibility by quickly noting that his physical body is not accessible (“Epitaph One” 1.13). As a disembodied object, he is aware that he now only exists within the construct of the mainframe. The disembodiment he experienced when he was transferred into the Attic becomes the point of origin for Clyde’s hybrid subjectivity, but it is not his object emancipation. His freedom exists in his entanglements among objects. He remains a subjectivized person through his entanglements with objects. Alpha and Echo, each instantaneously bodied with (multiple) subjectivities, must grapple with a similar transition into object, although it is complicated by their embodiment of the humanist subject identity. As bodied-subjects, they must reconcile the binary structure of self-other with the integrated structure of self-with-others.

Just as Clyde/Arcane is a program deviation—an aware object—in the Attic, the chair has its own anomaly, Alpha, who then creates a second “composite,” Echo. Unlike the Attic’s deviation (an agencied act of an internal unit, Clyde), Alpha is created when a technological malfunction occurs during a (mostly) routine wipe. After the Alpha-Doll attacks the female Whiskey, a fellow Doll, Topher tries to reboot his Doll-state. Instead of wiping Alpha, a machine malfunction causes all of Alpha’s previous imprints to download at once. The Alpha-Doll no longer exists; rather, because of this “composite event,” Alpha consists of (approximately) fifty fully-accessible personality units, some of which are quite dangerous. Echo, on the other hand, is purposefully created by Alpha. In “Omega” (1.12), we learn that Alpha has created his own chair (henceforth, the Omega chair), which functions similarly to Topher’s in the Dollhouse. Alpha kidnaps Echo (and the wedge with her original personality, Caroline), puts her in the chair, and uploads all of her previous imprints simultaneously. Both Alpha and Echo are now composites, but they are not the same. Whereas Alpha is multiple, Echo is many. That is, because Alpha positions each of his personalities as individual pieces he controls, Alpha’s composite construct is similar to the Attic’s. Each separate unit is manipulated so that it supports his authority as the lead personality, or mainframe. Alternatively, Echo immediately realizes after her “composite event” that she is entangled in many beings: “We’re not anybody because we’re everybody. [. . .] I’m experiencing like 38 of them right now, but I somehow understand that not one of them is me. I can slip into one. Actually, it slips into me” (“Omega” 1.12). Her assertion that her

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subjectivity exists but is as fluid as any other subjectivity within her body positions her not as a subject controlling other (perhaps lesser) subjects, but as an object among many (equal) objects.⁶

Dollhouse interrogates the emergence of object identity in order to situate viewers to critique our own positions as objects—to place ourselves enmeshed in and among other objects. The difference in narrative casting for Alpha’s and Echo’s composite events signals a division of posthuman subjectivity and object-oriented thingness. Adelle explicitly refers to Alpha’s “incident” as an “unfortunate technological anomaly,” framing his identity as an object reaction to a material malfunction, rather than as object relation to environmental encounters (“Omega” 1.12). That is, as a program error, Alpha is a mistake or “glitch” and, as such, should be corrected (i.e., eliminated). Alpha’s point of origin is not the rebirth of networked posthuman subjectivities, but the harbinger of humanist subjectivity’s demise in a technoenvironment. He is our Omega, a visage of anthropocentrism’s chokehold on hybridity. Conversely, Echo is a creation, made through Alpha’s purposeful act, and cast as an evolution—empowered and agencied from the moment of her origin. Echo is hybridity emancipated.

As part of his desire to possess the (perceived) authority inherent to anthropocentricity, Alpha engages in a series of aggressively violent acts. However, two specific moments resonate most profoundly in his post-composite identity construction: the destruction of Karl William Kraft and the creation of the Echo-composite. Karl William Kraft is Alpha’s Actual, his original personality. Immediately following Alpha’s composite event, the first person he destroys “the moment he had a choice” is, essentially, himself (“Omega” 1.12). As an aware being, post-composite Alpha must create new parameters for his subjectivity, boundaries that leave no room for a lesser, alienated version of himself. Alpha claims his agency by exerting power over the wedge storing his original personality. Yet by killing his original self, he makes integration impossible and becomes the quintessential postmodern representation of posthumanism: the fractured cyborg. Alpha realizes he is like no other being or object; he is not othered, he is unique. “Briar Rose” (1.11) takes place several months after Alpha has destroyed his original personality. In the episode, Alpha suggests that he is aware that he consists of multiple units (personalities) and that each unit has its own ontology both independent of and relational to his object *self*. Seemingly, Alpha understands his object-purpose, but it is not his object-desire. His conflicting awareness of his own posthuman object-autonomy in an anthropocentric posthuman paradigm, in part,

spurs his desire for returned subjectivity. K. Dale Koontz proposes that Alpha seeks a reflective Other that he believes will be his partner in chaos and domination and will signal Alpha's possession of his desire (212-13). However, Alpha must reach beyond the reflection, beyond the simulacra, in order to embody anthropocentric subjectivity. Simply, the intentional act of creating an Other substantively re-frames him as Subject, and creating this Other from that which he most desires (Echo) will preemptively suture his fracture and make him whole. To this end, when Alpha puts Echo in the Omega chair, he is attempting to solidify his epistemological subject-agency through premeditation and action, through creation. Echo's rejection of Alpha immediately following her composite event fortifies his unrealized subjectivity. Remaining in the confines of posthumanism, he is unable to fulfill his object-desire.

Prior to Echo's composite event, Alpha uploads Caroline, Echo's Actual, into Wendy, a store clerk they acquired on the journey from the Dollhouse to Alpha's lair, where the Omega chair is located. Echo, as the imprint Crystal, meets her Actual, her original *self*. She is confronted with her own severed subjectivity, whom Alpha declares has "abandoned" Echo in the choice to join the Dollhouse. During their initial confrontation, Caroline insists that Echo's brain is her brain, Echo's head is her head, Echo's body is *her* body ("Omega" 1.12). Yet, it isn't, and they both know it. Echo/Crystal is separate and chooses to sit in the Omega chair. This creates a positionality distinction between Alpha's and Echo's events: Echo enters her composite event with an awareness of her Actual. Locked in a mutual gaze with Caroline, Echo/Crystal is already an object; therefore, she constructs her post-composite identity and experiences her subjectivity/ies from an object-oriented positionality, beginning the process of emancipation. Following her composite event, she rises from the Omega chair and asserts her *self*, both physically and dialogically. After an initial fight with Alpha, Echo uses personal pronouns self-referentially and informs Alpha that continuing to call her Omega will end badly, instructing him that her name is Echo. However, in conversation with Caroline, she equates herself to a "porch light" ("Omega" 1.12). Her interaction with Caroline indicates that she sheds the internal, centralized, humanist subject as she reconciles her object-state of thingness. As she processes her transition into thingness, Echo accepts the uploaded personalities as object units within the constructed environment of her body. She shifts from subject-oriented references of ownership (i.e., "I" and "me") into object-oriented references of observation (i.e.,

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“her,” “it,” and “the Active”). Echo then brings these things together rhetorically, using “we” and “our” to acknowledge the entanglement of object units that she has become. In declaring that each personality “slips into me,” Echo confronts the reality that she is less of a Cartesian body (cf. Starr 5-6) than a “container,” a receptacle that both is and is not the object unit(s) (“Omega” 1.12).

Returning briefly to the concept of the gaze and its importance to object subjectivity, prominent object-orientation philosopher Levi Bryant postulates that objects relinquished from the human gaze only then can equally exist (20). *Dollhouse* complicates this tenet by creating many of its objects, particularly its human objects, both for and in the gaze. In the comic book series that bridges the time gap between “Epitaph One” and “Epitaph Two,” Alpha struggles to participate in meaningful ways that embrace his posthuman thingness. Throughout this brief story arc, Alpha attempts to reconcile his brutal nature with that of his more socially acceptable desire (i.e., to belong by trying to save a group of Actuals from the damage and the danger of the thoughtpocalypse). He physically alienates himself from his group of survivors when he engages his less savory needs—when he kills—and hides the evidence of his carnage, but he is guilt-riddled in the realization that he cannot hide from himself, from his own gaze (Chambliss, Whedon, and Tancharoen, *Epitaphs* #2-#4). Narratively, this indicates that Alpha only functions in the defining space of the gaze, specifically the desired gaze; unlike Echo, the Alpha object cannot be without it, cannot ontologically identify with or in it, and cannot reconcile these contraries. Indeed, Alpha’s composite creates objects that remain in his gaze (he controls the personalities within him), and he believes Echo’s composite event creates her in his gaze. However, the severed observation that Caroline’s abandonment permits for both the Caroline-subject and the Echo-object provides the oppositional bifurcation required for Echo to self-identify. Alpha’s fragmentation binds him to the desire of an Other’s gaze. He never truly embodies the thingness emergent in object-oriented hybridity; he merely mimics it in his search for a returned anthropocentrism and a returned embodied subjectivity. While Echo may exist in the gaze, she does not need it to realize her subjectivity in relation to an Other because Echo *is* the gaze.

Conclusion

Alpha may be the product of an error in the system, but he is aware that he has transitioned into something different, other: a human object. In “Omega,” Alpha explains to Echo, “We’re not just humans anymore. We’re not multiple personalities. We’re many personalities,” to which Echo replies, “We’re not gods” (1.12). Alpha knows this; however, he is not wrong in his estimation that he and Echo are “Objective. Something new.” They are not beyond the human; they are the object human. On some level, they both realize this. Alpha grapples with the dichotomy of his human-subject/object state, never fully slipping into the understanding that, for him and for Echo, there can be no human subject, only hybrid object.

He is not alone in this conflict. In “A Love Supreme” (2.8), after hearing that Echo has been rejecting the personality “wipes” for several months, Topher asks, “*What* does that make her? *What* is she?” (emphasis added). Topher cannot frame Echo as a subject (a “who”) because as a Doll, she is *his* object; he created Echo from Caroline and continued to re-create Echo into her various Active personas. His anthropocentric subjectivity prohibits acknowledging Echo as anything beyond a material object, a reflection of subjects’ desire. Therefore, Topher struggles to reconcile that Echo, as an object, consists of many things *he* created but that are now emancipated in their emergence. When she achieves a targeted personality recall without the chair, Topher declares himself “obsolete” (“A Love Supreme” 2.8). The creator’s subjectivity is fractured by object autonomy, and his postmodern anthropocentrism must give way to something new, something different.

Topher and Adelle’s postmodern subjectivity is rooted in their orientation to the gaze. That is, the Dolls, including Alpha and Echo, are created in not only Topher and Adelle’s gaze, but also that which these characters represent, the Dollhouse and Rossum Corporation. As such, the Dolls are always already objects in the postmodern sense; they are products of their creators and stripped of subjectivity. The Alpha-composite, however, is created in the maker’s gaze while the Echo-composite is born in the literal gaze of her original subject, Caroline. Because of this difference, Alpha, perhaps, is a more explicit representation of the epistemological object created in the moment of posthuman hybridity. Echo, however, is the object-aware, representative of the ontological object that eschews the limitations of the Cartesian subject. More simply, she is the object-oriented technodomestic hybrid while Alpha is the anthropocentric technodomestic hybrid. Alpha is the

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domestic space/subject for the many that he seeks to control and, as such, can be framed as *object qua subject*; alternatively, Echo is the domestic space/object for the many that create her, or *object qua object*.

Object-oriented philosophy is neither nihilist nor essentialist; rather, it provides a middle ground that “subscribes neither to Nature nor to Non-Nature” (Morton 164). Arguably, the space between Nature and Non-Nature *is* posthumanism. Reading *Dollhouse* as a nihilistic representation or as an essentialist (or even corelationist) representation of posthuman subjectivity restricts our understanding of the object agency, and more specifically, the object autonomy, present in both the *post-* environment and the *post-* existence. In rejecting anthropocentrism as a sole narrative ideological framework, we embrace the limitations afforded in the subject-object dichotomy and begin inching toward the post-gendered notion that “*human* being is just one way of being in a mesh of strange strangeness” (Morton 165). That is, object-oriented philosophy holds that the foundation of subjectivity is *object*, specifically object entanglement. Human subjectivity is one expression of object agency inside the entanglement. For subjects such as Adelle and Topher, this realization fundamentally disrupts the god-like anthropocentrism that they both function within and believe they control. For subject-constructs Echo and Alpha, the presence of multiple subjectivities necessitates reconciling their own strange strangeness or understanding that any illusion of subjectivity’s desire for unification recedes in the awareness of their closed system of object-selves.

Notes

1. See Ginn, Buckman, and Porter’s collection for varied perspectives of the posthuman influence on identity construction in *Dollhouse*.
2. For two interesting, though varied, perspectives on embodiment and posthuman integration, see Randell-Moon and Calvert.
3. For a detailed account of postmodern subjectivity, see Tatarodi or Best and Kellner.
4. See, for example, Hawk’s discussion of reintegration and posthuman subjectivization in the *Dollhouse* narrative (“Hacking the Read Only File”).
5. After creating the technology that will allow Rossum Corporation to remotely wipe and imprint Actuals (without the need for neural architecture to support the imprints), Topher Brink names the apocalyptic fallout of his creation the “thoughtpocalypse” (“The Hollow Men” 2.12).
6. Drawing on the Deleuzian concept of “political anthropology,” Michael

Starr contends that the identity (re)construction of post-composite Echo situates the “possibility of a new postmodern mode of existence, where individuals overcome repressive arboreal forms of identity and stratification, instead embracing a constant process of becoming and transformation” (15). Echo’s and Alpha’s post-composite narratives resist the arboreal “hierarchic and totalizing principals” and instead reflect Deleuze’s rhizomatic structure “in which ideas should be conceived as multiple, interconnected, and self-replicating” (5). In relation to my argument, Starr’s exploration of identity construction is useful as it permits greater potential for fluid subjectivity than traditional humanist frameworks, but the Deleuzian lens maintains an inescapable postmodern human subject and non-human object dichotomy that ultimately prioritizes the bodied-identity. That is, the rhizomatic construct maintains a base root that produces lateral shoots with smaller supporting root systems (i.e., a base idea that produces multiple, interconnected ideas). Within this structure, Echo becomes the “base root,” the identity and subjectivity that produces and replicates the “lateral shoots,” or additional personality objects. The Echo identity controls, while the offspring identities influence. However, in an object-oriented structure, post-composite Echo and Alpha grapple nebulous connections and construction patterns in which all identities are subjectivized objects; there lacks a “base root” among the differentiated subjectivities existing equally within the body-object as the “many” entangle themselves among themselves. While there is a “me” in Echo, she is not hierarchically privileged any more than the next subjectivity that will inevitably “slip in.”

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Values Series**

Sarah Gregg Minslow

A lot of books for children and adolescents reinforce dominant conservative ideologies and encourage young readers to become like Prufrock, too anxious to “disturb the universe.” Books intended for young audiences that offer alternative concepts of normativity are often challenged or banned. Yet there is another, less obvious means of censoring books that encourages children to question authority and challenge the status quo that has been used by multibillion dollar businesses that target children, such as Disney and Chick-fil-A.¹ Chick-fil-A’s Classic Stories and Essential Values series exemplifies children’s literature that is highly political and promotes conservative, Evangelical values. According to the National Association of Evangelicals, followers adhere to notions of redemption through Jesus, believe they must share the good news, and have “a high regard for and obedience to the Bible as the ultimate authority” (“What is an Evangelical?”). In popular discourse this term has come to signify conservative principles. Using Mary Weber’s *Alice in Wonderland* (2004) as an example from the series, this article explores the complicated political relationships between a capitalistic fast-food chain that targets parents with children in its “family values” mass advertising campaigns, including the children’s books selected and disseminated by the chain in its kids’ meals. While Chick-fil-A is not the only organization to use children’s books to promote the company’s personal values, the potential impact of their practices have not been adequately interrogated.

Cultural critic Henry Giroux argues that critics do not pay enough attention to “innocent” companies’ attempts to encourage children to adopt worldviews that align with their own so that the children turn into lifetime consumers of their products, and he argues that the

“commercialization of culture . . . limits the choices that children and adults can make extending their sense of agency beyond a commercial culture that enshrines an intensely myopic and conservative sense of self and society” (256). People involved in writing, producing, selecting, reading, and studying children’s books need to be vigilant when considering what ideologies are presented to children, especially when they are in seemingly “innocent” kids’ meals. Through critical analysis, we can see how Chick-fil-A’s *Alice in Wonderland* is laden with conservative, Evangelical values that encourage children to accept conservative political attitudes related to difference and social order and to adhere to the Bible as the sole authority on how people should live their lives and view the world—values that reflect the widely-disseminated worldviews of the Cathy family with a strong emphasis on patriarchal family structures, following the strict rules outlined in the Bible, and the value and comfort of hegemony and tradition. The adaptation’s overall purpose differs from that of Lewis Carroll’s original *Alice* books, which can be read as emancipatory and subversive. The alterations made by Mary Weber on behalf of Chick-fil-A transform the originally subversive and emancipatory children’s classic into a cautionary tale that encourages children to obey their elders and unquestioningly accept conservative value positions that are highly politicized and embedded in a particular religious faith with strict rules related to the authority of men over women and abstaining from drugs, alcohol, and sexual activity.

Throughout the culture wars of the 1990s and into the 2000s, books intended for young audiences became increasingly engaged with political discourse, a political discourse that was intertwined so closely with religious discourse, they became almost inseparable. Further, these books tend to monologize the space between the text and reader so that there are few gaps where the reader may actually engage in dialogue with the text to become a meaning-maker.² This limits a child’s agency to create meaning while reading but also of children to challenge existing social norms. According to Jacqueline Rose’s influential book *The Case of Peter Pan, Or the Impossibility of Children’s Fiction* (1984), children’s literature cannot exist without attempting to colonize the child. To “colonize” the child implies that adults create children’s literature with the purpose of shaping the child’s worldview to align with that of dominant society. In support of Rose’s view, John Stephens (1992) writes that authors who write for children do so “to intervene in the lives of children” (8). The use of the word “intervene” implies that adults want to be the gatekeepers

between an innocent childhood and a more corrupt adult world. One of the ways authors engage in this intervention is by omitting contentious content from books for young audiences. In her book *Evasive Childhood: Impossible Representations in Modern Fiction* (2005), Susan Honeyman argues that “Denying any young person access to certain types of knowledge . . . is an infringement, not a protection” (145). Also, Rose’s argument suggests that children are passive receptors of whatever values they are exposed to, which is far from reality. Rose argues that children’s fiction is an impossibility, and she reiterates her assumption that children’s authors write to impose their concept of the ideal child onto child readers to the point that she claims we *cannot*—not just that we *do not*—provide children with texts that are non-colonizing.

When read from a dialogical perspective, Carroll’s original *Alice* books are anti-colonizing, and Weber’s appropriation of them has made them much more colonizing by changing some fundamental elements of the originals. Carroll’s texts are subversive because they attack the basic foundation of any underlying framework of social hierarchy—language. Carroll’s *Alice* books reveal that we establish and maintain structural oppositions and the social power associated with certain labels with language. These nonsense texts reveal that, if language has its own weaknesses, so too then does our concept of any essentialized “other,” as do labels used by society to categorize people or objects. Because Carroll’s texts demonstrate his careful selection of language, the altering of the language in Chick-fil-A’s version subverts the subversive elements of the original. Heather Coffey argues that “teachers using critical pedagogy demonstrate how to evaluate the function language plays in the social construction of the self.” Carroll’s original texts aim to make child readers more aware of this important role of language and offer them alternative reactions to the prescribed scripts available to most upper class children in Victorian England, therefore giving children more agency in the construction of self by allowing them spaces to consider multiple alternatives to the “norm”. By comparison, Weber’s adaptation reverts to a much more colonizing attitude toward child readers by encouraging them to accept as right the politically conservative and Biblical values that have come to be associated with Chick-fil-A.

It would be remiss not to acknowledge some of the important work Chick-fil-A does in terms of character education through various educational programs; however, the appropriation of “classic” children’s stories to promote conservative political values should

be interrogated. Beginning in 2004, Chick-fil-A included books that belonged to what they called the Classic Stories and Essential Values series in their kids' meals. The series included titles such as *Gulliver's Travels: A Story about the Value of Peace*, *Little Women: A Story about the Value of Generosity*, *The Prince and the Pauper: A Story about the Value of Fairness*, *The Secret Garden: A Story about the Value of Joy*, *The Wind in the Willows: A Story about the Value of Friendship*, and *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz: Friends Discover the Value of Cooperation*. These books remain widely available through libraries and online outlets including Amazon, eBay, and LibraryThing. It is clear from this list of book titles which values Chick-fil-A's directors see as "essential" in our society and those which children between the ages of four and eight should aspire to demonstrate. However, in the adapted versions, Chick-fil-A writers have reduced the complex original novels into twenty-four pages of illustrated texts and altered the language "presumably to be both simpler and more suitable to what passes for values in contemporary American society" (Imholtz and Imholtz). As part of the series, in 2006 Chick-fil-A released and distributed *Alice in Wonderland: A Story about the Value of Orderliness*. Yet the Chick-fil-A texts, through the abridgments and alterations, occlude complex issues related to language and its power to organize society and create hierarchies of social power, therefore denying a space for children to examine more complex issues related to power, justice, and equality and restricting the child's space to have a voice in a broader public discourse about values.

As August and Clare Imholtz explain, Weber made adjustments that "seem to signal a deliberate tampering with the text to soften the shocking impact of what Alice sees and hears in Wonderland," but an important function of Carroll's texts is to shock young readers. Reading a story in a different world that does not operate according to the same "rules" as one is accustomed to requires more active critical engagement on the part of the reader. This positions readers to be more reflective and, in turn, creates spaces for readers to question their own worlds and social rules. As stated, some of the more noticeable changes Weber made to Carroll's books have to do with sections where Alice asks questions and plays with language. The majority of her conversation with herself during her fall down the rabbit hole is deleted. She does not question where she might end up and therefore does not demonstrate any understanding of the world beyond her own, whereas Carroll's Alice wonders if she may end up in Australia and practices using words such as *latitude*, *longitude*, and *antipodes*,

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though admitting she does not know if she is using them correctly. Alice practices her own authority over language, the tool used to organize our social world. This initial conversation emphasizes the theme of language and how it works that continues throughout both *Alice* books.

Another example where language play is deleted is during the Mad Tea Party. In Carroll’s version, when the Hatter poses a riddle, Alice replies, “I believe I can guess that,” and the March Hare asks, “Do you mean that you think you can find out the answer to it?” (Carroll 70). When Alice says yes, the March Hare tells her to say what she means. Then Alice replies, “I do . . . at least I mean what I say—that’s the same thing, you know.” At this, her three companions remind her and readers that it is “not the same thing a bit.” For instance, the Hatter says, “You might just as well say that ‘I like what I get’ is the same thing as ‘I get what I like!’” (71). In Carroll’s version, this reinforces the need for precise language to clearly communicate, but, more importantly, the attack on Alice’s incorrect use of language draws attention to the power associated with language. In Weber’s version, Alice simply shrugs and says, “No, I give up. What’s the answer?” (12). This gives Alice no space to have authority and reinforces the Hatter’s power over her. Alice does not learn anything. This focus on language and its associated power is removed from Weber’s book by deleting scenes such as this one.

Another scene omitted from Weber’s version is the Caucus Race, which includes puns including *tail* and *tale* and *knot* and *not*. Others puns, such as when the Mock Turtle and Gryphon tell Alice their “lessons” “lessen” daily (99), and when they call their teacher a Tortoise “because he taught us” (96) have been omitted. Further, Alice does not meet Humpty Dumpty in Weber’s version. In Carroll’s version, Humpty Dumpty teaches Alice that the main question related to language (and therefore social order) is “Who is to be master?” and that “When [he] use[s] a word . . . it means just what [he wants] it to mean—neither more nor less” (213). Humpty Dumpty helps Alice critically think about words to decipher “Jabberwocky”. These exclusions do not allow space for young readers to play with language, consider how language relates to social power, or rebel against its conventional uses or forms, which is one way Weber’s text emphasizes the “value of orderliness” rather than offers space to challenge traditional order, as Carroll’s books do. One principle of Evangelical beliefs is that the Bible is the indisputable word of God, so offering varying definitions or interpretations of words contradicts the

simplicity with which a lot of people interpret the Bible. Simplifying the language and omitting word play are two ways that Weber's text limits young readers' critical literacy skill development and agency. As children become more aware of ways adults use language to construct and shape the world as a means to control it, they gain more authority, which can become threatening to adults with strict worldviews and narrow conceptions of how children should act and think.

In Weber's *Alice in Wonderland* retold for Chick-fil-A restaurants, Carroll's *Alice* texts have been condensed, bowdlerized, appropriated, and censored for a contemporary child audience that is constructed through an Evangelical lens of one needing adult instruction on how to become "good" by internalizing the conservative values inherent in the text. The political conservatism and use of "polite" language is clear through other noticeable changes. Some obvious exclusions in Weber's version are the "DRINK ME" episode where the whole phrase "EAT ME" has been excluded. Instead, there is "a note [that] invited her to *kindly*, eat" (italics in the original, 4). Then there is a cake "on which the words 'Help Yourself!' were clearly marked" (5). Eventually, Weber does away with the changes in size related to food altogether and allows Alice to change size by fanning herself. Although it seems a food chain that advertises with cows begging consumers to "Eat More Chikin" would want readers to identify with Alice's hunger and consumption, the phrase "eat me" has sexual connotations in popular culture. Given this connotation, this exclusion implies that children's books, and perhaps by extension children themselves, are, or at least should be, asexual and hints toward the threat childhood sexuality poses to adults.

The control of the body is closely tied to Christian faith and current political debates. When children begin to decide what to do with their own bodies, adults lose a sense of control over them. The agency young people gain over their bodies then requires them to make important decisions about their bodies without the consent of their parents or guardians. This lack of control tends to trouble, and at times outrage, political conservatives who often use Christian doctrine to justify their stance on important issues such as abstinence-only sex education, abortion, or Planned Parenthood, and whether the Affordable Care Act should cover birth control. The themes of loss of childhood, authority, and death that permeate Carroll's books link to Alice developing the ability to control her body, which is a major factor in her survival in the fantasy world. Yet by the end of Weber's version, Alice still has not managed to control her body herself, and

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the last illustration is of her lying with her head in her much older sister’s lap and receiving instructions from her sister to “run in to your tea” (24). The illustration and instruction infantilizes Alice rather than celebrating her agency and power to control her own body.

The attempt to colonize the child reader is most obvious in the way the Chick-fil-A version promotes particular values and a specific worldview and silences voices that question authority and social rules by including directive questions at the end of the book. The questions are

1. Orderly people use logic to solve their problems. They think before they act or speak. In what ways does Alice try to bring order into Wonderland?
2. Sometimes we don’t like rules, but they are needed to keep order. Without rules, you couldn’t play croquet or other games. Where in the story does Alice expect there to be rules? How do rules help us?
3. Have you ever heard the phrase, “Order in the court”? In what ways is the Wonderland court NOT orderly?

These questions reveal the values and “lessons” the Chick-fil-A *Alice in Wonderland* is trying to teach. The first question implies that it is desirable to be “orderly” and “logical” and that everyone should “think before they act and speak,” although this is often not the case in Carroll’s version. Carroll’s texts work to reveal the false links in society that provide the framework for hierarchal relationships among people and things. Their texts show that social systems (educational, legal, religious, etc.) and language can be completely irrational and illogical or that language can be used to overpower others, such as when Alice tells the Queen she will not leave the court for being a mile high or when she threatens to pick the live flowers if they do not stop criticizing her. As Mikhail Bakhtin argues, the dominant discourse helps to maintain the social hierarchies that are often accepted as “natural” power relationships:

False connections that distort the authentic nature of things, false associations established and reinforced by tradition and sanctioned by religious and official ideology [are found]. Objects and ideas are united by

false hierarchical relationships These false links are reinforced by scholastic thought, by a false theological and legalistic casuistry and ultimately by language itself. (169)

These false connections and their reinforcements are the main thematic concerns of nonsense texts and arguably of the Chick-fil-A series. Given that Chick-fil-A earned over \$6 billion in profits in 2014 while remaining closed on Sundays shows that American capitalist society places the chain near the top of the established hierarchy. Thus, there is no valid reason for them to encourage child readers to challenge existing ideologies that support capitalist consumer culture. Carroll's *Alice* books highlight that what people believe to be the "right" way of thinking or being is merely the result of what has been reinforced to them through various social institutions and language systems, but this question assumes there is one specific way to be "orderly". By flouting the limits of what is considered sensible or normal, Carroll's texts work to reveal a different way of conceptualizing the world, the self, and the other, which poses a threat to any inflexible belief system and its associated values.

The first question posed in the Chick-fil-A version also suggests to child readers that they can, or even should, bring order into disordered spaces, such as the playground. This does not allow space for the child to question whether it is right for Alice to inflict her ideas and values about order onto the inhabitants of Wonderland. The first statement does not allow the child to consider whether logic should be used to solve every problem. It propagates a social desire to be orderly and logical because success in a capitalist, democratic American society necessitates those qualities. Carroll's texts are "Endemically Subversive" because they mock and subvert the power of the social order (Stephens 121). They also question the reasons behind conventional behaviors. The *Alice* books show that rules are in place to provide order by highlighting instances when there are no rules and chaos results; however, the texts also subvert the social authorities that demand order by revealing that rules can be broken and that resistance is an option, such as when the hedgehogs and flamingos refuse to cooperate during the croquet match. Like Alice, young readers try to make sense of the strange worlds she visits as the episodic plot unfolds. When Alice cannot figure out the rules, she becomes frustrated, but rather than reinforcing the need for rules, Carroll's texts work to highlight the arbitrary nature of rules by showing that they

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can be different and revealing to young readers that someone makes the rules and that resistance to those rules is an option. Instead, they encourage the child to question the “real world” and how “that world has been constituted, [and] where, [and] who, it comes from,” which is what Rose says children’s books do not do (62). Rose supports her argument with examples of children’s fiction that promote civil order, gloss over sexuality, propagate childhood innocence, and gloss over the problems inherent in our use of language (all of which happen to be qualities of Chick-fil-A’s *Alice in Wonderland*).

Exploration of possible resistance to dominant forces that disempower and indoctrinate others encourages reflection on how people are indoctrinated to accept sets of rules as natural and how people have the power to resist or break the rules. Roderick McGillis argues that *Alice Through the Looking-Glass* is “politically useful” because “[r]ather than promote unconscious acceptance of social norms . . . [t]he reader of this book confronts questions that demand thoughtful reviewing of conventional social institutions and behaviour” (115). During Alice’s adventures, most of what she has been taught is “right” is scrutinized or disregarded by the creatures she encounters, so Alice is forced to re-evaluate her self, her concepts of normalcy, and her assumption that there is only one “right” way for the world to be ordered. The tension between order and disorder and the themes of subverting or resisting authority resonate throughout both *Alice* books and are presented in the continual negotiations of power present in the texts. Many creatures, in fact, resist Alice’s attempts to impose rules of above-ground order onto them. In the instances where Alice does try to impose Victorian order, she represents above-ground society and shows her faith in the necessity of above-ground order. Yet the creatures’ resistance to her shows Alice, and the reader, that resistance to Victorian order is an option.

In Weber’s version, the idea of there being a different world order is omitted in several ways. For instance, one of the Cheshire Cat’s infamous lines is when he tells Alice that if it does not matter where she gets to, it does not matter which path she takes. In Weber’s version when Alice says she does not mind where she goes as long as she gets somewhere, the Cheshire Cat says, “Oh you’re sure to do that . . . if you only walk long enough,” and then the book states, “Alice felt that this could not be denied” (11). That it does not matter which way one goes has been omitted from Weber’s version, possibly because it negates the Biblical belief that Heaven is the end goal and the only way to get there is through faith in Jesus. From a political view,

Chick-fil-A's profits topped \$6 billion in 2014, so the current "path" our country is on is serving their business interests well. Therefore, there is no need to encourage children to consider that there may be alternative pathways to get where one wants to go. Chick-fil-A's school partnership programs, kids' camps, and this book aim to teach the "right" path, or the "straight and narrow."

The second question silences the voices in the original texts that subvert rules and authority by stating that rules "are needed" and helpful. Rather than asking "Do rules help us?" the question is "How do rules help us?" which leaves the child reader no room to question if there are rules that hurt us or repress us. Carroll's texts provide this space. Alice reflects on how rules and laws created by social authorities are used to control society and create order when she is in the Queen's croquet-ground. Arguably, Alice has the mentality of an imperialist in this scene because she acts as she would in England, disregarding the cultural differences and practices in Wonderland. Once croquet has commenced, Alice feels frustrated by the lack of order, and she complains that "The players all played at once without waiting for turns, quarreling all the while, and fighting for the hedgehogs . . . they don't seem to have any rules in particular" (Carroll 85). However, Daniel Bivona states that Alice's frustrations are based on "her assumption that this Wonderland 'game' of 'croquet' is identifiable with the English version" (149). The "rules" of croquet are different in Wonderland, and the game seems only to be directed by the Queen's fickle mood. The creatures try to follow the rules to avoid losing their heads, but Wonderland croquet is confusing to Alice. However, it is not confusing for the inhabitants of Wonderland because the chaos is what they expect when they play croquet with the Queen. The disorder results from the continually changing rules, which paradoxically is what children at play often do. The one main rule is do what the Queen wants. This is an oppressive rule based on an arbitrary power structured and maintained by fear of losing one's head. Yet the fear is unnecessary since the Gryphon has already informed Alice and the reader that "they never executes nobody" (95). By running away and bending their heads up at the last minute, the hedgehogs and flamingos subvert the Queen's authority over the game, so the rules do not matter anyway.

Alice's frustration with the disorder of Wonderland is also revealed in the trial scene. When the Queen says "Sentence first—verdict afterwards," Alice replies, "Stuff and nonsense! . . . The idea of having the sentence first!" (Carroll 124). Alice's frustration

with the irrationality of the legal process in Wonderland contributes to the dialogue surrounding Victorian legal systems above-ground, suggesting that Carroll’s version was politicized. According to Sean Purchase, “Victorian society inherited an array of common, civil, and ecclesiastical courts of law . . . and the confusion [this] gave rise to, lay in the fact that Britain never had a written constitution on which to base its laws and judicial processes” (89). In relation to the dialogue within the text, this scene reinforces the need for rules while also subverting the ordering power of rules by suggesting some rules are nonsensical or need to change to fit more contemporary realities. Carroll’s version critiqued existing systems rather than reinforcing them, which opens space for young readers to consider how these institutions could be improved. Alice shows that she does not accept the Queen’s ordering of events because Alice thinks it is unfair. Alice’s refusal to ratify the Queen’s power to order the trial highlights the ease with which the Queen’s authority can be challenged and resisted.

The adaptation, unlike Carroll’s originals, does not draw attention to the power structures associated with rule systems. There is no room to ask Who makes the rules? Why do they get to make the rules? What do we sacrifice by following those rules? Are the rules applicable equally to everyone everywhere? The question implies that one must follow rules or he or she will not be able to have fun, which, in turn, encourages children to be obedient. This question also suggests that the same rules apply in all situations, which is similar to the moral absolutism of fervent Evangelicals. Alice has been taught that she should strive to belong and that, in order to belong, she must obey the rules of her given social situation. Before entering Wonderland, being able to recite her lessons and follow social rules helped her develop her sense of self, and pleasing those around her by following rules resulted in a feeling of belonging. In the dream worlds, though, belonging is not the *main* concern; survival is. In order to survive in the dream worlds, Alice must first recognize the differences between her concepts of normalcy and the “other’s” concepts of normalcy. She must be willing to “play along” to an extent, such as when she plays “croquet” with the Queen, but she learns to decide for herself when it is possible not to play along and to overpower others. The discrepancy between the concepts of normalcy in different societies raises questions about the social assumptions upon which those concepts are based and functions to put the questioning gaze back onto dominant society, but in Weber’s version, Alice just complains about the rules and happily returns to the above-ground world and

returns to following her sister's orders.

The third question also works to help children identify what behaviors are considered disorderly without considering why it may sometimes be necessary to act out and be disruptive. This question functions as a means for the adult to ensure the child reader is able to identify society's concept of disorder and implies that society condemns all forms of disorder. The focus on order represents a colonizing attitude towards children; as Riita Oittinen argues, "it is an adult wish for our children to internalize order and discipline (self-discipline), so that they will become easier to control and deal with" (52). Rather than allowing the child a space to reflect on death, sex, drugs, and drinking, the adapted version silences this discourse so that they become "forbidden" in this children's text. Other changes that demonstrate an "essentialized" idea of the child include the substitution of cheese for the mushroom Alice eats to change size. Mushrooms have become popularly linked to drug culture and experimentation, so this replacement suggests the need to distance young readers from anything drug related and to substitute what may be misinterpreted as a drug reference by adult readers with a food available at all Chick-fil-A restaurants. Similarly, Weber's book discourages drinking alcohol, a practice from which many conservative Christians refrain. The March Hare offers Alice some lemonade rather than some wine. Yet the most obvious alteration is that the Queen of Hearts in the Chick-fil-A version does not tramp around screaming "Off with his head!" but "Put him behind bars!" These changes engage in political discourse since the Queen of Hearts's declaration could be read as a denouncement of capital punishment because it is "unChristianlike" or because it seems too violent for young audiences. This again denies young readers a space in the public discourse regarding capital punishment.

In all, there is noticeably less violence in Chick-fil-A's version of *Alice in Wonderland* than in Carroll's originals. Even the Dormouse escapes without being crammed into a tea pot. Alice's fear of being eaten by creatures like the puppy, being knocked out by flying pans in the Duchess's kitchen, being beheaded by the Queen of Hearts, and going out like a light and therefore ceasing to exist are also excluded. While seemingly designed for society's concept of the innocent, family-oriented, asexual, apolitical, non-violent child, the book *is* political because it encourages social and cultural hegemony that requires a contemporary American child to be protected from and ignorant of the harsh realities of "adult" society such as alcohol and drug abuse, sex, violence, personal responsibility, and capital punishment. This

text closes any gap the child may have to comment on these issues by excluding them and presenting conservative values as unquestionably “right,” in part, because no alternatives are offered. Rather than perpetuating adult conventions and Victorian imperial ideologies, Carroll’s *Alice* books actually mock “sacred” institutions—such as science, education, “high” art, and class systems—that function to indoctrinate children by training and conditioning them to accept certain attitudes, beliefs, and values as natural.

One of the most problematic alterations to Carroll’s book occurs during the final two scenes of Weber’s version and reinforces an imbalance of power between men and women. Rather than having a large, bossy Red Queen ordering everyone around and conducting the trial, in Weber’s version, the King has complete control and authority in the courtroom. This anti-feminist alteration portrays patriarchy as the preferred social structure of power and authority, whereas in Carroll’s version, the Red Queen is physically larger than the King, and the King rarely speaks. In Weber’s version, the King and Queen are the same size, and the Queen says only four lines, the first two of which are in direct support of something the King just said. Interestingly, they also have ten “royal children,” alterations that suggest a woman’s role within the family is to produce children and support her husband while simultaneously completely disregarding the Red Queen as having any kind of authority disassociated from her husband. Smaller differences that reinforce traditional gender roles and a power structure that positions the man as superior is that the King is mentioned first every time the book reads, “the King and Queen,” and Alice’s dress is now pink in the illustrations instead of blue, which has come to be associated with boys. Also, when the White Rabbit, who is distinctly male, tries to find his white gloves, Alice “very good-naturedly began hunting about for them” (Carroll 7). While only a slight change in wording, this version may reinforce to young readers that girls should be helpful and “good natured,” especially when a boy is in need. These alterations resist feminist arguments for gender equality and its associated social power.

Carroll’s *Alice* books oppose the dichotomies of “us” and “them,” which yield conceptual positions of inferiority and superiority and are created and sustained by texts that propagate the colonial discourse that depends on binary oppositions to sustain fragile social power structures. Carroll’s *Alice* books also offer an exploration and critique of the systems that are in place to control the subjugated other, including children. The controlling social mechanisms the texts critique are

those associated with judgment and belonging, systems of rules, and language systems—those that are reinforced by Weber’s text. Carroll’s *Alice*’s adventures are part of her coming of age, wherein she comes to realize the world is not a just nor safe place. In realizing this, she is faced with situations that require her to determine on some level who she is. The themes of identity and self-determination emerge early in the first book when Alice encounters the blue caterpillar. The whole encounter is excluded from Chick-fil-A’s version. While it could be easily overlooked by claiming it was omitted because the Caterpillar is smoking and now we understand the associated health problems and do not wish to encourage kids to smoke, the real omission is space where young people can ask themselves, “Who am I?” When Alice falls into a world where rules are different, the authority is hers to determine who she is, and she cannot answer the question because she has never been allowed to define herself before. Chick-fil-A’s version excludes a space where young readers can consider who they are on their own terms and determine their own rules, which is another colonizing aspect of the text that differs immensely from Carroll’s originals.

Indoctrinating and colonizing the child by books such as Weber’s version encourage conformity and hegemony, so the need to self-determine counters the ideological values represented in the text. In Carroll’s version, although some adaptability is encouraged, hegemony is criticized. When Alice meets Humpty Dumpty, he admits that Alice is not memorable because she looks like other people. Alice identifies herself as normal and “nice” looking, and one can assume her conventional appearance has led to social acceptance above-ground. Yet Humpty Dumpty is not impressed by her “commonness” and sees himself as being different from, more memorable than, and therefore superior to Alice, shown in his discontented tone and his offering of only his finger for her to shake. Humpty Dumpty privileges unique characteristics, contradicting the sentimental essentialist perspective that the human race transcends “otherness” because essentially “we” are all the same—“two eyes, nose in the middle and mouth under” (219). Humpty Dumpty implies that we should not strive to be the same but to be different because our differences are what make us worth knowing and including. This is opposite to what Alice has been taught to strive for; she has been taught that conformity leads to acceptance, but this conversation challenges that notion and allows a space to consider that acceptance could be based on otherness and that otherness should not equal inferiority. To Humpty Dumpty, the worst insult is that “You’re so exactly like other people” (219). This

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episode shows Humpty Dumpty’s celebration of otherness, especially when he eagerly says, “Wait till you’ve tried it” (219). The *Alice* books show that following social rules and conforming to society’s expectations does not result in a strong sense of self. Carroll’s texts suggest, through Alice’s encounters with so many differentiated others and continual changes in her concept of self, that identity is based on differentiation and acceptance. Alice wants to belong, but she needs to realize that differences can lead to belonging in a world that is ordered differently, as suggested by Humpty Dumpty. Encouraging individuality discourages child readers to unquestioningly assume the “right”ness of any one worldview. This contradicts the public condemnation by Chick-fil-A’s owners of some people who do not share their religious or political views.

The inclusions, exclusions, and alterations Weber made demonstrate a selective, monologic approach to Carroll’s *Alice* books, whereby they have been appropriated to promote the same values the original texts allow space for the reader to question—those of orderliness, politeness, rules, and boundaries. In an increasingly globalized society, should children be offered books that purposefully explore alternatives to the established “norms,” or should they be reading books that reinforce traditional American values that privilege patriarchy, heterosexuality, Christianity, capitalism, and hegemony? Due to the shifting ideas about America’s place in the world in light of recent major events and the seemingly ever-increasing value gap between conservatives and liberals in America’s popular discourse, it is important for us to examine how children’s books get caught in the political crossfire and how they contribute to ideological formation, social norms, and children’s attitudes towards otherness. Adding religious discourse further compounds the complexity of children’s books that engage in constructing “norms” and propagating ideologies as “American”. Books intended for child audiences are best when they explore alternatives to “norms” and encourage positive and accepting attitudes towards difference. In pedagogical circles, this is referred to as critical literacy, which is defined as “the ability to read texts in an active, reflective manner in order to better understand power, inequality, and injustice in human relationships” (Coffey). To achieve critical literacy, children should have opportunities to consider multiple viewpoints, learn to respect differences, and become more self-aware, and, unfortunately, Chick-fil-A’s *Alice in Wonderland* does not provide such opportunities.

In our increasingly diverse society, it is important to provide young

people with literature that encourages them to be more inclusive and accepting towards differences and otherness and to treat those who have different qualities, backgrounds, values, or beliefs with dignity and respect. This includes texts that encourage children who may not fit the status quo to develop a strong sense of self and have high self-esteem even if they are different from the majority of kids around them. The books distributed by Chick-fil-A explore what the company feels are “essential values,” but the stories do not attempt to provide spaces for children to determine for themselves what their values are. In turn, they have the potential to negatively influence children’s constructions of their own identities and their attitudes towards those who do not embody or share the values presented as “right” in the books.

Notes

1. For a thorough analysis of practices, see Henry Giroux’s article “Public Pedagogy and Rodent Politics: Cultural Studies and the Challenge of Disney” (*Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies*, 1998), Joel Bakan’s *Childhood Under Siege: How Big Business Targets Your Children* (2012), and Peggy Orenstein’s *Cinderella Ate My Daughter: Dispatches from the Front Lines of the New Girlie-Girl Culture* (2011).
2. Some, such as Lynne Cheney’s *America: A Patriotic Primer* (2002), which according to ChristianBook’s website “reinforces the godly values, ideals, people, and events that make our country great,” function through what Robert Sutherland calls “the politics of advocacy,” which are “openly didactic and us[e] indoctrination in transmitting a particular moral or belief system” (Keyes & McGillicuddy 10). Jon Scieszka’s *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* (1996) can be read as an argument in favor of ethical relativism, and *Sweet Land of Liberty* (2012) by Callista Gingrich, a book described by Gingrich productions as designed “to introduce and explain the greatness of America” also functions through “the politics of advocacy” (“Sweet Land”).

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**Brandy, You're a Fine Name:
Popular Music and the Naming of Infant Girls
from 1965-1985**

Michelle Napierski-Prancl

In 1965, the name Michelle entered the top twenty most popular names on American girls' birth certificates for the first time ever: it was the same year the Beatles released the album *Rubber Soul* (1965) featuring the song "Michelle" (1965). In 1966, the song "Michelle" won the Grammy Award for Song of the Year, and in 1968, the name Michelle was the second most popular name for a girl born in the United States ("Past Winners"; Social Security Administration, "Research"). The name remained within the top ten most popular female names until and including 1980 (Social Security Administration, "Popular Names"). As someone who shares this name, I know what it is like to grow up listening to every elementary school teacher, every softball coach, and even the DJ at my wedding sing the chorus of "Michelle" to me. I am forever linked to the Beatles and their iconic song.

Because so much of our identity is connected to the way in which we present ourselves and the way others perceive us, especially on first impression, it is imperative to recognize the influence that song writers and rock musicians can have on a person's sense of self and ability to manage the way people perceive her or him. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* sociologist Erving Goffman suggests that others will form an impression of us, hopefully the one we desire, based on how we present ourselves to them. One of the first actions we take when we meet someone new is to tell them our name. However, it is possible that others may form impressions of us before they meet us. Consider Hensley and Spencer's study on the relationship between names and perceived attractiveness, which quotes a respondent who says, "I can't imagine anyone giving a 10 to a Hazel!" (728). This negative impression is based on preconceived notions about a name and not an actual encounter with a Hazel. Perhaps Tommy Roe's song "Hooray for Hazel" (1966) about an ex-girlfriend, the television series *Hazel* (Key 1961-1966) about a family's maid, or even the *Bugs*

Bunny character Witch Hazel (Jones “Bewitched Bunny”) influences this negative impression. The point is that this respondent formed a negative impression before an actual person with the name had an opportunity to present herself in a favorable public light.

The Baby Name Survey Book: What People Think about Your Baby's Name is marketed to expectant parents to help them choose a name for their baby. The implication is that what other people think about the name parents choose is significant. This book tells us that most people think Michelle is a pretty person, but they also think of Michelle as a snob (Lansky and Sinrod 104). This description stands in stark contrast to the Biblical meaning associated with the name, which says Michelle is “like the Lord” (Lansky 65). Similarly, the name Angie has an angelic meaning as it is derived from the more formal name of Angela (Lansky 33). Yet, when surveyed, people describe Angie as sexy and sultry, a description more compatible with the 1973 Rolling Stones song of the same name (Lansky and Sinrod 31). These examples suggest the possibility that popular music influences the impression others form of those with names in song titles. Thus, it is also possible that a song title can inspire a parent to select a specific name. This article presents an exploratory examination into the intersection of popular music and popular names.

Studying Popular Music and Popular Names

Scholars have long been interested in the study of names. In 1927, Miller argued that by studying naming practices, we can learn much about the progression and social processes of a culture, and he introduces us to different naming rituals around the world. In some cultures, young children choose their own names, whereas in other cultures babies are named after a relative or ancestor or even an important animal or bird species (Miller 589-595). Still, in other cultures, naming is delayed and reserved for infants who have lived long enough to demonstrate that they will survive (Lepowsky 79). In terms of popular culture, the scholarship examining its influence on baby names is limited. Claude Smith argues that parents have long been inspired by celebrities’ names from Barbara Stanwyck to Beyonce (127-128), and columnist Lucy Ward suggests that the growing popularity of the names Shayne and Preston, in England and Wales, reflects parents’ positive regard for contestants on the *X-Factor* and *Celebrity Big Brother* television shows (Ward “Top Baby Names”). The focus of much of the research on naming practices in the United States centers on the influence of race, ethnicity, and

religion on the names parents choose for their children (e.g., London and Morgan; Sue and Telles; Perl and Wiggins). Thus, this article fills a gap in the literature by highlighting the intersection of popular music and popular names given to infant girls from 1965 to 1985.

The evidence suggests that during the 1965-1985 time period a variety of associations between popular music and popular baby names can be seen, such as the one between the 1972 song and the name Layla. According to the Social Security Administration, the name Layla first appears in the top 1,000 most popular names given to newborn girls in 1972, the same year that Eric Clapton's song appears on the Billboard Hot 100 list (Social Security Administration, "Research"; *Billboard*). As with the Michelle example, this may be more than just a coincidence and suggests the need to explore the possible associations between other popular songs and popular names.

To examine the relationship between popular music and popular names, this study compares the Billboard Hot 100 list of popular songs with the Social Security Administration's ranking of popular names for girls. The Billboard Hot 100 List and *Billboard* magazine are recognized by the music industry as the standard for measuring the popularity of songs. Their rankings are based on a combination of airplay and sales (*Billboard*). The Social Security Administration rankings are calculated based on Social Security card applications for newborns (Social Security Administration, "Research"). The analysis is limited to girl names because of the greater number of song titles with female names appearing on the Billboard Hot 100 List than song titles with male names.

Scholars have utilized a variety of sources for studying names, including the Census (London and Morgan 266), a registry of residents (Wolffsohn and Brechenmacher 118), and even The General Social Survey (Perl and Wiggins 213). However, this study uses the Social Security Administration list of the 1,000 most popular baby names because of the extensiveness of the database. It includes every name submitted on Social Security applications for births since 1880. The database has few limitations, but they should be addressed. First, those babies whose parents do not submit the applications at the time of birth are not included in the sample. Similarly, if the gender is not reported at the time of the application, a name is not included in the dataset. The biggest potential for error comes from the spelling of names. Names are listed by spelling, and thus a name may actually be more popular than it appears if the name has more than one spelling, such as Ashley, Ashlee, Ashleigh, Ashli, Ashlie, and Ashly. Each spelling is

a unique name and has its own ranking. Thus, the reported popularity of Michelle at the beginning of this article is based solely on the spelling of the name with two “L”s and does not include the spelling of the name with one “L.” Additionally, rankings are calculated for first names only; consequently, names which are compounded or include a first and middle name are not captured on the Social Security Administration ranking. Any analysis of songs such as “Maggie May” (1971) and “Billie Jean” (1983) needs to look at each name separately. Finally, only the official name on the Social Security card application is ranked; a child named Amanda is counted as Amanda even though she may be best known as Mandy (Social Security Administration, “Research”). As a consequence, it is impossible to accurately measure how much Barry Manilow’s song “Mandy” (1974) influences naming.

The timeframe for this sample is 1965-1985. The 1960s appear to mark a turning point for secular influences on names in the United States. Since the Social Security Administration first reported name data in 1880, the 1960s represent the first decade in which the name Mary is no longer the number one most popular name given to an infant girl. The name Mary holds on to the number one rank from 1880 to 1961, but then declines abruptly (Social Security Administration, “Popular Names”). The 1960s also marks an important cultural turning point as this period is characterized by enormous social change and social turmoil associated with the Civil Rights movement, Vietnam War, second wave of feminism, hippie counterculture, and other challenges to longstanding social institutions, all of which also find their way into the popular music of the time. The period of analysis ends in the 1980s, which is a much more socially and politically conservative era characterized by the presidency of Ronald Reagan. The birth of MTV in 1981 (“This Day”) also marks an important cultural shift in the way Americans consume music. During this twenty-year period, the music industry produced a plethora of popular songs with female names in the titles. From 1965-1985 no less than eighty-five song titles with female names hit the Billboard Hot 100 list, from “Help Me Rhonda” (1964)¹ to “Oh, Sheila” (1985) (*Billboard*). With so many catchy songs, it would seem likely that parents of newborns would be influenced by the songs they hear on the radio.

The Billboard Hot 100 List from 1965 to 1985 provides a twenty-year sampling pool of musical hits to compare to the names given to infant girls. All song titles with feminine names are included in the sampling frame, even in cases when the name is referring to something other than a human being, such as “Elvira” (1981) and

“Penny Lane” (1967). However, in cases where women are alluded to in song titles but there is not a proper name, songs such as “My Girl” (1965), “Island Girl” (1975), and “Devil Woman” (1976), or when songs use surnames, such as “Mrs. Brown You’ve Got a Lovely Daughter” (1965) or “Lady Marmalade” (1975), the songs are excluded from the sampling frame. For each year the number of possible song titles containing female names varies from two to eight (*Billboard*). Songs were selected utilizing random sampling. This method prevents selection bias and allows each song in a given year the same probability of being included in the sample. The sample of names, which appear in song titles of Billboard Hot 100 hits, includes Rhonda, Renee, Windy, Delilah, Tracy, Candida, Maggie May, Brandy, Angie, Rikki, Misty, Fanny, Ariel, Deanie, Sharona, Sara, Elvira, Rosanna, Billie Jean, Joanna, and Sheila.

Care was taken to account for the time order of associations by using the year the song first appears on the Billboard Hot 100 List as the midpoint for analysis. The popularity of the name five years prior and five years after the song reaches the Billboard Hot 100 List is then compared. This helps to determine if the song influences the popularity of a name. If a name is ranked low or does not exist on the top 1,000 most popular name list prior to the release of a song and then increases in popularity after the song is released and hits the charts, it suggests a possible relationship between the song and the name. If a name is popular or increasing in popularity before the song hit the charts, then we cannot infer a causal relationship as it may point to the popularity of the name influencing the song title.

The Intersection of Popular Music and Popular Songs

The data reveal some interesting correlations and, with a few exceptions, point to an intersection of popular songs with popular baby names. For example, a curvilinear relationship is revealed when the popularity ranking of the names Joanna, Rosanna, and Angie are compared with the timing of the corresponding songs hitting the Billboard Hot 100 List. Five years prior to “Joanna” (1983)² hitting the charts, the name ranks at 193. In 1984, the same year that the Kool and the Gang song hits the Billboard Hot 100 List, the name moves up to the rank of 88. Five years after the song hits the charts, the name decreases again, to the rank of 142 (Social Security Administration, “Research”).

Five years before Toto’s song “Rosanna” (1982) hits the charts, the name ranks at 743, but in 1982, when the song becomes popular,

the name jumps more than three hundred points to a ranking of 438. Five years later, it decreases in popularity to the rank of 631. Angie consistently ranks in the mid-200s until the release of the Rolling Stones' (1973) song. As with Joanna and Rosanna, the name Angie experiences an immediate increase in popularity. In 1973, when the song hits the charts, the name Angie ranks at 254, and, within two years, the name moves more than one hundred positions to 114. The name increases and then decreases in popularity, moving back down to the rank of 209 in 1978 (*Billboard*; Social Security Administration, "Research"). These patterns suggest curvilinear relationships between the popularity of the songs and the popularity of the names. It appears that the song influences the rank of the name as the song grows in popularity. However, the name then decreases in rank within five years of each song's first appearance on the Billboard Hot 100 List.

The names Renee, Tracy, and Sara show a modest increase in popularity over the course of the time period their songs play on the radio. In 1961 Renee is already a popular name with a rank of 79 five years prior to the song "Walk Away Renee" (1966). When the Left Banke's song hits the charts, the name Renee shows a modest increase in rank and moves to the 66th position. In 1972, five years after the song hit the charts, the name decreases in rank to 73 (*Billboard*; Social Security Administration, "Research"). Fleetwood Mac's "Sara" (1980) and the Cuff Links' "Tracy" (1969) show similar patterns related to baby names. The name Sara moves from the 54th most popular name five years prior to the Fleetwood Mac song to the 27th most popular name when the song hits the charts in 1980. Tracy moves from the rank of 40 in 1964 to the rank of 17 in 1969 (Social Security Administration, "Research"). These names appear to be staples among the mainstream culture prior to the songs hitting the charts and thus enjoy only a small increase in popularity when the songs become hits.

"Maggie May" (1971) is an interesting case because this title contains two names. In 1966, Maggie ranks at 740, and in 1971, when Rod Stewart's song "Maggie May" plays on the radio, the name Maggie moves up to the 715th position. In 1976, five years after the song hits the charts, the name moves up further to 470 (*Billboard*; Social Security Administration, "Research"). Despite Maggie showing an increase in popularity with the timing of the Rod Stewart song, the name May never appears on the top 1,000 list during the song's tenure. Unfortunately, given the limitations of the dataset, it cannot be determined if the song influences the popularity of May as a middle name or even if the song influences the use of Maggie as a nickname

for the more formal name of Margaret.

“Candida” (1970), “Windy” (1967), “Ariel” (1977), “Rikki Don’t Lose That Number” (1974), and “Delilah” (1968) are not only chart toppers but the possible inspiration for parents naming baby daughters during the 1960s and 1970s. With the exception of the name Delilah, these names do not appear on the top 1,000 names list until after the songs hit the charts. Candida first appears on the list of top 1,000 baby names one year after the song hits the Billboard Hot 100 List in 1971 at 690. It last appears on the list in 1976 at 887 (Social Security Administration, “Research”). In 1967, the Association’s song about a girl with stormy eyes hits the Billboard Hot 100 List, and the unusual name Windy soon becomes popular. Like Candida, Windy never appears in the top 1,000 baby names list prior to the song, yet in 1967, the same year the Association’s song makes the Billboard Hot 100, the name debuts at 785 (*Billboard*). Once again, the popularity of the name is short lived as 1980 marks Windy’s last appearance in the top 1,000 list of most popular names (Social Security Administration, “Research”). Windy becomes one of our culture’s most popular names one year after the song hits the charts and stops being one of our culture’s most popular names five years later.

This ends up creating a cohort of women who share a name that is popular for only a short period of time. Today someone named Windy or Candida is likely to be thought of as having an unusual name. Having a unique name can impact how people present themselves and how others perceive them. Consider writer Shani Silver’s essay on her “weird” name where she refers to Rebecca as her Starbucks name. Her point is that it takes a lot of effort to explain how to pronounce her name correctly, and sometimes she determines that the interaction is not worth the extra effort. Instead of presenting herself as Shani, she presents herself as Rebecca (Silver, “Starbucks Name”). A search of the internet from social media to blogs brings a long list of stories about what life is like for people with unusual names. Most stories are humorous and refer to inconveniences such as never being able to find a souvenir coffee mug when on vacation to autocorrect changing names in texts. Other stories point to more serious frustrations such as questions about parents’ motivations for selecting a name and inquiries into the meaning behind an unusual name (La Rosa, “15 Most”; Jamipack, “16 Things”). These can be intrusive questions and are not asked of women with common names such as Mary.

On the other side of the story, it is possible that parents might regret selecting a trendy name for their daughter. A recent poll of three

thousand parents by the British parenting website Bounty.com finds one in five parents has what is known as baby name regret. They no longer like the name they picked for their child. This includes parents who believed a name was “cool or clever” at the time of birth (qtd. in PRNewswire, “Bounty.com”).

Today a name that is far from unusual is Ariel. Dean Friedman’s song “Ariel” (1977) describes a young woman at Paramus Park mall who wears a peasant shirt and gets the munchies. As with Candida and Windy, the name Ariel never appears on the top 1,000 names list until after Friedman’s song hits the charts. It debuts at the rank of 895, and, in four years, reaches 393. Today, for most Americans, the image that comes to mind when they hear the name Ariel is not a hippie at Paramus Park but a Disney mermaid. Friedman’s song may have sparked interest in the name, but subsequent cultural influences such as the animated film, *The Little Mermaid* (1989), undoubtedly influences its current popularity and meaning. One year after the movie hits the theaters, the name Ariel jumps in rank from 210 to 94. It then moves to its most popular rank of 66 in 1991. In 2014, it is still a popular name with a ranking of 133 (Social Security Administration, “Popular Names”).

Like Candida, Windy, and Ariel, the name Rikki never appears on the top 1,000 baby name list prior to the song, “Rikki Don’t Lose that Number” (1974). However, the influence of the Steely Dan hit appears to be delayed. Five years after the song hits the charts, the name Rikki debuts on the top 1,000 list of baby names at 979. It remains in the top 1,000 baby names only until 1996 and never reappears (Social Security Administration, “Popular Names”). The name Delilah shows a slightly different pattern as the name waivers on the fringes of the bottom of the top 1,000 popular names list for many years. The name exits the top 1,000 in 1960 but reappears in 1970 at 817, two years after Tom Jones’ song “Delilah” (1968) hits the charts. In 1973, five years after the release of the Tom Jones song, the name Delilah ranks at 833. However, the name Delilah is unique for a variety of reasons which may prevent parents from choosing the name. Many interpretations of the Biblical story of Samson and Delilah paint Delilah as a temptress who betrays Samson (Carol Smith 46), and the lyrics of Jones’ song describe a crime of passion.

The name that appears to be most positively influenced by a song is the name Brandy. While the song hits the charts after the name first enters the top 1,000 baby names, the song appears to greatly influence the increasing popularity of the name Brandy. It appears among the top

1,000 baby names only five years prior to the song's release. In 1967, the name ranks at 804, but in 1972, when "Brandy" hits the Billboard Hot 100 List, the name jumps to 140 (*Billboard*; Social Security Administration, "Research"). This is a 664-position improvement in just a five-year period. In 1977, the name ranks 51st among the most popular names given to girls born in the United States. In 1978, the name reaches its peak position at 37 (Social Security Administration, "Research"). The alternate spelling, Brandi, reveals a similar positive association with the song by Looking Glass. The name Brandi first appears in the top 1,000 baby names in 1966 at 851. In 1972, it jumps 710 positions to the 41st most popular name. Brandi remains in the top 100 most popular baby names until 1990, when it ranks at 103.

The positive relationship between the song "Brandy" (1972) and the names Brandy and Brandi presents an interesting finding because, if the calculation of the rank of the name includes both spellings together, the name would rank exponentially higher in popularity. The exact rank cannot be determined, but the underlying fact is that a lot of parents named their daughters Brandy (or Brandi), and this occurred in conjunction with the popularity of a song of the same name. This is significant because it suggests the power of music in our lives, so much so that like race, ethnicity, and religion (e.g., London and Morgan; Sue and Telles; Perl and Wiggins), popular music may also play a significant role in the names American parents select for their children.

While Billboard Hot 100 Hits such as "Candida" (1970) and "Brandy" (1972) may be a stimulus for parental selection of a name, the name Misty is already increasing in popularity when the Ray Stevens' (1975) song hits the radio, undoubtedly due in part to an earlier Johnny Mathis song of the same name. If the timeframe of analysis is expanded to look at the possible influence of the Mathis (1959) song, Misty debuts at the rank of 701 on the top 1,000 most popular names in 1960, one year after Mathis' song first plays on the radio (*Billboard*). Then, in 1975, when Stevens' song plays, the name moves up to an even higher rank of 47. In 1977, two years after the release of Stevens' song, the name Misty enjoys its highest rank at 40. It remains in the top fifty most popular names for baby girls up and until 1980 (Social Security Administration, "Research").

Four songs from the sample, "Help me Rhonda" (1964), "Fanny" (1975),³ "Hey, Deanie" (1978), and "My Sharona" (1979), show no effect on name popularity. Fanny, Deanie, and Sharona neither appear on the top 1,000 names prior to nor after their corresponding songs

play on the radio. In fact, they never ever appear on the top 1,000 most popular baby names chart from 1880-2014 (*Billboard*; Social Security Administration, “Popular Names”). Rhonda is a popular name before the Beach Boys’ song and remains so five years after the song hits the charts. Rhonda’s rank fluctuates very little, moving from 44 in 1960 to 37 in 1965 to 46 in 1970 (Social Security Administration, “Popular Names”). Interestingly, three names (Billie, Jean, and Sheila) decrease in popularity even when the songs “Billie Jean” (1983) and “Oh, Sheila” (1985) became popular. Elvira shows an interesting decline in popularity. In 1880, the first year the Social Security Administration ranks names, it holds the fairly popular position of 283. However, the name steadily decreases in popularity over the years, sporadically entering and exiting the top 1,000 baby name list. When the Oak Ridge Boys release the song “Elvira” (1981), the name Elvira makes its last appearance on the top 1,000 baby name list at 927. Prior to the Oak Ridge Boys’ version of “Elvira” (1981), songwriter Dallas Frazier in 1966 and Kenny Rogers in 1970 sing the song. The timing of the songs and the pattern of the name’s rank on the Social Security Administration’s popular name list suggest a relationship between the name and the songs.

Conclusion

The patterns of popular baby names and popular songs indicate a potential relationship between parental name choice and Billboard Hot 100 List songs. The trends show names that enjoy both short-term and long-term popularity while their corresponding songs play on the radio, and there is evidence to suggest a song may influence a name entering the top 1,000 most popular names for the first time. It is also possible that a song may delay a name that is declining in popularity from exiting the top 1,000 most popular names list.

This article suggests the need for additional research on the influence of popular culture on naming practices in the United States. While this article indicates a link between popular music and popular names intersecting between 1965 and 1985, it also suggests the need for additional research. Future research should interview women who are named Candida, Windy, Rikki, Brandy, and so forth who share a birth year within a five-year period of when the song of the same name hits the charts. Interviews will offer insight into the potential influence of the song on their sense of self and their presentation of self. Respondents may also be able to offer insight into why their parents

chose their name and if they believe the song played an influential role in that choice. If possible, researchers should interview the women's parents and ask them to reflect on the influences on their choices in names for their daughters. This will provide qualitative data and richer insight into the influence of popular music on parental name choice.

Notes

1. "Help Me Rhonda" was released in 1964 but hit the Billboard Hot 100 List in 1965.
2. "Joanna" was released in 1983 but hit the Billboard Hot 100 List in 1984.
3. "Fanny" was released in 1975 but hit the Billboard Hot 100 List in 1976.

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“Digging the Past”: Pop Arcana and the Recovered Life in Jean Shepherd’s “The Rosetta Stone of American Culture” and “The Return of the Smiling Wimpy Doll”

Michael Wentworth

Though he died in 1999, Jean Shepherd, or “Shep” to his avid legion of followers, remains one of America’s most legendary humorists. Shepherd’s iconoclastic rants and “when I was a kid” stories, broadcast nightly on radio station WOR in New York City from 1955-1977, established his reputation not only as a consummate performer-raconteur, but as “the voice-in-the-night genius” and “the originator and finest master of ‘talk radio’” when “the golden age of radio as a dominant force in American life had nearly ended” (Bergmann 9, 10). Shepherd’s reputation was further enhanced by live concert performances and comedy record albums; his forays into television with such PBS series as *Jean Shepherd’s America* (1971, 1985) and *Shepherd’s Pie* (1978); and the adaptation of a number of previously published boyhood stories, including *The Phantom of the Open Hearth* (1976), *The Great American Fourth of July and Other Disasters* (1982), *The Star-Crossed Romance of Josephine Cosnowski* (1983), and *Ollie Hopnoodle’s Haven of Bliss* (1988) as full-length television dramas. Shepherd was also a frequent contributor to *The Village Voice*, *Car and Driver*, and *Playboy*, and many of his topical essays and personal narratives were eventually published in six anthology volumes. Shepherd, of course, is best known as the inspiration behind Bob Clark’s now classic Christmas film *A Christmas Story* (released in 1983 and based on a number of stories from *In God We Trust: All Others Pay Cash*), in which, in addition to his role as the “off-screen” narrator, he makes a memorable cameo appearance. Intended to capitalize on the success of *A Christmas Story*, Shepherd’s last movie, *It Runs in the Family* (a.k.a. *My Summer Story*), was released in 1994. Shepherd’s work across media still attracts a cadre of loyal, passionate, “yes, we’re in on the joke” devotees and acolytes who even now proudly identify themselves as “Shepherd’s Nation.”

A recurring motif throughout Shepherd’s work is a lifelong

fascination with the popular arcana of material culture (long before the term “material culture” became academically and professionally fashionable) that dates back to his childhood and adolescence growing up in Depression-era America, the most well-known artifact of which is, of course, the Red Ryder Air Rifle featured in *A Christmas Story*. Such a fascination plays a particularly prominent role and provides the sustained focus in Shepherd’s essay “The Rosetta Stone of American Culture” in which he fondly and effusively recalls and itemizes representative entries featured in the annual sales catalogs released by the legendary Johnson Smith & Company through the first several decades of the twentieth century.¹ Identifying such irresistibly off-beat items as exploding cigars, celluloid teeth, anarchist stink bombs, itching powder, and, perhaps most notoriously, the infamous Whoopee cushion, Shepherd thus foresees the significance, in two hundred years or so, of the Johnson Smith catalog as a social and historical document and even ventures to predict that the catalog could turn out to be “the Rosetta Stone of American culture”; hence, “students of the future, in deciphering [the catalog] will learn far more about us than through any other single document I know of” (109).²

Considering the obvious artifactual disparity in value and significance between one of the most notable archaeological discoveries of the eighteenth century and a Whoopee cushion—or such assorted parlor tricks as the “diminishing billiard ball,” the “mesmerized penny,” and, yes, the “mysterious King Tut trick”—such a claim could easily be dismissed as altogether facetious and a matter of hyperbolic license—the prerogative, after all, of any humorist. However, Shepherd’s speculative projection is central to the fields of cultural anthropology and, even more directly, cultural archaeology, the purpose and focus of which involves the recovery and analysis of material artifacts from the past as a key, or “Rosetta stone,” to understanding, or “excavating,” the folkways, mores, and material culture of a specific culture or sub-culture. Whereas classic, historically significant archaeological “digs,” or “finds,” have revealed much about ancient or “primitive” (and thereby “exotic”) cultures and societies, Shepherd’s focus in “The Rosetta Stone of American Culture” is not upon some “distant” civilization, but the material and consumer culture of the U.S. through the first several decades of the twentieth century, in relation to which Shepherd, during his formative boyhood years, was not only witness, but an active, even avid participant. Moreover, Shepherd’s inventory of representative artifacts from the Johnson Smith catalog, seemingly trivial and inconsequential at first

glance, are, in Shepherd’s estimation, equal in value to more precious artifacts from more distant—and hence privileged—civilizations.

Shepherd’s leveling “democratization of stuff” and corollary “democratization” of cultural archaeology is not altogether dissimilar from any number of recent and current projects (and informing agendas) in cultural archaeology. Particularly notable in this regard is William Rathje and Cullen Murphy’s *Rubbish! The Archaeology of Garbage*, in which the authors, not unlike Shepherd in “The Rosetta Stone of American Culture,” note at one point that “Americans have always wondered, sometimes with buoyant playfulness, what their countrymen in the far future will make of Americans ‘now’” (13). As an illustrative response to such an intriguing speculation, the authors cite David Macaulay’s *Motel of the Mysteries* (published in 1979),

an archaeological site-report setting forth the conclusions reached by a team of excavators in the year A.D. 4022 who have unearthed a motel dating back to 1985. . . . Included in the report are illustrations of an archaeologist modeling a toilet seat, toothbrushes, and a drain stopper (or, as Macaulay describes them, “the Sacred Collar, . . . the magnificent ‘plasticus’ ear ornaments, and the exquisite silver chain and pendant”), all assumed to be items of ritual or personal regalia. (13)

By way of further illustrative projection the authors cite a 1982 exhibit in New York City called “Splendors of the Sohites”—

A vast display of artifacts, including “funerary vessels” (faded, dusky soda bottles) and “hermaphroditic amulets” (discarded pop-top rings) found in the SoHo section of Manhattan and dating from the Archaic Period (A.D. 1950-1961), the Classical Period (1962-1975), and the Decadent Period (1976-c.1980). (13)

Such whimsical and fanciful ventures aside, the primary focus in *Rubbish! The Archaeology of Garbage* is a “summary of the research conducted and discoveries made by the Garbage Project”—established by the late William Rathje, former professor emeritus of anthropology at the University of Arizona, in 1972--beginning with the excavation of a number of Tucson dumpsters in 1973 and extending, “over [the following] two decades,” to various landfill excavations throughout the U.S. and Canada (28). The investigative

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impetus for such landfill excavations was, as Rathje and Murphy explain, to discover potentially clarifying

insights not into the nature of some past society, of course, but our own. Garbage is among humanity's most prodigious physical legacies to those who have yet to be born; if we can understand our discards, Garbage Project archaeologists argue, then we will better understand the world in which we live. (4)

In terms that Shepherd would have fully endorsed, the authors then compare “the conviction that prompts Garbage Project researchers [or ‘garbologists’] to look upon the steaming detritus of daily existence” to “the same quiet excitement displayed by Howard Carter and Lord George Edward Carnarvon at the un-pillaged, unopened tomb of Tutankhamun” (4-5). In a no less fanciful comparative scale of value—and, once again, in mock-heroic terms Shepherd would have appreciated—the authors describe the Fresh Kills landfill, on Staten Island, in New York City—a 2005 Garbage Project excavation site—as “a treasure trove—a Pompeii, a Tikal, a Valley of the Kings—of artifacts from the most advanced civilization the planet has ever seen” (3). Indeed,

while every archaeologist dreams of discovering spectacular objects, the bread-and-butter work of archaeology involves the most common and routine kinds of discoveries. It is not entirely fanciful to define archaeology as the discipline that tries to understand old garbage, and to learn from that garbage something about ancient societies and ancient behaviors. (10)

Speaking of the residual value and meaning of “garbage,” Rathje and Murphy further claim that

human beings are mere place-holders in time, like zeros in a long number; their garbage seems to have more staying power, and a power to inform across the millennia that complements (and often substitutes for) the written word. The profligate habits of our own country and our own time—the sheer volume of the garbage we create and must dispose of—will make our society an open book. (11)

By way of transference, such a claim could just as easily apply to Shepherd's assertion that the artifacts featured in the Johnson Smith catalog will enable future generations to read, to no less telling

and revealing effect, the “profligate habits” of American society, particularly the adolescent fixations and fantasies of American male youth culture, during the early part of the twentieth century.

As an unembarrassed and distinctively American “barbaric yawp” in defense of American material and popular culture, Shepherd, in “The Rosetta Stone of American Culture,” speaks with an oracular authority far ahead of his time. In fact, as in so many of his essays and personal narratives, Shepherd makes an exuberant and, albeit unselfconsciously, a compelling case for the methodological and critical study of material and popular culture as a legitimate enterprise in its own right. But given the focus of current research in cultural archaeology featured in such studies as *Rubbish! The Archaeology of Garbage*, Shepherd was no less timely and prescient as a cultural anthropologist. Though Shepherd, as a self-fashioned “vox populi” and arbiter of taste for his fellow “lumpen-slobs,” would no doubt have scoffed at such a formal, academic, and therefore “elitist” designation, Gerald Nachman aptly observes in this regard, “Somebody called him [Shepherd] a ‘comic anthropologist,’ sifting through the cultural remains for any jawbone or cracked urn from which he could construct a nation’s folkways—a Wimpy doll, a pack of Walnettos, an old vaudeville song” (276).

Such a process of excavation and recovery is pivotal to much of Shepherd’s work, most notably, his loosely autobiographical radio monologues and published stories, though the typical focus of such a process is not some era two-hundred years removed, as in the case of “The Rosetta Stone of American Culture,” but Shepherd himself.³ Indeed, few writers are as obsessively fascinated with the personal past and, more specifically, the formative years of childhood and adolescence as Shepherd; further, such a fascination applies equally to the cultural effluvia (of the sort described in the pages of the Johnson Smith catalog)—the gadgets, gew-gaws, self-improvement and get-rich schemes—that played such an instrumental role in shaping the young Shepherd’s identity. It should come as little surprise, then, that such effluvia play a no less vital role in Shepherd’s reconstruction of his personal history than in future scholars’ reconstruction of the “human desires and vanities” of a distant civilization as revealed in the pages of the Johnson Smith catalog or of any distant civilization even farther removed.

In fact, the work of perhaps no other American humorist reveals such an intimate love affair with the pulp and media heroes, the narrative formulas, the full gamut of iconographical paraphernalia—in short, the popular and material culture—of his or her past. As

Gerald Nachman observes, “Other sixties stand-up comics have been compared to Mark Twain—Bill Cosby, Jonathan Winters, Richard Pryor—but Shepherd perhaps comes the closest. He recreated the lay of the land—its sounds, music, smells, characters, miming the very scenes and scents of his, of everybody’s boyhood” (268). In “miming” or, perhaps more aptly, “mining” the “scenes and scents” of his own boyhood, Shepherd often draws upon name brands, celebrities, media heroes, and related popular ephemera as secondary, but integral props to evoke a sense of a nostalgically limned past. For example, in “Ollie Hopnoodle’s Haven of Bliss,” an account of his family’s annual summer pilgrimage to “colorful Clear Lake” in southern Michigan, Shepherd frequently introduces seemingly casual details to situate his narrative in the culturally specific time and place of his youth. A partial inventory of such details includes Ovaltine, Chase & Sanborn coffee, Lucky Strike cigarettes, the Andrews Sisters, *True Romance*, Burma Shave signs, and, perhaps most memorably, the family’s “large, hulking,” four-door Olds sedan.

Frequently, however, some popular artifact from Shepherd’s past provides the primary occasion and focus of the narrative itself, to such an extent that there wouldn’t have been a story if it weren’t for the generative artifact. Such is the case, for example, in “Duel in the Snow, *or* Red Ryder Nails the Cleveland Street Kid” (one of several source narratives for the immensely popular film *A Christmas Story*), which recounts the young Shepherd’s various schemes, all of which comically backfire, to convince his parents to buy him a Red Ryder air rifle for Christmas.

To cite yet another of many representative narratives, such is the case as well in “Leopold Doppler and the Great Orpheum Gravy Boat Riot,” the focus of which is the tenacious determination of Shepherd’s mother (no less a pop connoisseur than her son) to collect a complete set of “Artistic DeLuxe Pearleen Tableware, the Dinner Service of the Stars,” one piece of which was “presented FREE to each adult woman in attendance” over a series of consecutive Friday evenings at the Orpheum (a local neighborhood theater) by the theater manager, Leopold Doppler.

Beyond their iconic focus, the two narratives share a narrative dynamic typical of many of Shepherd’s stories: Shepherd’s unwary, chance encounter of some material or circumstantial stimulus in the present that triggers the recollection of some analogous artifact and accompanying narrative from the past and a closing return to the originating stimulus in the present. For example, “Duel in the

Snow” opens during the Christmas season as Shepherd is eating lunch at an automat when he notices the slogan “DISARM THE TOY INDUSTRY” “gleam[ing] out” from a “large white button like a neon sign” (21). The button is worn by “a tiny Indignant-type little old lady” (and, as it turns out, an impassioned vegetarian), who proceeds to inveigh against the insidious machinations of toymakers who shamelessly force “the implements of blasphemous War on the innocent children, the Pure in Spirit, the tiny babes who are helpless and know no better!” (22). Contrary to such a perfervid condemnation, Shepherd reflects, if only to himself, “As if the Toy industry has any control over the insatiable desire of the human spawn to own Weaponry, armaments, and the implements of Warfare. It’s the same kind of mind that thought if *making* whiskey were prohibited people would stop *drinking*” (23). He then begins “to mull over my own youth, and, of course, its unceasing quest for roscoes, six-shooters, and any sort of blue hardware—simulated or otherwise—that I could lay my hands on” (23). This, in turn, leads, in a predictably associative fashion characteristic of his “recollective narratives,” to Shepherd’s childhood memory of “another Christmas, in another time, in another place, and . . . a gun” and not just any gun but an “OFFICIAL RED RYDER Carbine Action Two-Hundred Shot RANGE MODEL AIR RIFLE,” promotional ads for which he had discovered in the monthly publication *An Open Road for Boys*. Shepherd becomes so obsessively preoccupied with the prospect of ownership that “for the first time in my life the initial symptoms of genuine lunacy, of Mania, set in” (25).

The ensuing narrative recounts Shepherd’s dogged pursuit of the prized air rifle, though such a pursuit is discouraged and, it would seem, ultimately frustrated by the monitory prediction of various senex figures who warn him that “you’ll shoot out one of your eyes.” Thankfully, Shepherd’s “Old Man,” no stranger himself to the overwrought dreams and fantasies of adolescence, saves the day when, on Christmas morning, the young Shepherd discovers a “long, heavy, red-wrapped package” that, as it turns out, contains the prized BB gun. While Shepherd does manage to avoid “shooting an eye out,” he does break his glasses when he first fires his newly acquired air rifle in the backyard—fortunately, out of view of his parents. Typical of so many of Shepherd’s stories, “Duel in the Snow” returns to the present as Shepherd “sip[s] the bitter dregs of coffee that remained in my cup” and wonders “whether Red Ryder was still dispensing retribution and frontier justice of old. Considering the number of kids I see with broken glasses, I suspect he is” (48).⁴

Like “Duel in the Snow,” the iconic focus in “Leopold Doppler and the Great Orpheum Gravy Boat Riot” is inadvertently, but portentously, introduced at the outset of Shepherd’s narrative, at which point he is eating a bowl of “soggy Wheaties” in a motel diner when he is suddenly, and inexplicably, reminded of the Hollywood actress Rochelle Hudson, “who had not entered my conscious musings since the age of eight” (235-36). This, in turn, leads to an equally unsolicited series of “shifting kaleidoscopic images” of Charlie Chan, Judge Hardy, Jack Oakie, and Wallace Beery, among others, and an epiphanic moment of illumination when Shepherd, “scooping up” the last Wheaties flakes from “the bottom of the bowl,” realizes, “It was the bowl *itself* that had caused Rochelle Hudson to make an unscheduled guest appearance! . . . Yes, there was no mistake. It was genuine—a mint-condition, vintage Movie Dish Night Premium Gift Bowl” (237).

Such a recognition leads, in turn, to Shepherd’s extended recollection of the “Great Orpheum Gravy Boat Riot” when Shepherd’s mother and other blue-collar housewives, outraged by the distribution of identical Gravy Boats over four successive Fridays, hurl “wave upon wave” of Gravy Boats on stage, in consequence of which “The Dish Night Fever was over, once and for all,” and “the great days of the Orpheum and Leopold Doppler had passed forever” (260). Once again, like “Duel in the Snow,” Shepherd’s narrative concludes with a return to the present, as he leaves the motel diner, but not without surreptitiously appropriating the cereal bowl, “my priceless *objet d’art*,” which, in terms reminiscent of Shepherd’s homage to the contents of the Johnson Smith catalog in “The Rosetta Stone of American Culture,” he describes as “a relic that would confound and bemuse as yet unborn future generations of anthropologists, a mute, lumpy Rosetta Stone of our time” (261). “Duel in the Snow” and, even more notably, given the telling archaeological-anthropological images and allusions, “Leopold Doppler and the Great Orpheum Gravy Boat Riot” model a metaphorical extension of that process of cultural retrieval projected in “The Rosetta Stone of American Culture,” though in Shepherd’s case such a process is characteristically accompanied by the concurrent “retrieval” of an earlier chapter from his youth.

Shepherd’s most direct and extended treatment of the intimate relation between cultural and self-retrieval occurs in “The Return of the Smiling Wimpy Doll.” In “The Rosetta Stone of American Culture,” Shepherd imagines future scholars’ recovery of a lost generation two centuries before in the pages of the Johnson Smith catalog. Through the chance arrival of a box of “kid effluvia”

Shepherd, in “The Return of the Smiling Wimpy Doll,” is brought face to face not with the material culture of a distant “lost generation,” but rather with nothing less, and perhaps something more, than himself as the unexpected recovery of long-forgotten artifacts from the past triggers a series of associative memories that amount to an episodic scrapbook reconstruction of his “kidhood.”

The narrative opens during the Christmas season. Shepherd is alone in his apartment overlooking his “beloved wasteland of Manhattan” and, in the spirit of the season, is in the process of assembling a “Deluxe Yule A-Go-Go Tuneful Musical Revolving Puncture-Proof Table-Model Aluminum Xmas Tree”—the very sort of seasonal gadget that would have once been featured in the Johnson Smith catalog. His futile attempts to activate his “Yule-A-Go-Go” are interrupted by a knock on the door and an announcement that he’s received a package: a “huge, lumpy, battered cardboard carton” bearing the portentous blazon “LIFE—THE COMPLETE CEREAL” (265). The package is accompanied by a letter from his mother explaining that while “cleaning out the basement,” she had come across “all kinds of junk” Shepherd had as a child and since it was “still good” and he “might want to play with it,” she had sent it on (266).

Shepherd is less than enthusiastic over the arrival of such unexpected and unsolicited largesse. His apartment is already loaded “to the gunnels with *grown-up* mementoes,” including a “complete library of first-edition *Peanuts* paperbacks” and a “matchless, nationally known collection of rare swizzle sticks, all personally earned” (266). At the same time, he apprehensively recalls that as a youth he had acquired any number of self-incriminating odds and ends that he wouldn’t want his mother to know about. Still, powerless to reverse the inevitability of a personal fate that he senses had long since been decided, Shepherd opens the box and discovers a “rich, moldering compost heap [which] lay like some archaeological treasure-trove before me” (268).

Elaborating on the archaeological allusion, Shepherd explains that “for a fleeting second, I felt like King Tut would feel if he came back and somebody insisted he take a tour through the Egyptian section of the Museum of Natural History to look at his junk in the glass cases” (268).

Shepherd’s mood brightens when he rediscovers his “Smiling Wimpy Doll”—Wimpy, the unflappable mooch who would “gladly give you a nickel next week for a hamburger today.” Shepherd, who had always identified with Wimpy rather than the more celebrated spinach-chomping Popeye, is forced to admit that he’s actually “glad

to see the old freeloader again” (270).

Shepherd now warms to his task, though he is careful, in the process of retrieval, not to break any of these *now* “precious artifacts.” Indeed, like some intrepid jungle explorer, he proceeds “with gusto . . . to push on through the undergrowth of my childhood” (277). Like magical totems, each successive artifact, upon tactile and visual recognition, activates some memory filed away in the deep storage of Shepherd’s unconscious, but at the same time embedded within the artifact itself, like some genie or spell-bound princess patiently awaiting some fortuitous moment of release. The pleasure of recognition, then, operates, and simultaneously for the most part, on both a sensory and associative narrative level.

Following his reunion with his “Smiling Wimpy Doll,” Shepherd rediscovers his “genuine” Buck Rogers Space Helmet (specially designed “for intergalactic flight”) and is immediately concerned that his mother has overlooked or thrown out an as yet unidentified, but apparently indispensable, complementary artifact; then, after scrabbling through “the tangled mess,” he breathes “a great sigh of relief” as he pulls out his “precious space goggles” (271). Shepherd’s change in attitude is underscored by a similar change in assigned semantic value. What moments before had been “seven tons” of lifeless junk soon assumes the status, unselfconsciously on Shepherd’s part, of sacral, awe-inspiring “precious artifacts,” each of which is ritualistically invested. So it is that Shepherd “reverently” pulls on the goggles and squeezes the space helmet down over his head and then rushes into the bedroom “to admire myself in the mirror, as I had done so many times in the past” (271). Shepherd suddenly remembers another missing artifact, instantly returns to the box to complete his futuristic ensemble and “sure enough,” there it was: “my faithful Flash Gordon Zap Gun” (271). The physical process of reclamation triggers a fast-paced montage of related childhood memories, including

the giant snowstorms through which I had burrowed, trusty goggles protecting my eyes, as I pretended that I was on a space flight to Venus, Buck Rogers Space Rockets strapped to my back, on my way to trap the vile Black Barney, who was now in league with Zog, evil master of the Swamp Planet, to subjugate the entire known universe. (272)

Though separated by nearly six decades, in terms of the self-fashioning agency of popular artifacts, Shepherd would have found an equally

enthusiastic confederate in Bart Simpson. To illustrate the expansive and self-empowering effect of popular American icons, Jack Nachbar and Kevin Lause, in “Living in the Material World: The Meaning and Power of Popular Icons,” examine the symbolically and symbiotically charged relationship between Bart Simpson and his skateboard. More specifically, Bart’s previously repressed identity, once liberated from the Stygian confinement of the classroom, is spontaneously released and self-actualized by way of his skateboard, the limitless and unbounded territorial trajectory of which transcends the moribund routine of formal education and family life. Thus, once the school bell rings, Bart grabs and hops on his skateboard, “zipping into the sky, defying the force of gravity . . . wooshing over curbs and around trees and bouncing off the tops of cars” (169). Not unlike the fully outfitted Shepherd in his self-imagined space flight to Venus, “Bart is Bellerophon [sic] on his winged horse Pegasus, the Lone Ranger raising a cloud of dust on his mighty steed Silver, Batman using his wonderful toys to crash through skylights and soaring through the nighttime air” (169) or Buck Rogers—for Bart would have found an equally enthusiastic confederate in Shepherd as well—“to trap the vile Black Barney.” Indeed, not unlike so many of Shepherd’s childhood artifacts,

Bart’s skateboard is a special kind of popular object because it is one which calls forth emotional and/or intellectual meanings beyond its physical appearance or use, and because it functions [once again, not unlike so many of Shepherd’s recovered artifacts] to convey significant “magical powers” upon the people who use or display it, Bart’s skateboard is an icon. (170)

Sherry Turkle explores and reconfirms the transformative and subjectively invested effect of objects, including though not necessarily restricted to popular icons, in *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With*, a compilation of essays by scientists, humanists, artists, and designers that reflect upon the authors’ emotional, intellectual, and creative engagement with familiar, though special self-defining objects in their lives, ranging from the *World Book*, comic book superheroes, and a “stuffed bunny” to a 1964 Ford Falcon and an SX-70 instant camera. Thus, as Turkle observes in her introductory essay, “Material culture carries emotions and ideas of startling intensity” (6), an observation clearly confirmed not only by the contributing essayists in *Evocative Objects*, but by the young Shepherd’s adolescent role-playing. Turkle further observes

We find it familiar to consider objects as useful or aesthetic, as necessities or vain indulgences. We are on less familiar ground when we consider objects as companions to our emotional lives or as provocations to thought. The notion of evocative objects brings together these two less familiar ideas, underscoring the inseparability of thought and feeling in our relationship to things. We think with the objects we love; we love the objects we think with. (6)

Toward the end of her essay, which is aptly titled “The Things That Matter,” Turkle cites Walt Whitman’s memorable lines “A child went forth everyday / and the first object he look’d upon that object he became” and, in the case of the adult Shepherd’s iconic re-investiture as an inter-galactic superhero, still remains, albeit latently until the present.

Amusing enough in their own right, the nature and quality of Shepherd’s recollections reveal the powerful and dynamic role that popular gadgets such as space goggles and ray guns—or, more currently, fashion dolls, live action figures, and video games—play in identity formation, which, in Shepherd’s case, extends residually to the present. As David Hoffman observes in *Kid Stuff: Great Toys from Our Childhood*—featuring such items as Roadmaster tricycles, Radio Flyer wagons, Lionel trains, Barbie dolls, G.I. Joe, and the Magic “8” Ball—

As kids, our toys were our center and our solace. It isn’t hard to understand why; no matter how little we were, with toys, we were in control. We may have been too young to cross the street alone, but alone in our bedrooms or dens, we could be the parent, make a million or rule entire worlds. (10)

In Shepherd’s case, any mail-order gadget was little more than that until it was unwrapped and transformed by the imagination to talismanic significance and import. For a blue-collar kid like Shepherd growing up during the 1920s and 1930s in the north-central mill-town of Hammond, Indiana, mail-order gadgets provided access and an escape to other worlds and, through a process of imaginative self-fashioning, enabled the constructive exercise not only of the narrative, but the ethical imagination. For Shepherd and his fellow legion of self-imagined superheroes, what otherwise would have passed as mere gadgetry inspired the potential would-be crime-fighter or intergalactic warrior to situate such gadgetry within an appropriate and ethically surcharged narrative context. Thus, when Shepherd discovers “one of

the true treasures of my youth, my Melvin Purvis G-Man Badge,” followed quickly in turn by his discovery of a matching set of “Melvin-Purvis G-Man Escape-Proof Handcuffs” and the equally essential “Melvin Purvis G-Man Book of Instructions on HOW TO STOP CRIME,” he is reminded that as a fully-invested G-Man, with all the privileges and responsibilities appertaining thereunto, he would listen “intently” as Warden Lawes of Sing Sing would intone an “all points bulletin” describing the fugitive criminal of the week. As a virtuous, right-thinking, and “implacable foe of crime,” Shepherd, along with hundreds of other equally zealous crime-fighters, would bravely and dutifully report to the nearest corner cop that he had just spotted Harry the Fink, or whoever the featured desperado of the week happened to be, boarding the Island Steel bus.

Shepherd’s retrieval of certain artifacts reveals an implicit faith in their continuing usefulness and, no doubt, a subconscious desire to return to a more innocent, more fantastic past when such usefulness was tacitly assumed as a matter of fact. For example, of the random catalog of recovered artifacts, perhaps the most exotic and, according to Shepherd, “his most occult treasure” is “a genuine Mystic Voodoo Skull Ring, with genuine simulated emerald eyes—a ring designed to put curses on your enemies” (293). Less than an hour before, Shepherd might have casually dismissed the alleged powers of such a ring. For the moment, beyond his literal repossession of the artifacts from his youth, he is charmed, or possessed, in turn, by some totemic influence intrinsic to the artifacts themselves, to such an extent that the magical and imminently practical applications of such artifacts are automatically transferred to the present. Thus, in the case of his newly-recovered voodoo ring, Shepherd carefully pockets the device, “already formulating plans [for its use]” (293). Less arcane, though nonetheless indispensable, is Shepherd’s Tom Mix Periscope Ring, which he likewise pockets for future use—or, more specifically, to eavesdrop on the amorous dalliance of young ambitious office executives “on the make” (293).

Closer to the actual rhythm and pace of everyday life is Shepherd’s Official Jack Armstrong Pedometer which, at the cost of a mere twenty-five cents and one Wheaties boxtop, enabled the wearer to determine “just how far you walk everyday” (273). Depressing the “counter lever,” which activates a “tell-tale click at each revolution,” Shepherd is relieved to discover that the pedometer still works and is reminded of the time in his youth when “the whole neighborhood sounded like an enormous flock of crickets, day and night, as kids measured how

far it was to everywhere” (273). Convinced that this is “an important find,” and thereby reconfirming the continuing usefulness of the myriad gadgets of his childhood, Shepherd straps the device to his leg, walks to the built-in bar and back and, following a series of “hasty calculations,” determines that “six martinis would result in traveling one-twelfth of a mile” (274).

In *Rubbish! The Archaeology of Garbage*, William Rathje and Cullen Murphy observe that “if our garbage, in the eyes of the future, is destined to hold a key to the past, then surely it holds a key to the present” (11). Though speaking of “garbage,” such an assertion bears a direct relation to Shepherd, who, in the process of recovering various artifacts from his youthful past, discovers, however facetiously in the case of Shepherd’s Official Jack Armstrong Pedometer, their continuing value and relevance in the present, thereby not only bridging the temporal distance between Shepherd’s youth and adulthood, but the geographical distance between Hammond, Indiana and New York City. Indeed, as Rathje and Murphy further explain, garbage remains are far more than material debris; rather, recalling Shepherd’s reverential homage to his youthful artifacts, they are, in fact, “relics of specific human activities—relics no different in their inherent nature from many of those that traditional archaeologists work with (though they are, to be sure, fresher)” (11). What is true, in the case of “garbologists,” for discarded cereal boxes, plastic soda bottles, disposable diapers, and “the once-familiar detachable pop-pull tab” is no less true, in Shepherd’s case, for his Buck Rogers Space Helmet, Flash Gordon Zap Gun, and Mystic Voodoo Skull Ring.

No less revealing, then, than the adult Shepherd’s literal retrieval of various artifacts from his youth is his corollary discovery that such stuff still matters, a validation that is the informing premise of cultural archaeology and current material culture studies. Nevertheless, when looking through his stuff, Shepherd finally realizes he’s “had enough” (294). The spell of enchantment broken and the resurrected montage of childhood memories evidently played out, Shepherd sadly returns various effigies from “out of the past” to their former resting place: that “dusty magic mountain of illusion—lost and gone, grieved only by the wind” (294). Then, in by now familiar archaeological terms, Shepherd places “the Dead Sea Scrolls” (the newspaper packing from yesteryear) over the “communal crypt.”

In the late George Carlin’s classic stand-up monologue “A Place for Your Stuff,” he “riff[s] on” the pervasive and self-defining role of “stuff” in American culture and, more specifically, the relentless,

evidently uncontrollable acquisition of “stuff”—including, in Carlin’s case, his “fourth-grade arithmetic papers, *National Geographics*, commemorative plates, [and his] prize collection of Navajo underwear” (37)—which can lead to the progressively space-diminishing dilemma of storing our ever increasing glut of “stuff.” According to Carlin, possible solutions might include buying a bigger house (for a house, after all, is simply “just a pile of stuff with a cover on it”) or renting a storage unit. Then again, we can always reduce our cumulative surfeit of stuff by way of yard sales, garage sales, “the swap meet, the flea market, the rummage sale . . . or the Salvation Army and Goodwill. . . . It’s part of what economists call the Redistribution of Stuff” (38). In the case of Shepherd’s mother, she is clearing space in her basement, by way of an unexpected Christmas package to her son. Sadly acknowledging that “the ball,” or “stuff,” is “in his court,” or the confined space of his New York apartment, Shepherd considers shoving “the whole sorry mess out onto the garbage landing,” but for some reason, which for the moment eludes him, he reconsiders, as he both literally and figuratively “drag[s] his childhood” to the hall closet, where, with “an enormous effort,” he positions the box on the top shelf; then, as a closing signature notarizing the afternoon’s unraveling of the past, he once again notes the lettering on the side of the box: LIFE—THE COMPLETE CEREAL (295).

Whatever his personal and philosophical conclusions, if any, Shepherd keeps them to himself, though recalling Shepherd’s paean, in “The Rosetta Stone of American Culture,” to the Johnson Smith catalog, a number of concluding generalizations can be drawn. Stylistically, a compelling case could be made that Shepherd’s expressive idiom in “The Return of the Smiling Wimpy Doll,” given its rhetorical reliance on exaggeration, descriptive overstatement, exclamatory urgency, and self-authenticating testimonial, was clearly influenced by the Johnson Smith style sheet. Shepherd, in fact, could have made his reputation and fortune as a merchandising “dream merchant.” Consider, for example, Shepherd’s claim for his Japanese Yule-A-Go-Go as “a triumph of modern science over the tuneless, non-reusable, old-fashioned Christmas tree of yesteryear” (261) or his authentication of his “faithful Flash Gordon Zap Gun” as the very “same gun that had destroyed Ming the Merciless with its deadly Disintegrator Rays” (271-72).

When, in “The Rosetta Stone of American Culture,” Shepherd describes representative highlights of the Johnson Smith catalog, he appropriately adopts a catalog technique and often, if not altogether

systematically, assigns various catalog items to categorical genera such as gags and parlor tricks, get-rich schemes, self-improvement programs, and crime-fighting equipment for the righteous vigilante. Shepherd just as naturally adopts a catalog technique in “The Return of the Smiling Wimpy Doll.” In fact, many of Shepherd’s recovered artifacts recall various of the taxonomic categories in his description of the Johnson Smith catalog. In “The Rosetta Stone of American Culture,” Shepherd at one point describes the catalog as “the Bible of the go-getting *entrepreneur*, always alert for new opportunities offering ‘untold riches’” (100). A number of Shepherd’s recovered artifacts recall the very sort of entrepreneurial success and “untold riches” augured by the Johnson Smith catalog, though Shepherd’s speculative investments more often than not fall short of the anticipated self-aggrandizing dividends. Thus at one point, he comes across “a mint-condition flat-white can of White Cloverine Brand Salve.” Motivated by a sales sweepstakes, the grand prize of which was a Shetland pony, the young Shepherd eagerly sends off for an “enormous case” full of the salve, but only manages to sell three cans (284).

As a youth, Shepherd was likewise attracted by various educational and self-improvement schemes (yet another taxonomic staple of the Johnson Smith catalog), as revealed by his rediscovery of his Charles Atlas Dynamic-Tension Muscle-Building and Chest Expanding course, his four-color Magic Slide Rule Patented Piano Lesson that “had guaranteed to teach me to play in just seven minutes” (291), and his “prized collection” of Fleers bubble-gum cards “illustrating great moments in American history” (281). Moreover, numerous artifacts such as Shepherd’s Mystic Voodoo Skull Ring and his Mystic Ventril-O kit clearly recall Johnson Smith’s reliance upon the occult as a selling feature.

Perhaps the most telling point of contact between Shepherd’s random inventory of the Johnson Smith catalog and his equally random inventory of childhood artifacts is revealed in his reference to the Johnson Smith catalog as “this great volume of human desires and vanities” (“Rosetta Stone” 102). Geared primarily toward a juvenile male audience, still naïve enough to believe in the American dream of self-made success, the Johnson Smith catalog was essentially a primer of sometimes mystical, sometimes pseudo-technological avenues to popularity, one-upmanship, superior intelligence, self-enlightenment, survival in a world “fraught with danger,” and, not least, material wealth. A Ouija board and Spirit Medium Ring no less than THE BOOK OF GREAT

SECRETS: ONE THOUSAND WAYS OF GETTING RICH—or, in Shepherd’s case, a Mystic Voodoo Skull Ring no less than a “Melvin Purvis G-Man Book of Instructions on HOW TO STOP CRIME”—all originate in a desire for power, control, and an enlarged sense of self whereby the impressionable and pliantly suggestible adolescent recognizes the distant, but fully reachable, horizon of his or her manifest destiny. Now grown and more or less comfortably situated sixteen stories above his “beloved wasteland of Manhattan,” Shepherd (fortified in the present by Jim Beam rather than Ovaltine) is reminded of similar dreams of empowerment from his childhood and adolescence. Thus, at one point in his self-excitation, and in language markedly similar to his description of the Johnson Smith catalog, he admits that he has by now “been sucked bodily into this sobering and edifying dissection of my yeasty formative years. Old excitements and cravings, fugitive passions and desires crowded in upon me” (277).

Read as companion pieces, “The Rosetta Stone of American Culture” and “The Return of the Smiling Wimpy Doll” provide clarifying insight into both the substance and narrative dynamic of Shepherd’s stories. Whatever his frequent denials to the contrary, Shepherd’s recurring subject, of course, is the autobiographical self, but a self most often situated in “the yeasty formative years” of the past and constellated by a phantasmagorical array of period-specific icons fixing the autobiographical subject in time and place. The recovery of the past is usually instigated, accidentally and involuntarily as it were, by some material stimulus in the present that activates the recognition of some cognate artifact from the past, which in turn leads to Shepherd’s familiar engagement of the reader, “Did I ever tell you about the time” or “I’ll never forget the time.” Given his fascination with his distant past, Shepherd’s fondness for archaeological images, allusions, and comparisons is especially apt. Just as the intrinsic value of the Johnson Smith catalog to future scholars lies in its revelation of the “desires and vanities” of a culture two hundred years in the past, so, too, the intrinsic value, originally unrecognized by Shepherd, of his mother’s Christmas box lies in its potential as a key to unlocking the forgotten doors to Shepherd’s past, any one of which artifacts therein, no less than Charles Foster Kane’s childhood sled, might emerge as a Rosetta Stone to Shepherd’s own personal identity.⁵ What is true of Shepherd, and Charles Foster Kane, is no less true of us, as David Hoffman likewise observes in *Kid Stuff*: “[Y]ears later—as we second-guess lives and double-think careers—each of us has our own ‘Rosebud’; that single toy that is a one-way ticket back to simpler times”(10). Metaphorically,

then, “The Return of the Smiling Wimpy Doll” illustrates the process of self-excavation—reclaiming and reconstructing the self—which is at the very heart of Shepherd’s stories.

Indeed, such a retrospective process may enable Shepherd to achieve, if only for the moment in his imagined reconstruction of the past, a measure of power and control that, given the pressing exigencies and complications of the present, no longer seems nearly as possible as it did in the ever-expanding vistas and Saturday matinees of childhood and adolescence. Moreover, in the case of the Christmas box in “The Return of the Smiling Wimpy Doll,” the recovered artifacts activate a cyclonic vortex of random memories, to which, in his role as self-archaeologist, Shepherd can always return at greater length at some point in the future; for the Christmas box, with its emblazoned lettering LIFE—THE COMPLETE CEREAL, figuratively contains Shepherd’s life, or, at any rate, his “buried life” as a child, and as such contains the operative material for his muse, the palpable stuff that, no less than his former dreams, his stories are characteristically made of. Fancifully perhaps, that’s why he doesn’t throw the box out but drags it, and his childhood along with it, to the closet to be removed, relived, and retold more fully at some propitious point in the future.

For the moment, Shepherd sits pensively in “the gathering gloom” when, “coming full circle,” he notices, as if formally signaling his return to the present, “the huddled form of my little aluminum Japanese Christmas tree,” the installment of which had been his most pressing concern prior to the interruption of his past. Suddenly, however, he notices “a thin, dime-sized copper disc with the faded inscription POPEYE SPINACH EATERS’ LUCKY PIECE,” a token evidently overlooked during his previous rummaging. With an almost intuitive sense of purpose, Shepherd picks up the Christmas tree, unscrews the fuse that “he had twisted to death,” and inserts the “lucky piece.” As if on cue,

magically, the thin but unmistakable notes of “I’m dreaming of a white Christmas” filled the room and the tiny tree began to pirouette, its hidden mechanisms working flawlessly, its miniature red and green, blue and yellow candles sending out a dazzling rainbow of soft Christmas cheer. (295-96)

Shepherd then “lovingly” places the tree “on the window sill for the world to see” and then concludes, “Popeye had saved the day again” (296). The ending, of course, may strain the credulity of the cynic, though the happier romantic might reply, “But don’t you see,

it’s finally a Christmas story after all!”

Arguably, the “Popeye lucky piece” is, as it turns out, little more than a random artifact that Shepherd had overlooked in re-boxing his archival treasure. It may seem little more than coincidence—or possibly even mechanical contrivance—that the “lucky piece” proves instrumental in finally activating Shepherd’s Yule-A-Go-Go. Symbolically, however, the “lucky piece” may be seen as a constructive continuation of the past in the present, and the felicitous instrumentality of the lucky piece in sparking the Yule-A-Go-Go to life may likewise be seen as the rehabilitative power of the past in facilitating the achievement of one’s immediate “wants and desires” in the present, which, in Shepherd’s case, aren’t that markedly different from the dreams and fantasies of his childhood and adolescence. All things considered, the child’s “Popeye lucky piece” is little different in its appeal from the grown man’s Yule-A-Go-Go, which only serves to confirm a variation of the old cliché: you can take the kid out of the past, but you can’t take the past out of the kid.

Here and elsewhere Shepherd would no doubt have taken exception—if not, in fact, offense—with such a nostalgic and, admittedly, sentimental reading. As Gerald Nachman observes, Shepherd “recoiled from being tagged a purveyor of nostalgia” (268), a reaction with which Nachman concurs: “He [Shepherd] ventured further than nostalgia; he was almost anti-nostalgia. His every recollection was laced with cynicism. Just because his tales took place in the past didn’t make them nostalgic any more than American history is nostalgic” (268). Speaking of Shepherd’s childhood stories, Eugene Bergmann observes, in similar fashion, that “on the surface they contain reminders of stuff one used to do, or seems to remember doing—in other words, nostalgia. Shepherd found it frustrating that people failed to go beneath that surface to the dark core of his tales—that life is tough, especially for a kid” (45). Shepherd’s close friend Ron Della Chiesa likewise notes that Shepherd “hated the word ‘nostalgia.’ . . . He said it wasn’t nostalgia. What is nostalgic about the Depression?” (qtd. in Bergmann 114).⁶ On a Long John Nebel radio program (March 1, 1961), Shepherd claims in this regard

Long John, you misquoted me fantastically last night! Long John on his program said, “Jean Shepherd is always talking about how great things were in the old days.” I have never *once* said that! Have I! *Never!* In fact, I am constantly saying quite the opposite. It was *rotten* in the old days. [Laughs.] (qtd. in Bergmann 112)

Elsewhere, Shepherd asserts, “My work I think is anti-sentimental as a matter of fact. If you really read it, you realize it’s a putdown of what most people think it stands for—it’s *anti*-nostalgic writing” (qtd. in Bergmann 113). Consistent with such an assessment is Shepherd’s claim that he had originally wanted to call the now nostalgically imbued *Christmas Story*, “Santa’s Revenge,” an assessment that clearly challenges viewers who “wax nostalgic over it [the film] despite the nearly unrelieved string of misadventures” (Bergmann 403). Shepherd, in fact, had wanted to “have ‘Silent Night’ played on a kazoo and washboard. He said his fans were sentimental, but he saw himself as a misanthropic Mark Twain” (Nachman 282).

On the other hand, whatever his protests to the contrary, Shepherd, at times, would eulogize not only the past, but the continuing and meaningful relevance of the past in the present, in the facilitation of which he, himself, was an artful transactional agent. Particularly revealing in this regard is Shepherd’s response to the legendary oral historian Studs Terkel’s observation to Shepherd, “You cover an aspect of American life that nobody else covers” [meaning the past], to which Shepherd “bristled and said: ‘You think it’s the *past*. Most people who become writers think that everything they used to do no longer happens. I evoke a time past for all people, including a seventeen-year old’s time past, because I’m writing about American rituals. The one thing about a ritual is, it *does* continue’” (qtd. in Nachman 270-71). Without directly acknowledging as much, Shepherd, on the basis of his personally and often ritualistically inflected narratives, could just as easily be speaking of himself. No less apt, albeit indirectly, is Shepherd’s observation that “I don’t think there’s any one of us, no matter where we live, who doesn’t have a secret place, whatever it is. It’s like Oz” (qtd. in Nachman 271). For Shepherd, no less than Dorothy, such a “secret place” is the fictive Hohman, Indiana of his youth, a past that, in “Return of the Smiling Wimpy Doll,” is recovered, if only temporarily, through the unexpected arrival of his mother’s Christmas box, the interior “secret place” of which contains the previously forgotten artifacts and embedded memories of Shepherd’s past.

Shepherd’s mother, in sending off his box of “kid effluvia,” had assumed that he “might want to play” with the junk contained therein and, then, with the eminent practicality of any Depression-era mother, she adds that the junk is “still good.” As it turns out, she is ultimately vindicated on both counts but especially the second; for the junk, as symbolically typified by the “Popeye lucky piece,” is even better than she had imagined or Shepherd had forgotten to remember.

Notes

1. “The Rosetta Stone of American Culture,” included in Shepherd’s collection *The Ferrari in the Bedroom* (1972), is, in fact, a reprint of Shepherd’s essay, “Mail Order America,” which served as an introduction to a 1970 reprint of the 1929 edition of the Johnson Smith Catalog (the very catalog that Shepherd would no doubt have perused as an eight-year-old boy). “Getting as much mileage as possible out of one essay” (Bergman 33), Shepherd included the essay yet again, retitled as “The Whole Fun Catalog of 1929,” in *A Fistful of Fig Newtons* (1983).

According to its official website, The Johnson Smith Company, “one of America’s oldest catalog companies,” was officially founded in the U.S.A. in 1914 by Alfred Johnson Smith and is presently headquartered in Bradenton, Florida, where it still specializes in the gag and novelty items so reverently described by Shepherd, including reproductions of the “frilly fishnet-clad leg lamp” so memorably and hilariously featured in *A Christmas Story*.

2. At one point in his article, “Novelties in American Popular Culture,” Michael-Jean Erard cites Shepherd’s claim, in his introduction to the 1970 reissue of the Johnson Smith Catalog from 1929,

Only America could have produced Johnson Smith. There is nothing else in the world like it. . . . The Johnson Smith Catalog is a magnificent, smudgy thumbprint of a totally lusty, vibrant, alive, crude Post Frontier society, a society that was, and in some ways still remains, an exotic mixture of moralistic piety and a violent, primitive humor. (qtd. in Erard 2)

Erard regards the 1929 Johnson Smith Catalog as “a treasure trove of not only novelties, but everything that the Johnson Smith mail order house ever carried” (14). Notable in this regard is the following quote from the official Johnson Smith Company website:

Our story is not without sociological aspects and influences. During the 1920s and 1930s, practical jokes and home hobbies provided an escape for people wracked with economic struggle brought on by WWI and the Great Depression. Our 700-page catalog provided hours of “escape,” fun and fantasy for the depressed nation, even without having to place an order! Even today we hear from people who remember our catalog and the “relief” we provided!

Focusing upon the sort of novelty items that fascinated Shepherd in his boyhood, and that still fascinated him as an adult, Erard notes the inexpensiveness of such items and, drawing upon the 1929 Johnson Smith

Catalog, cites the following illustrative examples: “[A] squirt gun was 20 cents. Three vials of Anarchist (Stink) Bombs cost 10 cents. Collapsible scissors was twenty-five cents. A Soap Surprise Egg was 15 cents. A Whoopee Cushion was 25 cents” (6).

3. More precisely, what should be understood here and elsewhere as Shepherd’s self-fashioned persona is what Eugene Bergmann describes as “the artistic construct he [Shepherd] wanted listeners [and, by extension, readers] to perceive as the persona ‘Jean Shepherd’” (26). For a perceptive assessment of the vexatious “authenticity” of Shepherd’s personally inflected radio monologues and published stories and the resulting obfuscation (clearly deliberate and calculated on Shepherd’s part) of any precise genre classification, see the following sections in Bergmann’s biography of Shepherd “*Excelsior, You Fathead!*” *The Art and Enigma of Jean Shepherd*: “Foibles: The Real Jean Shepherd” (23-38), and “Tough to Be a Kid: Growing Up in the Midwest” (41-62, esp. 43-47). Psycho-biographical considerations and the prerogatives of creative agency aside, Bergmann aptly describes Shepherd’s oral and published childhood and adolescent narratives as “fictional autobiography.”
4. In speaking of Shepherd’s legendary radio monologues on WOR in New York City (many of which were later expanded as published stories), Nachman notes, in this regard, that “Mort Sahl-like, Shepherd would weave a winding tale that, in its final seconds, would somehow circle back to its opening premise and, in the peroration, build to a climactic moment embedded with a rueful moral” (269).
5. Gerald Nachman poignantly notes, in this regard, that Shepherd did, in fact, own the Red Ryder BB gun that figures prominently in *A Christmas Story*, and, “‘Roesbud’-like, he still had his first toy fire truck with him in Florida when he died” (280).
6. Nonetheless, though speaking of Shepherd’s radio monologues, Chiesa adds

But he [Shepherd] was able to evoke that era in a way—as a storyteller—that I think a lot of people related to, and I think that was a big part of his humor. That there is humor in nostalgia. And satire. But I think he [Shepherd] envisioned himself much more as a satirist than somebody who is just reminiscing. . . . So I think that the line you draw is between people who listened to him and laughed in a humorous way over the nostalgic aspect. (qtd. in Bergmann 114)

Given Shepherd’s aversion to the alleged nostalgic bent of his work, Chiesa finds it ironic that “Shepherd himself is now a nostalgic memory for his former avid listeners—and there was no such thing as a non-avid Jean Shepherd listener” (qtd. in Nachman 268).

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Wentworth

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**Alternative Masculine Performances in American Comics:
Brian K. Vaughan and Pia Guerra's *Y: the Last Man***

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Even in the 21st century, American comics tend toward the overly conservative and heteronormative masculine identity that is synonymous with their superhero roots. Perhaps most glaringly in modern superhero creations but also in non-traditional comics like Bill Willingham's *Fables*, the American comic landscape is littered with white, muscle-bound supermen who save the more fragile, if buxom heroines from sexually-threatening villains. Brian K. Vaughan and Pia Guerra, however, reject comics' indelible hypermasculine, patriarchal heroes in *Y: the Last Man*, with a future absent of hyperaggressive, domineering men—what in the decade since the comic's release has been dubbed “toxic masculinity.” Begun in 2002, *Y: the Last Man* takes place after a global apocalypse eradicates every creature with a Y chromosome, except for the protagonist, Yorick Brown, a comically ineffectual and out-of-work escape artist with a Bachelor's degree in English, and his pet capuchin monkey, Ampersand. The main crux of the narrative is Yorick's juvenily romantic quest to reunite with his girlfriend Beth while traveling with various women who, out of personal, political, or humanitarian motivations, are attempting to ensure the future of the human species. Primary among these women are 355, an agent of the Culper Ring, an American-espionage organization that has assigned her to protect Yorick, and Dr. Allison Mann, a geneticist and cloning researcher who is attempting to uncover the reasons for Yorick's immunity to the plague. The sixty issues of *Y: the Last Man*, published by Vertigo Press between September 2002 and March 2008, cover the first six years after the loss of almost all of the world's men, as the central characters travel from the American East coast westward across the United States, through Australia, Japan, China, and Russia, to end in France, exposing the changes (according to the authors) such an apocalypse would have unleashed upon the world. Instead of the familiar rite-of-passage story, where the inept boy learns to become a heteronormative masculine ideal, Yorick's

maturation is marked not only by “traditional” notions of adulthood (responsibility, assertiveness, and confidence), but also by empathy, sexual submissiveness, and athletic weakness, and he is connected to (once-)marginalized entertainment media (science fiction, fantasy, comic books, alternative music)—all traits often considered anti-masculine or weak in the American popular consciousness throughout the 20th century.¹ His specific performance of masculinity, à la Judith Butler, is essential to uncover, as Yorick will serve as figurative and literal father for all men to come in the world of the comic—as it is his DNA that is ultimately cloned to ensure the continuance of the species and thus serves as the symbolic model for masculinity espoused by the authors.

Yorick’s maturation towards a more fluid gender construction comes during a moment when American definitions of masculine performance are slowly shifting. With our growing reliance upon technology has come an increase in its cultural capital—and the capital of those who were formally marginalized for their connection to technology. During the 1980s, movies like *Revenge of the Nerds* and *Weird Science* depicted geeks craving popularity and legitimacy, and while they used their native intelligence and technical skills to become questionable “heroes,” the characters still had to demonstrate physical prowess and sexual conquests that demeaned women in order to be considered masculine. In the last ten years, however, the technologic landscape has become an integral part of youth culture, and the blending has turned the artifacts of a formerly marginalized subaltern class (traditionally labeled as geeks or nerds) into popular icons of American culture. Look no further than Marvel’s blockbuster regime or the Oscar-winning *Lord of the Rings* trilogy—comics and fantasy novels that were once only loved by the disenfranchised are now beloved American movie franchises.

As icons formerly labeled childish or weak become mainstream, so are other productions of masculine identity. Currently, the internet and high schools (both maelstroms of popular culture signposts) are rife with slogans, t-shirts, and other pop culture paraphernalia lauding “geek” culture. Comic book characters and fantasy novels dominate both Hollywood and cable television, and the technology formerly reserved for the socially maligned has become commonplace across the entire social milieu. However, shifts in masculinity are much slower to become accepted than entertainment options, and these works are still more populated by powerfully built, muscle-bound male actors than those who match its traditional audience, with women still shunted to

the margins in smaller and overly sexualized roles. It is acceptable to be a fan of these “geeky” intellectual properties, as long as they are still filled with patriarchal ideals.² After all, even as online spaces for geek feminism open up (e.g., Geek Feminism, The Learned Fangirl, Feministing, Feminist Frequency, The Black Feminist Geek, to name only a few), there is still pushback from male- (and mostly white-) dominated spaces looking to ensure heteronormative, patriarchal power. In these online communities, men demand to finally have “their turn” as alpha men, most famously seen in #GamerGate, a male-oriented backlash to attempts to open up feminist conversations about video game production that exploded into mainstream culture in 2015. While openly a movement about ethics in game journalism, #Gamergaters responded to women speaking out against sexism in the gaming industry with a slew of online attacks, including doxxing (the release of personal information into the public sphere), as well as rape and death threats.

Most disturbingly, and most pertinently for this article, online communities like /r/TheRedPill (named for a geek film icon—*The Matrix*) on the social media network Reddit, with ties to #GamerGate and the more antagonistic aspects of the Men’s Rights Movement,³ continue the binary of strong/weak men that has dominated American masculinity development since the 19th century.⁴ In these social communities, there is a strict division between “alphas,” so called dominant men whose behavior is crafted through either evolution or God to attract women, and “betas” who attempt to attract women by creating comfort and security, rather than aggressive, powerful displays of control and sexuality. This heteronormative, anti-feminist rhetoric of natural gender divisions and pseudo-evolutionary biology demonstrates that there is still a strong resistance to ending the presumption of masculine authority—even by those who were ostracized when an interest in technology, a love for science fiction and fantasy, or desire to play video games over sports was culturally dominant in the United States.

It is no surprise then that the genres and formats beloved by the geek community have traditionally been aligned with patriarchal gender binaries. Comics, specifically superhero comics, have drawn a lot of attention for their reflections of the more problematic aspects of American identity (e.g., jingoism, sexism, racism, to name only a few), yet they are also a space for resistances to these anti-humanist beliefs. Autobiographies like Craig Thompson’s *Blankets* or Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, explorations of systemic racism like Mat Johnson and

Warren Pleece's *Incognegro* or Joe Sacco's *Palestine*, and Pulitzer-winning stories like Art Spiegelman's *Maus* push back against the authoritarian narratives commonly found in superhero comics.⁵ They reveal aspects of marginalized American identity, and within them are places where alternative forms of masculine production are encouraged and celebrated. Of these, Vaughan and Guerra's work is one of the most critically acclaimed examples, published by one of the largest comic presses and a winner of an Eisner Award during its conclusion in 2008 for Best Continuing Series. During this narrative, the protagonist's change from an immature, pop culture-obsessed youth into an adult comfortable with his non-traditional performance of gender gives voice to an alternative to the aggressive, patriarchal binary that still struggles to maintain its cultural relevancy. Within the realm of *Y: the Last Man*, the future can only be successful if all characters learn to adopt fluid gender constructions and remove the necessity of rigid, constricting gender binaries. It is essential that our artifacts of popular culture adopt performative gender constructions espoused by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* in order to overcome the power of hegemonic masculinity, as described by R. W. Connell in *Masculinities*.

In this post-apocalyptic world, much like in our world, with its woman-bashing Men's Rights Groups and political and cultural backlash against feminism, even in (increasingly less so) socially marginalized groups like geek fandom, the process to alter one's perceptions is a painful one. Yorick, as the comic opens, is filled with self-recrimination and doubt about his place in the pre-apocalyptic world, without a trace of assertiveness or employable skills. He is a clownish lay-about with slight agoraphobia and chronic unemployment whose only talents are an encyclopedic knowledge of popular culture, a strong sense of humor, and the escape artist skills he has honed since he was a child. His many inadequacies as an adult are highlighted in the first issue, where a conversation with his successful, archaeologist girlfriend Beth is intersected with introductory scenes of each of the major characters—all women whose competency, skills, and power make Yorick a laughable candidate for the last man on earth. After seeing how Yorick's mother, U.S. Senator Jennifer Brown, brilliantly handles herself in a casual conversation with a male Senator who threatens her re-election, readers meet "Alter" Tse'elon, a colonel in the Israeli Army who deplores her fellow female soldiers who "could be paratroopers or naval commanders . . . but men have taught them to be content behind a typewriter or radar screen" (*Unmanned* 16). The

next page has Yorick stating his fears that he has become agoraphobic, too uncomfortable to step outside to see the world, while “you and the rest of my globetrotting friends are all off saving the world or whatever, but I haven’t done a goddamn thing for *anyone*” (*Unmanned* 17). The next character introduced is the American secret agent 355, who has been sent to Jordan to protect a woman’s rights activist fighting to end the “honor killings” of women by Muslim extremists. Even though the rescue attempt fails, 355 demonstrates high levels of athleticism, combat prowess, and compassion by free-scaling a building, defeating two armed intruders, and attempting to spare women from needless deaths. Dr. Allison Mann is introduced giving birth to her own clone, and even though she physically appears no older than Yorick and Beth, she is a highly acclaimed research scientist possessing a strong level of intelligence and dedication. These brief vignettes, only a few pages each, introduce characters who overshadow Yorick’s every accomplishment until he appears in the final panel of the first issue looking uncertainly out the window for the source of the loud gunshot that came after a woman’s declaration that “all of the men are dead” (*Unmanned* 34-35). The underlining impression of both the issue itself and the final panel is that if Yorick, even though he is likeable in a hapless, bumbling way, is our last man on earth, any hope for the species lies in its more competent women.

While I argue that Yorick develops into a moral, humanist model for white heterosexual men, he certainly does not start the comic as an admirable person—or to put it in the words of the author, the five-year run of the comic is “the exact length of time [needed] for Yorick to transform from the last boy on earth to the last man” (Jensen 4). This is the model that Claire P. Curtis, in *Postapocalyptic Fiction and the Social Contract*, sees in the majority of post-apocalyptic narratives—a white male main character removed from the apocalyptic event bands together with a quirky cast of characters to form a new society based upon the ideals of its author. That is the “interpretive, explanatory function” of post-apocalyptic narratives, according to James Berger in *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse* (5). In fact, it is as if Vaughan and Guerra are directly responding to Berger’s claims that “the problematic position of sex, and particularly women’s sexuality, is an enduring feature of apocalyptic discourse . . . that seeks to destroy the world expressly in order to eliminate female sexuality” (11). While this is true for a vast majority of post-apocalyptic narratives, in *Y: the Last Man*, it is the destructive and problematic nature of masculinity that comes under assault through the existence of, and changes to,

Yorick's portrayal of manhood. Humorously incapable at the beginning of the story, Yorick is far from unsympathetic; he quickly establishes himself as clever, witty, and connected to popular culture—traits which endear him to the traditional comic audience.⁶ He establishes his obsessive love of literature early with references to the Shakespearian roots of his and his sister's names, but he also shows his knowledge of mediated popular culture—everything from early radio and science fiction to modern film and television. He has a fascination with science, reveres astronauts as (once-)living legends, and can quote classic and new films. While he lacks Dr. Mann's scientific capabilities, Yorick is quick witted, often saving himself with his ability to outthink those around him—usually with a ready quip à la Peter Parker. Yet what is most striking about Vaughan and Guerra's protagonist is that he would be useless in a post-apocalyptic world. While his ability to escape bonds could (and does) help, Yorick's survival skills are limited—he has no experience with firearms, scavenging, self-defense, hunting, or construction. All of his attention has been focused on the impractical. Even his body is called into question, as his physical limitations are continually brought to the reader's attention, both by Yorick himself and the women he encounters. This only underscores how every character in the years immediately after the apocalypse still hold to traditional notions of masculine identity—good men, after all, are strong men. Yorick is depicted with none of the massive male traits normally associated with mainstream comics. Although he is tall, he is often shown with spindly arms, and even the occasional slight paunch, when circumstances after the apocalypse allow a surplus of food. The artist does not shy from showing Yorick's nude form, and even though the character seems comfortable with women while he is naked, his self-deprecating remarks demonstrate his awareness of his "shortcomings."

Perhaps the scene which most strongly outlines Yorick's lack of competency in his new environment is when he compares himself to two astronauts whose death was delayed until they returned to Earth over a year after the apocalypse:

Those guys were fucking heroes even *before* the plague hit. They're much better qualified to save mankind than some socially retarded white kid. Don't get me wrong, I still want to do whatever I can to help, but my motto's always been, 'with little power comes little responsibility.' And that's not about being a slacker mind you. It's about knowing your *limitations*.

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I mean, I can barely do a chin-up. The only shit I've ever been good at involves Chinese finger cuffs and . . . and milk can escapes. Most of the time, I just fuck stuff up. Everyone thinks they know how to 'fix' the world, but we'd all be a lot better off if some of us just stayed out of the way . . . you know? (*One* 45)

For the majority of the comic, he refuses to accept that he has anything worthwhile to give to the world, and even when complimented, he mentions his failings, arguing that “ladies go nuts for zits and a thinning hairline. I combine the worst attributes of the adolescent boys who teased them and the middle-aged husbands who left them” (*Ring* 8). Yorick cannot live up to the standards set by heteronormative hypermasculinity, and even though he exists in a world where he can create his own understanding of masculinity, initially he cannot separate his identity from his failure to meet its demands.

He is far from the only character, though, to continue with traditional understanding of masculine production, as nearly all women insult or humiliate him about his apparent weaknesses. After guessing that Yorick in disguise might be a man, a former model-turned-human-remains-disposer grasps his genitalia, saying “I don't believe it. You're a *real man* . . . but just barely” (*Unmanned* 46). He is repeatedly referred to as “harmless” or weak, and his attempts to perform “traditional” manly duties, like splitting firewood or fighting in hand-to-hand combat, are dismissed as being “like a girl.” Throughout the series, Agent 355 teases him for his lack of martial competency, and she becomes outraged when he interferes during a fight, even when his attempts at physical violence succeed—which is rare. Even though his physique is not drawn in a feminine style, his appearance is often linked with a woman's figure, as when a transgender prostitute tells him that he must learn to bind down his breasts more if he wishes to successfully pose as a man.

His adherence to the masculine obsession with virile sexuality is equally under attack, as Yorick possesses crippling sexual hang-ups that originate from before the apocalypse. Unlike his sister Hero, who is first introduced as a firefighter known for her sexual conquests, Yorick is plagued by psychological trauma that causes him to distance himself from his own sexuality. He spends the first two years after the apocalypse avoiding sexual encounters, and it is only after an intervention from another female agent of the Culper Ring, 711, that

he comes to grips with his own sexual hang-ups. After discovering that Yorick has been putting his life purposefully in danger to fulfill an unacknowledged death wish, 711 puts him through “a form of aversion therapy” which posits that sexuality and morality are rooted in the same principles, but this therapy really serves as a vehicle to announce to the audience why Yorick has resisted indulging in the sexual authority his unique position as the last man on earth would seem to entail. During the process, Yorick is placed in a submissive role, mostly nude and tied, while 711 alternates between the fetish garb of a dominatrix and the silken robe of a professional courtesan. The comic alternates between depicting Yorick as a sexual aggressor and a submissive sexual receiver. By far during the entirety of the comic, however, he is more often seen as submissive, and even when he initiates a sexual encounter, he is then placed under another’s power. Repeatedly, Yorick is shown in submissive positions, especially in the cover art, where he is either tied up or beneath a woman. These illustrations rarely include titillating pictures of women (except for the occasional open mouth) but often have Yorick naked and restrained—focusing the audience gaze on a submissive male body. It is this act of submission with which Yorick initially feels uncomfortable, as his faltering attempts to exert dominance detailed earlier allude.

According to 711, it is not the act of submission that is weak, but failure to admit his enjoyment of the submissive act, and their encounters allow Yorick a safe space to accept and embrace his submissive sexual appetites—a position he holds throughout the rest of the comic. As Tina Portillo argues in her article “I Get Real: Celebrating my Sadosomachistic Soul,” “when engaging in S/M play I am free to feel all my feelings and thereby be a whole and integrated person” (50). She further posits that it is only in S/M play that she feels totally herself, and that in dedicating herself to performing for her top, she is transformed into someone peaceful and relaxed. It is commonly accepted that the submissive partner in S/M interactions is the one with the power, as they set the limits of the encounter and control its beginning and ending. However, Yorick’s desires are not firmly rooted in sadosomachistic relationships. While 711 educates Yorick on his own suicidal impulses using the persona of a dominatrix, in his actual physical encounters, Yorick is the pursued rather than the pursuer, and he seeks out powerful, strong-willed women as his partners. The one liaison that shows his sexual aggression, holding Beth Deville against a wall after they reunite after five years, only allows him to understand that while Beth may now adore him for his

confident, potent masculinity, he truly desires Agent 355—the woman he knows is his physical superior. This leads him to acknowledge his sexual submission when he and Agent 355 admit their feelings for one another. She states her fear that as soon as he crawls off of her, he will run back to Beth, and he quips, “First of all, I wouldn’t be on top. I have very poor upper-body strength” (*Whys* 83).

After the epiphany provided by 711 regarding his sexual desires, Yorick slowly begins to stop judging himself in relation to the hypermasculine norm of his youth. Earlier in the comic, Yorick more often aligns himself with previous notions of masculine place. As an example, when informed of his father’s death, he accepts the loss without tears, attempting to maintain the stoic façade required by hypermasculinity. He repeatedly throws himself into danger, not only to end his existence but to protect women—even when his genetic material may be the most essential thing for the continuance of the species. He states that he cannot stop himself from trying to save women regardless of their competency, and he also believes he is more capable of logical reasoning and leadership. Even though his mother is a U.S. Senator, he has no experience in governmental affairs. Nevertheless, he interrupts the heads of state to give them a speech on the founding *fathers*, stating that he would “hate to have to tell *my* children that this great nation, which millions of my brothers shed their blood to forge, was completely *undone* by [you women]” (*Unmanned* 77). His choice of words intentionally belittles the women occupying the most powerful positions in the United States, all of whom he dismisses out of hand. His humor even occasionally strays into gender bashing, mocking Dr. Mann and her lover Rose after catching them having sex by mimicking their sexual escapades towards Agent 355 and complaining that “laughter died with the dudes” when she does not appreciate his gay bashing (*Kimono* 119). At this stage of Yorick’s development, he has not completed his transformation, and he continues to struggle with power dynamics and the comedy ideals of not “punching down.” In this, Vaughan and Guerra foresaw by ten years the current controversy in American comedy, where the (mostly male) comedians of the late 20th century are refusing to do college shows, as the current generation, raised on so called “politically correct” values, no longer find their riffing on racial and gender stereotypes funny—and the comics blame the young for their lack of humor.

These moments slowly begin to vanish as Yorick matures, though, and by the end of the comic he stands staunchly against such small-

minded attitudes regarding gender. In the final scene of the comic, an old Yorick gives his hard-won advice to one of his grown up clones (and a stand-in for the audience). Yorick chides the youth for attempting to continue the narrow gender binaries of the pre-apocalypse. *Y: the Last Man* attempts a hard balancing act, but the authors are willing to risk robbing a main male character of his traditional male potency and still hoping their often conservative audience will embrace Yorick's gender performance and feminist ideals. Yorick becomes a champion of rejecting gender boundaries, especially in his confrontation with the most likely cause of the global apocalypse, Dr. Mann's father, Dr. Matsumori. He believes that the genocide began during the birth of a clone of his daughter, and it is certain that the drugs he injected himself and Ampersand with saved both Matsumori and Yorick. Deciding that the world would be better off without men, he plans to murder Yorick and commit suicide, saying

MATSUMORI: Ever since I was a little boy, women have terrified me. I suspect this is why my male colleagues and I *marginalized* so many later in life. Our sexes may be equal, but they are not the same. I'd hoped we could all find a way to coexist, but evolution clearly prefers the idea of *segregation*.

YORICK: A few years ago, I would have been totally down with your suicide pact, ace. I made up all sorts of excuses about how *offing myself* and leaving this world to the ladies would be noble and selfless and . . . shut up and listen to me, Matsumori! Every guy goes through a period where he's . . . he's scared shitless and completely baffled by girls, right? But then we're supposed to *grow up*, figure out that the best place for all the great women probably isn't *behind* every great man. The two sides are only going to get through this together . . . so why don't you stop being such a *pussy* and man the *fuck* up? (*Motherland* 79)

In this scene, Yorick challenges not only Matsumori, but all the men of his generation, all of his "male colleagues," who continue to enforce a patriarchal system—and seek to find legitimization for it. While Yorick's language choice could be seen as problematic, as it casts the debate in stereotypically sexist language, aligning female genitalia with weakness, seeing it as such would be short sighted. Yorick's challenge to Matsumori inverts the usual meanings ironically—in

this instance, to be a “pussy” is to *fail* to treat women equally, while “acting like a man” means to distance oneself from the patriarchy. The importance of this challenge towards the male readers of the comic is bolstered by an interview Vaughan gave in late 2015, where he says that all of his comics are written as exercises to deal with the fears and issues with which he struggles. As a new father, one of his current comics, *Saga*, is about the fears associated with parenthood, but with *Y: the Last Man*, written after a breakup, “I was sort of confused and terrified about the opposite sex . . . [and] the conflict is always really internal and then I just spread it out to characters to try to figure out what the hell is wrong with me” (Lendof 10). With this, “what the hell was wrong with him” can be inferred as confusion about the power dynamics at play in relationships, and the answer was to embrace an open understanding of gender performance across gender lines.

By the end of the comic, Yorick stands as the feminist mouthpiece of the author, questioning the decisions of others and passing judgment on their actions. While this position of a white masculine authority passing judgment is hardly inventive (the history of philosophy is filled with white male voices), here Yorick is pushing for Matsumori and his audience of traditionally conservative white men to consider more inclusivity and equanimity in their moral stances. The morality he espouses reveres life, equality, peace, and responsibility for one’s actions—behaviors and beliefs already performed by many women of the comic from their introduction.⁷ This stance only further removes him from the hypermasculine ideal, which has no problem sowing death and destruction when on “moral” ground (i.e., when not starting the fight). When his sister Hero joins the masculine hate group the Sisters of the Amazons and unquestioningly kills when commanded, he argues that she is responsible for her actions, regardless of the cultesque brainwashing she has experienced: “I’m as liberal as the next Naderite . . . but *fuck* that Patty Hearst shit. My sister is responsible for what she did. She deserves to be punished” (*Cycles* 112). Even in this judgmental language, Vaughan and Guerra shy from making Yorick the sole arbiter of moral justice. He does not have control over his sister’s fate, and these words are his opinions given to the woman who does. Although he seeks for Hero to receive justice, he does not push for her death, because he sees killing as immoral. When he does accidentally kill a woman in self-defense, shooting her in the leg specifically so she will not die, he suffers recurrent guilt for his actions. His moral stance also includes forgiveness for those who repent their actions, as he helps Hero heal from her guilt over killing an unarmed woman and

accepts Rose even though she has betrayed his trust. He stands as a liberal humanitarian, in opposition to the jingoistic, hyperaggressive male superhero, and Yorick finishes the comic, after the near genocide of the human species, with these ideals intact. When truly pressured, and the Israeli commando Alter stands revealed as the woman who killed both the woman he loves and his mother, Yorick cannot find it within himself to kill her. She begs for release, seeking to die the only honorable death that she can imagine (i.e., death at the hands of a man in combat), and Yorick refuses to accept the label she has attempted to place upon him. He refuses to become a murderer and thus rejects all of the anti-masculine rhetoric of groups like the Sisters of the Amazon, who see all men as base animals without principles.

As stated earlier, the entirety of Yorick's journey is the struggle to be accepted as a man, even though he does not embody many stereotypical masculine traits. His childishness in the first few graphic novels nearly threatens the extinction of mankind, but as he begins to accept both his survivor's guilt and his lack of traditional masculinity, he becomes more self-confident and accepting of his differences. Shortly after his intervention by Agent 711, when he discovers that he survived the plague because of antibodies present in Ampersand, Yorick bemoans that

any delusions I once had about me being the protagonist of some predestined epic quest have gone the way of *boy bands*. Can you believe I honestly used to think there was a *reason* I was still here? Divine intervention, fate, fucking *magic* There had to be *some* larger-than-life explanation why it wasn't Stephen Hawking or . . . or Clint Eastwood or Chuck Palahniuk or any of the millions of other dudes who were substantially better suited to this job than I. But now I know it was all just a crap shoot. (*Ring* 163)⁸

The self-recrimination and lack of self-doubt ebbs as the comic progresses, and he accepts both his limitations and his strengths. His courage had never been in doubt, except for the questionable bravery in successfully committing suicide, but he learns to not risk his life performing tasks better suited to more capable people. His self-deprecating humor moves from the present tense to the past, as right before he meets Beth for the first time in six years, he tells Agent 355 that "I used to be a self-centered, suicidal shut-in, but these days, I flatter myself to think I'm a whole different string of alliteration"

(*Whys* 23). While at this point he questions his ability to raise boys, “if I ever have a son,” he asks, “how the fuck am *I* going to teach him to be, you know . . . *masculine*,” during the denouement, sixty years later, he succeeds in giving fatherly advice (*Whys* 41). He speaks to one of his various adult clones (who is the same age as Yorick when the comic began) and tells him that he is going on a journey that begins in boyhood, and this allegorical journey is the heart of this essay.

Once Yorick accepts that he is different from his earlier understanding of masculinity, he struggles to find that same acceptance in a world of women who see him as a child. Rarely is he referred to by any woman as a man until near the comic’s end, and those few moments are usually in recollection of all lost men—as when Natalya tells him that it is nice to hear a man’s voice again. Usually, he is cajoled for his boyish antics and referred to either by a plethora of boyish synonyms, like boy wonder, magic lad, innocent boy, harmless boy, or as someone who splits wood, fights, shoots, runs, etc., “like a girl.” As he demonstrates forethought, responsibility, and strong humanitarian ideals, he slowly is acknowledged as both an adult and a man. In their last sparring match, Agent 355 tells him that he has “finally stopped hitting like a girl” and refers to him as “big man” (*Whys* 11, 21). While this might demonstrate only that Yorick has become physically competent, in his fight with Alter several pages later, he is quickly outmatched, and his quick wits, not his fighting skills, save him. His full acceptance probably comes near the end of their journey, both when Ciba wants Yorick to be in her child’s life, stating that children need “a strong male influence,” and after reuniting with Beth (*Motherland* 77). After a long separation, she compliments him on his manly scars and the sexual prowess that he never demonstrated before, and after confessing that she was going to break up with him when they last spoke, she speaks to his qualities:

You have always been an extraordinary human being, but I . . . I wasn’t sure you were the right person for me to spend the rest of my life with. But now, now you’re courageous and strong and . . . and responsible. You’re the man I’ve been dreaming of, *literally*. (*Whys* 67)

These three descriptors—courageous, strong, and responsible—are the attributes of traditionally performed masculinity that are still incorporated in Yorick’s characteristics, and with these traits are Yorick’s other aspects: humanitarianism, appreciation for popular

culture, humor, the ability to admit weakness, and a willingness to accept a submissive sexual role, if desired, without it diminishing his self-esteem or moral strength.

It would be remiss, however, to ignore the critique that *Y: the Last Man* produces a patriarchal space through centering the story of a world full of women on the lone remaining man. More than one critic has decried the work for silencing the voices of women in order to tell yet another masculine post-apocalypse story. In examining the global dynamics in relation to the local ones in *Y: the Last Man*, queer theorist Lyndsay Brown believes that the comic is a

decidedly heteronormative story: a linear, globally focused buddy-cop tale of intrigue and espionage on the high seas, full of one-liners, clichés, gender-based jokes, and an eventual victory by the good guys. (3)

In Brown's reading of the text, *Y: the Last Man* is not, as Michel Foucault would say, a heterotopic space where gender identity finds transformative power but a return to a patriarchal text urging for gender normative binaries. I argue, however, that rather than looking at the comic as "decidedly heteronormative," it might be assigned the label *self-aware*, as it frequently references and mocks its place in literary history and uses of gender and sexuality. More important, the authors situate the work deliberately as an exploration of (then-)contemporary white masculinity and its failures, in an attempt to address the author's self-confessed concerns and fears about women and heterosexual relationships. Vaughan and Guerra are fully aware of the complicated gender politics of their work, and instead of encouraging patriarchy, they attack the notions of masculine authority upon which it is built.

Their self-awareness is most prevalent in the story arcs concerning a group of traveling artists, Fish & Bicycle Productions, who struggle to retain and advance culture in a world torn apart by global tragedy.⁹ They are the only characters outside the main cast with more than one individual issue dedicated to their story, which takes them from first producing original and classic theatrical productions in a traveling show (where actresses are cast in both male and female roles, a reversal of Shakespeare's time), to attempting a failed movie production, and finally to creating an internationally best-selling comic about the last woman on Earth.¹⁰ Their writer/leader, the passionate Cayce, serves as an author-surrogate who highlights *Y: the Last Man's* tongue-in-cheek literary awareness. Cayce expresses her hatred of "crappy works of fiction that

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try to sound important by stealing names from the *Bard*” (like Yorick and Hero), yet she does more than supply literary humor; she also informs the reader of the influences and inspirations of the comic:

Besides, Lionel is my tribute to the founding mother of sci-fi . . . a little tip of the hat to *Mary Shelley* . . . Back in the 1800’s, she wrote this book called *The Last Man*, about a twenty-first century plague that kills everyone except for a guy named Lionel . . . [What caused] the plague? She never really gets around to explaining it. But it’s not the point of her story. It’s a condemnation of the . . . the unchecked *masculinity* that was always threatening to destroy the planet. It’s about the failure of art and imagination to save the world. (*Small Step* 149-150)

Vaughan and Guerra reference Shelley to establish their historical and literary credentials, as well as to refocus Shelley’s bleak future landscape into one filled with hope. The world at the end of *Y: the Last Man* is not on the brink of devastation when the men die; it is just an average day in the modern world: mostly female couples holding hands on public transportation systems and mothers playing with their daughters in the park. Clones of Yorick and Vladimir (the child of astronauts who were deployed during the apocalypse) are slowly filling in the gaps as equals to women, instead of as masculine authority figures. In Shelley’s future, men were vehicles of destruction, but Vaughan and Guerra consciously construct a world where there are viable options for men other than patriarchal enforcers.¹¹

These men, however, are entirely, and problematically, white—one of the more glaring flaws of the narrative. Not once do any women of color bemoan the racial loss of their counterparts. They accept the last man as a white man without concern for the death of billions of men of color and the inevitable blow this will cause to racial identity. This easily could have been (somewhat) mitigated through the story of Vladimir, a boy born in an orbiting spaceship. When all of Earth’s men died, three astronauts—Americans Ciba and Joe and Russian Vladimir—remain in space, fearful of contamination on Earth, for more than a year. During that time, the three enter a romantic relationship, and Ciba becomes pregnant. Ultimately, after crashing on Earth and giving birth, white Russian Vladimir proves to be the father instead of African-American Joe. With one easy alteration in the story, Vaughan and Guerra could have altered the racial identity of the male clones but instead chose to whitewash all

men in their stories' future. While the female cast is allowed diversity, it is shallowly explored, especially as Dr. Mann's story, an Asian-American woman warring against an overbearing and distant father figure, is as stereotypical as they come. Agent 355 is allowed a bit more nuance, especially as the comic explores her childhood dealing with racism in the foster care system. However, in her interactions with Yorick, her race is more often used to classify Yorick as geeky and "unhip" more than any in-depth understanding of Agent 355 as an African-American woman. The vast majority of the action of the comic is in Westernized countries, where whiteness abounds, and while women of color are given positions of authority and power in the world's governments, they remain mostly on the margins in the central story. When *Y: the Last Man* does explore non-white countries, most notably Japan in *Kimono Dragons*, these places are explored through a lens that is expressly white and American. The Japan of the comic is filled with Yakuza bosses, stealth assassins, and "bizarre" cultural traditions—truly a white understanding of Japanese culture. In these moments of non-white exploration Vaughan and Guerra's work fails, as their attempt to support an alternative to standard, hyperaggressive masculinity is still a white one.

Though not flawless, *Y: the Last Man* still serves as a vehicle to challenge the patriarchal power of the world of the pre-apocalypse, and its narrative does not only focus on the white man at the center of the story. For this transformation of patriarchal power to occur, the feminine characters must equally embrace the destruction of traditional notions of gender dynamics. In this vein, any female character who retains beliefs or attachments to former gender binaries is not successful in the world of *Y: the Last Man*. This is perhaps most apparent in Captain Kilina, a Hawaiian drug-running pirate, on whose ship Yorick, 355, and Dr. Mann stow away to gain access to Australia. When the Australian Navy sinks Kilina's ship to stop more opium from entering their country, Yorick runs to her side to prevent her from going down with her ship:

KILINA: Come on, you heartless *bastards*. Finish it already

YORICK: What are you, fucking *Ahab* now? Going down with the ship is a bit played out, don't you think? . . . We can still use one of the emergency rafts, Kilina. It's not too late.

KILINA: Yorick, it was too late for me the second I found out

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about *you*. My whole life, I've always been a . . . a *supporting character* in somebody else's story. Daughter, student, fuck buddy, first mate, *whatever*. But when the plague went down, I finally saw a chance to *change* that . . . wanted to be a *leader*. I wanted to help as many women as I could. I wanted to give them an *adventure*. And if a few people ended up getting hurt in the process, what the hell? We were all going to be gone in a few years, anyway, right? And then the last *man* on earth shows up.

YORICK: Kilina, save the bullshit thesis paper for your lit class and *let's go*.

KILINA: You don't get it, do you? The Australians are *right*. Now that you're here, I'm just another crazy bitch fucking up the world *you're* going to save. It figures. An entire planet of women, and the one *guy* gets to be the lead. (*Girl* 91-93)

Kilina's simplistic attempt to reverse the gender binary, to fill the role of masculine protagonist in an adventure tale, demonstrates her inability to survive in the post-apocalypse. She is far from the only character to fail this test. The Israeli colonel Alter ends the comic begging for Yorick to kill her, as the only honorable death for a warrior is at the hands of an honorable enemy, and in her mind, a man is the only suitable candidate. Dr. Allison Mann begins the comic similarly blinded, judging herself solely against her father, but learns to reject emotional unavailability and slavish dedication to a work ethic as viable options. She constantly compares herself to men, but she only finds happiness in her professional and personal life when she stops adhering to these gendered notions of proper behavior. In order to find fulfillment, in a humanistic sense, all characters must also remove their belief in or attempts to supplant gender binaries and embrace gender fluidity.¹² The example of this gender fluidity in the female character is in Yorick's opposite, his sister Hero. While Yorick's story is just "another boring bildungsroman," Hero's is one of redemption, the anti-hero who earns the right to a happy ending (*Whys* 134). In many ways, hers is one traditionally found in westerns and military melodramas, but unlike the infamous *Shane*, Hero ends the comic in the arms of the woman she loves—Beth Deville, the love interest of Yorick's years-long quest. Her story is the most traditional, the most expected, and in many ways the mirror to Yorick's, as she even ends with Yorick's dream woman. By naming the sister Hero, the comic's

authors seem to be challenging their own position that Yorick is, indeed, the hero of the piece, and maybe there is no single hero, just as there is no single performance of gender identity. Viewers shall see exactly how much of these complicated gender performances are continued when the story changes media; FX has picked up *Y: the Last Man* for television, with Vaughan (who has a great deal of experience in television) as a showrunner. When the television series is broadcast, it will be more than ten years since the comic ended, but the work the comic seeks to perform is far from finished.

Notes

1. This traditional narrative arc in American comics was first found in *Captain Marvel*, created by C. C. Beck and Bill Parker in 1939, with the magical transformation of a boy into a strong, masculine superhero, but it is a common narrative arc amongst the genre's most recognizable figures (e.g., Superman and Batman, to name the most popular).
2. There are exceptions, such as the third highest rated TV show of 2013, *The Big Bang Theory*, where stereotypically demasculinized character types are the protagonists. However, there is quite a bit of debate on whether the protagonists of *The Big Bang Theory* are positive portrayals of geek masculinity or merely humorous "others" for the audience to mock.
3. It would be unfair to tar the entirety of the Men's Rights Movement with the brush of patriarchal, hyperaggressive masculine control, as many MRA activists are feminists who fight for male equality in child custody and rape awareness. However, there is still a large swath of MRA members who focus on perceived notions of female dominance and privilege over men, espoused by writers like William Ferrell in *The Myth of Male Power*, which denies that men have more systemic power and authority than women.
4. E. Anthony Rotundo, in *American Manhood*, traces how masculine definitions moved from a communal, family-oriented model in the 19th century towards an aggressive, domineering individual model after the Industrial Revolution. For more information on the development of individualism and American masculinity, see his work and *Regeneration Through Violence* by Richard Slotkin.
5. There are places of resistance *within* superhero comics. For an excellent example, see J. Richard Stevens' *Captain America: Masculinity and Violence*.
6. For information on comic book fan communities, see Matthew J. Pustz's *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers*.
7. Some women, like Alter, fail to learn similar lessons, and others, like Dr. Mann, who struggles with accepting her responsibilities, must also learn these lessons through their own trials.
8. Even Yorick's choices of "better men" demonstrates his connection to

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fluid, masculine portrayals associated with geek culture: Stephen Hawking is brilliant but almost entirely paralyzed, Clint Eastwood is famous for his *portrayals* of hard-bitten masculine characters but is a renowned director of emotional dramatic films, and Chuck Palahniuk created *Fight Club* (1996), the novel and later movie about an underground collective of masculine violence mocked by its author.

9. Their name is notably a reference to the old adage “a woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle,” and it serves as yet more evidence of the comic’s self-awareness.
10. As a cap, perhaps, to Fish & Bicycle’s self-awareness is their comic about the only woman to survive in a world full of men after a global apocalypse. When Yorick reads it for the first time, as the only established literary expert among the main cast of *Y: the Last Man*, he is asked about its quality and describes it as “meh.”
11. *The Last Man*, published in 1826, is also known for both its celebration of her intimate circle of literary friends and a rejection of their Romantic philosophy (i.e., human nature is ultimately corrupt and destructive).
12. A more complete examination of the construction of feminine identity in *Y: the Last Man*’s post-apocalypse would be beneficial, especially one that studies the alterations in gender performance of the work’s other two protagonists, Dr. Allison Mann and Agent 355.

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The NFL's "Violence Against Women Problem": Media Framing and The Perpetuation of Domestic Abuse

Chris B. Geyerman

During the 2014 season, the National Football League (NFL) experienced a "domestic violence crisis" when a series of highly publicized cases figured prominently in the landscape of American popular culture, the most notable of which stemmed from an incident that occurred seven months before the season began, in the early hours of February 15, 2014. Upon returning from a Valentine's Day celebration with friends, in an elevator at the Revel Casino Hotel in Atlantic City, New Jersey, Baltimore Raven's running back Ray Rice and his then-fiancée, now wife, Janay Palmer¹ were involved in a verbal altercation when Palmer reached for Rice's cell phone and he spit at her and then punched her in the head, rendering her unconscious. Months later, when the incident was the center of a media firestorm, Terry O'Neill, President of the National Organization for Women, would proclaim that "The NFL has lost its way. It doesn't have a Ray Rice problem; it has a violence against women problem" (O'Keeffe). In itself, the event was sadly unremarkable.

A woman is beaten in the U.S. every nine seconds; each year, more than 4.5 million women are subjected to physical violence at the hands of their intimate partner. Intimate partner homicide is the leading cause of death among pregnant women; from 2001–2012 almost twice as many women were killed by current or former intimate male partners as soldiers were killed in Afghanistan. One in four women will be the victim of severe intimate partner violence during the course of their life; one in seven men will be the victim of severe intimate partner violence during the course of his life—and the list goes on (Vagianos). Domestic violence is, quite literally, epidemic.

However, the Ray Rice case was remarkable. In fact, it was so remarkable that when NBC News released its *Year in Review: The Top Stories of 2014*, "Domestic Violence in the NFL" was number 8, and the Rice case was featured most prominently (Leitsinger). For one week in September 2014, the Rice case dominated the sports news

and was featured in virtually every national newspaper and television news broadcast, such as *CBS This Morning* and the *Today Show*, to name just two. The Ray Rice case was the subject of great publicity for several key reasons. First, Rice was an all-pro running back for the Super Bowl champion Baltimore Ravens. When on February 15, 2014, both he and his fiancée Palmer were arrested and charged with “simple assault,” it made national news, especially in the sports media. Second, and more significant, on February 19, 2014, *TMZ*, the celebrity gossip and entertainment website, released video of Rice literally dragging the limp bodied, unconscious Palmer from the Atlantic City casino elevator in which the incident occurred. The sports media followed closely and reported the developments in the Ray Rice case from this point forward, and it played out in typical fashion: Rice’s indictment by an Atlantic City grand jury on a third degree assault charge on March 27, 2014; his and Palmer’s marriage the next day; Rice’s plea of not guilty on May 1, 2014; and his subsequent application to and acceptance in a “diversionary” program for first-time offenders, which meant that Rice would be clear of criminality after one year. Rice and his wife also met in person with NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell. Everything went as expected until on July 24, 2014 NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell announced a two-game suspension as punishment for Rice. Goodell was widely and almost universally criticized for his handling of the case, and the two-game suspension was viewed by most as, at best, woefully inadequate, and, at worst, misogynistic and tone deaf. Third, and without question most significant, on Monday, September 8, 2014, the day culminating week one of the 2014 NFL season, *TMZ* released another video, this time of surveillance footage from inside the Atlantic City casino elevator. It graphically portrayed the vicious blow to the head that rendered Palmer unconscious and Rice’s nonchalant response. *Year in Review: The Top Stories of 2014* begins its description of domestic violence in the NFL with these words: “The NFL has struggled with the gravest scandal in its history. A video surfaced earlier this year of Baltimore running back Ray Rice punching and knocking out his then fiancée, now wife, and dragging her out of a hotel elevator” (Leitsinger). By the end of the day, the Baltimore Ravens terminated Rice’s contract, and he was suspended indefinitely from the NFL by Goodell. The Ray Rice domestic violence case was “the story of the moment,” and the media frenzy was on in full force.

Given the prominent and sensational nature of the Rice case, it comes as no surprise that domestic violence emerged as a more

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visible social problem, and the increase in public scrutiny of domestic violence in the NFL was especially acute. Enter Greg Hardy, then all-pro defensive end for the Carolina Panthers, and Adrian Peterson, all-pro running back for the Minnesota Vikings.²

Hardy played in Carolina's 2014 season opener on September 7, 2014, despite having been arrested for assault and communicating threats on May 13, 2014, after allegedly beating and threatening to kill his girlfriend, Nicole Holder. Hardy was found guilty by a North Carolina judge that July, but when, on appeal, Holder failed to appear in court, North Carolina prosecutors dismissed charges. In the face of intense public criticism, fomented in large part by the release of the second Rice video, the Panthers deactivated Hardy on September 14, 2014, and the NFL placed him on the commissioner's exempt list.³ Hardy played no more in the 2014 season. In April 2015, during the off-season, he was suspended for ten games by NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell and then was traded to the Dallas Cowboys. The suspension was reduced to four games in arbitration, and in game five of the 2015 NFL season, Hardy made his debut as a member of the Dallas Cowboys. Despite missing the first four games, Hardy finished the 2015 season with six sacks, second highest by the Cowboys, and he likely led the league in public controversy.

Like Hardy, Adrian Peterson played in week one of the 2014 NFL season. Unlike Hardy and Rice, Peterson was not suspended for domestic violence against a woman. Rather, Peterson was placed on the commissioner's exempt list after being indicted on September 12, 2014, by a Texas grand jury on felony charges of reckless or negligent injury to a child after beating his four-year-old son with a "switch." *TMZ* posted on its website photographs of the bloody wounds on the boy's legs, back, and genital area, and Peterson's 2014 NFL season was over. Peterson avoided jail time by reaching a plea agreement in which he pled "no-contest" to the lesser charge of "recklessly assaulting" the child. Peterson was subsequently cleared to play during the 2015 NFL season, in which he led the Vikings to the playoffs and the NFL in rushing, with 1485 yards on 327 carries, scoring 11 touchdowns and being selected to the Pro Bowl.

Because they involve famous people and generate such publicity, the Ray Rice, Greg Hardy, and Adrian Peterson cases provide especially visible examples of public discourse on domestic violence. An analysis of sports media representations of these cases can be used to explicate the dominant media frames employed, giving particular attention to the attributions for

domestic violence. Through this approach, this study contributes to research on media coverage of domestic violence in general (e.g., Gillespie et al.; Rothman et al.; Nettleton; McManus and Dorfman; Berns, *Framing the Victim*)⁴ and on domestic violence in world sports in particular (e.g., Dabbs; Enck-Wanzer; McDonald; “Out of Bounds”; Welch).

Frame Analysis, Media Framing, and Attribution Theory

The analysis following is based on a close reading of media reports of domestic violence in the NFL from February 2014 to November 2015. There is no question that the Rice case, because of the graphic video footage, serves as the most significant motivating factor in the increased concern about domestic violence in the NFL. In fact, the Rice case is most often referred to in media reports of other NFL domestic violence cases, including those of Hardy and Peterson. In this sense, the Rice case serves as the context for the media reporting of the cases that have (and likely will) follow. For example, on *ESPN Radio's The Dan Le Batard Show*, which airs Monday through Friday from 10am to 1pm EST, Le Batard and co-host Jon “Stugotz” Weiner on November 11, 2015 engaged in a discussion about the unrepentant Greg Hardy and whether he was the most disliked person in sports. During the course of the November 11, 2015, discussion, Stugotz wondered aloud if Hardy’s refusal to act contrite causes people to view Hardy differently than Rice, who is “out there in the community saying the right things, he’s showing contrition, he’s doing the right things.” Le Batard countered with “no, but we still have a video of him knocking his wife . . . his fiancée unconscious in an elevator, and that speaks louder than any of it, and he’s not in the league anymore.” Because the Rice case occupies a central place in current public discourse on domestic violence in the NFL, it functions as the primary reference and point of departure in this analysis.

Framing analysis in communication and media studies can be traced initially to the work of Gregory Bateson and Erving Goffman. At its most basic, framing analysis posits that communication “sources,” especially media sources, present information and “facts” in specific ways that simultaneously encourage the making of particular meanings and discourage or even preclude the conceptual possibility of others. In Bateson’s words, frames are both inclusive and exclusive: just as “the frame around a picture says ‘Attend to what is within and do not attend to what is outside,’” the (discursive) frames of media

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events direct attention to that which is framed *as it is framed*, not to potential alternative framings, and the perception of the picture—in this case domestic violence in the media coverage of the Rice, Hardy, and Peterson cases—is “positively enhanced” (187). In short, to employ framing analysis as a method is to examine “the organization of experience” as it is “governed” by “subjective involvement” in social events thus experienced (Goffman 10-11). With respect to social problems like domestic violence, “by identifying what the problem is about and what its causes are, a frame at least implies, if not stated outright, what should be done to solve it” (Berns, *Framing the Victim* 8). Thus, media frames function as a form of “cultural pedagogy” (Kellner 9), and framing analysis focuses on the explication of those cultural lessons.

In the absence of experience, meaning is derived via some form of mediated communication, and the mass media here figure most prominently. To explicate how domestic violence is represented in the media framing of the Rice, Hardy, and Peterson cases, basic premises of attribution theory are used because this theory is concerned with “trying to make sense of others’ behavior” (Fogler, Poole, and Stutman 52). The behavior of others, according to attribution theory, is made sense of by attributing their actions to dispositional factors and situational factors. According to Fogler, Poole, and Stutman, dispositional attributions are causes for behavior that are seen as “arising from the individual,” whereas situational attributions are seen as “stemming from external forces” (52). Dispositional and situational attributions that characterize dominant media framing of these cases (re)constitutes an understanding of domestic violence in which blame is to varying degrees dispersed from the NFL and the perpetrators.

Media Framing of Domestic Violence in the NFL

The media representations of domestic violence around the Rice, Hardy, and Peterson cases are marked by the emergence of two distinct frames. First, media coverage of these cases framed domestic violence as an NFL problem. In so doing, the media coverage of these cases diverted attention away from domestic violence as a widespread social problem and set up a dynamic which allowed the NFL to attribute its domestic violence problem to ignorance and reposition itself as part of the solution. Second, because domestic violence, by definition, involves persons in a relationship, it should come as no surprise that media coverage of these cases of domestic violence is framed

by referencing the nature of the relationship between the perpetrator and victim. Specifically, media reporting on these cases framed the relationship between the principles at the time of the incidents as one marked by an interpersonal bond. The analysis demonstrates that, taken together, these media framings of domestic violence in the NFL serve two critical functions. First, they mollify both the NFL and the three perpetrators by reducing their culpability for these violent acts; second, they constitute conditions for redemption that invoke a patriarchal value structure which promotes an understanding grounded in American identity.

Frame One: Domestic Violence is an NFL Problem

As indicated by the epigraph and the fact that NBC News named “Domestic in the NFL” a top story for 2014, the sports and national media in its coverage of the Rice, Hardy, and Peterson cases recurrently framed domestic violence as a problem especially prevalent in the NFL. The framing of domestic violence as an NFL problem did indeed focus public attention to its occurrence and subsequent handling by the NFL. More important, it also set off a dynamic that allowed the NFL to employ rhetorical strategies by using a series of dispositional and situational attributions that blame the problem on its own ignorance and on society at large. The rhetorical strategies used by the NFL in its response to the media framing of domestic violence as an NFL problem allowed the NFL to reposition itself as part of a solution to the problem. This repositioning resulted in large part from two themes that characterize this frame: the competence of NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell and the NFL’s newfound recognition that domestic violence is a complex and pervasive social problem.

Goodell had been the subject of public criticism for the two-game suspension he handed down to Ray Rice on July 24, 2014, but criticism was nothing new to Goodell. Since assuming his role as NFL Commissioner in September 2006, Goodell had become known as the “law and order” commissioner for his no-nonsense attitude and handing down harsh penalties for player and team misconduct. Yet when the video was released of Rice punching Palmer in the head and knocking her out, the public criticism (and scrutiny) of Goodell reached heretofore unseen heights. The criticism of Goodell centered on his handling of the Ray Rice case and his refusal to deal proactively with NFL problems, instead dealing with them only as a reaction to public-opinion pressure. Also, it was primarily concerned with the

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three themes of demanding his resignation, questioning his competence regarding when he first saw the video of Rice punching Palmer in the head, and deciding to extend Ray's suspension indefinitely following the release of that video.

The speculation over Goodell's reign as NFL Commissioner was widespread, and it became the subject of debate by former NFL players and coaches, many of whom are current NFL analysts, and interested members of the public. For example, ESPN published an article that stated Goodell was "called into question . . . [by] former NFL players, an owner, a league sponsor and a leading U.S. legislator" ("Roddy White"), a story in the *Washington Post* indicated that "in fact, those in and around the NFL community have begun scrutinizing Goodell's priorities and, in some cases, calling for his job" (Babb and Maske), and the *International Business Times* reported that "Fire Roger Goodell" was trending on Twitter (Price). One of the most important and far-reaching criticisms of Goodell came from the National Organization for Women (NOW), which on September 10, 2014, issued a statement calling for Goodell's resignation (Armour and "NOW Wants"). According to the release, the president of NOW, Terry O'Neill stated: "The NFL has lost its way. It doesn't have a Ray Rice problem; it has a domestic violence problem The only workable solution is for Roger Goodell to resign" ("NOW Wants"). As the story was transformed from one about domestic violence to the survival of Goodell as NFL Commissioner, in which, ironically, NOW played a critical role, it soon became apparent that Goodell would weather the storm and retain his job. On the same day that NOW issued its press release, *USA Today* published a story that opened with these words: "The desk pounding cries for Roger Goodell's head are a waste of breath. He is not quitting and the NFL owners, money flooding their houses like a melting Arctic island, are not firing him" (Whicker).

Even though it became apparent Goodell would retain his job, his credibility was nonetheless the subject of criticism, particularly regarding when he actually viewed the video of Rice punching Palmer. The speculation was that he had seen the video, and *ESPN.com* published a September 28, 2014 story that leads with "A law enforcement official says he sent a video of Ray Rice punching his then-fiancée to an NFL executive five months ago, while league officials have insisted they didn't see the violent images until this week" ("Report: Rice Video"). Goodell, of course, denied seeing the video before September 8, 2014 but said in an interview with

USA Today that “when he did, he found it ‘sickening’” (Brennan). Regardless of whether Goodell had seen the video before Monday of that week, the media attention given to the issue functioned to keep Rice as a perpetrator of domestic violence in the background and serves as another example of how the media framing of domestic violence often obscures the perpetrator’s responsibility.

When Rice did become the focus of attention in this frame, it was the result of Goodell increasing his initial two-game suspension to an indefinite suspension because the latter was consistent with the “new domestic violence policy” (Brennan). Goodell was widely criticized for increasing Rice’s punishment on the grounds that because Rice already had been punished for his assault on Palmer with a two-game suspension, the increase to an indefinite suspension was arbitrary and unjust, nothing more than a “PR stunt” to placate public outcry. Former U.S. District Judge Barbara S. Jones, who heard Rice’s appeal in November 2014, agreed. She overturned Rice’s suspension on the grounds that Goodell’s indefinite suspension was “an abuse of discretion . . . and arbitrary” (“Ray Rice Wins Appeal”). The decision made Rice a free agent, eligible to sign with any NFL team. Regardless of whether one thinks he should have been eligible to play in the NFL during the 2015 season or that Goodell over-stepped his authority, the focus on the suspension of Rice from the NFL further diverted attention away from him as the perpetrator of violence against women, this time in an alternative persona of the abuser, i.e., Rice the football player..

During the height of media attention on Goodell, he gave an interview that was aired on *CBS This Morning*. In the post-script to the interview, which was televised an hour later, Goodell was “asked what he learned from his pre-discipline meeting with Ray Rice and his wife, Janay. ‘He [Ray] indicated what he and Janay are doing as a couple to try to address their issues,’ Goodell said. ‘It’s a very difficult issue for families. What I’m learning about this whole issue of domestic violence is that it’s very complicated. Very difficult on families. There are victims, there are family members that are impacted by this’” (Florio). The net result of the media attention around the competence of Roger Goodell was that the problem was transformed from a private, family problem between Rice and Palmer to a public problem about the future of Goodell as commissioner (and, by extension, the NFL) and Ray Rice the football player. When Goodell was asked what he learned from his pre-discipline meeting (June 16, 2014) with Rice and Palmer, he referred to “victims” and “families” in the plural, a

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rhetorical strategy used widely by the NFL and the sports media to emphasize that domestic violence is a permeating social problem.

Domestic violence, previously illustrated by the statistics, is indeed a widespread, common, and thus permeating social problem, so it comes as no surprise that incidents of domestic violence occur among NFL players. By employing a rhetorical strategy that attributes domestic violence in the NFL to the fact that it is a permeating social problem, the NFL and sports media function to attribute the problem of domestic violence outside the culture of the NFL and reposition the NFL as part of the solution. "Human violence" is an anti-feminist frame that removes gender from the problem of domestic violence by assigning culpability to both men and women (i.e., domestic violence is not a male or female problem, but rather a human problem), and the result is that women are held as partially responsible for the abuse they endure (Berns, *Framing the Victim* 106). In much the same way, the "domestic violence as permeating social problem" rhetorical strategy in the Rice, Hardy, and Peterson cases functions to remove the NFL from the problem (i.e., domestic violence is not an NFL problem, but rather a socio-cultural problem). The result is that domestic violence is deinstitutionalized as an NFL problem, and thus this rhetoric functions as a sort of implicit rebuttal to claims, like the one advanced by NOW president Terry O'Neill, that the NFL "doesn't have a Ray Rice problem; it has a domestic violence problem" ("NOW Wants"). The strategy of situating domestic violence as a permeating social problem came from the NFL itself, those critical of the league and Goodell, and those reporting on the Rice, Hardy, and Peterson cases.

The focusing of attention on domestic violence as a permeating social problem was a strategy employed by the NFL office even before the release of the second video, in the construction of the letter Goodell sent to all 32 NFL teams, which was published in *USA Today* on August 28, 2014. In the letter, Goodell outlines the actions he has directed to "reinforce and enhance" NFL policies with respect to domestic violence. In describing the fifth directive, he writes "Fifth, we recognize that domestic violence and sexual assault are broad social issues, affecting millions of people" ("Roger Goodell's Letter"). By using this rhetorical strategy, which extends domestic violence into the larger social system, Goodell situates domestic violence as not intrinsically germane to the NFL, thus "deinstitutionalizing" the problem from the NFL per se. Because this strategy functions to reject the individuation of the NFL as a specific site of domestic violence, it comes as no surprise that it is widely employed by league officials

and apologists. However, the strategy is also unwittingly employed by others, even when they are criticizing the NFL.

Describing domestic violence as a permeating social problem is evident in Phil Taylor's "The Brutal Truth," which was published in the September 15, 2014 issue of *Sports Illustrated*, the cover of which features a grainy security camera photo of Rice and Palmer entering the elevator. The overall tone of the story is critical of Goodell and the NFL's handling of the Rice case, noting that it should not have taken the release of the video in which Rice knocks out Palmer for Goodell and the league to take more serious action. Nevertheless, when Taylor describes the effects of that video, he writes "The video was so shocking, so brutal and so repulsive that it intensified the reaction of Johnson and countless others, who have suffered, directly or indirectly, from the scourge of domestic violence" (Taylor). When Taylor uses the phrase "countless others," the implication is clear: the pain associated with domestic violence extends well beyond the confines of the NFL. Even in his criticism of the NFL, Taylor frames the problem of domestic violence so that the league is a place, one among many, where the ills of the larger society are played out.

In responding to the fallout from its handling of the Rice case, the NFL announced the implementation of new policies and practices with respect to domestic violence. On September 15, 2014—one week to the day after the release of the second Rice video—*ESPN.com* published a report about one such development. On the surface, the report titled "NFL Hires Domestic Violence Advisors" is short and simple. Running just seven brief paragraphs and less than one printed page, it simply describes the "three experts in domestic violence [that] will serve as senior advisers to the league" (para 1). The important part of the report for this analysis is the description of the domestic violence advisors hired by the NFL, which reads as follows: "Friel was the head of the Sex Crimes Prosecution Unit in the New York County District Attorney's Office for more than a decade. Randel is the co-founder of No More, a campaign against domestic violence and sexual assault. Smith is the former executive director of the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence." By adhering to the journalistic convention of listing the credentials of experts, the report's author clearly situates domestic violence as a problem exceeding the borders of the NFL. This rhetorical strategy, coupled with the *Boston Globe* headline "Roger Goodell Admits Mistake, Toughens NFL's Domestic Violence Policy," in which Goodell's letter to all NFL teams states that "I didn't get it right" (Fendrich), implicitly exonerates Goodell and

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the NFL from responsibility precisely because they did not understand the depth and complexity of the problem of domestic violence. With the newfound knowledge that domestic violence is such a complex social problem, the "tougher policies" represent progress toward solving the problem. In short, the narrative gives the NFL a pass based on ignorance of the domestic violence problem, despite the fact that domestic violence cases in the NFL were by no means a new phenomenon ("Out of Bounds" 1048-65; Dabbs 167-99).

The prevalence of domestic violence in society at large is also a major theme in the media reports of Peterson's child abuse. Almost from the moment he was indicted, Peterson's legal team, led by Russell "Rusty" Harden, a Texas attorney with an established track record of winning favorable verdicts for athletes, employed the strategy of attributing Peterson's actions to the situational factor that he was disciplined in the same manner as a child. The media ran with it, from *USA Today* to *CBS News* to *Time Magazine*. One typical example is from the *Los Angeles Times*, which quotes Peterson from the first public remarks since his arrest: "I have to live with the fact that when I disciplined my son the way I was disciplined as a child, I caused an injury that I never intended or thought would happen My goal is always to teach my son right from wrong and that's what I tried to do that day" (Schilken). This strategy serves two important functions in terms of media framing of domestic violence in the NFL. First, it situates domestic violence as outside the confines of the NFL and relocates it in Peterson's upbringing. Second, because this strategy implies that he did not know any better than to beat a four-year-old with a switch, it at least partially exonerates Peterson from responsibility for his own intentional actions and suggests that he is a loving parent concerned with teaching his child right from wrong and developing a productive father/son relationship. In addition to framing domestic violence as an NFL problem, the media's coverage of the Rice, Hardy, and Peterson cases employed another dominant frame by focusing on domestic violence as a relational problem.

Frame Two: Domestic Violence is a Relational Problem

One of the most dominant frames employed by the media in its coverage of domestic violence focuses on the nature of the relationship between those involved. In this frame, domestic violence as a social problem is concealed, the victims (Palmer and Holder) in the Rice and Hardy cases are held as at least in part responsible, and the role

of perpetrators is minimized and obscured. In this frame Peterson is represented as a loving father who unintentionally harmed his son. In its reporting on these incidents, the media framing of the relationship between abuser and abused implies specific meanings about the nature of perpetrators of domestic violence and about the role that men and women play in incidents of abuse.

Through a series of dispositional attributions, some made even by her, Janay Palmer is represented in the media as responsible for the violence she endured at the hands of her soon-to-be husband, Rice. This phenomenon is nothing new. For example, Nettleton (139) has suggested women's magazines place the responsibility for preventing domestic violence on the women. Similarly, Berns has suggested that as the problem of domestic violence is "degendered," the blame for domestic violence is "gendered" and as a result "places the burden of responsibility [for domestic violence] on women" ("Degendering the Problem" 278). In short, the victim of domestic violence is at once blamed for "provoking the abuse and held responsible for ending abuse" (Berns, *Framing the Victim* 3), and the media framing of Palmer was no exception.

On the day of the incident it was reported widely that both Palmer and Rice were arrested after they "struck each other with their hands" and were each charged with "simple assault" ("Key Events"). The mere fact that Palmer was also arrested and charged establishes her as at least partially to blame for the incident, and this trend continued throughout the media coverage of this case. For example, on Friday, July 25, 2014, on the daily ESPN television program *First Take*, sports analyst Stephen A. Smith made comments while discussing the Rice case that implied women can "provoke" domestic abuse. Smith was, of course, criticized widely, and on Monday, July 28, 2014, *Time Magazine* reported that he had apologized and "retracted statements that implied women can provoke domestic violence" (Dockterman). Perhaps the most blatant example of Bern's notion of "degendering" domestic violence and "gendering" the blame unfolded on Friday, May 23, 2014, when the Ravens held a press conference with Rice and Palmer appearing together. During the press conference, Rice apologized for "the situation my wife and I were in" ("Key Events"; Maine); Palmer apologized for "my role in the incident," and following the press conference the Ravens tweeted "Janay Rice says she deeply regrets the role that she played the night of the incident" (Taylor). Palmer continued along this path of self-blaming right through her exclusive November 5, 2014, interview with *ESPN's*

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Jemele Hill, which, incidentally, took place at the home of Janet Rice, the assailant's mother. Palmer described herself as that day as "annoyed" (Rice) because she was not going to get the Valentine's Day celebration she had wanted—just the two of them—as Rice had made plans with friends. In recalling the moments prior to the incident, Palmer said, "As we were arguing, he [Rice] was on his phone and not looking at me. I went to reach for his phone, and when he grabbed it back, he spit at me and I slapped him" (Rice). Later in the interview, Palmer recalled the May 23, 2014, press conference with these words: "Looking out over the media, I became angry When it was my turn to speak, I said I regretted my role in the incident I'm not saying that what Ray did wasn't wrong It's been made clear to him that it was wrong. But at the same time, who am I to put my hands on somebody?" (Rice). These media representations clearly illustrate the gender dynamics described by Bern. The problem is degendered here via situational attribution: when Rice apologizes and thus accepts responsibility only for being "in a situation" with his wife—as if the situation were already there, independent of them—the incident is clearly seen as emanating from something external to Rice. By choosing to not include content that situates responsibility for Rice's actions solely on him, the blame for the violence is "gendered" here via dispositional attribution: when Palmer apologizes for "the role she played in the incident," which ultimately emanated from her being "annoyed" because Valentine's Day did not go as she desired, the cause for the incident is clearly established as arising from "within" Palmer, in the form of stereotypical feminine "annoyance."

The media framing, in addition to situating much of the blame on Palmer and thus degendering the problem of domestic violence, at least partially exonerates Rice, primarily through dispositional attributions characterizing him as a basically good guy who just made one terrible mistake that was not indicative of his underlying character, as well as situational attributions that suggest alcohol consumption and his upbringing were in part responsible. For example, on February 21, 2014, just six days after Rice knocked Palmer unconscious, it was reported in the media that "Baltimore Ravens Head Coach John Harbaugh speaks at the NFL [scouting] combine about Rice's arrest: 'There are a lot of facts and a process that has to be worked through in anything like this. There are a lot of question marks. But Ray's character, you guys know his character. So you start with that'" ("Key Events"). Then, on March 27, 2014, when Rice was indicted by an Atlantic County grand jury for aggravated assault in the third degree and charges against Palmer

were dropped, the Ravens issued the following statement: “This is part of the due process for Ray. We know there is more to Ray Rice than this one incident” (“Key Events”). Dispositional and situational attributions that in part exonerate Rice were also made by the victim. In her exclusive interview with *ESPN’s* Jamele Hill (Rice), Palmer tells her story of the incident. During the course of telling her story, Palmer notes that “we were drunk and tired,” “Ray never knew his father because he was murdered when Ray was just a year old,” “since Ray didn’t have a father growing up, getting close to my father meant a lot to him,” Ray “asked my dad” before proposing marriage, “Ray accepted responsibility from the moment we left the police station,” and that “This came out of nowhere. Nothing like this had ever happened before. I knew it wasn’t him.”

The media framing of the relationship between Hardy and Holder was much different than between Rice and Palmer. Whereas Rice and Palmer were characterized as essentially a couple devoted to working through their shared problem, Hardy and Holder were characterized as estranged, with Holder pressing assault charges, resulting in Hardy’s conviction by a judge. Nonetheless, the media framing of this relationship is characterized by attributions assigned to their relationship and to Holder which function to animate their relationship, place at least partial blame on Holder, and objectify and sexualize Holder.

Reporting for *Sports Illustrated* on Friday, September 12, 2014—at the height of the media frenzy fomented by the Rice case—in a story questioning whether Hardy would be allowed to play in that Sunday’s game, Wertheim and Kaplan write that “Even during the heights of their coupling—when, for instance, Holder flew to Hawaii to accompany Hardy to the Pro Bowl—their relationship was volatile by any measure.” Two critical points can be drawn from Wertheim and Kaplan’s language. First, by attributing the quality of volatility to the relationship between Hardy and Holder, the relationship is reified and thus assumes a state of thingness. The implication is clear: both Hardy and Holder were caught up *in* a volatile relationship with its own agency, rather than Hardy being a volatile and abusive man. Second, by writing that Holder flew with Hardy to the Pro Bowl, the implication is that she chose not to end the volatility and, by extension, the abuse and is thus in part to blame for what she experienced at the hands of Hardy. This attribution implicitly placed on Holder manifested itself in *Rolling Stone’s* February 25, 2015, story on Hardy just after the case against him was dismissed. In the story, Kenneth

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Arthur writes, "Regardless of his actual guilt, Hardy's association with a violent incident is enough to warrant a suspension, given the league's supposed deviation from a laissez-faire attitude regarding domestic violence." With these words, Arthur at once both casts doubt on Hardy's guilt and, by stating "his association with a violent incident," subverts his agency in choosing to beat and threaten to kill Holder. Although the content of media frame here is much different than with Rice and Palmer, the form is essentially the same. To use Bern's framework, the problem is degendered when the relationship is reified (i.e., it is the relationship, not Hardy, that is volatile), and the blame is gendered when the implication is that Holder shares in the responsibility for her abuse—Hardy was merely "associated with the incident" ("Degendering the Problem" 262).

Despite the fact that Hardy and his victim, Holder, were represented as not continuing their relationship, even after he was convicted of beating, threatening to kill, and throwing her into a futon on which sat several loaded assault rifles, the media nonetheless referred to them as a couple. In reporting on the July 2014 trial finding of Hardy's guilt for assaulting and threatening to kill Holder, *The Charlotte Observer* published a story that, incredibly, included these lines: "Even in court, Hardy and Holder made a striking pair. He wore a black suit and Pantheresque blue-and-black tie. She came to court in a stylish black dress with towering high heels" (Gordon, Person, and Jones). By referring to them as "a striking pair," many of the dynamics discussed above that place blame on Holder come into play. More insidious is the objectification and sexualization of Holder. Whereas a men's suit signifies the attribute of occupational success, high heels, especially "towering" high heels, function as an ingrained cultural signifier which attributes to the wearer the desire to be more sexually attractive by creating the illusion of "longer legs." Women's heeled shoes "have obvious sexual aspects: display, the tilting of the body when high heels are worn so as to emphasize the breasts and other sexual characteristics, forcing the woman to walk in a certain way. This sexual aspect of the shoe is found in the Cinderella story, where the prince discovers Cinderella by putting a glass slipper on her foot" (Berger 256). Thus, the implication is that Holder desired to appear sexually attractive at the criminal trial of the man convicted of beating and threatening to kill her. By so describing Hardy and Holder, the authors invoke a patriarchal world view and value structure.

The media framing of the relationship between Peterson and his son is marked by two critical elements. First, Peterson is characterized

as a man intending his son no harm. For example, in reporting on Peterson's first public remarks after being arrested and indicted on child abuse charges, the *Los Angeles Times* published a story that quoted Peterson as writing "I am not a perfect parent, but I am, without a doubt, not a child abuser . . . I am someone that disciplined his child and did not intend to cause him any injury. No one can understand the hurt that I feel for my son and for the harm I caused him" (Schilken). Since Peterson issued his statement in writing, it prevented the author from framing the incident in any other way—for instance by focusing on what he had learned about child abuse as a social problem—and the implied dispositional attribution applied here to Peterson is that, because he "has to live" with the fact, regrets causing injury to his son, and in trying to teach his son "right from wrong" was well intentioned. Second, Peterson is characterized as loving his son. In reporting on the November 2014 plea bargain that reduced his crime from a felony to a misdemeanor, Eric Prisbell and Brent Schrotenboer of *USA Today* write "'I truly regret this incident,' Peterson said outside the courthouse. 'I stand here and take full responsibility for my actions. I love my son more than any one of you could even imagine. I am looking forward to and I am anxious to continue my relationship with my child.'" In addition to attributing to Peterson the quality of parental love, the choice he made to beat his child with a switch is hidden in the vague language of "regretting the incident" and taking responsibility for "his actions."

The media frame of domestic violence as a relational problem, especially in the Rice and Hardy cases, is consistent with previous research on attributions regarding causality in spouse abuse. Overholser and Moll found that perpetrators tend to "attribute their violent behavior to external causes" whereas "victims often attribute the abuse to defects within themselves or situational factors affecting their spouses" (107). As illustrated previously, the media frame of domestic violence as a relational problem is constructed in much the same way. The problem of domestic violence in the NFL is degendered and the blame is gendered (Berns, "Degendering the Problem" 262) when the media framing disperses blame from the perpetrators to the "situation" and attributes the actions of the victims—often tacitly—as contributing in some way to the causes and perpetuation of their own abuse.

While the Rice, Hardy, and Peterson cases were playing out, one of the more persistent themes, in print, sports radio, and sports television, dealt with whether and when they should get a second chance.

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The overwhelming consensus has been that they should get a second chance, once they have paid for their sins. Almost all sports media commentary has espoused this attitude, most often on the grounds that ours is a society of second chances.

Searching the American Soul: The Rhetoric of Second Chances and the Perpetuation of Domestic Violence

There is little question that redemption is endemic to American national identity. Ernest Lee Tuveson, in his 1968 classic *Redeemer Nation*, demonstrates that redemption is rooted in America's origins and explains the American belief in its role as preordained to make the world a better place. Wilfred M. McClay takes Tuveson's notion of redemption, which "flowered . . . particularly with regard to the nation's external relations and foreign policy" and notes that the "logic of redemption is just as applicable, if not more so, to individuals as well as nations." McClay's notion here is consistent with Ross Poole, who in *Nation and Identity* writes that the nation is an "imagined community" and a "form of identity" (12-13). In *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By*, Dan P. McAdams illustrates both the rootedness of redemption in the American experience and its expression as a form of identity in individual stories, noting that "sources" for stories of redemption "come from family experiences, music, schooling . . . heritage, ideas about literature and art, current events, the media, and everyday talk" (19). A central characteristic of redemption is that, in order to be redeemed, one must rise from a fall of some sort and emerge as a better person. Rice, Hardy, and Peterson each suffered a fall from the grace of NFL stardom when they were arrested for domestic violence, and in order to achieve atonement (i.e., redemption), each man must meet certain conditions, the most important of which is the public display of contrition. Rice and Peterson have publicly displayed contrition, and the sports media is replete with reports that each is deserving of a second chance, whereas Hardy has remained steadfastly unrepentant, even taunting, and is represented in the media as less deserving. The rhetoric of second chances enveloping the Rice, Hardy and Peterson cases thus displays the dynamic between American identity and the "conditionality of secular salvation" (i.e., redemption) (Geyerman 61-63). That dynamic can be seen in the reasons given as to why and to what extent each man deserves a second chance, and those reasons are grounded in a patriarchal value structure and originate from the idea of hegemonic

masculinity (i.e., a culturally preferred form of masculinity which values and naturalizes stereotypical masculine traits that operate in the realm of the mundane so as to subordinate and marginalize the feminine and alternative forms of masculinity). Nick Trujillo identifies distinguishing features of hegemonic masculinity as physical force and control, occupational achievement, familial patriarchy, frontiersmanship, and heterosexuality (1). Sports-mediated second chance rhetoric in the Rice, Hardy, and Peterson cases illustrates where, in each case, hegemonic masculinity is naturalized.

Occupational achievement and familial patriarchy in particular are featured prominently in the sports-mediated call for Rice's second chance. One of the more typical displays of patriarchy naturalizing hegemonic masculinity through occupational achievement and familial patriarchy played out in the media around the Ravens' 2014 home opener versus the Pittsburgh Steelers, their archrival. In reporting on events around the game, one of the main story lines was how many female Ravens' fans demonstrated their support for Rice by wearing his #27 Ravens jersey. When interviewed, most of them indicated they supported Rice for two reasons: first, they believed that he was unjustly penalized when released by the Ravens and suspended indefinitely from NFL; second, most felt the situation with Ray and Janay was a personal matter (i.e., private) and not properly the province of public discourse. In perhaps the most telling example, Laken Litman of *USA Today* published a story the day after the game about three women who publicly supported Ray Rice—two of them victims of abuse at the hands of their intimate male partners. The story begins with these words: "LaTonya Jones is a survivor. The first time her husband hit her, she got out of that relationship immediately. She was strong for her kids, she said. But that isn't keeping her from wearing her Ray Rice jersey. 'I'm keeping my jersey,' she said. 'I'm not going to trade it in I don't agree with how they went from a two-game suspension to ending this man's career,' Jones said. 'This is someone's livelihood. He has a family they should not have took that man's job away We shouldn't be involved in their personal life'" (Litman). The story includes the testimony of another survivor, Robin Manahan, who is the proud owner of four Ray Rice jerseys, one which she wears in an accompanying photo. Manahan is quoted as saying she "absolutely 100% support[s] him" as an "awesome guy" and "upstanding guy" and that he "should not have lost his job." Finally, the third woman, Maria Priovolikos, who "doesn't own a Ray Rice jersey but if she did would have worn it" because he is

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"such a sweet guy. He never said no when I asked for pictures or an autograph or anything." As the story concludes, Priovolikos is quoted as saying, "They're both to blame . . . she put her hands on him . . . I don't think what he did was right, but you know what, it happens every day. They were drunk. They're both to blame." The sports media also featured Rice's endorsement for a second chance from *A Call To Men*, a national organization that advocates men ending domestic abuse. In *ESPN's* report on the development, senior writer and expert NFL analyst Adam Schefter quotes the organization's co-founders as saying, "We have been around a lot of abusive men, but our experience with Ray has been tremendously positive We feel strongly about him having the opportunity of having a second chance. He's deserving of it." Schefter's report "was consequently aggregated by sites including *The Sporting News*, *nj.com* [the e-version of the *Star-Ledger*, the largest circulated newspaper in New Jersey and also the state where Rice played college football at Rutgers], *Bleacher Report* and *The Christian Science Monitor*" (Starchan). Then, two days later, the co-founders of *A Call To Men* issued a public apology for the endorsement, noting that "male entitlement played a role in our decision to not consult those most impacted" and that they were "irresponsible" when they "characterized Rice's actions as a 'mistake.'" They added that "domestic violence is not a mistake. Men's violence against women is a choice rooted in patriarchy and sexism, used to gain power and control over another person" (Starchan). Not surprisingly, this story never became part of the Ray Rice narrative, and the sports media push for his second chance continues.

Hardy is an enigma. When he was signed by the Dallas Cowboys and appeared in game five after serving his reduced suspension, he simply needed to show contrition and some modicum (even false) of humility, and the stage would be set for the sports media to construct a narrative that he deserves a second chance. However, Hardy could not stay out of his own way, and his tweets played a critical role. He became, perhaps, America's most vilified athlete of 2015. Consider these headlines from sports news stories on Hardy's exploits on Twitter since signing with the Cowboys: from *CBS Sports*, "Cowboys DE Greg Hardy Makes Tasteless Twin Towers Joke on Twitter"; from *Fox News*, "Cowboys' Greg Hardy Slammed on Twitter Over 9/11 Related Joke"; from *The Washington Post*, "Greg Hardy Tweets Out 'Regret 4 What Happened in Past'"; from *dallasnews.com*, "National Reaction to Greg Hardy Twitter Apology: 'He's Not Sorry'; 'Crass Move'"; from *foxsports.com*, "Cowboys' Greg Hardy Makes Bizarre Comment

About Tom Brady's Wife Gisele"; from *USA Today*, "Tom Brady on Greg Hardy's Ridiculous Comments About His Wife: 'I'm Focused on My Job'"; from the *Star-Telegram*, "Cowboys Admonish Hardy After Comments on Brady's Wife, Guns." The vitriol toward Hardy during the season became so widespread that on November 12, 2015, during *ESPN Radio's Mike and Mike in the Morning*, cohosts Mike Golic and Mike Greenberg were discussing Hardy, and Greenberg said "Do I think he's [Hardy] a despicable human being? Yes, I do." The absence of contrition makes it virtually impossible for the dominant media to situate Hardy as deserving a second chance, and, given Hardy's refusal to express remorse for beating and threatening to kill Holder, it is precisely this impossibility that reconstitutes the American sense of identity-rooted redemption.

Unlike Rice, who demonstrated contrition but has yet to get a second chance to play in the NFL, and Hardy, who has been given a second chance to play but has demonstrated little if any contrition, Peterson has both expressed remorse and re-emerged as an NFL superstar. The sports media push for redemption is on, in full force. Even before the re-emerged as an NFL star, there were many calls for him to get a second chance. Before the season began, nfl.com published a story titled "Vikings A.P. Feels the Love at 'Adrian Peterson Day'" (Sessler). The story quotes Peterson's coaches and teammates attributing to him the masculine qualities of being "extremely explosive" and having "electric foot speed." Toward the end of the season the sports media redemption of Peterson began in earnest, and it was primarily centered on familial patriarchy. During the telecast of the Vikings game against the Atlanta Falcons on Sunday, November 29, 2015, Peterson rushed for 158 yards and two touchdowns, leading Minnesota to a 20-10 victory. Peterson scored a touchdown late in the fourth quarter with a 35-yard run to seal the win for the Vikings, whereupon the announcer referred to him as "the great Adrian Peterson." The sports media at the end of the 2015 NFL season launched a full-scale redemption campaign with respect to Peterson, and two of its most prominent media outlets were *ESPN's* weekly program *NFL Countdown* and *Sports Illustrated*. On the January 10, 2016, telecast of *NFL Countdown*, just hours before Peterson's Vikings were to play their first-round playoff game, the cast discussed Peterson's child-abuse case and his return to the NFL. During the course of the discussion, in which Peterson was basically represented as a wonderful human being, cast member Mike Ditka, the only man inducted into the Professional Football Hall of Fame as both a player and coach, said "My father whipped me a lot. And I thank

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God every day that he did. He made me a better person. . . . I never had a problem with this and I'm not politically correct, so I can't talk about it" ("NFL Countdown"). The next day, when the January 11 issue of *Sports Illustrated* was released, the headline tease for the secondary cover story read "The Complicated Exile of Adrian Peterson." The story, in its essence, describes him as a reformed and hence redeemed man, noting that "Peterson says that through counseling he learned other methods of discipline. He says he'll never use a switch again," and then quotes an expert as saying that when he admitted his mistake and changed how he parents, it represents "terrific progress" (Bishop 30). Predictably, because atonement for the "sin" of child abuse is founded essentially in familial patriarchy, the story resonates with many in the American public because becoming a "good" father confirms that part of American identity rooted in redemption.

Domestic violence in the NFL currently occupies a space of significance in popular culture, and rightly so. However, the NFL functions in a larger social system where the scales of justice are unbalanced, tilted by patriarchy in favor of men. Despite the fact that being arrested for domestic violence "is associated with less repeat offending" (U.S. Department of Justice), past research has found that more than 62% of "the most serious charges (aggravated batteries) were more likely to end without arrest . . . than with arrest" (Bourg and Stock 177). This problem is compounded and perhaps understood when considered in the context of research on domestic violence among members of law enforcement, which "suggests that family violence is two to four times higher in the law-enforcement community than in the general population" (Friedersdorf). Finally, as of May 2015, eight states still have laws that allow perpetrators of domestic violence to enter pre-trial diversion programs (Widgery), like the one then available in New Jersey that allowed Rice to escape being prosecuted and, eventually, even charged, thus wiping the slate clean. Social and political structures like those just described serve to marginalize victims of domestic abuse, and, in order to make meaningful progress regarding the social problem of domestic violence, they must be addressed. Until such time as violence from men directed at women and children is no longer trivialized through its normalization—and in some cases even legitimation—in the socio-political system, that violence will continue, and perpetrators of domestic abuse will in all likelihood be both forgiven and forgotten.

Notes

1. Janay Rice is referred to by her maiden name of Palmer so as to avoid confusion with her husband, Ray Rice.
2. There were four high profile domestic violence cases in the NFL during this time. I omitted the case of Ray McDonald from my analysis because it assumed essentially the same form as the Rice and Hardy cases.
3. For an explanation of the commissioners exempt list, see Jason La Canfora's "How the Exempt/Commissioner's Permission List Works."
4. For more on media coverage of domestic violence, see Gillespie et al. 222-245; Rothman et al. 733-744; Nettleton 139-160; McManus and Dorfman 43-65; Berns, *Framing the Victim*.
5. For more on domestic violence in sports and media coverage of domestic violence in sports, see Dabbs 167-199; Enck-Wanzer 1-18; McDonald 111-133; "Out of Bounds" 1048-1065; Welch 392-411.

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Book Reviews

The TV Crime Drama. Sue Turnbull. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014. 266 pages.

In her comprehensive, well-researched book on television crime series, Sue Turnbull takes what she describes as a “genealogical approach” (13) to the genre in its broad sense and to the various subgenres that have evolved since the 1950s. Many series, principally American and British, are examined in terms of production issues, character, narrative forms, and style and aesthetics. The six chapters cover the origins of television crime dramas; the British police procedural; the American police procedural; the male detective hero; the “specialists”—forensic/scientific investigators, cold case investigators, and profilers; and women featured in series. Throughout, the author discusses the relationship between television crime shows and societal trends, value judgments about what makes “good” and “bad” series, and the influences of technology on content and visual elements of production.

Beginning with *The Newgate Calendar* in London in the late 1700s, along with the “penny dreadfuls” in the 1800s, the public had access to sensational stories of crime, criminals, trials, and executions. While these stories were intended for moral instruction and caution, they also had the unintended effect of entertainment. From these origins, tales of crime grew into a genre, beginning with Poe, to the Golden Age of Christie and Sayers, to the American hardboiled and noir style of Hammett and Chandler, to radio crime dramas—and finally to television, establishing this genre firmly in popular culture and increasing mass consumption along the way.

In her assessment of the British and American police procedurals, which focused their content almost exclusively on the work of the police, Turnbull notes that the British style emphasized a “gritty, social-realist approach” (45); the BBC, with its public service focus, included crime series in the documentary category. Shows based on literature or real events had the cachet of quality, while more commercial shows, such as those aired on ITV, might be judged “bad” television. In the U.S., when the three major networks (ABC, NBC, AND CBS) aired series whose quality was associated with writers and producers with established reputations in artistic endeavors outside of television, especially film-making or fiction writing, these were

deemed to be higher quality television. Turnbull notes that taste is, well, a matter of taste: Who is to judge?

In her chapter on the male detective hero, Turnbull argues that the hero becomes a constant for viewers, merging the drama with its main character and providing familiarity and comfort for the audience, who know what to expect; the hero becomes a brand the audience identifies with. The audience can reconnect with a known literary character and narrative—i.e. Christie's Poirot, Conan Doyle's Holmes, P.D. James's Dagleish. The downside is that such incarnations and narratives sometimes challenge the audience's receptivity when the series does not match the original. In the chapter on women detective heroes, the author argues that their roles and representation in television crime dramas have run parallel to changes for women in society since the 1950s, in particular regarding gender equality and positions of authority in the workplace. The objectification of women was also an issue. The American series *Police Woman* and Britain's *Prime Suspect* addressed gender politics and sexual discrimination in policing and reflected the social move toward equality in the workplace.

The chapter on the role of "specialists" focuses on forensic science, cold cases, and profiling. The use of forensics to solve crimes has become increasingly sophisticated in recent decades, an advancement that has inevitably altered the television landscape, in American shows such as *Quincy*, *M.E.*, *CSI*, and *Bones*, and in Britain, *Silent Witness*. Their tone may vary from somber to humorous, but the audience is taken into the bodies of victims in ways as never before. Turnbull notes that such portrayals of the human body can humanize the investigator who advocates for the victim, but she also notes that some critics find such depictions as voyeuristic, even pornographic, in their effects. Cold cases tend to focus on the plodding, deliberate nature of the investigation process and on resolution for the victim. In the case of the profiler, a genre hybrid emerges that draws on criminology, psychology, psychiatry, and forensics; such a development parallels the type of crimes occurring in society—i.e. serial killings and pedophilia.

Throughout her book, Turnbull identifies numerous series—some more familiar than others—that support her arguments and invite the reader to view, or view again. Possible omissions are *The Closer*, *Major Crimes*, *NCIS*, and perhaps *In Plain Sight*. She comments on the various formats engendered by these series: self-contained episodes of thirty and later sixty or ninety minutes, arcs of episodes, season-length narratives, season-to-season narratives, anthologies, mini-series or television movies, spin-offs. She cites the major influences on change

and innovation in the genre: *Dragnet*, *The Sweeney*, *Peter Gunn*, *Law and Order*, *Hill Street Blues*, *CSI*, *Prime Suspect*, *The Wire*, and *Luther*; to name a few. Further, she argues for reconsideration of series she deems undervalued: e.g., *Charlie's Angels* and *Miami Vice*. Her ability to connect, back and forth through time, these influences speaks to her observation that the path of the genre is one that loops back on itself as it moves forward. Turnbull also provides interesting commentary on elements of production that have emerged with new technology, such as visual style and effect, strategic integration of music to support content and theme, varied color schemes to reflect different settings, and multiple layered sound tracks. If one is a devotee of television crime series, as this reader is, *The TV Crime Drama* is a treasure chest of information, analysis, and citations for further reading.

Sarah D. Fogle
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Knight, Cher Krause. *Power and Paradise in Walt Disney's World*. Gainesville, FL: UP of Florida, 2014. 248 pages.

A description of Walt Disney World's "Kodak PictureSpots" in the last chapter of Cher Krause Knight's excellent new book, *Power and Paradise in Walt Disney's World*, brought to mind my own first experience of the iconic theme park in 1974. As a callow and arrogant young graduate student, I was offended by the little camera platforms showing exactly the postcard quality picture one would get by placing one's Instamatic there and pressing the button: "None of this manipulation and conformity for me—I'll choose my own shots, thank you!" I thus anticipated Professor Knight's judgment concerning these PictureSpots, which, in her words, "underscore notions of corporate control, but are potential points of resistance" (159-160). Her confirmation of my own youthful response encapsulates the refreshing focus Knight places on developing informed individual responses to the Disney World experience, as opposed to the all too common academic propensity to decry Walt Disney World as a place where the herd-like masses are cynically conditioned into consumerist conformity. As Knight makes clear in her introduction, she is "advocating for the increased agency of all kinds of audiences" (3).

Cher Krause Knight is associate professor of art history at Emerson College, and her academic rigor in furtherance of her

somewhat contrarian thesis is formidable. There are hundreds of sources in the Bibliography and dozens of citations and explanatory endnotes per chapter. She is also thoroughly conversant with critical theory, especially postmodernist criticism, when it is relevant to her purposes. Her book is organized around clearly and thoroughly documented architectural and historical correlations as well, which demonstrate convincingly how Disney World's design replicates the idealistic artifice of traditional landscape gardening and the fantasy architecture of Las Vegas, how the World Showcase of EPCOT derives from nineteenth and twentieth century expositions and World's Fairs, and how "going to Disney World" satisfies yearnings to experience a spiritualized ideal akin to that of the medieval pilgrimage.

Yet, all of this thorough and diligent scholarship is leavened by Professor Knight's own unabashed personal commitment to experiencing Disney World firsthand. Thus, she builds a narrative of her experience of the park, from childhood enthrallment to adult curiosity, into the development of the book's argument; so that often, after passages of carefully documented third person analysis, she concludes or reflects in that first person singular so rarely encountered in academic writing. In the last chapter, she even takes her readers along on the "The Keys to the Kingdom Tour," a guided, adults-only excursion into the fabled underground "utilidors" where "Cast Members" can discreetly carry out the necessary utilitarian tasks and move unnoticed by "Guests" from one section of the park to another.

Professor Knight's personal interaction with Walt Disney World is by no means an uncritical one. She gives full attention to the negative responses to Disney World from other sources, as well as her own negative assessments of various aspects of the park itself and the Disney legacy as a whole. For example, she strongly criticizes the "Future World" of EPCOT as "emphasizing the 'futuristic' over the 'future' itself," so that the "future" seems like something "that has already happened and indeed passed us by" (129). In fact, what she is encouraging overall is a critical interrogation of the Disney World experience, whereby one visits Disney World as what Professor Knight calls a "Shrewd Guest." The "Shrewd Guest" is willing to participate in what the park purports to provide but engages the Disney World experience in an informed and conscious way, employing skepticism and resistance if necessary.

In *Power and Paradise in Walt Disney World*, Cher Krause Knight uses her scholarly and intellectual knowledge very effectively to show

how Walt Disney World fulfills traditional human desires to both construct and visit idealized environments. Of course, it is possible to reject categorically the idealized environment offered by Walt Disney World, as many of Disney's critics have done. Yet, if one has the openness to experience Walt Disney World both knowledgeably and critically, then Professor Knight is an outstanding guide.

Bruce Nims
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Chaudhuri, Shohini. *Cinema of the Dark Side: Atrocity and the Ethics of Film Spectatorship*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2014. 202 pages; bibliography; index.

In *Cinema of the Dark Side: Atrocity and the Ethics of Film Spectatorship*, Shohini Chaudhuri analyzes, through an extensive critical framework, images of atrocity and the complex relationship between audience and subject in late 20th and 21st century, mostly post-9/11, cinema. Chaudhuri posits that, unlike often sanitized images captured in the never-ending sensational news cycle on TV and the Internet, which often desensitize audiences to the grim realities of brutality, cinema has the ability—perhaps even the duty—to engage with atrocity in provocative, complex narratives. Chaudhuri makes the case that cinema can do more to elucidate the political, ethnic, and historical circumstances that lead to many atrocities, to use a more balanced rendering that does not choose sides in a re-envisioning of events or push victims to the far edges of the frame, and to make it more difficult for us, the spectators, to accept simple moral outcomes.

Over the course of five chapters, Chaudhuri illuminates these core ideas through comparative analyses of criticism from a wide variety of disciplines and through examination of artistic choices in the construction of cinematic narratives. Chapters are themed by “atrocity crimes” and often focus on films from different genres. Chapter 1 centers on the ethics and morality of depictions of torture in the era of “The War on Terrorism” in such films as the fictional *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) and the documentaries *Taxi from the Dark Side* (2007) and Errol Morris's *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008). In Chapter 2, the lens shifts to the relative moralism of portrayals of the Holocaust in *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* (2008) and the Rwandan genocide in *Hotel Rwanda* (2005), *Sometimes in April* (2005), and *The Night of*

Truth (*La Nuit de la vérité*, 2004). Chapter 3 explores ideas of memory and loss in a host of films that deal with disappearances in Chile and Argentina: *Imagining Argentina* (2003), *Chronical of an Escape* (*Crónica de una fuga*, 2006), *Nostalgia for the Light* (*Nostalgia de la luz*, 2010), *The Blonds* (*Los rubios*, 2003), *Abuelas* (2011), and *Post Mortem* (2010). Chauduri shifts to a spatial lens in Chapters 4 and 5, where space is seen as socially produced, remade, and organized into power structures that often discriminate. The science fiction films *District 9* (2009), *Children of Men* (2009), and *Monsters* (2010) are interrogated as historiographical models that reflect real-world issues of detention, deportation, and immigration. In Chapter 5, Chauduri examines the many ways cinematic space is used to depict violence and reveals social divisions in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in the films *Close to Home* (*Karov La Bayit*, 2007), *Lemon Tree* (*Etz Limon*, 2008), *Paradise Now* (2005), and *Waltz with Bashir* (2008).

Cinema of the Dark Side provides a well-researched primer on how to engage with contemporary films that involve atrocity; central to this approach is Chauduri's broad definition of *atrocity*, the breadth of which is evident in an array of subjects covered throughout the book and in the diversity of the films chosen. Chauduri sees the film lens not in terms of its ideal, as an objective eye or as a sort of truth teller, but primarily as artistic expression incapable of being truly objective. As artistic expression, Chauduri contends, cinema's value lies with how it counteracts the numbing sensationalism of news media's coverage, disrupts common perceptions about how atrocities occur, and compels its audience to interpret their role in geopolitical realities in order to break oppressive patterns that lead to such suffering.

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Armstrong, Julie Buckner, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to American Civil Rights Literature*. Cambridge UP, 2015. 234 pages.

The Cambridge Companion to American Civil Rights Literature, edited by Julie Buckner Armstrong, studies the history of Civil Rights in the United States as depicted in literary works (primarily fiction, poetry, film, and drama). Focusing primarily on works published during the post-World War II through the Black Power eras, the essays provided examine how authors respond with words to the volatile

and ever-changing sociopolitical climate in order to protest injustice. Works that constitute as Civil Rights literature seek to answer Richard Wright's question: "can words be weapons?" Wright's inquiry is the central question of this collection, teaching readers the profound impact that language can have on changing attitudes and status quos.

While discussions on the American Civil Rights Movement focus mainly on history and policy, this collection tries to fill in the gap for the dearth of information regarding the cultural and artistic productions inspired by the struggle to achieve equality. Chapters such as Zoe Trodd's "The Civil Rights Movement and Literature of Social Protest" and "Civil Rights Movement Fiction" by Julie Buckner Armstrong aim to show how literature can teach history and immerse the reader into the struggle for equality in creative and meaningful ways. Other chapters within the collection such as Gerhun Avilez's "The Black Arts Movement" and "The White Southern Novel and the Civil Rights Movement" by Christopher Metress explore literary responses (or lack thereof) to key events within the Civil Rights Movement such as Jim Crow legislation, The Great Migration, and The Black Arts Movement. For authors such as Lorraine Hansberry, Amiri Baraka, and Ralph Ellison writing during this time frame, literature helps explain and come to terms with the psychological effects of racism and segregation.

Ultimately, the chapters in this collection teach that the quest for civil rights was not just a movement that achieved its goals but is still ongoing: responding to and facing the challenges of our current cultural and sociopolitical landscape. One effective feature is the chronology offered at the beginning of the book, starting with the Emancipation Proclamation of 1865 and ending with the 2012 shooting death of Trayvon Martin and the 2013 Supreme Court decision that granted federal recognition of same-sex marriage, demonstrating that the fight to achieve equality in the United States is a continual progression. Certainly, the current state of race relations in the United States is tenuous given the controversial and newsworthy stories regarding police misconduct against African-Americans—most notably the 2014 protests in Ferguson as the result of the Michael Brown shooting and the 2015 protests in Baltimore due to the death of Freddy Gray in police custody—and the rise of the Black Lives Matter Movement, thus making the essays contained within this collection timely and relevant. It would be interesting to see how a second edition of this collection would further respond to current events. As is, the final two essays in the collection especially, "Gender, Sex, and Civil Rights" by

Robert J. Patterson and “Twenty-First Century Literature: Post-Black? Post Civil Rights?” by Barbara McCaskill, expand the conversation on civil rights in new ways, focusing on how literature challenges heteronormative and patriarchal constructs and the supposed current “post-racial” society when gender, sexuality, and class are considered, adding new, pertinent layers to the discussion.

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