



DIALOGUE

*The Interdisciplinary Journal of
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**Adapting Our Approaches: (In)Formal
Learning, Stereotypes, and Traumas**

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Editorial

The term adaptation enjoys a variety of applications, of which the scientific and cinematic use most immediately come to mind. While the term clearly resonates in these spheres, adaptation certainly can be found beyond them: psychology, education, politics, and economics likewise experience what could be termed adaptation in response to both external and internal forces. In this issue of *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*, *Adapting Our Approaches: (In)Formal Learning, Stereotype, and Traumas*, authors from several fields, ranging from the visual and performing arts to rhetoric to social justice, explore the role of adaptation in a number of contexts. To introduce the concept of adaptation, Laurence Raw offers a guest editorial in which he considers the idea relative to a recent visit to the city of Albuquerque and the 2016 Southwest Popular/American Culture Association conference. Raw encourages the reader to move beyond a binary approach to adaptation, inviting an examination of the relationships between events, cultures, and people and how individuals might respond to adaptation.

Our first area of examination is that of education and literacy, as the initial articles address adapting learning in a variety of contexts. Janis Harmon and Roxanne Henkin examine the power of books in changing students' perception of social justice, reminding us that learning takes place both within and outside formal classrooms. In keeping with this idea of lifelong learning, Magnus Persson discusses the paradox of high culture as entertainment, describing a live book club in which musicians adapt literary texts through performance. The final article within this section, by Sheldon Kohn, seeks to expand our thinking about learning and teaching in general, proposing a shift from grand narratives to everyday change.

The second group of articles delves into the tensions between stereotypes and reality, addressing first Native American rhetoric and then masculinity in the shifting narratives of professional wrestling. Edward Karshner considers *Diné* rhetoric and its ability to affect an individual's perception of reality by means of participation in Navajo ceremonies. Marc Ouellette continues by examining televised professional wrestling in the 1990s, focusing on the roles of masculinity and corporatism in the genre into the twenty-first century.

The final section of the issue addresses trauma in two popular television programs. Adam Crowley discusses the impact of psychological trauma in the AMC series *The Walking Dead*, both to the characters on the show and, beyond the medium, to social movements. Further considering trauma, Courtney Weber presents the case for considering trauma as seen from the varied perspectives of detective and serial killer, with potential real-world application in responding to survivors of trauma.

We conclude this issue of *Dialogue* with a review by Lexey Bartlett of Laurie Kahn's *Im Love Between the Covers* (2015), a documentary which explores the creation and consumption of romance novels in historical and contemporary contexts. Together, the essays in this issue encourage viewers, educators, and readers to reconsider the interplay of various texts, the means by which we approach them, and the continued expansion and exploration of the field of popular culture studies.

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Binarisms, Adaptation, and Love: Albuquerque 2016

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I was fortunate enough recently to attend the Southwest Popular Culture Association meeting in Albuquerque, New Mexico in February 2016. This was the third time I had attended the conference; I find it rather unique in its capacity to embrace academics and graduate learners in a non-threatening ambiance, where participants genuinely try to help each other rather than to try and score cheap scholarly methodological points for their own personal self-gratification.

I also offered more suggestive ideas as to how we might approach the idea of adaptation and apply it to agendas other than the familiar literature-film-media paradigm. I visited a thrift shop while I was there, and was fortunate enough to pick up a stack of books at \$1 each. Although my suitcase was weighed down, I was pleased to find a variety of titles ranging from Katharine Hepburn's autobiography, Neil Simon's ideas on playwriting, and a polemical work by the American talk show host Rush Limbaugh.¹ While Limbaugh might be an extremist, his book offered a salutary explanation as to why binary oppositions form such an essential part of western thought. They provide an intellectual safety-value, a means by which individuals can distance themselves from phenomena that they find uncomfortable or even disturbing. I don't like Obamacare because it's redolent of "socialism," and I believe in the free market; this is one of Limbaugh's favorite refrains. Likewise: the "Middle East" is full of Muslims, and I am a Christian; I have frequently read that in recent reports on the Turkish Republic. Or, more prosaically: I am an educator working with learners, and I find it difficult to understand why they are so reluctant to think for themselves (a familiar lament on Facebook).

It seems to me that "adaptation" consists of the ability to be able to transcend such oppositions and acquire more pluralistic viewpoints. You might be an educator, but you might also try to understand your learners; likewise, you might make the effort to understand the purpose behind President Obama's health policies. I was vividly reminded of the importance of this process when I visited the Albuquerque Museum of Art and History. Situated just outside the Old Town, it is a bustling hive of activity; on the day I went, a local history group listened to a lecture and thronged the museum café afterwards, chattering excitedly about what they had just heard. As I walked round the exhibits, I became more and more conscious of how the various communities inhabiting the city – Native Indians, Euros, Mexicans – had spent centuries learning how to live with one another. In particular the Native Indians had had to learn how to accommodate themselves to the experience of white expansion, of having their lands colonized and their rituals policed. Sometimes their sole

means of expressing resistance was through crafts and/or the practice of religion, of maintaining the belief that they could achieve a spiritual state of grace through sustaining their faith in God.

My perceptions were radically sharpened two days later when I walked round the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center that traced the growth, development and perpetuation of Pueblo Indian Culture, History and Art. One gallery was entitled “Adaptation,” and used a combination of archival photographs, paintings and explanatory panels to trace how the Pueblos had accommodated themselves to the major socio-economic developments in nineteenth century America. The myths I had grown up with, of Native Indians perpetually fighting the Euros, were exploded; what I saw was a much more complex story of cultural and religious give-and-take, of cultures trying their utmost to negotiate with one another in an often difficult and dangerous environment. I am not trying to defend the actions of white settlers here; my experience of the Cultural Center taught me that I did not have to think of nineteenth century New Mexican history in such militarist terms. Rather I should focus on the ways in which the Pueblos adapted themselves so as to reinterpret their past traditions in light of present-day realities.

Suitably energized, I returned to the conference, and had the good fortune to re-encounter Jarrod Bolin and his group of high school learners and graduates. In 2015 I had listened to their presentation and had been quite literally bowled over by the coherence and enthusiasm with which they presented their arguments. Any fears they might have had of talking to an audience of academics was not immediately apparent; what we heard was a marvelous set of arguments attesting to the value of forging a community of purpose in a learning environment. This year I wanted to interview Jarrod and his learners, with a view to publicizing their efforts worldwide. They were more than ready to talk about how their entire educational experience had been revolutionized; rather than following a pre-ordained curriculum, they had been encouraged to work on their own and discuss their insights in small groups. Jarrod did not actively tell them what to do, but offered encouragement and inspiration where necessary. He also admitted that he had learned a great deal about person management – more so than he had ever expected when he became an educator in the first place.

I was struck by the coherence with which the interviewees recalled their experiences and tried to make sense of them for their futures as educators and university learners. Like the Pueblo Indians, they had subjected themselves to a process of adaptation, by setting aside their (often negative) recollections of education in the past and committing themselves instead to more collective modes of learning. There was a considerable amount of risk involved – would the group actually cope with collaborative rather than top-down methods of instruction? On the other hand the benefits of this mode of education were obvious, not only educationally but personally: all Jarrod’s learners possessed the kind of self-confidence and sheer naked optimism that us oldies can sometimes only dream about.²

Listening to the various presentations given by more established academics, I wondered – rather wistfully – why they could not have taken a leaf out of Jarrod’s learners’ pedagogical books and learned how to talk to rather than at their audiences. That is, until I heard Jillian Saint Jacques’ presentation, which offered another mind-blowing experience of how established forms of conference communication could be turned on their head (adapted, perhaps?) to produce something highly stimulating and – in this case – emotionally affecting. Jillian talked at length about his own process of adaptation throughout his life, as he became a transsexual and then decided after a period of time to reassume his masculine identity. It would be invidious of me to summarize his piece in detail (in case he wants to publish it), but what struck me was the honesty and passion with which he spoke. He was talking about “adaptation studies” in a psychological sense, but was also using himself as a case-study to prove his points. We listened, almost stunned, as he talked about how people reacted to his various shifts of identity, and how such shifts forced him to make major personal shifts in values and outlook. Even today, he admitted, he still wasn’t sure about who he was, and had to undergo considerable periods of “adaptation” to the most mundane things – having a family, being a parent, even going to work.³ His

presentation vividly underlined what the Pueblos probably experienced over a hundred and fifty years ago, as they struggled to survive in a rapidly changing world.

As I listened to Saint Jacques' talk, I was also struck by the uncanny parallelism between apparently disparate experiences taking place in different cities at different times. I had recently read about the Russian Surrealist painter Kazimir Malevich, whose works had been shown at Tate Modern, London the previous October. Superficially they had little or nothing to do with the material in hand – except in one respect. Art critic Rachel Polonsky had been struck by the subliminal effect the exhibition had had on her consciousness, as it opened windows in her mind to embrace “the endlessly dynamic tension [...] between [...] seeing and blindness; illumination and eclipse; form and dissolution; face and effacement; matter and void.” Saint-Jacques' work explored similar tensions; it was not just “about” his life, but represented a profound exploration of his relationship to the world. Just like Jarrod's youngsters, he took advantage of the occasion to remind us precisely what “conferences” are – not simply collections of papers, but opportunities to refresh and restore ourselves both intellectually as well as emotionally.⁴

What did these experiences tell me? First, that “adaptation” is not only a transdisciplinary as well as a transnational concept, but applies to our daily lives. I have talked about this before, so do not want to belabor the point. Second, I think that we should treat the world as an *anima mundi*, in which apparently diverse experiences prompt us to reflect in similar ways. Through such methods we can understand how the past impacts the present and future, as well as vice versa. Third, I think that the Albuquerque experiences reminded me of just how superficial – yet damaging – the practice of willfully cutting oneself off actually is, as it tends to curtail rather than admit the possibility of negotiation or debate. I was reminded of this as I read a review of a recent book *Superpower: Three Choices for America in the World* (2015), where the author Ian Bremmer called for an “Independent America,” that would liberate itself from the rest of the world's problems and defend its national interest “modestly.”⁵ I believe that no person, community or nation-state can remain self-contained: the only way we can prosper emotionally as well as spiritually is to really listen to one another.

is is not designed as a political piece: far from it. Rather it is designed to show how a mindful awareness of one's surroundings and how we respond to them can help us become more “adaptive” as people, as well as making us more aware of the continuities linking different cultures. Such processes can take place anywhere, anytime, anyplace; but they are most meaningful at conferences such as the Albuquerque event, so long as people can understand them.

Leo Tolstoy once emphasized how the world might become a better place if we learned to love each other more – perhaps these adaptive experiences might play a significant part in helping us to achieve this goal.

ENDNOTES

1. Katharine Hepburn, *Me: Stories of My Life* (New York: Ballantine, 1996); Neil Simon, *Rewrites: A Memoir* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998); Rush Limbaugh, *See, I Told You So* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993).
2. For more on Jarrod's pedagogy, see “A Right Turn at Albuquerque,” *Mhaynes.org*, 16 Feb. 2015. Web. 13 Sep. 2016.
3. Jillian's talk attracted the attention of Elsie Walker, editor of *Literature/ Film Quarterly*. See her editorial to Vol. 44, no. 2 (2016): iii-iv.
4. Rachel Polonsky, “Windows in the Mind.” *TLS*, 26 Sep. 2014, 18.
5. Ali Wyne, “Rules of Engagement.” *TLS*, 24 Jul. 2015, 12.

AUTHOR BIO

Laurence Raw teaches at the Department of English, Baskent University, Ankara, Turkey. He is currently working on a book of essays about adaptation studies, as well as an edited collection of essays on value in adaptation for McFarland. Recent publications include *Theatre for the People* (Rowman, 2015).

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The Power of Books: Teachers' Changing Perspectives about Using Young Adult Books to Teach Social Justice

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ABSTRACT

This study examined teachers' knowledge about social justice and their perspectives and understandings about the use of young adult books to teach social justice. The participants were 14 graduate students in a graduate literacy course. The course provided learning experiences about social justice, including the use of young adult books. These learning experiences were designed to deepen students' understanding of how to address social justice issues with students in the elementary, middle and high school classrooms. Using qualitative measures, the researchers found changes in participants' understanding of social justice and the use of young adult books as a powerful resource for teaching social justice.

All four discussion groups noted a change in their thinking with the themes of awareness and acceptance evident in their responses. For two books, *Shine* (2011) and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007), what stood out for three of the four book discussion groups were the many social issues evident in the books. In the book *Shine* (2011), some participants felt that the social issues were not fully addressed, and others focused on the "dark" topics in the book including language usage, sexual molestation, and parental abuse. In their discussion of *Trafficked* (2012), three of the four groups felt that the book raised their level of awareness and gave them a new perspective about the issue of human trafficking.

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian (2007) changed the thinking of all four groups of students about Native American culture and reservation life in regard to cultural assimilation and disparities that continue today. However, the experiences of the participants in reading the three books also deepened their understanding that some books address social justice issues in very strong and powerful ways—ways that may

result in constraints that need to be acknowledged regarding appropriate classroom use. The participants in our study reported that they acquired a more detailed and more in-depth knowledge base about social justice.

This was especially evident in their growing awareness of social justice, in perhaps their personal acceptance of the issues, and in their comments about taking action that might lead to change in existing problems surrounding social justice.

Keywords:

Social Justice, Young Adult Books, Teacher Education, Bullying, LGBT

Today's news headlines continue to show that many people are the victims of unfair and unequal treatment by others. We read about instances of teenagers who are bullied and even killed, women who are abused, police violence, and young people embroiled in gang violence. In the midst of these challenges, we, two literacy educator/researchers, wondered how we could address such social justice issues as teacher educators in our college classrooms in ways that would encourage these teachers to address social justice with their own students. Turning to the rich resources found in young adult books, we investigated teachers' knowledge about social justice and their perspectives and understandings about the use of young adult books to teach social justice.

We first present how we framed our study within the context of what we know about the meaning of social justice as well as within the context of existing scholarly works about the use of young adult books for teaching social justice. We then describe our efforts and findings in addressing the following research questions:

- What are teachers' understandings about social justice?
- What are teachers' beliefs and perceptions about the use of young adult books as a tool for social justice instruction?

UNDERSTANDINGS ABOUT SOCIAL JUSTICE

The term social justice appears frequently in a variety of educational contexts. For example, in many instances teacher education programs include social justice in their mission and vision statements to emphasize a fundamental belief in the interest and well-being of all in a diverse society (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011). Many of these programs are built upon specific principles and ideas associated with social justice, such as inclusion, equity, promotion of critical thinking, and social change (Bettez, 2008; Hackman, 2005; Michelli & Keiser, 2005, as cited in Hyttén & Bettez, 2011). Hyttén and Bettez (2011) further emphasize that the phrase is "used in school mission statements, job announcements, and educational reform proposals, though sometimes widely disparate ones, from creating a vision of culturally responsive schools to leaving no child behind" (pp. 7-8). While the term is ubiquitous on this broad level, it also is a term frequently used by scholars in the field as well as practitioners.

Yet, it is difficult to pinpoint a precise definition of social justice since it may mean different things to different people. An informal poll of several undergraduate students seeking teaching certification revealed these differences. When asked what social justice meant to them, some replied with general responses about treating all people fairly regardless of race, religion, or socioeconomic status and upholding equality for all while providing for the needs of everyone. Others talked about social justice as a progressive theory socially constructed to provide equality in the field of education. More specifically, some felt that social justice refers to the treatment of minority groups to prevent discrimination and to ensure that their voices are heard.

Still others viewed social justice as a matter of perspective. In particular, a currently popular idea of what is morally just and equitable focuses on societal issues of race, culture, and personal beliefs. The fundamental idea underlying these informal responses about the meaning of social justice, as well as the use of the term in broader educational contexts, is respect for all regardless of individual differences—a respect that leads to fair and equitable treatment. Our knowledge and awareness of social justice encompasses these ideas in that it is a perspective that values equity, equality, and fairness and seeks to understand the complicated issues that lead to social inequality and discrimination. Social justice education focuses on ways that students can make real change in the world.

Social justice is such a broad term that is also closely related to social responsibility and stewardship (Wolk, 2009). Wolk (2009) views social responsibility as encompassing a wide spectrum of themes, including caring and empathy for others, existence of social problems, government issues, power and propaganda, historical consciousness, nonviolence, and even environmental literacy. While all of these social responsibility topics warrant careful and close attention, the existence of social problems, or rather social injustices, such as bullying, abuse, and gang-related problems continues to be prevalent in many of our schools today. From an educational standpoint, teachers can be instrumental in effecting change by helping students understand social justice. Young adult books can serve as a potentially effective vehicle for this instruction.

YOUNG ADULT BOOKS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Young adult books hold appeal to adolescent readers because they address the issues, topics, and concerns that are relevant to these readers. As young adults are developing their sense of self-identity, which is a major factor during their transition to adulthood, young adult books allow the readers to safely explore various life situations vicariously. These situations resonate with the readers and enable them to consider the potential consequences for particular decisions made by characters in the book. Young adult books as a whole cover a variety of themes and issues dealing with realities of life, ranging from family relationships to gangs and violence (Bond, 2011). Young adult books also address particular issues of social justice, including the reaction of characters who bully others who are different. In these books the characters are different in many aspects, including race, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religious affiliation, or culture (Harmon & Henkin, 2014). Many of these books speak to adolescents in direct, open, and sometimes starkly realistic ways.

This study is situated within the context of existing scholarly works that have addressed the use of young adult books as a tool for teaching about social justice. In the words of Glasgow (2001), “Young adult books provide a context for students to become conscious of their operating world view and to examine critical alternative ways of understanding the world and social relations” (p. 54). From this perspective, we note that various social justice issues as represented in young adult books have been addressed by others, such as Simmons’ focus on social action in *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2012) and gender identity in the book *Stitches* as a topic in North’s social studies methods course (2010). Moreover, Stover and Bach (2012) view young adult books as an important venue for not only introducing to students social justice issues but also serving as a catalyst for active involvement in service learning or social action as discussed by Simmons (2012).

According to Quinn, Barone, Kearns, Stackhouse and Zimmerman (2003), teaching socialization skills and tolerance can no longer be addressed as part of a hidden curriculum. It must be viewed as part of a democratic classroom where reading and writing are important tools for learning humane behaviors that include respecting others. Unfortunately, such admirable endeavors are at times overshadowed by the political context of today with its strong focus on standards and competition. Nonetheless, there are literacy proponents in the field who advocate the use of young adult books as an instructional tool to teach social justice (Groenke, Maples, & Henderson, 2010) and in particular social responsibility (Wolk, 2009). It is the

responsibility of everyone to confront the social problems facing many youth today, especially discrimination because of culture, gender, sexual orientation, and economic class.

However, while Davis (2010) argues for the role of books to teach about social justice and social action in democratic classrooms, he also cautions that such efforts require “genuine dedication...on the part of teachers everywhere” (np). In a similar vein, Golden (2008), in his interview with Linda Christensen, noted social justice educator, includes her belief that any teaching of social justice is challenging and rigorous. Therefore, it appears that the effectiveness of teaching social justice to students and using young adult books to do so is no easy task and may depend heavily upon what knowledge, awareness, and inclination the teacher brings to the task. This study therefore closely examined what teachers know about social justice and potential changes in their beliefs and perceptions about the use of young adult books as a tool for social justice instruction.

METHOD

The purpose of this study then was twofold: (1) to investigate teachers’ understandings about social justice; and (2) to examine the impact of course instruction on teachers’ beliefs and perspectives about teaching social justice using young adult books as a resource. The participants were 14 graduate students in a graduate literacy course offered at a large urban university in the southwestern United States. Most of the students were practicing teachers with varied years of experience and varied grade levels. The course, Integrating Reading in the Language Arts, was a required course for students interested in pursuing a reading specialist certification.

The course in general focuses on reading processes and instructional practices that promote an integrated language arts curriculum across the grade levels from primary to secondary classrooms. In the following sections, we describe the project on social justice and then discuss our data collection and analysis process.

COURSE PROJECT

As part of the required course activities, graduate students participated in a variety of learning experiences designed to deepen their understanding of addressing social justice issues through young adult books. The learning experiences included: (1) exposure to young adult books that address social justice issues; (2) personal and critical response to the readings in professional online blogs; and (3) development of instructional tasks to accompany the young adult books. Specifically, the student participants were required to read three novels in which social justice issues played a critical role in character and plot development. The books represented different social justice issues, including poverty, dysfunctional families, human trafficking, sexual orientation, and ethnic discrimination. Furthermore, in following Glasgow’s (2001) notion that young adult books provide critical contexts to help students become aware of their own worlds, these three books represent different contexts and different ways in which characters view and react to the social conflicts in their lives. The books were Sherman Alexie’s *The True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007), *Trafficked* by Kim Purcell (2012), and *Shine* by Lauren Myracle (2011).

In Sherman Alexie’s *The True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007), Junior, the major character, uses humor and wit to tell his story. He leaves the school on the Spokane Indian Reservation where he lives to attend a much better school in a nearby farm town—a school with only white students. In doing so, Junior rises above the expectations of others as he faces discrimination at school and contends with family and cultural issues at home. The context in which Junior finds himself forces him to grow up both at home and at school.

In *Trafficked* (2012), the issue of human trafficking is brought to light as we come to know Hannah, a Moldavian teenager who moves to Los Angeles to become a nanny for a Russian family. She quickly learns that she is an indentured servant to this family and has no hope of escape. In this context of being a modern-

day slave in a foreign country, Hannah is left to her own devices to change her situation.

In the coming of age book *Shine* (2011), sixteen-year-old Cat tries to figure out who perpetuated a terrible hate crime against her gay best friend. Set in a small southern community where everyone knows each other, Cat exhibits great courage as she confronts serious issues of drugs, intolerance, and poverty, all of which contribute to what had happened to her friend. She does so within the context of her own past experiences with others in the town, especially one encounter that has left her withdrawn, despondent, and alone.

For each book, participants wrote personal comments, impressions, and insights in individual blogs on the Google-site. These blogs served two purposes: (1) they allowed students to interact with each other online, and (2) they provided a springboard for entry into small group and whole class discussions of the book during class sessions. In this way, class members had an opportunity to think about and articulate their own questions and insights before the group discussions began.

The students then developed a unit based upon an appropriate social justice theme of their choice.

The unit included an explanation and rationale for the social justice issue, ways in which the unit could be implemented into the curriculum, descriptions of critical literacy instructional activities, a sample lesson plan, and an annotated list of at least four high quality picture books as well as at least four high-quality, longer children's books (both fiction and/or non-fiction, trade books and/or informational books). Students were given guidelines on book selections that included choosing high quality books with recent publication dates. They were also asked to follow the guidelines for culturally appropriate books found on the [wowlit.org](http://www.wowlit.org) website.

DATA COLLECTION

Our data collection came from several sources. During the semester, we collected data from teacher pre- and post-questionnaires about social justice issues and the ways in which teachers envision teaching social justice issues. (See Figure 1 for the questionnaire.)

Figure 1

Pre and Post Questionnaires

Pre Questionnaire

What is social justice?

What different issues or themes do you associate with social justice?

What are the responsibilities of an individual in regard to issues of social justice?

Should social justice be taught in schools? Why or why not?

If so, whose responsibility is it to teach social justice?

How should it be taught?

Can books serve as a vehicle for social change? Why or why not?

If so, what are some examples of books for children and young adults that address social justice?

How would you teach social justice with the children's and/or young adult books?

Post Questionnaire

What is social justice?

What different issues or themes do you associate with social justice?

What are the responsibilities of an individual in regard to issues of social justice?

Should social justice be taught in schools? Why or why not?

If so, whose responsibility is it to teach social justice?

How should it be taught?

Can books serve as a vehicle for social change? Why or why not?

If so, what are some examples of books for children and young adults that address social justice?

How would you teach social justice with the children's and/or young adult books?

What have you learned by participating in the social justice books unit?

The learning experiences described previously served as the intervention of the study across six weeks. In addition, another data source included the completion of a language chart for each book in which groups of students discussed their responses to the readings of the young adult books. A sample of the language chart for one book is in Figure 2.

Questions	Group #1	Group #2	Group #3	Group #4
What stands out to all of you about the book?	<p>the current issue of domestic slavery stands out and especially the fact that many people have no clue about it. Also, Hannah's naivety and how she did not stand up for herself stood out. Sergey and Lillian played on her ignorance to keep her contained as a slave.</p>	<p>Her efforts to improve her life stand out but yet she struggled so much and was constantly pushed back down.</p>	<p>A girl can want more opportunities by coming to the U.S. but can end up becoming another statistic. She had innocence about her and seemed oblivious to what was really going on. She started to live the dream until she got into the home of Sergey and Lillian.</p>	<p>the main character never considered herself as being trafficked.</p> <p>Sergey was tender toward her; he seemed like not such a bad character; he seemed to help.</p> <p>the neighbor Collin stood out. Also,</p> <p>the innocence and ignorance of the character--Hannah and the children stood out.</p> <p>Females are really the villains.</p>
Has the reading of this changed your thinking about human trafficking? In what way?	<p>the book raised awareness of how bad an issue it was.</p> <p>We saw how they manipulated immigrants using fear.</p>	<p>the book gave us a completely new perspective on human trafficking. Previously we thought of it as kidnapping but not the type of living like Hannah was experiencing. the prevalence of it was also shocking.</p>	<p>We didn't really connect with it or thought it could really happen to someone coming to the U.S. from a different border other than the Mexican border.</p>	<p>is "face" of trafficking was different. the majority of the time we only think of the "sex trafficker" part. It makes us think of how close we are to it and how well hidden it is.</p>
Is the book appropriate for classroom use? Why or why not?	<p>Yes.</p> <p>It should be used for small book circles and self-choice readings.</p> <p>Grade level: high school</p>	<p>Yes.</p> <p>It is relatively tame for the topic level. It is a prevalent issue to study with them.</p> <p>Grade level: upper high school</p>	<p>Yes.</p> <p>It can show students how another person's kindness can change a life whether they know it or not. It is an occurrence and is real so if students see a different perspective, they can relate.</p> <p>Grade level: high school</p>	<p>Yes.</p> <p>It is a good jumping off point for awareness and research.</p> <p>the sexual content is not as explicit.</p> <p>Grade level: 9-10</p> <p>Upper levels--use as resource--language too simple</p>

What are the constraints for using this book in the classroom? How could you get around them?	<p>One constraint is the graphic content and serious topics—sex and abuse.</p> <p>Allow individual choice.</p> <p>Warn students about the upsetting content ahead of time.</p>	<p>You will possibly need parental consent.</p> <p>It would be interesting to do with a gender study.</p>	<p>One constraint is the graphic words used.</p> <p>We could ask parents to read it first to give them an idea of it. We could get parental consent.</p>	<p>The topic of sexual abuse is a constraint. The book demands a mature audience. Old-fashioned, classic literary teachers may not use this book. There may be objections from parents. The book could be an elective read. Teachers could use excerpts that lead to discussions but would need parental notice.</p>
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Figure 2

Sample Language Chart Used in Group Discussions for *Trafficked*

We collected these class assignments to analyze for themes about social justice and related instruction.

DATA ANALYSIS

After compiling the questionnaire responses, we used a constant comparative data analysis technique to examine all the data (Merriam, 1998). We first read the responses to the open-ended questions in the questionnaires individually and then came together to discuss our findings, address differences, and arrive at consensus. In addition, we tallied the frequency of occurrence of specific topics that the participants discussed. For example, in the pre-questionnaire where participants were asked to define social justice, we noted 31% focused on the topic of action. One participant stated that social justice was “ensuring that people are treated fairly and with equality.” Another comment categorized as action was “standing up for what is right, even if society does not accept it.”

We followed this same procedure with the instructional artifacts developed and completed by the participants. These artifacts included instructional tasks developed by the instructor to support participants’ engagement with the young adult books as well as the instructional activities the participants developed with their own self-selected books. We examined this assignment closely to determine if the instruction was an appropriate match with the young adult book(s). For example, one participant focused on slavery for her instructional unit. She selected several quality young adult books, such as *Sold* by Patricia McCormick (2008) and *Copper Sun* by Sharon Draper (2008), to represent various forms of slavery for an eighth grade class.

The unit contained several activities that engaged students in responding to the readings through writing and discussion. The culminating activity for the unit involved a visual aid representing a form of slavery and consideration of realistic ways in which to take action against modern-day slavery.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

We acknowledge the limitations inherent in this study. First, the instructor of record for the course was one of the researchers. While this had the potential to influence the outcomes, the responses to the questionnaires were anonymous and were not administered by the instructor/researcher. In addition, we realize that students typically learn something when they participate in a university course. However, given that the unit of instruction was focused on social justice, our goal was to capture the nature of this learning and the students' own acknowledgement of what they learned. Finally, we realize the pitfalls associated with self-report data but also understand that these data can be a rich source of descriptive information that may inform future investigations.

FINDINGS

We discuss the findings in terms of two major strands of data that were collected and analyzed in this study. The strands are the following: (1) participants' growing understandings about social justice; and (2) the nature of instruction about social justice. Across the two strands we noticed that the themes of awareness of social justice, acceptance of others, and the need to take action were evident.

Participants' Growing Understandings about Social Justice

We documented participants' growing understandings of social justice through several data sources (e.g., questionnaires and in class discussions) and found changes in the ways in which participants defined social justice. We present the findings for this section, highlighting participants' growing understanding of the meaning of social justice, changes in their thinking about social justice, and their recognition and appreciation of the responsibilities associated with social justice.

Defining social justice. Initially, approximately one third of the participants provided more generalized responses with references to issues facing those in leadership and government positions as well as issues relating to how groups of people are treated in society. More specifically, in the pre questionnaire, participants focused on issues, such as educational opportunity (14%), race relations (10%), and economic hardships (12%). In contrast, in the post questionnaire, the participants provided more specific issues in that bullying, racial inequality, and sexual orientation accounted for 40% of the responses about social justice issues.

The number of issues also changed, with participants mentioning ten different descriptions in the pre-questionnaire and 29 in the post-questionnaire. These differences were not only in terms of topics that participants associated with social justice but also differences in terms of the depth of understanding about social justice. The depth of understanding changed as illustrated in this general pre questionnaire response: "Social justice deals with issues that are continuously dealt with by leaders and people from government." In contrast, in the post questionnaire one participant defined social justice as "an all-encompassing topic including such issues as bullying, race relations, and equality of education. Social justice discusses, speculates, and researches ways to implement understanding and solutions of these issues."

We also noticed that the definitions provided by the participants in both questionnaires fell into distinct categories, including awareness, action, and equality. For example, while initially 31% of the participants defined social justice from an action standpoint, they did so in terms of what is done or should be done to others. In contrast, in the post questionnaire, the 15.3% of the participants who talked about action did so in reference to actions that need to be taken against unfair treatment and wrongdoing. Another difference was that some participants (15.3%) in the post questionnaire talked about social justice in terms of developing an awareness of the issues—something not evident in the pre questionnaire.

Changing ideas about social justice. As described previously, participants' definitions of social justice changed from general ideas to more detailed understandings of the concept. Other changes also occurred.

For example, 18% of the participants reported that they learned about the widespread use of the term social justice. They came to realize that social justice included not only bullying but also other issues such as lying, cheating, and stealing. Moreover, one student commented that social justice is “so much more than just being aware of an issue. We have to learn to take action.” In addition, 22% of the participants felt that they now realized the value in using engaging books to help students grapple with the issues of social justice. One participant commented that “literature brings humanity into the situation. Most people need to view the situation through others’ eyes in order to better understand the issues of social justice.” Still another noted that “the more we can identify with book characters or story lines, the more we can see where there are problems that need attention and hopefully [lead to] correction.”

Forteen percent of the participants mentioned their understanding of the multiple ways to address social justice with students. One participant wrote “I have learned several different ways to present social justice issues to students. I have also learned that social justice issues can be taught to all students regardless of ability or age. All students have a voice.” Another student learned that “there is more to social justice than what’s going on in my class. It involves entire communities...with some issues that can be corrected through awareness and knowledge.”

All participants except one admitted a change in their thinking about social justice. These changes were varied. For example, 15.8% were more open to the different issues associated with social justice, 21% claimed to have an increased awareness of social justice, and another 21% felt their knowledge base of social justice had broadened and deepened. One student wrote: “I previously saw this as an issue best addressed in higher grades. I now realize the importance of starting younger as well in order to prevent injustice.” Another stated that “I have always felt strongly about issues and have always felt passionate about standing up for others, but it made me realize how common certain issues are and how these can be discovered through books.” Still another wrote: “I feel that these are important issues that many people push aside. If we bring it up more often, perhaps children will discuss the issues.”

Determining responsibilities associated with social justice. While the importance of taking action was mentioned in both the pre and post questionnaire, one major difference was an individual’s responsibility to bring awareness of social justice issues to others. This awareness was not mentioned in the pre questionnaire. After the course unit on social justice, however, all participants felt that the topic should be taught in schools and that it was the responsibility of the teacher to teach about social justice. In particular, in the post questionnaire 23.9% of the participants stated that the responsibility of teaching social justice issues rests on the shoulders of not only parents but all those who work in schools (e.g., teachers, administrators, counselors). In fact, after the course unit, a few more participants who had not included parents initially now felt that parents are responsible for teaching social justice—an increase from 14.8% to 19.6%.

Nature of Instruction about Social Justice

In response to how social justice should be taught, most participants initially focused on general instructional procedures, such as by example, through modeling and explanations, and through the use of multimedia. In contrast, in the post questionnaire, participants provided more specific suggestions involving the use of multimodal traditional and multimodal digital tools. For example 16% felt that visuals, such as posters, photographs, movies, and video clips, were useful for teaching about social justice. The use of visuals was discussed in whole class discussions and used by the instructor and students in class. Another 20% stated that active participation in classroom activities is important for teaching students about social justice. Again, active participation was modeled in the course. These activities included skits, plays, and other dramatizations as well as discussions and even dance.

In both the pre and post questionnaire, approximately the same number of participants mentioned the use of books for teaching about social justice (24% and 25%). However, when asked directly about the use of

books for teaching social justice, only two participants in the pre questionnaire were not sure about the use of books to teach social justice. By the end of the course unit, however, all participants stated that books can serve as a vehicle for social change. The reasons especially focused on how books enable the reader to relate to characters. For example, one participant stated:

Yes, many times books can help us see things that we may have never paid attention to before. It can help give us empathy by putting us in someone else's shoes. Many times children may ignore a history lesson, but a book they can relate to may help to see similarities that they never saw before. Books can make us aware of more issues to where we want to work towards creating a world free of discrimination.

Another stated:

Many students might not know how to talk about a certain issue. Reading a novel can help open the door to what can be talked about. It gives students the opportunity to step into the issue and really live it & experience it while learning.

Initially, 30.4% (7/23) did not know any book titles addressing social justice. Those who did provided titles of fairy tales and well-known titles such as the Harry Potter series, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou (1969). At the end of the course unit, as expected, participants provided a variety of current, quality book titles that address social justice issues, such as Jennifer Brown's *The Hate List* (2009), *The True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007), *Lovely Bones* by Alice Sebold (2002), and *Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Steven Chbosky (1999). After the course unit, more participants (41.2% compared to 33.3%) mentioned the use of book discussions. While in both the pre and post questionnaires participants talked about the use of videos and drama activities, only in the post questionnaire did participants (10.3%) mention the use of writing.

After reading the three young adult novels that focused on different issues of social justice (i.e., tracking, inequalities, and sexual orientation), participants initially shared their individual responses to the following questions in blogs and then discussed their thoughts in small groups.

- What stands out for you about the book?
- Has the reading changed your thinking about ____? In what way?
- Is the book appropriate for classroom use? Why or why not?
- What are the constraints for using this book in the classroom? How could you address these constraints?

We report the findings from their collective group responses in categories based upon the questions previously listed and also include examples from the blogs of their individual thoughts to support the findings.

These categories include what stood out in the readings, changes in thinking about social justice issues, and classroom use of the books.

What stood out in the readings. For two books, *Shine* (2011) and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007), what stood out for three of the four book discussion groups were the many social issues evident in the books. In the book *Shine* (2011), some participants felt that the social issues were not fully addressed, and others focused on the "dark" topics in the book including language usage, sexual molestation, and parental abuse. For example, one participant wrote "the book also did bring to light for me how the stigma of being gay is still incredibly shameful for many people and how that can be exasperated by your upbringing and community." Another noted the following about *Shine*:

The bullying definitely took center stage in this book. There were so many instances of bullying, such as verbal abuse, sexual abuse, and physical abuse. The author put a lot of issues into this book, but I think that young adults can relate to most of those issues. The language was a little harsh for my taste, but honestly it made the story line seem more real to me.

On the other hand, in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007), participants in all four

discussion groups mentioned their new awareness of the many issues found on Indian reservations, such as extreme poverty, death, eating disorders, racism, bullying, and prejudice.

One participant reflected about these issues at a deeper level as evidenced in the following comment:

Sherman Alexie truly brings to life the impact of robbing someone or some group of their hope. He has truly opened my eyes to the ramifications of Americanization and of forcing someone to give up their culture and heritage. Previously, I have been involved in discussions about the power of hegemony and of Westernization and the dominant culture. However, I now understand that those were surface-level conversations and did nothing to open my mind's eye or heart to the life-altering impact those powerful concepts can have. It took a work of literacy and seeing the world through the eyes of a 14-year-old boy for me to truly understand.

Two groups also commented about the author's use of humor to lessen the harshness of these issues as well as the use of illustrations to depict character development.

For the book *Trafficked* (2012), the literary element of character made a strong impression on all of the participants. The groups mentioned several things that caught their attention as they read the book. Three groups noticed Hannah's innocence and naivety and the fact that she did not stand up for herself. One group felt that Hannah probably did not see herself as being trafficked and another commented on the futility of her efforts to improve her life. To illustrate this point, one participant wrote in her blog:

One thing that stood out the most to me was the fact that Hannah herself did not realize she had been trafficked until someone else mentioned it. She was willing to come over from her home and do whatever was asked of her in order to live in America and have the opportunity to become a doctor. She went on accepting that there was a chance she would not be a nanny but would end up being a prostitute... The fact that she would be willing to accept such a life even for a short time and not even consider that she was being trafficked leads me to think that it is possible that the ones most likely to become victims are the ones least prepared to recognize the danger.

In addition, one group mentioned that Sergey and Lillian capitalized on Hannah's innocence to keep her contained as a slave in their home.

Changes in thinking about social justice issues. All four discussion groups noted a change in their thinking with the themes of awareness and acceptance evident in their responses. For example, in their discussion about *Shine* (2011), three shifts in thinking resulted for the groups—one on the topic of bullying and hate crime, the other on acceptance, and the last on communication. Two groups talked about how their thinking changed about bullying. They had never considered the varying forms of bullying, including physical, verbal, or relational (Harmin & Henkin, 2014). One participant stated, "This book has changed my thinking about bullying. There are so many different ways a person can be bullied...from the area they grew up in, to their sexual orientation, to the size of their bodies, etc. This book relates to many different forms of bullying, [such as] the 'hick' terms that are used throughout the book." One group focused on changes that involved the uplifting experience that comes with forgiveness and acceptance, and another group felt that proper communication could have prevented the major problems in the book.

In their discussion of *Trafficked* (2012), three of the four groups felt that the book raised their level of awareness and gave them a new perspective about the issue of human trafficking. One group commented on how well hidden such trafficking is while another group felt they could not accept the idea that such trafficking could happen to someone coming to the United States from another country other than Mexico. As in the words of one participant,

Reading this story changed my thinking in how we address these issues with young adults today either in school or at home. I think most of the time these controversial topics are ignored because we think that something like that could never happen where we are....While this topic is ugly and unglorified, I think

that it still needs to be addressed to teens. We need to stop hiding the fact that it does happen and that in order to do justice to others, we need to attempt to help them and get them out of situations that are beyond their control. I have always been a believer in bringing up controversial topics, and I have always thought that these books make the best reads. However, I have not always promoted them to their targeted audience of young adult...We need to trust them [young adults] more and trust their instincts and provide them with the knowledge they need to be informed about what happens in the world.

Another participant wrote:

This book has changed the way I look at tracking. I have heard the term but had never really thought about it on a deeper level...I feel like I could relate to the character and this made me feel unsafe. The kind of unsafe feeling that you know you will never be the same again because you have been made aware of something that you can't take back. I feel like this is happening and in many times right under the noses of unsuspecting people.

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian (2007) changed the thinking of all four groups of students about Native American culture and reservation life in regard to cultural assimilation and disparities that continue today. One group wrote, "The feelings you get from reading the book are far beyond what you would get from a history lesson." This quote illustrates how young adult books can contextualize events within social, cultural, and historical settings enabling readers to broaden their understandings about diverse populations and cultures (Groenke, Maples, & Henderson, 2010). The following written response about this book from one participant represents this change in thinking about social justice issues:

I reflected back to a professor I had who taught Navajo Indians for many years and shared her experiences with my class. The most important lesson I took from her stories was that the Navajo's (sic) taught her far more than she taught them. When I think back to that and pair it with this novel, I see the vast differences between the two. The lesson that will now always be at the forefront of my mind is that attempting to conform others to be like us is wrong in so many ways. Instead, we must actively seek to learn from others who are "different" from us to avoid having a "part-time" identity.

This is such an important insight. As educators, it's important to build on the students' strengths and to see their culture as important and valuable.

Classroom use of the books. The two major topics covered about classroom use were the appropriateness of the books and the ways in which constraints for classroom use could be addressed. For the book *Shine* (2011), three of the four groups felt that the book was inappropriate for classroom use. Their major concern was the many controversial topics included in the book, topics such as molestation, drug use, physical abuse, strong language, and hate crimes. In addition, one of these three groups raised concern that, because too many of the issues were left unresolved, class discussions could lead to "uncomfortable and unpredictable situations." One participant noted the following:

My first inclination is to declare this novel as inappropriate for classroom use. *Shine* contains extremely mature content. The combination of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, drug use, and coarse language seem to me difficult hurdles to pass. If it were used in a classroom, as with all books that deal with such issues, the maturity of the students needs to be kept in great consideration.

The teachers' hesitation to use *Shine* reflected their reluctance to discuss controversial topics in their classrooms.

One group in particular stated that teachers may be reluctant to use the book due to the mention of faith and religion. In contrast, one group felt strongly that the book was appropriate for high school classrooms. They argued that the types of bullying portrayed in the book mirrored reality and that students could engage

in discussions that addressed bullying from these different angles.

As one participant stated:

I think it's appropriate for 8th or 9th grade. I think it's very engaging; students won't want to put the book down. I think the message it brings is very powerful. Your emotions are transformed to that of the characters. You feel how lonely and hurt Cat is. You feel her braveness and it makes you feel proud. You can feel how annoyed she was with Robert but also how patient she was with him. Students can get into this book and also learn from it.

Another noted:

I feel this book is appropriate for classroom use. There are some instances such as when Cat gets attacked by Tommy at her house, and how the dad's (sic) in the story either had alcohol, drug, or mental issues that will need to be discussed while or prior to reading this book. I feel like many students will relate to the book, which might make it easier to talk about and or express feelings they may have about certain issues. The grade level that I would choose would be 9th-12th grade. I think you might want to get parents(sic) permission due to the level of homosexuality that is discussed in the book. Sadly, many parents do not want their child discussing homosexuality and I don't know how reading a book about it would make them feel.

For the book *Trafficked* (2012) all groups agreed that the book was appropriate for classroom use in grades 9-12 despite the constraints of the serious content of sexual abuse and the use of graphic language. One group recommended the book for self-selected independent reading and another group felt that the book could be used as an introduction perhaps to an inquiry project on human trafficking. Similarly, for *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007), two groups of students felt that the mature content of the book was better suited for high school students despite the simplistic reading style used by the author. The other two groups felt that the book was appropriate for eighth grade students. However, all four groups voiced concerns about the sexual content and strong language used in the book. As one participant noted:

I am truly torn about whether or not I would feel comfortable using this book in the classroom. While I think it is a transformational piece of literature, I think it requires an audience of a certain maturity level. I wouldn't want to use it below a high school level...I would primarily be concerned about the frank discussions and descriptions of masturbation in the book. I am certain that there would be parents (myself included) who would not want their children exposed to this kind of endorsement. I do recognize that I come from a very sheltered life and that I probably didn't even know the meaning of the term when in high school. Thus, I realize this has an impact on my perspective. On the other hand, the book is such a powerful tool in transforming one's thought processes about accepting those who are different, that I think it would be a wonderful thing for students to read.

To address the constraints imposed by controversial topics and graphic language, participants in all four groups mentioned the need, first of all, to seek parental consent to use the book in the classroom as a required assignment. One noted that for the book *Trafficked*, "I would agree that at some high grade level, probably high school, this book could be used for instructional use in the classroom but it may require parental permission because it has some sexual content." In addition, participants also felt it was appropriate to include the books in a classroom library. In this way, students would have the option to select the books for

independent reading.

DISCUSSION

This study investigated the changing perspectives of graduate students in a literacy education course about the learning and teaching of social justice. We did not set out to have the graduate students develop their own strict definition of social justice, a murky concept that can mean different things to so many different people. Rather, given that social justice has no firmly established meaning agreed upon by all and can be a controversial topic to many, we wanted our participants to grapple with the complex and broad issues related to this social concept. The instructor, using the books as a medium to guide the social interactions among the participants, served as facilitator rather than erudite professor with an agenda about social justice. Therefore, with no solid, concrete definition for social justice leading the experiences in the course, the participants were able to individually generate their own personal understandings of this concept and did so through reading and discussing young adult books. For example, in her response to the book *Shine*, one student wrote:

... This book was much more than a story about the atrocities of an anti-gay hate crime. It was more about contrasting the negative impact and overwhelming power that hate and self-loathing can have on a person's life with the liberating glory, joy, and light that can come from forgiveness and acceptance. For example, we can trace Cat's journey from darkness, hatred, gloom, and loneliness to forgiveness, acceptance, joy, and love.

This response illustrates how the books mediated the participants' developing notions about social justice. It may be that this book enabled her to think more deeply about the meaning of life and the lessons that can be learned from life's events.

We also wanted them who? to focus on the use of young adult books for teaching social justice to students. The participants did report that they understood how books can serve as an important instructional tool for teaching about social justice as illustrated in this student's comment about the book *Trafficked*:

This book is appropriate for high school kids. I would focus on a small group or individual reading assignment so that the discussion of the controversial issues would be a little more intimate than a whole class discussion. I bet most students are not familiar with trafficking (I know I wasn't in high school) and this book would be a great opportunity to open their eyes to this issue.

However, the experiences of the participants in reading the three books also deepened their understanding that some books address social justice issues in very strong and powerful ways—ways that may result in constraints that need to be acknowledged regarding appropriate classroom use. The same student who made the comment just mentioned above also had this to say about the constraints for using the book *Trafficked* in the classroom:

This book has some horrific scenes of abuse. A few times a sexual encounter is referenced, but not really [explicitly] described and then toward the end, the sexual encounter between Sergey and Hannah is fairly graphic for adolescents. However, I thought the author kept it pretty clean overall. I would ask parents to preview the book before asking their child to read it and, of course, be open and willing to discuss anything that makes a student feel uncomfortable.

This comment illustrates that, on the one hand, participants learned that the issues need to be out in the open and discussed with students, but, on the other hand, discussion of such controversial issues may

create other problems that need to be addressed. This is not a new dilemma that many teachers face when making decisions about what texts to use with students (Golden, 2008). Yet, we believe that teachers want to create a safe environment where difficult issues can be discussed openly. In this way, students can hopefully be equipped with a variety of ideas and strategies for addressing the challenges they may be encountering in their own lives.

The importance of teaching educators about social justice must not be overlooked. We hope and believe, that in any course students take, they should learn something. Thus, after participating in the social justice unit of instruction, it appears that the participants in our study reported that they did acquire a more detailed and more in-depth knowledge base about social justice. This was especially evident in their growing awareness of social justice, in perhaps their personal acceptance of the issues, and in their comments about taking action that might lead to change in existing problems surrounding social justice. Overall, these educators appeared to value their newly gained knowledge about social justice that might lead to changes they could personally make in their own lives and, as mentioned above, in the lives of the children they teach.

We advocate that children and adolescents need to be taught about social justice, but we also realize the challenge this may present and the questions that arise. As teacher educators, we believe that all those involved in the field of education need to address the issue of social justice in ways that can evoke change. Hence, teacher preparation programs with a mission to transform practice need to consider the inclusion of social justice as part of these programs at both the undergraduate and graduate level. Furthermore, we advocate that teachers consider the use of young adult books as an instructional resource for addressing social justice in the classroom. These books can be vehicles for transforming the lives of the students we teach as well as a springboard for future change in society.

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"High Culture as Entertainment": Hybrid Reading Practices in a Live Book Club

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ABSTRACT

The Bushwick Book Club (BBC) is a live book club in which invited pop musicians perform musical interpretations of a predetermined literary work in a nightclub environment. What can a typical BBC show, with its strong emphasis on popular music and performance, teach readers about the uses of literature? This case study will investigate which reading practices are at work and in what ways they challenge traditional ideas of the forms, functions, and values of reading. Another important aspect concerns how the borders between high and popular culture, and between the printed word and other media are renegotiated. Based on the findings of the case study and supporting theory, the article argues for a radically broadened conception of reading.

Keywords

Reading Practices; New Media Landscape; Book Clubs; Popular Literary Culture; Literary Performances; Bushwick Book Club

The dominant conception of reading is the solitary, concentrated, and silent reading of a print literary text (Long, “Textual Interpretation as Collective Action”). Given the crisis of reading and declining scores in large-scale reading tests such as PISA, this dominant conception of reading is further underscored. However, this reduces the multiple uses of literature. In a similar vein, the collective, bodily, and material dimensions of reading tend to be forgotten in the theories and practices of literature instruction. In the multitude of passionate reading practices flourishing outside of the educational system, it is precisely these dimensions that are essential (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo 1–3). Reading practices in the new media landscape should be seen as inscribed in a vast network comprised of artifacts, new and old media technologies, people, institutions, places, and affects, as highlighted through empirical evidence from a case study of the Bushwick Book Club (BBC).

BBC is a live book club in which invited pop musicians perform musical interpretations of a predetermined literary work in a nightclub environment. Founded in 2009 in New York City, BBC has established new chapters in Seattle, Los Angeles, and New Orleans. The one branch outside the US, focused on in this article, is in Malmö, Sweden.¹ A regular show in Sweden lasts approximately two hours; the founders and producers of BBC Malmö, Thomas Teller and Kristian Carlsson, function as hosts. A specific book, usually a novel, is the focus, and the selection of books leans strongly to high-quality contemporary fiction, although theme nights with classics such as *Frankenstein* and *Orlando* also occur. The producers/hosts generally invite three pop artists or groups, who must write at least one new song inspired by the novel in focus. The artists also play some songs of their own; the musicians usually discuss their impressions of the novel between songs. Since it began in 2012, BBC Malmö has produced between six and seven shows each year. On its webpage, BBC is described as a live book club, and its producers explain the following:

If there's something we really like, it's to try out new things: new combinations and mixes of genres. What always characterizes Bushwick Book Club is that a book (or a literary work of some sort) inspires musicians, artists, writers, etc., to create new works to perform during a thematic, entertaining, and interesting evening. And remember: it works just fine to come to the show if you haven't read the book in advance. (Bushwick Book Club Sverige)

BBC offers multiple points of view on literature in a single setting and gives rise to a number of interesting questions regarding what characterizes a reading practice and where its borders and limits can or should be drawn.² What can a typical BBC show, with its strong emphasis on popular music and performance, teach readers about the uses of literature? Which reading practices are at work, and in what ways do they challenge (or confirm) traditional ideas of the forms, functions, and values of reading? How are the borders between high and popular culture and between the printed word and other media renegotiated?

As part of a larger project about passionate reading within and outside academia, I have conducted a case study of BBC. I attended six of BBC Malmö's shows during one year, and I conducted interviews with the two producers, Teller and Carlsson. I also interviewed the founder of the original BBC, Susan Hwang.³ Accordingly, my empirical material consists of interviews, field notes from the shows, and a vast number of texts in various media from the Swedish and the American BBC websites.

THE PERFORMANCES

An important point of departure for this article is that ideas concerning reading must be broadened to take into account its collective, social, material, and bodily dimensions. Taking BBC as an example can hopefully serve this purpose well. Despite its simple premise, BBC is a complex and difficult-to-classify phenomenon, and it could thus be approached from a number of different theoretical strands, including intermediality, cultural studies, musicology, or sociology of literature.

ere are similarities with traditional book clubs (typically meeting in the homes of its members), in terms of the emphasis on socially sharing a reading experience (Long, *Book Clubs*) but the performative and public dimension is usually not in play in such instances. BBC is best understood as a popular cultural performance in which the simultaneous physical presence of artists and audience and the strong elements of play and ritual give new meanings to reading (Fischer-Lichte 38–40; Schechner 52–122). During a BBC performance, the values of reading and literature are renegotiated in ways symptomatic of what Jim Collins calls the popular literary culture in the new media landscape:

What used to be a thoroughly private experience in which readers engaged in intimate conversation with an author between the pages of a book has become an exuberantly social activity, whether it be in the form of actual book clubs, television book clubs, Internet chat rooms, or the entire set of rituals involved in "going to Barnes & Noble." What used to be an exclusively print-based activity – and fiercely proud of it – has become an increasingly image-based activity in which literary reading has been transformed into a variety of possible literary experiences. (Collins 4)

In this new media ecology, where "high" literature is increasingly being packaged and consumed in ways earlier primarily associated with popular culture, the power of literary judgement has been multiplied and decentralized. Literature and reading are redefined and given new values in social contexts, and this process is carried out by actors not belonging to the old literary establishment (i.e., professional critics, literary scholars, and so forth); on the contrary, these actors often take a distanced position towards the traditional arbiters of taste. To assert that one does not have to read the book—as BBC does on its homepage—could very well be perceived by these traditional arbiters as a provocation lacking respect. Further, as show producer Kristian Carlsson explained in an interview, BBC's conceptualization concerns "high culture as entertainment." The selection of literature is dominated by serious contemporary literature and classics, but it should be transmitted in an unpretentious and pleasurable manner.

What does a typical Bushwick performance look like, and which reading practices can be discerned in it? As mentioned earlier, the shows follow a structured format, alternating between the performances of the invited artists and the hosts. The atmosphere at the shows is relaxed and jolly. When one group has finished its act, the hosts comment on what they have heard and discuss their own approaches to the book. Throughout the evening and through various means such as humor and direct audience interaction, the hosts strive to create a feeling of what performance theorist Erika Fischer-Lichte singles out as the most important sentiment of a performance: the feeling that we are all part of a unique community, albeit a temporary one (20, 24–29). Other recurring features of the show are shorter oral readings of the book and Thomas Teller and Kristian Carlsson performing two new works—one musical and one literary—based on the book of the evening. They explain the latter as follows: "Especially the fact that we write ourselves, as well—that's very important for maintaining the pleasure and energy of the project. ... It would have been creative anyway, but it's something completely different when you yourself shall join in and interpret the book" (Teller).

The producers contend their own active participation strengthens the role of the book in the show; otherwise, there could be a risk of the literature being less important than the music. However, to return to Collins' argument about literature in the new media landscape, it is precisely this open relationship to the printed text that is significant. Reading literature in the context of BBC is always a strongly mediated affair, in constant play with other media technologies. Accordingly, it is not surprising that a Bushwick show can also include screenings of shorter films, multimedia installations, or, occasionally, a group of acrobats. This cross-fertilization of different art forms and media is, as Denise Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo have contended in their study of contemporary mass-reading events, typical of new collective reading practices:

the multiple mediation of the text through various kinds of formal performance by authors and experts, theatrical, cinematic and visual art adaptations, visits to the built or natural environment, and other participants may, of course, add to or alter an individual reader's interpretation of the selected book. But it is the emotional connections and social intimacies that these multiple mediations make possible that intensifies the pleasures of learning about the world of the text. (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo 243)

On a general level, BBC can be seen as part of a long historical chain of reading communities (Rehberg Sedo) and oral performances of literature: from rhapsodes and bards to literary salons and the poetry slams of our own time (Lönnroth). Bushwick has certain similarities with poetry slam in particular, even if the key element of competition is missing. At BBC, as at a poetry slam, the person (producer or artist) is in focus rather than the poem. The audience is given an active role, and the whole concept is performative rather than text-based (Gregory 24). In these respects, both BBC and poetry slams differ from another important form of oral literature: the (academic) poetry reading. As Helen Gregory points out, there is a tension between these two arenas that can be characterized as a conflict between popular and legitimate cultural capital; however, this conflict should be seen not as absolute but as open for negotiation and exchange. In his historical study of American poetry readings from the 1920s and onwards, Lesley Wheeler points out academic poetry reading is fairly rigid in terms of structure and framing; it changes only slowly (128-130).

At an academic poetry reading, the audience is quiet and is seated in orderly rows. The props are very few and typically include nothing more than a glass of water and a microphone. The performer's clothes are tidy and proper. BBC incorporates an important, albeit brief, element from academic poetry reading: the recurring feature of a piece of new written literature (often poetry) being read (by Kristian). Gregory and Wheeler both emphasize that the literary establishment has criticized poetry slam and other forms of popular cultural oral performances of literature. Wheeler writes: "Even when the poems themselves allude to and sometimes express yearning for the audible world, the poets themselves, their critics, and some audiences resist the mixing of poetry and mass culture. To read aloud is to hawk not only the words but one's very body in public marketplaces" (Wheeler 11-12).

An example of this attitude is Harold Bloom's verdict on poetry slam, which according to him is equal to "the death of poetry" (qtd. in Gregory 69). A more nuanced diagnosis is given by Dana Gioia, who points out that the printed literary text is backgrounded in performance poetry and poetry slam but that this also leads to a new and enhanced author function which she calls "the amplified bard" (29). BBC, thus, incorporates elements both from slam and the academic poetry reading, piecing it together into something new, a totality in which media technologies and art forms other than printed (and spoken) literature also play crucial roles. The boundaries between literary text, author, interpreter, and audience become less sharp (cf. Kolodziej 17-18). Further, the borders between "high" and "low" are disrupted, not least because most literary works taken up by BBC belong to "high" literature but are worked upon by pop artists and placed in a popular cultural context. This transgressive dimension returns when one more closely examines the artists and their interpretations of the literary works.

The artists' musical interpretations of literature are at the heart of BBC. This is what makes the show unique and is what can be presumed to constitute an important part of the attraction for the audience. Musicians being inspired by literature is of course not a new phenomenon: in popular culture, such exchanges have been comprehensive and intense.⁴ From an intermedial perspective, BBC can be seen as an example of "musico-literary intermediality"; more precisely, it can be viewed as a "hidden" form of intermediality, where "literature may be transformed into, or appear in, music" (Wolf 54). Another way of putting it is that we have a "post-text" (the BBC-song) interpreting a "pre-text" (the literary work in question) (Lund 20). What these

concepts and distinctions miss, however, is the performative dimension and the songs being part of a larger—and, intermedially speaking, even more complex—whole.

As mentioned, BBC values transgressive and unexpected mixes of genres. On a basic level, this is a foundation of the event itself, but it sometimes becomes particularly clear. During one BBC-evening, the novel *Towelhead* (2005) by Alicia Erian was in focus. It is a dark but humorous story about an Arab girl, Jasira, growing up in the US; its primary themes include sexual awakening and abuse. Three bands were invited to interpret the book: singer songwriter Anna Jadeus, a "murder ballads"-band named Your Saviour, and Floridaz, a band that parodies the specially Swedish low-brow, cheesy, and sentimental music genre called "dansband." Already, this mix of music styles says something about the eclecticism prevalent in BBC.

The artists approached the novel in radically different ways. They all felt it was a dark and unpleasant story. Anna Jadeus said her band usually "gets down to angst, but that this book was almost too heavy and dark." Jadeus played a handful of her own compositions that clearly connect to the novel's themes of young and fragile love, and she finished with a song written for the occasion and about the novel. The producers introduced the next band, Your Saviour, in the following manner: "Now we will finally see some of the evil characters in the book suffer." The band consisted of two young women playing guitar and accordion, both wearing old white Victorian dresses covered with lace. They told the audience that they indeed had some problems with the book and that they would let the music talk for itself. Dirty men were then "executed" in their songs, as if on an assembly line. Their final song was an example of explicit reinterpretation in the form of a dreadful portrayal of the neighbor, Mr Vuoso, who sexually assaulted the young female protagonist.

Floridaz' front man began the performance for the last band of the evening by saying, "it's hard to find a dansband-angle on anxiety" and they, therefore, would start off by acquainting the audience with the "vocabulary of the genre." The musicians' costumes were in-line with the corny aesthetics of the genre, the stage had new props (including a big green plastic palm), and the songs performed were musically faithful to the genre.⁵ However, the crooner's voice and exaggerated vibrato, along with an increasing sentimentality and accentuated halting rhymes, made the performance a clear example of parody rather than pastiche, something to which the setting itself also contributed (the venue is usually a hip rock club). The song written for the evening, "My Safe Place," employed a more unobtrusive form of irony; it was a celebration of Jasira's supportive and caring neighbor, Melina.

Based on these details of a BBC-show, its transgressive and eclectic dimensions are clear. It is striking how radically different the musical and textual strategies adopted by the participating artists are. As Susan Hwang states in an interview, the concept itself enforces both interpretative pluralism and increased creativity:

It's so interesting to see how people will use the same material but come up with their own, and to respond to the same material in so many different ways. And of course you can have three different songwriters writing on the same character and each song is from a completely different perspective. Yeah, it's fascinating.

An important feature of contemporary popular literary culture is the complicated interplay between old and new ideals of reading. We not only see a transformation of individual reading practices into collective and multimedial ones, we also see a rebirth of the Author and the belief in literature as an existential and therapeutic project of identity and Bildung:

is culture may indeed rely on twenty-first-century technologies of scanning, storage, and downloadability, but it also draws on early-nineteenth-century notions of reading as self-transformation, filtered through late twentieth-century discourses of self-actualization, all jet-propelled by state-of-the-art forms of marketing "aesthetic experience". (Collins 10)

the author is not, as the new critics and post-structuralists claimed, dead but is a source of wisdom and aesthetic pleasure. This also holds true for the authors (writers and artists) of popular culture. In both cases, the question of authorship concerns complex and varied interrelations between strong notions of originality, on the one hand, and more sociologically inclined explanations, on the other (Negus 608–616). The rebirth of the author is, not surprisingly, accompanied by a new focus on the role of the self in reading practices—something that also becomes quite clear in BBC. The differences between the novels selected for the show can be great, ranging from Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* to Valerie Solana's *SCUM Manifesto*, from Alice Munro's *Too Much Happiness* to Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. A common denominator, however, is that the chosen literature allows for strong personal reading experiences with rich possibilities for effect and existential reflection. What can be discerned, despite all the differences, is an ethos of reading, a belief both in the passionate reader and in literature as a fountain of insights into the deeply human. This ethos appears in the producers' own interpretations of the literary works as well. During the *Towelhead*-evening, elements of autobiography and confession were employed.

In his oral performance, Kristian Carlsson movingly told attendees about his parenthood and about how his and his child's nightmares seemed to be synchronized at night. Thomas Teller's song evolved into a melancholy and self-ironic account of what it was like to be the same age as the girl in the novel. To increase the emotional strength and authenticity of the piece, the song was preceded by Teller reading from his sister's twenty-year-old (authentic?) diary. Explicit or implicit autobiographical elements were recurrent also during other shows. These can be viewed as markers of authenticity, but the self-revealing and confessional content is also constantly balanced with humor and irony. In conclusion, reading is about exploring and representing the self.

As Collins notes, the reader has been upgraded to an active co-creator in the new popular literary culture: "The fully empowered reader is a given—why else would they be passionate readers if they weren't making books meaningful, and pleasurable, on their own terms?" (31). This is clearly the case for the producers and artists of BBC, but it is also the case, by extension, for the audience, as well; they can be presumed to share the same ethos.

It is not easy to summarize the multitude of reading practices that become (more or less) visible during a typical BBC-show. Several are obvious: the producers reading aloud from the book, the producers' and the artists' literary and musical adaptations of the novel, the producers' and the artists' comments on the book, members of the audience chatting about the book during the intermission, and the actual reading (or non-reading) of the book before or after the show. Does this list not widen the concept reading practice too much? Most people would probably agree that listening to an audio book is, in some sense, an instance of reading. But can the performance of a pop song really be considered reading? Not in the traditional, narrow sense of reading, but certainly in the sense that is foregrounded by Collins', Fuller's and Rehberg Sedo's theories of social reading beyond the book. It is perhaps significant that the most traditional reading practice among those mentioned above, reading aloud, is at one point deprived of its monologic form. During the show on Françoise Sagan's *Bonjour tristesse*, the audience was suddenly asked to shout out a number of a page and a line in order to reveal an "especially important passage of the novel." A member of the audience shouted "page 34, line 12," and Teller quoted, "Women were spotted on the path of the goats." Laughter erupted, and Teller concluded, "Isn't it nice to read aloud!" Thus, old reading practices are both reproduced and parodied, and new ones are created and hybridized. A necessary condition for this venture is the collective and social dimensions of passionate reading.

THE PRODUCERS

The producers of BBC are independent cultural workers. BBC has no formalized ties to existing cultural institutions and is dependent on various forms of temporary cooperations and alliances. Funding is insecure: BBC in Malmö has received public funding a couple of times, while BBC in New York City relies on unpaid work and ticket sales. Advertising in newspapers is too expensive, so, both for BBC Malmö and BBC New York, social media is a necessary platform for marketing and information and for documenting the project (songs, film clips, lyrics, and so on).

Asked if they considered BBC to be a reading promotion project, the Swedish producers Teller and Carlsson state that they cooperate with public libraries, but they distance themselves somewhat from the term reading promotion, suggesting it could have a deterring or even intimidating function: "In our applications for grants we mention reading promotion, but that's never our public face. I think it's important to stress our cool and conceptual starting point" (Teller). To maintain a distance from explicit reading promotion can have several causes, but one plausible interpretation is it can signal duty and work. Also, at the bottom of many reading campaigns lies what has been called the literature myth, according to which the reading of good literature will make you a better person (Persson, "The Literature Myth"). Not wanting to be associated with this myth became apparent during one show when the singer of the garage rock band Baboon said the following to the audience concerning his not very positive experience reading the novel of the evening, *The Tiny Wife* (by Andrew Kaufman): "I still think I've become a much better person by reading this book, but it was nice that it was so short."

Despite the producers' skepticism towards reading promotion, they hope their project contributes to an increased interest in reading. Teller mentions that many in the audience approach them afterwards to tell them not only that they really like the concept but also that the concept has opened their eyes to the multitude of possible connections to and interpretations of the same book.

Even though one primarily associates reading promotion with idealistic activities outside the education system, it is still interesting to take part of the producers' views on their own earlier experiences of reading literature in school. Both Hwang and Teller have positive memories of literature instruction in school, and they mentioned the value of committed and broad-minded literature teachers as positive role models. Conversely, Carlsson was more critical; avoiding his school's literature classes stimulated his interest in literature: "The best way to develop my own reading was to jump class and stay at home to read, something I practiced quite a lot in high school. ... I had more important things to do. But libraries and school libraries are extremely important. There you find this broad selection of books. I remember picking up Ginsberg's *Howl* at my school library." Carlsson made the same observation regarding his university studies in comparative literature: "I guess it was the same thing there; the reading you did by not going to class was better than the lectures." He contended the ideal reading practice stems from freedom and from strong inner motivation.

BBC is, then, involved in a form of reading promotion "undercover" or "in disguise" and avoids any kind of duty, discipline, or morality which could lead the thoughts either to traditional reading campaigns or to literature instruction within the education system. However, this does not imply the producers would encourage a relativistic view on literary value—quite the contrary. As mentioned, the selection of books is very broad, both in Malmö and in New York. The producers further indicated that there is not any kind of literature that could absolutely not be part of a BBC-show. Susan Hwang said, "I don't think there's anything too high or too low." The selection is in part random and is sometimes the result of current affairs, as when they chose Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* on its 150th anniversary. Besides novels (one by Kurt Vonnegut every year), she has, amongst others, chosen a photography book and a dictionary of synonyms and wants to choose a cookery book for a future event. Teller and Carlsson do not see any limitations when it comes to genre, either. The only important factor is good language and literary quality: "It must be good and very well-

written. And it, of course, is based on us two, who are very different kinds of readers. But we must think that it's fun to do it" (Carlsson). Both emphasized there are many factors to consider before making the choice: length, availability, profile of the invited artists, variety, an exciting mix of genres, originality, and cultural and linguistic diversity.

A founding idea is, as mentioned, that high-quality literature must be presented in an entertaining manner: "We want the audience to understand that the prestige lies not in exclusivity but in quality. Not in the demand to be serious, to just sit quietly and not respond, as if it were in a classroom of comparative literature" (Carlsson). Here, a sharp dividing line is drawn between BBC and a central actor of literary evaluation: the academic discipline comparative literature. Simultaneously, Carlsson also draws a line between BBC and mainstream popular literature, albeit implicitly. According to BBC, you cannot compromise with literary quality. Consequently, there are no examples of popular, feel-good novels, bestsellers, or what Collins calls Lit Lit: a kind of popular highbrow literature that thematizes and celebrates the healing power of reading. As mentioned earlier, BBC Malmö welcomes books on the darker sides of humans—books that encourage existential reflection. These may appear as subtle distinctions, but they are crucial for BBC's views on literature.

An interesting question is how the producers describe themselves as readers, and if they see any difference between their reading for BBC and their private reading (in terms of technique, purpose, and interconnected activities). Susan Hwang explained she studied creative writing in school, and she has always loved to read. Reading for BBC, however, is special; she always performs herself, so she has not only to read much and regularly, she has also developed a special technique of reading. Susan reads with a pen in hand and underlines specific phrases. After reading, she collects the underlined phrases, and sometimes an idea for a song emerges based on patterns in choice of words, symbols, and scenes. This reading technique may seem to have much in common with the one practiced in the close reading of literary studies, but it is also an intensely bodily reading. Susan stated the song often comes to her before the whole reading is finished, an experience she compared to an orgasm: "I tend to focus on the words first. Sometimes as you're falling asleep, or on a train, or sometimes in a dream, or whenever you're relaxed, you hear something, and [you're] like, 'My god, that's the song!' It's nice when that happens, but it doesn't happen all the time." Here, it is clear how reading is widened to encompass a host of other interrelated activities of varying degrees, such as writing, underlining, compiling, composing, dreaming, travelling, and falling asleep. Hwang's narrative resembles the French author George Perec's plea for a more comprehensive conception of reading:

Would it not be right in any case to investigate the environments in which we read? Reading isn't merely to read a text, to decipher signs, to survey lines, to explore pages, to traverse a meaning; it isn't merely the abstract communion between author and reader, the mystical marriage between the Idea and the Ear. It is, at the same time, the noise of the Métro, or the swaying of a railway compartment, or the heat of the sun on a beach and the shouts of children playing a little way off, or the sensation of hot water in the bath, or the waiting for sleep. (Perec 181)

Both Teller and Carlsson emphasize that the boundaries between their professional and private reading are fluid. Carlsson states:

BBC affects what I want to read. My private reading is never just private. Everything enriches each other. There is no such thing as private reading, and at the same time there is no clearly defined public reading either. ... It is not both, and it is not either or, it is something else. Reading for BBC does not imply duty and discipline in any traditional sense. Despite one having to read widely and deeply with pencil in hand as a producer for BBC, this method of reading could also be considered freer: I have

always been a reader, underlining and making notes, which you do for Bushwick, as well. And as a publisher I read a lot, and I'm an author myself. I feel rather that because of Bushwick I now can read more novels for pure pleasure, something I previously had to set aside in favor of poetry. Reading is more a goal in itself now. Even though we have to make a selection, there's still more free reading. (Carlsson)

To the question what their ideal reading experience or reading situation would entail, all three producers responded that they prefer the printed book instead of Kindles or iPads. This corresponds to observations made both by Fuller and Rehberg Sedo in relation to participants of various mass-reading events and by Christina Olin-Scheller in relation to fan fiction: Despite the practices being intensely multimodal and virtually unthinkable without social media, the printed book is still singled out as the original and superior source. At the same time, the BBC producers distance themselves from the idea of reading being all about discipline and hard work; instead, they emphasize surrounding factors such as place, reading position, and various artifacts linked to reading:⁶

When you mention school, it's sort of the opposite, sitting by a desk reading, and that definitely doesn't appeal to me. I read lying on the sofa when everybody else is sleeping. I guess that's ideal. (Carlsson)

I like that I have to focus, [to] put everything else aside. ... It's more of a mood I have to be in. If I'm preoccupied by other stuff, I first have to make a to-do list, and then I can begin to read. My surroundings don't matter that much; I can be on a bus with loads of people. But it's also about making it nice and comfortable: the sofa is great. You want to reward yourself a bit, like, "now, I'm going to disappear for a while." (Teller)

The producers' reasoning about themselves as readers complicates several strong ideas on the differences between professional and "ordinary" readers. Literary sociologist John Guillory's influential discussion on this distinction (31-32) is clarifying but also problematic (cf. Persson, "On the Differences between Reading and Studying Literature"). According to Guillory, the differences between how one practices reading within and outside of academia have evolved into an unbridgeable gap. Professional academic reading is characterized by hard work, by analytical distance, through reading techniques that take years to master, and by reading that takes place in a collective context in dialogue with other professional readers. Conversely, ordinary reading—or "lay reading," as Guillory calls it—is characterized by its taking place in your spare time, by it not being institutionally framed, by it being driven by pleasure, and by it being an individual activity.

When Guillory discusses professional reading, he is referring only to the kind of reading practiced in literary studies. There are many other professional readers (librarians, teachers, book reviewers, and so on) in other arenas, where the conditions for and evaluations of different kinds of reading may differ. The reading carried out by the producers of BBC must also be considered professional, albeit in a slightly different manner. One cannot criticize Guillory solely on this ground, of course; he isolates two different ways of reading and clarifies many factors. One must also take into account the changes in the literary sphere since his article was first published; for instance, what Collins and other scholars refer to as the new popular literary culture has certainly gained in importance since then.

However, based on the interviews with the producers of BBC, one can definitively conclude the borders between professional and ordinary reading seem less well defined than Guillory asserts. There are features of academic reading in the producers' practices, not least the thorough close reading with a pen in hand or the commitment to literary value. This means the characterization of ordinary reading as only concerning pleasure must also be nuanced. The producers testify it is hard to draw any clear distinctions between professional and

private reading. Close reading and a bodily and affective reading for pleasure do not preclude each other; rather, they function as fertile prerequisites for one another. Ordinary reading can no longer be seen as an isolated individual reading practice; on the contrary, events such as BBC show that reading literature can be—and often is—an intensely social, collective, and multimedial practice with meeting boundaries between different actors, texts, media, genres, technologies, activities, and places.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

A starting point for this article was the need for the predominant view on reading to be widened. Reading can mean and involve so many other and more things than the solitary reading of a printed literary text. The case of BBC provides an abundance of examples of how reading in its narrower sense is now interconnected with a plurality of other practices, media, places, and artifacts. The reading of a literary text is here transformed into a popular cultural performance where the scenic and dramatized meeting between the spoken and printed word, and music, becomes crucial. In this meeting, other media technologies and art forms are also very important. Focus is shifted from the literary work itself to its manifold “stagings,” from the text to its performers and performances. The social dimension becomes important, partly from the presence and participation of the audience, and partly because the event itself can be seen as a collective project, a kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (Total Work of Art) where the vantage point is still a specific book, but where, through the hosts’ and artists’ interpretations, it is inscribed in new constellations and networks in terms of medium, genre, style, and cultural circuit (“high” or “low”). Members of the audience might be drawn to the show because of the book, of course, but they might as well be there because of the performing artists. In either case, new and unexpected constellations of literature and music will unfold.

There are no pedagogical quick fixes or obvious moral lessons to be drawn from this case study. Nevertheless, BBC offers a rich map of different ways of working with literature in pleasurable and innovative ways. The producers distancing themselves from the term “reading promotion” is not surprising, for the term connotes utility, duty, and work. The challenge seems to be to invoke genuine motivation for literature without expecting too much of a service in return.

The relationship between pleasure and achievement is especially critical in school and higher education. How does a teacher bring about optimal conditions for passionate reading at the same time as being obliged to evaluate and grade exactly these achievements? The challenge is a well-known one within literary pedagogy, and it has grown more important in these times of New Public Management, with increased focus on test scores and quantification of knowledge. This challenge must be addressed. Without passionate readers, there will be no critical readers and probably no high achievers in large-scale international literacy tests (such as PISA), either (Bruns 62-63). Trying out new and creative ways of mediating literature could be a start. A crucial insight to be learned from BBC is precisely that reading has amorphous boundaries to other cultural practices. A creative exploration of these boundaries has great aesthetic—and, by extension, pedagogical—possibilities. There are no guarantees the slogan “you don’t have to read the book” works for all. In school and college, you still have to have read the book, of course. These unavoidable compulsory elements could be balanced by a more open and curious approach, highlighting both the singularity of reading literature and its intimate dependence on surrounding factors and practices. This would also be in better harmony with the changing conditions for reading in the new media ecology. Reading should no longer simply be seen as threatened by new media; on the contrary, it should be seen as a (both specific and amorphous) kind of media experience in itself (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo 248). Further, even if the book sometimes seems to completely disappear in favor of other competing media during a BBC-show, the particular literary text in focus is the catalyst for the particular evening’s unique and complex media experience.

END NOTES

1. In 2013, a local chapter with a similar design was started in the city of Helsingborg, and in 2015 in Gothenburg.
2. The concept reading practice has in recent years been theorized and applied most extensively within the field of new literacy studies, see, e.g. Barton. In literary and cultural studies, the influence of De Certeau cannot be overlooked.
3. The interviews were semi-structured, conducted by the author, and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes.
4. See e.g. Ganetz; Lindberg; Olsson for overviews and case studies.
5. For a discussion and rehabilitation of this genre, see Trondman 198–235.
6. Cf. Persson, "Reading around the Text."

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From the Vertical to the Horizontal: Introducing Mikhail Epstein's Transculture to Perplexed Educators¹

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ABSTRACT

A shift in focus from supporting or opposing vertical, grand narratives to the horizontal, the ordinary and the everyday, can lead educators to transformative developments. Educators find themselves in a false dichotomy of being restricted to supporting or opposing competing vertical utopian visions of education. Mikhail Epstein's ideas about transculture can help perplexed educators make a shift from the vertical to the horizontal, focusing their praxis and pedagogy on the ordinary and the everyday, including objects and artifacts of popular culture. In a radical move, Epstein argues that commodification represents resistance to totalitarian controls and impulses; he urges educators to embrace commodification as a strategy for regaining some of what has been lost to corporatist influence in education. When educators shift their focus and perspective from the vertical to the horizontal, they create a space for *interference*, which involves using difference creatively and can lead to the creation of entirely new culture. Many ideas can be viewed profitably from a transcultural point-of-view, including Alison Cook-Sather's ideas about metaphor in education and Henry Jenkins's exploration of the emerging media culture. In the classroom, educators can undertake qualitative experimentation to develop and apply transcultural pedagogy; there is no underlying defined epistemology of education to accompany such work. The current situation in education, and the larger culture, may thus be seen as proto-, i.e., an exciting future that is not predefined and foreclosed. Transculture offers educators a maybe world that allows exploration of the lacunae and lack in every field.

Keywords

Epstein, Mikhail; Transculture; Pedagogy; Commodification; Interference; Proto- Mode; Corporatist Education; Vertical Culture; Horizontal Culture; Creation of Culture

Many educators today are perplexed. They know, or at least think they know, what education ought to be, how exciting and wonderful it is to learn and teach. Many of them do not understand the baffling present moment in education, with its competing claims and counterclaims, its ceaseless calls for reform that are thinly veiled attacks on their professionalism and integrity from people with questionable motives. They also know that today's certainty may change or disappear before tomorrow. Where education is going and what it will become, the *after*, remains frustratingly opaque: out of their control and beyond their understanding.² In this time of constant change and uncertainty, *education* has become increasingly problematic and confusing for everyone involved in teaching and learning on any level. All too often, educators' voices are not heard. Their professional choices seem limited to supporting or opposing someone else's ideological vision of what education is, and what it should become.

Educators could develop an experimental pedagogy for these new times by shifting their perspectives and efforts from struggling for or against the vertical, grand narratives and strategies designed to transform society, to focusing on the horizontal, the ordinary and everyday, including objects and artifacts of popular culture. Mikhail Epstein's theory of transculture supports such a shift. The basic structure of transculture is elegant in its simplicity: picture a common x-y axis (see Figure 1).

<p>Horizontal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ordinary and Everyday • Creative Commodification • Interference • New Culture Created in Lacunas and lacks • Subjunctive Mode 	<p>Vertical</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grand Narratives • Socialism, Capitalism • Utopian • Power Struggle • Imperative Mode
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Figure One: The Vertical and the Horizontal in Culture

The north-south lines on this axis represent vertical forces with the power and the money to force educational change along lines that support their interests and ideology, often in the name of "reform." The vertical supports and encourages grand ideas and narratives; this is the space where people literally try to force the world to change in accord with their ideological definitions of how things are or should be. Socialism and capitalism, modernism and postmodernism, represent vertical movements of the twentieth-century. There is often, if not always, a utopian strain in vertical ideas, initiatives, and promises. In contrast, the horizontal east-west axis represents the ordinary and the everyday, the realm where most educators live and work. Classroom dynamics occur on the horizontal level, as does the busyness of everyday life. To claim the horizontal as ordinary and everyday is not to deny its power: quite the contrary. Educators who shift their attention and effort from supporting or opposing vertical movements to the ordinary and the everyday of the horizontal can help their students learn how to create new culture. Individual creativity and freedom reside in the horizontal.

Since the early 2000s, moneyed interests and their conservative allies have been pursuing a quest for a vertical transformation of all levels of education by calling for "reform." As Diane Ravitch explains,

For the past fifteen years, the nation's public schools have been a prime target for privatization. Unbeknownst to the public, those who would privatize the public schools

call themselves “reformers” to disguise their goal. Who could be opposed to “reform”? These days, those who call themselves “education reformers” are likely to be hedge fund managers, entrepreneurs, and billionaires, not educators.

This movement might well be referred to as “corporatism” and its adherents and champions as “corporatists.” For example, after experimenting in the K-12 educational sector, often with very little success, Bill Gates, through his foundation, now “wants nothing less than to overhaul higher education, changing how it is delivered, financed, and regulated” (Parry). In Gates’ utopian educational vision, utilitarian education aligned with corporate goals and ideology will be delivered to students through “a system of education designed for maximum measurability, delivered increasingly through technology” (Parry), a system with many benefits for Microsoft. At a meeting of the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities in 2012, Gates said, “The education we’re currently providing, or the way we’re providing it, just isn’t sustainable” (qtd. in Parry). He insists that educators ask, “How can we use technology as a tool to recreate the entire college experience? How can we provide a better education to more people for less money?” (qtd. in Parry). Such a corporatist view of education now seems so widespread and accepted that in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, critics of corporatist goals for education fear to speak because they do not “want to scotch their chances of winning Gates grants” (Parry). The grand vertical vision driving Gates and his allies seems to be creating a system of education in which educators are no longer necessary; the provision of job-related credentials useful to corporatists is to become the sole purpose and function of education. Paul J. LeBlanc, President of Southern New Hampshire University and recipient of funding from the Gates Foundation, explains that education is to be delivered free of educators: “The notion of the faculty member as the deliverer of learning—that’s the piece that we pull out” (qtd. in Parry).

Corporatists powerful or influential enough to support and push vertical agendas for education typically do so without consulting educators or asking for their input, and educators’ reflexive response often becomes adopting instinctive active opposition to any such ideas or programs. Fredric Jameson’s writing, for all its brilliance and influence, illustrates the promises, processes, and perils of embracing a reactively oppositional stance. Jameson offers opposition as the sole legitimate response to market-driven ideology while offering his own vertical prescription for curing our ailing culture and society: “critiques of consumption and commodification can only be truly radical when they specifically include rejection, not merely on the problem of the market itself but, above all, on the nature of socialism as an alternative system” (207). Jameson’s utopian socialism consists of enlightened people joining together in committed opposition to market ideology: in this world, vertical utopian socialist political ideals and projects, which are the only right ones, still offer a vision of a glorious possible future. He goes so far as to claim that “Anti-Utopian thought . . . is flawed” (225). Jameson’s purpose is clearly vertical in its scope and process: “to put an end to metaphysics, and to project the first elements of a vision of some achieved ‘human age,’ in which the ‘hidden hand’ of god, nature, the market, traditional hierarchy, and charismatic leadership will definitely have been disposed of” (336). All that remains is for educators to join others working to implement this utopian vision while waiting patiently, and with apologies to Francis Fukuyama, for the end of history. Jameson always remains convinced that in the battle of utopian visions, socialism will defeat capitalism, and all shall be well. It is profitable, however, to explore what might occur if educators were to embrace and explore a pedagogical approach based in a shift away from grand narratives and vertical domination of culture, from both the right and the left, to the creation of new culture through a focus on the ordinary and the everyday.

As Glenn Altschuler’s study of the history of rock’n’roll illustrates, the creation of culture can have widespread implications for all parts of a society: “Although rock’n’roll was a commodity, produced and distributed by a profit-making industry, and therefore subject to co-optation by the dominant culture, it continued to resist and unsettle ‘mainstream’ values” (34). Rock’n’roll music operated in a space where before

there was lack, and it interfered with a wide variety of vertical control strategies and mechanisms of the then-dominant culture: “Rock’n’roll deepened the divide between the generations, helped teenagers differentiate themselves from others, transformed popular culture in the United States, and rattled the reticent by pushing sexuality into the public arena” (34). Those involved in the early days of this creation of new culture had no vertical ambitions whatsoever. They simply wanted to sell as many records as possible. Bill Haley, whose “Rock Around the Clock” became a huge hit, “did not quite know what had hit him” (33). Those in positions of power and control tried to eliminate this new, dangerous commodity while the youth kept listening to, dancing to, and buying it. Rock’n’roll interfered with the dominant hegemonic cultural narrative of the 1950s so the young “could examine and contest the meaning adults ascribed to family, sexuality, and race” (8). Even the term *rock’n’roll* arose from the position of lack, for there was no name for this new sound: “rock’n’roll was a social construction and not a musical conception. It was, by and large, what DJs and record producers and performers said it was” (23). However much rock’n’roll created new culture from the horizontal, no matter the extent to which social protest, experimentation, and change became linked with rock’n’roll, it remained a commodity. During the 1950s, “record sales nearly tripled, from \$213 million in 1954 to \$613 million in 1959” (131). The vertical corporate forces in control of popular music at the time opposed rock’n’roll with “a fight against ‘low quality’ music, race music, sexual license, and juvenile delinquency” (134). Industry associations approached Congress to point “to the popularity of rock’n’roll as evidence of a clear and present danger to the American public” (135). No less a diehard reactionary than Barry Goldwater proclaimed that “the airwaves of this country have been flooded with bad music” (qtd. on p. 135). Defenders of rock’n’roll eagerly emphasized its commodity nature and “wrapped themselves in the ideology of free market capitalism, consumer choice, and opposition to censorship” (138). Thus it is that, sometimes, the embrace of commodity choice on the horizontal can rise to the creation of entirely new culture, influencing an entire society and introducing an entirely new world view.

Mikhail Epstein’s ideas about transculture offer a path for educators, and others, to seek freedom even in the face of totalizing vertical demands for intellectual conformity to any ideology. Epstein is a philosopher and cultural theorist who was educated and came of age in the late period of the Soviet Union. Even before the Soviet Union fell, he had begun to look beyond socialism in an effort to imagine what might come next. Educators might follow his lead as they try to imagine what future education might evolve out of the present climate. Given the power, influence, and reach of those promulgating vertical corporatist visions of education, there may seem little left to contest. The future path of education may seem utterly out of educators’ control.

There may seem to be no mechanism to halt commodification of who educators are and what they do. However, in what implies a truly radical shift in perspective, Epstein suggests that educators embrace commodification and focus entirely on the agency available in the ordinary and the everyday.

Through his qualitative experimentation, Epstein discovered that a focus on the horizontal, the ordinary and the everyday, can lead educators, and others, to interesting new places, even to the creation of entirely new culture. His experimental work forms the base for what he has developed as the “transcultural movement” (*Transcultural* 100). Eschewing any temptation to offer an abstract model describing utopian society or to propose grand vertical utopian solutions, Epstein keeps his focus on remaining always “deeply connected with everyday life” (*Transcultural* 110).

Epstein’s approach to commodification exemplifies how transcultural thinking challenges, engages, and subverts much of what Western cultural studies teaches about the relations of power and culture. He finds freedom in the horizontal, not in the vertical, though much energy is expended to make us believe otherwise. While educators may feel powerless in the face of the corporatist movement in education, on the horizontal level, transculture offers a stance to promote individual freedom through even such simple acts as choice in commodity culture.

Development and application of a pedagogy rooted in transculture would replace any focus on grand narratives or overarching vertical strategies developed to guide and mold an entire society along ideological grounds to the horizontal vision guiding an individual who must develop agency in things as they are. The utopian strain in transculture is individual, not collective: “the resurrection of utopia after the death of utopia, no longer as a social project with claims of transforming the world, but as a new intensity of intellectual vision and a broader horizon for the individual” (*Transcultural* 100). While living and working in a totalitarian society, Epstein searched for methodology to move his focus in cultural theory from the vertical, which was carefully guarded by the vast apparatus of the Soviet state, to the horizontal, which everywhere and always accommodates individual variation. The impetus for his development of transculture was “to activate the transsocial potentials inherent in human individuals rather than those oppositional or revolutionary elements pertaining to specific social groups” (*Transcultural* 102). Educators may easily find sympathy with the idea of eschewing reactive resistance to the empowered collective, in their case corporatism and market ideology in education, in favor of individual agency, discovery, and freedom for both themselves and their students.

In a certain sense, after embracing the shift from the vertical to the horizontal, educators would continue as if nothing had changed. However, everything would have changed, for transculture opens the path to create culture, even when educators are commodified. The shift from supporting or opposing competing vertical movements to seeking agency in the horizontal represents a fundamental shift in stance that allows for individual variation and unpredictability in education. At the time Epstein first began to look for what might follow the Soviet state, one could have concluded that such efforts were futile; now they can be seen as prescient. Educators making the same shift from the vertical to the horizontal enter what has shown itself to be a fertile area for qualitative experimentation. This change in stance, this shift in attitude, is not intended to challenge directly corporatist control of educators' professional lives and work, but it forms a critical part of the process of seeking the “after” that seems elusive in the current educational milieu.

In the realm of vertical utopianism, individual choice remains limited only to embracing or opposing commodification, which is separated from culture. Epstein insists that commodification is not foreign to culture: “commodification seems to be built into the very enterprise of culture as one of its (self-) transcending dimensions” (*Transcultural* 107). From a transcultural view, any insistence that educators must reactively oppose or thoughtlessly embrace commodification rests on a vertical foundation as shaky as corporatists' insistence that totalizing market control must now define *education*. Culture without commodification, such as that practiced in the late Soviet Union, speaks to no one:

Culture stopped being what people want to read, view, and listen to, and for which they are ready to pay. It became what people are obliged to read, view, and listen to in order to think and feel in the way that the state wants them to. The Soviet system struggled with the exteriorization of the internal life, the process that *at a certain point* generates art as commodity. What the Soviet system required was, on the contrary, the interiorization of social life, of the officially approved artistic works, mythological schemes, philosophical concepts, and political imperatives that the state imposed on people. (*Transcultural* 108, italics added)

Western educators may become uncomfortable with the implications of Epstein's further claim that commodification “can be regarded as a grass-roots challenge to all kinds of totalitarian uses and abuses of culture” (*Transcultural* 108). Totalitarian ideologies, including corporatism, seek to control how questions can be framed and do not accept individual responses as cogent analyses. Without a shift to the horizontal, personal responses to vertical claims and strictures may become definitional for individuals, leaving little room for alternate approaches or new choices within predefined utopian totalities. Transculture offers the shift

in individual perspective and effort towards the horizontal, the ordinary and the everyday, as transformative and resistant to all totalitarian impulses and programs. Though it seems the polar opposite of what many Westerners have been taught and come to believe, creative commodification allows educators to regain some of what has been lost. Commodification as resistance offers a welcome tactic to perplexed educators after they understand the necessary shift from the vertical to the horizontal.

Anyone schooled in Western cultural studies may well be shocked when first encountering Epstein's claim that the "status of the commodity secures freedom in the relationship between those who produce and those who consume" (*Transcultural* 109). Although such a claim seems to embrace totalizing market ideology, which many educators would be loathe to do, Soviet socialist culture taught Epstein that when "culture is decommodified it becomes subject to exploitation by the power that is indifferent to what people want to receive and are able to produce" (*Transcultural* 109). The decommodified culture Epstein knew consisted of "ungifted producers offering unwanted products to uninterested consumers" (*Transcultural* 108).

Few educators would embrace decommodified culture in practice. Although educators on all levels may cringe, for good reason, when they consider the baleful impacts consumer commodity culture has made on their students' intellectual and emotional growth and development, they cannot claim that commodity products are unwanted or that consumers are uninterested. Much effort goes into making people care whether, for example, they prefer Coke or Pepsi. American commodity culture may be regrettable in almost every way, but bad taste can be an expression of freedom.³ Commodification, in addition to its numerous flaws, shortcomings, and betrayals, offers choice, including the individual's choice to choose something better, which is a nice spot for educators and students to explore. Individual choice in commodity culture, when multiplied over many individuals, can make a large impact on what gets offered. Educators' agency, no matter the impositions and strictures of vertical culture, presupposes their ability to guide students as they make the choices necessary to navigate through commodity culture. To put it another way, although educators focused on the ordinary and the everyday may not change the World, they may well change many worlds.

Consumer commodities offer the worst of culture, simultaneously wasteful and frivolous; they seem to provide an illusion of meaningful choice. Yet, these same products once "served as signs of liberation for the Soviet people, and also as signs of culture because culture is everything that is beyond permission, that transcends the boundaries of the allowable" (*Transcultural* 109). Toothpaste and deodorant may seem a poor substitute for revolutionary protest against corporatist thinking, yet, as Epstein writes, "challenge to the structures of power is what the greatest creations of art share with the most trivial products of commodity culture" (*Transcultural* 110).

Epstein knows well "the bitterness which those of us working in the humanities feel when witnessing the lack of demand for our expertise, our vocation, and when we observe an arrogant contempt towards that which we consider the focus of our life" (*Transformative* 1). Educators join many who hold serious and legitimate concerns about sustainability and equity in what seems a static society creative only in pursuit of profit and puerile in pursuit of everything else. While Epstein rejoices in the freedom that lies in commodities, educators long for freedom from commodification. Educators have learned to live and work in the shadow of overwhelming vertical demands for conformity; their first impulse may be reactive opposition to Epstein's views, along the lines that Jameson would encourage. However, the transcultural practice of *interference* offers a way for those holding radically divergent views to influence each other in the lack and lacunae beyond difference. Vertical movements isolate and exacerbate difference, forcing educators to choose one of only two views. They offer "no space for difference as a category that is itself different from both identity and opposition" (*Transcultural* 92). Transculture locates difference at the point where contrasting, even conflicting, views begin to operate on each other, not as the end of engagement. Vertical ideology "renders people only schematic illustrations of some abstract principles: 'good and bad,' 'rich and poor,' 'oppressors and revolutionaries,'"

allowing only two positions: “opposition and unity” (*Transcultural* 95). In contrast, *interference* creates productive difference through non-dialectical discourse: “‘Interference’ is not taken here to mean an intrusion or intervention, but, in line with its definition in physics, [*interference*] denotes the mutual action of two or more waves of sound or light. Such an effect is found, for instance, in the butterfly’s colorful markings” (*Transformative* 60). From a transcultural view, rather than creating dualities leading to false, forced choices, differences “strengthen our need for each other” (*Transcultural* 99). Though contrasting views inevitably differ in vital, fundamental ways, interference places each as open to interaction with the other so that something new can be created: “Transculture is an experience of dwelling in the neutral spaces and lacunas between cultural demarcations. Transculture is not simply a mode of integrating cultural differences but a mode of creating something different from difference itself” (*Transcultural* 112).

Stanley Fish reported an experience that could be viewed in terms of interference. Distressed by the inability of graduate students, who are also instructors of English composition, to write literate sentences, Fish “came to the conclusion that unless writing courses focus exclusively on writing they are a sham.” Fish reports being “slightly uncomfortable” at finding support for his conclusion in a white paper from the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, an organization “[f]ounded by Lynne Cheney and Jerry Martin in 1995.” While he finds agreement with the organization’s insistence that composition courses focus exclusively on developing students’ writing skills, he also recognizes that Cheney and Martin have a political goal of “reconfiguring the academy according to conservative ideas and agendas” which he does not support. In accord with the transcultural practice of interference, Fish explores the space between the lacunas where lack exists. Even if reluctantly, he is influenced in his effort to influence, and he creates something different from difference.

For interference to become an essential process for educators, they need to develop some new habits and eschew as mere distraction any practice of reacting reflexively in opposition to vertical forces, such as corporatism in education. It is not an overstatement to place the transcultural shift from the vertical to the horizontal as “the next step in the ongoing human quest for freedom, in this case the liberation from the prison-house of language and a variety of artificial, self-imposed, and self-deifying cultural identities” (Epstein, *Transformative* 60).

If Epstein’s ideas about transculture describe existing educational culture, one expects to find ideas from other scholars that may be viewed productively from the transcultural perspective. Alison Cook-Sather, for example, objects to “orthodox pedagogies—scripted approaches to teaching and learning—that teachers in public schools are pressured to embrace” (“Change” 345). Her ideas support empowering teachers and students to “learn to resist the imposition of oppressive, disempowering, and commonly accepted educational practices” (“Change” 346). Through a pedagogy that incorporates a focus on the ordinary and the everyday, Cook-Sather hopes to provoke “an interaction with metaphors presented by popular culture and a choice to take them on in an active and critical way” (“Movements” 947). In line with the transcultural idea of creative commodification, Cook-Sather notes, “We can deliberately choose other ways of thinking, naming, and being, even as the dominant models of schooling and many of the people who function within them are trying to keep us contained and controlled” (“Movements” 948-949). She identifies the two dominant metaphors of education (production and cure) as vertical control mechanisms, though she does not use the terminology of transculture: “Because metaphors not only foreground certain qualities but also obscure and eliminate others, they can lead people to assume or accept that one particular way of thinking is the only way to think and one set of particular practices the only possible set” (“Movements” 950). Further, Cook-Sather proposes that education “must be guided by metaphors that unsettle, that expect students to seek, find, and invent what we do not know, that lead us not only to imagine but also to create other possible worlds” (“Movements” 959), a goal much in tune with Epstein’s ideas about transculture. The particular metaphor Cook-Sather prefers is

“translation”: “It casts students as active agents engaged in an ongoing, interactive, and reflective process of making new versions of themselves—versions that are at once duplications, revisions, and recreations, with meaning lost, preserved, and created anew with different textures, boundaries, and resonances” (“Movements” 961). Metaphors, not methods, drive the possibilities arising in Cook-Sather’s twenty-first century pedagogy: “When the school becomes a space within which students can actively compose and re-constitute themselves, the school can become a revolutionary site that can open up more diverse ways for students to understand and participate in the world” (“Movements” 962).

Cook-Sather’s translation framework, like that of transculture, focuses on educational process over product: “These processes are never finished; they are always open to further revision and always lead to further re-renderings” (“Translation” 219). The obsession with data and measurement in education has created a situation of “finishedness [*sic*] in the production and finishedness as an outcome of that education: educational contexts are structured toward achieving finishedness, and success is evaluated in terms of finishedness” (“Translation” 230). She argues that the “generative work of meaning making unfolds in the spaces between people and ideas,” which Epstein identifies as the lack or lacuna where interference is possible (*Education* 25). When a metaphor becomes imposed as a controlling vision, rather than a symbolic statement of possibility, the linking verb transforms to the imperative mode, and the subjunctive mode of suggestion disappears in favor of command and control. Metaphors conceptualizing vertical definitions of educational possibility become totalitarian threats resisted through an educator’s embrace of creative commodification in the horizontal.

In media studies, Henry Jenkins revels in the nature of emerging culture, which he sees as developing unpredictably. He finds a strong disconnect between the conception of *literacy* operating in formal education and what students want and need to know, understand, and be able to do. Average teenagers worldwide, so long as they are on the privileged side of the digital divide, routinely far exceed any existing curricular standards for media literacy: “A teenager doing homework may juggle four or five windows, scan the Web, listen to and download MP3 files, chat with friends, word-process a paper, and respond to e-mail, shifting rapidly among tasks” (17). Emerging artistic and literary forms and media cannot be categorized and contained through existing academic rules and boundaries. *The Matrix* film series offers an exemplar of “transmedia storytelling”: “A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole” (95-96). Such storytelling interferes with the archetype, beloved of many educators, of the solitary creative genius isolated from everyone else: “storytellers are developing a more collaborative model of authorship, co-creating content with artists with different visions and experiences” (96). Narratives developed collaboratively lead to new places not confined to traditional forms or media. They cannot be examined within traditional academic boundaries: “storytelling has become the art of world building, as artists create compelling environments that cannot be fully explored or exhausted within a single work or even a single medium” (114). Epstein would add that we cannot begin to imagine where such developments of narrative will lead: “In terms of literature, we live in the epoch of Beowulf and medieval epic songs. An abysmal gap separates us from the future Tolstoy and Joyces, whom we are unable even to predict” (*Transformative* 33).

In emerging culture, the collaborative, yet commodified, nature of the Internet challenges assumptions and rules about what constitutes good and useful criticism. Vertical strictures and controls limit educators to rules of criticism based on forms, patterns, and assumptions that no longer apply: “Criticism may once have been a meeting of two minds—the critic and the author—but now there are multiple authors and multiple critics” (Jenkins 128). Students who operate in collaborative intellectual communities and create works with many hands and eyes seem unwelcome in many educational institutions: “Our schools are not teaching what it means to live and work in . . . knowledge communities, but popular culture may be doing so” (129). Play,

and not schooling, popular culture, and not education, now provide students with entry points into exciting new worlds full of possibility.

the constricting, restricting nature of teaching and learning in our corporatized era limits both students' and educators' possibilities: "educators are coming to value the learning that occurs in . . . informal and recreational spaces, especially as they confront the constraints imposed on learning via educational policies that seemingly value only what can be counted on a standardized test" (Jenkins 177). Students may well be learning what they really need to know outside of schooling through activities such as participating in online communities: "literacy experts are recognizing that enacting, reciting, and appropriating elements from preexisting stories is a valuable and organic part of the process by which children develop cultural literacy" (Jenkins 177).

An educator interested in exploring the pedagogical implications arising from transculture can pursue qualitative experimentation: "an experiment in culture has no reference point for verification, no means of being tested objectively in relation to external reality. It neither confirms nor rejects any preliminary postulate but aims to multiply and disseminate new forms of expression or new paradigms of knowledge" (Epstein, *Transcultural* 6). An experiment in transculture "problematize[s] a particular cultural symbol or system, to potentiate a series of alternative symbols rather than to solve a problem or to actualize a specific potential" (Epstein, *Transcultural* 7). Such goals are fully in accord with the deepest nature of education as "one of the most mysterious and intimate moments in life" (Epstein, *Transformative* 291).

Adam Lefstein's 2005 analysis of deep divisions in Western culture could be read as transcultural experimentation; fully in the horizontal mode of interference, he advises readers to "judge the extent to which the competing visions resonate with their own thinking about the issues" (335). In a statement that could have been written explicitly from a transcultural point-of-view, Lefstein argues that teaching materials and curriculum guides should by design create space for interference:

[their] message could be reinforced by casting the ideas in a less confident and authoritative tone, for example, transforming the imperative 'pose the following question' to the subjunctive 'one possibility is to explore with the pupils the following question.' This stylistic shift would imply that instead of representing rules with which teachers must comply, the guidance is a collection of resources and ideas from which teachers may draw. (349-350)

Movement from the vertical imperative to the horizontal subjunctive mode empowers educators to make the same shift with their students. Although perhaps subtle, a permissive stance, instead of a commanding tone, could make all the difference in what students are taught about what *education* really means. Transculture concedes grand narratives and overarching utopian claims and theories to the vertical in favor of horizontal transcendence grounded in the ordinary and everyday work of educators in their classrooms.

the horizontal shift Epstein proposes becomes clearer when one considers what might follow transcultural experimentation in a classroom. An educator's move towards applying transculture, or searching for an experimental pedagogy, could begin with a focus on self and a commitment to becoming experimental in intention and design, in a shift from the vertical imperative mode ("Do this!") to the horizontal subjunctive mode ("Consider this as one choice."). Movement towards horizontal transcendence evolves unexpectedly and unpredictably, creating culture, not spinning utopian educational narratives. Rather than imperatively insisting that educators accept uncritically yet one more epistemology of teaching, transculture subjunctively invites them to experiment. Transcultural experimentation "develops a subjunctive modality . . . , attempting to broaden the range of possibilities and to transfer the status of experimentation from certainty to uncertainty, from 'result' to 'drawing'" (Epstein, *Transcultural* 7). Educators are invited to move from the isolation, obedience,

and allegiance corporatist education demands toward interference, where “differences no longer isolate . . . but rather open . . . perspectives of both self-differentiation and mutual involvement” (Epstein, *Transcultural* 9).

Educators who base their work in opposition to corporatist vertical strictures, as Jameson insists they must, remain stuck in a countercultural echo chamber more than forty years old; it is a deterministic world that neither surprises nor delights. The stance these educators take concedes the battle before the fight even begins because there is nothing productive or dynamic in such an approach. Transculture’s focus on horizontal transcendence “by acceptance and understanding” teaches the teacher how “to embrace and encircle” rather than how “to define, analyze, and oppose” (Epstein, *Transcultural* 45). Transculture moves educators towards a necessary rethinking of academic subjects and a deliberate move away from enforced and artificial curricular boundaries that, for example, claim to assess students’ writing skills through standardized testing requiring no writing. Transculture’s experimental curriculum’s “subject matter . . . [is] ‘everything’ and its methodological criteria ‘all’” (Epstein, *Transcultural* 46). Transculture allows for creation of new culture, embracing all that could imply for educators’ pedagogy and students’ creativity.

In transcultural experimentation, educators forsake the approach to culture they have applied, as well as methods and practices they have used for many seasons. The shift to transculture reveals and uncovers “culture after culture as there is life after life in other transcendent dimensions” (Epstein, *Transcultural* 65). Many educators working in today’s corporatist-collectivist, data-driven authoritarian educational market culture will find themselves much in sympathy with Epstein’s intention to interfere, never to blend.

Transculture offers educators “a radical transition from finality to initiation as a mode of thinking” (Epstein, *After* 332). Nowhere does this become clearer than in Epstein’s conception of the “proto-.” As the idea of “post” (as in postmodernism) dominated the intellectual culture in the latter part of the twentieth century, Epstein argues that the “present era . . . needs to be redefined, probably in terms of ‘proto-’ rather than ‘post-’” (*After* 280). Proto- manifests itself in uncertainty and lack of specificity: “A beginning . . . understood as leading to an open future and manifesting possibilities for continuation and an impossibility of ending can be designated as ‘proto’” (Epstein, *After* 331). Proto- cannot be defined or otherwise restricted: “Proto-, as it is emerging on the boundary of post-, is not proto-something, it is *proto* in itself” (Epstein, *After* 334). It expresses the transcultural mindset:

Proto- signals a humble awareness of the fact that we live in the earliest stage of an unknown civilization; that we have tapped into some secret source of power and knowledge that can eventually destroy us; that all of our glorious achievements to this point are only pale prototypes of what the coming bio- and info- technologies promise to bring. (Epstein, *Transformative* 32)

For educators restricted and bound by competing vertical utopian claims and counterclaims, “proto” offers “a state of promise, . . . expectation without determination” (Epstein, *After* 335). Educators can again approach the future in a state of excitement, in spite of all vertical attempts to define and control it or them in the form of standards, curriculum, testing, bureaucracy, control, and surveillance. As the living, breathing, undefined future, students now are efficiently ignored, predefined, sorted, and foreclosed. If educators do not want, for themselves or their students, what Epstein refers to as the “dead, objectified future . . . that we now find ourselves living” (*After* 335), they might begin creating new culture by attending to the ordinary and the everyday, privileging the horizontal not the vertical.

Although education is often the focus, one is tempted to say “the victim,” of massive vertical forces—true education ever resists control and standardization. Education is a process well suited to the horizontal focus Epstein urges: “Education is an improvisational activity that exercises the human capacity for wonder and unpredictability. Education is not just talking about what we already know; it initiates a social event

of creative co-thinking, where what is unknown is revealed to us only in the presence of others" (Epstein, *Transformative* 292). Through a dynamic that Faulkner would appreciate, the past once again becomes part of every person's present and his or her future: "The postmodern addiction to citations and intertextuality brought the past to the brink of extinction through the expanding dialogue with the present. The electronic web in particular brings the past preserved in texts to the fingertips of our contemporaries who cut, copy, and paste the past according to their own projects and constructive needs" (Epstein, *Transcultural* 153).

Student writing offers a promising area for transcultural experimentation. In their schooling, students often learn that academic writing is a solitary, isolating, task-driven activity that rarely requires creativity, and, seldom, if ever, results in joy. Epstein invites educators to consider what might happen were students free to write on the utterly commonplace, for example, on garbage, fences, or a favorite song or movie from their popular culture. Likewise, we might ponder what would happen were a group of educators to come together and write collectively on a topic they all chose, for example, "teacher and disciple" or "Myth and tolerance," maybe "Money" (Epstein, *Transcultural* 41). At the very least, both educators and students might find that they have something interesting to say, after all.

Schooling as presently constituted routinely fails to meet the needs of creative and passionate students: "someone who has just published her first online novel finds it disappointing to return to the classroom where her work is going to be read only by the teacher and feedback may be very limited" (Jenkins 184). Such students find themselves in the paradoxical position of having to "wait for the school bell to ring so they can focus on their writing" (Jenkins 184). Educators may well object that such writing is undisciplined apprentice work that lacks rigor and is of low quality. Even were this absolutely the case, students who cannot wait to go home and write "are passionate about writing because they are passionate about what they are writing about" (Jenkins 185), which is not how many students feel about and approach typical academic writing assignments. Transcultural pedagogy could bring the fervor of haphazard creativity back into the classroom. Leveraging the skills in collaboration and technology students have already mastered, educators may begin to expect, and receive, interesting, perhaps even amazing, writing on topics never explored before in schooling because they were never before admitted to an academic context.

Transculture remains passionately nondeterministic; there can be no one model for transcultural pedagogy. It is subjunctive and horizontal in both conception and practice:

Practice creates something new altogether that was not contained in the object previously explored or explained by theory. . . . Thus practice, even when it is based on a particular theory, cannot simply be reduced to that theory. It creates a possibility for new theories that in turn create possibilities for new practices. (Epstein, *Transformative* 58)

Educators will develop unique transcultural pedagogies and practices based on the results of their individual qualitative experiments, and all results remain drafts, starting points for further experimentation. Transcultural pedagogy invites educators to focus on the ordinary and the everyday, to transform what often seems to students, and to their teachers, a series of lifeless and pointless tasks and assessments into an exciting craft. Students may begin acting creatively in ways that their educators never imagined possible. In contrast to the certainties of corporatist education, transculture offers a maybe world; it is a first draft of a culture we cannot yet imagine. No matter what the vertical pressures and demands of the moment, educators remain the people, perhaps the only people, who can show their students how commodification can serve the cause of freedom, though it seems that does not; what it means to live in the proto-, as we do; and where to seek the lack and lacuna to set forth on explorations that lead to the creation of new culture.

ENDNOTES

1. I would like to thank my colleague Ximena Cordova for her very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.
2. It is interesting to note titles of some recent books in this regard: Terry Eagleton wrote *After Theory*; Valentine Cunningham wrote *Reading after Theory*; and Mikhail Epstein wrote *After the Future*. *After* seems to be an important contemporary intellectual trope.
3. John Waters, for example, created an aesthetic based on bad taste. His autobiography is *Shock Value: A Tasteful Book About Bad Taste*. One wonders if a commodified culture could hold space for his work.

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AUTHOR BIO

While working as an English Teacher in secondary education from 2001-2009, Sheldon Kohn began to

explore ways to negotiate freedom as an educator while being subject to commodification, marketplace ideology, and the tyranny of standardized tests. The philosophy of Mikhail Epstein spoke to him from the first time he read it, and he immediately saw its applicability to education. Since 2010, he has lived and worked in Abu Dhabi, UAE, where he serves as Chair of the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies at Zayed University. His department includes professors and instructors in science, information technology, and social science who teach courses in the General Education curriculum. His current projects include an exploration of how a culturally sensitive focus on the ordinary and the everyday could help L2 college students improve their written work in English. He is an active member of PCA/ACA and has a page available on academia.edu.

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The Diyinii of Naachid: Diné¹ Rhetoric as Ritual

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ABSTRACT

Rhetoric is far more than a theory of communication or the antiquated ancestor of freshman composition courses. As a system, rhetoric is the process that directs, on the one hand, individual experiences with the world and structures, and on the other, the stories cultures tell about themselves. These foundational narratives (myths) reveal a culture's metaphysical understanding of the nature of reality, the psychological understanding of human nature, and the epistemological notion of what can be known. Using the *Diné Bahané*, this paper will explore *Diné* rhetoric as *naachid*, an inclusive, outward-directed communication model of problem solving which functions as a ceremonial purification of mind, body, and speech while simultaneously addressing spiritual, social, economic, and political exigencies. As a rhetorical system, *naachid* synthesizes thought, symbol, and action through participation in ceremonies which alter an individual's perception of reality, thus maintaining the balance between the individual and the metaphysical system.

Keywords

Rhetoric; Navajo Studies; Philosophy; Metaphysics; Communication; Ritual; Mythology; Ceremony

In the 1972 article “Navajo World View and Cultural Patterns of Speech: A Case Study,” Gerry Philipsen, following the lead of P. Albert Duhamel, structures his analysis of *Diné* rhetoric by focusing on the cultural manifestations of metaphysics, epistemology, and psychology. While Philipsen asserts that “the Navajo has no written rhetorical theory” (139), he maintains that in *Diné* discourse “these categories [metaphysics, epistemology, psychology], as well as rhetoric itself, are products and expressions of cultural variations” (139).

His study begins where Philipsen’s ends, by taking issue with the assertion that the *Diné* have no established rhetorical theory. Philipsen’s belief that if rhetorical theory is not written down, it must not exist, emerges from what Paul Zolbrod characterizes as “Europe’s print driven legacy” (*Reading the Voice* 2). However, this paper argues that *Diné* rhetorical theory is embedded in their creation and journey narratives recorded by scores of anthropologists since the late 1800s.

This paper will make use of Paul Zolbrod’s *The Diné Bahaané*, a synthesis of songs and stories from various published versions of the Blessing Way Ceremony. While not an attempt to canonize or reduce the rich oral tradition of the *Diné*, Zolbrod, himself, understands this book to be “an experiment in text retrieval, since my original intention was to present an English version of the Navajo creation story as evidence of an ongoing pre-Columbian literary tradition in North America” (Zolbrod, *The Diné Bahaané* 1). The philosophical value of this text is found in its providing a tangible and stable platform to begin an explication of *Diné* beliefs.

The *Diné Bahaané* strikes a balance between the Western need for physical texts and the demands of a cultural tradition to speak for itself.

Zolbrod’s text will be used to explicate the *Diné* process of *naachid*, a generative process of mediation between the exterior world of experience and the interior world of opinion, as approximating the act of creation (metaphysics) by stressing thought and speech as the primary means of altering reality through the redirection of thought (psychology). *Naachid*, as rhetoric, synthesizes thought, symbol, and action through participation in ceremony (epistemology) which alters an individual’s perception of reality, thus maintaining the balance between the individual and the metaphysical system.

PRINCIPLES OF RHETORIC

George Kennedy defines the act of communication as “the transmission of a message and often involves the creation of a new thought by the reaction of a receiver to the message of an original statement, which then in turn may impel the sender to revise the statement, making it clearer or more forceful, or meeting some objective” (5). In other words, rhetoric is the act by which information is gathered and presented through the meta-cognitive awareness of situations and contexts. Texts constructed by rhetoric reflect a unique model of belief and suggest a preferred mode of action. However, when considering the purpose of rhetoric in a ritual sense, consider I.A. Richards’ definition of rhetoric as being the “study of misunderstandings and their remedies” (106). The liminal quality of misunderstanding in ritual rhetoric is that dissonance is a defect not “in the world” but within the perception (expressed as *pistis*/belief) of the observer. Barry Brumett writes “consciousness or ideology is a system of belief—not the way things ‘really, truly are’ but what people perceived to be true” (27). Wayne Booth agrees, writing that dissonance, expressed as rhetorical exigence, begins with the first essential warrant of belief which states “the world as we experience it is somehow awed” (161).

The key word is “experience.” In actuality, the world is as it is; only our perception and experience of the world reveals that “something is wrong, deficient, broken, inadequate, lacking” (Booth 161). This perceived rottenness in the world emerges from the epistemic conflict defined in Booth’s second warrant which states “the flaws are seen in the light of the unawed . . . standards of judgment of the brokenness exist somewhere” (Booth 161). The starting point of rhetoric is the belief that “things” are not as they should be and a belief in a model that establishes what “things” should approximate. This break between “what is” and “what ought to

be” creates not only the possibility for rhetoric but the necessity of rhetoric.

Rhetoric, then, operates within a belief system, and that belief system itself “harkens back to operative principles set in motion at the time of creation” (McPherson 4). Solutions to current problems can be found in the process exhibited in the past. Robert Scott writes that when “looking to the future and making ethical decisions, we must look to the past” (317). These ethical models are narrated in the myths of a culture. Mircea Eliade writes that “because myth relates the *gesta* of supernatural beings and the manifestation of their sacred powers, it becomes the exemplary model for all significant human activities” (6). Rhetorical action takes shape within a complex series of relationships between agents and their experiences and those experiences filtered through events narrated in myth. In order to fully comprehend *Diné* rhetoric, a working knowledge of these operating principles is needed.

METAPHYSICS AS CONTEXT

According to Philipsen, the principle context of rhetoric is metaphysical which he defines as “presuppositions about the nature of reality, what there is, how it came to be” (Philipsen 133). In *Diné* metaphysics, the “universe” or “nature” was composed of three layers. The first layer is the “sensed objective world” which is experienced with the five senses and is 100% sacred (Burnside). For the *Diné* the “sacred” (*diyin*) is a morally neutral, generative power representing the pure potential of the undeveloped found at the moment before cognitive awareness. The second layer is the psychological layer of the internal world of feelings and opinions about those feelings (Burnside). This is the layer where direct experiences with the objective world are filtered through cultural constraints to form or support a belief (*pistis*) which becomes the rationale for action. Finally, there is the third layer of ceremony which functions as epistemological rhetoric. Here, experience and belief are made one when action is performed mindfully (Burnside). The interaction between these three layers establishes the foundation of the *Diné* rhetorical system.

In the beginning, *Diné* creation narratives speak of existence as being substantial but formless, undifferentiated, and inactive. John Farella characterizes the *Diné* act of creation as cognitive when he writes “since there was no movement, there was, of course, nothing to be sensed and, therefore, nothing to think about, and no language or behavior” (119). Then, there is movement. The *Diné Bahané* describes the creative process as “It is said that at [the Place Where the Waters Crossed] white arose in the east and was considered day . . . blue arose in the South. It too was considered day . . . In the West yellow arose and showed that evening had come. Then in the North Black arose” (Zolbrod, *The Diné Bahané* 35).

The creation of order is not linear but rather circular. Further, the circle is divided into “equal quadrants beginning in the East” (“Bitse Silei” 5). Within the four quadrants, arranged according to the four cardinal directions, are also four colors and later the four sacred mountains. These layered elements within the divided circle become categories that establish “the four sacred of all things” (Burnside). Each of these semiotic signs recall steps in a recursive process that creates a repetitive movement of awareness, action, and renewal.

This circular process moves according to the principles of *nahagha*—ceremony. The root of *nahagha* suggests movement and therefore life while at the same time it suggests an awareness of something because of its motion (Witherspoon 13-14). Both linguistically, and from observation and participation, Navajo ritual suggests thoughtful, meaningful action directed at resolving a perceived estrangement from the idea of order held by an individual. Directly related to *nahagha* is the verb *naaghahi*. According to Gary Witherspoon, this verb expresses the idea of “repetition, restoration, or continuous reoccurrence of an event or set of conditions, some of which imply the completion of a cycle or a revolution” (21). Referencing the process and structure of cosmological creation, the goal of the rhetorical/ritual management of “the four sacred of all things” is to arrive at *hozho*.

In the emergence narratives, *hozho* is characterized by individuals as they seek “their place on the earth and to tune their lives to the rhythms, melodies, and cycles of the earth and sky” (Witherspoon 258). Most often glossed as beauty or balance, *hozho* is a “cosmic concert” that expresses “the normal state of the fourth world [our current realm of existence], which is a state of beauty, harmony, health, happiness, and peace” (Witherspoon 264). In other words, *hozho* is a mental state of peace cultivated through maturity rooted in experiences with the world.

For those who are aware of their place in the process (*akonizin*), these experiences are “omnipresent, not just occasional. It is the experience of being part of something larger and grander than oneself, the direct experience of oneness (*nizhoni*)” (Farella 23). From this experience of *nizhoni*, the individual can “*nizhoni go silei*” or put things in their proper place. *Nizhoni go silei* rhetorically arranges experience in a way that reflects the rationality of the metaphysical system. *Nizhoni go silei* is the key to understanding *hozho*. When all things are put in their proper place, *hozho* is revealed. *Hozho*, then, is not an accidental process but rather one of maturity and transformation stimulated by a natural desire for onto-cosmological harmony.

However, *hozho* should not be understood as only a cosmological condition. *Hozho* is also a characteristic and a product of human activity. In the songs of the Blessingway, each *hatal* (song/prayer) ends with a variation of the refrain:

Before me it is blessed [*hozho*] as I go about
 behind me it is blessed as I go about
 below me it is blessed as I go about
 above me it is blessed as I go about
 everywhere all around me it is blessed as I go about.
 (River Junction Curly qtd. in Wyman 616)

The goal of each Blessingway song is to restore the individual to a state of harmony. As mentioned above, however, the entire ceremony serves as a means to remind the individual that beauty/*hozho* resides within them.

In the Slim Curly version of the Blessing Way, the prayer of “The Bath at Tree-Grove-Slope” ends with “wherever I go blessing radiates above me, where ever I go blessing radiates above me . . . as far as I gaze around me earth usually extends its blessing, where ever I go blessing radiates around me, wherever I go blessing radiates around me” (qtd. in Wyman 235). When this prayer (or variations) is performed by *Diné* as part of a morning prayer, rather than blessings (*hozho*) radiating “around” an individual, the phrasing is “*hozho* radiates/comes from me.” The implication is that *hozho* is a potential state of being one carries with them. Further the possibility of *hozho* rests in the conscious actions of the individual.

The preferred state of *hozho* is restored by turning the cosmological process of movement, awareness, and arrangement into a cognitive process. River Junction Curly’s Blessingway prayer calls on the power of the four sacred mountains as both containers of power and anchors of the creative process to restore thinking to the *hozhoji* (Blessed Way). Through rhetorical identification he prays “with its [sacred mountain’s] power I will go about, with its body I will go about, with its mind, its voice, I will go about” (River Junction Curly qtd. in Wyman 613). The purpose of prayer is to restore an individual’s awareness of *hozho* as an essential characteristic of their being. Farella comments that “parts of a person commonly mentioned in restoration rituals include . . . *bin* (his mind), *bizaad* (his speech), *begat* (his moving power or characteristic way of moving)” (97). In order to regain a sense of *hozho*, the individual must regain the ability to think, speak, and perform the foundational idea of beauty. In the end, the rhetorical quality of prayer validates ideas about foundational essence by manifesting the cosmological process of movement, awareness, and arrangement into a cognitive process.

PSYCHOLOGY: THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF RHETORICAL AGENCY

With the patterns of belief established and qualitative differences summarized in the text of the creation story, a being now emerges to experience and continue the movement initiated at the beginning. For Philipsen, these prototypical actors in the meta-narrative represent cultural psychology in that they reveal a particular view of human nature (Philipsen 136). The *Diné* creation story calls these entities the “Air Spirit People.” These first beings are unlikely ethical or meta-cognitive heroes. The text characterizes them as “people unlike the well-ordered earth surface people . . . [they] fought among themselves . . . they committed adultery with one another” (Zolbrod, *The Diné Bahané* 36–37). The text recounts their misadventures as they muddle from world to world, spreading disorder and ruin as they go. Then, something happens upon their arrival in the fourth world. In this world, the Air Spirit People are adopted by the *Kiis’aanii* tribe. The kindness of “the People who Live in Upright Houses” and the quality of the land cause the Air Spirit People to pause and consider their past and their future. They come to the realization that “this was a good world, and the wandering insect people meant to stay here” (Zolbrod, *The Diné Bahané* 47). This is the first time the Air Spirit People demonstrate meta-cognitive thinking and experiential awareness.

The psychological/spiritual layer of the *Diné* universe expresses the internal world of feelings and opinions about those feelings (Burnside). It is the relationship between the metaphysical and the psychological, placed against the awareness of an agent navigating these layers, that creates the need for rhetoric. Lloyd Bitzer writes in his classic article “The Rhetorical Situation” that all discourse begins with the awareness of exigence which he defines as “an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be” (6). This is precisely what happens in the narrative. Becoming aware of the perfection of their situation and their own “imperfection,” the Air Spirit People hold a council meeting. They talk quietly among themselves and they resolve to mend their ways and to “do nothing unintelligent that would create disorder” (Zolbrod, *The Diné Bahané* 47).

This first council meeting is significant in that it illustrates *Diné* epistemology by exploring “ways of knowing, what can be known, and sources of authority” (Philipsen 134). What can be known is the process of *nahagha* exemplified by the natural movement of creation that establishes the necessary conditions for movement and, therefore, life. The metaphysical process of *nahagha* is reapplied epistemologically as *diné kehgo nitsahakees*, the *Diné* process of problem solving, which stresses “an understanding of holistic life process—involving thinking, living, planning solutions, and achieving solutions” (“Bitse Silei” 5). *Diné* epistemology indexes the metaphysical model of the quartered circle with meta-cognitive problem solving strategies. In this onto-cosmological paradigm, the East and the dawn representing *nitsahakees* (the thinking process) are followed by *nahat’a* (planning together) placed with the South in the blue sky of noon. Then, *iina* (doing the plan or arriving at ideas) is indexed with the West and Sunset and the result, *sihasin*, is placed in the north with the dark of night (“Bitse Silei” 5).

This juxtaposition of physical landmarks [the sacred mountains] and the natural movement of time with psychological landscapes suggests semiotic indexing where “the ‘thing’ (sign) [cardinal direction/time of day] and the ‘something else’ (meaning) [quadrant of the thought process] are linked by way of cause or association” (Brummett 46). The arrangement of elements, the movement and awareness of movement summarizes and establishes “the entire pattern of Navajo life. First, the four are associated with certain patterns of behavior and thought; second, they are reduction of or a model for larger temporal units . . . which are themselves associated with certain activities and thoughts; and finally they summarize qualitative differences in the universe” (Farella 108). The placement of thought within the context of cardinal directions and the time of day is not arbitrary but makes the point that each stage in the rhetorical process is rooted in a cognitive geography and creates a “day” which is a functional and harmonious system in which to accomplish an intended goal.

is psychological arrangement of epistemic signs is the third layer of ceremony. For the *Diné*, ceremony is an actively focused mediating of the tension created between the objective world of experience and the subjective world of thoughts, feelings, and opinions. This rhetorical process of turning discord into meaningful action has been placed by contemporary *Diné* philosophy under the term “*naachid*.” According to Raymond Austin, *naachid* has two possible meanings: “first, it may refer to ‘gesturing with the hand’ . . . the other meaning may refer to ‘renewal or healing’ of Navajo society or everything encompassing the *Diné* way” (11-12). The first definition of *naachid* focuses on the implication of hand use. In James Ferris’ work on the Nightway Ceremony, a great deal of emphasis is placed on the use of gestures to pantomime specific events in sacred narratives. However, *naachid* has a more cognitive meaning as well. According to Sunny Dooley, *naachid* references the hands only in that the word means to “rummage” around with the hands, looking for something and in the process seeking to organize or arrange (Dooley). In this case, hands as hands are secondary to their metaphorical function of reordering what is in front of an individual.

The second meaning of *naachid* goes back to Witherspoon’s concept of *nahagha* and ritual as a means to renew a perceived disorder. John Farella writes that rituals are epistemologically focused problem-solving strategies of “altering one’s perception of or way of looking at the world” (189). *Naachid*, then, becomes a ritual where one reconsiders and renews/re-creates “the precepts one adheres to and the demands of the circumstances in which one must act” (Scott 318). Again, we find ourselves looking back to Bitzer’s definition of rhetoric as well as Farella’s understanding of *Diné* ritual which is “as much oriented toward being about a gestalt shift on the part of participants as it is in producing “objective change” (Farella 189). Like its cosmology, *Diné* epistemology is expressed as part of a rhetorical process characterized by “increasing complexity reflected in the amount of difference in the material world, as well as in the different ways of thinking that are part of the human . . . world” (Farella 95). Navajo rhetoric, then, is not concerned with the reassertion of objective truth but the renewal and reapplication of rhetorical belief according to the complex demands of ever changing situations.

That *naachid* is considered a ritual means of mediating misunderstandings is affirmed by its use in the Navajo Peacemaker Court established in 1982 to blend “traditional Navajo methods of mediating disputes with regular court operations” (Zion 65). According to Peacemaker Court literature, *naachid* is defined as “the relationship between the planner and the people for whom the plan is intended. The process of *naachid* is inclusive, important, deliberate, and invokes the Holy People. It governs the manner in which our reformers shall consider changes” (“Bistei Sillei”). *Naachid* is to be understood as a relationship between the rhetor who mediates the rhetorical situation and the audience who must be fully and willingly engaged in the process and the ever-changing situation itself. The Holy People function as constraints within the traditional stories.

They supply the beliefs and traditions that provide “a blueprint [which] outlines how people should act based on divine rules and principles” (McPherson 4). Finally, change is the primary cause of exigence. Exigence, as illustrated by the Air Spirit People, is a cognitive change rooted in experiences and the awareness of opinions about those experiences. So, *naachid*, to use Bitzer’s language, is “pragmatic. . . but functions to ultimately produce action or change in the world” (3-4) by changing the perception of the individual.

The first *naachid* is also important for its unintended result. It’s not just that the Air Spirit People have changed their tune and live happily ever after. The consequence of this Council is far more onto-cosmological. Shortly after their resolution, they hear a distant voice that gets louder and closer until “they [Air Spirit People] found themselves standing among four mysterious beings. They had never seen such creatures anywhere before. For they were looking at those who would eventually become known as [*Diyin Diné*]” (Zolbrod, *The Diné Bahané* 48). Having become aware of their world and their opinions about the world, the Air Spirit people make use of ritual to bring “things into focus, distilling events that matter” (Farella 28). This ritual mediation of exigence draws the holy people because, as Wyman writes, “ceremony attracts the Holy People .

... if they are correct the holy people ... are obligated to come and render aid" ("Navajo Ceremonial System" 551). The Air Spirit People, illustrating a capacity to reason beyond the primitive level of bodily needs, draw the Holy People to the Council who reveal what the future holds for the Air Spirit people.

Rhetoric, as a critically conscious act, establishes a clear relationship between knowledge as an artifact and the rhetorical method used to gather and present knowledge. The relationship between the Holy People and ritual is much the same. In Navajo, the word *Diyin* (holy/sacred) is not, necessarily, a religious term. Rather, *diyin* carries with it the idea of generative power and "immunity." For Farella, the *diyin* are seen to "bound the realm of the possible" (147). In this sense, *Diyin Diné* are not "holy people" as much as potentially powerful people who are "immune" from confusion. Farella argues that in *Diné* philosophy, power is not "an inseparable attribute of a being. One has the potential for power through the possession of knowledge, the power is actualized or achieved through the ritual exercise of this knowledge" (62). The Holy People, as concept, express the idea that knowing is being and "it is the possession of knowledge that makes one 'divine.' Rather than divineness existing as an inseparable attribute of being, it is acquired" (Farella 26). This "knowledge" that exists potentially in all people is created "moment by moment in the circumstances in which [an individual] finds [him or herself]" (Scott 318).

The Holy People explain to the Air Spirit People that they "want more people to be created in this world. But they want intelligent people, created in their likeness" (Zolbrod, *The Diné Bahané* 49). According to Farella, this likeness to the holy people consists "simply of the acquisition and ritual exercise of knowledge" (27). So, the knowledge to make one powerful like the Holy People need only be acquired and then used. The Holy People relate how this intelligence is to be acquired. They explain to the Air Spirit people that these "new people" are to "have hands like ours. They are to have feet like ours. They are to have mouths like ours and teeth like ours. They must learn to think far ahead, as we do" (Zolbrod, *The Diné Bahané* 49). The essential nature of *Diné* epistemology is revealed in this plan. One acquires knowledge through the experience of the world (senses), the reflection on that experience (the mind), and then a way to construct contingent "truths" about those experiences (speech).

Once again Farella opens a place to think about rhetoric as generative ritual. He writes "acts of creation do not just happen [in *Diné* metaphysics]; they are achieved ritually" (26-27). Lloyd Bitzer seems to agree when he states that rhetoric, through the use of language and thought, creates discourse which induces action that mediates the altering of perceived reality. Witherspoon, writing specifically about *Diné* rites, agrees, stating "words, like thoughts, are considered to have creative power" (22). Ritual rhetoric, unlike arresting discourse geared toward engineering the consent of an audience, makes use of the generative power of language. Victor Turner writes that in ritual "speech is not merely communicative but also power and wisdom. The wisdom that is imparted in sacred liminality is not just an aggregation of words and sentences; it has ontological value, it re-fashions the very being of the [individual]" (103).

The individual, in turn, is compelled by the power of language to act and consequently "by acting and in action [he or she] is enabled to know" (Scott 315). In a lengthy quote, Witherspoon breaks down this ritual/rhetorical process of being as

knowledge is the awareness of symbol, thought is the organization of symbol, speech is the externalization of symbol and compulsion is the realization of symbol. Symbol is word and word is the means by which substance is organized and transformed. Both substance and symbol are primordial, for in the beginning were the word and the element, the symbol and the symbolized. (46)

Ritual rhetoric and rhetoric as ritual do not simply use nomenclatures to "direct the attention to some channels rather than others" (Burke 45). Rather, and in addition to, the use of language and discourse to produce change in the individual's perception of the world, rhetoric calls upon the narrative structure of myth to compel an individual to action and therefore knowing.

In his article “On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic,” Robert L. Scott argues that rhetoric, beyond communication, is the process of reflective experience that leads not only to “contingent truth” but the creation of our own authentic selves. John Farella writes that in *Diné* culture, thinking is a sacred act. In fact, in *Diné* culture “it is the possession of knowledge that makes one divine [diyin]” (Farella 26). This acquisition of knowledge is rhetorically based: “the stories describe experience, and in that sense they create it . . . if a person listens to the stories, thinks about them, and relates them to his own life, he will necessarily perceive that they are true. Having learned this, he will experience more; having experienced more, he understand the stories better, and so on” (Farella 24). For the *Diné*, rhetoric as ritual is epistemic in the sense that the experiencing and interpreting of texts leads not just to existing as existing but the cognitive conditions necessary for existing.

It is not to say that the process of *naachid* always creates harmony or that being is synonymous with balance. Exigence, misunderstanding, disorder are not independent entities at work in the world to confound or test us but are created by us simply as “the price of doing business” (Dooley). Likewise, Robert Scott believes that experience creates contradictory claims (315). Even as we seek to create “truth” or stasis, we find ourselves, time after time, creating in our solutions the very root of our next misunderstanding. Farella agrees, writing that disorder was “not created but came as part of and as a necessary consequence to the creation of something else” (51). *Naachid*, then, is concerned not with creation as an entity but with establishing the conditions of existence which must include disorder as well as order.

The Diné Bahané illustrates this idea in the story of “The Separation of the Sexes.” In this story, First Man and First Woman have an argument over who is the hardest working and consequently the most valuable member of the marriage. As the disagreement progresses, both allow themselves to become increasingly angry until First Man leaves the home. The next morning, he gathers only the men, announcing “as for the women, let them stay where they are . . . I have nothing to say to any woman around here” (Zolbrod, *The Diné Bahané* 60). The text then states that First Man “instructs” the men gathered and pronounces “the women think they can live without us . . . they think they can continue to exist thanks as much to them as us. Well, let us see if all that is true . . . we will cross the stream and live apart from them” (Zolbrod, *The Diné Bahané* 60). While First Man does convene an assembly, he violates the first rule of *naachid* by excluding the women. The remedy to the misunderstanding between First Man and First Woman lies in their working out their own issues. Yet their problems are made the problems of the community and First Woman, as well as the other women, is excluded from mediating the “solution” given by First Man.

Naachid requires an audience fully engaged and equally involved in considering and implementing solutions. The story suggests that First Man does not allow for rhetorical problem solving. Rather, he “instructs” those gathered. Further, the story reveals that “as some of the young men rowed across the stream they wept at having to part with their wives. They had not been angered by anything the women had said. But they had become used to doing whatever [First Man] had told them to do” (Zolbrod, *The Diné Bahané* 61). *Naachid* requires active participation by all members of the audience. Clearly, some of the men with alternative views did not speak out because of either fear or passive acceptance of First Man’s authority. First Man also violates his role as *naat’ani* (leader/mediator) by passing down unilateral edicts. First Man’s abandonment of the rules of *naachid* transforms him from a leader seeking harmony into a tyrant seeking personal justification for his self-righteous indignation.

Eventually, the sexes are reunited once they are encouraged to “talk things out” (*baa yati’*). However, the faulty *naachid* that led to the separation has consequences. The *Diné Bahané* clearly illustrates that when the process of mediation has become corrupt, the outcome will be disorder. In the story, the consequence of the decision to separate is the creation of monsters who “looked nothing like an ordinary child. Instead, this infant was a round misshapen creature with no head” (Zolbrod, *The Diné Bahané* 94). These monsters, or *naa’ye*, are not physical beings as much as the resulting situation caused by a poorly conceived solution to

a minor disagreement. *Naa'ye* are understood as representing “anything that gets in the way a person living his life” (Farella 51). Further, as with all *Diné* concepts, these monsters are considered a power driven by an individual or groups bringing disorder into existence through the failure to properly mediate their dissonant state.

Recognizing that disorder requires mediation, *The Diné Bahané* records that “when the people saw, they were frightened and ashamed. So, they held a council and decided that this baby should be abandoned. They threw it into a gully and left it there to die” (Zolbrod, *The Diné Bahané* 94). Once again a council is convened and a group decision is made. Here, the inclusive process of mediation arrives at a temporary solution which is to simply bury the problem and move on. Yet the people are soon to learn that the creatures would “grow up . . . and eventually destroys many of [them]” (Zolbrod, *The Diné Bahané* 94). There are two lessons taught by this incident. First is that while the process of discourse (*naachid*) is the preferred method of problem solving, the process cannot “bury” or take the place of corrective action. In other words, the rhetorical process of mediation is not itself a solution. Second, as stated earlier, the process only works when both rhetor and audience are fully engaged the process of mediation. As this episode suggests, while the council decides (not just one individual), the creature is hidden rather than directly dealt with. In rhetorical mediation, as well as in healing, the *Diné* way is not to treat only symptoms (fear and shame) but to directly engage the monster itself.

Ultimately, the task of dealing with these monsters will fall to the Hero Twins, specifically Monster Slayer. In the individual actions of this powerful cultural hero, the text presents the ideal cognitive process that each person should bring to the Council. In the story, Monster Slayer systematically destroys the monsters that have decimated the Earth Surface People. Finally, he learns that only four monsters remain: Poverty, Old-Age, Hunger, and Cold. Monster Slayer is driven by *Nilchi*, the wind (intuition), to seek out and rid the earth of the last of the monsters.

Each encounter with these monsters reveals that Monster Slayer is not just a physical hero but an epistemological one as well. As representative of his encounters with these last four monsters, Monster Slayer travels to Roof Butte to dispatch Poverty Man and Woman. He informs the couple that he intends to kill them so that the earth surface people “will not suffer the consequences of [their] wear and tear” (Zolbrod, *The Diné Bahané* 267). The couple replies:

If we were to be slain, they [the earth surface people] would have no reason to replace anything, no cause to improve upon the tools they are accustomed to using. But if we go on living and continue slowly to wear out what others use, ingenuity will flourish among them. They will think of better ways to sew and to carve. Garments will become more beautiful. Tools will become stronger and more useful. Designs of all kinds will improve. (Zolbrod, *The Diné Bahané* 267)

Monster Slayer considers this argument and lets the old couple (and the remaining three monsters in turn) live, concluding “some things are better left as they are” (Zolbrod, *The Diné Bahané* 268).

The adventures of the Hero Twins reveal a uniquely *Diné* perspective of rhetorical exigence. *Diné* rhetoric stresses the necessity of exigence in creating the possibility of positive modification and the continuity of the conditions necessary for generative rhetoric. Farella writes that “these negative states assure that there will be planning for the future. At this level, and the level of the assorted emotions, different ways of thinking are produced” (124). The focus of *Diné* rhetoric, then, is not merely to mediate exigence out of existence. Rather, exigence is seen as “sacred” in the sense that any imperfection is generative, if not potentially dangerous, and needs to be considered in terms of how its modification can create the conditions of thought, differentiation, movement, and, therefore, life.

However, as seen in the birth of the monsters, exigence must be directly addressed in order to determine the exact nature of the situation at hand. Bitzer writes that when an exigence is “perceived and when it is strong and important, then it constrains the thought and action of the perceiver who may respond rhetorically if he is

in a position to do so" (7). Monster Slayer illustrates this behavior by responding directly to the monsters that have constrained the thinking and growth of the people. He responds rhetorically by allowing the "negative" conditions to exist since the existence of these conditions allow for the possibility of positive modification and, consequently, growth. The stories teach that all people are positioned to respond to the conditions that they perceive as imperfect. Burying or hiding the problem leads to being hunted by the exigence in which case the "monster" controls the rhetor rather than the rhetor positively modifying the exigence. From the *Diné* viewpoint, the ultimate role of rhetoric is to acknowledge the possibilities offered by the exigence in order to ensure the agency of the rhetor and audience. In this context, the "organizing principle" of exigence and the agency of rhetor and audience are synonymous.

This examination offers *Diné* myth as the meta-text that *naachid* (*Diné* rhetoric) utilizes to produce and present ideologies, as the power of *naachid* is to make an audience aware of and partners in this process of knowing. Key to this cooperative process is the creation and reception of texts. Eliade writes that myth is a conscious expression of belief that "have constituted [humanity] existentially" (12). This use of myth as an epistemic and existential model is essential to *Diné* philosophy where "the ceremonial stories go back to the very beginnings of Navajo life. They form the foundation of what it has meant to be Navajo" (Manolesco and Salabye 20). Following the method used by Gerry Philipsen, this paper has explored *naachid* as an epistemological ceremony negotiating the layers of meaning encoded in traditional stories (metaphysics) as well as creating awareness in the speaker and audience (psychology) of the layers of contexts in the ever-changing landscape of *hanii* ("my awareness"). *Naachid*, beyond communication, is the process of reflective experience that leads not just to "contingent truth" but the creation of our own authentic selves through a recursive and restorative model of thinking and speaking.

Whether from the internet or the constant twenty-four hour cable news cycle, individuals are bombarded with information every waking minute of the day. It is easy to forget that human beings are not merely receivers of information but also generators of meaning. Now, more than ever, in this unprecedented time of accessible data, it is important to look at discourse models as more than just a "theory" or mechanism of communication. Looking at the evolution of rhetorics as epistemological systems reveals the intimate relationship between the metaphysics that establishes the principle model for meaning making and the psychology and epistemology of the agents within that system. In *Diné* metaphysics, truth or *pistis*, expressed as *oodlah* (*Diné* belief), is created as part of a cooperative process of both physical creation and psychological awareness. Exploring the metaphysics, epistemology and psychology of rhetorical systems reminds us that we exist only to the extent of our participation in the creation of possibility.

ENDNOTES:

1. Unless used in a direct quote, this paper will use the indigenous name *Diné*, meaning "the People," to refer to the Athabascan speaking people of the Four Corners area rather than the more common "Navajo." This choice reflects the trend in Navajo Studies to use the traditional name of this cultural group.

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"If you want to be the man, you've got to beat the man": Masculinity and the Rise of Professional Wrestling in the 1990s

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ABSTRACT

This paper traces the relationship between the shifting representations of masculinity in professional wrestling programs of the 1990s and the contemporaneous shifts in conceptions of masculinity, examining the ways each of these shifts impacted the other. Most important among these was a growing sense that the biggest enemy in wrestling and in day-to-day life is one's boss. Moreover, the corporate corruption theme continues to underscore the WWE's on-screen and off-screen coverage, well into the second decade of the twenty-first century. Thus, the paper provides a template for considering a widely consumed popular cultural form in ways that challenge the determinism of sex, violence and fakery.

Keywords

Masculinities, Gender, Popular Culture, Television, 1990s, Cultural Studies

MEN IN THEIR UNDERWEAR

Especially in terms of its plots, professional wrestling was transformed radically in the mid-to-late 1990s. Not only did this coincide with a contemporaneous reconsideration of masculinities, the change in wrestling adopted, portrayed and ultimately reinforced the concurrent shift in masculinities. In the 1990s, the most easily and readily identifiable enemies were corporations such as Enron, Merck, WorldCom, Adelphia, Kmart, and Arthur Andersen, companies known for corruption and whose officers have been indicted for illegal activities. During this period, the “sports entertainment” industry achieved unprecedented box-office success along with unprecedented critical condemnation. During the height of their competition, World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) and World Championship Wrestling (WCW) typically placed four of the top five programs in the Nielson ratings for basic cable networks (Canoe).¹ Even a change in the network that hosts WWE’s top-rated show, *Monday Night Raw*, had little effect.² Audiences responded to a greater emphasis on plot development than on muscle development. This fact in itself becomes even more significant given the staying power of wrestling since promotions stopped denying that the action is staged and given the rise of mixed martial arts fighting as a competing media draw. In a rare television interview during wrestling’s rise, on TSN’s *Off the Record*, WWE owner Vince McMahon explains that without its storylines, or “angles,” professional wrestling would be “just two men, in their underwear, fighting.” Many critics condemn wrestling for exploiting women, for obscuring reality and for portraying violence, yet this obscures the importance of the plots to the success of the formula.

So important are the stories that even WWE video games contain a storyline feature which allows players to create their own ongoing plot. Although wrestling depicts “men in their underwear,” it also relies on plot structures borrowed from other genres, most notably westerns and action films. Beginning in the 1990s, wrestling writers began to adapt these themes to broader contemporary social themes in order to attract viewership among the male demographics.³ Curiously, part of wrestling’s past and current appeal derives from critical denunciations which reinforce — even duplicate — the underlying narrative, which depicts the powerful corporate leader as the principal enemy of the hero. The pleasures of wrestling, then, compensate for the perceived diminishment of and threats to traditional forms of masculinity in North American culture at the end of the twentieth century. Moreover, the corporate corruption theme continues to underscore the WWE’s on-screen and off-screen coverage, well into the second decade of the twenty-first century.

MEN IN THEIR UNDERWEAR: WRESTLING PLOTS

Like action and western films, wrestling reflects the culture that produces and consumes it. For example, the post-war era featured “German” wrestlers, most notably the “von Erich” family. Similarly, the 1970s and 1980s saw an increase in “Soviet” and “Iranian” wrestlers. However, the threats posed by the enemies of the Cold War and World War II are not part of the immediate experience of contemporary culture. Threats became more varied and not as easily defined; indeed, the largest organizations have largely avoided post-9/11 themes and characters. Therefore, a formula more complex than a simple good-vs.-evil dichotomy has developed. In his study of action movies, especially Sylvester Stallone’s *Rambo* series, William Warner proposes that “in the seventies and early eighties the rise of the hero film offered audiences a pleasurable way to work upon an insistent historical problem — the perceived decline of American power both in relation to other nations [following Vietnam and the oil crisis], as well as a recent, fondly remembered past” (672). Warner’s view is echoed by Susan Jeffords, both in *The Remasculinization of America* and in *Hard Bodies*, as well as Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner in *Camera Politica*. Wrestling, westerns, and action movies such as the *Rambo* and *Missing in Action* series are often dismissed because they lack “authenticity”: the movies for their lack of historicity and wrestling for its “fake” action. This type of dismissal obscures and ignores their intrinsic

appeal, especially in the case of professional wrestling, and overlooks the fact that any theatric production has a predetermined outcome. The majority of fans know the action — billed as “sports entertainment” performed by “sports entertainers” — is staged. As well, the current variety of professional wrestling places as much emphasis on plot as it does on spectacular action. The key difference is that the decline is domestic — inside the borders of both the United States and the home — in terms of shifting employment and economic patterns, especially based on the pattern of corporate “downsizing” amid record profits and executive salaries, many of which came as a result of accounting and trading fraud.

In “Looking at the Male,” Paul Willemen suggests that male heroes in western movies perform in two distinct but inter-related ways: first as spectacle and second as a physically beaten body. Paul Smith, in “Eastwood Bound” adds a third and final stage occurs when the hero triumphs. Eventually, action films supplanted westerns, but as William Warner points out in “Spectacular Action: Rambo and the Popular Pleasures of Pain,” the genres’ appeal

depends upon subjecting hero and audience to a certain masochistic scenario — the pleasure of intensely felt pain, and crippling incapacity, as it is written into the action, and onto the body of the hero. Secondly, each [production] supports the natural virtue of the hero through a display of technology’s magic. Finally, each [production] wins the audience an anti-therapeutic relief from confronting subjectivity by releasing it into a vertiginous cinematic experience of spectacular action. (673)

Professional wrestling depends on just such a structure and has since the 1990s. Indeed, such a reality is reflected in wrestler Ric Flair’s motto, which forms the first part of the title of this article. The highly structured and ritualized matches position the wrestlers as both spectacle and beaten body. Each wrestler’s entrance is announced and accompanied by music. Convention dictates that several momentum shifts occur during matches. The outcome necessitates spectacular action: slams, jumps, landings, and chairs over the head. These involve actual physical exertion and actual physical contact even if the move is scripted. In a move known as “blading,” the wrestlers cut themselves on the forehead with a razor blade kept in the tape around their wrists. Thus, the blood, the sweat, and the tears are often real. Moreover, the action almost always produces a victor. While there are several possible results for a match — pinfall as in amateur wrestling, submission, disqualification, or time limit draw — there is always a winner in the minds of the fans.

Wrestling programs function more like serials than complete cinematic productions, which interferes with the third stage mentioned above — hence the cliché of wrestling as “soap opera for men.” The recent change in the role of women in the industry further complicates (an examination of) the narrative framework. Currently, characters portrayed by female body builders and fitness models, often with “masculinized” physiques, can and do “compete” physically with the men. Regardless, since former WWE mainstays, “Diesel” and “Razor Ramon,” left to join WCW, plots have depicted masculine diminishment. The wrestlers, Kevin Nash and Scott Hall, respectively, appeared under their own names and called themselves “The Outsiders.” Wrestlers usually adopt a ring name and a persona to go with it. In the case of Nash and Hall, WWE actually owns the trademarks “Diesel” and “Razor Ramon.” The Outsiders were so-named because of a (real life) contract dispute with WWE’s owner, Vince McMahon. They then appeared, without invitation, at WCW events although the latter’s officials denied having signed them to contracts. Eventually, they were joined by several prominent “heels,” or bad-guys, to form “The New World Order,” or “NWO.” The format, and the NWO, were so successful that WWE reintroduced the unit and its storyline following the takeover of WCW. The purpose of NWO was to destroy the existing structure of WCW and to take over the corporation. They were among the most sadistic rule-breakers in the history of wrestling. They rarely, if ever, engaged in matches, but rather interrupted matches involving other wrestlers to “punk” everyone, regardless of affiliation.⁴ Frequently, they

would force one combatant (or set of combatants) to leave the ring while they singled-out a fan-favourite, or “babyface,” to assault.

When WCW’s then president, Eric Bischoff, revealed his membership in the group, the implications of the NWO’s on the narrative structure became clear: the “x was in,” because the boss sold out his employees. Professional wrestling now follows the conventions of

a series of films which took up an old theme of American film and culture — the individual’s struggle against an unjust system — and gave that scenario a distinct new turn. The protagonist did not challenge the system by teaming up with an ambiguous woman to solve a crime (as in *film noir*), or organizing the good ranchers against the Boss who owns the whole town (as in some Westerns). (Warner 675)

The contemporary character is almost always a loner. While he does take on the boss, who also owns the whole corporation, and the boss’s henchmen, the hero does so with neither female companions nor male allies. A further shift away from westerns and *film noir* is the increased violence in action movies and professional wrestling. In addition, Warner perceives a more important alteration in action films as opposed to westerns, one that reflects changes in social and technological configurations. He observes:

Now the System — sometimes a state, sometimes a corporation — is given extraordinary new powers of surveillance and control of the individual. The protagonist, almost entirely cut off from others, endures the most insidious forms of manipulation and pain, reaches into the primordial levels of self, and emerges as a hero with powers sufficient to fight the System to the point of its catastrophe. (675)

According to Warner, the 1980s variation on this theme manifests itself in movies such as the *Rambo*, *Missing in Action* and *Iron Eagle* series. These films were intended to redress the powerlessness caused by the perceived national failure of the Vietnam War. Indeed, according to Warner, “this is the crux of the [films’] explicit discursive project: not only to reclaim the American vet [...] but further, to discover that what Rambo is and represents (pride, strength, will) is precisely that which is most indispensable for America today” (674). While the Vietnam veterans finally have been acknowledged, the current generation of men is faced with another perceived failure.

Susan Faludi’s contemporaneous study, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*, details the contemporary situation of (North) American men at the close of the last century. Stated briefly, her premise is that instead of a lost war, the powerlessness and failure North American men feel stems from losing “a useful role in public life, a way of earning a decent living, [and] respectful treatment in the culture” (40). In addition, Faludi finds that this situation causes many men turn to “the fantasy realm [of a] clear-cut controllable world of action movies and video combat, televised athletic tournaments and pay-per-view ultimate-fighting bouts” (32). The writers for the professional wrestling organizations are cognizant of this trend and incorporate it into the stories; the writing is so important that WWE has hired script writers away from Conan O’Brien, MTV and elsewhere (Leland 51). Further evidence of the emphasis on the stage-play can be gleaned from the box office success of wrestling stars, including Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, John Cena, and Stacy Keibler. When the WCW began to lose ground to WWE in the ratings, Eric Bischoff was reassigned. In his place, Turner Broadcasting poached Vince Russo and Ed Ferrara who had been the head writers for WWE. Following WWE’s takeover of WCW, Russo and Bischoff were both hired by Vince McMahon to reinvigorate the company. Whereas the old stories pitted a character like Sergeant Slaughter, a gruff-voiced United States Marine Corps drill sergeant (played by Robert Remus, an actual former Marine), in feuds with all of the stereotyped enemies of the United States — from Baron von Rashke, a Nazi, to Nikolai Volko, a Soviet, to the Iron Sheik, an Iranian who later became the Iraqi Colonel Mustafa during the Persian Gulf War —

Remus himself now doubts “whether his All-American babyface character could have achieved stardom in this generation” (Marvez, 27 May 2000). Unlike the post-war or Cold War eras, but like the Vietnam War, there is no obvious enemy of the state.

Indeed, the American “war on terrorism” has had no influence on wrestling’s storylines. While Saddam Hussein is the villain who (supposedly) sent Colonel Mustafa and General Adnan to defeat America (and its wrestlers) in 1991, he receives no mention today. There was a brief memorial which included the sounding of the ring bell following the attacks of 11 Sept. 2001 (as there was following the in-ring death of wrestler Owen Hart), but neither Osama Bin Laden nor his cohorts rates a wrestling persona. Furthermore, no one is winning the current “war” that Faludi documents. For wrestling, this means that today’s “All-American babyface,” played by a former Olympic Gold Medalist in freestyle wrestling and multiple WWE Champion, Kurt Angle, can be hated by the fans; he often plays a “heel.”⁵ The irony is that Angle was a “real” wrestler who combined athleticism and hard work to achieve his Olympic dream — another popular plot — but upon his entry into WWE, Angle was given an immediate “push,” or promotional emphasis, before “proving” himself against the competition. Thus, he has not “earned” his position at the top. The fans most resent Angle’s sense of entitlement. Angle has parlayed his status into being the most-hated heel in WWE, “whose arrogance overshadows his patriotism” (Marvez, “Babyface”). The proverbial “boy next door” is an arrogant phony and braggart. Angle associates with a group known as “Right to Censor,” which “attempts” to rid WWE of its foul language and sexual content. Currently, Angle heads “Team Angle,” which features two more former amateur wrestlers. The members of Team Angle sport red, white and blue singlets, wave the American flag and wear their medals to the ring. Needless to say, Team Angle constantly tries to curry favour with the boss, Vince McMahon.

In a *Newsweek* article about wrestling’s surge in popularity in the 1990s, Jean Paul Levesque, better known to wrestling fans as WWE wrestler Hunter Hearst Helmsley, or The Game, explains that the reason for this dramatic change in focus is that “in the post-cold-war era, ‘there is no horror now. To the average person, the real-life enemy now is their boss’” (qtd. in Leland 54). Susan Faludi finds the same perspective among the men she interviews. According to Faludi

the handful of men plucked arbitrarily from the anonymous crowd and elevated onto the new pedestal of mass media and entertainment glamour [are] unreachable [not] because they [are] necessarily arrogant or narcissistic, though some would surely become so; they simply [exist] in a realm from which all lines to [other men] have been cut. [The others become] unseen backing for the corporation’s real star: its brand name. (33)

The Kurt Angle storyline, like many others, exemplifies the situation. He does not deserve his status. It has been given to him as the corporation’s chosen star. Merit never enters the equation in such storylines. The corporation’s only allegiance is to its brand name, not physical prowess. Thus, the ability to enact masculinity is not necessarily the measure of the man.

Rather than taking care of its employees, the corporation only takes care of itself. McMahon has famously double-crossed several wrestlers, most notably Bret Hart, in real life. This often makes its way into the plot. R.W. Connell finds the corporate setting to be an important site of masculine formations:

The corporate activity behind media celebrities and the commercialization of sex brings us to [another] arena of hegemonic masculinity politics, the management of patriarchal organizations. Institutions do not maintain themselves; someone has to practise power for power effects to occur. [But] the fact that power relations must be practised allows for divergence in *how* they are practised. (215).

Instead of a “patriarchy,” Connell suggests that different modes of “hegemonic masculinity,” each with different methods of deployment, vie for power. Despite criticism to the contrary, this occurs because “there is no Patriarch Headquarters, with bags and limousines, where all the strategies are worked out. It is common for different groups of men, each pursuing a project of hegemonic masculinity, to come into conflict with each other” (Connell 215). Relationships and personal ties are no longer important in an era in which there is no greater common purpose, or more likely, a greater common enemy. Competing forms of hegemonic masculinity — here, economic and physical — come in contact with each other. In professional wrestling plots, this competition results in arbitrary deployments of power and enacted rage.

At any given time, several angles involve a wrestler (or group of wrestlers) as the victim(s) of the evil corporation and its “boss.” The basic plot remains consistent to the present day and indeed has been renewed since the WWE split its “brands” into the *Smackdown* and *Raw* offerings. Whereas Eric Bischoff and Vince McMahon previously appeared on camera only as announcers — for many years McMahon’s ownership of WWE was hidden — they are now central characters in the plots. In a plot mimicking a current corporate trend, the NWO replaces the older, hardworking, loyal, traditionalist wrestlers, those who rely on their performance in the ring and the classic good vs. evil construction, following a hostile takeover. The message is clear: get with the New World Order or be beaten up and “downsized.” As if the hundreds of methods of beating on a human anatomy are not enough, the NWO spray-paints their logo — graffiti *qua* branding in the corporate as well as physical sense, because this is how the logo appears on the T-shirts they sell — on the defeated body of the victim. Finally, since the entire proceedings are always videotaped and photographed, “the System” has extraordinary powers of surveillance built into it. One of the most familiar scenes is a supposedly candid scene featuring a wrestler “back-stage,” watching the in-ring proceedings on a monitor. He never likes what he sees, so he smashes the monitor, but not the camera that is filming him. This act seemingly symbolizes resistance: he uses the features of the system against itself by watching without being seen and then smashes the equipment that makes this possible. Such an act is typical of the action movie genre. For example, in *Running Man*, Arnold Schwarzenegger’s character destroys the “Cadre” satellite TV network. Similarly, Rambo machine-guns the computerized reconnaissance systems that guides, or controls, him on his mission. Warner concludes that “by destroying, or interrupting, the operation of the system, the audience is left [...] with a freeze frame image of Rambo as a nuclear subject, a self etched against a landscape where no supporting social network seems necessary” (676). He is alone against the system and self-sufficiency is his best method of resistance. No supporting social network exists in wrestling; all that exists is subjection. Smashing the surveillance equipment is a futile act since a camera is still present, watching the wrestler as he watches. Moreover, destroying the monitor does little to stop the action that so upset him. He only thinks he has control, when the corporation has complete control.

While the NWO’s treatment of the older wrestlers is exaggerated and (physically) violent, it echoes the treatment the same generation of workers — the spectators — are receiving from the large corporations that employ them. Downsizing, outsourcing and forced early retirement do not cause bodily harm, but they do create violent disruptions in people’s lives on a large scale. Faludi lists some of the larger examples:

The deindustrialization and “restructuring” of the last couple of decades [has] scythed through vast swaths of industrial America, shuttering steel and auto plants across the Midwest, decimating the defense industry, and eliminating large number of workers in corporate behemoths: 60,000 at Chrysler, 74,000 at General Motors, 175,000 at IBM, 125,000 at AT&T. Though going “postal” [is] an extreme reaction, downsizing [is] a violent dislocation, often violently received. Yet those prototypical workingmen [are] taking their bitter disappointment with remarkable gentility. (60-1)

Daimler-Chrysler later cut 28,000 more jobs world-wide. Nortel Networks eliminated 50,000 of its 90,000 positions in a two-year period. These cuts affect workers at all levels of seniority. The remaining workers must be available to work all of the time. Legislators are moving to enforce what had been mere business practices.⁶ Monitoring and surveillance of employees actually are increasing through the use of passive means. According to an American Management Association study, "About 74% of companies do some form of electronic monitoring of employees." Companies monitor employees' computer use through "firewalls" on the servers which prohibit the reception or transmission of "inappropriate" materials and catalogue attempts to do so. John Cloud wonders, "Which is more stifling, the paternalistic company with its gold watch as a reward for lifetime service, or the new paradigm: all work, all the time, all your life?" (54). Given this type of unsettled environment, it is not surprising that many employees act out their frustrations. Professional wrestling capitalizes on this situation by virtue of its inherent structure: the co-workers are necessarily rude and belligerent; the boss is completely unreasonable and occasionally gives his workers ultimatums of "win your next match or lose your job;" each wrestler is hated by a significant proportion of clients, or fans, who chant epithets, spit, and throw objects at the wrestlers. Where the average worker might be reduced to tears, wrestlers are supposed to seek revenge by damaging either the competition, the equipment or the boss.

Eventually, professional wrestling's most recognizable and most marketable performer, perennial fan-favourite, Hulk Hogan, became Hollywood Hogan when he joined the NWO. This was a major coup for the NWO and a major departure for Hogan since he had preached a gospel of "say your prayers and take your vitamins" to all the "little Hulkamaniacs" for well over ten years. Hogan's entrance music, "Real American," with lyrics proclaiming that he "fights for the rights of everyone" was replaced by Jimi Hendrix's "Voodoo Chile (slight reprise)." This indicates that the "American" way of life no longer matters in the new world order. Hollywood and Bischoff became the leaders of the NWO. Hogan's new moniker and transformed behavior symbolize his allegiance with the corporatized world, or what Faludi calls "a culture of ornament" (40). In such a culture, "manhood is defined by appearance, by youth and attractiveness, by money and aggression, by posture and swagger and 'props,' by the curled lip and flexed biceps, by the glamour of the cover boy and by the market-bartered 'individuality' that sets one astronaut or athlete or gangster above another" (Faludi 40).

The colourful ring attire many of the NWO members traditionally wore was replaced by a uniform of black pants and a black shirt with the NWO logo on it. Thus, in the New World Order, individuality ceases to exist, and their motto, "NWO for life," is a constant reminder.⁷ This is a simplified — black and white, if you will — version of the current world order, but the basis of the storyline clearly resonates with audiences and accounts for a great deal of wrestling's popularity.

"STYLIN' AND PROFILIN'": RIC FLAIR

The foremost example of the cruel corporation vs. the solitary male involves Ric Flair and Eric Bischoff as the principle players in a strange mixture of art and life. Flair is one of the greatest performers in the history of wrestling. However, even Ric Flair can fall victim to the New World Order and the new corporate reality.

This should not have come as a surprise given that the convention involves what Warner describes as:

a version of the fable of self and system which dichotomizes fictional space into two positions. The self, often associated with nature and the erotic, becomes the locus for the expression of every positive human value, most especially "freedom." Opposite the self is the System, which in its colorless, mechanical operations, is anathematized as a faceless monster using its insidious powers to bend all human effort to its own service. (676)

In stark contrast to the NWO's austere uniform and amateurish logo, the flamboyant Flair is known for his outlandish robes, one of which "has 7,200 rhinestones and weighs 45 pounds," countless colourful

sayings, and his entrance music: *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (AP). He could not be more closely associated with nature since his nickname throughout his entire career has been “the Nature Boy.” Flair is so-named because he seems natural in the ring; that is he “sells,” or makes the actions seem real, better than anyone. Flair’s association with the erotic is ensured by more than his platinum blonde hair, perennial tan, and brief wrestling attire. He has always portrayed, even at 35, a playboy. In his words, Flair is a “stylin’ and pro lin,’ limousine-riding, Learjet- flyin’, wheeling-dealing, kiss-stealing, love-making, heart-breaking son-of-a-gun.” Of course, sexual freedom is one of the ultimate freedoms.

The plot began with a “real-life” dispute between the wrestler and WCW. Flair’s contract allowed him flexibility in terms of his performance schedule. Thus, Flair decided to forego a WCW event in order to go to the AAU national amateur wrestling — that is, real wrestling — championships so that he could watch his nine-year-old son, Reid, compete in the tournament. Nothing could be more natural than wanting to watch one’s son. Apparently, Eric Bischoff did not agree because in a “suit filed by World Championship Wrestling [the company] claims Flair’s failure to show up at a series of bouts this year played havoc with ‘story lines’ planned out for the performances” (AP). The lawsuit was settled eventually, but not before Flair’s entire family was drawn into the action when the script was changed to include elements that occurred outside the ring. When Ric Flair had a heart attack — a “work,” or well-guarded part of the script — Eric Bischoff appeared to have a change of heart and called Ric’s wife Beth, along with sons Reid and nineteen-year-old David, to the ring so that he could say he was sorry. In a classic heel move, Bischoff said that he was sorry that Ric Flair is an old, broken-down man who cannot provide for his family and rudely kissed Beth Flair. An NWO thug then held Reid while Bischoff beat David. A few weeks later, on the night of Flair’s triumphant return to WCW following his (actual) reinstatement, Bischoff crashed the proceedings to re Flair. Flair responded, “You can’t re me, I’m already reed” and condemned Bischoff’s “abuse of power” (Gardner). When Bischoff entered the ring, Reid Flair, with his AAU medal hanging around his neck, tackled the president. In other words, the boss is not man enough to defeat a child. Nevertheless, Bischoff’s hubris led him to challenge Flair to a winner-takes-all match for the presidency of WCW. Naturally, Flair won, but triumph is not complete until the wrestler is champion of the world. In the weeks leading up to the title match between Hollywood Hogan and Ric Flair, Bischoff and the NWO made Flair’s life miserable. Of course, Flair won the title. However, at the moment when Flair was both president and champion, he turned heel by abusing his power and refusing title matches. Thus, the continuity of the narrative is never in danger.

BEATING THE BOSS: STONE COLD STEVE AUSTIN

While WCW’s plots involving Ric Flair and the NWO present the new approach to sports entertainment, Vince McMahon has seemingly perfected the ruthless boss vs. employee format. The longest running such feud involves McMahon and Stone Cold Steve Austin and is detailed in the video, *Austin vs. McMahon: The Whole True Story* (AvM). It is interesting to note that the video has the feel both of a work and of an actual documentary, including narrator Jim Forbes of VH1’s *Behind the Music* documentaries. Fans consider the Austin-McMahon feud, now more than five years old, “the greatest feud in sports entertainment history” (AvM).⁸ Forbes summarizes the phenomenon that is the angle: “WWE fans have embraced a new attitude in the past two years, leading to explosive growth in our industry. And, the happiness these fans feel is in large part due to hatred; hatred between two men: Vince McMahon, the owner of WWE, and Stone Cold Steve Austin, his most popular and rebellious employee. [...] Their conflict changed the face of sports entertainment” (AvM). Former wrestler turned WWE booker Terry Taylor explains the heart of the angle: “You’ve got a guy like Stone Cold, who says, ‘To hell with the boss,’ and makes the boss the target — which has never been done” (AvM). WWE announcer and Vice-President in charge of talent, Jim Ross, puts it, “Stone

Cold will never be employee of the month" (AvM). In the characterizations of Vince McMahon and Steve Austin, WWE writers encapsulate current corporate trends and their impact on employer-employee relations and the resultant impact on masculinities.

In keeping with the archetype of the hero, Stone Cold Steve Austin is a white heterosexual male. As mentioned earlier the protagonist in this form is a loner. Austin is no different and this is reflected in his nicknames and character. Like Ric Flair, Austin's *nom de guerre*, "Stone Cold" more than implies his association with nature, in this case at its harshest and most heartless. He is not like "stone cold;" he is stone cold. In addition, Jim Ross gave Austin the nickname, "the West-Texas Rattlesnake," or simply, "the Rattlesnake." Such a nickname enhances Austin's connection to nature and signifies several aspects of both the man and the form of masculinity he represents, all of which are connected to popular American myths. The rattlesnake is a species peculiar to North America but is especially associated with the southwest, which is in turn associated with the rugged masculinity of the frontiersman and the cowboy. The rattle indicates that the snakes wish to be left alone; they are not aggressive but will defend themselves with deadly force, if necessary. As well, Texas is the "Lone Star State" which gained independence in a purportedly rebellious war with Mexico which featured the legendary battle of the Alamo. As the story goes, Texas stood alone against tyranny then and Austin does so now. Austin further removes himself through his philosophy of interpersonal relations: "D.T.A.: Don't trust anybody." He frequently repeats this line and it has appeared on T-shirts. On the rare occasions when Austin has accepted the help of a partner, it has been forced upon him by circumstances beyond his control and then accepted only begrudgingly. Finally, he has no romantic life. While certainly indicative of Austin's independence, his approach also reveals his self-destructive streak.

For Austin, relenting to McMahon's demands or accepting help from a partner means giving up freedom. In dichotomizing the self and the system, the producers of action movies create what Ryan and Kellner find to be the genre's "essential ideological gesture, [by which] no middle ground is allowed [. . .] anything that departs from the ideal of pure individual freedom (corporations, but also socialism) is by implication lumped under domination" (256). Warner surmises that "Such a notion no doubt has deep roots in American populist paranoia about global conspiracy" (676). In Austin's case, a partner precludes his total independence. Austin will ultimately have to suffer alone.

Austin's solitary style has a doubly detrimental effect: it incites the wrath of his vindictive boss and eliminates any possibility for help. In hero films, "the exchanges of self and system are given the insistently Oedipal configuration of a struggle between overbearing fathers and a defiant son" (Warner 676). In the action genre, however, the father possesses added authority because his "authority is linked to the state" (Warner 676). It is worth recalling that Warner posits that corporations can take the place of the state. Plot suspense, then, "pivots upon a personal drama, meant to allegorize the struggle of every modern person who would remember their freedom: a contest between the system's agenda for the self and the self's attempt to manipulate the system to his own ends" (Warner 676). On several occasions both Flair and Austin attempted such a manipulation. During a broadcast from Minneapolis, his hometown, Ric Flair enlisted the aid of the city's mayor and local sports heroes John Randle, of the Vikings, and Kirby Puckett, of the Twins, to remove Eric Bischoff from the arena. Similarly, in Chattanooga, TN, Steve Austin turned the tables on Vince McMahon and had the boss "arrested" by local police after McMahon admitted to having assaulted Austin the previous week. In both cases, the victory was only temporary. Although these manipulations temporarily even the score, Warner finds that victory does not suffice: "two ideas are developed about loss [. . .] Both emphasize the cruel sadistic sources of this pain and loss: 'we were unfairly beaten [. . .] and experienced loss'; 'others were responsible for that loss, and they should now be punished'" (Warner 677). Wrestling operates around these two ideas. Rather than the state, the source of the pain is now the corporation and its chief executive. Instead of Vietnam, the loss is at home, in the battlefield of the workplace. This is not an entirely new viewpoint,

especially when one considers that many magnates of the early twentieth century — Henry Ford, William Randolph Hearst, John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie — were reviled for their (violent) treatment of workers. To an extent, World War II and the Cold War overshadowed worker-boss enmity. Labour unions have lost much of the power, where they exist at all. The fact that the site of the dispute is now on North American soil means that the enemy is within — a traitor, as it were — rather than from without makes the scenario more sinister. This framework contains a third idea “which is never allowed to reach consciousness [. . .] but nonetheless motivates and informs the narrative diegesis: ‘I am responsible for the losses, and I should be beaten’” (Warner 677). The result is that “unconscious guilt for failing [. . .] is dejected away from consciousness, but it motivates that deplorable and risky behavior which repeatedly throws [the hero] into the position to receive punishment for failing” (Warner 677). As mentioned above, both Flair and Austin attempt to use the system to their advantage. However, their efforts invariably fail. Since the boss — either Bischoff or McMahon — is allied with the system (and is the system), he will always have greater access to power. Each small victory for Flair and Austin results in massive retribution by the corporation. Thus, in a palpable way, Flair and Austin are the sources of their own pain through their deplorable behaviour toward their bosses. By continuing to be involved in the feud, they ultimately are submitting to pain and defeat.

One of the most dramatic and revealing series of episodes in the Austin-McMahon feud occurred during the fall of 1998. At the September pay-per-view, McMahon conspired with “Undertaker” and “Kane” to beat Austin and retrieve the WWE Championship Belt. Following the match, in typical McMahon style, he reminded Undertaker and Kane that they might both be over seven feet tall and weigh over 300lbs but he is the boss and they owe their success to him. With his power, McMahon can reverse the fortunes at any time. This is an expected feature of many storylines. Once Undertaker and Kane turned away from McMahon following Austin’s removal from the ring, he mouthed the words, “Fuck you!” and flipped his middle fingers at the pair. Unfortunately for McMahon, Undertaker saw the gesture and with Kane retaliated by “breaking” McMahon’s leg by “crushing” it between the metal ring steps. The pummelling forced McMahon into hospital where he was assaulted by Austin, who was disguised as a doctor. The routine began as slapstick comedy, with Austin hitting McMahon over the head with a bedpan and zapping him with a pair of de-bridement paddles. However, the scene ended in a more disturbing fashion. Austin grabbed McMahon, the latter clad only in his underwear and a hospital gown, and bent him over the bed. Austin positioned himself behind McMahon and lifted WWE owner’s gown, saying “I’ve always known you were full of shit, Vince, so let’s find out how full of shit you really are” (*Raw*). Austin then appeared to slam an enema tube violently into McMahon, while shouting, “This is going to hurt you a lot more than it’s going to hurt me, I can tell you that” (*Raw*). The scene fades to black as the tube disappears, McMahon screams, and Austin ends up belly-to-back with McMahon.

The bedpan is reminiscent of a beer shower Austin gave McMahon in Chattanooga and serves to level the playing field. The effect is to say “You might be the most powerful man in sports-entertainment, but you still have to piss and shit like the rest of us.” McMahon is so enfeebled — that is, less than a complete man — that he is confined to a bed and needs a bedpan to relieve himself. McMahon also looks silly and clumsy in his underwear and hospital gown because his frailty is exposed. He may as well be naked, because he has been stripped of his power, or at the very least, it is useless to him in the hospital; you cannot buy unbreakable bones. Moreover, in this context, McMahon’s power does not stem from any intrinsic ability. He has not earned it and he is not “man enough” in a tangible, physical way, to hold power, but Stone Cold Steve Austin is. The de-bridement paddles also symbolize McMahon’s reduced power. An actual jolt to a functioning heart could seriously harm a person. The effect is to say that McMahon, and by extension, all corporate leaders, do not have a heart in both the literal and the metaphorical sense. He is only interested in the “bottom line.”

Finally, the insertion of the enema tube into McMahon serves a greater function than to ensure that the boss is no longer “full of shit.” Given that the tube is forced into McMahon, the scene evokes anal rape.

is point is reinforced by the positioning of the pair when the scene ends. Both men are at an angle to the camera, facing the bottom-right of the screen. The probe disappears into McMahon as Austin's belly slams into WWE owner's backside. Whether or not Austin's body or a phallic object is penetrating McMahon's is of no significance since the effect is the same. It is still Stone Cold who controls the "phallus" and who uses it. Again, McMahon appears as something less than a man. As Connell writes, "Anal sexuality is a focus of disgust, and receptive anal sex is mark of feminization" (219). Austin is physically doing to McMahon what the boss figuratively does in business: "fucking him up the ass." It is worth recalling that neither the boss nor the wrestler is fixed in the position of spectacle or beaten body. Instead, the genre depends on an oscillation not just between good and bad, but between beating and being beaten. Whenever one of the players triumphs, the third and final part of the formula, it is temporary and fleeting. However, the difference is that Austin is able physically to assume the role of the sadistic abuser while McMahon must use manipulation and deception, practices typically projected onto femininity, to achieve a similar result. Corporate power, then, is illegitimate power since it is obtained through means that are not essentially masculine.

As male heads of patriarchal organizations, Eric Bischoff and Vince McMahon can be considered the figurative fathers of their respective federations. When Austin attacks McMahon with the enema tube, for instance, he is figuratively raping his "father" in a violent revision of the Oedipal configuration. Such a formation is typical of action films. As Warner observes, "pain becomes the occasion for pleasure through an encounter with figures of 'the father' — but not the mother. In each film that father is bifurcated into 'good' and 'bad' fathers, so each becomes emblematic of public aspects of America" (677). The major difference in the contemporary is that the absence of the "good" father. As held by McMahon, Bischoff, and CEOs of aforementioned companies, the position traditionally occupied by the good father, the provider and head of the household, becomes the domain of the bad father, the "entirely cynical bureaucrat [and] duplicitous organization man" (Warner 678). Rather than a complete break with the formula, McMahon and Bischoff represent a progression of the type. In the films on which wrestling is based, "there is enough evidence of the complicity between [the] rival fathers to suggest that they are in fact two sides of one father" (678). McMahon and Bischoff represent two important progressions: first, bad fathers currently control the order of things; second, good fathers can become bad fathers at any given moment. This attitude reflects a lack of trust in institutions and leaders. This is hardly an original observation, given the critical view that postmodernity is marked by a lack of faith in institutions and "grand narratives" and a resultant tribalization of society. However, one must also consider that patriarchies have reproduced themselves seemingly without interruption during this same period and that the current lack occurs on a microcosmic scale.

STANDARDS AND PRACTICES: THE (ACTUAL) EFFECTS OF CRITICISM

According to William Warner, *Rambo*, and other action films construct "a subject position — one which is Western, white, and male — which hails spectators to an ethos for being in the world [that] values isolated self-assertion, competitive zeal, chauvinist Americanism, and the use of force" (675). Although the hero in professional wrestling is a Western male, he is not necessarily white in the currently popular formula. What is telling in Warner's analysis is the popular reaction to the criticisms of the *Rambo* films, which decried the films' overt "Reaganism;" that is, their endorsement of Ronald Reagan's policies. He explains:

by reading *Rambo* as a filmic expression of Reaganism, an approach used repeatedly by film critics and cultural and political commentators [. . .] the film hero and the president become each other's latent cultural truth. This reading uses the popularity of Reaganism to gloss, explain, and (for many commentators) discredit the popularity of *Rambo*. In a complementary fashion, *Rambo* becomes the dream-fantasy in film,

the “truth” of Reaganism, now blatantly exposed as in various ways mendacious. (675)

Critiques of *Rambo* and of professional wrestling very successfully point out the social ills the forms glorify, especially violence and sexism. However, as Warner recognizes critiques of *Rambo* and Reagan had a

paradoxical effect within the political culture of the 1980s: [they] helped *Rambo* become a generally recognized cultural icon. [C]ritical condemnation of *Rambo*, almost as much as the film itself [. . .] allows *Rambo* to emerge as a cultural icon in the mid-1980s. Thus, *Rambo* as a cultural icon includes the idealized filmic projection, and its scathing critique, condensed in one image. (675)

For people who watched *Rambo* then and the people who watched wrestling in the 1990s — and continue to do so now — consume the productions in spite of *and* because of the critical reaction to them. In fact, the turn of critics to the extreme, sanctioned, and real violence of mixed martial arts events has allowed wrestling to mimic its competitor while receiving reduced attention. Criticism, especially from sources perceived as elitist or self-righteous, makes wrestling more attractive. Fans take dismissals of wrestling as dismissals of themselves, which adds to the list of oppositions (in fans’ minds) which led to the popularity of wrestling. Even for those who refuse to become consumers of the shows professional wrestling, with its “icon[s] of the masculine, the primitive, and the heroic, becomes the site of a (bad) truth about American culture” (Warner 675). Rather than enlightening viewers, critics become class enemies.

Much of the criticism of wrestling looks at what is “wrong”: authenticity, violence, and subject matter. Conversely, wrestling as a text — how it functions, how it is consumed, and why it remains popular despite condemnation — remains ignored. Michael Jenkinson, of the *Edmonton Sun* recognizes, “the debate isn’t really about the validity of wrestling [. . .] but a broader one about who defines acceptable forms of culture. [. . .] It’s really a debate over who sets the canon — the elites or the populists. And pro wrestling is one of the quintessential expressions of mass populism” (“Wrestling Studies”). Several recent events highlight the paradoxical effect of criticisms. One centers around the doll of “WWE character Al Snow, complete with a tiny severed female head in one hand. He’s holding it by the hair. Lovely” (Haskins). Following several protests, the doll was pulled from stores, including Walmart and Toys-R-Us, across North America. Eventually, WWE recalled all of the dolls and absorbed a considerable loss to appease critics like Sabrena Parton, of Kennesaw State University, who claims that the doll, and the character, “promote the brutalization of women” (qtd. in Jenkinson, “Feminists”). An *Edmonton Journal* editorial suggests that when WWE “produced and sold a doll whose gimmick was to carry around the severed head of a woman, they showed their true colours. [The doll] is a horrifying toy with a violent message” (qtd. in Jenkinson, “Feminists”). Psychologist Lori Egger claims that Al Snow depicts a “television image [that] draws a link between sexuality and violence and implies it’s normal male behaviour” (qtd. in Jenkinson, “Feminists”). In a line of defense frequently adopted by wrestling fans, both then and now, the critics are accused of never actually having watched the WWE, otherwise they would notice that the character is a “lunatic” who has escaped from an asylum. He carries the detached head of a mannequin named “Head.” Snow only calls it Head, which furthers the notion that he is crazy. Within the story, he, and everyone who watches, knows it is a mannequin, yet he still believes the mannequin talks to him. Truth be told, the Al Snow doll, along with Head, is among the least violent of the toys WWE sells.⁹ Al Snow belongs to the “J.O.B. Squad,” which refers to the wrestling slang, “to job,” which means that one is paid to lose. Snow then becomes a lovable loser.

It is not to suggest that the character is lawless but to point out that superficial analyses and knee-jerk reactions produce an opposite reaction among the wrestling fan souls that are supposedly in need of saving. In the words of Michael Jenkinson, fans see the critics as “humourless, politically correct busybodies” (“Feminists”). The critics of the entertainment become the enemies of the fans; upsetting the

critics is definitely part of the enjoyment for the fans. Vince McMahon has exploited this phenomenon in two recent storylines: a gay wedding and a “hot lesbian action” match. In both cases, protesters were active at wrestling matches. In fact, McMahon’s daughter, Stephanie, disguised as a prototypical “feminazi,” led the protests. Stephanie, according to the plot, wants to wrest control of the company from her father and used the protests to help. Actual protesters were completely duped by the plots and their own involvement in them. Once again, academics and cultural police appear to be talking only to themselves. They merely cause fans to resent the critics and the “establishment,” the perceived powers that would be.

Beyond the social and cultural factors which attended the rise of professional wrestling in the 1990s, an increase in men’s involvement in bodybuilding corresponds to the rise in wrestling’s popularity. Not surprisingly, this contemporaneous trend also reflects the then prevalent sense of masculine diminishment. Sport sociologist Philip White suggests that this “preoccupation with muscularity is [. . .] best explained as a response to contemporary male feelings of uncertainty and powerlessness. Men individually and men in general are experiencing a crisis of masculinity and are drawn to areas of social life where they feel comfortable and safe” (116).¹⁰ While it may be argued that men remain(ed) the privileged gender, White notes that

with the growth of large and impersonal bureaucracies, whether public or private, there has been a transfer of power away from individual males [. . .] Power has shifted into the public domain, leaving many men feeling privately powerless — small cogs in large machines. Consequently, because men feel increasingly confused and insecure about what “real men” are like in a time of shifting expectations, they are also impelled to seek out ways of bolstering and validating their masculine identities. (116)

White also contends that due to advances in technology and a shift away from a production-based economy in the last quarter of the twentieth century, “[North American] men are increasingly doing work where physical strength is not needed and where women are steadily breaking barriers to occupational mobility and success” (117). White suggests that in conjunction, “these factors represent threats to traditional masculinity and have made symbolic representations of the male body as strong, virile and powerful more prevalent in popular culture. A man may have to increasingly compete with a female colleague on an equal basis in the competitive world of work, but he can still display his muscles in a compensatory display of masculine power” (117). Connell notes that the military-industrial trends of the twentieth century have led to a “split in hegemonic masculinity. Practice organized around dominance [is] increasingly incompatible with practice organized around expertise or technical knowledge” (193). This split often results in competition between and/or among different versions of hegemonic masculinity.

Connell describes the schism between management and labor, economically, socially, professionally, as a chronic problem for corporations and for the state. Connell concludes that eventually a polarity “developed within hegemonic masculinity between dominance and technical expertise. However, neither version has succeeded in displacing the other” (194). This plays out in the wrestling ring and in the workplace as the opposition between those who “know,” the bosses, and those who “do,” the workers. Exacerbating this situation is the widely held sense among workers that those in positions of power have not earned their place through hard work—that is, physical work, which remains the essence of the “honest” day’s work. Sadly, the statistics seem to support the suspicion. In a contemporary survey of American corporate executives, *USA Today* found that 63% of male executives landed their job through networking. This compares with only 13% who turned to classified ads or search agents.¹¹ In other words, privilege begets privilege. The myth of America as a meritocracy is just that. Like wrestling, the match is fixed, the outcome is predetermined. The workers have no chance. Wrestling, then, exposes the boss as undeserving through his weakness in the ring.

Another trend arising in the 1990s and continuing in professional wrestling makes it another site of the

growing power and presence of females in areas that traditionally have been the strongholds of men. Moreover, the presence of women as wrestlers furthers the sense of powerlessness that men feel, especially when the women win. Former WWE star Chyna, a.k.a. Joanie Laurer, best exemplifies this situation. She is physically as large as, and as strong as, most of the men in WWE. She has held the Intercontinental Championship belt, which signifies the top-ranked contender for the federation's World Championship. While Laurer has undergone several surgeries to enhance her feminine attributes (several were necessary to correct a serious underbite with which she was born), she has maintained all of the muscle and all of the wrestling ability. It is arguable that Chyna's enhanced beauty might be for "eye candy," but her mat skills are not. Thus, she and the women who have followed in ever-growing numbers pose a significant threat to masculinity because she can be a sexually desirable woman and at the same time, can assert her power over *anyone*. More importantly, there is also the possibility for a male-to-female cross-gender identification among the identification processes involved in the consumption of a visual medium like a televised wrestling match. Chyna has been placed in the same type of situation as Austin and Flair, and it results in a similar viewing process.

Professional wrestling is not a fantasy-world in the same manner as professional sports, or even as the Ultimate Fighting Championships. These most often are purely masculine domains that depend on actual fighting. Professional wrestling is fiction, the audience knows it and, since the 1990s, the corporations have admitted it. Wrestling is not fantasy, but meta-fantasy. Herein lies one of the greatest ironies of this form of entertainment. Despite the notions of class revolt it might appear to exhibit, in terms of content and consumers, the multiple layers of containment ensure this possibility never occurs. First, the action occurs between character types rather than actual class constituents. The ring literally boxes in the action and television, the usual method of transmission, further mediates the content and adds another layer of containment. Finally, the outcome is predetermined, but more importantly, it changes nothing. When the bell rings, Vince McMahon still owns the company. The fact that criticism has no effect indicates that McMahon continues to win the fall, as it were. Professional wrestling is not necessarily the nostalgic look back to a lost era that some (or most) westerners are, nor is it altogether the reclamation project William Warner outlines in his analysis of eighties action films. Nor is it necessarily of the type Connell describes: "The imagery of masculine heroism is not *culturally* irrelevant. [...] Part of the struggle for hegemony in the gender order is the use of culture for such disciplinary purposes: setting standards, claiming popular assent and discrediting those who fall short. The production of exemplary masculinities is thus integral to the politics of hegemonic masculinity" (214). Instead of a project of maintaining hegemonic masculinity, professional wrestling should be seen as exemplifying the reifying reach of commodity capitalism. Masculinity and class revolt, both inside and outside the ring, come pre-packaged and staged. Every pay-per-view purchase confirms the consumers' consent and containment. Given the poignancy of the plots and the increasingly threatening female presence — not as a companion, but as competitor — professional wrestling might yet be a small acknowledgment of a possible new order and the increasing impossibility of an old one. Masculine privilege is no longer a certainty because masculinity is tenuous rather than dominant. One of the ultimate lessons of the cultural shifts of the 1990s, shifts exemplified by the rise of professional wrestling, is that men can be replaced.

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NOTES

1. During the period of growth, there were two wrestling corporations, the World Wrestling Federation (WWF) and World Championship Wrestling (WCW). WWF has purchased its competitor. As well, it was forced to change its name to "World Wrestling Entertainment" (WWE) by the World Wildlife Foundation. WWE operates as if the latter change never occurred. Fans do not seem to have noticed either. Neither major corporate change affected the stories. Therefore, I use "WWE" throughout for the sake of consistency.
2. In Sept. 2000, *Raw* moved from USA Network to the National Network (TNN) in a deal worth a reported \$28 million per year, over four years. The latter broadcaster had only recently changed its name from the Nashville Network, and modified its format — originally, a schedule based on outdoors and country and western shows and aimed at a specific, regional audience — to a content mix aimed at a more diverse audience. The plan, according to Brian Hughes, Senior Vice-President of TNN Sports and Outdoors, is to "position some programming that fits within the 18-to-49-(year-old) demographic" (qtd. in Marvez, "TV's Raw"). WWE fans followed *Raw* to TNN. In its first week it drew a "5.5 rating, which translates into

an average of 7.14 million people in 4.28 million households” in North America (qtd. in Marvez, “TV’s Raw”). When Hughes mentions the target demographic the unstated focus is on males, who comprise the vast majority of professional wrestling’s viewership.

3. Former wrestler turned advertising consultant, Arn Anderson, reports that approximately 63% of professional wrestling’s adult viewers are male and 70% are between the ages of eighteen and forty-four. Half of the 69% of the viewers who are employed work in “blue collar” jobs (Anderson). This statistic also indicates the youth of the viewership since 22% of them are between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five, ages at which many still live with parents or custodial guardians.
4. This practice, known as the “run-in” ending, usually takes the form of a “save,” in which a wrestler is rescued from a defeat or a beating. For the NWO a run-in serves neither purpose. They “punk” or beat on everyone with an array of chair-shots, slams through tables, and other moves. They then leave their victims in the centre of the ring in a display of might-makes-right.
5. In fact, the WWE attempted to give a serious “push” to a babyface character known as “The Patriot” shortly before the terrorists attacks occurred. The character wore an outfit of stars and stripes, waved the American flag and defended the helpless. Despite the push, the character never “got over” with wrestling fans and disappeared from storylines mid-way through a feud.
6. The Canadian province of Ontario is among the most aggressive in this regard. The province’s Bill 147 increases the work week from forty to sixty hours and removes employees’ rights to choose overtime and be paid for it. Bill 74 expands the definition of “essential services” beyond police, fire, and medical workers, and forces Ontario’s teachers to be available *at all times* to supervise children.
7. Shortly after Turner Broadcasting (now part of Time-Warner/AOL) purchased WCW, Vince McMahon briefly attempted to play the family-owned WWE as the little guy fighting the massive multi-national conglomerate. These included parodic skits with bumbling characters based on wrestlers who leapt for WCW. Ironically, McMahon lured most of his talent, including those he parodied, away from other promoters at the expense of many small, often family-run, independent and local organizations. In any case, McMahon first employed the “us vs. the corporation” narrative to attack Turner. Eric Bischoff subsequently elevated the structure, but McMahon may have perfected it with the Stone Cold Steve Austin plot as will be shown later.
8. Angles involving Austin were suspended after the arrest of Steve Williams, who plays Austin, in the summer of 2002, on charges of domestic assault. Williams then entered a rehabilitation program to treat addictions to alcohol and to pain-killers which allegedly stem from his several knee, back, and neck injuries. In a case of reality mimicking a fiction that mimics reality, WWE has no employee benefits program and has a history of quickly dropping performers who have medical and/or legal problems. Some are welcomed back once they have completed treatment. Thus, all that matters is the ability to make money for Vince McMahon. For example, Austin returned for the next “Wrestlemania,” in mid-2003 and remains a regular.
9. I acquired the dolls at a factory outlet for less than one-third of the original price. Even in the doll version, the mannequin’s status as just that — a mannequin — is emphasized.
10. This article was originally published in the *Globe and Mail*, 25 Nov. 1992.

11. Equally telling are the statistics for female executives. While 41% of them found their jobs through networking – indicating that the “old boys’ club” might function for females – more than two-and-a-half times as many, 31%, found their jobs through the classifieds or search agents – which suggests that the club is not actively pursuing new members.

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The Roots of Authoritarianism in AMC's *The Walking Dead*

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ABSTRACT

AMC's *The Walking Dead* (2010 –) is a unique artifact in the twenty-first century's expansive catalogue of undead-themed entertainments. To date, the show's producers, commentators, and critics have noted the relevance of psychological trauma to the series. If the experience of realistic psychological trauma is relevant to *The Walking Dead*, then it should be possible for critics to articulate detailed assessments of the particular kinds of traumatic experiences that are foregrounded in the program. Trauma is, after all, an extremely nuanced and highly theorized facet of the human condition. This paper provides one such assessment and considers the significance of ego trauma to the authoritarian dispositions of Merle Dixon and others.

Keywords

Zombies; Adorno; Freud; Jung; Authoritarianism; *The Walking Dead*; Governor; Psychology; Merle Dixon

AMC's *The Walking Dead* (2010 –) is a unique artifact in the twenty-first century's expansive catalog of undead-themed entertainments. As of this writing, it stands alone as the only mass-market television program concerned with zombies that has received widespread critical acclaim. However, while *The Walking Dead* is a distinctive drama, it is also true that the series advances a particular narrative structure that can be associated with a number of popular, recent television shows, such as *Lost* (2004 – 2010), *Battlestar Galactica* (2004 – 2009), *Jericho* (2006 – 2008), *Survivors* (2008 –), and the short-lived reboot of *V* (2009 – 2011). Like *The Walking Dead*, each of these narratives is concerned with a small group of survivors trying to establish social order in the context of a reality-shattering event. Such struggles occur in two basic contexts: within a primary group working to maintain a democratic identity, and between that group and a motivating (read: threatening) personality or organization espousing anti-democratic ideals. Without dismissing any of the fascinating and often unique narrative threads that define each of these shows, it is reasonable to assert that *The Walking Dead* has a distinctive approach for dramatizing such discordances. More than any other contemporary televised program, it stages and re-stages the significance of psychological trauma to social movements.

To date, the show's producers, commentators, and critics have noted the relevance of psychological trauma to the series. For example, Andrew Lincoln – who plays the embattled lawman Rick Grimes – states, “the [narrative] moves so quickly that [the characters] don't have time to catch up with the trauma of what's happened to them” (Ellwood). Lincoln indicates that such experiences deny the involved the opportunity to enact what H. Eric Bender elsewhere describes in conversation about the show as “positive resiliency,” strategies for dealing with such challenges. Across the blogosphere, there are numerous speculative comments on the significance of this issue. Often, such observations consider whether the series dramatizes emotional pain with the same level of realism that it brings to physical violence and infrastructure degradation. For example, Steven Schlozman notes the show's “signature thematic elements” and their relevance to “the various ways we humans react to terror.” In a related argument, Mollie Berg attends to the ways in which the show “brings up common issues such as what we, as humans, do when we are desperate in traumatic situations.”

These comments, like those offered by Lincoln and Bender, stand on a shared assumption: namely, that there is something truthful about the depiction of psychological trauma in the series.

If the experience of realistic psychological trauma is relevant to *The Walking Dead*, then it should be possible for critics to articulate detailed assessments of the particular kinds of traumatic experiences that are foregrounded in the series. Trauma is, after all, an extremely nuanced and highly theorized facet of the human condition. Furthermore, if trauma should rise to the level of theme in the program, then it should be possible for scholars to articulate in some detail its significance to and between particular episodes, and also within and between seasons. Certainly, such analysis might begin with a consideration of any number of potential subjects. However, it is worth noting that there is already an interesting vein of commentary in the popular press that approaches these concerns and which could benefit in significant ways from its association with specific psychological concepts.

The general notion that the show's survivors are unable to “catch up with the trauma of what's happened to them” bears on related conversations concerned with the show's illustration of developing authoritarian attitudes. For example, Zack Beauchamp states that the major authoritarian players – e.g., Rick Grimes and the Governor – act as they do as a natural consequence of the difficult fact that “you can't trust others to remain peaceful” in the brutal Walker-infested landscape. Elsewhere, the anonymous blogger behind “Green Fissures in an Otherwise Pristine Robot” notes a more nuanced explanation for the phenomenon. The blogger links key characters' incipient authoritarian attitudes with a general “grief process that we have to go through” wherein the bereaved individual attempts to establish a rigid hierarchy to stave off the pressures of a rapidly collapsing world. While intriguing, this view – like Beauchamp's – locates the dictatorial impulse in a rather nebulous set of conditions with a particular aim to establish order in reaction to a disorderly or potentially

untrustworthy world. Though these views are not unreasonable, they lead to exceedingly general questions about whether the impulse is a common or uncommon reaction to such conditions. This concern is relevant to *The Walking Dead*, as the major characters, while certainly traumatized, do not all demonstrate the same authoritarian strategies, and some do not demonstrate any such strategies.

An indication that a consideration of the specific psychological rationales for authoritarianism may clarify such observations can be inferred from comments about Woodbury's paramilitary strongman, the Governor. In an interview with *IGN.com*, David Morrissey describes his desire to align his portrayal of *The Walking Dead's* Governor with the character described in Robert Kirkman's novels *The Walking Dead: Rise of The Governor* and *The Walking Dead: The Road to Woodbury*. He explains that he prefers the novelized version of the character to its comic book counterpart because the former demonstrates greater "complexity" than the latter. For example, in his comic book representation, the Governor comes across as an unrepentant savage who meets an early and extremely violent end. He is brutal without apparent remorse or evident reason. In Kirkman's novels, there are events that contextualize the Governor's sadism. For example, in *Rise of The Governor*, the reader is exposed to the long and arduous road that leads Brian Blake to renounce his extended adolescence and adopt the power-focused persona of his deceased brother, Philip. This transformation involves an evident psychic break, during which Brian begins to conceptualize himself from an external position: "His consciousness now floats above his body, a ghostly onlooker, gazing down at himself in that airless, reeking, crowded community room in the old Woodbury courthouse" (306). In this state, he murders the ever-threatening, would-be Woodbury strongman, "Gavin." When the rescued townspeople ask for his name, he identifies himself as "Philip ... Philip Blake" (308). The significance of this transformation as it bears on Blake's evident complexity is that, by this point in the novel, Philip's obsession with power and violence has led him to a grim and ignominious end. Whether Brian has adopted the moniker to redeem or impersonate his sibling is an open question at this point in the narrative.

During his tenure on the television program, Morrissey makes this already fascinating character a substantially more psychologically complex and believable entity. The essence of this complexity is indicated in the events surrounding the murder of a number of well-armed National Guardsmen in "Walk With Me." In this episode, the Governor leads an assault on a group of unsuspecting soldiers. After dispatching the troops, he takes their supplies and returns to Woodbury, where he fabricates a story in which the Guardsmen were murdered by "Biters" in the wilderness because they lacked "the walls, fences, and other protections" that are readily available in the enclave (*IGN.com*). As Morrissey explains, this action has a purpose: namely, to provide the survivors with a sense of security while confirming their worst fears about the outside world. However, what Morrissey does not explain, and what no one has bothered to address in detail to date, is the question of why the Governor would enact this specific deception to achieve this particular effect.

Certainly, it is true that early reviewers of "Walk With Me" do mark the Governor's deception as a revelatory development that is indicative of the character's disturbed worldview. Yet, they do so only to imply that the Governor's fabrication reveals a distinct and basically negative aspect of an otherwise positive personality. For example, Phelim O'Neil observes that the Governor's hornsoggling lends "some ambiguity to the role." He states, "[U]p until the end, it [is] possible that the Governor [is] a good leader and provider, stern but fair – but killing off the National Guardsmen then kicking back with a glass of booze ... shows there's plenty wrong there." A similar sentiment can be found in the work of Zack Handlen, who notes, "There are times ... when the Governor seems like the most openly decent character.... Then the Governor has to ruin everything by shooting a friendly National Guardsman and leading his men to massacre the rest of their group." These general observations are not, of course, indicative of a critical failure for either reviewer, as O'Neil and Handlen are tasked with writing accessible and entertaining plot summaries. Nevertheless, to date, the question of why there is "plenty wrong there" with the Governor remains an outstanding concern.

One approach for resolving this issue is to recognize that there is already a sizable branch of research on the relevance of trauma to authoritarian dispositions and attitudes. Early considerations, such as those found in works by Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, take the individual as their primary subject, while later efforts, such as those produced by Wilhelm Reich and Theodore Adorno, use the Freudian and Jungian models of individuality as a starting point for considering the significance of the traumatized persona to general society. In what is arguably Freud's most specific work on the subject, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud associates trauma with a "comprehensive general weakening and shattering of mental functions" that is brought about by a "very extensive disturbance in the workings of the energy of the organism." In his later *Group Psychology and The Analysis of the Ego* (1921), Freud explores how such disturbances can bear on a child's relationship with a father, the "Commander-in-Chief" of Freud's family unit. When the relationship is disturbed from its ideal, wherein the Father is perceived as "loving all his soldiers [i.e. children] equally," the child's understanding of authority is, Freud claims, compromised, if not shattered, with potential long-term results. Such and related concerns are also relevant to Carl Jung's conceptions of the "psyche," which he describes as "the totality of all psychic processes, conscious as well as unconscious," and its significance to individuation, or the process by which one gets in touch with the various components that underlie the self (Hopwood). According to Jung, when the process is hindered by eventualities, the individual becomes a compromised subject. These notions are meaningful for later theorists like Wilhelm Reich. In his *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1933), Reich explores in detail the relevance of traumatized individuals to society and articulates the impact of such populations on authoritarian movements.

By the middle of the twentieth century, these and related efforts established the groundwork for Theodor Adorno's *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950). Adorno and his team of researchers consider authoritarianism to be an anti-democratic pattern of expression for traumatized individuals. They pursue "the rise of an [new] 'anthropological' species ... [who] seems to combine the ideas and skills that are typical of highly industrialized society with irrational or anti-rational beliefs" (ix). Importantly, they view authoritarian actions as being symptomatic of an individual's movement away from social democratic ideals and toward a redoubtable fascism, and they argue that this occurs as the result of a weakened or traumatized ego (1-27). As such, the authoritarian personality is conceptualized as a personality in development. In terms of *The Walking Dead*, the approach is interesting, as it appears to account for why and how characters directly confronted with the limitations of democratic thought, such as Rick, Merle, Shane, Herschel, and the Governor, demonstrate authoritarian traits approaching fascist ideals, while other traumatized characters who are not concerned with the revealed leadership vulnerabilities of democracy do not. As such, the approach suggests a scheme for adjudicating the dramatic development of specific characters as well as the significance of authoritarian attitudes to larger narrative developments and potential thematic trends.

However, it is also true that *The Authoritarian Personality* offers a very broad array of assessment tools, far too many to be considered in the scope of a single essay. Nevertheless, one vital program of analysis in the chapter "The Measurement of Implicit Antidemocratic Trends" appears to have exceptional relevance to the concepts under discussion. Adorno's team advances the "Fascist Scale" or "F Scale," which is composed of a series of personality variables that contribute to an anti-democratic disposition. These variables include "conventionalism, authoritarian submission, anti-intraception, superstition and stereotypy, power and toughness, destructiveness and cynicism, projectivity, and sex" (228). Each term has its own specialized connotation for the researchers. Arguably, all of these particularized variables are descriptive of characters in *The Walking Dead* who struggle with or succumb to an authoritarian impulse. However, the variable of "anti-intraception" stands out as being particularly apt for assessing how such actions can arise from a particular form of ego trauma that is germane to *The Walking Dead*'s major authoritarian players. This is because the term is founded on the notion that it arises directly from a "weak ego" that is compromised by a specific subject:

the fear “of genuine emotions” that threaten the ego with a loss of control (235). In order to stave off this consequence, Adorno contends, the anti-intrceptive personality will resist thinking “the wrong thoughts” (i.e., thoughts that would lead to genuine emotion) with a strategy of opposing what he or she perceives as “subjective, imaginative, [or] tender-minded” notions that would lead to self-reflection. Adorno argues that “[a]t its most extreme,” anti-intrception leads the individual to regard “human beings ... as if they were physical objects to be coldly manipulated – even when physical objects, now vested with emotional appeal, are treated with loving care” (253). Evidence drawn from several episodes in season three suggests that the term can be used to illuminate actions the Governor takes that “seemingly ruin everything” and which also “suggest there’s something wrong there.”

In the opening action of “Walk With Me,” the Governor emerges as a nameless figure, barking orders to a group of well-trained subordinates who set about dispatching a minor Walker threat at a helicopter crash site.

His unquestioning loyalty and dispassionate brutality in this early conflict convey a sense of organizational efficiency and purpose. While the nature of that purpose is not entirely clear, it does stand in sharp relief to the deeply troubled point of view through which the audience experiences these events. Hidden in the nearby foliage, a wearied Andrea watches the drama develop in a state of essential confusion and helplessness, trapped by her circumstances while the strongmen ruthlessly go about their mysterious task. When contrasted with Andrea, the Governor appears to be more than simply a dominant force at the crash site: he stands as the literal dictator of what is possible within the immediate context of the aerial disaster. The nature of his command and control is detailed further in a following scene where a kidnapped Andrea and Michonne are transported to Woodbury. Through her bindings, Andrea can hear the Governor communicating with another subordinate – who we later learn is Milton – about the need for a medical team to treat the women, as well as about some Walker-related findings that he wants Milton to research. The relevance of these comments to the Governor’s developing personality and potential anti-intrception is their collective implication that the Governor is in total control of the salvage operation. He is both the macro- and micro-manager of the events, which is noteworthy, if not curious, given the size of the salvage team. For example, it raises the question of why it is that one individual needs to be in control of so many facets of the operation. Certainly, these details do not prove the Governor’s anti-intrception, but they do establish a context for later developments that suggest that the character models such behavior.

In season three, the Governor’s increasingly peculiar efforts to both charm and dominate the lives in Woodbury can be understood as efforts to stave off “the wrong thoughts,” the kinds that would lead either himself or the town’s population to entertain otherwise “subjective, imaginative, [or] tender-minded” notions that would lead to self-reflection. These efforts emerge as part of the Governor’s anti-historical project. He works to define Woodbury as a place out of time, where the calamitous and all-too-human past is literally hidden from the day-to-day political process and confined to discursive spaces where it is only engaged during moments of emotional or political crisis: e.g., the gladiator fights. His dark plan to weaponize the Biters in Woodbury (for entertainment) as well as for military action elsewhere has a potential anti-intrceptive explanation. He appropriates historical evidence of humanity’s downfall to manage social challenges to his own vision of the world for the purpose of solidifying his power within the community. In doing so, he imbues the Biters with new ontological and political significance that denies the very thoughts of horror they should inspire for the human survivors. They are no longer merely evidence of a former civilization: rather, they become champions of the Governor’s settlement program. These and related actions, such as his slaughter of the Guardsmen, indicate that he is more than willing to “coldly manipulate” people as if they were objects. However, and as is shown in his private sanctuary, it is also the case that he is dedicated to “treating with loving care” a collection of objects: decapitated heads and the corpse of his own daughter. When considered in their broader context, these efforts indicate that the Governor is going to extreme lengths to fashion an

iron- sted grasp on a particularized view of reality, one created out of and also at the expense of the fallen world. However, con ned to its own demonstrative context, it is also true that it is not immediately clear why it is that the Governor's anti-intrapeption is signi cant to either the man or to the larger narrative he inhabits.

Adorno views anti-intrapeption as a response to ego trauma, and for the Governor the death of his daughter — Penny — appears to be a signi cant, if not the signi cant, traumatic experience that led this former milquetoast to become a brutal tyrant. His reaction to Penny's infection and death can be connected to a broader theme concerning loss and its relationship to individual agency and the need for control that bears on the entire series. This thematic association makes it possible to compare and contrast the Governor's seemingly anti-intrapeptive actions with the actions of other characters who have more specific experiences with ego trauma and particular anti-intrapeptive dispositions that arise from such trauma. Arguably, the show's essential commentary on trauma and individual agency in Walker-ruined America is indicated in the parallel adventures of Rick and Lori Grimes in the pilot episode, "Days Gone By." Near the end of the adventure, Rick, pursued to the point of utter desperation, faces a difficult choice: death from the Walkers or death from suicide. He chooses suicide, the less painful option — though the act is deferred at the last possible moment. The act requires a willful momentary suspension of any and all possibilities for life, undertaken for a singular purpose: to maintain control of the situation at hand. In this way, Rick sacrifices his sense of self — including his status as a thinking, feeling individual — to mediate the overwhelming pressures of his situation. For her part, Lori is also faced with a transformative choice: to warn potential survivors away from doomed Atlanta or to submit to Shane's dictatorial demands. By choosing the latter, she willingly sacrifices her emotional investment in others to mediate the overwhelming pressures of her present situation. While Rick and Lori's experiences are dissimilar in many ways, they are united under the notion that they lead to a moment of self-sacrifice (literal for Rick, figurative for Lori) that requires a willful emotional divestment from an established sense of self and purpose. While these experiences are not indicative of anti-intrapeption per se, they are indicative of a particular kind of trauma that can be associated with all the major characters who go on to demonstrate anti-intrapeptive attitudes, including the Governor.

A striking example of how such trauma can lead directly to anti-intrapeptive attitudes can be found in Merle Dixon's character arc. The character first appears in season one's second episode, "Guts." Here, the audience is treated to a rooftop exchange between Merle, a dispossessed brute, and Rick, an already-weary democratic idealist. In its climax, the exchange involves the latter informing the former that his established view of self is no longer relevant to the post-Walker world, a world that demands tribal, if not outright democratic, unity. In the rising action, Merle calls an African-American survivor, T-Dog, a "nigger" and then holds a number of survivors hostage at gunpoint, demanding that they recognize his authority. In a parody of democracy, the group complies, and then Rick intervenes violently, disrupting the fascist power fantasy. As he shackles Merle to the rooftop, Rick explains that Merle's racist understanding of self and the world is outdated: "Look here, Merle, things are different now. There are no niggers anymore. No dumb as shit inbred white trash fools, neither. . . . There's us and the dead. We survive this by pulling together. Not apart." In what will become a defining character trait, Merle rejects Rick's democratic plea for unity, spits in the sheriff's face, and snarls, "Screw you."

In terms of Adorno's theory, the exchange is representative of Merle's desire to maintain his established sense of self at the expense of accepting "tender minded" ideals that threaten to undermine his surety. Notably, these ideals are democratic. The fact that Merle believes that he has been abandoned on the rooftop by the end of the episode only serves to strengthen his notion that Rick's call for unity is farcical and weak-minded in the face of the realities of the Walker plague. This development is significant to what is arguably the first major anti-intrapeptive moment in the series. In "Tell It to the Frogs," the audience finds Merle alone, still trapped on the roof, but now totally divested of his surety. He is reduced to a squirming, squealing victim

– horrified to the point of madness by his impending live cannibalization. Interestingly, he is no longer screaming for his democratically-inclined fellow survivors, as he has given up all hope in the possibility that the band will come to his aid. Rather, he is screeching for the ultimate form of authoritarian intervention: divine intervention. However – and remarkably – almost as soon as he begins to express these uncontrolled feelings of hopelessness and despair (which he says he has never expressed before) he violently rejects them and recommits himself to a so-far failed plan to obtain some nearby tools with his belt. In the context of its utterance, Merle's prayer stands as a rather fascinating rhetorical device. With his brutal dismissal of his panic-inspired pleas for clemency, Merle effectively argues for a particular form of self-actualization, one in which he literally survives by dominating his immediate environment through the expression of rugged individualism.

is is the essence of anti-intracception as it is described in *The Authoritarian Personality*: unstable emotion is rejected by an ego struggling to maintain a sense of control over the environment, regardless of the potential sacrifices. While the act is psychological, it has a literal impact on the scoundrel. He emerges from the struggle a man literally diminished by his turn inward from the rest of the world and its possibilities: he is divested of his own right hand.

the behavioral trends that Merle demonstrates on the rooftop can be associated with later developments that confirm Adorno's theories about the significance of anti-intracception to individuals who are vulnerable to fascist states. For example, when we next meet Merle in season three, he has become a henchman for the Governor's paramilitary force. In conversation with Andrea, he explains that he joined with the Governor because the Governor found him when he was wounded and took care of him. Insofar as Merle's wound is a practical example of his anti-intracception, a direct correlation can be made between Merle's reaction to trauma and his association with a fascist organization. Over the course of a number of episodes, Merle demonstrates his service to the Governor's petty empire with a series of actions that have extraordinary anti-intracceptive implications, all of which drive him deeper into the brutal and ultimately self-destructing organization of the Governor's political machine. For example, in "When the Dead Come Knocking," an enraged Merle is informed by the recently incarcerated Glenn that Rick and the others returned to the rooftop to save him, a notion that affirms Rick's initial (and rejected) call for democratic unity. Merle's reaction is telling: he dismisses the possibility that Glenn is correct and insists that his understanding of the events and abandonment is accurate and then uses this rationale to justify Glenn's torture and attempted murder. He cannot do the opposite because to do so would be to experience emotions that would put him out of control of his present situation: i.e., he would have to accept the notion that his drastic self-mutilation was committed in error and that, rather than being the master of his own fate, he has been a weak-minded pawn to circumstance.

A similarly violent reaction emerges in "Hounded." In that episode, Merle is sent to kill the recently released Michonne with several other Woodbury thugs. When his belief that Michonne will be easy prey falls victim to Michonne's razor-sharp sword, Merle fabricates a lie about her being destroyed by the Walkers in the woods. The deception is brought about by his fear that he will lose control of the hunt and become the hunted if he continues further in the pursuit. When Merle's claim is rejected by a fellow guardsman, Neil, Merle kills Neil and later lays the blame for the murder on Michonne. Upon returning to Woodbury, Merle recounts his concocted story to the Governor. The significance of these events lies in their implications for Merle's relationship with the Governor: rather than face the possibility of losing control, Merle affirms and brutally defends an extremely weak assessment of the hunt, one that guards his own emotional shortcomings at the expense of his political savvy. He foists the fantasy on the very authoritarian personality that has provided him with a sense of security since he escaped from the rooftop – a fatal flaw that leads to the character's eventual undoing.

As season three comes to its close, Michonne returns to Woodbury and wounds the Governor. As a consequence, the fascist dictator turns on Merle and eventually orchestrates his death. With Merle's

developmental arc, the series illustrates an extended scenario in which an anti-intrceptive personality moves away from democratic possibility and into a self-destructive authoritarian state. The example is valuable because it shows a particular developmental cycle, one that comes with evident implications for the involved character's personality and for the show's broader commentary on democracy and fascist attitudes. While it is not the case that the behavioral concerns that define Merle's journey are necessarily relevant to all the characters in the series who battle with democratic notions of unity, they do establish a conceptual foundation for adjudicating the anti-intrceptive actions of other major characters. For example, in season one's concluding episodes, "Wildfire" and "TS-19," the suicidal Jenner's much shorter arc presents an example of the relationship between anti-intrception and authoritarianism in the Walker-ruined world. As is the case with Merle, this journey leads Jenner to a position of inescapable confinement, brought about by his reductive approach to reality.

Jenner, his sense of self and purpose destroyed by the death of his wife and the destruction of the international scientific community, explains to Rick and the other survivors that their impending and inevitable immolation in the now-defunct CDC will create "an end to sorrow, grief, regret." Unlike Rick's irritation with suicide in "Days Gone By," here the rationale for the individual's absolute control of the moment at the expense of literally everything is not the grasping fingers of the dead but rather the act of reflection itself, which is too painful for Jenner to withstand. He seeks to destroy himself rather than contemplate the "subjective, imaginative, [or] tender-minded" possibilities for the future offered by Rick and the others. As the concept is theorized by Adorno, anti-intrception does not necessarily compel an individual to suicide, so it is noteworthy for the series that Jenner's rationale for self-destruction has anti-intrceptive overtones. This relationship becomes even more fascinating when one considers that Jenner is using the rationale for more than just his own death but for the death of all of the people who assume that they have been saved by his merciful solicitude.

When Jenner's actions are considered in their entirety, it is possible to argue that from the first he is demonstrating what Adorno identifies as a primary authoritarian trait: the trait of dominance-submission. For Adorno, dominance-submission is defined by actions that the authoritarian undertakes to ameliorate the essential needs of others before he or she demands their allegiance to his or her will (314, 344-46). This essential relationship is evident from the first, as Jenner provides access to the CDC in the very same moment that he tells Rick and the survivors that once the doors of the CDC close "they do not re-open." Later, at the height of his suicide crisis, he reminds them of this fact with an intensity that seems to indicate that the observation is an inalienable law. The concept of dominance-submission can also account for Jenner's peculiar hospitality: he offers food and water, shelter, warm showers, alcohol, and the basic amenities that the survivors need to feel safe before he presents them with the inescapable suicide pact. This behavioral pattern can also be used to account for one of the more bizarre events that occurs during this period. Jenner fully and rightfully believes that there is no way to escape from the CDC, yet he lets Rick and the others scramble toward the exit in the final minutes of the self-destruction countdown. He has no way to know that they have a grenade that they can use to escape, so his actions cannot be viewed as merciful: rather, here he is continuing the pattern of catering to the needs of his guests – their desire to pursue freedom – while at the same time he is sure that they will have no choice but to remain submissive to his plan for self-destruction. At the moment of his death, he does turn to Jacki and observe that the survivors made it out of the CDC: "They got out." However, given his actions to date, it is reasonable to assume that any joy he may associate with those words comes from his knowledge that he is soon to die and that he is not dying alone, thanks to his program for dominance-submission.

While Merle and Jenner are certainly distinct characters, it is interesting to note that Merle's misadventure on the rooftop also begins with the issue of dominance and submission, though not with the

process of amelioration that defines Jenner's actions. For example, when Merle turns a gun on Glenn, Andrea, and the others, he does so with the demand that he be recognized as the power in control of the situation, a fantasy that Rick shatters. However, at the CDC, Rick cannot react in a similar way, as he is already dominated by Jenner's will and plan. This distinction is informative of the lawman's developing struggles with the limits of democratic thought and possibility, which in this instance are all but helpless in the face of an authoritarian personality demonstrating anti-intracceptive attitudes. This becomes a major concern in the series's third season and is the struggle at the heart of Rick's dispute with the Governor.

The significance of such developments and attitudes to an understanding of the Governor's psychological motivations lies in their descriptive – not predictive – capacities. They remind the viewer that just as the Governor might choose to regard a collection of heads to “steel himself” for the horrors of the Walker-ruined world, the viewer might consider the head of the Governor at the very same time – as part of his or her own process for coming to grips with all that has passed and all that will pass for *The Walking Dead's* authoritarian personalities. Whether these attitudes will continue to manifest in future seasons is, of course, impossible to determine. However, their significance to the series to date speaks to the narrative's extended investment in these essential attitudes.

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Destructive Plasticity, "Surplus of Consciousness," and the "Monster" in *True Detective*

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ABSTRACT

The first season of HBO's cult hit *True Detective* introduced viewers to a southern gothic murder mystery that many will not easily forget. Since many of us focused primarily on the whodunit narrative, we may have missed the narrative of trauma simmering under the surface of the story. This narrative of trauma reveals a deeper layer to the story between Detective Rust Cohle and serial killer Errol Childress, one that also reveals our own fears regarding trauma in our lives. By applying first the nihilist philosophies of Peter Zapruder with Cohle and Catherine Malabou's concept on destructive plasticity in Childress, we can understand on a deeper level the motivations behind Childress' murderous actions and Cohle's frequent existential musings that are scattered throughout every episode. By understanding these characters as trauma survivors and representations of what happens psychologically after a traumatic event, we can further learn how our inability to talk about trauma and have true empathy for survivors can ultimately harm a survivors' ability to navigate their new post-trauma space and, perhaps, lead that survivor to become like Childress—a fate that could just as easily happen to us.

Keywords

True Detective; Survivor; Zapruder; Malabou; Trauma

The first season of HBO's cult hit *True Detective* caught the interest and imagination of viewers as we were taken on a violent journey into the heart of Louisiana and of madness. The first season was fascinating for several reasons, but perhaps the most powerful element of the show were the characters of Detective Rust Cohle (Matthew McConaughey) and serial killer Errol Childress (Glenn Fleshner). While some critics tend to focus primarily on the relationship between Cohle and his partner, Marty Hart (Woody Harrelson), I argue that we need to also focus on the connections between Cohle and Childress as these two characters are brought together not as foils to each other (like Cohle and Hart), but because they both represent the fluidity of identity that is sparked after a traumatic event. Both Cohle and Childress are survivors of traumas of a physical and of an emotional nature. Traumas do not just change us a little; traumas can make us an "other" to our old identity. By applying first the nihilist philosophies of Peter Zapruder with Cohle and Catherine Malabou's concept on destructive plasticity in Childress, we can understand on a deeper level the motivations behind Childress' murderous actions and Cohle's frequent existential musings that are scattered throughout every episode. By understanding these characters as trauma survivors and representations of what happens psychologically after a traumatic event, we can further learn how our inability to talk about trauma and have true empathy for survivors can ultimately harm a survivor's ability to navigate their new post-trauma space and, perhaps, lead that survivor to become like Childress—a fate that could just as easily happen to us.

Before delving into the philosophical elements of this analysis, it is necessary to first explain the complicated narrative of *True Detective's* first season and how the structure of the episodes adds another level to how we understand Cohle and Childress. For the first half of the season, the narrative is set in the present day with Cohle and Hart summoned separately to a police station to help Detectives Maynard Gilbough (Michael Potts) and Thomas Papania (Tory Kittles) with a murder case that echoes elements of a case Cohle and Hart allegedly solved seventeen years before. While the viewers are not aware of the detectives' motives at first, Cohle is smart and figures out rather quickly that he is considered a suspect. Even with his suspicions, he recalls to the detectives his memories of the old case involving the cult-laced death of prostitute Dora Lang and "the Yellow King." Most of the past events are told through the point of view of Cohle as he weaves his memories with philosophical asides while he drinks Lone Star beer and chain-smokes in the interview room. Cohle is an enigma to viewers: extremely intelligent, a functioning alcoholic, obsessive, and nihilistic. And yet, in spite of his flaws, we trust his view of the events because he comes across as genuine—though a very depressed kind of genuine. We also learn that Cohle shared his philosophies in the past as well as in the present, so it is difficult not to take his existential musings seriously as he certainly has in his own life. These musings also make Cohle seem mysterious and "other" to us and we are drawn to him.

The use of time in the narrative also allows viewers to see how Cohle and Hart have changed in the past seventeen years. While Hart appears to be physically well, he is divorced and clearly misses his family life. He is no longer in the police force and instead runs his own private detective agency. Cohle, on the other hand, looks terrible. While he was very thin in the past, now he looks skeletal with his hair unkempt and thrown into a haphazard ponytail; he has dark bags under his eyes and drinks away his days when he is not working in a bar. His appearance makes us want to know more about him and his life choices in the past seventeen years. We are never told what happened and must piece together his life through what he allows us to see of him—which is not very much. Since most of what we do know about Cohle is through his philosophical tangents, we latch onto them as they are the only real clue into who he is, making them even more prominent and important than they would be otherwise. It is impossible to separate Cohle from his philosophies because they are so ingrained into his identity. As we learn about Cohle's traumas, we are fascinated when he speaks as his system of belief is rooted in his traumas that simmer below the surface and threaten to bubble over at any moment.

Before delving into Cohle's traumas, it is important to first establish the philosophical lens of Peter

Zappfe used to analyze Cohle. Zap's philosophy is nihilist in nature, and he warns us of the dangers of becoming "too" conscious of our respective positions in the world, "too" aware of our own capability to slip into an "otherness" that was always beneath the surface. This moment of existential awareness is what Zap calls the "damaging surplus of consciousness," a realization that serves to essentially shake us out of our fog of living to reveal that life is too overwhelming for us ("The Last Messiah"). For Zap, humanity creates various anchors (religion, education, family) that serve to keep us from becoming "too" aware of our lives and hopelessness that goes along with this realization. Zap writes, "Anchoring might be characterized as a fixation of points within, or construction of walls around, the liquid fray of consciousness" ("The Last Messiah"). Yet, these anchors are artificial in nature and we need to release ourselves from them in order to truly know ourselves and realize our fate—that we should not exist.

Due to this haunting realization that we should not be alive, Zap also advocates that we should kill ourselves and deny procreating. In "The Last Messiah," Zappfe's eponymous character beseeches the human race to "know yourselves—be infertile and let the earth be silent a while." While many may find this philosophy of nihilism and antinatalism far too depressing to even think about, Cohle constantly does and says things brought upon his various traumas that tie him firmly to Zap.

Prior to the events of the show, Cohle was married and had a young child, Sophia. Sophia was killed by a car while she was riding her tricycle at the tender age of two; the shocking death ultimately split up Cohle's marriage and wounded him psychologically. To help deal with the pain of being too aware of the futility of human life in the world, he buried himself in his work as an undercover agent in the drug world and subsequently developed a drug addiction. As a result of the PTSD from his daughter's death and the years of extensive drug use, Cohle admits to others that he sees visions, visions that he believes will never end. He feels these visions help him see "the secret truth of the universe" that haunts him even though he tries hard to bury it ("Seeing Things"). As a result of his traumas and visions, Cohle firmly believes that being "too" aware of our status in the world does far more harm than good. In "The Long, Bright Dark" he explains:

I think human consciousness is a tragic misstep in evolution. We became too self-aware. Nature created an aspect of nature separate from itself; we are creatures that should not exist by natural law. We are things that labor under the illusion of having a self; an accretion of sensory experience and feeling, programmed with total assurance that we are each somebody, when in fact everybody is nobody. Maybe the honorable thing for our species to do is deny our programming, stop reproducing, walk hand in hand into extinction, one last midnight, brothers and sisters opting out of a raw deal.

Cohle addresses the idea of an "illusion of the self" in another episode, "The Locked Room," while he cuts up cans of Lone Star into little people:

To realize that all your life—you know, all your love, all your hate, all your memory, all your pain—it was all the same thing. It's all the same dream; the dream that you had inside a locked room. Just dream about being a person. And, like a lot of dreams, there's a monster at the end of it.

Trauma forces us to have a "surplus of consciousness," to realize we are just as clumsy as those cut-out people made from a can of beer, and we see the monster we are (or could become) as a result of those traumas. As a result of seeing a glimpse of this monster, through Zap's "surplus of consciousness," Cohle also advocates Zap's antinatalism. In "Seeing Things," he asks Detectives Gilbough and Papania if either of them are fathers. When they both answer in the affirmative, Cohle responds, "Think of the hubris it must take to yank a soul out of non-existence into this...meat, to force a life into this threshers. My daughter—she spared me the sin of being a father." He continues: "I think about my daughter now, and what she was spared. Sometimes I feel grateful. The doctor said she didn't feel a thing—went straight into a coma. Then, somewhere in that blackness, she slipped off into another deeper kind. Isn't that a beautiful way to go out, painlessly as a happy child?" ("Seeing Things"). Cohle rationalizes the death of his young daughter by making her an

innocent martyr for his sin of procreation. Her violent death is not so tragic if it were for a greater purpose: to make right Cohle's decision to bring a new life "into this threshers."

Since Cohle's philosophy is rooted in Zapata's, it is not a surprise that he also despises the various anchors his fellow human beings cling to in order to avoid the "surplus of consciousness." We especially see this disdain in Cohle's view of the anchor of religion. From the very first episode of the season, religion plays a vital role in the show. The death of Dora Lang, the first victim shown, is reminiscent of Christ's sacrifice on the cross when he died not for just the "sins of the father" but for the sins of all humankind. When Cohle and Hart find her body, she is wearing a crown of thorns and has shallow stab marks on her abdomen. In the third episode, "The Locked Room," Cohle and Hart visit a revivalist tent for Friends of the Church. While they watch church-goers swinging their arms in the air and chant scripture, Cohle asks Hart, "What do you think the average IQ of this group is, huh?" He adds that "certain linguistic anthropologists think that religion is a language virus that rewrites pathways in the brain...dulls critical thinking." Cohle sees religion and God as "an authoritative vessel" that "absorbs their dread with his narrative."

Cohle also blames preachers for their role in facilitating the anchor of religion: "The ontological fallacy of expecting a light at the end of the tunnel, well, that's what the preacher sells, same as a shrink. See, the preacher, he encourages your capacity for illusion. Then he tells you it's a fucking virtue. Always a buck to be had doing that, and it's such a desperate sense of entitlement, isn't it?" ("The Locked Room"). The symbols associated with the anchor of religion are also portrayed as weak and easily destroyed, in spite of the connotations of the word "anchor." When Cohle asks a minister at a church about the "devil traps" found around the body of Dora Lang, the minister tells him that he used to make these traps as a kid by "just tying two sticks together" ("The Long, Bright Dark"). While he says this sentence, the camera pans and zooms in on an image of the crucifix on the wall, two limsy sticks also tied together. Also, the church where the revivalists used to worship is literally and figuratively destroyed by a fire.

With Cohle and Zapata firmly connected, it is important to turn towards Cohle's foil of trauma, Errol Childress, and the philosophy rooted within him. In *Ontology of the Accident*, Catherine Malabou writes that "as a result of a serious trauma, or sometimes for no reason at all, the path splits and a new, unprecedented persona comes to live with the former person, and eventually takes up all the room" (1). Therefore, "we must all of us recognize that we might, one day, become someone else, an absolute other, someone who will never be reconciled with themselves again, someone who will be this form of us without redemption or atonement, without last wishes, this damned form, outside of time" (2-3). Malabou calls this phenomena "destructive plasticity," which is the idea that destruction and trauma can reveal the human psyche as flexible and limsy. For Malabou, "destructive plasticity enables the appearance or formation of alterity where the other is absolutely lacking. Plasticity is the form of alterity when no transcendence, flight or escape is left. The only other that exists in this circumstance is being other to the self" (11). Destructive plasticity "refers to the possibility of being transformed without being destroyed; it characterizes the entire strategy of modification that seeks to avoid the threat of destruction" (44-45). We may feel fear when we think about the plasticity of the self, and perhaps even disbelief that such a change can occur to us without even knowing it. But, due to Freud's death drive, destruction of the self is not only possible but also probable. Destructive plasticity is "the power to form identity through destruction—thus making possible the emergence of a psyche that has vacated itself, its past, and its 'precedents.' In this sense, such plasticity has the power of creation *ex nihilo*, since it begins with the annihilation of an initial identity" (Malabou *The New Wounded* 68).

As Cohle represents Zapata's philosophy of "surplus of consciousness" and nihilism as a result of surviving trauma, Childress embodies Malabou's theory of destructive plasticity. We learn early on in the show that the suspected killer has scars on his face from a vicious burn, and when we see Childress for the first time we see these marks clearly. We learn later that Childress' father is the reason behind his terrible burns, but

the exact incident that incited the violent act is unclear. Based on how Childress treats his father (tying him to a bedspring and sewing his mouth shut, leaving him to rot), we can speculate that his father burned him on purpose in an attempt to murder his son. The reason why his father tried to kill him is because the family he belongs to in the show, the Tuttles, is a powerful and deeply religious group—and Childress is an illegitimate child. Zap's anchor of religion in the Tuttle family is what ultimately destroys Childress as the pressure to adhere to the rules of religion force his father to extreme measures in the name of "forgiveness." It is also significant to remember the church, mentioned earlier, that was burned down as this important detail ties the anchor of religion intimately to Childress' trauma and destructive plasticity. Like Childress, the church is now an "other" to what it once was since a mural on the side of one of the burnt walls depicts the Dora Lang crime scene. Just like Lang, the church's trauma gave birth to an other, one that is painted over the self that used to be there. The destruction of the church, specifically by the father, reveals a literal example of Malabou's destructive plasticity while also tying the anchor of religion directly to Childress. It is not surprising that in the following episode the viewer is introduced to Childress.

The mistreatment of Childress by his father also echoes the theme of children and sins of the father. The sin of Childress' father, however, is one similar to Dr. Frankenstein's sin—both men created a "monster" and then denied any relation to that monster. In addition to attempted murder, Childress' father destroyed any pertinent paperwork tying him to his son. Both the father and the destruction of identifying paperwork are traumatic to Childress' identity, mostly because these traumas are "of human origin" and the source of the trauma "not only shatters one's fundamental assumptions about the world and one's safety in it, but also severs the sustaining connection between the self and the rest of humanity" (Brisson 40). Therefore, Childress is much more likely than Cohle to experience Malabou's destructive plasticity and become an other as Cohle's trauma of his daughter's death, while caused by another human being, was an accident.

The "other" for Childress is the entity of the Yellow King. The idea of the Yellow King comes to us from Robert Chamber's eerie collection of short stories entitled *The King in Yellow*. Each of the stories in the collection connects in some way to the unknown play *The Yellow King*, a play that we only get snippets of throughout each story in the book. The back jacket of the book explains:

It is whispered that there is a play that leaves only insanity and sorrow in its wake. It tempts those who read it, bringing upon them a vision of madness that should be left unseen...the stories herein traverse the elements of the play, and the words, themes, and poetry, are permeated by the presence of the King in Yellow, weaving together to leave upon the reader the ruinous impression of the Yellow Sign.

The "ruinous impression of the Yellow Sign" can be seen as a nod to the "ruinous impression" left on a psyche by a trauma. There is some debate among viewers as to *who* the Yellow King is on the show, but I believe he is Childress' other. Childress is a shadow for most of the series and we only know him primarily from the "ruinous impressions" he leaves on everyone who has been in contact with him. Just like those who've read the terrible play, anyone who saw the Yellow King/Childress was forever changed by the encounter, either haunted by the image of what they saw (former workers of the Tuttles and distant relatives of Childress) or literally driven to madness (like Kelly, who sits in a catatonic state until she remembers Childress' face and starts to scream in the episode "Haunted Houses").

Another way, besides using his physical appearance, that Childress attempts to mimic in his victims the madness of the other he experiences first-hand is by injecting them with drugs, particularly Meth and LSD. In Aldous Huxley's *The Doors of Perception*, Huxley contemplates the ability of the drug mescaline to tap into the unconscious mind and expand our consciousness—to give the user a "surplus of consciousness." After taking the drug, Huxley notes that "space was still there; but it had lost its predominance. The mind was primarily

concerned, not with measures and locations, but with being and meaning" (20). Based on his experiences with mind-altering drug use, Huxley muses on what he calls the Mind at Large, a concept very similar to Zap's "surplus of consciousness":

...each one of us is potentially a Mind at Large. But in so far as we are animals, our business is at all costs to survive. To make biological survival possible, Mind at Large has to be funneled through the reducing valve of the brain and nervous system. What comes out at the other end is a measly trickle of the kind of consciousness which will help us stay alive on the surface of this particular planet. (23)

Since Childress' trauma made him an other through destructive plasticity, his mind is in a constant state of "surplus of consciousness." In order to guide his victims into this same state, he injects them with a formidable cocktail. He wants his victims to experience madness from a "surplus of consciousness" before he rapes and murders them so they have some inkling of what it is like to be him. Perhaps drugging his victims makes his decision to violate and then murder them more acceptable to him, especially when we think about Zap's Last Messiah's final words, mentioned earlier. In their last moments alive, Childress forces his victims to "know themselves" through the use of drugs and then ultimately "guides" them to their fate of death.

We do not truly see Childress until the penultimate episode. While we are given a small moment with him and Cohle earlier in the season (when Childress is on a lawnmower and Cohle goes to speak to him about the school building near where he is cutting grass), that moment is brief and we are unable to really "see" Childress as he is covered in dirt and grass clippings. When we finally truly meet Childress, he is again on a lawnmower, but this time he is cutting grass at a cemetery and is approached by Gilbough and Papania. The sun shines brightly on Childress' face and there is no dirt to cover the shine of scars on his lower jaw. When the detectives leave Childress, he watches them leave before uttering, "My family's been here a long, long time" ("After You've Gone"). This phrase is haunting, not only in the way Childress says it, but also when we think of what he may mean. On one hand, Childress refers to his ancestry and familial ties with the Tuttles. But, on the other hand, "family" could refer to his relation to all of the "others" created by trauma who came before him (and all of the "others" who will be made well after he is gone).

Those traumatized before and after Childress represent not only destructive plasticity but also the cyclical nature of trauma and identity. In the final episode of the series, Childress switches back and forth between different accents, mimicking the fluidity of identity simply by speaking in a southern drawl one moment and an English accent another. But what he says is far more interesting. When his relative/lover prompts him for sex, Childress replies, "I'm busy. I have very important work to do. My ascension removes me from the disk and the loop. I am near the final stage. Some mornings, I can feel the infernal plane" ("Form and Void"). The "disk and the loop" most likely refers to something Cohle said earlier in the series when he described time as a "flat circle" ("The Secret Fate of All Life"). We are destined (or, perhaps, cursed) to repeat the same actions and repercussions over and over again. To ascend from this destructive pattern would be ideal—to finally die without any chance of reincarnation and finally break out of the painful patterns of life.

The idea of time as repetition is also associated with trauma. Trauma survivors tend to deal with their traumas either through repression or repetition. For Childress, to ascend is not only to break out of the repetitious routine of life but to also finally cut ties with his own traumas and his otherness. But whether or not such an ascension is possible is not answered in the show—or in life.

Finally, Childress and destructive plasticity suggest the idea of creating a mask to hide the otherness from the outside world. Without some type of buffer, all trauma survivors become Yellow Kings to those who do not understand what it is like to live through a traumatic event—which explains why so many of us shy away from listening to trauma survivors out of fear that doing so will only remind us of our own frailty and

trigger a “surplus of consciousness.” Susan Brison writes about this innate, uncomfortable feeling when those outside of a trauma try to speak to the survivor. After she survived a rape and attempted murder, her relatives reacted in various ways to her when they found out:

More to reassure themselves than to comfort the victim, some deny that such a thing could happen again. One friend, succumbing to the gambler’s fallacy, pointed out that my having had extraordinary bad luck meant that the odds of my being attacked again were now quite slim...Others thought it would be most comforting to act as if nothing had happened...Some devout relatives were quick to give God all the credit for my survival but none of the blame for what I had to endure. Others acknowledged the suffering that had been inflicted on me, but as no more than a blip on the graph of God’s benevolence—necessary, meeting, evil, there to make possible an even greater show of good...But I learned that everyone needs to try to make sense, in however inadequate a way, of such senseless violence. (10-11)

Brison goes on to note that “we lack the vocabulary for expressing appropriate concern, and we have no social conventions to ease the awkwardness” (12). Perhaps one reason why we resist creating a vocabulary of trauma is our fear of a “surplus of consciousness” that will undoubtedly happen once we fully connect a survivor’s trauma with our own lives—and the possibility of us becoming a survivor one day. To help aid in this endeavor, trauma survivors may feel pressure to pretend that everything is fine and convince others that they are the same person they were before the trauma, even if both of those assertions are false masks.

Childress refuses to wear his mask, refuses to pretend his traumas have done nothing to his psyche, and this refusal causes others to fear him—and makes him feel powerful. Cohle, on the other hand, still fights to keep his other, born of trauma, hidden from view. But he does not hide it well enough. In “The Secret Fate of All Life,” a meth cook looks at Cohle and says, “You’ve got a demon, little man...there’s a shadow on your soul.” Childress also sees right through his façade when the two violently meet in the series finale. When Childress stabs Cohle, he growls, “Take off your mask,” hoping the mixture of physical trauma from the knife and emotional trauma from Cohle’s life will shake loose the “demon” hidden within Cohle’s bones (“Form and Void”). The traumas Cohle has survived have left their mark on him, but he has not become a complete other with no remorse like Childress. As with any person who suffers terrible traumas, the decision on who survives with only minor scars and who becomes a complete other is never quite understood. Perhaps not knowing our fate when trauma strikes is also a nod to the title of the final episode as not knowing is indeed the secret fate of all life. All of us will be touched by the shadow of the other created from our traumas at some point, and it is not up to us whether or not we become a monster like Childress or manage to keep some semblance of self while fighting off the “surplus of consciousness” like Cohle.

But Childress’ attempt to make Cohle an other by stabbing him with the knife fails. Cohle recalls what went through his mind as he felt himself slip away from the extent of his wounds in one of the final scenes of the show:

There was a moment, I know, when I was under in the dark, that something...whatever I’d been reduced to, not even consciousness, just a vague awareness in the dark. I could feel my definitions fading. And beneath that darkness there was another kind—it was deeper—warm, like a substance. I could feel man, I knew, I *knew* my daughter waited for me there. So clear I could feel her. I could feel...I could feel the peace of my Pop, too. It was like I was part of everything that I have ever loved, and we were all, the three of us, just fading out. And all I had to do was let go, man. And I did. I said, “Darkness, yeah.” And I disappeared. But I could still feel her love there. Even more than before.

Nothing. Nothing but that love. And then I woke up. ("Form and Void")

After this revelation, Cohle breaks down in tears, a rare moment of deep emotion from a traditionally stoic character. Shortly afterwards, he and Hart look to the night sky and Hart mentions how there is far more darkness than light. But Cohle disagrees: "Well, once there was only dark. You ask me, the light's winning" ("Form and Void"). Did Cohle experience a new kind of "surplus of consciousness" and found only love in that release? Perhaps by embracing our traumas, and the traumas of others, the "surplus of consciousness" we will gain will not be a terrible thing, as Zapke warns, but rather an enlightening moment—a chance for us to experience the elusive true empathy for others so many of us feel is impossible to find. We fear trauma and the destructive plasticity/"surplus of consciousness" that comes with it, but should we? Would there be less of a chance of us becoming like Childress as a result of our traumas if we did let go like Cohle? Would there be fewer Childress' if we created a language of trauma and really listened to survivors?

In the *11m Session 9*, we are introduced (via an old psychiatric recording of various therapy sessions) to a woman with multiple personality disorder, a disorder brought out by a traumatic moment in her childhood. One of her personalities is "Simon," the most violent part of her psyche. When the psychiatrist asks "Simon" where he lives when he is not the dominant personality, he replies, "I live in the weak and the wounded." What makes this confession haunting in this *11m* is the same reason that makes Childress so terrifying in the first season of *True Detective*. Both of these violent identities are shadows within all of us. In a moment of severe trauma, this shadow finds strength in our weaknesses, pulling to the surface with violent repercussions.

There was a moment in the first episode of the season when Cohle and Hart are driving through a ghost-like town. Surveying the scene, Cohle muses, "This place is like somebody's memory of a town, and the memory is fading. It's like there was never anything here but jungle" ("The Long Bright Dark"). This statement is true for our own beings, often a flesh container for the wildness within us and at any moment our current self may become a memory in the face of some type of physical or emotional trauma. Hart replies, "Stop saying shit like that. It's unprofessional" ("The Long Bright Dark"). But we need to hear Cohle's existential thoughts, we need to be reminded how fragile the self is and how, one day, we could become an other and "no one wants to be other than they are, or think they are" because the fear of unleashing that other "is a fate worse than death: the transformation in which you stop being you" (Ligotti 91-2). We could become Childress. Right now, the light may be winning—but for how long?

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Review of *Love Between the Covers* by Laurie Kahn (Blueberry Hill Productions, 2015)

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Dear reader, I have a confession to make: I am not a reader of romance fiction. But do not count me among those who denigrate it, for I have another confession to make: I, too, am a reader of genre fiction (mysteries being my particular pleasure). And as a reader of genre fiction, I am familiar with many, but not all, of the aspersions cast upon romance, and Laurie Kahn's *Love Between the Covers* has admirably explored the range of perceptions that romance writers and readers struggle with, as well as showing the value of the genre and the remarkable community that creates and consumes it.

One of the most important ideas that emerges from the film is the one that unites us as readers: We all need a story. We may like different kinds of stories, but the need is real. And one of the aspects I liked most about the authors and readers (often the same people) interviewed in the film is that when the story they needed was not available, they wrote it themselves.

The film includes several interviews with scholars who explain the historical context of the genesis of popular romantic fiction from Jane Austen through nineteenth-century popular domestic fiction and the economic motivation for bashing writing by women. Nathaniel Hawthorne is quoted as referring to these popular writers as "the d---d mob of scribbling women," and as a scholar of nineteenth century British and comparative literature myself, I can attest that that comment is pretty PG compared to some of the ways writers like Charles Dickens and Gustave Flaubert talked about women's writing. Of course, as my mother told me when I was a child, people make nasty comments when they are jealous, and the women who were targets of these nineteenth-century misogynists were often more commercially successful writers than their male counterparts. And let's not forget simple misogyny: Riptide editor Sarah Frantz Lyn notes, "Romance is sneered at because it's written by women, it's written for women, and it's written about women." But women continue to buy romance, despite the sneering.

The commercial viability of the romance market serves as one of the first points in the film and is returned to a couple of times in the film. Apparently, the market for romance fiction provides enough income that publishers use it to subsidize less lucrative niche markets, a point underscored by the enthusiasm and voracity of the readers interviewed in the film.

While economics are important in the publishing industry, as a feminist and a scholar who teaches literary theory (and a human being), I was more moved by the ways the readers and writers in the film spoke about their motivations for reading and writing. The film's greatest strength is the individual testimony of

romance readers who became writers or otherwise connected to the industry. I teach in a fairly conservative environment with limited diversity, and although my students are wonderfully accepting of peers who identify as LGBTQIA+, or who have disabilities both visible and invisible, or who are people of color, I wonder whether they have ever really felt the struggle of being someone who doesn't see themselves represented well in a text, or even represented at all. *This* representation is one of the *film's* greatest strengths.

Two of the most powerful voices in the *film* in this respect are those of Beverly Johnson and Len Barot. Beverly Johnson speaks about her experience as a romance reader who didn't see herself represented in the genre she liked to read, so she began writing romances with African American characters. In more than one scene in the *film*, her fans express their jubilation at seeing characters like themselves in her novels, especially from a reader who notes that a character in a story *finally* thought a dark-skinned heroine was beautiful. She also has explored the genre of historical romance, including the history of slavery, in which it can be difficult to balance realism with the sacrifices we often associate with high romance, a topic that Johnson addresses in the *film*. Johnson has undertaken tours of historical sites with her fans, and some of the more poignant moments in the *film* are clips of Johnson and her fans coming to terms with being the descendants of slaves while visiting sites like a former slave market.

Another thread running throughout the documentary, the story of lesbian writer Len Barot, whose pen names are Radclyffe and L. L. Raand, addresses the difficulty of finding stories representative of her sexuality as a younger reader. She talks about discovering her own sexuality in college but also of discovering Giovanni's Bookstore in 1973, which stocked love stories featuring characters like her. However, early lesbian romances often featured negative outcomes for characters, a factor that has inspired many writers to write more positive stories that reflect themselves. The interesting trajectory of Barot's story begins with her writing as a side job while working as a surgeon and ends with her current work managing a publishing house that specializes in LGBT writing, showing a career that spans the full spectrum from fan to writer to publisher.

Another writer featured in the *film* is Mary Bly, daughter of poet Robert Bly, a Shakespeare scholar and romance writer under the pen name of Eloise James. While Bly's own story is interesting, since she defied her family's preference for poetry over narrative literature and began moonlighting as a romance writer to supplement her academic salary in her early career as an assistant professor, the story that emerges of her business partnership with reader Kim Castillo offers a greater insight into the relationships between writers and readers in the romance genre. Their relationship began when Castillo wrote to Bly thanking her for creating a character with a plump figure, and Bly wrote back to Castillo to see if she were representing that character's feelings accurately, as well as the kind of comments she might have heard about herself. Castillo wrote back that she was being too kind, since she'd heard much worse about herself, and a relationship was born. When Bly realized Castillo's own talent for writing and her business sense, the two created a partnership in which Castillo helps to handle fan correspondence, newsletters, and shipping autographed books, and through Bly's recommendations to other authors, Castillo now runs a business helping authors with social media and other aspects of fan correspondence.

This story highlights the message of female empowerment that runs through the *film* in a number of ways, from romance's economic empowerment of women to sexual empowerment and identity politics. These examples highlight just a few of the writers and scholars interviewed in the *film*, including celebrities like Nora Roberts and writing teams like Celeste Bradley and Susan Donovan, as well as writers just getting started.

This documentary has much to recommend it for a variety of pedagogical purposes, whether the course in question is about theory, creative writing, genre or traditional literature, or popular culture. As noted, the *film* addresses issues of diversity in literature and publishing in a variety of ways, such as the quite poignant connection between Beverly Johnson and her readers on their historical tour of sites related to the history of slavery, as well as diversity in terms of sexual preference, body size, and even different levels of conservatism

regarding sex. The presentation of these ideas is very even-handed, but it is moving to see the way women talk about how they recognize themselves in literature for the first time. These topics would be relevant in a course introducing literary theory, but the film has much to offer on the mechanics of writing and the publishing industry, too—writers talk about their processes and what it's like to work with publishing houses, which also shows publishers' processes and what they are looking for from writers. Popular culture scholars and faculty could use this film as an excellent example of the interface between fans and authors and the overlap between those two groups in the field of romance. The film would also be relevant in addressing fan fiction and the ways that social media and online communities represent a reciprocal relationship between writers and fans—one key example is the focus on the business developed out of the fan-author relationship between Castillo and Bly. Even for more traditional literature classes, many scholar interviews make connections between modern works and the canon in clear and thoughtful ways, so this film could have wide application in a variety of courses (the film's website, <http://www.lovebetweenthecovers.com>, includes more in-depth information created by Eric Selinger, president and co-founder of the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance (IASPR), about these connections with traditional literature).

One insider term mentioned early in the film is the acronym HEA, which stands for “happily ever after,” the stereotype of the ending of most romances and the reason so many look down upon the romance genre. However, if you are a reader, you read because you need stories, and stories fulfill some kind of specific function for each of us. As a reader of detective fiction, my desire is fulfilled when justice is done, and in a fictional world, I can relax into a story and see the writer make that happen, when in the real world, I know justice may never be done. Thus, I can sympathize with my fellow genre literature readers' desires to get the happy ending they want. As one reader/writer notes in the film, it takes energy to imagine a happy ending, and these stories give their readers hope that they, too, could have a happy ending. It seems churlish to deny anyone that hope, and the ultimate message we take away from this film is a hopeful one in which everyone's desires are reflected and fulfilled and readers and writers have created a supportive—and commercially viable—community.

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