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2007 Whatley Award

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

The 2007 Whatley Award winner is

***“Cowboys, Indians, and Iraq: Jessica Lynch, Lori Piestewa,
and the Great American Makeover”***

By

**Gioia Woods
Northern Arizona University**

From the Editor (at the end of the journal's thirtieth year):

Crossing Media Lines

One of the pleasures of popular culture is that it appears in so many different media and genres. Perhaps that is one reason scholars from so many different disciplines enjoy its study. The current issue of *Studies in Popular Culture* opens with Matthew Sutton's discussion of Athens rock band R.E.M. and its relationship with the installation art of the Reverend Howard Finster--a fascinating study of a connection of different media of artistic expression. Next is James R. Keller and Anne Goodwyn Jones' analysis of the film *Brokeback Mountain* and the Annie Proulx short story on which it is based--again, covering two incarnations of art, in two media. Alex Pitofsky considers the neo-noir crime novels of George Pelecanos, advertizing briefly to Pelecanos' contribution to the neo-noir television series *The Wire*. Sarah Henstra tackles the talk show as narrative, focusing on the redoubtable Oprah Winfrey--and she notes the occasional convergence with the discourse of politics--another kind of chimaera. Bryan E. Denham and Richelle N. Jones cover *American Idol*, *Survivor*, and *The Apprentice* in terms of the more overt television contests that make some claim to cross from the screen into real life--and the "survival of the stereotypical," as they term it. Roy Schwartzman and Merci Decker analyze advertising and the physical object, the product, in their discussion of Volvo's "Your Concept Car." And Scott Stalcup explores the intersection of art and addiction in two novels which became films--*Trainspotting* and *High Fidelity*. We are happy that journals such as this one provide a place to recognize the complex interweaving of media in our culture.

There are, as always, many people to thank for the publication of this issue, a number of whom are named on the inside back cover. Of course we thank all our contributors. In addition to the board members who serve as reviewers, thanks go to other scholars, as well, for performing this important service. These include: Alex Bruce, Jeff Bussolini, Jennifer Courtney, Liz Cummins, Doug Davis, Neil Lerner, Lewis Moore, Mary Alice Money, Ananya Mukherjea, Shirley Peterson, Alcena Rogan, Ed Whitelock, and Gioia Woods. Thanks, too, as always, to Diane Calhoun-French and all the members of the Popular Culture Association in the South.

Rhonda V. Wilcox

Gordon College, Barnesville, Georgia

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Little America: R.E.M., Howard Finster, and the Southern “Outsider Art” Aesthetic

The critical and popular ascent of the Athens, Georgia-based rock band R.E.M. during the 1980s is remarkable not only for its pioneering use of alternative media such as college radio and fanzines but also because of (or despite) the band’s early allegiance to subaltern Southern culture. From 1982 to 1986, R.E.M. developed their unique visual presentation in collaboration with several self-taught and “visionary” artists, most prominently Reverend Howard Finster of Summerville, Georgia. The result was an aesthetic that subverted prevailing music and image trends in the Eighties as well as the Old South iconography associated with the previous generation of Southern rock. The use of perceived “outsider art” from the South helped shape R.E.M.’s image through album covers, videos and promotional materials, as a created notion of outsider authenticity fostered the twinned rise of the band and Southern art in the popular consciousness.

R.E.M. was formed in 1980 while all four members were attending the University of Georgia in Athens, a school better known for Southeastern Conference football than as a haven for artists. Significantly, all four members of the band – singer Michael Stipe, guitarist Peter Dinklage, bassist Mike Mills and drummer Bill Berry – were born outside of Georgia and moved to the state when their families were relocated by the military or industry, a result of the inroads business and education had made in the Sun Belt in the 1970s. Attending high school in Macon, Georgia, Mills and Berry had played in bands that parlayed versions of Top Forty hits as well as self-identified “Southern rock,” the solo-driven, bluesy hard rock epitomized by

the Allman Brothers Band, Lynyrd Skynyrd, and Black Oak Arkansas. Buck and art-student Stipe were relatively inexperienced musicians, more inspired by the “do-it-yourself” credo of punk rock than the technical flash and pomposity of self-styled rock virtuosos. Continuing the example of bands like The Clash and Talking Heads, whose lineups mixed adept musicians with raw beginners who crossed over from a visual-art background, R.E.M.’s supple rhythm section anchored the exuberant, untutored approach of its guitarist and singer.

As bootlegs of early live performances attest, R.E.M. developed quickly from an energetic, though sometimes retro-leaning, bar band to creators of a singular, compelling sound. Much of this had to do with their adaptation of rock’s tonal tradition. Michael Stipe’s vocals were often indecipherable, at times seeming wordless or blending into the instrumental mix. Peter Buck’s trebly guitar regularly ceded the role of lead instrument to the voice or the bass and abandoned standard rock “power chords” for deftly picked arpeggios that created a second, fragmented melody line (much as the banjo operates in bluegrass). The result was a striking and, given the industry standard of sterile production values and simplistic pop “hooks,” unclassifiable sound. For many listeners, the nearest point of reference was the 1960s folk-rock of The Byrds and Fairport Convention. In fact, Michael Stipe, who represented himself early on in R.E.M.’s career as a naïve outsider to popular culture and rock music in particular, for a brief time described the band’s sound as “folk,” less as a throwback to the 1960s and more as a declaration of artistic integrity (Gray 441). If R.E.M. did not perform traditional folk-rock, they did parlay a style that insisted on being defined outside the parameters of mainstream rock; they are more responsible than anyone for the emergence of “alternative” as both a descriptive category and a catch-all marketing term.

R.E.M.’s rise depended on a developing alternative-music infrastructure centered in college towns. Formerly, most college-radio stations were low-wattage with no set format; increased funding and professional training in communications departments meant better equipment and more powerful range. By the early Eighties, listeners in many parts of the country no longer had to be physically on campus to hear college radio. Exercising the kind of self-conscious, class-influenced taste Pierre Bourdieu analyzes in his book *Distinction*, listeners alienated from the mainstream could choose

college radio as an alternative to commercial rock stations. Without advertisers to appease, college stations could pursue a more adventurous range of music at a time when commercial stations' programming had become stagnant due in equal part to chain ownership and the safe "corporate rock" that defined the Eighties pop mainstream. Along with its growing influence, however, college media had to take on some of the dimensions of its for-profit adversary. Nationally distributed tipsheets like *College Music Journal* featured Top Ten lists that resulted in increasingly standardized playlists among college stations. In turn, small independent record stores in college towns could partly compensate for the spotty distribution of records on independent labels by consulting these playlists and stocking the most popular titles. Though such efficiency arguably squelched free-form broadcasting and the exposure of more "fringe" artists, R.E.M. was a prime beneficiary of this radio-retail nexus. Signed to I.R.S. Records, a subsidiary of the major label A&M, they enjoyed relatively good distribution and focused their early touring on college towns, especially in the South and the Eastern Seaboard.

College radio gave R.E.M. a "cult" presence that years' worth of playing on the club circuit could only hope to accomplish while also allowing them to shy away from any mainstream attention the band deemed intrusive. One result of this selective exposure was that R.E.M. could be a viable band with national visibility and still live in Athens. Previously, Southern bands that played cutting-edge music, like fellow Athenians The B-52's or North Carolina's The dB's, relocated to New York as soon as they had a demo tape in hand, in hopes of catching the attention of major record companies and the influential critics and club owners centered in Manhattan. Because of the support of college radio, R.E.M. was far less dependent on such opinion leaders. In a 1985 essay for the rock magazine *Spin*, Mike Mills championed the region as a breeding ground for alternative music, free from the expectations of the industry:

You're out of the way here. You can do things as a band without all the pressure. When we started out, we were terrible, just like every band that starts out. But we had a whole year just to play around the South and get better – and to learn to deal with adversity, playing at pizza parlors and biker bars and gay discos...But in New York or Lon-

don, the minute you start playing – ZANG! There’s the local rock magazine reviewing your show and making all these judgments about you. (407)

Mills’s modest assessment of his band’s early abilities (echoing the band’s self-effacing comments during their premiere television appearances in New York in 1983 on *Late Night with David Letterman* and the children’s show *Livewire*) helped create a perception of Athens as a supportive arts community, outside the critical establishment, that prized idiosyncrasy and a distinct identity over standard rock showmanship and hype. Instantly, the band’s decision to remain in a relatively small town became a major part of their emerging mystique.

Until about 1986, folk-art motifs signified this mystique on posters, promotional photographs and fan-club materials. These relics of the old Hollywood star system were subtly and sometimes whimsically transformed into vehicles for Southern vernacular art, sometimes executed by local artists, sometimes by the band members themselves. Tour programs, t-shirts and souvenir posters often featured Michael Stipe’s roughhewn drawings and typography. Rather than push more product, the liner notes to their 1986 album *Life’s Rich Pageant* touted “The Cricket Machine,” an off-the-beaten-path roadside attraction in Athens that promised potential visitors the chance to “initiate predator-prey interaction exactly as it happens in the wild.” In a lighthearted manner, such unlikely advertisements not only reified the notion of R.E.M. as knowing Southern eccentrics but also drew attention to their changing status within the larger marketplace. With their success, R.E.M.’s image shifted from a provincial “garage band” to hip, young connoisseurs of the South at its best. In interviews they held forth on everything from local folk art to the best barbecue joints in Georgia. When pressed on their influences, they would cite writers like Flannery O’Connor and Carson McCullers alongside their postpunk musical contemporaries, articulating a separation between themselves and the stereotypical image of a rock band, especially from the supposedly benighted South. Their enthusiasm for an offbeat South may smack of an overdetermined self-consciousness, but their choice of regional role model is noteworthy: nothing could be further removed from the hypermacho postures of 1970s Southern rock than a knowledgeable discussion of Eudora Welty.

R.E.M.'s mid-Eighties breakthrough coincided with the revival of Southern rock after a decade-long slumber. Surviving members of Lynyrd Skynyrd and the Allman Brothers Band reformed their respective groups to popular acclaim. (Three members of Lynyrd Skynyrd, including lead vocalist and songwriter Ronnie Van Zant, had perished in a 1977 plane crash, while the Allmans' Duane Allman and Berry Oakley died in separate motorcycle accidents.) Hank Williams, Jr. mounted rowdy, sold-out arena shows that bridged the gap between hardcore country and blues-based rock. In 1985, Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers released a concept album of sorts, *Southern Accents*, in which the Gainesville, Florida band (who had found their fortune in glitzy Los Angeles) reclaimed their white working-class Southern roots, or at least a marketable simulacrum. In the song "Rebels," Petty proudly sings of being "born a rebel/ down in Dixie/ on a sunny morning," cursing the "blue-bellied devils" of the North to construct a link between the mythology of the Confederacy and the modern-day "redneck." *Southern Accents* was followed by a national tour, dubbed "Pack Up the Plantation," that featured a massive Confederate flag as a stage backdrop; Mike Mills was among the musicians who took Petty to task in interviews for his blithe, ahistorical adoption of such charged, exclusionary symbolism. Though Petty soon abandoned his "Rebel" persona, his foray into exaggerated, belligerent white "Southernness" illustrated both the multiplicity and the pull of the regional clichés that R.E.M. and like-minded musicians and artists maneuvered around in finding their own niche.

To be fair, this niche was a safely apolitical one. Though R.E.M. became known later in their career as a band that embraced "causes" both local and global, their initial "New South" orientation allowed them to slough off many of the burdens of Southern history and maintain an artistic detachment from current issues of race and class. Individually and collectively, the members of R.E.M. employed the relative privileges of their time and place: the thriving Sun Belt economy, proximity to cosmopolitan cities like Atlanta, the relatively relaxed admissions policies of state colleges and the support of college radio and the independent press. The phrase "college rock" became (often pejorative) rock-critic shorthand to describe R.E.M. and other non-mainstream bands that attracted mainly middle-class white audiences and held aspirations (or pretensions) to art. Though many of these bands were mischaracterized as simple R.E.M. clones, a wave of

alternative-rock bands followed R.E.M.'s lead, rooted themselves in the South and incorporated a bricolage of Southern art and literature motifs from their very names on down to their songs, album art and videos, each transmitting their own brand of postmodern regionalism. A partial list would include R.E.M.'s Athens, Georgia contemporaries Pylon and Love Tractor, The dB's and Let's Active (both from Winston-Salem, North Carolina), Jason and the Scorchers (Nashville, Tennessee), Drivin' n Cryin' (Atlanta, Georgia), Guadalcanal Diary (Marietta, Georgia), The Connells (Raleigh, North Carolina), Velvet Elvis (Lexington, Kentucky) and The Reivers (a.k.a. Zeitgeist, Austin, Texas).¹ The dual imprint of William Faulkner and Elvis Presley on this cohort is hardly coincidental, as the two native sons represented the boundaries of seriousness and camp, respectively, within which groups of this era operated.²

R.E.M.'s advocacy of a New South sensibility with roots in Faulkneresque ambivalence could take a defensive tone. "The Southerner is the terminal outsider," Peter Buck testily told an interviewer. "In movies and on TV, the Southerners are always hicks. They're idiots. Everyone always tends to look at you as if it's a miracle that you're a normal person from the South" (Fletcher 123). Buck's regional angst – especially remarkable for a transplanted Southerner – recalls in many ways Quentin Compson's anguished response to the needling of his Harvard roommate in Faulkner's *Absalom!, Absalom!*, climaxing in his final protestation regarding the South, "I don't hate it!" Significantly, Buck perceives "everyone" as media-savvy Northerners. Like Faulkner and Presley before them, R.E.M. as Southerners had to carefully represent themselves and their craft to a wider public that rarely understood intra-region distinctions and avoid all appearances of being provincial "hicks" without entirely renouncing their origins.

R.E.M.'s iconoclastic re-vision of the South was introduced to the marketplace on the cover of their 1983 debut album *Murmur*, which features a landscape choked with kudzu. Kudzu, a vine with amazing tenacity and a hydra-like ability to grow, was introduced in the South in 1883, as well-meaning agronomists proffered the weed for soil replenishment and as cheap feed for cattle, only to find it covering up anything in its path within a couple of days, killing other vegetation by strangling their roots (Alderman and Alderman 50). By mid-century, kudzu was just as likely to be found climbing up a telephone pole as the walls of an abandoned plantation house,

with no discrimination between the industry of the New South and the traditions of the Old. As Derek and Donna Alderman observe in their essay "A Tale of Two Weeds," kudzu is regarded as both an eyesore and a perverse source of pride in the contemporary South – it has lent its name to residential streets, a comic strip, a number of bars and restaurants, hair salons, even a few landscaping companies (58-59). Emblematic of deep roots and strength, kudzu has grown to be, to borrow one of William Faulkner's favorite words, an "indefatigable" presence in the South, with its cultural associations virtually unknown above the Mason-Dixon line. R.E.M.'s usage of the image was a brilliant one (and conveniently apolitical): both anti-modern and contemporary, pastoral and menacing, with just a touch of the Southern gothic.³ It was also an in-joke of sorts: those who had been raised in the South recognized the obnoxious vine and its insidious nature. To this day, many non-Southern R.E.M. fans believe they are looking at haystacks. Just as kudzu's central root could uncannily find water in the most arid climate, R.E.M. seemed eerily adept in delving into the deepest unconscious of rock music and deriving something both familiar and new.

Since his stint in the University of Georgia's art department, Michael Stipe had been a regular visitor to Reverend Howard Finster's Paradise Garden in Summerville, Georgia, a handmade folk-art installation that drew on a lifetime of Finster's ecstatic religious visions.⁴ Finster's travels as an itinerant preacher in the 1940s, documented in photographs, appear now like a living corollary to a Flannery O'Connor story, as he "customized" his ramshackle cars by painting religious exhortations on the side, outfitting the roof with a loudspeaker through which he would announce his arrival and mission in each new town (Bradshaw 47). Settling down on a swampy plot of land in rural Georgia and working with virtually any medium at hand, Finster juxtaposed found objects with painted Christian imagery and large handpainted signs, featuring biblical quotations or small sermons, and arranged them in a maze-like pattern that covered about four acres. By the Seventies, a magnificent five-story "Folk Art Chapel" towered over the garden and housed hundreds of Finster's creations. The Reverend modestly explained that his ambitious life's work, which immediately drew attention from folk-art experts, was a continuation of his Baptist ministry. In Paradise Garden's words and images, art critic John Maizels found "the

Southern evangelical oral tradition transformed into image and painted word” (117). Robert Bishop, the former director of the Museum of American Folk Art, described it as “probably the most exciting, beautiful, satisfying work of art I have ever seen” (Peacock 52). Once considered a neighborhood blight (as welcomed, one would imagine, as an outbreak of kudzu), Paradise Garden became an unlikely destination for tourists and art collectors alike after Finster was featured in *Life* and *Esquire* and made an appearance on Johnny Carson’s *Tonight Show*. “Always willing to spend time with visitors to Paradise Garden and to sell them a reasonably priced piece of art,” Reverend Finster clearly enjoyed his newfound attention and would enthusiastically greet his public (Maizels 117).

Like R.E.M., much of Finster’s appeal (both in and out of the South) came from his grounding in the region and impressive ability to conceive and cultivate a unique vision far removed from the mainstream. Literally planted in the Georgia soil, Paradise Garden could not be uprooted or transplanted to a sterile museum setting. As Finster rarely traveled, patrons and critics had to make the pilgrimage to see Finster’s art in its own context and on his own terms. Just as rock writers routinely began profiles of R.E.M. with fanciful descriptions of rural Georgia, some of Finster’s most sophisticated reviewers gave in to temptation and rendered Paradise Garden and its creator with broad strokes of local color.

This representation of a “hidden South” rich with found art carried over into *Murmur*’s accompanying music video for the single “Radio Free Europe,” shot in Paradise Garden in May 1983. In *Performing Rites*, Simon Frith notes that music videos are “less interesting as mini-films, as visual narratives, than as ideal types of performances” (224). The “Radio Free Europe” video, then, seems to be the “ideal performance” through which the fledging band wished to introduce itself to the wider, MTV-influenced audience. At a time when videos were crucial in how image was constructed, R.E.M. rooted themselves in a South that still held myth and mystery.

Though seemingly incongruent, the visual wonders of Paradise Garden and the sound of “Radio Free Europe” share a certain sympathy when merged. The video’s storyline, such as it is (amid rolling fields of kudzu, the band wanders through Paradise Garden in slow motion to deliver a mysterious box to Finster) bordered on the pretentious, but was enigmatic enough

to stand out from the mini-movie pastiches that were the standard of so-called concept videos.⁵ Admittedly, the video represents Paradise Garden very selectively; few of Finster's evangelistic works made the final cut. At times the Garden looks less like the manmade second Eden he envisioned and more like an eccentric's meticulously arranged junkyard. Yet the video documents many of the Garden's more captivating works: a towering collection of discarded bicycle parts, the cement Serpent Mound, and the small outbuilding in which he worked, called the Bible House.⁶ The contrasting shots of kudzu, endless and static by the frenetic standard of early-Eighties rock videos, subtly subvert the medium's overstimulating imagery, reliance on flashy special effects, and pandering to an audience with short attention spans. Befitting its location, the video seems to ignore time and move at its own deliberate, willful pace.

Perhaps not surprisingly, I.R.S. Records re-cut the video with energetic concert footage and layers of the aforementioned special effects, as if to assure impressionable young viewers that this was indeed a music video and not a strange, out-of-sync home movie broadcast by accident. In the song, Michael Stipe's "murmured" vocals work on the listener in much the same way as the figures appear in folk art, at once indistinct and familiar, blurring the lines between representational and nonrepresentational. The slow-motion non-action of the video engages in tension with the song's uptempo "new-wave" beat, as sight and sound match up only by coincidence.

It might seem that Reverend Finster would have been hesitant, if not outright opposed, to his visionary environment being appropriated as a setting for a rock video. But, in much the same way that he had justified his *Tonight Show* appearance, Finster assured interviewers that the "Radio Free Europe" video helped spread his evangelistic message and was quick to praise R.E.M. as "good Southern boys," especially Michael Stipe, who occasionally assisted the artist or performed handiwork in the Garden. This unlikely alliance was continued when Stipe and Finster collaborated on the cover of R.E.M.'s second album *Reckoning*, with its depiction of a snake-like figure. Again, Finster's message is somewhat restrained; if the snake-like figure on the album is meant to represent the serpent of Eden (a common Finster motif), it is an extraordinarily subtle rendering.⁷ Despite the suggestive double meaning of the title *Reckoning* – a title that alluded to

both the Southern vernacular and the language of predestination and suggested unspeakable rapture and hellish punishment simultaneously – Finster’s signature biblical verses are absent; the hand-painted text consists mainly of the album’s song titles. If *Reckoning*’s cover did not offer the same shock of Southern recognition as the kudzu cover of *Murmur*, it did fix the association between the region’s grassroots art and R.E.M.’s music. The album’s closing song, “Little America,” reverberates as an oblique take on their relentless touring through the South’s burgeoning college-rock circuit and a lament over the homogenization of the region, as Stipe sings of “Another Greenville/Another Magic Mart” on the horizon. The song’s refrain, “Jefferson, I think we’re lost” sums up the band’s dislocation from the overconfidence and entitlements associated with rock stardom (the “Jefferson” in this case most likely being the band’s then-manager/van driver Jefferson Holt, not the Southern-born agrarian third president of the United States—though listeners can hear more than one meaning). With the critical and popular success of *Reckoning* and their connection with an acclaimed folk artist, R.E.M. were now situated more as connoisseurs and advocates of self-taught Southern invention than outsiders-in-training.

The band promoted *Reckoning* with another video shot in a Southern folk-art environment, this time in Georgia artist Ruben Miller’s Whirligig Farm, a wide expanse of land marked by handmade windmills constructed from found objects. The twenty-minute clip, titled *Left of Reckoning* and directed by Stipe’s University of Georgia art professor James Herbert, features the band once again wandering through an art installation; the band admire Miller’s handiwork and make their own whirligigs as side one of the *Reckoning* album plays with no discernible relation with the onscreen “action.” The non-stop visual experimentation is somewhat jarring within the music-video medium, suggesting what a Stan Brakhage-directed episode of *The Monkees* might look like. While many of Herbert’s film-manipulation techniques are skillfully deployed, including the alternation of vari-speed motion with still frames, and use of color saturation and double exposures, the film as a whole seems labored, especially since handmade vernacular art is one of its subjects. Ultimately, this self-conscious attempt to recapture the aura of the “Radio Free Europe” video received relatively little notice.⁸

The constructed idea of R.E.M. revealing folk-art Utopias hidden in the Deep South was articulated again in the 1987 documentary *Athens, Ga.: Inside/Out*. Influenced by Errol Morris's irony-rich portrayal of an offbeat Southern community in 1982's *Vernon, Florida*, California-based filmmakers Tony Gayton and Bill Cody attempted to capture the Athens mystique through its music as well as its local artists, poets and quirky scene denizens. Profiled in context with R.E.M. and a succession of younger, rawer bands, Reverend Finster nearly steals the show, relating his ecstatic visions and duetting with Flat Duo Jets' rockabilly wild child Dexter Romweber on "When the Saints Go Marching In." Acting as the film's commentator and default expert on folk art, Michael Stipe frames a visit to African American folk artist Reverend John Ruth with an onscreen appraisal of Ruth's untrained art and raw gospel singing.

Athens, Ga.'s documentation of R.E.M.'s emergent art connoisseurship takes an interesting turn in a sequence shot in Peter Buck's home, as he leads the camera to his "Elvis Bathroom." After pointing out the bathroom's purposefully tacky accoutrements – a black-velvet painting of "The King" purchased at a roadside stand and postcards from Graceland adorn the walls – Buck reveals an original Howard Finster wooden figure titled "Elvis at Three," based on the oft-reproduced first photograph of Elvis. By presenting it in harmony with mass-produced souvenirs rather than in contrasting juxtaposition, Buck's deadpan assessment of it as "a beautiful work of art" is ambiguous, suggesting his appreciation for Finster's handiwork is qualified by Elvis's status as a junk-culture icon, well established a decade after his passing. (Significantly, Buck, notorious as a walking encyclopedia of rock lore, never mentions Elvis's brilliance as a singer or performer.) Though Finster had adopted Elvis as a secular (and marketable) adjunct to his visionary art objects, Elvis's image, depicted in almost any form, had become a readymade signifier for both "white-trash" bad taste and gilded excess. While "Elvis at Three" gives us a more pious representation of Presley, how and where Buck displays the work reshapes it within a wholly different context. In this instance it becomes hard to ignore the relative differences in sensibilities, beliefs and privileges between Finster and his younger, hipper and more affluent audience. Buck comes close to upsetting the balance of mutual respect between R.E.M. and Finster by co-opting the intended meaning of the piece.

That same year, a *Rolling Stone* feature on rock-and-roll road trips highlighted both R.E.M.'s first performance space in Athens (a decaying church) and Paradise Garden, glibly characterizing the latter as "a folk-art frenzy" (Barth and Wilkins 108). By this point, band and artist had become yoked together as tourist-worthy Southern curiosities. Though they remained on good terms, R.E.M. and Finster never worked together again. However, Finster was not yet done with rock and roll; until his death in 2001, Finster made Elvis one of his most common motifs, to the delight of those who came to his art through R.E.M. and the *Athens, Ga.: Inside Out* film as well as those looking for elements of camp in his work.⁹ In 1985, he accepted another commission to paint an album cover, this time from the New York band Talking Heads. The work raised his visibility even further and placed him in esteemed modern-art company, as an earlier Talking Heads cover was designed by Robert Rauschenberg.

A rock band trying to attain cultural capital by aligning themselves with art is not in itself remarkable, and given that rock and roll is still arguably idiosyncratic, vernacular music, perhaps the analogous use of "eccentric" folk art does not come as a total shock. But alliances between art and rock before R.E.M. had been mainly in the field of pop art, as demonstrated by Andy Warhol's visually arresting album covers for the Velvet Underground and the Rolling Stones, Richard Hamilton's iconic/ironic work for The Beatles and Roxy Music and the Jamie Reid cut-and-paste designs that gave the Sex Pistols, and by extension Seventies British punk, a visual identity. Folk-art collectors and rock audiences seem far removed in their tastes, discrimination and attitudes. Yet R.E.M. and Howard Finster triggered similar affective responses in their respective interpretive communities. Rodger Lyle Brown, a chronicler of the Athens music and art scene, noted that while R.E.M.'s postmodern music and Finster's evangelistic art seemed poles apart in approach, nevertheless both utilized "scrap...from the cultural junk pile" to connect with audiences (204). Stipe's early lyrics stitched together Southern vernacular sayings (as in "Sitting Still" and "Can't Get There From Here"), allusions to children's books ("Seven Chinese Brothers"), even a verbatim reading of the liner notes of an obscure gospel album ("Voice of Harold"). In early performances, R.E.M. punctuated their setlists with ragged versions of (best-)forgotten AM-radio hits like Johnny Rivers's "Secret Agent Man" and Zager and Evans's execrable "In

the Year 2525.” Similarly, Finster’s visions were brought down to earth with the novel “recycling” of pop-culture detritus like abandoned bicycles, broken televisions and discarded soda bottles. Such trawls through the “junk pile” underlined their alienation from mainstream pop culture and reaffirmed both the grounding and the relative exoticism of the band and the artist.

By the early Eighties, Finster’s creations were lumped in with the increasingly visible (and lucrative) field of “outsider art,” but in truth his work was only remotely similar. Derived from Jean Dubuffet’s definition/construction of *art brut* in 1945, “outsider art” is not a generic term for all forms of marginalized art, but rather a term used to identify works by those with little to no contact with society. By virtue of his outgoing personality as well as the missionary work he carried out in his art, Finster welcomed both a lay audience and the wider marketplace into his self-created world. Out of the mainstream, yes. Disarming in its directness and fundamental Christian orientation, yes. But Finster was no tortured artist and only an “outsider” to the most insular of critics. To R.E.M., Finster was neither mentor nor mascot. Though never really part of an artistic cohort (as R.E.M. was in the early Eighties), Finster and his work in Paradise Garden had connections with other self-taught artists and, consciously or not, reinforced a regional aesthetic. As Charles Reagan Wilson notes in *Judgment and Grace in Dixie*, Southern visionary artists commonly evoke divine grace through “[n]atural images and portrayals of the beauty and wonder of the garden” (82). Like Finster, African American folk artists like Minnie Evans do not sacrifice earthly standards of beauty in their depictions of holy fire; Wilson concludes, “even her images inspired by the Book of Revelations lack an apocalyptic, cataclysmic tone” (82). Both Finster and Evans eschewed the shock value of fire-and-brimstone evangelism (which could easily be dismissed by non-believing observers as Bible Belt kitsch) to exhibit a gentler evangelism that reaches beyond the church grounds (Wilson 83).

Though it had its share of disturbing images (depictions of Hell were a specialty), Finster’s otherworldly art was comforting to a jaded set of urban art collectors. Even his most extreme visions were tempered with smiling faces and written descriptions offering advice on repentance and forgiveness. Far removed from Boschian nightmare, Howard Finster’s paintings of Hell are actually pretty charming, taken as a whole. Not only were his works more tactile than, say, performance art or most “live” conceptual

pieces, but they also carried an aura of simplicity and guilelessness, the obverse of the irony-soaked art of the decade. Finster, in his method and manners, sat diametrically opposed from other “art superstars” of the Eighties. Jenny Holzer’s machine art and Laurie Anderson’s performances brought issues of power relations and gender to the fore in their works. The multi-layered self-portraits of Cindy Sherman exemplified the postmodern desire to blur or even obliterate the lines between artist, subject and audience. Jean-Michael Basquiat’s iconography (Aunt Jemimas and the like) tweaked the liberal guilt of many of his patrons. Postmodern art routinely confounded traditional art appreciation through its collapsing of high art and mass culture. Most disturbing to the collecting establishment, video and performance art could not be bought, sold and amassed quite in the same manner as paintings and sculptures. True products of the age of mechanical reproduction, neither their appearance nor their “aura” (to use Walter Benjamin’s term) could be adequately reconstructed. With home-video technology, video art appeared too easily reproducible from a technical standpoint to give it much value, while performance art had obvious limitations in its reproduction.

By contrast, the works of Howard Finster looked like quaint relics from a kinder, more earnest time. Finster never imposed an ironic distance between himself and his art nor hid behind a media-made persona. Despite Finster’s obvious sincerity in his mission, the fundamental Christian themes in his work pleased collectors looking for “naïve art” more often than it challenged them. Many times, Finster’s evangelism was interpreted (and marketed) as an aspect of his perceived primitivism, another quirk every bit as childlike and endearing as the occasional misspellings in his texts. For many Eighties art denizens, seemingly exhausted by the ambiguity of the times, his brand of folk art was a welcome retreat from the outer limits of conceptual art; created in good faith, it was representational, accessible and never assumed to know more than the patron. Art collectors could exert the superior intelligence needed for connoisseurship by imagining the artist as an untrained, provincial “outsider.” Additionally, they could rationalize their accumulation of unschooled art as an act of social work, reinforcing the lofty self-image of the collector as patron and benefactor.

Finster’s regionalism was an equally value-loaded issue in the art world. While most critics contextualized the Eighties’ minor folk-art boom as a

continuation of Dubuffet's concepts or as an anomaly within an overspeculative art marketplace, some cried fraud. Interviewed for a 1987 review of Southern vernacular artists, John Michael Vlach, then director of the folklife program at George Washington University, spared no words:

Howard Finster's a wacko. Howard Finster and these others are eccentric to any normal image Southerners hold about themselves, but it's good enough for Northerners, for Yankees who always look at all Southerners as crackers anyway...Folk art is any funny looking painting, by some guy who is slightly off the edge, a guy who talks to God and God moves his hand across the canvas. (Hitt 54-57)

Such a judgment both implicates and problematizes R.E.M.'s working relationship with Finster. While R.E.M.'s interest in Finster was mainly aesthetic, there was valuable cultural capital to be gained by bringing Finster, whose work was deemed both eccentric and collector-worthy, into their fold. Yet the members of R.E.M. do not fit neatly into Vlach's schema: recall Peter Buck's desire to shed the "hick" stereotype and be presumed "normal" by judgmental Northerners in context with his ironic positioning of an original Finster piece in his home. However ambivalent (or naïve) Buck and his bandmates might have been in their role as untrained art connoisseurs, and however "funny looking" the cover of *Reckoning* appeared to mid-Eighties rock consumers, few could seriously accuse R.E.M. of exploiting an already established artist. Ultimately, it must be remembered that in the decade of Michael Jackson, Madonna, and Ozzy Osbourne, there were more dependable ways of grabbing the mass public's attention than patronizing the work of a rural visionary artist in his late sixties.

Such issues demonstrate that in pop music sincerity and authenticity are tricky subjects; the field is full of anti-establishment multi-millionaires, and those who have parlayed their eccentricities and anti-social postures to the top. R.E.M. evaded much of the authenticity debate by not playing in an established subgenre. Standing in opposition to Southern rock allowed R.E.M. to move forward with a minimum of cultural baggage. Unlike contemporary blues or punk bands, R.E.M., with its oblique take on post-Beatles pop, did not perform within a strictly formalist genre defined by an unwritten orthodoxy and policed by dedicated fans and critics. It helped their integrity immensely to hew to rock's archetypal guitar-bass-drums lineup,

even if they employed this instrumentation in novel ways. This neo-traditionalism was welcomed by many American rock critics alienated by punk, preoccupied with attacking the supposed artificiality of so-called “synthesizer bands” from England and who had yet to form a critical framework from which to assess the emerging field of hip-hop. Despite stylistic trademarks like the indecipherable lyrics and the jangling guitars, R.E.M. could be linked by approach and/or sensibility to such touchstone figures (and critics’ darlings) as The Beatles, Bob Dylan and The Velvet Underground, without being accused of slavish imitation or stigmatized as novices.

On the cusp of mass popularity, critical debates about R.E.M.’s authenticity focused less on the music and more on its audience. Descriptions like “college rock” and “alternative rock” foregrounded the consumption of the music by a fanbase who were largely detached from the pop mainstream yet relatively affluent and well educated. By contrast, in the art world terms like “outsider,” “naïve,” “vernacular” and “folk art” describe (and often implicitly judge) the creation, and not its end user. Rock criticism’s master narrative is highly invested in a confrontation with and eventual surmounting of the status quo: examples include Elvis’s emergence in the Fifties and the stylish and stylistic revolts of punk and hip-hop. If rock music, especially from the South, has been largely Dionysian – from the wild abandon of Little Richard and Jerry Lee Lewis to the hard-livin’, hard-drinkin’ clichés of Seventies Southern rock – R.E.M. forged a more Apollonian sound; “dreamy,” “wistful” and “sublime” became pet adjectives of partisan writers. To the consternation of R.E.M.’s more “rockist” detractors, there was virtually nothing about the band at the time that suggested rebellion or disenfranchisement; for a rock group, R.E.M. was (and remains) almost embarrassingly articulate and conscientious.¹⁰ Even their championing of Howard Finster had less to do with his status as a marginalized figure than an art-for-art’s-sake appreciation expressed through an informal sponsorship that responded to Finster’s generosity of spirit as much as his art. Consequently, R.E.M. advanced a notion of the South as a creatively distinct and vital region that nurtured and inspired artists of varying ages, approaches and backgrounds.

Perhaps R.E.M.’s most self-consciously “arty” record, 1985’s *Fables of the Reconstruction* continued this thread, adapting a distinctly Southern mode of storytelling without the explicit references to the postbellum period

that the title might suggest. Rejecting any generic pronouncements on the region, songs like "Old Man Kensey" and "Wendell Gee" were character sketches of eccentric Southern outsiders, reminiscent of the quietly suffering figure Sherwood Anderson labeled "the grotesque" in *Winesburg, Ohio* and who became transplanted in three generations of Southern fiction from Faulkner to O'Connor to Cormac McCarthy. The song "Life and How to Live It" took its title from a strange, self-published book of cryptic ramblings by an Athens resident named Brivs Mekis. After Mekis's death, all the copies of his book were found boxed and sealed in one of his closets; apparently he had no interest in distributing his own book, a peculiarity reminiscent of the posthumous and disturbing discoveries that unearthed hermetic artist Henry Darger's work (Gray 277). The lyrics to "Maps and Legends" have commonly been interpreted as an oblique tribute to Reverend Finster, perhaps signaling their amicable parting (Gray 276).

Fables also marked a physical separation of R.E.M. from the South. While their previously released work had been completed in North Carolina at Charlotte's Reflection Studios (where televangelists Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker regularly recorded) and producer Mitch Easter's Drive-In Studio (so named because it was housed in his parents' garage), their third album was recorded in London, and supported with a major world tour, commencing an exhausting album-tour cycle that did not subside until late 1989.

Fables of the Reconstruction and 1986's *Life's Rich Pageant* indicated an endpoint – perhaps a necessary one – for R.E.M.'s sponsorship of Southern folk art. In the case of *Pageant*, the back-cover illustration by local artist Juanita Rogers appears more naïve and one-dimensional in its context than anything Finster had created for R.E.M. As a sign of the times, the reproduction of Rogers's work lost the clarity it would have had on a traditional 12 1/4" by 12 1/4" album sleeve; instead, it had to jostle for space on the CD liner's 5" by 5" canvas with a UPC symbol. Such a change illustrates that if R.E.M. had taken their connoisseurship much further, every subsequent record could have been ten musical portraits of rural obsessives rather than ten freestanding songs, with each album cover introducing a new folk artist informally competing with Howard Finster. The continued cultivation of an "outsider" Southern sensibility would probably have been limiting to overall artistic development. Moreover, the alternative music press and radio that had grown reciprocally with R.E.M. was

defining itself even more narrowly, and often through crude dialectics – independent labels vs. majors, alternative vs. mainstream – largely shutting out R.E.M. by virtue of its improbable commercial success. Up to that point, Peter Buck referred to his band as being “the edge of the unacceptable stuff,” a harbinger of mass-marketed yet “alternative” rock that straddled the line between popular and underground, and blurred arbitrary genre distinctions along the way.

What George Lipsitz writes about the East Los Angeles *conjunto*-rock band Los Lobos applies equally well to their Athens contemporaries: “Their definitive contours come from the conscious choices made by organic intellectuals attempting to address the anguish of invisibility by bringing their own cultural traditions into the mainstream of mass culture” (151). As organic intellectuals emerging from the latest iteration of the New South, R.E.M. navigated around musical clichés and pieced together a regionally informed aesthetic as an antidote to rootless, homogenized Eighties pop culture. Howard Finster’s grand-scale folk art proved to be a perfect complement to the band’s ambitious endeavors. While R.E.M. distanced themselves from Finster’s evangelistic message, they did elevate the man and his art as a vital symbol of dogged individualism, creativity and the “do-it-yourself” ethic. After R.E.M., “Southern rock” became a dated, meaningless term, as the influence of self-taught Southern art widened the parameters for what rock music from the South could express, reference and celebrate. In the place of regional clichés, a receptive generation was granted a point of entrance to an aesthetic that prized originality and independence.

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NOTES

¹ Drivin’ n Cryin’ provided one of the few links between traditional Southern rock and its alternative counterpart. The band opened several Southern tours for R.E.M. in the late Eighties, while Peter Buck and Mike Mills made guest appearances on their albums. Through the Nineties, however, Drivin’ n Cryin’ shifted gears and became headliners on the revitalized Southern-rock tour circuit.

² Faulkner's shadow was cast over R.E.M. as well; *The Sound and the Fury* was a working title for what became *Fables of the Reconstruction* and eventually the name of a widely circulated bootleg album.

³ Performing at New York City's Peppermint Lounge as a surprise guest at a 1984 Halloween-night show, opening for The Cramps, a Cleveland-via-New York band who drew heavily from 1950s Southern rockabilly and trash culture, R.E.M. dubbed themselves "It Crawled from the South," a name in line with both The Cramps' horror-movie aesthetic and a kudzu-like "creepiness" (Gray 194).

⁴ As ownership of Finster's art installation has changed, so has its appellation, vacillating between "Paradise Garden" and "Paradise Gardens." The more common singular form is used throughout this essay.

⁵ Even the band had mixed feelings about the final cut of "Radio Free Europe"; Bill Berry, the most straightforward interviewee in R.E.M., simply called it "pretty boring" (Black 79). All the R.E.M. videos discussed in this essay are compiled in the 2006 retrospective DVD *When the Light Is Mine*.

⁶ Sadly, the "Radio Free Europe" video doubles as a visual time capsule of Paradise Garden(s) at its most beautiful. Finster's failing health through the 1990s and his willingness to sell the garden's constituent pieces and buildings to collectors left the space a shadow of its former self by 2001 (Bradshaw 137). Paradise Garden(s) endures in book form as well; see Robert Peacock, et al. *Paradise Garden* (1996) and Thelma Finster Bradshaw's *Howard Finster: The Early Years* (2001).

⁷ Intriguingly, Finster created an alternate cover image, incorporating photographs of the band (Black 95). Characteristically, R.E.M. turned down this more commercially attuned approach; until 2004's *Around the Sun*, R.E.M. was one of the few major rock bands that had never appeared on their own albums' front covers.

⁸ James Herbert applied many of these same painterly techniques to R.E.M. live footage for the 1985 videos "Life and How to Live It" and "Feeling Gravity's Pull." When R.E.M. "graduated" from college venues to arenas, they utilized Herbert's experimental films as widescreen visual backdrops, creating a synesthesia closer in spirit to Andy Warhol's Exploding Plastic Inevitable "happenings" with the Velvet Underground in the 1960s than the concerts of any other band touring sports coliseums in the late Eighties.

⁹ Not all critics were receptive to Finster's choice of subjects and ultimate execution, however. In his book *Dead Elvis*, Greil Marcus curtly dismisses Finster's renderings of Presley as "tramp art" (151).

¹⁰ This conscientiousness encompasses the band's advocacy for the preservation of historic buildings in Athens, their appearance on a youth-literacy poster for the American Library Association, and years of hands-on support for a number of environmental and human-rights organizations. The band helped deflate their own do-gooder image in a 2001 episode of *The Simpsons*.

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Brokeback Mountain: Masculinity and Manhood

Even before its release as a film in 2005, *Brokeback Mountain* became a cultural icon, a space in which people celebrated, raged, grieved, and found company. As is well-known by now, Larry McMurtry and Diana Ossana's screenplay based on Annie Proulx's short story made the rounds in Hollywood for years, the common wisdom declaring that it was simultaneously too good and too risky for anyone to produce. Thus Ang Lee's somewhat surprising decision to direct the film carried more than the normal significance, nor has the film disappointed. Reviews, blogs, and now books about the narrative in its several forms attest to—what? Here opinions divide: the courage to tell a gay cowboy story? the brilliance in universalizing a local and lonely love story? the statement it makes against homophobia? its mainstream success at the box office and in the awards—the first serious homosexual love story to make it? or its danger as a tool for recruiting more males into sin?

In what follows, we will look specifically at the representations of contemporary American masculinity, manliness, and manhood in the film, comparing it in these respects to the Annie Proulx story and the McMurtry/Ossana screenplay, to speculate on some of the reasons *Brokeback Mountain* was the film to break the back of Hollywood (and popular) resistance to the scene of men making love. In brief, we think the film allows itself to assert the legitimacy and beauty of romantic love between men by endorsing more traditional narratives of manhood and masculinity. We will link these gender narratives to aesthetic forms as well. Thus we believe the

film's success in depicting sexuality in new ways—though we hope not to detract from it—needs to be understood as coming at some cost to a progressive vision for gender and aesthetics. On the other hand, we will proffer an alternative reading, through Eve Sedgwick, that makes a different and more enlightened kind of sense out of the masculinities in the stories.

The queer culture machine was very busy even before *Brokeback Mountain* was released, prognosticating the likely compromises to which the writers and director would submit in order to facilitate mainstream success, changes that would no doubt mute the narrative's gay thematic. Many a critic has subsequently argued that Ennis and Jack are not gay enough and that the gay element of the narrative has been played down in the interests of mainstream marketability. B. Ruby Rick argues that "homosexuality is incidental to the film's achievements" (48); D. A. Miller suggests that Ang Lee's much celebrated cinematic technique constitutes a "celluloid closet," detracting from the sex and sexual politics of the film, allowing mainstream audiences to forget that they are watching a gay romance (52); Scott Herring sees *Brokeback* as an "issue film that invites nothing but pure escapism" (94); Dwight A. McBride says the film "opts out of the culture wars," championing "a love story about two guys who happen to be gay" (96); and Osterweil attributes the inoffensiveness of the subject matter to the requisite "sacrifice of countercultural subversiveness" in the interests of financial success (42). Along these same lines, gay affirmative critics have cited the exclusion of homosexuality from the marketing campaign for the film which was directed at straight women who enjoy the cinematic romance genre (Berry 34; Clover and Nealon 62; and McBride 95).

The success of *Brokeback* signifies the effort to mainstream homosexuality in the American media—not so much from the position of moral or ethical imperative, but from the position of commerce. After all, the GLBT community is perceived to have a good deal of disposable income (Rorke 33). The first main screen release of a gay themed film with a kiss between two men was *Making Love* (1982), a film which was a box office disaster for predictable reasons. *Brokeback*, on the other hand, constitutes a much more successful step in the progressive integration of homosexuality into popular cinema that began with the 1982 film, a progress that includes titles such as *Philadelphia* (1993) and *The Birdcage* (1996), both of which were

profitable and appealing to the heterosexist mainstream audience because the narratives elided sex and intimacy, opting for tragedy and comedy (respectively) over the romanic genre. *To Wong Foo: Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar* (1995) was also a success, but it played down male on male sex and intimacy and enlisted the confirmed masculinities of Hollywood heartthrobs—Patrick Swayze, Wesley Snipes, and John Leguizamo—and although these transvestites talk about loving men and adopt a camp affectation, they only ever succeed in facilitating heterosexual romance (a formula for success identical to that employed in *Queer Eye*). *The Adventures of Priscilla: Queen of the Desert* (1994) was a bit more edgy than *Wong Foo*, what with Bernadette (Terence Stamp) falling in love with Bob (Bill Hunter), but the narrative includes no sex between men and allows the camp carnivalesque humor to rule over the more serious subject matter. Ultimately, the film follows a heterosexual trajectory with Mitzi (Hugo Weaving) traveling to meet his son and to assume paternal responsibilities.

What makes *Brokeback* unique is the traditional masculinity of the gay protagonists, and one of the principal markers or constructs of this masculinity involves the filmmaker's adaptation of the Western genre to the gay subject matter. The extent to which the narrative borrows from the Western tradition varies, depending on the critic who addresses the subject: Susan Lee Johnson argues that the film only "looks like a Western... nothing else about the movie fits the genre" (988); Grundmann hails the film as a "long overdue move for a mainstream film" "irreversibly linking the classic Western scenery and iconography with explicit images of cowboy homosexuality" (85); Rich congratulates Ang Lee for 'queering' "the most sacred of American genres" (qtd. in Clarke 30); Clarke observes that *Brokeback* merely clarifies an element that has always been present in the Western—"men getting it on (or squabbling) with other men" (30); and Jim Kitses goes further than any others, describing Ennis as "the western hero incarnate" (23) and the western setting as a "naturalization" and "nationalization" of "same-sex love" (25).

While the traditional masculinity of the protagonists has been praised by many critics, it has also had its detractors. One might argue that such depictions advance a "gay" rather than a "queer" sensibility, the former retaining a more integrationist and conformist agenda, than the latter which demands that the GLBT community be accepted on its own terms.

Grundmann observes that the narrative promotes “coming out” as a “moral imperative,” but expects the denizens of the closet to “turn out to be mainstream” upon their emergence (85). Moreover, the mental anguish of the protagonists who suffer for love has not been well received by some critics, since it hearkens back to the historic medicalization of homosexuality by the psychiatric profession, a century-long history of institutional oppression only concluding in 1973 when the American Psychiatric Association, under constant pressure from gay and lesbian activism, elected to remove homosexuality from its nomenclature of pathology (Bayer 101-154). In this vein, Grundmann sees the gay portraits in *Brokeback* as ‘throwbacks’ to the 1950’s, as depictions of “anguished masculinity in crisis” (84), and Cobb calls the film a “Christmas gift to conservative Christians” (102), representing “the gay cowboy lifestyle [as] a depressing damaged lifestyle” (103) and “homosexual behavior” as self-destructive “like other addictions” (104). Moreover, the narrative emphasizes the collateral victims of homosexual relationships, such as children and ex-wives (Clover and Nealon 63).

In what follows, we will develop the ways Ang Lee’s film—even more than Annie Proulx’s story—depicts, even recuperates, traditional American masculinity. We believe that, in addition to the deserved reputations of the actors and director, the stunning beauty of the film, and the brilliant care for detail evident in every shot, *Brokeback Mountain* succeeded with a popular audience and (to a point, that point being the Academy’s “Best Picture”) with film critics because—with the exception of the object of desire—it does not challenge the central forceful prescriptions of American manhood. As a result, it has ensured that it does not alienate its audience, disappoint its financial backers, or inflame the cultural conservatives. On the other hand, as we will see, it may be serving an even more radical purpose: healing the ideological split that men still see between homosocial and homosexual desire.

Brokeback Mountain, with its gay sexuality, depicts traditional masculinities. In Ennis we see a man eager to construct and embody a very familiar manhood: the physically adept, hardworking, verbally silent, responsible, ethical western hero. In Jack, we see a man still caught up in the ambivalences produced by trying to match his father’s manhood, represented by ownership, dominance, and rodeo success. At the end of their teens, both men are already manly and are struggling to remain so in the

traditional senses prescribed by the American gender divide. They are not hiding alternative identities behind masculine performance, nor is the film. Both characters and film—to a greater degree than the story or the screenplay—draw spectators into a sympathetic and familiar relation to conventional gender. How can we interpret this apparent contradiction?

So what specific sacrifices to a mass audience—or moves toward a new vision of male sexuality—has the film *Brokeback Mountain* made? When she was asked about the theme of the narrative, Annie Proulx said that her story is not about “gay cowboys” but about “rural homophobia” (130). Yet one could argue that the film has paradoxically appropriated a certain homophobia in order to challenge homophobia. In the story, Ennis is right in thinking that Jack has been lynched by men, not killed by a tire iron. In story, screenplay, and film, we have seen Jack meet his new neighbor, the ranch foreman, and heard the man proposition Jack, offering a place where the two of them can “get away.” In all, Jack is likely lying when he tells Ennis he’s “had a thing going with the wife of a rancher down the road” (19); we suspect him when his father tells Ennis, in all versions, about the male ranch neighbor with whom Jack’s been planning to settle down. When Ennis first hears the story of Jack’s death from Lureen, he is incredulous, “No, he thought, they got him with the tire iron” (23). The film represents this visually, by cutting to Ennis’s imagined scenario. Later in the story and the movie, Jack’s father tells Ennis that Jack had “got another one’s goin a come up here with him and build a place and hep run the ranch, some ranch neighbor a his from down in Texas. He’s goin a split up with his wife and come back here” (23). These lines, like almost all the story’s dialogue, are replicated in the film. Yet in the story the next paragraph begins, “So now he knew it had been the tire iron” (25). The film offers no representation of this certainty, leaving the viewer to conclude with more ease that Ennis is simply projecting onto Jack his own horrific childhood memory of the dead and mutilated Earl, also beaten with a tire iron.

In spite of their own desires, even Jack and Ennis themselves have internalized their culture’s most enduring prejudices about homosexuality and homosexuals. Even after it is clear that their passion will last, they never modify their claims that they are “not queers.” Instead, they name their powerful love as a “thing” that grabs hold of them. The story makes

Ennis's internalized homophobia especially clear. In a passage left out of the film version, he says:

"You know, I was sittin up here all that time [the four years since Brokeback] tryin to figure out if I was ___? I know I ain't. I mean here we both got wives and kids, right? I like doin it with women, yeah, but Jesus H., ain't nothin like this. I never had no thoughts a doin it with nother guy except I sure wrang it out a hunderd times thinkin about you. You do it with other guys? Jack?" (13)

And Jack replies, lying, as we know, "Shit no." Jack is actively gay; he goes to Mexico to have sex with hustlers, and he comes on to other men at home, such as the rodeo clown, and poses provocatively against his truck even when he first sees Ennis. Nor does he continue to hide his queer desire: eventually he tells Ennis that he can't do without it the way Ennis can. Yet Jack's experience with gay sex does not mean he is less vulnerable to homophobia, has internalized it less, or protects himself against it any more easily than the relative newcomer Ennis. After the rodeo clown dismisses his offer, the bartender insults Jack's masculinity by asking this man who has just ridden a bull if he has ever tried calf roping.

Jack and Ennis' sexual relationship is frequently rendered in forms that emphasize the masculine. When Jack and Ennis first have sex, it takes a hyper-masculine form, in opposition to the traditional gay romance that codes men as weak via sentimentality. In the story, more explicitly than in the film or screenplay, Jack draws Ennis's hand down to his own erect cock. Ennis jerked his hand away as though he'd touched fire, got to his knees, unbuckled his belt, shoved his pants down, hauled Jack onto all fours, and with the help of the clear slick and a little spit, entered him, nothing he'd done before but no instruction manual needed. They went at it in silence except for a few sharp intakes of breath and Jack's choked "gun's going off," then out, down, and asleep. (7)

Jack's reference to the gun keeps this masculinized, as does the silence and near violence of the interaction. Ennis' heterosexual propensities are confirmed well in advance of sex with Jack. He indicates that he intends to marry Alma as soon as he comes down from Brokeback. Jack's

hetero-normative gender construction is confirmed in another way. As a rodeo bull rider, he engages in a very dangerous sport with a high risk of injury, one not appropriate for the effete and faint-hearted. Thus he associates himself with hegemonic, even hyperbolic masculinity. His failure at this career—while his wife Lureen succeeds as a barrel racer—and his parodic “riding” of the huge farming machines he sells underline his desire to be manly in conventional ways.

The *Brokeback* protagonists’ responsibility for their alternative desire is further mitigated by the presence of alcohol, which plays a clichéd role in many conversion narratives in which ostensibly straight men are compelled to engage in queer sex because they are too inebriated to know what they are doing. The inaugural sex act between Jack and Ennis results from happenstance. The men drink too much, and Ennis decides not to return to his pup tent residence and vigil over the sheep. The weather also conspires to bring the men into the same bed roll. The only attribute of the conventional gay guilty pleasure narrative that does not seem to be present is the participants’ pretense that they were so drunk they could not remember anything that happened the night before. Ennis is silent the next morning, but Jack comes out of the tent—in the film—to say he’ll see him for supper. That night—in the story, the date isn’t specified—they do speak. In a model of ambivalent dialogue from McMurtry and Osanna, Ennis both enables and rejects a continuing relationship when he says “It’s a one-shot thing we got goin’ here” (Screenplay, 20).

Jack and Ennis’s guardianship of the flock on Brokeback Mountain plays upon a variety of familiar metaphors. On the one hand, the sheep serve as analogues to the innocence of the young cowboys who have only recently left parental (or sibling) homes. The image of Jack carrying a lamb on his saddle as the cowboys move the flock through the mountains reinforces the moral connection between the men and lamblike innocence; viewers may recall New Testament references to Jesus as the shepherd of his flock. On the other hand, the sheep, if only by contrast, evoke the common cliché that rural men, particularly adolescents, in the absence of women, may satisfy themselves with sheep. Remembering this stereotype offers yet another extenuating circumstance—the absence of women, the alcohol—mitigating the two men’s eventual union, indicating as it does the extraordinary lengths to which men will presumably go in the pursuit of grati-

fiction. Following the first sexual encounter between the two cowboys, Ennis returns to his high altitude post on the following morning only to find that one of the sheep has been slaughtered by wolves or coyotes, its carcass a gaping hole. The shot is reminiscent of the one we see of Earl, the man whose castrated body Ennis's father shows his sons to train them in homophobia. Both are images of feminization; the sheep's body looks like a large and gory entrance to a vagina, labia spread apart. The links between irresponsibility—he has left his flock untended—and homoeroticism are clear; the reward for “sinning” is the loss of the very center and symbol of manliness.

Neither Jack nor Ennis accepts a “gay” identity even after they have acknowledged that they are hopelessly, even tragically, in love with each other. This seeming failure of self-knowledge can be explained through a variety of assumptions regarding the connection between sexual object choice, gender construction, and lifestyle. Jack and Ennis cannot accept the appellation “gay” or “queer” because they cannot reconcile gay male stereotypes with their ego ideals and/or their lifestyles. One could argue that Jack and Ennis are in love with each other partly because they are both in love with an idealized western masculinity that fetishizes the outdoors and the ascetic lifestyle. By this argument, as Leslie Fiedler made it so long ago, it is civilization that Jack and Ennis shun, specifically the civilizing influence of women. They chafe against interiors and domesticity, longing for their seasonal return to the wild places like Brokeback Mountain, what's left of the American outback and what's left of their unconfined youths. Yet at the end of the film and the story, the central symbol of their love is two shirts, one enfolded by the other, hanging first in Jack's and then in Ennis's closet. Similarly, in the film, Ennis has some difficulty accepting domestic responsibility. While he clearly loves his daughters, he drops them off at Alma's work because he is called in for a roundup; he refuses to serve their dinner when his wife accepts an extra shift at work, and he will not allow his teenage daughter to live with him to escape the restrictions of her mother's new marriage. When she announces her own impending marriage at the conclusion of the film, he is forced to choose between walking his daughter down the aisle and attending a yearly roundup. Remembering the failure of his love to Jack, due in part to his choice of work

over relationships, he finally chooses the former. The film thus adds to the story's apparent reversal of priorities.

Jack also rebels against domesticity. However, his wealth brings him a greater freedom than Ennis enjoys. There is clearly no heat in his marriage to Lureen; he admits that their relationship could be conducted over the phone, an apt metaphor for the business-like beginning of the union and perhaps an object lesson, warning against the mistake of marrying for money and conforming to compulsory heterosexuality. On several occasions when the camera focuses on Lureen, she is engaged in calculations and office-related tasks, only semi-conscious of her husband's activities. She clearly finds him frustrating and feels less and less passion for him, as her increasingly brittle makeup and hairdos suggest. When she speaks with Ennis on the phone following Jack's death, she is critical of her husband's idealism and seemingly indifferent to his demise.

The screenplay and film, however, add a key scene to the story that emphasizes once again the men's struggle for—and the narrative's apparent endorsement of—traditional manhood. Thanksgiving dinner scenes, juxtaposed, show both men in moments of gender trouble. For most of his marriage, Jack has been treated disrespectfully by his dominant father-in-law who refers to him as “rodeo.” Given Jack's failures in that same venue, this is a cruel appellation. Yet at Thanksgiving dinner, after allowing his father-in-law to carve the turkey (a sign of the patriarch), he draws the line and stands on it. His wife's father overrides Lureen's rule about not watching TV during the dinner, turns it back on, and says to her, “You want your son to grow up to be a man, don't you, daughter? (direct look at Jack) Boys should watch football” (Screenplay, 66). Jack stands up and says “not until he finishes the meal his mama spent three hours fixin'.” When Mr. Newsome gets up to go to the TV again, Jack says “Sit down, you old son of a bitch! . . . This is my house! This is my child! And you're my guest! So sit the hell down, or I'll knock your ignorant ass into next week. . . .” He sits, and Jack carves the turkey. It is hard not to cheer with Lureen as she secretly applauds her husband, but we need to recognize that Jack's behavior is coded not as an adult's taking an adult role, but as a man claiming his manhood. And that manhood is grounded by and in guns, knives, and ownership. By contrast, Ennis has no ownership in the Thanksgiving dinner he attends with Alma, his daughters, and Alma's new husband. Monroe's

masculinity is mocked by his carving style—he uses a loud, wimpy, ineffective electric knife—but he still owns the place and, in effect, the people. When Alma finally tells Ennis what she knows about his relationship with Jack, she provokes his rage and violence:

ALMA

Jack Nasty. You didn't go up there to fish. You
and him . . .

(ENNIS grabs her wrist and twists it.)

ENNIS

Now you listen to me, you don't know nothin' about
it.

ALMA

I'm goin' to yell for Monroe.

ENNIS

Go on and fuckin' yell. I'll make him eat the fuckin'
floor and you, too. (69)

It is the accusation of sex—more precisely, the homophobic charge of the accusation—that sets off Ennis. And his struggle for his “masculinity,” like Jack’s at his dinner, takes place in gender terms that are all too familiar: anger, denial, and physical violence. When he storms out, Ennis goes to a bar, but before he can even get in, he punches a roughneck and is in turn badly beaten. In these two scenes, then, the screenplay and film again participate in a seeming endorsement not of traditional heterosexual desire, but of traditional masculine behavior.

Traditionally, masculinity has been measured by the capacity of the male subject to inflict pain on other men; however, less frequently cited is the role that suffering plays in the same gender construction. The subject’s ability to endure great pain may be every bit as important in the performance of masculinity as his ability to inflict it. In his study *Power at Play*, Michael Messner discusses both the internal and external pressures on athletes to continue to play while they are hurt, revealing that the ability and willingness to suffer for the benefit of the team is central to the construction of hyper-masculinity (72-76). Kaja Silverman in *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* and David Savran in *Taking It Like a Man* have analyzed the role of what is called variously masochism, passivity, and stoicism in the making of men. While we do see the self-loathing Ennis lashing out at other

men, such as when he assaults a passing motorist after Alma upbraids him for his love of Jack, his most masculine-masochistic attribute is his brooding self-neglect, which ensures his poverty. Both Jack and the audience believe Ennis unwilling to make sacrifices to suffer for love at key moments in the story. Yet at the conclusion of the narrative, Ennis reveals that his poverty is that sacrifice. While Jack married wealth and is at leisure to vacation on impulse, Ennis is forced to forfeit his economic well-being in order to meet Jack on their seasonal rendezvous. Ennis has quit several jobs and subsequently sacrificed his marriage in order to be available when Jack wanted to meet. The spartan life that Ennis leads is an analogue to the emotional poverty of his life.

Jack's pipe dream about the two men working their own ranch—a dream that has as much to do with his desire to prove himself to his father as it does with romance—is undermined by Ennis's fear of public humiliation, grounded in that traumatic childhood lesson about Earl and Rich. Indeed there is a voyeuristic element to the narrative that also becomes metacinematic. Ennis repeatedly expresses his fear that their desire might be revealed. Ironically, after his uninhibited passion results in Alma's discovery of his love for Jack, Ennis argues the necessity of discretion, explaining that if they are found out publicly, they could be killed like Earl and Rich, who tried to live together on a ranch. Ennis believes that his father showed him (a nine-year-old boy) the gruesome scene to dissuade him from same-sex passion, and the lesson remains with Ennis throughout his life. While Jack is still alive, Ennis rarely agrees to meet with him anywhere but in the mountains where they cannot be observed. However, even there, they become the object of scrutiny, even on that first summer. The private passion that they sought to hide from the world is observed by their former boss Joe Aguirre who watches them having sex through his binoculars and, in all probability, cuts their time short on Brokeback Mountain to punish them for their transgression. While Ennis never learns of the discovery, Jack is denied work the following year when Aguirre upbraids him for the neglect of the sheep in favor of time spent “stemming the rose.” Aguirre's voyeurism is an analogue of that which Ennis dreads, the public scrutiny and condemnation of his love for Jack, and by extension the voyeuristic element encompasses the assumed heterosexist and skeptical film audience who also assess the content of the narrative and consign it to financial

success or failure. In a manner of speaking, just like Aguirre, if the cinematic audience does not like what it sees, it will make the boys come down early from *Brokeback Mountain*, and the commercial audience will only support the content of the film if the homoerotic and homo-romantic themes are toned down (a minimal amount of kissing and romantic dalliance) and the characters appropriately filled with self-loathing and punished, either physically or emotionally. The compromises that Lee makes with the voyeuristic audience are intended to rescue the film from financial failure, the same failure that Ennis considers his sacrifice for love.

In sum, Ang Lee's film does some important cultural work for the gay and progressive community, enabling a heterosexual public to acknowledge that same-sex passion is not merely a comic parody of the heterosexual paradigm, that male-to-male passions are not merely the consequence of the inaccessibility of women, that the obstruction of same-sex passion for the satisfaction of social convention is a betrayal of our culture's romantic mythology, which holds that sincere and enduring passion should be pursued against all odds and in spite of all consequences, and that the gay romance can be tragic even in the absence of HIV. The film's effort to legitimize same-sex desire asserts itself into the contemporary debate over gay domestic arrangements, demonstrating that compulsory heterosexual marriage is damaging to both partners, particularly for the spouse who can never be the principal focus of his/her partner's love, but only an unhappy substitute. Lee's film is clear in its portrayal of wives as the unwitting victims of obligatory heterosexuality. Each of the two wives constitutes a complementary partner to her husband's relative homophobia. Alma knows too much and Lureen too little. Complementarily, Ennis would at times like to forget or diminish his connection to Jack, while Jack openly embraces his love. All of the partners in the two marriages of *Brokeback Mountain* would have been happier and more fulfilled with someone else. Perhaps most importantly, the film creates visibility for a subject that is often confined to an art house audience. However, this visibility comes at a price. The queer narrative must always negotiate its place within the mainstream media, offering up its sacrifices to Moloch and Mammon, practicing what Jonathan Dollimore termed "strategies of inclusion" (51), the techniques and capitulations by which gay culture gains access to mainstream audiences.

Jack and, particularly, Ennis refuse to accept any but the most hegemonic masculinity, refusing to allow sexual object choice to define or even affect their normatively gendered self-image. Thus the film is less about gay cowboys than about cowboys who happen to love each other, if gay means claiming a gay identity. *Brokeback Mountain* does less to invalidate gay stereotypes, of which there are none in the film, than it does to broaden assumptions about traditional manhood. Men can fuck each other and still ride a bull, punch a cow, brawl, herd sheep, and make love to their wives. *Brokeback* is the story of traditional men who love in spite of their own masculinist assumptions and heterosexist paradigms, who love without becoming gay. While *Brokeback Mountain* does much for the visibility of same-sex desire, demonstrating that the love between two men can be moving and even tragic, it is not a movie about gay men, and the efforts made by the writers and especially the director to salvage Jack and Ennis's masculinity in spite of their activities seem at times overly labored. Unfortunately, approving of Jack and Ennis's love is not the same as validating the love of gay men. *Brokeback* succeeds in deconstructing the gay/straight binary by validating a poly or bi, not a gay sexuality. The narrative walks a thin line, doing work for both sides of the gay/straight, progressive/conservative binaries, and it erases the line as it passes.

How then should we interpret the internalized homophobia and hypermasculinity of the *Brokeback* narratives? Are they simply sacrifices to the box office? Eve Sedgwick will offer an alternative. Sedgwick has argued there is a breach between two sorts of male relations, a rupture between the homosexual and the homosocial, where between women there is a continuum of intimacy and desire. Thus men who form intimate social bonds within hyper-masculine and often single gendered environments—such as the military, the police force, the athletic team, etc., where men must work closely together and rely upon each other—often require a hyperbolic repudiation of same-sex desire, while within female environments, the ideas of women loving each other erotically and forming helpful social bonds are not mutually exclusive (1-20). The Wyoming setting as well as the homosexual and gay bashing subject matter combine with the “shepherding” motif to generate a subtle allusion to Wyoming’s (and America’s) most notorious hate crime against gay men, the murder of University of Wyoming student Matthew Shepard in 1998. Shepard was pistol-

whipped and tied with his shoelaces to a fence to die; he lived for five days. To some, his violent death seemed to reinforce a fundamental incompatibility between the masculine ideal of the western male and the more feminized/civilized demeanor of many gay men. From this point of view, Proulx, McMurtry, Ossana, and Lee seem to be trying to dismantle the gay/straight binary in the construction of masculinity within the American Western tradition, to heal the rupture Sedgwick sees. The idealized image of the roughneck and cowboy radically excludes same sex desire. Thus the formation of a combined homosexual/homosocial bond between Ennis and Jack—men who are a part of perhaps the most hyper-masculine profession in our culture, the cowboy, which, according to Michael Kimmel, embodies the “rugged outdoor masculinity” (148)—generates some radical possibilities in the construction of gender relations. *Brokeback Mountain* heals Matthew Shepard’s wounds, if only figuratively, reconciles the animosity between the murdered college student and his antagonists by imagining a love between men who may just as well have been the perpetrators of the young man’s murder, by recognizing that there is a homosexual subtext or tension within homosocial bonds. Jack and Ennis’s love reveals a radical possibility—that male bonding could evolve/devolve into desire.

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Race, Crime, and Motherhood in George Pelecanos's *Soul Circus*

George Pelecanos has written some of contemporary fiction's most relentlessly masculine narratives. In one neo-*noir* crime novel after another, he stages conflicts between detectives in muscle cars and heavily armed inner-city felons.¹ *Soul Circus* (2003) is in some ways standard-issue Pelecanos—a turbulent, cinematic tale about the drug trade in Washington, D.C.² In his representations of black women and their sons, however, Pelecanos emphasizes an aspect of urban culture he has never examined so closely in the past. The interplay of family and crime in African-American communities can be risky territory for a white male novelist to explore, but Pelecanos consistently depicts black single mothers in convincing, perceptive ways. More specifically, he calls attention to a problem that is seldom addressed in contemporary political and journalistic discourse: the drug trade endangers virtually everyone in America's inner cities, not only the young men whose outlaw narratives have dominated so many news reports, hip-hop CDs, and crime films. Most of the male characters in *Soul Circus* are exposed to drug-related mayhem, to be sure, but the novel's most compelling episodes highlight the victimization of women and children.

I

Soul Circus is the third novel in Pelecanos's series focusing on two former District of Columbia police officers: Derek Strange, a black man in

his fifties who owns a private investigation firm, and Terry Quinn, a white man in his early thirties.³ In *Right as Rain* (2001), Strange is hired by Leona Wilson, the mother of a black policeman killed by Quinn in a highly publicized incident. Officer Chris Wilson, dressed in plain clothes, arrested a white man on a street near Capitol Hill. Quinn and his partner Eugene Franklin saw Wilson holding a gun on the suspect, whom he had wrestled to the ground. Unaware that Wilson was a policeman, Quinn ordered him to drop his weapon. Wilson shouted his name and badge number and raised his gun so it pointed at Quinn, swept past him, and then pointed toward Franklin. Feeling certain that Wilson was going to shoot Franklin, Quinn fired and killed Wilson. A civilian review board exonerated Quinn, but he resigned from the force, unable to reconcile his passion for his job with the bitter fact that he had killed a fellow officer. Strange's investigation turns up a wealth of information the review board failed to uncover. On the night of the shooting, Wilson was searching for his sister Sondra, a drug addict. The man Wilson arrested was Sondra Wilson's former boyfriend, a drug peddler who regularly supplied her with heroin. Eugene Franklin orchestrated the events leading to the shooting because Wilson knew he was a "sold-out cop" accepting payoffs from a drug dealer. Strange removes the cloud over Wilson's reputation, returns Sondra Wilson to her mother, and develops a complicated relationship with Quinn. He believes Quinn would not have fired had he seen a white plainclothes officer holding a gun on a black suspect, yet he feels so drawn to the troubled younger man that he offers Quinn a job in his investigation firm. In *Hell to Pay* (2002), Strange and Quinn suffer a devastating emotional blow when Joe Wilder, a nine-year-old on the youth league football team they coach, is killed by stray bullets in a drug-related ambush.⁴ After Strange begins to investigate the shooting, he is contacted by Granville Oliver, a gang leader who reveals that he was Joe Wilder's father.⁵ Meanwhile, Quinn launches his career as a private investigator by throwing himself, with characteristic intensity and bravado, into the dangerous business of seizing teenage prostitutes and returning them to their families. This work leads directly to Quinn's murder at the close of *Soul Circus*, leaving Strange to mourn the victim of another fatal shooting.

Strange concentrates on two cases in *Soul Circus*. First, he gathers evidence for the defense team representing Granville Oliver, who has

been indicted for murder and is expected to receive the death penalty if convicted. (The narrator observes that the prosecution was “seeking death for Oliver under the [federal] RICO act, despite the fact that the District’s residents had overwhelmingly rejected the death penalty in a local referendum. . . . The last execution in D.C. had been carried out in 1957” [10]). Like a street-corner Foucauldian scholar, Oliver argues that the government wants to use his execution to coerce and control other dispossessed black people in the city: “They want to erase me, Strange. Make it so I don’t exist no more. . . . They want to strap me to that table in Indiana and give me that needle and show people, that’s what happens when you don’t stay down . . .” (7). Second, with Quinn’s assistance, Strange searches for Olivia Elliot, the missing girlfriend of Mario Durham, a would-be drug dealer who lives with his mother Arnice. The two investigators agree that Durham’s account of the young woman’s disappearance is probably misleading, but Strange accepts the case, reasoning that he could not stay in business if he refused to work for untrustworthy clients. The outcomes of both cases are disastrous. Durham murders Olivia Elliot less than a day after Strange and Quinn find her. And shortly before Oliver is convicted and sentenced to death, Devra Stokes—a defense witness mentored by Strange—and her four-year-old son are abducted by a gangster who wants to prevent Stokes from testifying at Oliver’s trial.

By foregrounding the aspirations of three single mothers, *Soul Circus* suggests that few residents of inner-city Washington can avoid the violence and corruption generated by the drug trade. Olivia Elliot’s story dramatizes, among other things, the plight of children whose parents sell drugs. Early in the novel, the narrator explains that Elliot ended her relationship with Mario Durham by stealing a pound of marijuana he had obtained from his half brother Dewayne, the leader of a gang known as the 600 Crew, and hiding in a small apartment with her ten-year-old son Mark:

She hadn’t intended to take it straight off, not exactly, but it came to her, big surprise, when she was high up on it one night, not long after Mario had brought the pound over to her apartment. She had been way up and got to thinking, Why do I need Mario to make some money off this? . . . She’d sold off half of the chronic in one-hundred-dollar bags, just to friends and to people she’d met in the apart-

ments around hers and to people they knew. And now she was flush. (94, 95)

For Elliot, then, the temptation to become a drug peddler is so seductive that she deliberately creates circumstances in which a gang leader and an enraged former boyfriend might search for her in the apartment she shares with her child. Disregarding the perils created by her scheme, Elliot assures herself that she is an exemplary parent: “It touched her, the way Mark was always trying to please her and protect her. The flip side of that was, the only thing she worried about in her life was Mark. She did love her boy and she wanted him safe” (95).

Not long after Durham gets a revolver from Ulysses Foreman, a former police officer who makes his living by selling and renting legally purchased guns to criminals, Strange and Quinn discover Elliot’s new address. (Quinn is tormented later in the novel by the fact that he obtained the apartment number from Mark Elliot by telling him that his mother had won a prize in a raffle.) When Durham approaches Elliot’s home, she is simultaneously watching television, listening to the radio, smoking a joint, and savoring her audacity as a thief. In one of the novel’s most puzzling moments, Durham initially seems more concerned about the safety of Elliot’s son than she does:

“Where your son at?” He moved toward her and she held her place. She was up against the arm of the couch.

“He’s stayin’ with my brother for a couple of days.”

“It’s good he’s not here. ’Cause you and me need to have a very serious conversation.”

“Ain’t no big drama to it, Mario.” (113)

As the conversation unfolds, Elliot mistakenly assumes that Durham’s anger is harmless and that she can brush it aside by attributing her actions to her sense of maternal duty: “[Mark’s] funny about having men around our house, and you got to understand, I put my son above everything else” (114). Later that evening, Durham kills Elliot and leaves her corpse in a wooded area.⁶

In light of *Soul Circus*’s insistent emphasis on the ways in which inner-city crime threatens children, it seems almost inevitable when Elliot’s body is found by a boy who is terrified by his discovery: “The thing that made him run was her face: the bottom part of her jaw was set off from the

top part, and her lips were drawn back over her teeth so it looked like she had died trying to smile” (186-87).

Throughout this section of *Soul Circus*, Pelecanos underscores the “collateral damage” produced by the drug trade. Though her name resembles Granville Oliver’s, Olivia Elliot is not, as she puts it, “a drug dealer for real” (94). She is simply a young woman whose observation of dealers has convinced her that she can perform the role of a criminal and secure a small share of the city’s underground economy. The audience can readily understand her desire to escape from poverty temporarily through crime, but her recklessness poses a number of unsettling questions. How many inner-city parents risk death or prison for a few hundred dollars in drug profits? How many children become orphans after one of their parents becomes involved with “the life”? Far too many, the novel suggests—nearly everything the audience learns about Olivia Elliot’s habits, attitudes, and relationships implies that stories like hers are not uncommon in inner-city Washington.

Arnice Durham, the mother of Mario and Dewayne, is the second woman in *Soul Circus* who attempts to strike it rich through the drug trade. Like Nancy Botwin, the marijuana-dealing suburban mother in the Showtime series *Weeds*, Durham wants to remain a respectable parent while basking in crime-fueled affluence. Unlike Botwin, however, she evidently considers these aims easy to reconcile.⁷ She knows Dewayne is a dealer, yet looks the other way when he and his “troops” count cash and package drugs on her dining room table. A career in organized crime would not have been Durham’s first choice for her son, but in light of his underprivileged childhood she believes he is entitled to “make his way” by any means necessary:

Arnice Durham never questioned her son about his business, and she didn’t question her own involvement in it . . . Wasn’t any opportunity where Dewayne had come up, and the people in those schools where he went had barely taught him how to read. He was out here now, making his way the best he could, and he was doing fine. . . . She did worry about Dewayne’s safety, though, and she prayed for him . . . She prayed for her first son, Mario, too, but for different reasons. The Lord would watch over both of her

sons, because at bottom they were good. This was something she believed deep in her heart. Sometimes, also, she said prayers of thanks for the life Dewayne had given her. She knew she was blessed. (135)

Reviewers have occasionally accused Pelecanos of sermonizing about criminal justice, public education, and other socio-economic issues,⁸ but this passage conveys the fears and resentments of a woman from the inner city in a few understated sentences. Imagine a mother who feels “blessed” because one of her sons is “doing fine” in the drug trade. Parents in Washington’s affluent suburbs would be horrified to learn that their sons were selling drugs in the city’s most violent neighborhoods. When Arnice Durham reflects on Dewayne’s success, by contrast, she seems to feel something akin to the satisfaction suburban parents feel when their children enroll in medical school.⁹

Dewayne’s decision to step into the periphery of the drug trade initially appears to answer her prayers. Dewayne buys her a townhouse in a middle-class neighborhood,¹⁰ and, like the dealer in Tupac Shakur’s “Dear Mama” (1995), showers his mother with gifts. The young man in “Dear Mama” insists that his ability to support his mother financially justifies his criminality: “I ain’t guilty, ’cause even though I sell rocks / It feels good puttin’ money in your mailbox / I love payin’ rent when the rent’s due / Hope ya got the diamond necklace that I sent to you.” In a passage that appears to be an allusion to Shakur’s anthem, Dewayne smiles when he notices that his mother is wearing a necklace that spells her name “in diamonds, all of the letters hanging on a platinum chain” (135). Having become accustomed to a variety of expensive comforts, Durham shows no inclination to give them up: “[S]he had been poor and looked ghetto most of her life, but that changed when Dewayne started earning the money that he had been bringing in the past two years or so. With Dewayne’s cash she bought furniture for her new house, and clothes and jewelry, and she made two trips a week to the hair salon and had her nails done while she was there” (134).

Had Pelecanos wanted to denounce irresponsible parents in *Soul Circus*, Arnice Durham would have provided an ideal target. Like Olivia Elliot, Durham welcomes drug money, and all of the perils that come with it, into her home: “She knew to let [Dewayne’s] troops in whenever they came by

... And she knew not to talk to the police about anything, anytime” (135). But unlike Elliot she is in her late forties—indisputably old enough to know better. Nonetheless, Pelecanos’s portrayal of Durham is generally quite empathetic. In spite of her dubious code of ethics, Durham is a devoted parent who has maintained strong ties to her adult sons. That is a notable achievement in the world Pelecanos reveals to his audience. In this regard, Durham has a great deal in common with Heylia James, the black single mother in *Weeds*.¹¹ James, unlike Durham, is directly involved in the drug trade, but both women appear to believe that in spite of the danger it produces, drug money is the best available means of supporting their families and giving their children a sense of purpose. Most of the criminals in Pelecanos’s novels—black, white, and Latino alike—appear to have no “family” other than their accomplices. Dewayne Durham stands apart from most of Pelecanos’s outlaws in that he adores his mother and does not care who knows it. He drives her to church every Sunday. He does all he can to protect his half brother because “he had promised his mother he’d look after Mario, and there wasn’t anything [he] wouldn’t do for his moms” (53). And when Ulysses Foreman mentions Durham while notifying Dewayne that he has rented a weapon to Mario—“Didn’t want to worry you or y’all’s moms. But I just thought it might be better if you knew” (70)—Dewayne seems to appreciate the gun dealer’s recognition that his mother is his first priority.

Pelecanos also appeals to his audience’s sympathy by highlighting Durham’s poverty-stricken past. Before she began to profit from Dewayne’s drug transactions, she lived in the slums of Southeast Washington for more than forty years. The fathers of her sons, moreover, have long been absent. Mario was an infant when his father was murdered. Dewayne’s father, a convict serving a lengthy prison sentence, never knew his son at all. Even more importantly, by the end of the novel Durham and her sons pay a horrific price for their failure to resist the allure of the drug trade. Dewayne, indicted for racketeering, seems certain to repeat his father’s plunge into long-term incarceration. And Mario, reenacting *his* father’s demise, is killed by a cocaine user he cheated in a drug deal. The narrator is silent about Arnice Durham’s future, but it seems likely that she will return to Southeast, with little more than her diamond necklace to distract her from years of grief and remorse.

Devra Stokes, a single mother who works in a hair and nail salon, tries to turn away from Washington's criminal underworld and raise her son on a working-class income. As a teenager, Stokes dated Phillip Wood, a lieutenant in Granville Oliver's gang, but in several conversations with Derek Strange she insists that she has changed: "I don't want to get back into all that. I moved away from it . . . That life is behind me, forever and for real. I got no reason to go back there. . . . I'm ashamed for what I did when I was younger. Who I hung with, too. But that will never be me again" (76, 171, 261). Stokes's actions, however, are frequently at odds with her assertions that she has "moved away" from crime. Her employer is a drug dealer who uses the salon to generate income he can report on tax returns. She admits that she once accepted a cash payment in exchange for withdrawing a domestic violence complaint against Phillip Wood. She lives in an extremely dangerous neighborhood (twenty-five percent of the murders committed in Washington each year occur near Anacostia's historic downtown, the area Pelecanos chose to be the site of Stokes's apartment) and stays there even though her roommate's "inconsiderate, no-account" boyfriend drinks and smokes marijuana in the apartment "at all hours" (170). These problematic decisions notwithstanding, Pelecanos suggests that Stokes does not deserve the audience's censure. First of all, poorly educated single mothers cannot expect to find a wealth of attractive employment and housing opportunities. In addition, as Strange quickly perceives, most of Stokes's missteps can be attributed to her youth:

"What time you get off today?"

"About five, unless my clients run over."

"Your little boy likes ice cream, right?"

"He likes it."

"How about I see you around five? We'll find him some, and we'll talk."

Devra's eyes caught light and her mouth turned up at the sides. She was downright pretty when she smiled. "I like ice cream, too."

Course you do, thought Strange. You're not much more than a kid yourself. (27)

To shield her son Juwan from threats arising from her past, Stokes never lets him out of her sight—at work, at home, and during her meetings

with Strange: “A little boy, no older than four, sat at the foot of the [salon] chair, playing with action figures . . . Devra Stokes’s little boy was holding on to her pants leg as she gathered up her things. . . . Devra got up from her chair and Juwan stood up with her. . . . Quinn and Strange watched her walk down a hall, Juwan holding her shirttail tight” (26, 46, 181, 328). In spite of Stokes’s vigilance, however, she and Juwan are abducted and separated by a gang leader named Horace McKinley. (McKinley, an ally of Phillip Wood, is determined to prevent Stokes from providing testimony that might help Granville Oliver at Wood’s expense.) Stokes is rescued by Strange and her son is released by a member of McKinley’s gang who refuses to victimize children, but *Pelecanos* makes it clear that without a great deal of luck Stokes’s links to drug dealers, like those of Olivia Elliot and Arnice Durham, could have given rise to bloodshed and unbearable loss.

Devra Stokes’s story is, in some ways, the most alarming depiction of motherhood in *Soul Circus*. It suggests that there is something irreversible about decisions to become connected to organized crime. Stokes attempts to distance herself from “the life,” but until she receives Strange’s protection—and the unexpected mercy of a gangster—the distance she craves seems out of reach. McKinley’s brutality is the main source of her troubles, but she also helps to create the hazards that surround her. Unprepared to break all of her ties to the gangsters she “hung with” in her teens, Stokes often places herself, and her child, on the boundary between the criminal and the “legitimate.” Her rescue, moreover, merely preserves an undesirable status quo. After she endures the abductions and testifies at Oliver’s trial, Stokes continues to face all of the problems that confront single mothers in the inner city. Strange offers to help her find a new apartment, but he worries that “Juwan’s future, like the futures of many of the children . . . born into these circumstances, did not look promising” (75).

In addition to his detailed portraits of Olivia Elliot, Arnice Durham, and Devra Stokes, *Pelecanos* laces *Soul Circus* with dozens of ephemeral references to motherhood. When Mario Durham knocks on her door, Elliot recalls some advice she received from her mother: “[S]he put the tip of her finger in her mouth while she let it all bounce around in her mind. Her mother had told her to take her finger [out of] her mouth all the time when she was a kid . . . [but] the habit had never left her” (112). Oliver’s defense attorneys inform the jury that he was taught early in his childhood to inject

his mother with cocaine. Jerome Long and Allante Jones, two of the apprentice dealers in Dewayne Durham's gang, are also troubled by memories of their mothers' drug- and crime-related misadventures: "With one mother on a slow junk-ride down and another in and out of jail, they had been raised by Long's grandmother until she could no longer handle them" (49). Mike Montgomery, the gang enforcer who releases Juwan Stokes, turns against Horace McKinley when McKinley's misogyny calls to mind the domestic violence Montgomery witnessed as a child: "Gettin' violent on women didn't sit well with him; he'd seen a whole lot of men—if you could call them men—beat on his mother . . . when he was a kid. One of them finally beat his mother half to death" (164). Janine Strange, the mother of an eighteen-year-old son named Lionel, patiently coaches her husband when he stumbles as an inexperienced stepfather. After Strange tells Lionel that neglecting to change the oil in his car is like "gettin' on with a woman without giving her a kiss" (104), for example, his wife lets him know that she did not care for the analogy:

"That was pretty smooth tonight," said Janine. "Comparing women to cars."

"Yeah, I know. But you got to remember, though, I came to this game late. You had sixteen years of practice with that boy before I even came through the door."

"You're doing fine." (106)

Pelecanos even pauses to give his audience glimpses of several mothers his principal characters have never met. A cashier embraces her son after four men are killed in a gunfight in front of a Korean-owned grocery store. In a courthouse, Strange sees "a mother . . . raising her voice to her sloppily dressed, slouching son . . . [and then] heard a clap as she slap-boxed his ear" (139). The detective gives a "polite but direct" (377) reprimand to a mother who leaves her seven-year-old son alone on a street corner while she buys groceries after dark. And in one of the few soothing moments Strange experiences in *Soul Circus* he hears a mother speak about her son on the radio:

He turned the radio on and moved the dial to PGC. The Super Funk Regulator was on the air, talking to a woman who had called in from her car.

"Where you at right now?" asked the DJ.

"I'm on Benning Road, headed home from work."

“Who you goin’ to see?”

“My son Darius,” said the woman . . . “He’s ten years old.”

“You have a good one,” said the DJ. “Thanks for rollin’ with a brother.”

“Thanks for lettin’ a sister roll.”

Strange smiled. He did love D.C. (84)

II

The representations of motherhood in *Soul Circus* are by no means unprecedented in American crime narratives. Mothers play vital roles in *The Public Enemy* (1931), *White Heat* (1949), and other gangster films starring James Cagney. In Martin Scorsese’s *Goodfellas* (1990), Tommy DeVito stabs a man with a carving knife borrowed from his mother’s kitchen. The first two seasons of *The Sopranos* (1999-2000), moreover, highlight numerous domestic conflicts stirred up by Livia Soprano. During a session with his analyst Dr. Jennifer Melfi, Tony Soprano claims that his mother’s belligerence gradually “wore down” his father, a violent, experienced gangster:

Melfi: Let’s stay on [the subject of] your mother.

Soprano: Now that my father’s dead, he’s a saint. When he was alive— nothin’. And my dad was tough. He ran his own crew. A guy like that—and my mother wore him down . . .

Melfi: Quite a formidable maternal presence. (Pilot)

Mothers have also figured prominently in popular music outlaw anthems as dissimilar in era, genre, and mood as Shakur’s “Dear Mama” and Merle Haggard’s “Mama Tried” (1968). As Armond White observes, the lyrics of “Mama Tried” suggest that “Dear Mama,” one of the first hip-hop records to focus on a criminal’s relationship with his mother, was not as innovative as some critics have asserted:

“Dear Mama” . . . displays the heart and sensitivity behind a music mostly known for insolence. . . . But Tupac’s celebration and testimony are not specific to the affection Black children feel for their mothers, nor are they an un-

usual expression of bad-boy remorse. Merle Haggard got there first . . . Both Tupac and Haggard show what it's like for a rebel to feel humbled. Their abashment contradicts the hell-raiser image of both country and hip-hop music. (117-18)

Some mothers in American crime narratives function as channels through which the audience receives information about the criminal's childhood and family background. The first season of *The Sopranos*, for instance, emphasizes the ways in which Livia Soprano's destructive behavior has engendered her son's criminal career: "The judicious use of flashbacks provides . . . a sense of Tony's childhood traumas at the hands of Livia. In one vivid scene she threatens to gouge his eyes out with a fork when Tony begs her to buy him an electric organ. . . . Livia is the evil *magna mater* who makes Tony's criminal behavior understandable. . . . We are amazed that [he] turned out as well as he did considering that he started life with Livia" (Gabbard 101, 106).¹² Other representations of motherhood in crime narratives reveal that the criminal has become violent in spite of the support of an affectionate parent. As James Niebaur points out, the audience infers from the scenes in *The Public Enemy* which feature Tom Powers's doting mother that Powers has spent most of his life "enveloped by family and friends who love him" (44). Robert Sklar argues convincingly that Powers's mother does not simply view him as a beloved child; he remains her "baby" all of his life:

Tom Powers . . . is his mother's perpetual baby—and his babyhood is linked to the violence that helps him rise to gangster power. . . . Lying in his hospital bed [after he is wounded in a shootout], weak and bandaged, he whispers to his mother, "You must like [my brother] better than me." She exclaims, "No, no Tom! You're my baby!" The gruesome final image of the dead Tom, left at his mother's doorstep, has often been described as a corpse trussed like a mummy; but in fact he is swaddled in a blanket like an infant in a nightmare fulfillment of his dependence. (32-33)

Gangsters' mothers have also been used to call attention to the poignant, ordinary traits of vicious characters who might otherwise seem utterly disconnected from common experience. In *White Heat*, Cody Jarrett

sits on his mother's lap and says, "Always thinkin' about your Cody, aren't you, Ma?," as he recovers from a painful headache. (As James Maxfield observes, this scene "demonstrates that there are times when Cody does not have iron control over events around him, but instead is subject to forces which overwhelm him and reduce him to childish vulnerability. . . . His grateful remark to [his mother] . . . reveals the degree of his dependency on her" [72].)

Pelecanos accomplishes all of these narrow objectives in *Soul Circus*. His portrayal of Arnice Durham, for example, emphasizes that Dewayne, like thousands of other young people in the District, was poorly educated in the city's public schools and turned toward the drug trade because of the dearth of "legitimate" opportunities in the neighborhood in which he was raised. Dewayne can be ruthless with his adversaries, but in his mother's home his demeanor is gentle and courteous. Early in the novel, Dewayne seems indistinguishable from the other gangsters in Pelecanos's Washington, but it becomes increasingly difficult to view him as a representative drug dealer when the audience learns that he commands his "troops" while wearing clothes his mother has washed and pressed and comforts her with boxes of chocolate truffles when she worries about her children's safety. Pelecanos strays from the traditions of his genre, however, by scattering *dozens* of references to motherhood throughout *Soul Circus*. This unusual step raises a number of questions. Why, given its preoccupation with parents and children, does *Soul Circus* have so little to say about fathers?¹³ Why does the novel allude to relationships between mothers and daughters so infrequently? Why are so many of the mothers in the novel from the inner city? Why does Pelecanos mention several mothers who are strangers to his characters? To answer these questions, it is necessary to recognize that *Soul Circus*'s messages about family and crime are broader and more political than those ordinarily conveyed in crime narratives.¹⁴ More specifically, the novel's portrayals of motherhood underscore the ways in which the drug trade endangers women and children. The list of young men who suffer drug-related misfortunes in the novel (Granville Oliver, Dewayne and Mario Durham, Allante Jones, Jerome Long, and others) is extensive, but so is the list of women and children (Olivia Elliot, Mark Elliot, Arnice Durham, Devra Stokes, Juwan Stokes, and others) whose safety is threatened by their proximity to "the life." Pelecanos emphasizes, in other

words, that his gangsters are not isolated figures; they have mothers, girlfriends, siblings, and in some cases children, and their crimes frequently expose those “civilians” to danger.

This issue is rarely mentioned in political and journalistic discussions of the drug trade. Most commentaries about the so-called war on drugs suggest that “the life” is populated almost exclusively by dangerous (and endangered) young males. Laura Bush, for instance, recently concluded a speaking tour in which she reframed Nancy Reagan’s “Say No To Drugs” campaign by urging young men to “say no” to crime: “Mrs. Bush, who will take her crusade all over the country over the next few months and plans a summit in [the fall of 2005], wants a ‘national focus’ on what we can do for boys. . . . ‘We want all young people to grow up to lead successful lives in our country,’ she said in Baltimore. ‘And we want to show young men, particularly, an ideal of manhood that respects life and rejects violence’” (Rauber 1). On the other side of the political landscape, the former *New York Times* columnist Anthony Lewis has argued that U.S. sentencing laws systematically target “lost young men” in inner-city neighborhoods:

[T]he effort to stop drug use by harsher and harsher penalties has had devastating side effects. It has made importation and distribution of the forbidden products immensely profitable. That in turn has lured large numbers of young men . . . into the trade. . . . One third of this country’s black men between 20 and 29 are now in prison or under supervision of the criminal justice system, most of them for drug crimes. (A29)

When drug dealers speak publicly about their enterprises, they also tend to characterize the drug trade as a snare for underprivileged young men. In 2004, for example, Tommy Edelin, the leader of a gang known as the 1-5 Mob, spent three hours during his sentencing hearing “lecturing” a district court in Washington about, among other things, the counterproductive results engendered by contemporary law enforcement policies: “Wearing an orange-and-white striped jail jumpsuit and wire-rim glasses, Edelin maintained that he was innocent of the government’s claims that he orchestrated killings to further his drug business . . . then warned that many other young men growing up rudderless and hopeless in neglected pockets of Washington were following his path into crime” (Leonnig B04).

These commentators' shared assumption that the drug trade has a destructive effect on young men is surely not incorrect, but it has some disturbing implications. If, in this time of political "polarization," everyone from the spouse of a conservative president to a prominent liberal columnist to a real-life Granville Oliver assumes that the principal victims of "the life" are armed and dangerous young male felons, it seems unlikely that many Americans will protest against things as they are. Virtually everyone will agree that men like Tommy Edelin deserve to suffer as a consequence of the violence and corruption they have produced. As Strange reflects during a conversation with Oliver, the damage inflicted by drug dealers is all but unforgivable: "You left out the part about all the young black men you killed or had killed, thought Strange. And the part about you poisoning your own community with drugs, and ruining the lives of all the young people you recruited and the lives of their families" (7).

In *Soul Circus*, Pelecanos moves beyond conventional opinion about inner-city crime by suggesting that the drug trade is not only an arena in which violent young males prey on each other—it is much *worse* than that. The crimes committed in the novel are not confined to dark alleys in deserted sections of Washington; to the contrary, they often take place in apartment buildings, townhouses, small businesses, and other sites occupied by women and children. By the end of the novel, the audience senses that nearly every family in inner-city Washington is threatened by the drug trade. Some women, like the three mothers discussed in the first part of this essay, sell drugs themselves, maintain close relationships (and/or collaborate) with dealers, or find it difficult to break their connections to "the life." Others, like Tosha Smith, the guardian of one of the boys on the football team coached by Strange and Quinn, become addicts. Even Janine Strange, the most prosperous African-American woman in the novel, is not immune from drug-related hazards. A house owned by the Stranges is ransacked by criminals who want to disrupt Derek Strange's inquiry relating to Phillip Wood, and the detective exposes himself and his family to danger late in the novel by wounding Horace McKinley. Thus, *Soul Circus* offers an eloquent reply to conservatives who argue that residents of American inner cities can avoid the perils of the drug trade simply by holding them at arm's length. One could plausibly apply that reasoning to Olivia Elliot and Arnice Durham, who deliberately chase after drug money, but several other traumatized

women and children in *Soul Circus* do nothing to associate themselves with Washington's underground economy. Mark Elliot does not have the option of "saying no" to his mother's murder. Devra Stokes is threatened, sexually harassed, abducted, and briefly separated from her child even though she has tried to keep away from "the life." Her son Juwan is, of course, in no position to resist when McKinley has him kidnapped. The Korean-American mother and son terrified by gang-related gunfire provide another haunting illustration of the drug trade's capacity to threaten innocent women and children: "Inside the market, a woman named Sung locked the front door, extinguished the lights, and sat down on the floor with her little boy. His name was Tommy. She held him tightly and told him not to cry" (208).

This embrace, as much as any moment in Pelecanos's fiction, highlights the ways in which he has departed from the traditions of American crime fiction. In Saul Bellow's *Dangling Man* (1944), the narrator asserts that "[m]ost serious matters are closed to the hard-boiled. They are unpracticed in introspection, and therefore badly equipped to deal with opponents whom they cannot shoot like big game or outdo in daring" (7). Nearly every page of *Soul Circus* casts doubt on this dismissive assessment. The novel's intricate plot, modern-day *noir* atmosphere, and explosions of violence attest to Pelecanos's mastery of "the hard-boiled," but they also challenge the notion that "serious matters" are beyond the reach of writers preoccupied with masculinity, violence, urban corruption, and so forth. *Soul Circus*'s representations of race, crime, and motherhood are so complex and subtly modulated, in fact, that it is hard to imagine where else readers can find comparably illuminating discourse about current conditions in American inner cities. Corporate-controlled media? Politicians in Washington? Not likely.¹⁵ Many writers of "literary" fiction could presumably keep pace with Pelecanos in terms of vibrant storytelling and incisive social commentary, but to do so they might have to revive the mode of urban realism associated with forebears such as Zola and Dreiser. In the meantime, George Pelecanos, a writer whose work has been overlooked by critics in the academy,¹⁶ will remain an indispensable source of dispatches on family and crime in the inner city.

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Notes

¹Pelecanos does not attempt to explain away the sexist attitudes that often accompany his detectives' hyper-masculine preoccupations. As Woody Haut points out, even Nick Stefanos, the first-person narrator of Pelecanos's most directly autobiographical novels, is not above viewing women in callous, exploitative ways: "[W]hen it comes to women, Stefanos's attitude is sometimes suspect. He demonstrates this in [*Down by the River Where the Dead Men Go* (1995)], not so much in meaningless sexual encounters as in the way he splits up with his girlfriend. Because he does not want to stop drinking, nor stop her from drinking, he decides to dump Lyla, but he does this only after speaking with her father. . . . [Lyla] has little to say in the matter" (118).

²A number of reviewers have stressed that Pelecanos's plots unfold in neighborhoods ignored by most writers of "Washington novels." Maureen Corrigan observes that "Pelecanos has both celebrated and eulogized the city rarely seen by the politicians, the tourists and the suburban commuters . . ." (BW03). Similarly, Ben Greenman writes that Pelecanos's representations of the city have "little to do with murder on the Mall or dirty deeds in Foggy Bottom. It is a rough patch of urban real estate populated by guttersnipes, snitches, dealers . . . [and] plenty of decent and hardworking citizens who have to stand by and watch as their neighborhoods go to hell" (90).

³By focusing on African-American investigators in the Strange-Quinn series and in *The Night Gardener* (2006), Pelecanos has aligned himself with an ongoing trend toward diversity in hard-boiled detective fiction. As Lewis D. Moore points out, "[t]hrough the 1970s, the hard-boiled detective novel is . . . largely white and male. Beginning with Marcia Mueller's Sharon McCone in San Francisco, Sara Paretsky's V. I. Warshawski in Chicago, and Liza Cody's Anna Lee in London, females play an increasingly significant role in the genre's development. Also, Walter Mosely's Easy Rawlins and James Sallis's Lew Griffin introduce black American hard-boiled detectives and Bruce Cook does the same with Chico Cervantes, a Chicano" (269). Maureen T. Reddy argues that feminist writers have produced a "countertradition" in detective fiction which emphasizes "the violation of linear progress, the ultimate absence of authority as conventionally defined, and the use of dialogic form. This countertradition shares with feminist work in other genres an essential subversiveness . . . exposing the genre's essential conservatism" (2).

⁴In some ways, this calamity is the principal link between *Hell to Pay* and *Soul Circus*. The earlier novel concentrates on the violent death of one child and the repercussions of that horrific event; *Soul Circus* implies that innumerable children in inner-city Washington are in danger of becoming the next Joe Wilder.

⁵*Hard Revolution* (2004), a “prequel” to the Strange-Quinn novels, reveals that the detective is all too familiar with Granville Oliver’s family. In the spring of 1968, Oliver’s father Alvin Jones murdered Strange’s brother Dennis. Strange, a rookie police officer at the time, avenges the killing by shooting Jones at the height of that year’s riots in Washington and then resigns from the force.

⁶Durham feels as exultant as Bigger Thomas in Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940) when he realizes that he has killed a woman. Bigger thinks of his inadvertent suffocation of Mary Dalton as a kind of rebirth: “He had murdered and had created a new life for himself. It was something that was all his own, and it was the first time in his life he had anything that others could not take away . . . Elation filled him” (119, 120). Similarly, Mario feels transformed when he assaults Olivia: “The revolver from the pocket of his Tommys appeared in his hand. He gripped it by its barrel. . . . She looked up at him, at the gun, and her eyes went wide, humble and afraid. He liked the way it made him feel. He was strong, handsome, and tall, everything he had never been before” (117).

⁷As a consequence of her attempted fusion of motherhood and marijuana sales, Nancy Botwin is tormented by fears of violence and imprisonment and repeatedly accused of hypocrisy. In the pilot episode, for example, a teenage drug peddler named Josh ridicules the “pot-dealing mom”: “Everything that comes out of Josh’s mouth is a sarcastic comment about the hypocrisy of adults generally—especially the ones who use dope—or of Nancy specifically, since she is dealing but, at the same time, ordering him not to sell to kids” (Franklin 156).

⁸In *Soul Circus*, Pelecanos generally articulates his political convictions through Derek Strange. Near the end of the novel, for example, the detective is annoyed by a politician’s disingenuous posturing with respect to gun control: “Deep inside [the front section of the *Washington Post*], a congressman from the Carolinas dismissed the need for further handgun laws and vowed to continue his fight to hold Hollywood and the record industry accountable for the sexual content and violent nature of their product” (373).

⁹In some ways, Durham’s relationship with Dewayne echoes that of Ma Jarrett (Margaret Wycherly) and her son Cody (James Cagney) in *White Heat* (1949). Durham is not directly involved in her son’s crimes, but like Ma Jarrett she makes those crimes possible by endlessly comforting and praising her son. As James Maxfield asserts, “Cody regards his mother as an altogether positive influence on his life: she comforts him when he is in pain, assists him in his career of crime (at one point she says to him, ‘I’ll help you, Cody, like always’), and builds up his ego . . . But despite, or perhaps because of, the warmth of Cody’s feelings for his mother, her influence on him in the end is entirely destructive” (66).

¹⁰With his usual attention to the history and culture of the District, Pelecanos situates Durham’s townhouse in “the Walter E. Washington Estates.” Walter Wash-

ington, the city's first black mayor and the incumbent Marion Barry defeated to become mayor in 1978 (Colburn and Adler 203-205), has come to represent the kind of respectable upward social mobility the Durhams fail to achieve. Born in a small farming town in Georgia, Washington studied public administration and law at Howard University and began his career as a D.C. government official by working for the Alley Dwelling Authority, an agency established in the 1930s to help poor families move out of the slums. Needless to say, Washington would have been dismayed to learn about a family that escaped from the inner city through crime instead of education, hard work, and progressive social programs.

¹¹A number of commentators have argued that *Weeds*'s portrayal of James is saturated with racist stereotypes. In *The New Yorker*, for instance, Nancy Franklin asserts that "[t]here is one shoddy aspect of *Weeds*, however, and that's the depiction of Nancy's supplier, Heylia (Tonye Patano) . . . a monotonously sassy black woman who is meant to be a tongue-in-cheek indictment of the way blacks are represented in pop culture" (156).

¹²Noël Carroll and Scott D. Wilson also conclude that Livia Soprano's transgressions help to explain why so many viewers empathize with her murderous son. Carroll points out that "[i]n important instances, Tony is more sinned against than sinning: no one deserves a mother as manipulative and poisonous as Livia" (131). Similarly, Wilson emphasizes that "Livia is a black hole of depression who does not recognize any of the good things Tony does for her. . . . Why does Tony spend so much time and effort trying to have a good relationship with her? Because she is his mother, and as he says to [Dr. Melfi] . . . 'You're supposed to take care of your mother'" (89).

¹³When characters in *Soul Circus* refer to fatherhood, they almost invariably mention the dearth of fathers in inner-city neighborhoods. Ulysses Foreman, for example, observes that the absence of steady paternal guidance has fueled the rise of urban gang violence: "[As long] as there was poverty, long as there wasn't no good education, long as there wasn't no real opportunity, long as kids down here had no fathers and were looking to belong to something, then there was gonna be gangs and a need for guns" (63).

¹⁴As Matthew J. Bruccoli points out, Raymond Chandler, like many other writers of mid-twentieth-century detective fiction, was seldom motivated by political concerns: "It has become a commonplace that the private eye figure . . . was a response to the corruption of the twenties and the social injustice of the thirties. However, it is not necessary to seek politico-socio causes for Marlowe's concern with honor and justice, which were moral concerns for Raymond Chandler. He was not political, and his work included no political ideas apart from his distrust of power" (22).

¹⁵Another compelling source of detailed, complicated narratives about current conditions in American inner cities is the HBO series *The Wire*, to which Pelecanos contributes as a producer, writer, and story editor.

¹⁶The *MLA Bibliography* lists only five items relating to Pelecanos: four brief interviews and “Between Origins and Art,” an essay in which Pelecanos discusses his creative methodology.

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The Politics of Talk: The *Oprah* Interview as Narrative

Bill Clinton on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*! The prospect drew more media buzz and longer lineups than usual for the June 21, 2004 studio taping in Chicago (“Oprah Goes One-On-One”). Airing the following day, the hour-long interview with the former President focused on the topics covered in Clinton’s hot-off-the-press autobiography, *My Life*: his abusive childhood, his conflicting public and private lives, his weight struggles, and, of course, his affair with Monica Lewinsky. Public reaction to the show was divided along fairly predictable lines. Oprah fans loved the way she kept Bill in the hot seat, curbing his impulse for grandstanding and continually steering the discussion back to the real issues: for this viewership, his sexual mistakes and their emotional impact on him and his family. Conversely, those who admire Clinton as a politician, initially mystified as to why he would appear on a daytime talk show in the first place, reasoned that he wanted finally to “come clean” about his personal life and “be heard” in a way he wasn’t able to be in the context of more highbrow media.¹ Asked afterwards if she’d had trouble keeping the politician on topic, Oprah acknowledged, “He’s a talker, he’s a talker!” (“Oprah Goes One-On-One”).

The irony of a comment like this from the mouth of the universally-acknowledged “Queen of Talk” gestures to the competitive atmosphere between the two celebrities on the set. As a talk show host and interviewer, Oprah is anything but a passive cipher for her guests’ “truth.” On the contrary, she determines the structure and emphasis of their stories even as she solicits those stories with her questions; she meets—and very often

trumps—their conclusions with her own. The interview is a genre in which the “facts” are always determined performatively, through a two-way negotiation of the terms and with some degree of struggle for rhetorical authority and power. Oprah’s interviews offer an extreme case, insofar as her celebrity ethos and “message” consistently take precedence over other kinds of authority (e.g., expert, experiential) presented on her show. The Oprah interview mobilizes the rhetorical conventions of testimony, witnessing, debate, dispute, confession, and psychotherapy. Whether the interviewee is a politician, a criminal, an author or an interior decorator, what brings the various modes of discourse together is the performative persona of Oprah herself. With her recent endorsement of Democratic presidential hopeful Sen. Barack Obama of Illinois, Oprah has deliberately moved beyond the role of celebrity role model to enter into political activism. In order to understand the kind of stories offered on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, then, viewers need to be versant in Oprah’s own story—both the biographical narrative that underpins her public persona and the self-help narrative that dictates both her choice of topics and her approach to them.

Oprah’s Personal Legend

The story of Oprah’s life comes into play in every interview she conducts, whether an “Oprah One on One” celebrity chat or a group discussion on a salient (or salacious) social issue. The widely-reported collection of anecdotes about Oprah’s childhood and upbringing, supplied for the most part by Oprah herself over the years, has become so familiar that it comprises what some refer to as a “legend” (Haag 117). Beginning with her dirt-poor Mississippi girlhood on her grandmother’s farm—complete with outhouse, corncob doll, and daily whippings for misbehavior—and punctuated with tales of sexual abuse, struggles with weight gain, depression, and being black in a white world, Oprah’s is a classic rags-to-riches story. She has been called a modern-day Horatio Alger so often that even she worries about becoming a cliché (Haag 117).

What makes Oprah legendary is the extremes of poor and rich, lowly and powerful that characterize her narrative. Oprah isn’t just rich; with a personal fortune of 1.1 billion dollars, she is the richest black woman in the world. Her talk show isn’t just successful; it airs in 107 countries, and with

26 million U.S. viewers, it has held its No. 1 spot in U.S. daytime talk for 18 years despite challenges from at least fifty rivals (Sellers). Oprah also owns Harpo Inc. (“Oprah” spelled backwards), a production company that creates feature films, award-winning TV specials, and home videos. Her lifestyle magazine, launched in 2000, is the most successful startup in the industry to date, outselling *Martha Stewart Living* and *Vogue*. Add to this list of accomplishments an Academy Award nomination for her acting role in *The Color Purple*, a Global Peace Award for her inner-city charity, the Angel Network, and a TV book club so popular that Oprah’s insignia on a novel’s cover typically boosts sales tenfold. Everything Oprah touches, in other words, seems to turn to gold.

But why are Oprah’s fans so fond of hearing her life story? Why, as we hear Oprah digress into yet another parable from her cockroaches-as-playmates childhood, doesn’t this Oprah-centric universe start to feel claustrophobic and repetitive? One disgruntled ex-producer at Harpo Inc. called the company “a narcissistic workplace” (qtd. in Sellers); why doesn’t the charge of narcissism get leveled at the media empress more often? The answer has to do with the way certain elements of Oprah’s mythologized biography tap into a wider, collective myth of self-reliance and limitless possibility commonly referred to as the American Dream. In her 1997 Wellesley College Commencement Address, Oprah exhorted, “Create the highest, grandest vision possible for your life because you become what you believe.” She invokes her personal legend by describing how, at the age of five, she watched her grandmother boil clothes in an iron pot and felt that her life could be greater than what she saw. “Anything is possible for you,” Oprah concludes. “I am proof of that. I think that my life, the fact that I was born where I was born, and the time that I was and have been able to do what I have done speaks to the possibility” (Wellesley Address). Interpreting herself as proof of how America rewards those who pursue their dreams is a recurrent theme in Oprah’s discourse. In *Time* magazine’s 2006 *Time 100* survey, Oprah is profiled under the category “Leaders and Revolutionaries” by none other than US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who claims triumphantly that “Oprah’s story is America’s story.”

The method of achieving success like Oprah’s, of course, is hard work and determination. Oprah claims that her harsh childhood gave her the strength of character to become what she is today (Haag 117). The

fact that she embodies the ideal of the self-made woman takes the emphasis off issues of social and racial (in)justice in Oprah's personal narrative. Recently, Oprah has ventured into building schools for girls in South Africa, and in discussing this project she mentions education as a key to her escape from poverty: "Had I not had books and education in Mississippi, I would have believed that's all there was" (Sellers). However, despite her recent political involvement, her own rags-to-riches story is framed apolitically, insofar as Oprah insistently interprets her own rise to stardom as a triumph of imagination and individual will rather than an exemplum of the need for social change. This permits Oprah's viewers to regard her as "a comforting, nonthreatening bridge between the black and white cultures" and helps explain Oprah's popularity among white as well as black women.²

As her name has increased in recognizability over the past twenty years, Oprah has repeatedly abbreviated it. *The Oprah Winfrey Show* is commonly referred to as *Oprah*, and the magazine is entitled simply *O*. The distilling of her identity into a single initial or symbol reflects and bolsters her "superstar" status, but it also points to an ironic element of depersonalization in Oprah's rise to the top: from a business perspective, Oprah's name is also Oprah's brand. Her message, centered on the idea of living one's "authentic life," is a product for sale not only through her talk show but in her magazine and, most recently, on an interactive, multimedia website that boasts forty-five million page views per month (Allen). This emphasis on personal authenticity makes it doubtful whether Oprah's image could survive, say, a jail term. As Patricia Sellers puts it, "If she does something as Oprah the person that undermines the trust her customers have in Oprah the persona, her brand could quickly fizzle."

Anxiety over Oprah's good name reared its head, for example, in the 2007 sexual abuse allegations at the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls in Johannesburg. While Oprah kept insisting that "the buck stops with me," South African media were dutiful in distancing the scandal from the school's patroness: "The abuse scandal that has rocked Oprah Winfrey's South African school for girls does not reflect badly on the famous talk show host. It reflects badly on this nation" (qtd. In Perry). Because of the risk, Oprah's employees sign a lifelong confidentiality agreement, and several attempts by former employees to publish their experiences have been blocked by the courts. So when Oprah enthuses, "I am just thrilled that I

get paid so much every day for just being myself,” the remark is disingenuous.³ Being “herself” requires careful grooming and management, and the rhetoric of authenticity here sidesteps the fact that the persona operates at several removes from whatever the “real” Oprah Winfrey might be up to on any given day.

Besides protecting her persona from being sullied by negative PR, part of Oprah’s management of her public self involves mediating between her “superstar” image and her “everywoman” image. Commentators define Oprah’s charisma as “the heroism of everyday life” and point to her “accessible style” as the key to her popularity (Illouz 114). An example frequently used to support this opinion is Oprah’s highly publicized struggle with her weight. Sharing so much information with her fans about her diet and grueling exercise regimen (Oprah often says she “hates every second” of her workout, an admission that always brings laughter and cheers from her studio audience) certainly underlines her self-discipline and determination. But at the same time, viewers see the extreme effort that goes into looking camera-worthy and feel Oprah’s stardom is less mysterious, less removed from their everyday lives, than that of other media celebrities.⁴

Onstage and on television Oprah performs her “everywoman” persona by presenting herself not only as the host of her talk show, but as a member of the various groups being represented: the black middle class, women in general, slighted lovers, abused children. Oprah thus appears to be “always already one of her own guests” (Masciarotte 94). But at the same time, Oprah also manages to align herself with her audience. In a show on proper brassiere fitting, for instance, Oprah reacts with the same laughter and incredulity as the studio audience to the “slimming” tips offered by the lingerie experts (“Oprah’s Bra and Swimsuit Intervention”). Kathleen Green calls this tendency to identify with the skepticism of her viewers a “recurring motif” in Oprah’s everywoman persona (671). Oprah’s periodic switch into southern black vernacular is another manifestation of her ability to become one of the crowd. Of course, Oprah has spoken with her guests before the show, and is thus more familiar with their ideas than are her viewers, so perhaps she may be better described, as Kathleen Dixon terms it, as “first citizen” of her audience (175): a regular member of the group, but also always the designated spokesperson for it. Oprah’s ability to shift her position in relationship to her guests and viewing audience maxi-

mizes the public's opportunity to identify with her. Indeed, as one admirer puts it, Oprah is "our mammy, our therapist, our cheerleader, our role model, our moral conscience, and our harshest critic when we need it" (Haag 120).

Oprah's Venue: The Talk Show Genre

Television talk shows have inherited some of their generic and structural characteristics from other, older cultural traditions. Formal debates, panel discussions, courtroom proceedings and public inquiry hearings all use codified procedures for sharing ideas and opinions, including the ideas and opinions of expert guests or witnesses. Talk shows adopt many of the discursive rules of these traditions, like turn-taking, rebuttal, and "taking the floor," but the rules are less rigidly enforced on TV. What makes the talk show look like a more participatory, democratic forum is the central role played by the studio and call-in audience. Historical pastimes that emphasized public discussion include the Italian academy, the French salon, and the English coffeehouse or club, and—going far back—the ancient Greek agora. Prior to TV, the radio call-in show featured (and still features) a public chat centered on an issue of common concern or interest and mediated by a charismatic host. But in many ways, talk shows are a unique product of the TV age, the natural showcase of what the medium of television does best. The first theorist of mass media, Marshall McLuhan, argued that television is the most intimate medium because it demands a high degree of viewer participation. Speech, according to McLuhan, is the most complex form of communication, involving more of our senses than, say, print (78)—and TV speech is the nearest thing to the live version (at least until webcams become ubiquitous). TV is also by nature a close-up medium. Even in scenes of action or violence, viewers tend to focus on the reactions displayed on the actors' faces (319-20), so close-up shots that are used sparingly in movies are standard fare on TV (317). Electronic images almost immediately received by viewers in their own homes bring content "closer," collapsing distance and seeming to establish an intimacy between performer and viewer (Wilson 91). People conversing on television has thus proven to be as popular a format as sitcoms or dramas, and TV talk

show hosts in particular take advantage of the medium to “connect” emotionally with the camera.

The Oprah Winfrey Show stands out amongst its competitors in maximizing the potential of the television format. Over the years Oprah and her producers have developed techniques that tailor the show to the demands of its two largest stakeholders: the advertisers, whose commercials constantly interrupt the program, and the viewers, who for the most part “tune in and out” of the show while performing other tasks (like child care) at home (Dixon 173). Oprah employs a wide variety of programming “genres” to sustain viewer interest, alternating casual onstage conversation with pre-recorded segments of a higher, almost filmic, production quality. Such segments might sketch out the background story of a guest with footage of his/her home and family, show suffering children in a developing nation where a guest volunteers, or re-enact a crime scene being recalled in the “live” discussion. The musical soundtrack and voice-over in these segments are always dramatic and emotive, helping to pull viewers in when they might otherwise remain detached or only marginally interested in the issue being discussed. Before each commercial break, viewers are offered a “pitch” for the episode’s next segment: Oprah will turn directly to the camera and say, “Don’t go away; you won’t believe what’s coming next,” and a pre-recorded vignette will offer a glimpse of something intriguing like a weeping or horrified guest, or a man in a prisoner’s uniform holding his head in shame. Also helping bridge commercial breaks are “commercials” for upcoming episodes of *Oprah*.

Oprah’s own hosting style varies throughout the show, too, from reportative or didactic speech to pathetic appeals; from generalized, “words to the wise” delivery to an intimate, whispering exchange with a guest. While no footage is ever repeated, the show is structured recursively and continually returns to the same themes and conclusions. Every statement Oprah makes responds to and recapitulates what a guest has just said, so that each comment relates to the episode’s over-arching concern. This ensures that a viewer can turn on the TV at any point in the show and never struggle to pick up the thread. All of this intertextuality and dialogic overlapping has led some scholars to suggest that the talk show is the most post-modern genre on television (Rapping, qtd. in Dixon 173). Mastering the elastic nature of television discourse to this extent has allowed Oprah to

create a product that capitalizes on the balance between entertainment and information, “reality” programming and slick, riveting drama.

Several of Oprah’s predecessors in the talk show business helped pave the way for her success with the format. 1960s programming focusing on “women’s interests” included Dinah Shore’s *Dinah’s Place* and Virginia Graham’s *Girlltalk*; these shows pioneered the “homey, folksy, friendly feel” of Oprah’s studio today (Haag 116). News interview shows hosted by Barbara Walters and Connie Chung also fueled audience appetites for TV talk. But it was Phil Donahue who first achieved long-term, sky-high ratings with a talk show centered on female guests and female audiences. The panel of experts, the audience participation, the sensational confessions, the roving cameras, the emotive, human host—Donahue made such elements an integral part of daytime TV. But Oprah really picked up where Donahue left off. Emotions in *Donahue* were merely by-products of the topic under discussion, side effects that undoubtedly served as the basis for viewers’ interest but were rarely discussed directly or acknowledged as important in themselves. Oprah dispensed with Donahue’s pose of (masculine) rationality amidst the (feminine) hysteria of the guests and his habit of reducing his guests’ painful stories to “evidence” of whatever social problem he was trying to present on the show that day (Masciarotte 92). For Donahue’s “report” approach she substituted “rapport” (Tannen), so that the focus shifted from *what* the guests were telling to *how* they were telling it and how it made them feel. For Oprah, women’s feelings are the whole point.

Discourse in Oprah

Some commentators point to the emphasis on feelings in *The Oprah Winfrey Show* as participating in a uniquely female type of discourse. Studies on gender differences in communication note that women tend towards greater self-disclosure than men in their conversations with friends (Haag 117). Sharing life stories and personal information builds intimacy in female relationships, and Oprah’s continued self-disclosure makes both guests and viewers feel closer to her. We could take this idea further to argue that Oprah’s insistence on “female” norms of communication also explains the show’s relative open-endedness and its favoring of process over product—

the discussion itself rather than its conclusions. Oprah herself likes to point out that her empathy with others' emotions stands her apart from other interviewers. Poking fun at her early career efforts to emulate the likes of Barbara Walters, she says "[it] wasn't really effective as a news reporter to be covering a fire and crying because the people lost their house" (she pretends to cry as she says this) (Wellesley Address).

The key word here is "empathetic" rather than the broader "sympathetic," as one might imagine any good interviewer would have to be. While the discussions on *Oprah* may represent "female" ways of interacting, a more accurate description emerges by narrowing the scope beyond the female to the personal—to the reactions of Oprah herself. Oprah's empathetic tears (or her conspiratorial laughter) comprise the key element of the narrative experience that viewers are expecting when they sit down every afternoon to watch her show. When my mother telephones me to say "women are still being killed at the hands of the men they love," I can hear Oprah's voice; I can see the quiver of Oprah's curls as she shakes her head slowly, her eyes brimming with tears for the stricken sister-in-law on her stage. The statement my mother is quoting transcends the banal for her not because of shocking new national statistics, nor even because of the heart-rending testimony of the women onstage, but because of Oprah's own manifest sorrow as she summarizes the show's theme.

By the "narrative experience" of Oprah's viewers, I am referring to a combination of story (entertainment one can sit back and watch) and gesture (questions put to viewers, mainly "what do you make of this?"). Oprah's tears set her apart from other interviewers by choreographing the narrative of her show around her own reactions, so that the climax of the plot occurs whenever Oprah is visibly moved. A glance at any transcript of the show reveals the extent to which Oprah's responses shape, echo and propel the guest's revelations. For example, in the show on wife-murder my mother was referring to, Oprah teases the details from the victim of attempted murder by echoing her comments:

Winfrey: And I hear—do you have flashbacks about this every day?

Karen: Oh, definitely.

Winfrey: Yeah.

Karen: If my mind sits idle for too long, I'm right back to that night.

Winfrey: Right back to that night. I know—I've heard—you told the producers that you can tell if it's going to be a good day or bad day when you're brushing your teeth.

Karen: If I can brush my teeth and not throw up, it is going to be a pretty good day.

Winfrey: A pretty good day. Yeah. But you had an indication even before your mother told you that the children were gone. You had an indication. Because when he was stabbing you, he said. . .

Karen: All he would say the whole time is 'You need to be with your children. Your children need you.' And so I know—I couldn't wrap my brain completely around it, but he's stabbing me. He wants me to die and so that must mean my children are dead, too. ("Oprah Goes to Prison" 11)

Each time Oprah repeats one of Karen's phrases, the camera cuts back to her face rather than remaining on Karen's. The back and forth movement ensures that viewers feel the emotional tension increasing as the story gets more gory and Oprah probes deeper, until the point at which Oprah reacts with emotion: falls silent, shakes her head, sighs heavily, tears up, reaches for the guest's hand. Often this reaction will include the audience, as Oprah looks into the crowd or into the camera and acknowledges our emotional response, too, with a tearful nod. Or, at one of these climactic moments, Oprah will break from the story altogether to tell the guest, "we applaud you for being here," and to solicit applause from the audience. This narrative arc occurs many times during the course of a single show, since commercial breaks allow for a redrawing of the initial tableau of dispassionate interviewer and guest ready for confession. Over and over, then, we watch Oprah bear witness to the guest's stories, and her experience of witnessing—rather than the stories themselves—forms the backbone of the show's plot.

If this formula sounds sensationalistic, it is. If the narrative payoff for the viewers lies in Oprah's tears, then *The Oprah Winfrey Show's* narrative currency is the specific, graphic details of the guest's stories.

When guests use general, clinical terms to describe their pain, Oprah probes for the details beneath, such as Karen vomiting whilst brushing her teeth in the morning. What makes the host's emotion "real" for viewers is its grounding in the visceral details:

Winfrey: And how did you keep him from slitting your throat?

Karen: Well, when he came back in and found me on the phone, he left and came back in with a new knife because we had destroyed the one he had initially used. .

Winfrey: He had destroyed stabbing you, yeah.

Karen: Yeah. And me trying to get it from him, I knew that it was, you know, totally bent and so it wasn't working properly. And then he came in and started slashing at me again. And I had a big sweatshirt on. And I just grabbed, you know, the collar and I put it in my mouth, so he'd have to, you know, cut through the sweatshirt.

Winfrey: Cut through the sweatshirt. ("Oprah Goes to Prison" 13)

In Karen's story, the deepest "truth" lies not in overcoming the trauma—in the language of healing, social support, and the empowerment of women—but in the details of the trauma itself. Masciarotte states of Oprah that "though her stated message may advocate cure, her investigative message denies the importance of cure" (97). Rather than being told about collective healing, viewers are being called upon to recognize individual suffering as the crux of the guest's authority and authenticity.

This discursive fascination with pain rather than on its relief is the source of many accusations against *Oprah* (and other talk shows) of trashiness—of selling spectacle and scandal despite all the self-improvement rhetoric. But the show's focus on the gory details doesn't necessarily contradict Oprah's social message. Firstly, the act of publicly admitting the specifics of pain contributes to the guest's relief, insofar as Oprah plays the role of therapist and facilitates a kind of catharsis-through-confession.⁵ Secondly, the notion of sharing one's story on *Oprah* often carries the rhetorical intent of overcoming alienation and shame. Indeed, a standard moment in the *Oprah* script has the guests explain why they felt compelled to share their story:

Winfrey: Why have you chosen to speak publicly?

Karen: That's a hard question. I never thought that I would. I thought that I would just keep it in, but there are so many people—you just read this more and more, and it's a very lonely feeling. You know? I have a wonderful community. I just love my city, but I'm alone, you know? There's no one that can really say, "I understand. I know what you're going through. And it's going to be OK." And if I could say that to another person that "I understand. I know what you're going through," I actually mean it. You know what I mean? ("Oprah Goes to Prison" 14)

Here, Karen is seeking a cure for her trauma in the possibility of a community of sufferers discovered through her appearance on the show. At the same time, she claims to be telling her story for the relief of others who might be going through something similar, also in isolation.

Even beyond this psychological function, the thirst for disturbing detail on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* comprises a serious inquiry into the moral relations between individuals. Emotions in talk shows are not simply an object of viewer's voyeurism: in a society that lacks a public language of morality, "emotion talk is talk about social relations" (Illouz 118). The seemingly superficial treatment of the guest's problems—the "we're all crying for you" reaction to his/her testimony—is merely a sidebar to the wider, ongoing moral investigation into embattled subjectivity in today's society. "Pain," according to Illouz, "has become a dominant cultural and political category to discuss selfhood and intimate relations" (118). In the talk show's moral architecture, the pain of the guest simultaneously offers proof of the "wrongness" of what he/she has suffered and validates him/her as the authentic subject of his/her own story. This is obvious for a victim like Karen, nearly murdered by her husband, but it is equally true of the pornography addict or compulsive spendthrift who breaks down in tears on Oprah's stage. If he is in pain, he must be worthy of our sympathy; in this formula, right and wrong are decided by the authenticity of emotion.

The recognition that emotions have a moral valence on talk shows helps explain the sense some commentators get that they are "value-laden programmes" operating prescriptively in the service of "advisory regimes" (Wilson 2). The cultural code of individualism, to which Oprah's own rags-to-riches story gives the nod, dictates for the show a master narrative of

self-definition and self-help as the path to happiness. But it is important to note that on *Oprah*, rehearsing the details of the problem—claiming pain as one's own—is more vital to the act of self-definition than overcoming the problem or banishing the pain. Karen's declaration that "I will make it. I will find a new normal," is followed by her admission that she hasn't, in fact, found it yet ("Oprah Goes to Prison" 15). But this lack of therapeutic closure is incidental to the narrative of the show, which has already achieved its rhetorical goal of moral authentication through emotional disclosure.

The Politics of *Oprah*

This is not to say that Oprah doesn't have an agenda beyond having people show their true colors. On the contrary: the formulaic trajectory of the interviews on her show suggests several rhetorical goals. Firstly, the open-ended, recursive structure, in which guests are brought in one by one with increasingly dramatic versions of the same problem, underlines that problem's sensational and seemingly insurmountable nature. Since the presentation of the problem is cumulative and the solutions incidental, varied, and partial, viewers are left with a troubling sense of collective malaise. My worried mother calls to say that wife-killing is on the rise not because she has been confronted with comparative statistics, but because *The Oprah Winfrey Show* presents it as a social crisis without a solution. At the same time that such problems are presented as systemic and omnipresent, however, they are always framed in terms of individuals instead of groups. Oprah tends to solicit from her guests what Dixon calls "testimonials of personal responsibility" (14) rather than comments that frame the issue in terms of social or state conditions. Oprah has said that all the problems in the world stem from lack of self-esteem (Peck 101). This posits an ideological starting-point that undermines the possibility of a collective approach to empowerment. The show thus leaves its viewers with a strong sense that something should be done about the problems plaguing Oprah's guests, but with very little rational direction as to how or where to apply their concern.

The mobilization of social concern without a socio-political framework in which to act brings the question of activism back to Oprah herself. Running parallel to and even eclipsing the show's interview narrative is the

ongoing story of the interviewer herself, Oprah Winfrey, as a force for change.⁶ This is most directly the case for the episodes whose themes dovetail with Oprah's social and charity causes, such as the "Oprah's Latest Capture" shows, in which the story centers on someone nabbed through the host's online database of wanted pedophiles.⁷ Similarly, the show regularly features stories from Oprah's Angel Network's South African orphanage visits, Hurricane Katrina rebuilding projects in New Orleans, and Use Your Life Awards program.

But even when Oprah doesn't have a direct hand in the action, her role on the show is increasingly eliminating the need for a guest expert to offer an authoritative interpretation of what needs to be done. An interview with a guest who habitually cuts herself saw Oprah first admitting, "I've said before I've had almost every experience. But I do not understand the cutting," but then reestablishing herself as the authority in relation to the guest's childhood experience of molestation, declaring of the link between sexual abuse and negative self-esteem, "I've been trying to say this for years" ("From White House Intern to Crack Addict"). Teaching a leadership course at Northwestern University in Evanston, conducting "Live Your Best Life" speaking tours, anchoring round-the-clock "coverage" of the Hurricane Katrina crisis in Louisiana—all of these recent activities confirm the extent to which Oprah has surpassed the traditionally neutral role of "interviewer" or "host." From its inception the show may have been, on some level, about Oprah herself, but the total eclipse of her role not just by her personality but by her social activism in recent years comprises a narrative that, in its own right, makes for good TV. When Oprah follows through on her planned one-month tenancy in an inner-city housing project in Chicago for a reality series on the housing crisis, the transition from interviewer to protagonist will be indiscernible to her viewers ("Oprah Launches Project").

The question of Oprah's political influence continually haunts this and similar discussions of the star's high-profile social causes. Is her expanding role as political activist altering her message of individualism and self-governance? Commentators agree that her endorsement of Obama represents a turning point in Oprah's approach,⁸ but her dealings behind the scenes of American politics are not new. Oprah was present at President Clinton's 1993 signing of the National Child Protection Act, a piece of legis-

lation of which she'd been such a vocal supporter that it was informally known as "the Oprah bill" ("President Clinton Signs"). Indeed, if Clinton was dubbed "The Oprah President" for his "touchy-feely" race-relations initiatives (Dokupil, MacArthur), and campaign analysts refer to the middle-aged, middle-income female constituency as "the Oprah vote," how far a leap might it be to "Oprah for President"? Often asked about running for office, to date she has always demurred, arguing that she can achieve more, spread her message more widely, with her show and website than she could in the formal political arena (King). Judging by the combination of ratings for her show—in 2005, 8.6 million viewers tuned in every day—and what's now commonly known as the "Oprah Effect" on sales of everything and anything she singles out (Walsh), whether an "Oprah's Book Club" title, a product featured on her "Oprah's Favorite Things" segments, or an up-and-coming pop star on "Catch the Buzz," she may be right in opting for omnimedia over public office.

Politicians, though, have not been able to resist cashing in on the Oprah Effect for themselves. While Bill Clinton may have been promoting his biography, since 2000 George W. Bush, Al Gore, and John Kerry have been guests on *Oprah* purely for campaign reasons. As material for her show, Oprah has always disdained politics as a "no-win situation," stating that it does not work for her viewing audience, which prefers issues centered on feelings rather than argument (Baum 214). Oprah's interviews with the candidates thus focused on the men rather than on the issues, and studies have subsequently shown that, sure enough, within the Oprah demographic, regard for each candidate who appeared on the show increased regardless of the viewers' prior political leanings (Baum 217). Speculation runs high whether her first direct foray into candidate endorsement will affect Oprah's public credibility (Venkataraman).

As television's most ubiquitous and influential interviewer, how has Oprah changed our expectations of public "talk?" The seemingly conflicting operations of Oprah as public persona and Oprah as universal sounding-board have produced a media "master narrative" of emotional divulgence, personal pain and self-healing whose reverberations are felt across the spectrum: from reality-TV shows, where competitors confess their darkest secrets to the camera, to "serious" dramatic series like *Six Feet Under*, *The Sopranos*, *Huff*, and *In Treatment*, where therapy and self-actualization

are central themes. *The Oprah Winfrey Show* offers a masterful example of the rhetorical balance of power through which a “truth” is negotiated collaboratively, in conversation between host and guest—but is also decided upon through the multiple frames of the interviewer’s persona and her “messaging” apparatus. This process, in turn, offers insight into the way all “truths” come into being for us as individuals navigating between public and private spheres of mediated subjectivity. In general, the media interview is still a relatively undertheorized genre. The increasing acknowledgement of Oprah Winfrey as an interviewer who has transformed the genre, transcending its boundaries’ limits as both an art form and a site for social inquiry, suggests that cultural studies may offer the most fertile ground to develop a critical language for assessing the interview’s particular narrative and rhetorical force.

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Notes

¹These opinions were expressed by friends and colleagues in my personal correspondence with them.

²Janice Peck notes that white viewers say that Oprah’s race is “not important” to them, while to black viewers it is central (91). See also Dana L. Cloud’s commentary on the “rhetoric of tokenism” that surrounds Oprah’s biography.

³Oprah qualifies this statement by adding, “but it was a lesson long in coming, recognizing that I had the instinct, that inner voice that told me that you need to try to find a way to answer to your own truth” (Wellesley Commencement Address). However, this caveat pertains to living one’s “authentic life” rather than trying to please others—the core message of Oprah’s self-help discourse. It does not acknowledge that the “self” Oprah gets paid to be is a more consciously performative and more heavily mediated one than most.

⁴Illouz argues that Oprah’s public disclosure of her “painful work to fashion her body. . .de-fetishizes what is otherwise the most revered fetish of media culture: the thin and flawless body” (114). I am not sure Oprah’s “everyday celebrity” approach helps demystify any Hollywood beauty ideals beyond her own, but it certainly creates an image with which her (largely female) audience can more readily identify.

⁵Illouz refers to talk shows as a “therapeutic genre,” because they purport to enact the remedy for the very conflicts they raise. The various scenarios of discussion—confessions, reunions, disputes and confrontations—are intended to bring about a therapeutic change in the participants’ relations and states of mind (111-12).

⁶Masciarotte discusses “two overlapping mechanisms” in the show: the talk itself, and “the media operation of representing Oprah Winfrey” (93). I am pressing beyond the story of Oprah’s media persona to examine the narrative of her social influence and activism that, in the last half-decade, has taken precedence over, or at least merged with, her celebrity biography.

⁷See, for example, “Oprah’s Latest Capture: From Boys’ School Director to Most Wanted Pedophile,” aired 17 Jan., 2006, and “Oprah’s Latest Capture: Hiding in Mexico—Turned In By a Friend,” aired 7 March 2006.

⁸See “Can the Oprah Effect Make Obama President?” and Venkataraman for examples.

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Book Reviews

An invitation to reviewers

In forthcoming issues, *Studies in Popular Culture* will include reviews of books in the field. Any scholar who wishes to review a book should contact the editor, Rhonda V. Wilcox, at rhonda_w@gdn.edu. Those whose work is unfamiliar to the editor may wish to send a CV.

Reviewers may suggest a book to be reviewed or request to be assigned one from among those sent to the editor. Reviews should be approximately 500-700 words long and should (like article submissions) be emailed to the editor as an attachment of a Microsoft Word document. Queries are welcome.

Survival of the Stereotypical: A Study of Personal Characteristics and Order of Elimination on Reality Television

Since the advent of television, people have enjoyed watching the dubious adventures of others. From Ralph and Alice Kramden to Homer and Marge Simpson, television viewers have laughed at personal foibles and followed satirical storylines in situation comedies. In recent years, however, the relatively light humor of these fictitious programs has given way to more severe and cynical forms of entertainment, such as the humiliation and ultimate elimination of contestants on “reality” television programs. While it surely is not inappropriate to enjoy programs that entertain audiences with plot twists and surprise maneuvers, weekly television shows that feature competitions to “survive,” to serve as an executive apprentice to a famous business mogul, or to become the next major pop star, may be important to analyze given their routine selections of “winners” and “losers.” If contestant patterns exist—that is, if reality programs perpetuate the same kinds of stereotyping that others programs do (Greenberg and Brand 273-314; Greenberg, Mastro and Brand 333-351; Potter 82-85)—then groups whose members seem to be eliminated first and most conspicuously on a regular basis may not find reality programming entertaining; instead, they might find the entire genre offensive and base.

Reality television has become ubiquitous in primetime, and the programs featuring competitions boast followings in the tens of millions (Nabi et al. 304). Yet, the genre also stands to reproduce many cultural stereotypes through its various contests. As examples, older contestants may ap-

pear “eccentric, infirm, stubborn, and foolish” (Potter 85), while female competitors may appear physically inferior to their male counterparts, who would appear more prepared to compete and lead others (see Lawrence and Jewett 129-133; Vera and Gordon 113-125). Contestants of color might be characterized for their physical prowess, in addition to being sexualized or portrayed as happy-go-lucky (Davis and Harris 154-169; Greenberg and Brand 273-314; Kraszewski 179-196). Indeed, as this paper will reveal, contestants on reality programs frequently tend to be stereotyped by age, gender and race, among other factors, and the programs thus may affect the perceptions of viewers who do not realize the extent to which they, too, stereotype others based on group characteristics (Gorham 229-247; Shugart 79-100). Shugart, for instance, describes how reality court programs reinforce dominant conceptions of discipline through representations of class and race/ethnicity, noting, astutely, that court programs have relatively little to do with legal situations and “more to do with the exposure, review, and discipline of the participants’ very lifestyles and behaviors, which are consequently inscribed as the locus and logic for the issues that bring them before the courts” (84).

Like primetime dramas, reality programs offer ongoing stories for audience members to follow, but unlike dramas, viewers get to watch “real people” realize lifelong dreams or make fools of themselves in front of millions. Because the programs are not scripted and do not employ directors, *per se*, viewers may draw conclusions about the competitions as if contestants were unaware that anyone was watching, let alone filming. Additionally, viewers may be naïve when it comes to casting decisions; that is, they may not realize that producers sometimes cast certain contestants precisely *because* those contestants satisfy a stereotype (Haralovich and Trosset 75-96). Casting decisions also may reflect the extent to which contestants stand to generate revenue apart from actual broadcasts – from what Bignell describes as “spin-off products, tie-in books and DVDs, mobile phone text updates and sponsorship of programmes” (22).

This article examines personal characteristics and order of elimination on three reality television programs: *Survivor*, *The Apprentice* and *American Idol*. The paper examines whether programs that purport to give every contestant an opportunity for success appear to do so, or whether the programs merely help to preserve the status quo and the cultural assumptions

therein. Given the relatively modest amount of scholarship on reality programming, the paper seeks to help fill a void, adding a content study to existing research.

Review of Literature

Although one could argue that the known presence of a video camera fundamentally alters “reality,” more than 40 television series since 2000 have been characterized by the term “reality television” (Deery 2). Programs have included *Survivor*, *Fear Factor*, *Temptation Island*, *The Apprentice*, *American Idol* and *Big Brother*, among others, giving media audiences captivating stories to follow and broadcast corporations fortunes to collect. As an example, as Deery points out (3), it took CBS the equivalent of one minute in advertising revenues to recoup the \$1 million prize it offered a victor on *Survivor*, the final episode of which (in season one) drew 51.7 million viewers (Nabi et al. 304). With that many people watching, it becomes important to consider the images and representations emanating from such programs, especially since producers tout the programs as “real,” thus implying that behaviors observed during a given episode are essentially the same as those one would observe “in reality.”

Deery sheds light on why studying contestant characteristics and order of elimination might be worthwhile, and potentially meaningful toward understanding cultural stereotyping in broadcast content: “Reality TV represents, among other things, the triumph of the market, the notion that everyone as well as everything has a price and that people will do pretty much anything for money . . . Audiences tune in to see how far the process has advanced, whereas producers capitalize on the spectacle of greed to generate their own profits” (2). Deery discusses how the target audiences for reality television show little interest in subjects of intellectual import, opting instead for “sensational, uneditorialized, intimate action in the personal, confessional, or therapeutic mode” (4). If, in fact, that is the case, one might expect the producers of reality programs to recruit contestants who represent extremes, such that audience members will grow fond of certain characters and develop a dislike of others. Exploiting cultural differences—and especially cultural stereotypes—likely assists in that process, a process that

can be grounded, in part, in disposition theory (Bryant and Miron 549-582; Oliver 507-524; Zillmann 225-239).

In advancing disposition theory, Zillmann suggests that audience enjoyment of a media production is contingent upon audience members' affective dispositions toward characters in the production, as well as the outcomes those characters experience (225-239). "Simply stated," Raney explains, "the theory predicts that enjoyment increases when liked characters experience positive outcomes or when disliked characters experience negative ones. Conversely, enjoyment suffers when liked characters experience negative outcomes and/or disliked characters experience positive ones" (350). Discussing this theory of media enjoyment, Raney notes that audience members tend to form alliances with characters in dramas and that enjoyment tends to increase with the opportunity to make a moral judgment. Because the contestant pool on many reality television programs tends to be heterogeneous, viewers have the opportunity to form alliances with certain characters, supporting those characters a bit more each week, and at the same time, hoping that contestants opposite the favored ones fare poorly—perhaps to the point of utter humiliation.

Disposition theory has been applied to several genres, but because reality television is a relatively new phenomenon, it has not served as a conceptual framework for this type of programming. Further, because disposition theory focuses on the viewing experience, as opposed to production choices, its fundamental assertions are mentioned in this paper primarily to inform the process by which reality television engages audience members. To become engaged in a media production, viewers need to care about the characters they observe—at least to some extent—and one way producers might go about "hooking" viewers is by maximizing perceived differences among the contestants and, in some cases, exploiting their lifestyles. As Shugart argues, backgrounds and behaviors of reality television participants assist in contextualizing the predicaments in which the contestants find themselves. "Writers design dramatic stories to have realistic characters that viewers can identify with and realistic trials to create greater arousal," Shapiro and Chock explain. "At the end, good things happen to characters who are liked and bad things to disliked characters, which gives a positive valence to emotional arousal" (186). Creating rivalries thus stands

to capture the attention of viewers, and the greater the number of viewers, the greater the advertising revenues (Podlas 141-172).

In discussing the extent to which audience members consider elements of media productions “real,” Shapiro and Chock point to perceived *typicality* (166). Specifically, the more typical the characteristics of individuals and situations are, the more “real” they may appear to audience members. Gorham explains what is at stake when productions capitalize on this notion, advancing (stereo)typical images in the interest of profit maximization and little else:

Racial stereotypes in the media can influence our interpretations of media content in a way that supports dominant racial myths. By automatically priming racial stereotype-congruent interpretations of subsequent media texts, and by doing so repeatedly and consistently, stereotypes in the media can maintain unjust, harmful, and dominant understandings of race by influencing the way individuals interpret media texts (244).

Through the work of Omi and Winant, as well as that of Hunt, and Bonilla-Silva, media stereotypes of race, in particular, can be contextualized in broader social terms. For instance, suggesting that social structures and everyday experiences are *organized* through race, Omi and Winant note that “Temperament, sexuality, intelligence, athletic ability, aesthetic preferences, and so on are presumed to be fixed and discernable from the palpable mark of race” (60). Additionally, consistent with the notion of *typicality* posited by Shapiro and Chock (166), Hunt writes about *race as representation* (19). In commenting on Omi and Winant, as well as the earlier scholarship of Prager (99-119), Hunt observes that “what we *know* about race at any given point in time is composed of commonsense ideologies, expectations, rules of etiquette – representations. And these representations are linked to important economic, political and cultural forces – forces which shape, *and are shaped by*, the shifting meanings undergirding racial categories” (19). Finally, Bonilla-Silva notes that in a given society, “After racial stratification is established, race becomes an independent criterion for vertical hierarchy” (45). Moreover, “Races, like other social categories such as class and gender, are socially constructed and thus permanently unstable categories of human identity and action. Yet after they emerge in

any society, they organize a hierarchical order with definite social relations of domination and subordination” (62).

Addressing both race and gender, Vera and Gordon explored the presence of “white messiahs” in film, noting how these autonomous and brave characters frequently come to the aid of vulnerable people of color (113-125). Media representations, the authors explain, do not merely mimic—or seek to mimic—reality but in fact may suggest new ways of acting, feeling and thinking, and while audiences may dismiss media representations as “entertainment,” societal messages contained in such productions may have lasting effects (for additional discussion, see Bennett 408-425; Dubrofsky 39-56; Ferris et al. 490-510; Annette Hill 79-107; Alice Hill 191-211; Nabi et al. 421-447; Roberti 117-134). “In the United States,” Vera and Gordon suggest, “whites have seen themselves as the norm while seeing racial others as all alike. Whites have seen and portrayed people of color in distorted ways that spread negative images throughout our culture and, via our media, throughout the world” (114). (Editor’s note: See also Richard Dyer’s seminal 1989 film studies essay, “White.”) As Cohen suggests, when one adds age to race and gender representations, even more severe stereotyping may occur:

Aging creates ‘double marginality’ for women who experience ageism and sexism and ‘triple jeopardy’ when racism, ageism, and sexism intersect. From card shops to policy decisions, and from media images to popular culture, older women have been objectified and devalued . . . While this devaluation affects both men as well as women, there is clearly a difference with older women. Three examples of how older women are diminished in this society include: making older women invisible, emphasizing youthful beauty over mature looks, and minimizing older women’s sexuality (601).

With regard to reality television, Patkin observed animosity between younger and older contestants on *Survivor: Africa* (15). Animosity developed, Patkin suggests, when older contestants did not keep pace with the physical tasks assigned to group members. From the standpoint of exploiting differences, this tension between younger and older contestants on reality television appears to reflect organizational cultures more generally. As

an example, in a cross-cultural study, McCann and Giles observed younger workers to perceive older employees as more negative, non-accommodating and self-centered, regardless of the culture at hand (1); television thus stands to reproduce cultural assumptions while purporting to expose instances of flawed thinking and stereotyping (Cavender 155-172; Foster 270-289).

In sum, stereotypes that seep into media productions stand to impact the viewer regardless of whether the viewer realizes it, or even whether the viewer disagrees with the stereotypes (Gorham 229-247). But reality television frequently travels well beyond subtlety and into the domain of outright humiliation. Contestants often are eliminated from reality programs one by one, and with assistance from “surviving” contestants, audience members are both tacitly and overtly encouraged to detest the eliminated contestants because of apparent shortcomings; after all, if the individuals were “stronger” or “brighter,” none of this would be happening.

Methods

In considering programs to evaluate, we based our decision, first, on a definition of “reality-based television programming” offered by Nabi et al. (2003):

Programs that film real people as they live out events (contrived or otherwise) in their lives, as these events occur. Such programming is characterized by several elements: (a) people portraying themselves (i.e., not actors or public figures performing roles), (b) filmed at least in part in their living or working environment rather than on a set, (c) without a script, (d) with events placed in a narrative context, (e) for the primary purpose of entertainment (304).

Given this definition, in addition to reasons that follow, we chose to examine contestant characteristics and order of elimination on three programs: *Survivor*, *The Apprentice*, and *American Idol*. We selected these three programs, in particular, because of their respective popularity and because each one has a different means of contestant evaluation/elimination. These differences may offer insights on techniques used by producers to retain “demographically preferred” contestants (Podlas 141-172). Addi-

tionally, examining programs with differing methods may shed light on more overt manipulation, which Boone discusses in the context of *Survivor*: “Clearly one component on *Survivor* that involves deception is the voting process. Though contestants discuss voting options openly, the voting is done individually and no one is assured that any other contestant will honor an agreement to vote a specific way” (103). Podlas identifies law suits that have been filed by contestants who characterized their respective contests as rigged. One of the most common complaints, Podlas explains, concerns the practice of “selective editing,” whereby producers manipulate what actually transpires by omitting certain scenes, and in some cases, showing scenes out of order to shed positive light on popular contestants. Thus, on *Survivor*, even though contestants vote one another off the island, as it were, editors may construct stories to appeal to certain demographics. When audience members cast votes to eliminate contestants, selective editing has the potential to undercut the integrity of a program entirely.

The premise of *Survivor* is for contestants to outlast the elements and one another, and it is the contestants, themselves, who control the order of elimination. Contestants stay “alive” based on the extent to which they contribute to the overall “survival” of the group, with one contestant voted out each week. Scholars suggest that while “survival” skills certainly assist contestants in remaining on the program, the real key to success is managing the “social milieu,” establishing (perceived) trustworthiness and “likeability” (Boone 97-110; Godard 73-96; Wingenbach 132-150). Such attributes are important because contestants eliminated from competition select the ultimate victor; contestants thus may be “resurrected” to determine who wins both the prize money and future endorsement opportunities.

Contestants on *The Apprentice* compete with one another toward landing a job as CEO of an organization owned by real estate magnate Donald Trump. On this program, Trump, himself, decides on which candidates can continue to compete and which he must let go with his now-famous line, “You’re fired” (Kinnick and Parton 429-456). In choosing a protégé, Trump, of course, must satisfy the interests of network executives, namely their interest in maximizing profits by collecting millions of dollars in advertising.

The third program in the study, *American Idol*, is a talent search in which television audience members vote on which contestants they want to

continue. Before audience members get to cast their votes, however, contestants must advance beyond preliminary rounds, in which judges decide on 24 finalists (12 from each gender). In the preliminary stages, judges wield considerable power in deciding which contestants stand to help build ratings and which should be dismissed and perhaps embarrassed on national television. As Bignell observes, those who “win,” or at least make it to the final rounds, tend to be those who stand to make the networks monies beyond the actual competition. DVD, CD and book sales are three examples.

In selecting programs with differing approaches toward contestant elimination, we sought to examine potential instances of humiliation in more than one setting, as humiliation, Hartling and Luchetta suggest, is often connected with broader practices of social control (259-278). They note that humiliation occurs when someone in a position of power launches a deliberate attack on another, and for purposes of the current paper, the important point is that humiliation is an attack on identity—something that is not readily changeable (Hartling and Luchetta 259-278). We thus considered it important to examine instances in which individuals from different gender, race and age cohorts were “kicked off” or “fired” from their respective contests—or whether they appeared as contestants at all.

Because any one season of these programs could have been anomalous, we analyzed three seasons of *Survivor* (i.e., *Borneo*, *Outback* and *Africa*), the first two seasons of *The Apprentice*, and the first three seasons of *American Idol*, creating a total candidate pool of 116. We coded each candidate for three demographic variables: Gender, race, and age. Race categories included African American, Hispanic, Middle Eastern, Asian American, Caucasian, and Other, allowing that some of these terms reflect ethnicity more than race. We included Middle Eastern as a category in order to examine whether Middle Eastern contestants appeared to experience heightened levels of animosity given recent world events. As Potter may have anticipated in describing the dearth on television of Asians, Hispanics, Native Americans and members of other minority groups, such as those from the Middle East, only African Americans and Caucasians appeared in sufficient numbers to warrant statistical analyses (81). We thus categorized members of minority groups apart from African Americans as “Other,” offering an early finding that the populations in our study appeared

to resemble those in other TV genres; apart from African Americans, few members of minority groups competed on the programs.

As Potter reports, 80% of all characters on television are white, and males outnumber females three to one (81). While the 16% of black characters on television eclipses the 12% population figure, Hispanics constitute just 2% of TV characters while composing 9% of the U.S. population (Potter 81). Asian Americans and Native Americans, combined, account for less than 1% of characters on television, and importantly, approximately 75% of all television characters are between ages 20 and 50; in the real world, just one-third of the population falls between those ages (Potter 81). Finally, just 2% of characters on television are over age 65, compared to 11% in the actual population (Potter 81). Thus, television tends to distort demographic realities, and in regard to race, we found that to be the case early on.

In terms of age, we consulted program websites—specifically, the online biographies of competitors—to categorize competitors in one of the following age brackets: 16-20, 21-25, 26-30, 31-35, 36-40, and 41+. For exploratory purposes, we also recorded marital status, sexuality of competitors (if stated), nature of occupation, and hair color. We included the variable addressing hair color because of scholarship suggesting that females on television often have blonde hair, which is associated stereotypically with glamour (Davis 325-332; Glascock 656-669). Additionally, as Potter notes, another stereotype is the “dumb blonde, who is superficial, cares only about physical appearance and dress styles, and has no common sense” (83).

With respect to statistical analyses, we recorded the order in which all contestants (n=116) departed their respective programs, listing the contestants in order and indicating alongside their first names their age, race and gender. We ran basic frequency analyses in describing the individuals included in the study and used cross-tabulation and chi square tests, where appropriate, in exploring whether differences existed across age, race, and gender in terms of the programs on which contestants appeared. In terms of how these analyses informed cultural stereotypes, while the overall number of African American characters on television has eclipsed actual population figures (Potter 81), African Americans have nevertheless been depicted on television as less likely to be employed or less likely to be in professional occupations (Glascock 90-100). African Americans historically

have been stereotyped as entertainers (e.g., athletes, musicians), while Caucasians have been portrayed more as stoic individuals in white-collar occupations (Greenberg and Brand 273-314). Finally, African Americans have been portrayed as younger than Caucasians (Baptista-Fernandez and Greenberg 13-21) as well as disproportionately overweight (Kaufman 37-46). The following section reports the results of our study, indicating whether reality television stands to reproduce common cultural stereotypes.

Results

Beginning with a descriptive report, 81 (69.8%) of 116 contestants in this study were Caucasian, followed by 22 (19%) African Americans and 13 (11.2%) individuals from other minority groups. The sample consisted of 56 (48.3%) males and 60 (51.7%) females, and the two genders showed relative parity across age. Overall, 12 competitors (10.3%) appeared in the 16-20 age bracket, 41 (35.3%) appeared in the 21-25 bracket, with 28 (24.1%) in the 26-30 range, 13 (11.2%) in the 31-35 bracket, 9 (7.8%) in the 36-40 range and 13 (11.2%) in the 41-plus.

With regard to marital status, 78 competitors (67.2%) indicated they were single, followed by 22 (19%) who said married, and 16 (13.8%) whose status could not be determined. Just three of 26 competitors (11.5%) who revealed their sexuality said they were gay or lesbian. Nearly one in two competitors (56 of 116; 48.3%) held white-collar positions, compared with 19 (16.4%) in blue-collar jobs, 15 (12.9%) students, six (5.2%) retirees, and 20 (17.3%) undetermined. The appearance variable related to hair color is reported later.

Race. As the collapsed frequencies and row percentages in Table 1 indicate, African Americans made 22 appearances, nearly six in 10 of which were on *American Idol*. Despite having more than three times as many competitors overall, just two more Caucasians ($n=15$) than African Americans ($n=13$) participated on *American Idol*. Among other minorities, 46.2% appeared on *American Idol*, compared to just 18.5% of Caucasians. Mirroring that, about one in three Caucasians appeared on *The Apprentice*, compared to fewer than one in five African Americans. Additionally, Caucasians appeared in much higher numbers on *Survivor*, and the differences observed in Table 1 were highly significant, $\chi^2(4, n = 116) = 16.43, p < .01$.

Table 1
Cross-tabulation of race by reality television program

	American Idol	Survivor	Apprentice	Total
African-	13	5	4	22
American	59.1%	22.7%	18.2%	100%
Other	6	3	4	13
	46.2%	23.1%	30.7%	100%
Caucasian	15	40	26	81
	18.5%	49.4%	32.1%	100%
Total	34	48	34	116
	29.3%	41.4%	29.3%	100%

Gender. Table 2 reveals a relatively even dispersion of men and women across the three television programs. Overall, 19 (31.7%) of 60 female appearances came on *American Idol*, compared to 24 (40.0%) and 17 (28.3%), respectively, on *Survivor* and *The Apprentice*. No differences in Table 2 showed significance, $\chi^2(2, n = 116) = .24, p = ns$.

Table 2
Cross-tabulation of gender by reality television program

	American Idol	Survivor	Apprentice	Total
Male	15	24	17	56
	26.8%	42.9%	30.3%	100%
Female	19	24	17	60
	31.7%	40.0%	28.3%	100%
Total	34	48	34	116
	29.3%	41.4%	29.3%	100%

Age. Table 3, a cross-tabulation of age across the three reality television programs, offers some noteworthy findings. Here, all contestants in the first age bracket appeared on *American Idol*, as did 53.7% of contestants in the second bracket. Contestants must be between ages 16 and 25 to appear on *American Idol*, and one could certainly expect minors to appear exclusively on that program. Nonetheless, one might have expected more contestants from the second bracket to appear elsewhere. Mirroring that pattern, not a single competitor aged 41 or over appeared on *The Apprentice*, and just two (22.2%) of nine competitors ages 36 to 40 appeared on that program. Most of the older contestants appeared on *Survivor*. Because Table 3 contains seven cells with zero observations, we did not compute chi square.

Table 3
Cross-tabulation of age by reality television program

	American Idol	Survivor	Apprentice	Total
16-20	12 100%	0 0%	0 0%	12 100%
21-25	22 53.7%	13 31.7%	6 14.6%	41 100%
26-30	0 0%	12 42.9%	16 57.1%	28 100%
31-35	0 0%	3 23.1%	10 76.9%	13 100%
36-40	0 0%	7 81.8%	2 18.2%	9 100%
41-plus	0 0%	13 100%	0 0%	13 100%
Total	34 29.3%	48 41.4%	34 29.3%	116 100%

Appearance. Table 4, a cross-tabulation of gender across hair color, reveals that the majority of female contestants had brown hair, as opposed to blonde. Yet, the table also reveals that, compared with male competitors, higher percentages of women had blonde and brown hair, respectively, and fewer had black.

Table 4
Cross-tabulation of gender by hair color

	Blonde	Brown	Red	Gray	Black	Other	Total
Male	4 7.1%	30 53.6%	2 3.6%	5 8.9%	14 25.0%	1 1.8%	56 100%
Female	10 16.6%	39 65.0%	1 1.7%	4 6.7%	3 5.0%	3 5.0%	60 100%
Total	14 12.1%	69 59.5%	3 2.6%	9 7.8%	17 14.7%	4 4.9%	116 100%

Elimination. In examining the order in which competitors were eliminated from their respective programs, several interesting patterns emerged. Beginning with *The Apprentice*, both winners were white males, with an African American male, Kwame, finishing second the first season and a white female, Jennifer M., finishing second in year two. While an African American male, Kevin, was one of the last competitors cut in the second season, African American females finished nowhere near the final rounds, nor did other minorities of either gender, with the possible exception of Ivana, an Asian American who departed relatively late in the game in the second competition. Notably, Ivana was “fired” for stripping, and her dismissal may have reflected how Asian women are stereotyped as sexual provocateurs, and how women, in general, tend to be sexualized through mass media. Moreover, Omarosa, an African American female from the first season, not only did not advance into the final rounds, but in the months following her departure, she served as the brunt of skits and/or jokes on programs such as *Saturday Night Live* and *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, her confidence in her identity a primary source of entertainment.

An examination of the data from *American Idol* reveals a pattern largely opposite that of *The Apprentice*, in that African Americans—one male and one female—won two of three competitions. African Americans

and members of other minorities could be seen throughout the lists of competitors, with no apparent patterns of elimination. In examining the first and second seasons, it is worth noting that Kelly (Clarkson), who won the competition in year one, and Clay (Aiken), who finished as runner-up to Ruben Studdard in year two, have become celebrities; both are white. It remains to be seen whether Ruben or Fantasia Barrino, who won the third competition, will, at some point, receive the degree of adulation enjoyed by Kelly and Clay. (Editor's note: One might also observe that Jennifer Hudson, an eliminated African American contestant, has since won an Oscar for a role in a musical, *Dream Girls*.)

Finally, in examining the data from the three *Survivor* competitions, one of the most conspicuous patterns involves age. Looking at *Survivor Borneo*, the first two competitors eliminated from competition were Sonja, a 63-year-old white female, and B.B., a 64-year-old white male. That same pattern held on *Survivor Outback*, with Debb, a 45-year-old white female, and Maralyn, a 51-year-old white female, departing first and third, respectively. On *Survivor Africa*, several of the older competitors were among the first ones eliminated, but because the third season included more competitors from the older age brackets, several "lasted" until the final rounds, when Lex, a 38-year-old white male, and Ethan, a 27-year-old white male, took over. Thus, with a few notable exceptions, "old folks" tended to depart the *Survivor* programs relatively early in the process.

Discussion

This study has demonstrated that, in many respects, reality television reproduces cultural stereotypes and societal expectations and assumptions. Beginning with the race demographic, African Americans appeared the most frequently—and enjoyed the most success—on *American Idol*, an entertainment talent contest. African Americans enjoyed little success on *The Apprentice*, and they scarcely appeared on the *Survivor* programs. An implication of such patterns is the perpetuation of stereotypes about African Americans and their capacity to entertain people of all races. White males, it would appear, tend to make stronger executives, where "serious" work and "difficult" decisions must be made (Kinnick and Parton 429-456). Data revealed, somewhat remarkably, that while the study included more

than three times as many whites as African Americans, just two more whites than Blacks appeared on *American Idol*. More than four in five white competitors appeared on the other two programs, compared to approximately three in five African Americans who appeared on *American Idol*. It should be noted, of course, that reality television programs do not exist in a vacuum; that is, they must satisfy the commercial interests of their respective networks, and one way of doing so is to ensure that women and contestants from minority groups are retained for much of a given season. Large numbers of women and minorities are less likely to quit watching when they can identify with certain contestants, as disposition theory would suggest. Still, stereotypes appeared manifest in the programs we studied.

Indeed, as Torres and Charles note in summarizing the perceptions of African American college students about how their white peers view them, “The most popular stereotype is that Blacks are entertainers—generally more musically and/or athletically inclined than whites. Implicit in this perception is that Blacks are also less equipped for more cerebral pursuits” (122). Still, at the end of the proverbial day, it may be the white entertainers (e.g., Clarkson and Aiken) who receive longer-term monetary benefits. In sum, the two programs *American Idol* and *The Apprentice*, through both winners and program distributions of African Americans and other minorities, appear to have perpetuated the cultural stereotype of African Americans as entertainers and as individuals not equipped for the tasks of an executive in an office boardroom. On *The Apprentice*, for instance, Omarosa appeared overly emotional and somewhat defiant, leading her to be satirized on other television programs.

The *Survivor* programs shed stereotypical light on what it means to grow old in American society (Cohen 599-620). Competitors on these programs purportedly had to demonstrate to one another how important each was to the overall “survival” of the group, and as one might expect, the older competitors—especially older women—were not deemed terribly important. Thus, the *Survivor* programs appear to have perpetuated the age-old patterns of Hollywood, namely that men grow more distinguished with age, thus continuing to star in movies in their seventies and eighties, while women simply grow older (Cohen 599-620; Roth 189-202). As Cohen posits, “To be old in our society is to be devalued. To be old and female is to experience double oppression” (599). It should be noted, though, that *Sur-*

vivor Africa, while ironically including just one African American competitor, did include an older cross-section of competitors than did the two previous competitions.

With regard to appearance, this study did not find evidence that a majority of women on reality television tend to have blonde hair and thus appear more glamorous or urbane. Of course, that may be the result of how reality programs come together. Producers look for interesting people (i.e., those who can help to generate high ratings), and in assembling reality “casts,” they likely try to locate competitors who appear opposite one another along variables such as appearance and personality. Such casting assists viewers in building alliances with certain competitors while growing to dislike others. As indicated, Omarosa, an African-American who appeared on the first season of *The Apprentice*, became fodder for late-night comedians and actor Maya Rudolph on *Saturday Night Live*. Appearing on “Weekend Update” as Omarosa, Rudolph spoke of her strength as a proud African American woman, and as she spoke, various objects, such as dry-wall and a bowling ball, landed on her head from above the set. Looking back to the segment of this paper addressing embarrassment, while many people insist that they are laughing *with* the person in a humiliating predicament, they likely are laughing *at* the person and the stereotypical behaviors therein.

Future research on reality television might address how (and if) the demographics of reality programs change as the programs become more popular, thus commanding larger sums in advertising. Studies should continue to compare the types of programs on which competitors from various races and ethnicities compete, for as the current study has demonstrated, the aggregate numbers can mask show-specific patterns. Ecological fallacies such as these can in turn mask stereotypical assumptions and the exploitation of those assumptions for the entertainment of millions—and the monetary gain of a few. Ultimately, reality television offers a clear window through which to examine cultural stereotypes and the consequences those stereotypes yield for members of different groups.

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Figure 1. The YCC design team with their creation.

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A Car of Her Own: Volvo's "Your Concept Car" as a Vehicle for Feminism?

Virginia Woolf observed that in order to create great art that articulates women's experiences and perspectives, women would need to establish physical and financial independence from men. Commenting that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction," Woolf (1928) wrestled with the paradox that women need to extricate themselves from patriarchy while expressing themselves through language shaped by patriarchy itself. An analogous set of paradoxes haunts the automobile industry, which serves as a microcosm of mature capitalism. How can women, marginalized from the means of production, participate in manufacturing products that reflect their needs and experiences without further distancing themselves from the means of production? Phrased more concretely, how can women's voices be heard in the design and manufacture of an automobile in ways that do not accelerate their marginalization?

As the central commodity produced by and identified with capitalism for the past century (Urry, 2004), automobiles provide a logical site for exploring the connections between the means of production and social power. Indeed, the automobile may qualify less as a simple manufactured object than the site for "dominant cultural discourse" (Gartman, 2004, p. 169) to be articulated through the ways cars intermesh with the politics of language. Although some researchers have examined how the automobile has reconstituted the fabric of time and space (Urry, 2004), the automotive industry itself has remained a bastion of masculinity. That situation supposedly changed dramatically with Volvo's unveiling of Your Concept Car (YCC),

the first automobile designed entirely by women and targeting women consumers. Amid a flood of self-congratulatory promotion, Volvo first displayed the vehicle with the tagline “by women, for women” at the March 2004 Geneva International Motor Show. YCC is the first car in automotive history designed by an all-female design team (Associated Press, 2004).

YCC, ostensibly a major step toward inclusion of women in automotive production and marketing, actually sends far more ambiguous messages about the roles of women in capitalist modes of production. While YCC does indeed represent a breakthrough for women designers in the automotive industry, it also can serve as a means for furthering patriarchal norms within the industry and in society at large. The mechanism of marginalization occurs via a process akin to what Herbert Marcuse (1965) labels “repressive tolerance.” The existing power structure fosters an apparently benign allowance of dissent. This implicit permission to differ defuses radical ideas and actions, claiming their existence as proof that the status quo is open-minded and beneficent enough to indulge such anomalies. Thus the more dissent, the more it can be co-opted as a sign that all voices are heard and no systemic changes are necessary.

This essay probes the ambiguities surrounding Your Concept Car on several levels. First, we explain how YCC configures women as creators and consumers. Second, we discuss discursive patterns arising in media coverage of the car. We find a frequent tendency to “domesticate” the women designers and consumers by using terminology that places the automobile within the realm of household activities, thereby relegating women to their “proper” role of homemaker and caretaker for others. Third, we place YCC in the broader context of repressive tolerance, showing how the emergence of woman-powered automotive design can marginalize the very constituencies it purportedly promotes. The discursive framing of YCC not only reinforces patriarchal restrictions on the “proper” sphere of women’s knowledge and activities, but shows how women can become complicitous in their own oppression through the discursive choices they make. The decidedly mixed messages YCC sends reflect the complexity accompanying social projects that purportedly elevate the social and economic status of women.

Marginalization from Modes of Production

We might hypothetically possess ourselves of every recognized technological resource on the North American continent, but as long as our language remains inadequate, our vision remains formless, our thinking and feeling are still running in the old cycles, our process may be “revolutionary” but not transformative. (Rich, 1979, pp. 247-248)

Many feminist theorists such as Adrienne Rich (1979), Teresa de Lauretis (1993), and Diane Richardson (1996) have stressed the discursive construction of gender. The discourse surrounding YCC weaves a screen that filters perceptions of women, the choice of terminology associated with the car metonymically transferring to the women who created it or who comprise its target market. The car’s design bespeaks “what women want” (Knox, 2004), a phrase that peppers popular press coverage of YCC. Not only can the patterns of language usage reflect patterns of dominance, but greater awareness of discursively forged social hierarchies can enable creative reappropriation of repressive terminology. The struggle to break free of patriarchy therefore coalesces in the struggle Virginia Woolf described: to speak as a woman within the bounds of a patriarchal lingua franca. Another alternative would be to transcend the masculine idiom, since as “we become acutely, disturbingly aware of the language we are using and that is using us, we begin to grasp a material resource that women have never before collectively attempted to repossess” (Rich, 1979, p. 247). The first step in reclaiming language is to recognize patterns of discourse that separate women from the masculine power structure while preserving that power structure as the entry point to social influence. Thus “language becomes an essential code in redefining and restructuring the world with women at its centre” (Rowland & Klein, 1996, p. 32). In the case of YCC, women may have engineered the car, but their own creation becomes a vehicle for keeping them strapped into the back seat.

The terminology associated with YCC demonstrates how “culture and rhetoric are mutually constitutive” (Cyphert, 2001, p. 390). In this case, the language surrounding the concept car both reflects and shapes gender-bound cultural assumptions, especially as they pertain to automotive manufacturing. Simultaneously, the patterns of language use are generative by

fueling a continuous spiral of language choices that reinforce the same social roles the female design team supposedly attempts to overturn.

The very name of the automobile reinforces its status as an abstraction rather than a reality. As a self-proclaimed concept car, YCC retains its noumenal nomenclature, never acquiring a name derived from swift or ferocious animals (e.g., Mustang, Viper, Impala), specific human virtues (e.g., Focus, Accord), or euphonious neologisms (e.g., Sephia, Camry). The name reminds potential buyers that this car remains an idea. Any concept car qualifies as a prototype, “a vehicle for ideas, which may filter into production models” (Hales, 2004, p. C2). Both physically and discursively, however, YCC becomes distanced from the production line. Displayed at a Washington, DC art exhibit “[a]mid galleries filled with fashion, art and objects, the car designers’ presence assured that form and function would be familiar concepts to anyone with a driver’s license” (Hales, 2004, p. C2). Classified more as a curio or an aesthetic monument than a functional automobile, YCC keeps its distance from the manufacturing plants, trading the garage for the display pedestal, an object of marvel for admiring eyes. Recalling the role of women as aesthetically pleasing objects, the car is driven to exhibit halls where its shapely form can be admired.

Despite the cavalcade of compliments the concept car earned, its most enduring identity may be as a curiosity. Volvo (2004) praises the car as “a stunning concept vehicle loaded with innovative designs and features,” adding that it has “an appealing design with smart storage solutions, easy entry and exit, good visibility, minimum maintenance, easy parking and a car its owners can personalize.” Yet the novel design is relegated to a novelty as the car itself finds another home in an art museum instead of in automotive showrooms.

Your Concept Car (YCC), as it is called, is being shown at the Geneva International Motor Show and will make its first U.S. appearance at the New York International Auto Show in April. It also will go to the National Women’s Museum of Art in Washington, D.C., in conjunction with an exhibit of Nordic art by women, in late April, and will be displayed at Wellesley College. The YCC is unlikely to go into production as is, Volvo officials said, but features from

it may show up in future production vehicles. (Volvo concept designed, 2004)

The Nordic art exhibit where the car was displayed bore the title "Nordic Cool: Hot Women Designers," whose nomenclature intertwines sexual allure with aesthetic pleasure. The "women designers" rather than their designs are "hot," and the title's syntax does yield the phrase "Hot Women." The car, far from a template for mass production, transforms into the antithesis of the assembly line: a unique, vaguely sexually enticing art object. YCC's exterior style designer also migrated the machine to the purely emotional realm: "'A car is something you buy with your heart and guts,' said Anna Rosen, who gave the car its dynamic exterior styling. 'It has to be really cool'" (Hales, 2004, p. C2).

Certainly art can have political implications and applications, but only insofar as "art, if taken seriously, intervenes in cultural conversations about individual and collective identities" (Schemen, 1993, p. 167), conversations that artistic creations cannot enter as long as they are classified as little more than intriguing curiosities. Naomi Schemen (1993) argues that art as a liberatory force challenges and offends entrenched systems of privilege. Stressing the aesthetic aspect of YCC and defining it as an aesthetic object outside mass production reinforce the very definition of patriarchy. Adrienne Rich describes patriarchy in terms that aptly describe the discourse surrounding YCC and its fateful classification as an artistic, idealistic accomplishment. According to Rich, patriarchy describes male-dominated groups "in which capabilities assigned to women are relegated generally to the mystical and aesthetic and excluded from the practical and political realms. (It is characteristic of patriarchal thinking that these realms are regarded as separate and mutually exclusive.)" (Rich, 1979, p. 78). YCC is and will remain a concept, an ideal, and aesthetically valuable to the extent that it is unique and does not provide a precedent for mass production. A BBC report on YCC summarily dismisses the prospect of the car entering production lines at all, despite the fact that concept cars routinely act as harbingers of upcoming models. The BBC story remarks offhandedly, "Volvo will never actually take this car into production, of course" (Madslie, 2004). At least one female journalist laments the message sent by Volvo's failure to consider mass-production: "The car will have to stay a dream for the future as despite what women want in wheels, Volvo has no immediate plans to mass-

produce the car, although they might incorporate some of the features in other newly designed vehicles. ... When will the world start giving women what they really want?" (Lategan, 2004).

Eve and the Auto-Genesis of Marginalization

Your Concept Car was designed for an imaginary prototypical female named Eve. Shorn of her Biblical baggage, she supposedly embodies the empowered modern woman. "She is described as a modern professional woman in search of power, safety and convenience in an elegant package" (Hales, 2004, p. C2). Eve also represents the intended target market for YCC. She "wants all a man wants, and more. Her list is longer. She wants to store her bag and cellphone in a safe place, wants hassle-free parking, wants to get in and out of the car easily and in elegant style. She wants a vehicle that's ideal to park and easy to maintain" (Car Connection, 2004). Eve still conforms to impractical fashion expectations. Since Eve often wears high heels when driving, the design of pedals and driver-side carpet had to accommodate this fashion dictate (Brown, 2004).

Eve might appear to be a progressive archetype, but her construction glosses over considerations of class that intersect with gender (hooks, 2000a, 2000b). It remains unclear how Eve might have achieved her high income and expensive tastes that mark her as successful by the standards of contemporary capitalism. Indeed, insofar as YCC embodies yet another commodity to mark class status, the automobile itself reinforces the commodity fetishism that requires status to be displayed publicly by tangible signs of economic prosperity. (The word "prosperity" does contain the word "property.") Women become the focus more as consumers than creators. Volvo, with only one percent of the United States auto market, does have the highest rate of female purchasers (52 percent) of any luxury car, so YCC represents a step forward in marketing to women (Cars.com, 2004). Yet, only eleven percent of Volvo's managers are women, compared with twenty percent for parent company Ford (Knox, 2003). Apparently Eve did not ascend the socioeconomic ladder by becoming a Volvo executive.

Social critic bell hooks observes that one method of perpetuating sexism, paradoxically, is "by the victims themselves who are socialized to behave in ways that make them act in complicity with the status quo" (2000a,

p. 43). She has in mind situations that involve women acting against their own self-interest, such as the mutual antagonism that splinters groups of women who might unite effectively for social change (a phenomenon depicted as part of women's socialization in the 2004 film *Mean Girls*). YCC enacts a larger and more empirically documentable phenomenon that could be called "self-marginalization": participating in discursive traditions or patterns that demean one's own group or deny its access to social privileges. Self-marginalization can be observed and traced discursively in the language marginalized groups use for self-reference. The all-woman design team for YCC engages in self-marginalization by adopting language that traditionally has been used to contrast the private, familial, and unpaid world of women with the supposedly more significant public, individualistic, economically prosperous and productive world of men. Instead of defending Eve as the "Modern Independent Woman," discourse of the designers supports images of women as homebound, capricious creatures obsessed with personal hygiene and fashion.

Prevailing clusters of discourse characterize how Eve's legacy gets configured in discussions of YCC. Discourse about the car consistently resides in the realm of domestic life, especially as an adjunct to kitchen and laundry. The terminology reinforces the accumulation of consumer goods as the symbol of success, portraying women as capricious and focused on appearances. Close textual analysis of these comments reveals marked convergence toward language that relegates women to the domestic sphere. This tendency in effect minimizes their roles as independent agents and relegates them to consumers whose preferences are portrayed as frivolous, picky, or amusing. Design features discussed as part of the traditional realm of unpaid labor, especially the labors of the cook and domestic servant, connect the car to "women's work" often "regarded as unskilled, marginal, transient, or simply 'natural,'" despite the flattering image of Eve as a professional, affluent woman (Morgan, 1996, p. 7). A potentially radical innovation in automotive conception and construction gets "tamed" by interpreting it in ways that reinforce images of women as proprietors of the home, dutiful consumers, and whimsically superficial.

Design team member Tatiana Butovitsch Temm (2004) remarked that the car is "a bit like your living room, you know." YCC offers several interchangeable seat covers and carpets, a veritable interior wardrobe. The

seat décor options include “shimmering pale yellow with embroidered flowers...[c]omplemented by a bouclé-based dark brown carpet with strands of pale yellow linen. All the materials would work equally well in a living room. Many of them have never before been used in cars. Each seat top option has its own label, reinforcing the link with home interiors” (Automotive Intelligence, 2004). In the eye of the designers, the domestic benchmark of the living room replaces the reference point of high-performance machines. This shift in viewpoint was not lost on the press. A female reporter for the *Washington Post* noted: “Designers explained that they’d been inspired by a well-ordered living room instead of a testosterone-fueled cockpit” (Hales, 2004, p. C2). The testosterone rush or the return to domesticity provide the mutually exclusive, exhaustive options for women, mirroring the rigidity of traditional gender bifurcations. Even the car’s body design was placed within the gender dichotomy. One caption beneath a photo of the car remarks: “The car’s chunky styling was not what we were expecting from a bunch of girls” (Volvo YCC concept, 2004).

Kitchen and laundry room also provide reliable reference points for discussions of the car’s features. YCC includes specially designed paint that resists stains, so road grime, tar, and insect debris do not accumulate. The paint’s durability was consistently compared not to shields or armor (as in Armor All® protective coating), but instead to non-stick cookware. The “easy-clean exterior paint finish behaves rather like the coating of a non-stick pan—dirt finds it very hard to cling to in the first place and, if it does, it washes off very easily” (Design aimed, 2004, p. 12). The phrases “non-stick pan,” “non-stick frying pan,” and “Teflon pan,” consistently describe the special paint throughout media coverage in the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States (Moore, 2004; Job, 2004; Kemp, 2004; Alkhalisi, 2004; Barton, 2004). The linkage to kitchen utensils may have been catalyzed by Anna Rosen, a spokesperson for the design team. She boasted that the auto’s exterior was “as easy to clean as a nonstick frying pan” (Geller, 2004, p. 19).

Woman’s role as cleaner also surfaces in one of the most widely discussed features of the car: interchangeable seat covers and carpets with different designs and fabrics. Rather than concentrate on their durability or other practical features, reporters dwelled on the ease of cleaning (Pegg, 2004), reflecting an ongoing assumption that women would be especially

concerned with implications for their role as designated charwoman. Thankfully the seat covers could be placed in a washing machine (Wernie, 2004), presumably alongside the other laundry that the woman of the house bears responsibility for cleaning.

The interior trim not only is washable, but capitalizes on the notoriously whimsical nature of women. Adding variety accommodates choice, but the choices women make apparently rely on caprice rather than rationally justifiable needs or preferences. Seat covers can be changed to match a woman's mood (Design aimed, 2004) or simply whenever she feels she wants a change (Moore, 2004). A derisive Canadian review of the car criticizes its design as demeaning to women. The author notes: "In recognition of the adage that it's a woman's prerogative to change her mind, there are exchangeable seat covers in eight colours" (Kingston, 2004, p. SP1). Feminine frivolity gains reinforcement from the design team. Color and trim designer Maria Ugglä quipped: "No need to trade in your car just because you have grown tired of its colour scheme" (Pegg, 2004, p. A28). The décor can change to match the driver's outfit, notes a woman reporting from Scotland (Smith, 2004), a point corroborated in American media coverage (Geller, 2004).

The car's features also reinforce images of women's fragility. There is no gas cap, so fingernails will not be broken trying to pry it open (Geller, 2004). Repeatedly the low-maintenance features of the car accompany references to the high-maintenance nature of women. For example, a BBC report mentions "an external filler point for washer fluid (no breaking your nails while trying to open the bonnet)" (BBC Top Gear, 2004).

Women also require protection—from dirt. The external filler for windshield washer fluid eliminates the "need to stick your head under the mucky bonnet" (Barton, 2004, p. 8). Gull-wing doors open upward to "preserve a lady's modesty when getting out" (Massey, 2004). Thus wearing unwieldy clothing becomes necessary from a prurient standpoint. Fashion dictates are enforced for a woman's own good, forcing design accommodations rather than challenges to the prevailing Puritanical prudence. The specially designed doors also safely guide dirty surfaces away from expensive shoes (Hales, 2004), thereby protecting extravagant purchases.

Finally, the car protects Eve's mechanical innocence by having a sealed hood, permitting engine maintenance and repair only by a qualified

Volvo technician. “The design team decided early on that women preferred not to have to look under the hood” (Hales, 2004, p. C2). The car’s computer sends an electronic message to the Volvo dealership when the engine requires service. Project Manager Temm admitted: “Honestly, the only time I open the bonnet on my car is when I want to fill up washer fluid” (Madslie, 2004). Her comment fits neatly with the BBC’s tagline for the story: “Girl Power Softens Volvo’s Edges.”

Repressive Tolerance

YCC exemplifies Marcuse’s notion of repressive tolerance, a concept rooted in the discursive techniques that reinforce extant relations of power while appearing to offer an escape from hegemonic forces (Aune, 1994). Aune offers a vivid, concise description of how repressive tolerance works:

the system incorporates dissent by, in effect, patting it on the head, and then using its existence to confirm how good and tolerant the status quo is. . . . Tolerance now serves the purpose of providing the illusion that freedom exists in society, while political power remains in the hands of elites. (Aune, 1994, p. 84)

Returning to the literary allusions, Volvo has reserved a space where women can indeed control automotive design. This room of their own, far from centrally placed, is consigned to a realm of fancy that remains distant from grimy factory floors. Project Manager Tatiana Butovitsch Temm enthusiastically describes the changeable seat covers by noting “you can, by that, not only change the look of your car—you know, you could have a very strict, very smart or more playful kind of interior, but you can also bring in new materials. You can bring in linen or wool” (CNNfn, 2004). The room for automotive design turns into a playroom. One woman observer at the auto show where YCC debuted remarked: “It’s Barbie’s car. But it is very pretty” (Fernandez, 2004).

An all-woman design team does qualify as an important achievement in an industry that designs vehicles almost exclusively from a male viewpoint. The celebration of apparent women’s empowerment, however, may be subverted as the artifact designed by women generates discourse

that reinforces patriarchal attitudinal, behavioral, and aesthetic norms. Habermas notes that well-intentioned legislation (such as child care and family leave) to ameliorate economic practices that systematically impoverish women can

turn into new forms of discrimination and instead of liberties being guaranteed people are deprived of freedom. In the domains of law that feminism is particularly concerned with, social-welfare paternalism is precisely that, because legislation and adjudication are oriented to traditional patterns of interpretation and thus serve only to strengthen existing gender stereotypes. (1994, p. 115).

An analogous situation arises with YCC. Although the target market seems to claim ownership of the car—it is *Your* Concept Car—the features of the car foregrounded in discourse gravitate toward the patriarchal parameters of the “feminine” sphere. Including women in the realm of automotive design in this case renders their contribution a collection of amusing “feminine touches” such as the vertically split headrests that can accommodate a ponytail, a feature acknowledged almost universally in media coverage of the car. By welcoming women into the realm of automotive design, women potentially contribute to the very social structures and forces that disadvantage them.

The car accommodates rather than challenges physical limitations imposed on women: cumbersome clothes are made more manageable by the gull-wing doors and retractable splash guards; unwieldy hair styles are endorsed by the ponytail-friendly headrests. Justifying the door design, “‘Sometimes you have clothes that are not really easy to move around in, so we wanted it to be good for any day,’ YCC exterior designer Anna Rosen says with a laugh” (Stevenson, 2004). These awkward situations are not so much special needs of women, but social conventions less likely to be questioned if they fit neatly into the car’s design. Instead of asking: “Why should women be expected to wear impractical, constrictive clothing?” the expectation remains intact because YCC makes fulfillment of the expectation easier.

A more vivid example of accommodation to (literal) constriction was the incorporation of “fainting rooms” and “fainting couches” into home and hotel architecture (Martell, 2004). Instead of challenging the norms of

fashion that imprisoned women in corsets, structures such as the Franklin Hotel (opened in 1903) in Deadwood, South Dakota, included “a private parlor known as the fainting room. Often ladies would faint from the air rushing into their lungs when they released the tight corsets they wore to obtain the then-fashionable 18” waist” (Franklin Hotel, 2002). Interlacing corsets and cars might seem far-fetched, but both instances illustrate how accommodation of oppressive practices perpetuates them.

Welcoming women into the inner circle of automotive design might actually jeopardize their position as an oppositional force to the androcentric automotive industry. To the extent that “feminism itself has become rescripted (but not disavowed) so as to allow its smooth incorporation into the world of commerce and corporate culture” (Banet-Weiser, 2004, p. 123), women achieve importance primarily as means to accelerate the accumulation of capital rather than as challengers to hegemonic structures such as class and gender hierarchies. Personalizing the car as “Your Concept Car” gives the illusion that the consumer actually guides the means of production when the car tends to make adaptation to “proper” feminine appearance and demeanor easier. “And for the ultimate in elegant egress, when the gull-wing doors go up, the sill rotates out and down, so costly stilettos need never brush against a grimy or greased surface—on the car, anyway” (Hales, 2004, p. C2). The car also boasts a “heel support pedal sensor” (Hales, 2004, p. C2). One skeptic disparages “a theoretical automobile that’s still telling them [women] how to drive” because so many functions are automated. Labeling the car as “yours” allies the automotive industry with the consumer (Aune, 1994), fueling acceptance of an automobile that enacts control of the driver rather than by the driver.

Satisfaction can extend not only to the product itself, but to the entire ideological system that allows the automotive industry to produce such a wonderful design. This “Happy Consciousness” treats every triumph of the capitalist productive mechanism as a vindication of the system as a whole. Marcuse defines Happy Consciousness as “the belief that the real is rational and that the system delivers the goods” (1964, p. 84). The idea of Happy Consciousness is that the interest advocated ideologically does not need to restrict the desires and needs of its audiences as long as any of the audiences’ goals can be met within the ideological framework. The fanfare for the first all-woman automotive design team celebrates the

achievement of women. The appearance of advances in one area of capitalism, however, gives the appearance that the capitalist system per se is free of oppression and that restrictions on achievement reflect limitations *of* the individual, not limitations *on* individuals built into the system itself (hooks, 2000a). Tokenism serves as a political palliative, with the presence of the all-woman design team “effectively used to validate the existing social and economic structure” by the very people who protect the status quo from disruption by marginalized populations (hooks, 2000b, pp. 65-66).

Implications

Your Concept Car demonstrates that a product does not necessarily become a liberatory device for women simply because it was formulated by women. Toril Moi (1997) observes a similar situation with theory: authorship by women is less important than the effects a theory can generate when appropriated to serve political purposes. Although Volvo touted YCC as a progressive step for women in the automotive industry, the involvement of women in automotive design highlights more than one *modus operandi* for sexism. The occasion of women taking charge of automotive design, far from signaling an unmitigated advance for feminism, actually reasserts patriarchy on multiple levels. Socially, women are relegated to the realms of art and inspiration, safely segregated from the means of production and implementation. Linguistically, women’s place is ensconced in the realms of the household, beauty, and lighthearted frivolity. Inclusion of women in an automotive project hardly heralds greater inclusiveness of feminist concerns in the automotive industry or in society at large.

Habermas (1994) observes that institutionalized paternalism often produces new or renewed forms of oppression for women, but in the guise of liberties. The purportedly progressive corporate move of using an all-female automotive design team apparently opens new frontiers for women. Yet the new design has taken the exit ramp from the production line, entering the non-industrial realm of the aesthetic. The novel features that receive most attention are precisely those that accommodate the most restrictive roles associated with womanhood: impractical clothing that requires protection from dirt and stains (reinforcing images of purity and fragility), hairstyles that impede vision and motor skills (reducing competence for the

sake of appearance), purely cosmetic and whimsical interior redesigns (recalling women as frivolous). The new automobile, far from challenging paternalism, incorporates design features that reinforce paternalistic expectations.

Translating our central contention into literary idioms, the promotion of and reaction to Your Concept Car grants women a room of their own, but this room may well have a locked door and yellow wallpaper. By celebrating women's access to a room (design of a concept car), the male-dominated automotive industry can claim accommodation of women while still consigning them to subservience or invisibility in the overall economic landscape (the automotive industry). If automobiles are not merely the objects of emotion but the manifestation of deep emotional and psychological commitments (Sheller, 2004), then the discursive construction of automotive design may have profound implications for the construction of femininity itself.

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Figure 2. The YCC design team with the car's floral seat covers, one of several interchangeable patterns.
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<https://www.media.volvocars.com/global/enhanced/en-gb/YCC/Model/Home.aspx>

Trainspotting, High Fidelity, and the Diction of Addiction

During the 1990s, two journalists penned novels that would quickly become modern classics in the canon of British Literature. In 1993, Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* presented the story of heroin addicts in Edinburgh, told mainly through the narration of junkie Mark Renton. Nick Hornby labeled Welsh as "the best thing that has happened to British writing for decades" (Welsh i). Two years later, Hornby would follow with his work, *High Fidelity*, depicting another group of young adults existing in a state of arrested development, their lives ruled not by a heroin needle but a diamond needle. (Editor's note: Cf. Kavadlo.) Hornby's narrator came in the form of self-absorbed record store owner Rob Fleming. It is not possible to say much in terms of the plot, simply because there is not much of one in either book. The ensuing years saw their works translated onto celluloid, although *High Fidelity* came to the big screen in an Americanized adaptation, courtesy of star and scriptwriter John Cusack's moving the setting from London to his native Chicago in a fit of affective fallacy. As he explained in an interview on the DVD release, "People said, 'How can you change the locale from London to Chicago?' And I thought that was probably the simplest part of the whole process. [W]hen I read Hornby's book, I could transpose it directly" (*High Fidelity*). Director Stephen Frears was similarly troubled as latecomer to the project, saying "The idea of it not being set in England was quite shocking When [the novel] came out and people said to Nick Hornby, 'Well, what's it about?' He would say 'Well, it's about England.' So, in a way, you were denying the whole subject matter that the

author thought he was writing about” (*High Fidelity*). In the original novels, both Welsh and Hornby present images of youths frightened by the prospect of adult responsibility in the bleak geographic and economic landscape of late twentieth century Great Britain, choosing to deal with it by *not* dealing with it, opting instead to use their respective addictions as shields from reality.

To place both works in context, youth culture in England hardly existed until after World War II. Colin MacInnes’ 1959 Mod bible *Absolute Beginners* catches that age group in full bloom. Despite his friend “The Wiz” believing “I won’t regret it when the teenage label’s torn off the arse pockets of my drip-dry sky-blue jeans” (12), MacInnes’ unnamed narrator states, “This teenage ball had had a real splendour in the days when the kids discovered that, for the first time centuries of kingdom-come, they’d money . . . and our world was to be our world, the one we wanted” (12). Later on, he speaks of one of his junkie friends, Dean Swift, who “is convinced that . . . you and I, who don’t jab hot needles in our arms are just going through life missing absolutely everything worthwhile in it” (64). Though he disagreed with Dean, history demonstrates that perhaps Dean was onto something. The “splendour” MacInnes’ character spoke of faded in the ensuing decades, assuming it *ever* existed. Three weeks after V-J Day, America called in the Lend Lease agreement. England owed three billion pounds (Savage 108). Great Britain’s status, or lack thereof, in the global power structure following World War II left it in a state closer to the Airstrip One future envisioned by George Orwell than most realized. Of those who did realize it, none of them wanted to admit it. The decades that followed would make the truth as unavoidable as the desire *to* avoid it, by any means necessary.

When Kevin McDonald asked Welsh if his novel could be considered a period piece, he responded, “Yes, it’s dated in the context of Edinburgh because the whole drug scene has changed slightly there. . . . The fact that there’s just so few opportunities for people that it’s not surprising that they try to escape from it or try to obliterate as much of the pain of the world as possible. So while the drugs have changed, the issues are just the same” (121-22). Pressed further, Welsh admitted, “If you’re being pedantic about it, you could say [*Trainspotting*] was set in Edinburgh between 1982 and 1988, but the issues of drug addiction and drug abuse and the on-going HIV

issues are as pertinent as ever” (122). In Hornby’s novel, Rob Fleming “celebrates” his thirty-sixth birthday (213). Considering the novel’s publication of 1995, simple mathematics demonstrates that the characters in both works would be roughly the same age today. The historical context is relevant, for Welsh and Hornby as individuals and in their respective works. Both were shaped by growing up in a nation in denial.

According to journalist Jon Savage, “England was smug and static, full of imperial pretensions, even in areas such as the celebration of the Beatles’ worldwide fame after 1964— one of the country’s few successes” (108). Shortly before his death, former Apple publicist Derek Taylor recounted in a WGBH documentary, “[B]y the Autumn of 1963, [The Beatles] were . . . now a major topic. . . . Life was going to be good now, because we had the Beatles” (“Shakespeares in the Alley”). It is easy to draw a connection between the Beatles and the drug culture; it is already well-known that they were a part of it by the middle of their careers. The Beatles served as a gateway opiate for England under Harold Wilson’s administration.

1964 saw Wilson’s Labour Party oust the Conservatives after over a decade in control. Socialism rose to power on what Philip Norman described as:

a tide of stupendously opportune verbal gimmickry . . . culled almost entirely from the pop idiom used by teenagers and would-be teenagers. ‘Let’s Go With Labour,’ the decisive campaign slogan, borrowed pop music’s preeminent image— that of being galvanized, as by music, into keen and exhilarating life. (245)

In 1965, the Queen’s official birthday was designated as a time to bestow royal honors. The queen’s duties consisted of, as they had the previous year, signing the list made by the Prime Minister. On June 12, the Beatles received their MBEs (246). Rather than the fruition of the Socialist threat feared by British subjects, the Wilson administration, according to Norman:

is remembered not for white heat or driving dynamism but for short-sighted euphoria and feather-headed extravagance. It is remembered, above all, for an hallucination which descended on England’s capital city, brilliant at first,

but in quickly fading, tawdry colors—the hallucination of Swinging London. (247)

Instead of the hard times foretold by Wilson, one only saw the spending boom centered on a youth culture barely two decades old. Its most concrete expression came in the high hemlines and loud patterns of Carnaby Street. It was “an attitude . . . [that] to a great extent, came from the Beatles” (247). However, at the same time the Beatles ceased touring, the positive economic climate began to crumble. July 1966 was marked by a six-month wages freeze and a devaluing of the pound. Early in the next decade, unemployment would top one million for the first time since the 1930s (Savage 42).

The whitewashed Jubilee celebration in 1976 occurred at a significant time in both parties’ lives. Savage writes, “The United Kingdom was not only bereft of Empire, but also divided within itself” (352). Of particular interest where Welsh’s work is concerned, Savage notes, “Scottish nationalism [was] at a peak while the Civil War in Northern Ireland had spread onto the mainland with the post-1974 IRA campaigns” (352). Recounting the sociopolitical climate that greeted *Leaving the 20th Century*’s publication in England, Richard Parry wrote, “In 1974 . . . the second miners’ strike effectively brought down the Tory government. The early Seventies were marked by mass and wildcat strikes, street fighting and terrorism in Ireland and political protest in England from the mass demonstrations to attacks by the Angry Brigade” (vi). If times seemed bad, by the time of Thatcher’s election, it was clear the worst was yet to come for citizens in the United Kingdom.

Jon Savage cites a 1985 report for the *British Journal of Addiction* that notes:

1978-9 was a watershed year for heroin use in Britain. Political events in Iran contributed to a substantial increase in supply on the British Market. This combined with a decline in the existing subcultural taboos against heroin use, filled existing demand and seemed to encourage experimentation. (qtd. in Savage 494)

That experimentation continued into the 1980s, no doubt spurred on by the gloom of the Iron Lady’s reign of terror. The Conservatives’ victory in May of 1979 by forty-three votes set the gears into motion for the “applica-

tion of market forces, jingoism, a hard-line morality and the explicit disenfranchisement of the dispossessed” that would define “Thatcherism” in the coming decade (Savage 541). Margaret Thatcher’s election was the pavement the country hit after decades in freefall after World War II.

In Welsh’s fiction, one finds, according to Simon Reynolds, “characters too unsavory for the sedate drawing room of literary fiction: junkies, [football] hooligans. . . and other species of British lowlife spawned during the Thatcher-Major government’s [eighteen]-year long project of systematically transforming a united, unionized working class into an autodestructive lumpenproletariat” (71). Jane Mendelsohn describes *Trainspotting* as “A ragged tale of young junkies in their [twenties], living on the dole, fending off adulthood and trying to escape from a world of AIDS, death, and emotional despair, . . . set in a milieu so miserable that it is easy to understand the characters’ desire for oblivion” (31).

In 1997, Brian Groom noted in the *New Statesman*, “[D]uring the politicking leading up to the decision on Scottish home rule, the character Renton’s remark, “ ‘Fuckin’ failures in a country ay failures’ has become axiomatic of the 1990s” (12). Renton continues in the same speech, saying, “It’s nae good blamin’ it on the English fir colonising us. . . . They’re just wankers. . . . We’re ruled by effete arseholes. What does that make us? The lowest of the fuckin’ low, the scum of the earth. Ah hate the Scots” (qtd. in Groom 12). According to Groom, one can see, “[The] collective lack of national confidence, the self-loathing that results from the admission of it” (12). If one is in Scotland long enough, he or she “start[s] to share the perceived slights to national honour” (13). These slights range from Scotland being referred to as “a region,” to the BBC and ITN giving priority to stories that have no relevance to life in Scotland, and to Thatcher’s assumption that England’s history was Britain’s history. “Worse,” Groom noted, “[Y]ou even start to enjoy feeling slighted” (13).

The drugs that Welsh uses in his book Simon Reynolds views as “sacraments of dissident subcultures, surrogates for thwarted dreams of social transformation. If these drugs can’t change the world, they can at least change the way some individuals walk through the world” (73). As Mendelsohn explains, the title of the novel comes from “the depressing British hobby of keeping obsessive notes on the arrival and departure times and it is a metaphor for shooting heroin and the obsessed, hopeless nature

of the addict's life" (33). All of the main characters in *Trainspotting* either have or develop a heroin habit during the course of the novel. The usage of the word "habit" is important because it implies a lack of choice, a very real lack the characters experience (34). In what one could argue is the manifesto for Welsh's novel, the main character/narrator Mark Renton says:

Society invents a spurious convoluted logic tae absorb and change people whae's behaviour is outside its mainstream. Suppose ah ken aw the pros and cons, know that ah'm gaunnae huv a short life . . . but still want tae use smack? They won't let ye dae it . . . because it's seen as a sign ay thir ain failure. The fact that ye just simply choose tae reject whit they hav tae offer. Choose us. Choose life. . . . Well, ah choose no tae choose life. If the cunts cannae handle that, it's thair fuckin problem . . . ah jist intend tae keep right on to the end of the road. (Welsh 188)

According to Mendelsohn, "This is a terrific passage. It is a manifesto not for suicide, but for the sidelines—for the limbo of addiction, sarcasm, escape" (34). In our accelerated age, the only part of Timothy Leary's credo that still works is "Drop out."

Ginia Bellafante, in a review of Hornby's *High Fidelity*, notes, "If there is a single grating habit that has afflicted young writers of the past decade, it is a tendency to define characters not necessarily by their histories . . . but more economically, as a sum of their pop cultural tastes" (85). Unfortunately, Bellafante does not group Hornby among those writers, saying, "Happily, Hornby does not rely on pop cultural allusions to limn his characters' inner lives, but uses it instead to create a rich, wry backdrop for them" (85). The exact opposite is true. Case in point, when discussing his many failed relationships, Rob tells his audience he seeks repair. He wants closure, but he wants it to play out the way he would like. To no surprise, he wants his life to be "like a Bruce Springsteen song. . . . I'd like to phone all those people up and say good luck and good-bye, and then they'd feel good, and I'd feel good. We'd all feel good" (158). His own life is so bankrupt he has to borrow scenarios from Bruce Springsteen lyrics. Pop cultural allusions run rampant in *High Fidelity* as that is the high, the addiction of Rob Fleming and his fellow addicts.

Chris Savage King comes closer to the mark in his review, recognizing the addiction of Rob Fleming and the other chief characters, saying, “[Hornby] writes for the generation who drew their formative cues from pop music and TV. Impressions sink in deep because there was nothing exceptional about the childhood view except for the outlets that provided dreams for the future. . . . Pop music and romantic life nudge each other along” (47). Of Rob’s addiction, he seeks solace in the typically, though not always, black disc of audio. He asks the reader, “Is it so wrong, wanting to be at home with your record collection? . . . There’s a whole world in here, a nicer, dirtier, more violent, more peaceful . . . more loving world than the world I live in” (83). This is not a new idea. In *Jubilee*, filmmaker Derek Jarman’s vision of a futuristic England, the character Borgia Ginz states, “As long as the music’s loud, we won’t hear the world falling apart” (*Jubilee*). In moments of emotional distress, Rob likes to reorganize his record collection. He tells us, “There are some people who would find this a pretty dull way to spend an evening, but I’m not one of them. This is my life, and it’s nice to be able to wade in it” (54). It is not difficult to imagine Rob, like a preschooler, building a massive fort out of his albums.

The image is driven home when Rob informs the audience of which artists he uses to blot out negative feelings. As the rest of Britain used the Beatles as a shield from reality, Rob Fleming almost demonstrates a sense of nationalism when he informs the reader, “The Beatles were bubblegum cards and *Help* at the Saturday morning cinema and toy plastic guitars and singing ‘Yellow Submarine’ at the top of my voice in the back row of the coach on school trips. They belong to me . . . and though they’ll make me feel something, they won’t make me feel anything bad” (45). The Beatles are associated with childhood. He is able to regress through their music to a time before hormones and adult concerns complicated things.

While as draining on the bank account as addiction to illicit drugs, a fair number might scoff at pop culture, namely pop music, being classified as an addiction. Record producer David Rubinson drew a very concrete comparison between the music of the 1960s and the counter-culture for which it provided the soundtrack. He recounted attending an industry function where he said, “You have to understand the only people we trust right now are our friends and the people we buy dope from. . . . You’ve got to

market this music like you were a dope dealer. You've got to get the trust of your clients and then you can sell them anything" ("Blues in Technicolor").

Though the film version of *High Fidelity* remains crippled by its Americanization, it and *Trainspotting*, in their film incarnations, provide important opening scenes in discussion of their dual images of addiction, be it the traditional form of drugs or popular culture. In the film adaptation of Hornby's book, Rob (Fleming) listens on headphones to "You're Gonna Miss Me" by the Thirteenth Floor Elevators, the Texan psychedelic group led by Roger Kynard "Roky" Erickson. The image works on the level that while Rob listens to Erickson wailing "You didn't realize, you're gonna miss me, baby" (*Psychedelic Sounds*), his girlfriend Laura is removing her belongings from his apartment. And another level is there: As recounted in the recent documentary on his life, Erickson has spent his life in and out of mental hospitals since pleading insanity on a marijuana possession charge in the late 1960s, suffering from schizophrenia complicated by his abuse of hallucinogens during the Elevators' recording career (*You're Gonna Miss Me*).

As for *Trainspotting*, many people remember the opening chase scene where Ewan McGregor as Renton gives the "Choose Life" speech while "Lust for Life" by Iggy Pop plays in the background (*Trainspotting*). Iggy recorded the song, fresh from rehab, during the cocaine-fueled holiday he spent with David Bowie in Berlin in the mid-1970s, recording the album it provided the title track for, as well as *The Idiot*, as recounted in Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain's oral history *Please Kill Me* (255). His renouncement of his vices rings hollow, especially considering his mention of "Johnny Yen" from *The Ticket That Exploded* by William S. Burroughs in the lyrics (*Lust for Life*), an author whose influence Iggy discussed with Lynn X in *Search and Destroy* magazine (66). Burroughs was no stranger to heroin or the "meat injection" that Alison, one of the female junkies in *Trainspotting* prefers heroin over, saying "That beats any meat injection . . . that beats any fuckin cock in the world . . ." (Welsh 9). The Iggy connection is used to lesser effect in the book when some of the characters attend one of his concerts, and during "Neon Forest," Iggy changes the first word in the line "America takes drugs in psychic defense" to "Scatlin' [Scotland]" and "defines us mair accurately in a single sentence than all the others have ever done" (75).

Writing on the effects of heroin, Jon Savage cites the example of Sid Vicious, who actually embodied both the heroin addict as well as the addict of popular music, starting out a fan of the Sex Pistols before becoming one of them. Savage wrote, “One of the problems of heroin use is that, although the drug offers insulation from the stresses of everyday life, it does so by effectively embalming the user’s body and emotions. Sid [was] . . . locked into permanent adolescence” (502). At the end of his co-worker Dick’s revelation that he has a girlfriend, Hornby’s narrator Rob is left on his own with Dick going off with Anna and his other co-worker Barry storming off angry. Rob thinks, “I feel as though I have been having conversations like this all my life. None of us is young anymore, but what has just taken place could have happened when I was sixteen We got to adolescence and just stopped dead; we drew up the map then and left the boundaries exactly as they were” (Hornby 151). In both novels, it appears the characters “got to adolescence and just stopped dead.” Earlier on, Rob discusses his fleeting relationship with Alison Ashworth, telling the audience, “It would be nice to think that as I’ve got older times have changed, relationships have become more sophisticated, females less cruel . . . [b]ut there still seems to be an element of that evening in everything that has happened to me since” (9). Whose fault is this?

Among the dream jobs Rob would like to have, his top five, a convention that Hornby’s characters carry throughout the book, include his first choice, a journalist for the *New Musical Express* during the Punk explosion of the 1970s. His reasons were “Get to meet the Clash, Sex Pistols, Chrissie Hynde, Danny Baker, etc. Get loads of free records—good ones, too” (290). His second dream job was to be a producer for Atlantic Records during the glory days of rhythm and blues. He would get to meet such luminaries as Solomon Burke and Aretha Franklin and of course, “[g]et loads of free records—good ones, too” (290-1). Three and four are musician (of any kind except classical or rap) and film director (though he would prefer not to be a silent or German film director), respectively. Rounding out the list is “architect” (291). Rob informs us, “It’s not even as though this list is my *top* five, either. . . . I just thought that if I failed to come up with five, it would look a bit feeble” (291). As if the number thereof would make any real difference.

In Rob Fleming's catalogue of the songs he has listened to since he was a teenager on the average of once a week or "three hundred times the first month, every now and again thereafter," he counts "Last Night I Dreamed That Somebody Loved Me" by Manchester's masters of mope The Smiths, and "Only Love Can Break Your Heart" by Neil Young. Rob asks his audience:

How can that not leave you bruised somewhere. . . ? What came first—the music or the misery? Did I listen to music because I was miserable? Or was I miserable because I listened to music? Do all those records turn you into a miserable person? (Hornby 24-25)

No matter what the genesis was, Rob and his records exist in a symbiotic sickness.

In his review of Danny Boyle's screen adaptation, Richard Grenier wrote, "[T]he heroin addicts of *Trainspotting* are deprived of any redeeming virtues. They lie to each other, steal from each other, betray each other. They lack of the slightest speck of morality of conscience as they sink into the squalid depths of heroin addiction" (13). Grenier cites Welsh's statement on his characters, writing "[They] are not 'victims' and their heroin addiction is not the result of . . . any of the old-fashioned Marxist reasons. The problem is larger than that. It's 'life,' 'the world'" (13). Grenier's review may reek of moral outrage, much like Bob Dole's condemnation of the film when he protested its content during his presidential campaign, but as Mendelsohn notes, "[T]o say that *Trainspotting* glorifies heroin is like saying that the *Inferno* glorifies hell" (31). Mendelsohn further explains, "*Trainspotting* is not the radical manual for the destruction of society that it sometimes pretends to be, but it isn't a moralizing tract prescribing sentimental answers either" (35).

When we are introduced to the characters in Welsh's novel, courtesy of Renton, certain traits of the heroin junkie are introduced along with them. The main supplier of the group is Johnny Swan or Mother Superior, called such due to "the length of his habit" (Welsh 6). "'Mother Superior' wis Johnny Swan . . . hud once been a really good mate ay mines, back in the auld days," Renton says. "We played fitba together fir Porty Thistle. Now he wis a dealer. Ah remember um saying tae us once: Nae friends in this game. Jist associates" (6).

The junkies in Welsh's novel are only connected in their mutual addiction. According to Renton, "[T]he real junky . . . doesnae give a fuck about anybody else" (7). Although they share the addiction, they refuse to share needles. Sick Boy protests, "Ah dinnae share needles or syringes. Ah've goat ma ain works here" (9). The fear of death from AIDS as opposed to overdose loomed large over the junkies. At least they had *that* much concern for their health. When talk turns to "Goagsie," and his test coming back positive, all agreed that even though he had it, he still had to go on with his life, however short it might be. Of course, "It's easy tae be philosophical when some other cunt's goat shite fir blood" (10).

The lack of friends also pervades Hornby's depiction of vinyl addicts. Hornby's narrator admits, "I'm thirty-five years old, and I own a tiny failing business, and my friends don't seem to be friends at all but people whose numbers I haven't lost" (Hornby 74). When he phones up some "friends" for a drink when his thirty-sixth birthday rolls around, they are characterized as "people I haven't spoken to for months, ex-colleagues or old college friends, or people I've met through ex-colleagues or old college friends . . ." (218). Their response is one of shock. Hornby writes, "They're aghast, they're baffled, they're kind of amused but most of all, they just can't believe it" (218).

Rob survives in his failing business via his clientele, whom he characterizes as "young men, always young men, with John Lennon specs and leather jackets and armfuls of square carrier bags. . . . I get letters from young men, always young men . . . who spend a disproportionate amount of their time looking for deleted Smiths singles and 'ORIGINAL NOT RERELEASED' underlined Frank Zappa albums. They're as close to mad as makes no difference" (37). Of his best customers, Rob says:

[They] are the ones who just *have* to buy a record on a Saturday, even if there's nothing they really want; unless they go home clutching a flat, square carrier bag, they feel uncomfortable. You can spot the vinyl addicts . . . I know that feeling well (these are my people, and I understand them better than I understand anybody in the world): it is a prickly, clammy, panicky sensation, and you go out of the shop reeling. (95-96)

Is it purely coincidental that the symptoms described sound like withdrawal of an addict in need of a chemical fix? In this light, Rob allies himself more with “Mother Superior,” being both user and dealer. Welsh provides description of the fix being satisfied in the injecting of Alison by Sick Boy. He writes, “She pulls back her head, shuts her eyes and opens her mouth, givin out an orgasmic groan. Sick Boy’s eyes are now innocent and full ay wonder They baith look strangely beautiful and pure in the flickering candlelight” (9).

Of Rob’s co-workers, Dick is described as “thirty-one years old, with long, greasy black hair . . . wearing a Sonic Youth t-shirt” and reading a Lou Reed biography when Rob arrives to open his shop (37-38). In reductionist terms, Dick is a stunted adolescent, dressing like and having the concerns of someone half his age. Dick is unconversational about anything other than the mix tapes he makes for Rob which he never listens to. Rob hypothesizes that if he tried to tell Dick that his girlfriend Laura left, or for that matter, *anything* of a highly personal nature, “He’d probably just crumble to dust” (39).

As for Barry, he enters humming the riff to a Clash song, or rather “he’s making that guitar noise that all little boys make, the one where you stick your lips out, clench your teeth and go ‘DA-DA!’” (41). To further emphasize the stunted emotional growth of Rob and his co-workers, Hornby notes Barry’s age of thirty-three (41). Barry’s conversational skills rival Dick’s. He provides “simply an enumeration: if he has seen a good film, he will [rank it] in his best-of-year list . . . he thinks and talks in tens and fives, and as a consequence, Dick and I do too” (42). This desire to reduce people to the sum of their tastes takes on an almost scientific slant among the three.

Rob informs the reader, “A while back when Dick and Barry and I agreed that what really matters is what you really like, not what you are like, Barry proposed the idea of a questionnaire for prospective partners, a two- or three-page multiple choice document that covered all the music/film/TV/book bases. . . . [T]here was an important and essential truth contained in the idea. . . . [T]hese things matter, and it’s no good pretending that any relationship has a future if your record collections disagree violently, or if your favorite films wouldn’t even speak to each other if they met at a party” (117). One need only look at the way Rob characterizes prudish

Penny, number two in his top five split-ups, in chronological order. Hornby writes, "[Penny was] nice-looking and her top five recording artists were Carly Simon, Carole King, James Taylor, Cat Stevens and Elton John" (10). Seemingly, Hornby ties in her chaste nature with her fondness for the sensitive singer/songwriters of the 1970s as if this is the reason why "she wouldn't let me put my hand underneath or even on top of her bra, and so I was finished with her" (10). In the opening paragraph, the flat, lifeless adjective "nice" is used to describe Penny and the elements surrounding her *eleven* times (9-10).

The three's audiophile snobbery emerges, at least from Rob, when they go to watch American singer (and Rob's future interim girlfriend) Marie LaSalle. When she covers the Peter Frampton song "Baby I Love Your Way," Rob breaks down and cries, which confuses him because it was one of the songs he and his college girlfriend Charlie used to stick their fingers down their throats to when "invariably a geography student, or a girl training to be a primary school teacher played it" (61). Is Rob stereotyping? He rationalizes his two characterizations, saying "I don't see how you can be accused of snobbishness if all you are doing is stating the plain, simple, truth" (61). And the "plain, simple truth" is that, despite what Washington D.C. punk band Fugazi sang (an allusion Rob, Dick and Barry would no doubt appreciate), you *are* what you own (*Repeater*).

At least to the three of them, this is true. When Laura returns to get her belongings from Rob's apartment, Rob asks her about her new boyfriend Ian/Ray's place. She says it is less cluttered. Rob responds by remarking, "That's 'cause he's only got about ten records, and CDs." When Laura asks him, "And that makes him an awful person, does it?" Rob replies, "In my book, yes" (209).

When Dick introduces Rob to his girlfriend Anna, Dick throws a monkey wrench into the threesome's hypothesis that there is no point in trying to get on with someone whose tastes differ. Dick informs Rob that Anna is a fan of Simple Minds. Rob admits, "I don't know what to say. This, in our universe, is a staggering piece of information. We hate Simple Minds. They were number one in our Top Five Bands or Musicians Who Will Have to be Shot Come the Musical Revolution. . . . Barry wanted to shoot the Beatles, but I pointed out that someone had already done it" (160). Dick's connection to Anna is emotional, as opposed to the "chemical" con-

nection of vinyl he shares with Rob and Barry. In a sense, Dick has outgrown the two of them.

Life revolves around addiction to records, but so does death, as well. Laura calls Rob to inform him of her father's death. If concern for her exists, it is fleeting as Rob, Dick and Barry turn the occasion into an opportunity to list their top five songs about death. Barry's catalogue of potential songs for the funeral runs the gamut from "Leader of the Pack" because "[t]he bloke dies on his motorbike," to "Tell Laura I Love Her" for the obvious reasons. For his own funeral, Barry's list includes "One Step Beyond" by Madness and the Rolling Stones' "You Can't Always Get What You Want," a choice for which the other two give him grief due to its inclusion in the funeral scene from *The Big Chill* (234). Recognizing the ghoulishness of their exercise, Rob says "I'm glad Laura isn't here to see how much amusement her father's death has afforded us" (233-34).

As for Rob's list, he admits he could never list it in front of anyone as they would laugh at him. All the same, they include:

"One Love" by Bob Marley; "Many Rivers to Cross" by Jimmy Cliff; "Angel" by Aretha Franklin, and I've always had this fantasy that someone beautiful and tearful will insist on "You're the Best Thing That Ever Happened to Me" by Gladys Knight, but I can't imagine who that beautiful, tearful person will be. (235)

Death also looms large for Welsh's junkies. When Dawn, Lesley's baby, dies, Renton describes the scene, saying, "Ah can feel death in the room before ah even see the bairn. It wis lying face doon in its cot. It, naw, she wis cauld and deid, . . . Ah didnae huv tae touch her tae ken" (Welsh 52). The other junkies respond first with shock, such as Spud's response of "Fuckin' heavy this . . . eh, likesay, em fuck" (52) to a resigned stance along the lines of "Yeah. Well, what can you do?" Matty says, "The way ah see it . . . is thit it's Lesley's bairn, ken? Mibbe if she'd looked eftir it right, it might not be deid" (53). Renton agreed, "Hate tae say it, bit Matty's got a point." His bigger concern? "Ah'm startin tae hurt really badly," Renton says. "Ah jist want tae take a shot and fuck off" (52). He tries to show some compassion, saying "Ah feel thit ah love thum aw. Matty, Spud, Sick Boy and Lesley. Ah want tae tell them. Ah try, but it comes oot as: — Ah'm cookin" (55). And what of the mother, Lesley? She goes into where

Renton is cooking up his next shot of heroin and declares, “Ah need a shot Mark. Ah really need a fuckin shot. C’moan Marky, cook us up a shot” (55). It is eerily appropriate. Without the dawn, it stays dark.

The number of bystanders who become casualties in the junkies’ orbit does not stop with Baby Dawn. Tommy, arguably the *only* morally upstanding character in the text, descends into junkiedom after breaking up with his girlfriend, Lizzie. Before Tommy’s downfall, he is characterized by Renton as “[O]ffensively fit. . . . It has to be said that Tommy’s a fairly handsome cunt wi a tan. . . . Handsome, easy-going, intelligent, and pretty tidy in a swedge. Tommy should make you jealous, but somehow he doesnae” (87). Then he approaches Renton about taking up heroin. Renton informs us, “Normally Tommy’s daein a bad impersonation ay ma auld lady . . . yir killin yirsel/pack it in/ye kin live yir life withoot that garbage, and other such shite” (89). He wants to try it. Renton justifies his turning Tommy on, saying, “Basically, we live a short, disappointing life; and then we die. We fill up oor lives wi shite, things like careers and relationships tae delude oorsels that it isnae aw totally pointless. Smack’s an honest drug, because it strips away these delusions. . . . It’s the only really honest drug” (90). Renton admits his culpability in Tommy’s using, “He nivir used before. It’s probably our fault; probably ma fault. . . . Lizzy’s kicked him intae touch” (175). Not long after, and perhaps not surprisingly, Tommy contracts HIV.

Strangely though, to Renton, “Tommy looks well. . . . He’s gaunny die. Sometime between the next few weeks and the next fifteen years, Tommy will be no more. The chances are that ah’ll be exactly the same. The difference is, we ken this wi Tommy” (314). He considers giving Tommy the same “The show must go on” speech, but he knows “Tommy cannae afford tae heat this gaff. He isnae Davie Mitchell, never mind Derek Jarman. . . . He willnae live five, or ten, or fifteen years before he’s crushed by pneumonia or cancer. Tommy will not survive winter in West Granton” (317).

Though Tommy’s doom is certain, what of Renton? Mendelsohn writes, “Whether [Renton] will have the strength to move on and become his own person . . . betray his friends and his heroin habit becomes the single most important question of the book” (33). As he does in the film adaptation, in Welsh’s novel, Renton takes off with the money made from a

deal he worked on with Sick Boy, Spud, Begbie, and the others. What of his fate? He thought, “[W]as he a junky? True, he had just used again, but the gaps between his using were growing. However, he couldn’t really answer this question now. Only time could do that” (343). The road ahead “appears” bright enough. Welsh writes, “Now, free from them all, for good, he could be what he wanted to be. He’d stand or fall alone. This thought both terrified and excited him as he contemplated life in Amsterdam” (344). Mendelsohn writes, “Even if he doesn’t choose the straight road, he does, despite all indications to the contrary, choose life” (36). Does he? Looking at where Renton is headed at the novel’s resolution, one wonders how short the life Renton has chosen will be. Amsterdam, during the late 1980s when Welsh’s novel takes place, was arguably the center of European drug culture. One recalls the prediction Renton made regarding his own mortality in relation to Tommy’s and in doing so, one might assume Renton will either lead or follow Tommy to the grave.

Before Anna, Dick’s method of expressing himself came in the form of making a mixtape, passing it on to a person in a form not unlike needle sharing. Upon their reunion, Rob reminds Laura of the Solomon Burke song he first copied for her. Rob exclaims, “Solomon Burke! ‘Got to Get You Off My Mind’! That’s our song! Solomon Burke is responsible for our entire relationship!” To this, Laura responds, “Is that right? Do you have his number? I’d like a word with him” (Hornby 263). In the dénouement, the vicious cycle begins anew as Rob informs the reader he is compiling a new mixtape in his head for Laura of “stuff she’s heard of, and full of stuff she’d play. Tonight, for the first time ever, I can sort of see how it’s done” (323). The night marking his return to being a club disc jockey is viewed by Rob as “like the end of a film. The entire cast is dancing” (322). Has he learned nothing from the past? Apparently not.

To varying degrees, Renton and Rob are doomed characters, representing the adolescently post-adolescent in Great Britain. Neither is able to relate to anyone outside of his own little community of addicts. Both Mark and Rob’s lives are ruled by a needle. In the interactions, for lack of a better term, that Renton has with Sick Boy, Tommy and his other fellow junkies, and that Rob has with Dick, Barry, and other musically inclined members of his circle, a picture is drawn of a latter-day, now older Tiny Tim hobbling on his crutch with Mother Britain still suffering from a close-to-

sixty-year postwar hangover. Given the abysmal environment surrounding the two, as well as the two authors, addiction becomes all the more unavoidable as a way to blot out reality. One may argue that Hornby and Welsh represent the vanguard of a new wave of British novelists in turn of the century England. Certainly the two realistically depict life in England and how the latter part of the twentieth century shaped it.

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Book Reviews

Cylons in America: Critical Studies in Battlestar Galactica. Ed. Tiffany Potter and C. W. Marshall. New York: Continuum, 2008 . Pp. 278; and *Battlestar Galactica and Philosophy: Knowledge Here Begins Out There*. Ed. Jason T. Eberl. Oxford: Blackwell, 2008. Pp. 288.

Perhaps no text of popular culture is more well equipped to address contemporary anxieties about technology, race, religion, and war than the “re-imagined” television series *Battlestar Galactica* (*BSG*). This relevance is emphasized in two recently published collections on *BSG* which explore issues of the posthuman, the possibility of religious faith in a modern world, and the complex ethical questions facing a surviving remnant of humanity at war with a deadly enemy of its own creation.

In the introduction to their *Cylons in America: Critical Studies in Battlestar Galactica* editors Tiffany Potter and C.W. Marshal observe that “it is the presence of fantastic elements such as malevolent robots that makes possible a level of social commentary that cannot be achieved anywhere else on modern television” (5). Their thought-provoking collection’s main focus, as the title indicates, is to point to *BSG* in its specifically *American* context. This emphasis is articulated more specifically by the editors, who refer to the series as an “aggressive engagement with post-9/11 American politics” (1). Although some of the essays perhaps make a too literal connection between contemporary American politics and the series, most offer challenging insights. Both Brian L. Ott and Erika Johnson-Lewis, for example, read *BSG* as a commentary on recent American activities, demonstrating how it stresses the ambiguity and complexity behind familiar war rhetoric and Manichean characterizations of good and evil. Johnson-Lewis writes that “*BSG* echoes the rhetoric of the Bush administration’s continuous invocation of the possible end of civilization, but implicit is an embedded irony that requires a much more subtle analysis” (31). Other less politically direct but interesting interpretations of *BSG* as a form of cultural critique include Lorna Jowett’s essay on science stereotypes, which examines the way that the character of Gaius Baltar and the Cylons can be used to question our assumed ideas of science and rationality and Kevin J. Wetmore’s

reading of the complex performative aspects of sports, drinking, and sex on the show.

A section on Cylon/Human Interface gets at some of the most difficult and discomfiting questions that *BSG* raises about how we view ourselves and others. Tama Leaver compares the horrific scenes of a Cylon “baby farm” to President Laura Roslin’s decision to outlaw abortions in order to prevent human extinction. As Leaver writes, “the president’s decision does force some women in the fleet to have children against their will, reducing them in some ways to the status of a baby machine.” Furthermore, she points out, when Roslin then removes a Cylon/human hybrid from her mother, she has “not only remove[d] a human woman’s right to control her own body in the fleet, but also clearly does not consider a Cylon woman to have the right to raise her own child” (139). Her essay points strongly to, in Mathew Gumpert’s words, the “struggle to understand what it means to be human. The fable of the machine helps us to do that, while serving, paradoxically, as a veiled reminder that we do not know the answer” (144). Gumpert’s essay effectively destabilizes many of the common assumptions that accompany comparisons of human and machines, among them our cherished concepts of freedom, morality, and originality. While there are too many outstanding essays in this collection to name, others that I found particularly impressive include Christopher Deis on the Cylons as racial other, Suzanne Scott on fan activity and authorial control, and Eftychia Papanikolaou on musical perception and narrative.

Battlestar Galactica and Philosophy: Knowledge Here Begins Out There, edited by Jason T. Eberl, is a new addition to the Blackwell Philosophy and Popculture series. As in *Cylons in America*, many of the best essays address the ambiguous nature of Cylons. Robert Sharp, for example, by reading *BSG* through Nietzsche, sees the Cylons as representing the early Christians, “struggling to make sense of their lives as slaves by embracing a morality that shows the Cylon way of life to be better than the human way” (19). Other essays employ Heidegger to contrast the human and Cylon awareness of death, John Stuart Mill to analyze the sacrifice of the one for the many, and Aquinas on the existence of a monotheistic (i.e. Cylon) God.

While many essays in *BSG and Philosophy* address similar issues to *Cylons in America*, the overall tone and force of the essays is, for me, less engaging. Written for a more general audience, these essays seem too quick to arrive at an easy conclusion and less likely to leave ambiguity suspended. Rather than establishing *BSG* as an open text that is part of contemporary negotiations of ethics and politics, we merely see, for example, that “Nietzsche’s account of the rise of slave morality fits *BSG* quite well” (26). Perhaps part of my complaint lies in the disjunctive “and” that is in between “philosophy” and the subject. In this case, it seems to result in essays that go back and forth, using *BSG* to demonstrate an idea and then going back to philosophy to give a summary of that concept. While readers may be convinced of significant connections between *BSG* and philosophy, these essays are not likely to change how readers think. The importance of *BSG*, as the best criticism illuminates, is not that it resembles or can be interpreted by philosophic concepts, but that it *is* that thought.

Both collections make it clear that *Battlestar Galactica* offers a way of looking at ourselves in an uncertain time. Potter and Marshall describe a *BSG* scene in which the audience is led through an argument on the ethics of genocide: given the opportunity, do we wipe out the Cylon race or not? This is not an easy question, and many viewers will lean towards a position counter to our accepted morality. What does this say about us? Where does the evil lie now? As Potter and Marshall write, “Television isn’t supposed to make us think like this” (6). As these collections demonstrate, sometimes it can.

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Netporn: DIY Web Culture and Sexual Politics. By Katrien Jacobs.
 Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007. Pp. i-x, 1-207, Bibliography, Index.

In her conclusion Katrien Jacobs observes, almost in passing, that “. . . we cannot return to the era when porn was more innocent, less hardcore, and merely a relief for horny males” (179). As this study of the function of Do It Your-self amateurism in the pornosphere demonstrates, access to

cheap and nearly effortless computer technology has resulted in a massive multiplication and diversity of sexual expression.

Just as the printing press in the fifteenth century made every man and woman his or her own interpreter of Scripture and so generated a vast diversity of religious expression, the ubiquity of the Internet and its democratizing practices appear to be allowing every man and woman his or her own constructions of sexuality. Life in a “networked society,” it is now widely conceded, allows habitation in a wide variety “spaces,” commonly oscillating between personal and collective spaces which in experience often collapse the distinction between the virtual and the actual. And these spaces are increasingly filled with expressions sexual and pornographic: “Porn,” Jacobs observes, “is successfully being appropriated and reinterpreted by alternative producers and activist sex workers, younger pro-porn feminists, queer porn networks, aesthetic-technological vanguards, p2p [person to person] traders, radical sex/perv cultures, and free-speech activists” (3).

Here Jacobs’ primary focus is upon the “gifted” amateur; that is, the lover of sexual expression for its own sake who commonly makes a gift of it to others on line. Indeed, netporn as sexual potlach which “. . . aims to construct a mechanism of social cohesion rather than economic utility or profit” (58) is a central theme of this study, one critically warranted by commercial pornography’s effort to exploit the rising taste for pornographic “amateurs” and the increasingly common practice of giving away downloadable samples of its wares.

Jacobs’ treatment of Netporn falls into five chapters: “Netporn Browsing in Small Places and other Spaces,” “Post or Perish: The New Media Schooling of the Amateur Pornographer,” “Porn Arousal and Gender Morphing in the Twilight Zone,” “Eros in Times of War: From Cross-Cultural Teasings to the Titillation of Torture,” “Post Revolutionary Glimpses and Radical Silence: Net Porn in Hong Kong and Mainland China.” Each reads like a separate critical essay, all of which are informed—some more explicitly than others—by critical theory and practice, drawing upon Steven Shaviro, Alfred Kinsey, Paolo Virno, Michel Foucault, and Georges Bataille, among others. Jacobs adroitly applies theory—rather than rubbing the reader’s nose in it—leaving the bulk of the reader’s attention to the evidence for the claims which is described in her text and which may be to be

found in vivid detail by any who care to look on the Internet at the web addresses she supplies.

The heart of the matter appears in the first three chapters. The essay on “Eros in Times of War” is very interesting and well done, but finally tangential to the book’s central argument. So too the essay on Hong Kong, based upon her experience as a faculty member at the City University of Hong Kong, which is almost disconcertingly personal—the book’s most aggressive manifestation of Jacobs’ exploration of the “. . . shifting boundaries between analytical (cold) and experiential-involved (warm) modes of processing data” (4).

Whatever one’s view of processing cultural studies data, however, Jacobs’ account of Netporn is interesting and very useful. I suspect it will prove an important contribution to the serious academic study of these significant popular phenomena. At the outset—particularly in the Introduction—something of the COIK factor characterizes Jacobs’s account; that is, much of it may be clear only if one already knows about such things, has some experience with Netporn. Soon into the first chapter and again soon after visiting some of the Internet sites she mentions, both the burden and the importance of her arguments come clear.

Many readers may not want to engage Netporn—the book or the phenomena it addresses—but to ignore it is akin to ignoring the Reformation.

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The Republic of Mass Culture: Journalism, Filmmaking, and Broadcasting in America Since 1941, 3rd ed. By James L. Baughman. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006. Pp. 287.

Since its first publication in 1992, *The Republic of Mass Culture* has become a respected text of American media history. As its full title declares, this book by James L. Baughman takes a uniquely comprehensive approach to the development of American audio, print, and visual media since World War II, offering a bracing account of the evolving competition among these media for the attention of the American citizen, and by extension, for the American advertising dollar. Baughman’s book is based on

solid scholarship, reflected in its authoritative use of surveys and statistics. He also provides an extensive Bibliographical Essay at the end, which discusses the sources for each chapter in detail.

The title, though teasingly ambiguous (Has America become a republic defined by its addiction to “mass culture,” or has “mass culture” somehow become a republic unto itself?), misleads a bit. The real, and very cogent, story at the heart of this book is the emergence of television as the dominant medium of the last half of the twentieth century. Of the media discussed in the book, only television shows a consistent pattern of growing importance and relevance. All of the other media—print, radio, and film—have had to adjust to the stresses that television’s success has brought to bear upon their market shares.

Baughman does an admirable job of connecting the socio-economic changes in post-war American life to the fortunes of the various media. For instance, the rise of suburbs drew people away from downtown areas where movie theatres had generally been located; television was much more convenient than a long drive into town for a movie. Also, as television programming made radio network programs redundant and inferior, more and more local stations with independent programming began to sprout up and prosper, allowing an otherwise outlaw musical form like rock and roll to get a hearing. Teenagers then took up radio as their medium, which offered sounds and ideas that they could not find in stodgy, mainstream television programs.

Baughman’s book also offers a very credible and concise portrait of what he calls “the film colony’s” self-destructive greed and complacency during the immediate post-war years. He brings a much broader perspective to bear than most film textbooks on his discussion of the film industry’s initial blindness to the challenge of television, its subsequent misjudgments, and its ultimate acquiescence to the new medium.

The slow decline in importance of print media, such as daily newspapers and general interest magazines, gets detailed coverage, too. Baughman deftly uses demographic information to show how newspapers and magazines had to adjust their content, consolidate financially, and specialize in an increasingly futile attempt to remain competitive with television.

The final chapters tell of television’s triumph and transformation in the 1970s, navigating the reader systematically through all the competing programming philosophies tried by the three major networks during their period

of unparalleled dominance of the airwaves. As the entertainment role of television trumped news and public affairs programming, Baughman's account of the competition for ratings and audience share among the networks and their star producers has an almost novelistic quality.

Like many attempts to update classic studies, the chapters added for this edition, on cable television in the 1980s, and the "new media" emerging from the Internet revolution from 1995-2005, seem a bit superficial in relation to the rich analysis and narrative thrust of the original eight chapters. These new chapters add some significant factual data, but the author seems more committed to "getting caught up" than engaging readers in the large-scale drama that infuses the earlier work.

Another quibble this reviewer has with this edition is its dense print and lifeless typeface. The publisher seems to have made a calculated decision to get as many words onto as few pages as possible. At the very least, some of the excellent statistical information that Baughman uses could have been broken out into some charts and graphs to break up the forest of print. *The Republic of Mass Culture* is a book that sits very comfortably on the cusp of scholarly study and general reader interest. Its unattractive physical presentation could limit what should be a broad audience for a magisterial overview of the business of media in modern America.

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Undead TV: Essays on Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Edited by Elana Levine and Lisa Parks. Durham, NC: Duke UP. 2007. Pp. viii + 209. \$74.95 (hardcover); \$21.95 (paperback).

In spite of its title, *Undead TV* isn't mostly about *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Though some of the chapters are tightly focused on the show, others are media criticism that riffs on *Buffy*—*Buffy* is merely the instrument and media criticism the music. Not that there's anything wrong with that, but readers should be prepared for what they'll find.

The book's orientation isn't a secret: at first, it seems as though *Buffy* is the subject, for the editors ask, "What is the legacy of such a series? Why has it been so influential to so many? In what ways can it live on as a special anomaly in television history, and in what ways might it be better character-

ized as a typical output of the commercial media industries of the late 1990s and 2000s?” (2-3). But much of the book focuses elsewhere: “To consider a television series as having an afterlife or as being ‘undead’ is not to conflate television with liveness, but rather to recognize that the industrial structure of commercial television lends itself to the constant recovery of used, terminated, canceled, expired material for maximum return” (5). These are all excellent questions, as far as they go, and devoting a book to them is a worthy enterprise. The “undead” trope is clever, too: television is statically active or actively static, suspended between the two alternatives, never dead or dying, but never *per se* a lively art.

The trope belies the liveliness of the several contributions, though. In “The Changing Face of Teen Television, or Why We All Love *Buffy*” (17-41), Mary Celeste Kearney proposes the WB’s deliberate construction of a “coalition audience” of “youthful viewers between the ages of twelve and thirty-four” (26), *Buffy*’s audience as well as that devoted to *Charmed*, *Dawson’s Creek*, and *Gilmore Girls*. Kearney considers the creepy effect of thirty-four-year-olds crossing the generation line, sharing the erotic content of such shows with their neighbors’ pubescent children. In “I Know What You Did Last Summer: Sarah Michelle Gellar and Crossover Teen Stardom” (42-55), Susan Murray explains the role of crossover stardom in media marketing and the intertextual experience of teens in contact with the system of television series, films, magazines, Web material and interaction about the series, films, and magazine photo spreads, etc. Annette Hill and Ian Calcutt contribute a very informative piece, “Vampire Hunters: The Scheduling and Reception of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* in the United Kingdom” (57-73), which contrasts viewer experience of the shows on either side of the Atlantic, facilitated by scheduling in the US, frustrated by scheduling in the UK.

Cynthia Fuchs’s “‘Did Anyone Ever Explain to You What ‘Secret Identity’ Means?’ Race and Displacement in *Buffy* and *Dark Angel*” (96-115), is a thoughtful, persuasive, and eloquent argument about *Buffy*’s rejection of her own otherness, in her metaphorical conflict with the First Slayer: “The image of the First Slayer is problematic in various ways: at the same time that she represents the African roots of *Buffy*’s Euro-American present, she also can be read as an ignorant (not to say racist) image of a primitive Black character being bested by a white girl’s ‘modern’ know-

how and training” (98). The contrast between Buffy and Max of *Dark Angel* is an illuminating one, and Fuchs’s argument is bigger than *Buffy* or television criticism as a result.

Allison McCracken’s “At Stake: Angel’s Body, Fantasy Masculinity, and Queer Desire in Teen Television” (116-144) pairs well with Jason Middleton’s “Buffy as *Femme Fatale*: The Cult Heroine and the Male Spectator” (145-167). According to McCracken, “one of the program’s more remarkable accomplishments is its construction of a new kind of masculinity through the character of Angel” (117), in representations of his body as permeable and resilient, “characteristic of the vampire that is here specially designed for girl erotics” (123). As the title of her contribution suggests, though, Angel’s erotics, and indeed the erotics of both *Buffy* and *Angel*, are more complex than heterosexual heart-throbbing—even when *Buffy* is heterosexual, it isn’t necessarily heteronormative (127), and, of course, lesbianism is a protracted element of the show, an interesting counterpoint to the feminine homosociality on which, one might say, the show was founded (poor Xander!). McCracken argues that *Buffy* “queers” Angel’s body, and, “like *Buffy*, *Angel*’s flexible approach to gender and genre nurtures and accommodates a number of queer characters and situations” and “its deployment of the penetrable male body to critique normative masculinity and explore the instabilities of contemporary gender categories” (131).

Middleton agrees that Buffy “provides a valuable resource for young people, and girls especially, to explore identities and identifications often perceived as deviant or misfit within teenage culture” but proposes that “certain formal elements of *Buffy* promote a voyeuristic and/or fetishistic male gaze” and that “this form of spectatorship links the show with a number of other filmic and televisual texts, fan magazines and even video games” (145). These two essays are wide-ranging, carefully argued cultural criticism. They try to do big things, not just argue the limits of television criticism. McCracken’s article, for my money, is the best of the volume; it fully justifies buying the paperback—nothing really justifies the hardcover price—but all of the chapters in *Undead TV* repay reading, right down to Elana Levine’s stylish “*Buffy* and the ‘New Girl Order’: Defining Feminism and Femininity” (168-190). *Undead TV* is a good book.

It is also curiously self-involved. Amelie Hastie’s chapter “The Epistemological Stakes of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*: Television Criticism and

Marketing Demands” (74-95) is especially annoying in this regard: as she points out, as an anthology about television shows, *Undead TV* is a subject of that very chapter, a hip move, but also a disingenuous one: “the timing of television scholarship is always one step behind television itself. In this way, built into television criticism is also a sense (and a fear) of obsolescence” (79). This is an odd remark from a book published years after the series on which it focuses ended—certainly fear did not disable criticism in this case, nor did the publisher worry much about the effect Hastie’s argument might have on sales. Still, Hastie wonders, “How do we avoid falling into television’s own traps of ephemerality, obsolescence, and market demands?” (75). Allow me to propose an answer.

Television criticism so called is not the only way to look at television or a television series. *Undead TV* would be a better book, and less susceptible to Hastie’s concerns, if it engaged recent *Buffy* scholarship and its less ephemeral perspectives. For instance, my own *Slayer Slang* (2003) offers alternative motives for *Buffy*’s cross-generational audience; it also provides lexical evidence of the role Riot Grrls and girl power played in the construction of that audience, an issue that Kearney addresses in her chapter. Why doesn’t Murray compare her conclusions on crossover teen stardom with Roz Kaveney’s idiosyncratic but very relevant *Teen Dreams: Reading Teen Film and Television from Heathers to Veronica Mars* (2006)? Why does Fuchs overlook Lynne Edwards’s contribution to *Fighting the Forces: What’s at Stake in Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (2002), “Slaying in Black and White: Kendra as Tragic Mulatta in *Buffy*,” and her “Black Like Me: Value Commitment and Television Viewing Preferences of U. S. Black Teenage Girls,” in *Black Marks: Minority Ethnic Audiences and Media* (2001)? Why does McCracken ignore Kaveney’s “A Sense of the Ending: Schrodinger’s *Angel*,” in Stacey Abbot’s collection *Reading Angel: The TV Spin-Off with a Soul* (I. B. Tauris, 2005), which deserves mention in Hastie’s chapter, too. Why do Fuchs, McCracken, and Middleton skip over Lorna Jowett’s *Sex and the Slayer: A Gender Studies Primer for the Buffy Fan* (2005)? Why do none of the essays cite Rhonda Wilcox’s *Why Buffy Matters: The Art of Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (2005), which bears in some measure on every one of them?

The introduction to *Undead TV* mentions some of these works: *Buffy* is worth looking into, the argument goes, partly because it has stimulated an

extensive literature in a short time. *Undead TV* brackets all of that literature as incidental to the book's argument, but much of it is surely relevant. The issue is not merely one of respect or fairness, though surely the authors have read the works they mention, works that must have informed their thinking in ways they could have expressed in endnotes, if they'd thought doing so was important. The book would have been more profound, both as commentary on *Buffy* and related shows and as television criticism, had it engaged ongoing conversations about *Buffy*, not only *Buffy* as television, but *Buffy* in relation to other things, like language, literature, and gender studies: *Buffy* is a many splendored thing. *Undead TV* might have advanced the case for *Buffy* as exemplary television in a more splendored way.

If television critics are concerned about the ephemerality and built-in obsolescence of their own discipline, they might mitigate it some by plugging into a breadth of perspectives that contrast with those of television criticism precisely in the claims they make about *Buffy*'s relevance. Is that relevance, as the editors suggest, anomalous? Perhaps not, and perhaps the logic of all television criticism can avoid the ephemeral logic of television itself. *Undead TV* is a good book; retrospectatorially, it is also a missed opportunity.

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Contributors

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