

STUDIES
IN
POPULAR
CULTURE

39.1
FALL 2016

STUDIES IN POPULAR CULTURE

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

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

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

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2015 Whatley Award

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

The 2015 Whatley Award winner is

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

by

**Peter Kunze
University of Texas at Austin**

From the Editor

“Crazy world
Full of crazy contradictions, like a child.
First you drive me wild, and then you win my heart
With your wicked art.
One minute tender, gentle, then temperamental as a summer storm.
Just when I believe your heart’s getting warmer, you’re cold,
and you’re cruel.
And I like a fool, try to cope, try to hang on, to hope.”

“Crazy World,” *Victor, Victoria*, music by Henry Mancini,
lyrics by Leslie Bricusse

Recently I happened to watch director Blake Edwards’ *Victor, Victoria* again. The 1982 film was advertised as the story of “a woman pretending to be a man impersonating a woman.” British soprano Victoria Grant (Julie Andrews) is struggling to find work in the Parisian nightclubs of the 1930s when she meets Toddy (Robert Preston), a cabaret performer who comes up with the crazy idea of promoting Victoria as Victor, a male female impersonator. With Toddy as her manager, Victoria is a hit as Victor, leading, as one might expect, to all kinds of complications when a Chicago mobster (James Garner) falls in love with Victor/Victoria. The song weaving its way through this musical comedy, “Crazy World,” not only captures the economic and political upheaval of Europe in the 1930s but changing gender roles and societal expectations. Perhaps that is why “Crazy World” has become the ear worm that haunts me—its gentle melody belies the turbulence occurring outside the insular cabaret, and its lyrics reflect not only the pre-World War II setting but might also describe the fraught sociopolitical world in which we live. Popular culture, with its reflections of who we are, were, or would like to become often helps us “try to cope, try to hang on, to hope.” As we strive to make sense out of political rhetoric during the year of the Hilary Clinton-Donald Trump presidential campaigns, the cultural clashes or harmonies of the Rio Olympics, and concerns about escalating global violence, for example, we often look for respite or meaning in the “wicked art” that has the power to drive us wild or claim our hearts.

This issue provides multiple readings of cultural artifacts in our “crazy world”: popular films, fast-food advertising, novels, Broadway

plays, and television series. These texts have allowed this issue's scholars to delve into topics ranging from desire—heteronormative, female, queer—to the concept of immortality (at least on television) to the immigrant experience to feminism. Many of these artifacts reflect current “hot topics,” including immigration issues and the determination of self-identity.

In this issue, two articles discuss the concept of desire and popular texts' presentation of “acceptable” gender roles. Like *Victor, Victoria* attempted to do humorously in the early 1980s, other films, novels, and scientific studies provide provocative ways to make the public think about sexuality and desire, what is “typical” or “normal” or “desirable.” Jennifer Wojton and Libbie Searcy analyze heteronormative constructs and queer desire as illustrated in the film *Up in the Air* (2009). David McCracken also deals with the concept of sexual desire but focuses on the commodification of female desire in Chuck Palahniuk's *Beautiful You* and Alfred Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*.

Several authors discuss cultural identity and the way it is marketed to a mass audience, whether overtly through television or print advertising or more covertly through American movies. Ty Matejowsky dissects the rhetoric used in fast-food advertising, especially what it implies about cultural identity and U.S.-Mexican border politics. Kristi Rowan Humphreys uses the lens provided by the early American stage and film musicals to study the immigrant experience of “if this is America, this is for me.” Lucy Bednar also looks to film (*Hester Street*, 1975) for an analysis of the immigrant experience and the emergence of a new “American” self-identity.

In the “American century,” Agatha Christie's novels written during the interwar period reveal the author's changing approach to imperialism and the British Empire. Judy Suh also explains how Christie's female protagonists become more feminist and present a then-new perspective on the Middle East.

Pop culture artifacts illustrate a type of cultural immortality because they have survived one time and place to be deemed worthy of study in another. Lisa Perdigao notes the recurring theme of immortality among the CW's television characters. She compares the current iteration of Oliver Queen in the television series *Arrow* (2012-present) with the multiple resurrections of the Green Arrow in comic book series.

Just as the characters of *Victor, Victoria* find that clinging to old expectations—whether about gender roles, cultural or self-identity, or sexual desire and desirability—does not help them navigate a changing “crazy world,” so too do the characters and real-world people discussed

in this issue find that their worldview changes as they explore new cultures or new aspects of their own. The texts and artifacts analyzed in this issue illustrate the way popular films, novels, television series, comic books, plays, and advertisements reflect and influence cultural shifts. These articles explore how people cope during times of great change, personally or nationally, and how popular culture provides reasons “to hang on, to hope.”

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Book Reviews

An invitation to potential reviewers and authors

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

DOUGLAC2@erau.edu

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

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

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

**There's No Place Like Home:
Heteronormative Constructs and Queer Desire
in *Up in the Air***

Jennifer Wojton and Libbie Searcy

The most powerful constructs in heteronormative ideology—expectations to commit to one person, marry, and raise children—are so ubiquitous that their position as the default expectations for adult heterosexual people pervades our culture. Everyone, regardless of sexual identity (e.g., gay, straight, asexual), is subject to the shaping force of heteronormative instantiations of social and cultural practices. In the film *Up in the Air* (2009), written for the screen and directed by Jason Reitman, the film's protagonist, Ryan Bingham (George Clooney), though not excluded from marriage like a homosexual character may well be (and would have legally been when the film debuted), chooses a life without traditionally meaningful attachments to family, friends, or lovers; his active resistance to and advocacy against these heteronormative constructs make him a queer character, yet by the film's end, he falls victim to the those prescriptive, sentimentalized constructs as a result of his relationship with his love-interest, Alex (Vera Farmiga), who eventually reveals her vested interest in maintaining the appearance of heteronormativity despite her own queer desire. Ultimately, the film forces the audience to confront the power that heteronormative constructs have to shape perceptions of how intimate relationships can and/or should be structured.

Although dominant culture has always valued the heteronormative constructs of marriage and family, its cultural packaging as a product everyone should buy has shifted over time; essentially, only the sales pitch has changed. *Up in the Air* was released a few years before marriage equality was legalized in the U.S., and its theme reflects an even stricter dichotomy between heterosexuals and everyone else. Although in some ways the film may seem “dated” in light of changing U.S. laws, as Supreme Court challenges continue to illustrate, not everyone agrees with societal shifts away from heteronormativity.

As John D’Emilio points out in “Capitalism and Gay Identity,”

the family existed, first and foremost, as an economic entity in which members counted on each other's interfamilial labor to survive. Capitalism and the free labor system led to the disenfranchisement of the nuclear family as the only possibility for sustainable living; as a result, according to D'Emilio, the nuclear family, once valued for the economic stability it offered, became distinctly "social" and emotional and was venerated as the sole "source of love, affection, and emotional security," which kept in place heteronormative constructs as the only sanctioned structure for adult human relationships and excluded homosexuals from participation (473). Although economic autonomy could now exist, the sheer pervasiveness of the ideological value of the nuclear family would compromise everyone's ideological autonomy in that few people question whether they really need or want this "product." D'Emilio urges gay people to question not the (then-)current laws that prevent them from marrying but their own interest in marriage in the first place because it is, by its very nature, an oppressive regime. Heterosexual people who may not be best served by expectations for a traditional family and whose sexual and/or intimate practices do not fall in line with the traditional and highly politicized expectations for family and child-rearing would benefit from valuing the de-centering of normative constructs even though, unlike most gay people, they are not excluded from participation in the hegemonic dictates of marriage and family. People who do have access to state-sanctioned relationships often fail to consider that options other than the nuclear family do exist.

In "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Politics of Sexuality," Gayle Rubin makes a case for the importance of recognizing "the political dimensions of erotic life"; this notion goes beyond just gay or straight identity. Rubin calls for an examination of the underpinnings of power and oppression (35). She diagrams what she calls the "charmed circle," putting into sharp focus the "sexual value system" in which the dominant discourse demonizes any non-normative desires (13). Married heterosexuals who procreate are most securely within the "charmed circle," assuring their safety from persecution and judgment.

With all rights and privileges of marriage laid out before him, *Up in the Air's* Ryan initially rejects the constructs of this oppressive regime with great fervor, even offering formal lectures about the terrible weight of traditional monogamous relationships. During his speaking engagements, he uses the metaphor of a backpack, asking the audience to stuff it with all of their possessions and relationships and then to feel how impossible movement becomes with such a

heavy bag strapped to their shoulders. "And make no mistake," he says in his lectures, "moving is living." He urges his audience to become "sharks" whose survival depends on mobility, to reject any attachments that might impede their constant motion, and to never allow themselves to become "swans" who most often mate for life. By attempting to convince others to adopt his philosophy, to recruit them into his way of life by valorizing his alternative epistemology, he advocates a decentering of heteronormative constructs.

Ryan, whose job requires that he almost constantly travel, that he remain mobile, has a unique "not of this world" position that serves both to reinforce the integrity of his queer philosophy and to undermine its viability for others who do not spend most of their time "up in their air" on airplanes. In his first voiceover, Ryan claims, "To know me is to fly with me. This is where I live." Like an alien, Ryan exists primarily outside of the culture of which he is presumably a part. When lecturing about his philosophy, which he describes as an alternative "lifestyle choice," he teaches "people how to avoid commitment." Because audiences learn nothing of his relationship history, they receive no trite or convenient explanation for his philosophy; they have no reason to believe that his ideology stems from pain or dysfunction, which allows savvy viewers to perceive his "lifestyle" as not a reaction to something but as a queer identity. While he eschews marriage and kinship in favor of "mobility," the vast majority of his audience, his potential queer community, lives not on airplanes and in hotels but on the earth in houses, making them more susceptible to the cultural pressure to make of that house a home and to populate that home with a family. As a result, we can sense how heteronormative expectations function like a gravitational pull for most people who, unlike Ryan, cannot easily soar above them.

However, even Ryan's disavowal of these heteronormative expectations starts to wane as he becomes sexually and intimately involved with Alex, a woman who seems vested in a philosophy of sex and intimacy that parallels his own. Because the gender binary is as rigid and as culturally guarded as the "charmed circle," her resistance to the mandates of the female side of the gender binary results in her portrayal as "masculine," which, by extension, positions her desire for no-strings-attached sex and intimacy outside of the "charmed circle." While this gender play may, at first, seem to open up a space for subversive gender-bending, the fact that her "masculinity" results in a feminization of Ryan reveals the power of the heteronormative presumption that necessitates differently gendered partners. Ryan and

Alex do not escape the binary; they simply switch places.

The gender-neutrally named Alex acts like a female version of the stereotypical male in both subtle and overt ways. She claims to “hate asking for directions” and clearly relies on corporate sensibilities rather than domestic ones. Instead of being in the stereotypically female position of creating hospitality, she explains that she appreciates hotels’ “simulated hospitality.” Then, sounding like two men comparing the number of sexual conquests each has amassed, Ryan and she competitively compare their number of frequent flier miles; Alex baits Ryan, trying to get him to share with her his specific number: “Come on, show some hubris. Come on, impress me. I bet it’s huge. . . . How big? What is it, this big? This big?” Her hand gestures indicate increasing size—a clear allusion to the size of Ryan’s penis. When they compare sexual exploits each has had in airplane lavatories, Alex trumps Ryan’s awkward bathroom encounter, which prompts him to ask, “How do you do that?”; she has sexual knowledge that he lacks. After they have sex, she saunters over to the bed, wearing only his necktie around her waist, to where he lies exhausted on the floor, her sexual prowess clearly established. Shortly thereafter, she leaves to sleep in her own bed, clearly not leveraging for recognition of a presumed intimacy between them just because they have had sex. After a later sexual encounter, Ryan is the one worrying about propriety, and she chastises him: “Appropriate? Ryan, I’m not some waitress you banged in a snowstorm. That word has no place in our vocabulary. I am the woman you don’t have to worry about.” By differentiating herself from “some waitress,” she highlights her independence as a professional woman who does not need a man to supply her with the material trappings of a comfortable life and distinguishes herself from dominant cultural perceptions of womanhood in general. By saying, “Think of me as yourself with a vagina,” she assumes an understanding of how he perceives women and himself. He grins in response to her pronouncement, clearly surprised and impressed by such rare “masculinity” in a woman, and asks, as though she alone has the power, “When can I see you again?” All of these details convey her alignment with the “masculine” shark mentality and serve to undermine Ryan as the traditionally masculine figure.

Because Ryan does not yet know that Alex has a husband and children, he begins to see her as a woman liberated from the gender binary that, in part, insists that women live like swans. The shocking revelation that she has a family should beg the question Is Alex only free to resist the constructs of normative gender roles in her interactions

with Ryan because she “passes” in her “real” life as the traditional wife and mother? Carole-Ann Tyler, in “Passing: Narcissism, Identity, and Difference,” explains that people who must choose whether to “pass” do not make this decision in a vacuum; this decision and its implications are shaped by a “narcissistic investment” that “binds us deeply to others who have the power to alienate us from ourselves” because all people desire recognition within the framework of what is considered “Reality,” which is structured by the dominant ideology/discourse (230). Therefore, Alex, regardless of her sexual and intimate tastes and desires, confines herself to the appearance of traditional, monogamous married life and conceals her investment in alternative behavior and/or relationships that would undermine the traditional family system and result in stigmatized “cheating” and “a broken home.” D’Emilio argues that, despite the promises of marriage’s power to sustain both partners, it ultimately fails; the rigid construct of marriage and, more specifically, of gender and sexuality, causes the “instability of families and the sense of impermanence and insecurity that people are now experiencing in their personal relationships” (474).

As Ryan continues to assume that Alex is unmarried, his sister’s impending wedding is woven into the landscape of the movie as surely as it is woven into heteronormative culture. Because his younger sister and her fiancé lack the financial means to travel for their honeymoon, they have asked friends and family to take photographs of a large cardboard-cutout picture of them in different locations so that they will at least have images of themselves that suggest travel. When Ryan first packs the cardboard picture, it does not fit easily into his luggage, which indicates the lack of space in his ideological framework for marriage and reinforces the metaphor of the backpack that he uses in his speeches to convince his audience that what they pack in the bag, what they value, weighs them down and limits mobility. These photos, taken as a replacement for travel, quite literally suggest that marriage “grounds” people, precluding forward motion; consequently, Ryan, who requires constant transience, regards this exercise as trite. Regardless of how he feels about the exercise, he does carry the cardboard cutout around the country, dutifully taking the photographs. The cardboard cutout represents the unwieldy rigidity and pervasiveness of marriage as a construct, and because this symbol keeps appearing throughout the film, the specter of marriage constantly looms.

When Ryan asks Alex to be his “date” for the wedding, she balks. He explains that, even though he is not “the wedding type,” he now does not “want to be that guy alone at a bar” and, instead, wants “a

plus one.” This confession indicates the beginning of a shift in his philosophy. As Alex and Ryan walk through the airport on their way to attend his sister’s wedding, the camera zooms in for a tight shot of them dragging their well-matched luggage, and the audience begins to suspect that Ryan has become less committed to non-commitment. His walk down the aisle of sentimentality has begun, and as Ryan takes Alex for a stroll down the memory lane of his childhood, his eldest sister once again calls him to service. She asks him to persuade Jim, the groom who has cold feet, to walk down the aisle. Ryan listens as Jim lists generic details about what he imagines as the inevitable trajectory of traditional married life, finally asking, “What is the point?” Ryan admits, “There is no point,” but he then convinces Jim that the only reason he finds himself questioning his impending nuptials is that he has just spent the night alone in the honeymoon suite of the hotel. When Ryan tells Jim, “Life is better with company,” he conveniently leaves out the possibility that one can find company outside the construct of marriage; furthermore, in order to tap into the sentimental notions about commitment that Jim is bound to have as a product of heteronormative culture, Ryan says, “Everybody needs a co-pilot.” Jim returns to his weeping bride, apologizes, and uses Ryan’s line, asking her, “Will you be my co-pilot?” She then embraces Jim, relieved her dreams have not been shattered. The rhetoric, rather than any authentic sentiment or logical argument, sells the idea of marriage (to the groom and to the bride), just as clearly as the ritual of the wedding will sell to Ryan the idea of commitment. During the ceremony, Ryan’s eyes well up with tears not for his sister, whom he “barely knows,” but because he cannot seem to resist the sentimentality of the ritual. During the reception, Ryan and Alex share sweet moment after sweet moment—a sentimental montage put to music. Finally, at the reception’s end, though Alex does not catch the bridal bouquet, Ryan hands her a bouquet of flowers that she holds in front her of as they stand facing forward in the elevator, framed in the shot like a bride and groom, before they turn toward each other and kiss, suggesting their potential matrimonial pairing.

Shortly before the wedding, Ryan learns from his boss that he will be “grounded” from further travel. Knowing that he will no longer have mobility, that he will have a singular address, he is more susceptible to cultural constructs of domesticity, of “home.” Because he will no longer have the luxury of living “in the air,” his reaction to his sister’s wedding begins his descent back to the earth and its rigid “rules.” After the wedding, he settles into his apartment that lacks a

hotel's convenient comforts, which he previously explains that the hospitality industry describes as "faumy"—a combination of "faux" and "homey." After he finishes unpacking, he looks at himself in the mirror as though he has no idea how to be in a home that is not "faux" but is also not "real" by heteronormative standards because he is the only one in it. He takes mini-liquor bottles (reminders of the life he loved and has now lost) out of the refrigerator and pours himself a drink that he sips while staring out his window from which the view will never change. Just after going onstage to deliver his lecture at Goal Quest, the venue he once prized, he suddenly stops mid-sentence, lets out a laugh, implying that he recognizes the absurdity of his former philosophy. He smiles as though he now has life all figured out and energetically walks out in the middle of his own presentation. He has left to surprise Alex by showing up at the doorstep of her home—a stereotypically romantic and sentimental gesture. For the first time (despite his life of catching flights), audiences see him running through an airport, and when the scene cuts to him getting into his rental car, he drives away in such a hurry that the employee yells that Ryan has forgotten to give him the card that would earn him the miles he once treasured above all else. His priorities have shifted. While his running through the airport and speeding away in the rental car do align with his "moving is living" philosophy, he now moves toward something; he has, he believes, a final destination.

Only after "selling" marriage to his sister's fiancé and being forced to stay in one place does his philosophy change, which is exactly what Alex has feared would happen. After she and Ryan have attended his sister's wedding, Alex prepares to board her flight to her next location while Ryan prepares to fly back to his apartment for good. She says to him, "So settled. You're not gonna change on me, are you?" He replies, "Same guy. Just one address." She says, "Call me when you get lonely," and as she walks away, he says, "I'm lonely." While she remains the queer shark, Ryan continues to morph into the heteronormative swan in need of a full-time companion.

Ryan once referred to the "systematized, friendly touches" associated with elite travel as the "warm reminders" that he is "home," but when Alex opens her front door, he and the audience learn that she has not only a house but a home—one with a husband and children. After Alex opens the door and Ryan says, "I was in the neighborhood," with the all the confidence of a suitor who believes he is about to get what he wants and give her what she wants, the only line spoken by either of them occurs as Alex closes the door and

Wojton and Searcy

responds to her husband's inquiry about who was at the door by saying, "It's just someone who's lost." Neither Ryan nor the audience gets the expected romantic coupling, and the shock is palpable. This plot twist defies conventions for the romantic movie where the perpetual bachelor finally sees the light because he has found the right woman; it also defies gender conventions as it is most often men who are portrayed as unable to live up to expectations for marital monogamy. Immediately thereafter, audiences see how lost Ryan has become. He sits in a hotel room, looking completely dejected while staring at his reflection in a window; the camera focuses on his back while the reflected image is blurred—just as his perceptions of himself and his trajectory seem out of focus. When the camera then cuts to the outside of the hotel room, audiences see Ryan through that window and hear only the sound of winter wind whistling through the open space between buildings—the void that clearly represents his life now that he seems to have no viable, fulfilling option. As the camera pans back, more hotel windows come into view, but the curtains in those rooms are closed. Only Ryan is exposed. For the first time, he appears palpably lonely rather than alone.

In the next scene, Alex calls Ryan, and the following brief conversation is their last:

Alex: What were you thinking, showing up at my door like that?

Ryan: What do you mean? I wanted to see you. I didn't know you had a family. Why wouldn't you tell me that?

Alex: Look, I'm sorry I ruined your evening, but I mean, you could have seriously screwed things up for me. That's my family. That's my real life.

Ryan: I thought I was a part of your real life.

Alex: I thought we signed up for the same thing.

Ryan: Try to help me understand exactly what it is you signed up for?

Alex: I thought our relationship was perfectly clear. You are an escape. You're a break from our normal lives. You're a parenthesis.

Ryan: I'm a parenthesis.

Alex: I mean, what do you want? Tell me what you want. [Ryan doesn't answer.] You don't even know what you want. I'm a grown up, okay, so if you would like to see me again, then give me a call. Okay?

Ryan opens his mouth to answer, but after looking genuinely confused, closing his eyes, and dropping his head, he hangs up the phone. This conversation reveals how heteronormative constructs prevent them from continuing their relationship and precludes the negotiation of a queer kinship. Ryan cannot have a "home," a heteronormative relationship, with Alex, and now that he wants one, he will discover that, when his boss decides that Ryan will go back to a life of travel, the sky no longer feels like the home he chose but, instead, like the only home he has left.

When Alex describes Ryan as an "escape," a "break" from normalcy, and a "parenthesis," her words and tone clearly indicate that she views the parenthetical nature of their relationship as less valuable than the sentence into which it is inserted. Alex minimizes the significance of the relationship by positioning it as less valuable than her marital relationship in the same way that all queer desire is judged and found lacking when heteronormativity, specifically monogamy in this case, is the only sanctioned referent for heterosexual relationships. For all her desires that exist outside the "charmed circle," she is still a product of the culture that endorses that circle, so although she appreciates her relationship with Ryan, she chooses not to validate her real connection with him; more importantly, she does not acknowledge that, for her, a fulfilling life may *require* a parenthesis. She says she wants to continue seeing him but does so in such a casual way because she is not supposed to be invested in the survival of a relationship that threatens the existence of her traditional, nuclear family. Only the familial unit merits protection. In fact, by acknowledging only that she "ruined" his "evening" and then proceeding to explain that he jeopardized her "family," her "real life," she dismisses any significant emotional reaction he might have to learning that she has a family. She shows no remorse for having lied by omission about being a married mother and, instead, chastises Ryan for "showing up" at her (heteronormative) home as though he should have known better. Finally, when she says she is a "grown up" and asks him to call her if he wants to see her again, she implies that she has matured beyond the need to live within the constraints of marriage and hopes he will do the same. However,

she has not evolved enough to realize that some negotiation between them would likely be required for their relationship to continue. This negotiation would likely have proved challenging, given that no politically viable identity, no clear flight pattern, exists for this specific type of queerness. As a married, non-monogamous woman, Alex can be perceived as queer, but her queerness is subsumed by “passing” as a participant in the “heterosexual lifestyle”; because this is true for others like her, little opportunity exists for collective action or recognition, which severely limits agency.

Ryan, too, has no access to a clear flight pattern for a queer relationship—one that is extra-marital but nevertheless significant and valuable. The fact that Alex has a family apparently makes the end of his relationship with Alex inevitable. When he asks her to “help” him “understand” what her expectations of the relationship were, he seems to have abandoned his own philosophy about the limitations of marriage and the stagnant nature of stability—the very philosophy for which he has served as prophet and from which he has literally profited. When he echoes her words by saying, “I’m a parenthesis,” he is visibly insulted and hurt by how casually she is discussing their relationship. Those words are the last he utters in the conversation, even though she asks him what he wants. When she responds to his silence by saying, “You don’t even know what you want,” she fails to consider that he simply has nothing to say since the family, apparently, trumps all. Prior to this conversation, when he makes the grand gesture of showing up on her doorstep, he knows what he wants: a “real” relationship. Although audiences cannot assume that he has visions of marriage and family, they can assume that he wants commitment of some sort, as though as a result of his experience at his sister’s wedding and of him being literally and figuratively “grounded,” he now has now seen the light—a light in which those people inside of Rubin’s “charmed circle” bask. Upon discovering that Alex cannot bask with him in that light, he assumes he has been cast out into a void as cold and dark as the space outside that window through which audiences see how lost he has become. His older sister once said, “You’re awfully isolated the way you live,” but only now is he truly isolated—now that he finds himself longing to be in the existing “charmed circle” instead of seeking satisfaction outside of it. Although Ryan may well have simply discovered that he wants a heteronormative “lifestyle,” that he is simply not queer, he clearly has not even considered how the intimacy and connection he and Alex have experienced might be the foundation for a queer relationship and, ultimately, for the shaping of a queer identity that does not yet have any

viable social or political space—an identity that is “up in the air,” that has no place to call “home.”

Even when queer communities have come so far as to be identifiable as communities—albeit outside of the “charmed circle”—there exists the challenge to determine if the goal should be to assimilate into the mainstream or defiantly swim upstream; Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner discuss this challenging dilemma while ultimately arguing that queer people should opt for the latter. They claim that the “radical aspirations of queer culture” should not seek to gain acceptance or recognition by the dominant culture but to decenter heteronormativity as that by which everything else is defined and judged. They lay out the imperative of these “radical aspirations” as uncovering the potential for “the changed possibilities of identity, intelligibility, publics, culture, and sex that appear when the heterosexual couple is no longer the referent or the privileged example of sexual culture” (548). However, they also recognize that “queer is difficult to entextualize as culture” because it relies on subversive and untenable methods for its instantiation and intelligibility. Berlant and Warner warn that “the heteronormativity of U.S. culture is not something that can be easily rezoned or disavowed by individual acts of will, by a subversiveness imagined only as personal rather than as the basis of public-formation” (566). While “queer” culture does create a “safe space” for queer expressions of sexuality, what often brings individuals together in queer culture is not the sameness of their sexual expression but their difference from the status quo; therefore, queer communities can offer no truly cohesive, viable response to presumed heteronormative hegemony (565). Certainly, like any queer group, people who identify as polyamorous or who reject monogamy face this dilemma.

Although heterosexual polyamorous and non-monogamous people, unlike many queer people, have guaranteed access to all the rights and privileges of heteronormative constructs, they currently have less social and political viability as an identity group than those who identify as gay—partly because no overt rights need to be granted, making the battle one for amorphous social acceptance. Furthermore, no well-known or “respectable” role models and few spaces exist yet for people who are alike only in that they reject the notion of monogamy as a “lifestyle.” Heterosexuals who embrace non-monogamy and polyamory as a way of life (rather than as a temporary state) face a stigma slightly different than the stigma faced by homosexuals because many heterosexuals view them as traitors to heteronormative culture who threaten dominant culture from

within. Therefore, should these “traitors” speak out against marriage and family, heteronormative culture passes a kind of judgment that queer people who seek to participate in marriage and family do not face because anyone who wants a place inside the “charmed circle” supports the dominant notions: everyone should want to find “the one,” the singular, the spouse, and everyone should raise children, protect the world for them, and ensure the culture’s future.

In “The Future Is Kid Stuff,” Lee Edelman argues that “the image of the Child” figures into political discourse as “the repository of variously sentimentalized cultural identifications” and “has come to embody for us the telos of the social order come to be seen as the one for whom that order is held in perpetual trust.” This discourse relies on the existence “of a collective future whose figurative status we are never permitted to acknowledge or address” (10-11). Edelman calls for the death of this Child because it prevents people from believing they can ethically question the status quo, as the film demonstrates when Ryan does not even dare to consider remaining involved with someone’s wife, with a child’s mother. To do so might result in a “broken” home, which our culture insists is more important than anyone’s broken heart. The tragedy is that he never considers how he might engineer a kind of “lifestyle” that allows genuine connections with others outside of existing cultural constructs.

Judith Butler lays out the dilemma facing those who must choose between assimilation and forging alternatives to state-sanctioned unions in her essay, “Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?”:

On the one hand, it is important to mark how the field of intelligible and speakable sexuality is circumscribed so that we can see how options outside of marriage are becoming foreclosed as unthinkable, and how the terms of thinkability are enforced by the narrow debates over who and what will be included in the norm. On the other hand, there is always the possibility of savoring the status of unthinkability, if it is a status, as the most critical, the most radical, the most valuable. As the sexually unrepresentable, such sexual possibilities can figure the sublime within the contemporary field of sexuality, a site of pure resistance, a site uncoopted by normativity. But how does one think politics from such a site of unrepresentability? And in case I am misunderstood here, let me state an equally pressing question: how can one think politics without considering these sites of unrepresentability? (106-107)

With no perspective other than heteronormative referents, Ryan cannot articulate his non-normative values. Indoctrination into heteronormative expectations for sexuality and relationships leaves Ryan in a very vulnerable position. He gets back the life he once valued, which occurs when his boss puts him back “in the air” indefinitely, saying, “We’re gonna let you sail and sail. You send us a postcard if you ever get there.” However, Ryan’s utter ambivalence toward the things that once mattered most in his life persists even when he finally hits the milestone that once meant more than anything: he has flown ten million miles. As the captain sits beside him on the plane to honor his “accomplishment,” he tells Ryan, “We really appreciate your loyalty.” Whereas Ryan once valued his loyalty to airlines and, by extension, his “keep moving” philosophy, he now longs for kind of loyalty that heteronormative culture insist that everyone values. Ryan explains how often he has imagined what he would say when this moment finally arrived, and when the captain asks, “What did you want to say?” Ryan replies, “I don’t remember,” as though his former identity has been displaced by his new belief that traditional loyalty matters more than anything else. His inability to even recollect the significance of attaining his goal harkens back to his first conversation with Alex in which she likens his large number of miles to the size of his penis. Now, this former representation of his manhood matters little, making his shift to the “female” side of the gender binary complete.

In fact, immediately after his number of miles has swelled to be as big as once hoped, he spends a significant portion of those miles on two round-the-world tickets for his sister and her new husband. By doing so, he has castrated himself in service of sentimental notions about marriage and monogamy, establishing his complete shift to the opposite side of the gender binary and final move into the “charmed circle” in terms, at least, of what he values. While Ryan now values what exists inside of “the charmed circle,” he experiences the kind of loneliness that occurs as a result of subscribing to the dominant notion that one must have a monogamous partner to be complete. In response to the captain’s question about where he is from, Ryan replies, “I’m from here,” but now, the pride and pleasure are gone. Ryan has, indeed, become “just someone who’s lost.” While his “up in the air” status once represented his queer philosophy, it now represents his alienation from the life he once led as well as from the life most people lead. Just as the people he fires for a living find that they no longer have a position in the company, he finds that he has no place in the culture.

Although many, perhaps most, viewers of the film would point to Ryan as an example of someone who just needed to see the light, to accept the value of heteronormativity, the film nevertheless can serve as a warning against such narrow definitions and as evidence for why some queer people should perhaps carve out not a communal space but individualized ones. In his discussion of the nature of queer theory, Edelman claims, “We would do well to construct queer theory, then, less as site of what we communally want than as the want of any communal site. Queer theory is no one’s safe harbor for the holidays; it should offer no image of home” (348). However, it is exactly these “images of home” that flood Ryan’s mind at the film’s end; as the camera represents the plane sailing above the clouds in the sky (Ryan’s “home”), audiences hear him speak the film’s final lines: “Tonight, most people will be welcomed home by jumping dogs and squealing kids. Their spouses will ask about their day, and tonight they’ll sleep. The stars will wheel forth from their daytime hiding places. And one of those lights, slightly brighter than the rest, will be my wing tip passing over.” The fact that Ryan is back to continual sailing means that, although he is in no danger of reaching the “safe harbor” Edelman warns against, he also no longer experiences pleasure in that mobility and does not realize that intimate connections need not be monogamous or domestic to be worthwhile. Instead, he can see himself only from the perspective of the world below—the world that believes there’s no place like “home.”

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Tex-Mex and Spandex: Understanding Cross-Border Politics and Red Meat Rhetoric in Fast Food Advertising

Ty Matejowsky

Two separate controversies erupted within a six-year span beginning in 2009 after a series of edgy television, print, and web ads showcasing a novel variation of Burger King's flame-broiled classic, the Whopper, were launched across U.S. and European markets. These advertisements set off a minor political flap that was only resolved through official diplomatic intervention. The uproar surrounding advertisements for Burger King's "Texican Whopper," much like the one precipitated by Carl's Jr.'s "Tex Mex Bacon Thickburger" in fall 2015, focused on the rather flippant and politically-tinged portrayals of Mexicans and Mexican culture. Of particular complaint was how these indelicate depictions were presented alongside representations of American prowess and Texan swagger, especially in the lead up to the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

Some discursive elements animating this style of fast food advertising especially emphasize the subtle and not so subtle appropriation of Mexican cultural and political identity by two major American quick-service eateries. Detailed examination of recent ad campaigns by Burger King and Carl's Jr. reveals not only how fast food chains increasingly adopt edgy marketing strategies to appeal to their core customer constituencies of Millennial males (Matejowsky 97), it also illuminates the ways in which national and cross-border politics inform these kinds of promotional efforts with mostly sensationalized or superficial depictions of ethnicity and/or gender.

The interplay between political and advertising discourses has important implications for popular culture studies in that it offers examples of how entrenched cultural/political practices and attitudes are variously expressed and/or reified within mass media frameworks. As Henry Giroux (10) notes, media remains a non-neutral terrain in which hegemonic perspectives, narratives, and arguments hold particular sway. To be sure, the problematic portrayals of Mexican

identity and culture examined herein are perpetuated in ways that superficially appear strictly lowbrow and, thereby, effectively obscuring the commercials' "own invisible pedagogy" (Giroux).

Red Meat Rhetoric

Incorporating aspects of Mexican culture and national identity to advertise spicy menu items is nothing new for American quick-service eateries, particularly those dealing in hamburgers, French fries, and other traditional fast food fare. If anything, marketing efforts of this variety reveal just how convenient, if frequently problematic, the formulaic conventions that some burger chains openly embrace in promoting such fast food specialties have become. To visually evoke the hot and zesty flavors of the Mexican and Tex-Mex cuisine on which these new fast food menu selections are based, nothing apparently works better in principal than some stereotypical characters and imagery associated with North America's second most populous country. By default or design, this kind of stylized advertising invariably runs the risk of provoking a consumer backlash, especially when the potential for adverse viewer reactions to such clichéd depictions is seriously misjudged. In early fall 2015, as the Republican Party presidential primary continued to intensify, topics of border security and immigration showed little sign of abating as political lightning rods for many right-leaning voters. Despite the fact that Hispanic support was deemed crucial for winning the White House the following year, it seemed anti-immigrant sentiments struck a deep chord with many conservatives in the GOP base in the months leading up to the 2016 general election. Opinion polls consistently placed this hot button issue at or near the forefront of campaign season concerns, thanks mostly to the hardline stance and memorable soundbites of frontrunner Donald Trump (e.g., "They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.").

Even those presidential hopefuls who had previously maintained a more measured approach on immigration policy quickly adopted a harsher tone similar to the unapologetic Trump, lest they get lost in the shuffle of such a historically crowded Republican field (e.g., Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker saying it is "legitimate" to consider building a U.S.-Canada border wall). In fact, nearly all of those seeking the party's nomination—whether they were Tea Party-favored political outsiders or less ideologically rigid candidates backed by the Koch brothers and other wealthy influence peddlers—felt compelled to offer

their own red meat rhetoric on this issue, lest their right flanks remain dangerously exposed with the all-important Iowa Caucus and New Hampshire Primary looming ominously on the horizon.

Against this backdrop of sometimes fiery oratory and partisan bombast, a minor fast food scandal erupted across parts of the Internet and Twittersphere involving unlikely intersections of novel hamburger hybrids, sexy female athletes, and longstanding cross-border antagonisms (Pittman). Compared to public reactions to some of the more extreme and draconian proposals espoused by Trump and other prominent Republican candidates in America's ongoing immigration debate,¹ the furor surrounding this most recent advertising campaign of a second tier U.S. hamburger chain publicizing their specialty Southwest-inspired sandwich was relatively short-lived (Judkis).

That said, the public ire sparked by its controversial content was still quite intense, particularly because it represents the latest example of a major American fast food company deliberately wading into matters of cultural identity and political controversy as a way to raise brand awareness and increase sales. Indeed, more than a few eyebrows remained raised among media pundits and fast food critics alike in the weeks and months after titillating depictions of scantily clad fitness models playing volleyball across an imaginary stretch of border fence separating Texas from its southern neighbor hit the airwaves in September 2015 (Thomas).

Like other recent promotions for Carl's Jr.'s, this ad for the chain's new "Tex Mex Bacon Thickburger" cannot be readily described as anything approaching the cerebral (Davies). In trying to appeal to the eatery's main demographic of 18- to 34-year-old males (Taylor), this "Borderball" commercial is nothing if not highly sexualized, making the rather incongruous association between come-hither female sexuality and inexpensive fast food. To be sure, the ad comes across as something akin to a juvenile male fantasy, albeit one with decidedly political undertones. Besides its gratuitous objectification of women, celebration of competitive sports, and showcase of immoderate and unhealthy eating habits, the commercial also features more than a few subtle nods to expressions of American nativism and Texas exceptionalism. Viewed within the highly charged atmosphere of Obama-era immigration politics and the 2016 presidential campaign, this confluence of elements bears all of the hallmarks of a deliberately provocative and politically tinged advertising ploy.

No less problematic than the commercial's seemingly calculated "bro-centric" content is the fact that the "Borderball" ad also

simplistically foregrounds Mexico and Mexicans within the debate over unauthorized immigration to the exclusion of most other countries and nationalities (Blidner). In this way, it effectively reiterates some prevailing themes informing both the 2016 presidential campaign and recent U.S. political discourse on the origin and demographic composition of those undocumented aliens currently living and working on American soil (Gonzalez-Barrera and Krogstad). Namely, illegal immigration remains an intractable problem solely between Mexico and the United States, with states like Texas left to deal with border enforcement and related matters in their own unique way.

While Mexicans still comprise slightly more than half of all illegal immigrants in the U.S. (52% in 2012), these numbers have declined by more than a million since their 2007 historical high point (Gonzalez-Barrera and Krogstad). In fact, by 2014 more non-Mexicans (257,473 arrestees) than Mexicans (229,178 arrestees) were apprehended at U.S. borders (Gonzalez-Barrera and Krogstad). With increasing numbers of undocumented aliens coming from Central America and overall unauthorized immigration recently leveling off, fewer Mexicans are now arriving in the U.S. than leaving (Gonzalez-Barrera and Krogstad). Based on these and other findings, it becomes readily apparent that the demographic make-up of those crossing unlawfully into the U.S. is much less homogenous than generally recognized.

Mexico currently stands second only to the United States as North America's second most populous country with some 121 million citizens. The continent's next largest Hispanicized nation is Guatemala, which has a population of approximately 16.2 million. Given its geographical proximity, population size, and shared historical linkages with the U.S., Mexico maintains a kind of exaggerated, if almost mythical, presence within national conversations about immigration reform, amnesty, and pathways to citizenship/legal status. With such ingrained understandings, it is probably unsurprising that these kinds of oversimplifications find similar expression in other areas of American life, including popular culture² and fast food advertising. The pronounced and subtle tensions these perceptions create among audiences, whether in political or entertainment contexts, offer a viable source of material for all types of satire, subversion, and appropriation. Indeed, several other top U.S. snack and fast food brands, including Carl's Jr. rival and perennial second place global hamburger chain Burger King, have experienced pointed criticism for their Mexican-influenced marketing efforts.

Banditos and Chihuahuas

The backlash against the Burger King's "Texican Whopper" and Carl's Jr.'s "Borderball" commercials is not without precedent in American popular culture. The two burger ad controversies from 2009 and 2015, respectively, are neither the first nor only incidents involving allegations of a U.S. convenience food company distorting or sensationalizing aspects of Mexican identity for promotional purposes. Even when presented in a seemingly humorous and lighthearted manner, advertising of this variety still conveys discernable political undertones that highlight sometimes coded understandings of Mexico and its historically ambivalent relationship to the U.S. in general, and Texas specifically.

To wit, American snack food giant Frito-Lay memorably introduced the animated and gold-toothed "Frito Bandito" in the late 1960s to hawk its brand of salty corn chips (Smith 112). Speaking with a caricatured Mexican accent à la Speedy Gonzales and packing six-shooters and bandoleers, the sombrero-wearing cartoon character earned the ire of advocacy groups like the National Mexican-American Anti-Defamation Committee for perpetuating a "Mexican bandit" stereotype both through his outmoded appearance and songs about stealing people's Fritos to the tune of the mariachi standby "Cielito Lindo." While their protests brought about a company-ordered makeover that rendered the "Bandito" less leering and sinister, Congressional hearings on television ethnic stereotypes eventually led to the Frito Bandito's 1971 retirement ("On the Media").

American fast food chain Taco Bell faced similar issues with its popular talking chihuahua ads nearly two decades later. Launched in 1997, the spots feature a pint-sized dog uttering the catchphrase "¡Yo quiero Taco Bell!" ("I want Taco Bell!") via CGI special effects. Not only did the mascot become an audience favorite, it also quickly snowballed into a veritable pop-cultural phenomenon, producing lines of toys, t-shirts, and related merchandise, as well as appearances on the *Tonight Show with Jay Leno* and a nationwide resurgence in the breed's popularity. Like the "Frito Bandito" advertisements, however, the commercials also sparked allegations by some activists that the chihuahua is little more than a thinly-veiled stereotype of Hispanics, particularly when depicted as a sombrero-wearing Mexican outlaw or as a Che Guevara-like revolutionary (Stevenson). Allegedly, external pressure from these critics caused Taco Bell to drop the chihuahua as a corporate mascot in 2000 (Lawson and Person 192).

The Brand that would be King

To understand how Burger King became enmeshed in an international dispute over its depictions of Mexican political and cultural identity similar to those affecting Frito-Lay in the early 1970s and Taco Bell in the late 1990s, it is necessary to situate this 2009 incident within the broader framework of ongoing company efforts to transcend its perennial runner-up status *vis-à-vis* global fast food giant McDonald's. Attempts to supplant or, at the very least, close the gap between Burger King and the Golden Arches have generated a range of marketing approaches over the years that have met with varying levels of success.

Beginning in the mid-2000s, the company waged a new and possibly groundbreaking advertising campaign based on an overarching ethos of "cool." Such efforts were implemented by Burger King to win over the appetites and patronage of those American and European diners loyal to other restaurant brands, without alienating its core base of consumers (Horovitz). While conceptually intriguing and highly original, no doubt owing something to the seminal comedic work of Andy Kaufman and, more recently, Sacha Baron Cohen, the ironic winking stance of this "coolness offensive" raised a number of thorny issues for the company, consumers, and others, particularly because these subversive marketing efforts reached audiences of millions and effectively tested the boundaries of what is currently aired for broadcast.

The advertising firm behind Burger King's "coolness offensive" was *Creativity* magazine's 2008 agency of the year, Crispin Porter & Bogusky (CP+B). With a client list that reads like a who's who of iconic global brands, the Miami-based firm produced a number of high-concept and unconventional ad campaigns over the years for Microsoft, Volkswagen, IKEA, Coca-Cola, Harley-Davidson, and American Express, among others. CP+B took over the Burger King account in January 2003 and has played an instrumental role in significantly reviving its corporate brand image. That said, many aspects of CP+B's Burger King advertising have not been understood or favorably received outside of the targeted Millennial male demographic (Matejowsky 97).

Indeed, this integrated marketing strategy appeared designed to both reinvigorate Burger King's flagging brand image and raise the chain's comparatively bland profile by rendering its line of products increasingly hip and cutting edge to key segments of Western consumers. In concrete terms, these rebranding efforts involve

assigning established products with trendy new names, reviving long dormant corporate symbols such as the iconic, albeit now largely enigmatic, 1970s King mascot,³ and pushing the envelope with high-concept, stylistically innovative, and sometimes pointedly satirical advertisements.

In many ways, Burger King's recent embrace of a more ambitious and subversive advertising ethos of "cool" reflects nothing if not an escalation in the seemingly endless "Battle of the Burgers" (Smith 20). Some of Burger King's more memorable marketing efforts take specific aim at the Golden Arches and its top-selling menu items (Jake and Sculle 119; Matejowsky 85). Years of trailing McDonald's in most key markets has presumably emboldened Burger King to adopt a new and ostensibly more sophisticated marketing tack, as earlier and less audacious approaches have only had limited success in overcoming the Golden Arches' continued dominance over global fast food retailing.

With Burger King's promotional strategy rooted in decidedly offbeat concepts of "cool" taking root on both sides of the Atlantic, the family-friendly image that McDonald's has diligently cultivated over the decades is thrown into increasingly stark relief. This aggressive marketing approach has, by all accounts, paid dividends for Burger King in terms of both increased sales and brand visibility in the U.S. and abroad. Its more provocative manifestations have also generated their fair share of public controversy, no doubt as the company intends. In fact, the questionable depictions of Mexicans and Mexican identity in the "Texican Whopper" commercials may not even be the most notorious example of this ambitious and largely polarizing promotional strategy (Elliot).

Cowboys and "Texicans"

The launch of its "Texican Whopper" ad campaign in select European markets in April 2009 touched off a round of negative publicity for the chain that saw company officials concede some ground to its critics. More than anything, the vocal objections of Mexican government officials in the matter prompted Burger King to tone down or abandon some of the promotion's more controversial elements. The cross-border politics of immigration and historically rooted antagonisms between Texas and Mexico assumed particular dimension within this fast food controversy.

Promoting a novel twist on Burger King's flagship sandwich, specially made with Southwestern chilies, spicy condiments, and jalapeño peppers, that was briefly run in the U.K. and Spain, these

targeted advertisements feature cartoonish interactions between two unlikely roommates: a stereotypical rawboned cowboy from the Lone Star state and a diminutive but muscular *luchadore* (Mexican wrestler) nicknamed “Just a Little Bit.” This latter character is conspicuously attired in a red, white, and green wrestler’s mask, satin cape, and stretchy spandex unitard. Taken as a whole, his tricolor ensemble bears a striking resemblance to the Mexican flag, especially in some European print ads, where Mexico’s national coat of arms, a golden eagle perched atop a cactus clutching a half-devoured snake, is prominently displayed.

Notably, the web and television commercial present the masked wrestler and his unshaven cowboy counterpart meeting for the first time. A montage of the new roommates amiably attending to various household duties, including the horseman hoisting up the half-sized “Just a Little Bit” by the waist to reach high shelves and clean tall windows, follows. This “bromantic” sequence culminates with the pair seemingly bonded as an off-screen narrator quips, “the Texican Whopper, the taste of Texas with a little spicy Mexican” (Ruggless).

Setting aside concerns about the demeaning nature of the *luchadore* character and the “Texican Whopper” ad’s reinforcement of stereotypes about the short-statured as sources of amusement and entertainment, the commercials also evoke some historical ambivalences and/or resentments that many Mexicans still feel towards the U.S. in general and Texas in particular (Lomnitz 15). Images of a self-assured Texas cowboy towering above a diminutive Mexican wrestler are surely ones that do not sit well with a good many North Americans on either side of the border, especially when presented within the context of an advertisement for American fast food, a style of cuisine variously associated with notions of Western cultural imperialism (Ritzer 174-176).

Given the past controversies surrounding convenience food mascots like the “Frito Bandito” and Taco Bell’s talking chihuahua, it is little surprising that Burger King’s *luchadore* also touched a nerve amongst Mexicans at home and abroad. As reported in various international newspapers and websites like *Fark.com* and the *Drudge Report*, Jorge Zermeño, Mexico’s Ambassador to Spain, wrote a formal letter to Elías Díaz, CEO of Burger King in Spain, complaining about the “Texican Whopper” campaign. Among other things, Zermeño requested that the television and print ads be removed because they “improperly use the stereotyped image of a Mexican” (Stevenson). Indeed, the “Texican Whopper” campaign drew formal condemnation

from Mexican government officials for possible violation of the country's Law on the National Coat of Arms, Flag, and Anthem Law. Presumably, this complaint stems not so much from the televised depictions of a short-statured wrestler sporting supposedly patriotic spandex tights and cape almost identical to the Mexican flag, but rather the "Texican Whopper" print ads widely circulated in Spain featuring "Just a Little Bit" wearing a poncho of his home country's national coat of arms (Ruggless).

Yet, beyond the "Texican Whopper" campaign's cartoonish and stereotyped portrayals of Mexicans both in television and print ads, Ambassador Zermeño and others also raised objections with Burger King's depictions of the country's flag in some posters and in-store displays. Mainly at issue are those promotional items featuring "Just a Little Bit" in a red, white, and green cloak that vividly evokes Mexico's national coat of arms. Featuring the *luchadore* and cowboy leaning against a hitching post above the tagline "*Unidos por el Destino*" ("United by Destiny"), the wrestler's spandex outfit in the print ads strongly resembles the Mexican flag. Notably, Mexico has very strict guidelines about how its flag, coat of arms, and national anthem can be used and publically displayed. Violations of 1984's Law on the National Coat of Arms, Flag, and Anthem can result in hefty government fines. In 2008, the government penalized Random House Mondadori SA, a foreign-owned publisher, for inappropriate flag use in a short on-line video. The web promo features an individual wearing a Mexican flag cape and tearing off a piece of Brazilian writer Paulo Coelho's jacket (Stevenson).

Zermeño's letter generated considerable negative publicity for Burger King across Europe, North America, and elsewhere. In the wake of mounting official and public criticism, aspects of both ad campaigns have been either significantly retooled or cycled out of television rotation. Indeed, the company quickly agreed to pull or significantly modify aspects of the offending "Texican Whopper" campaign. After revamping the original television ads with a less than contentious theme and recalling the print ads entirely, the chain issued the following statement: "The revised campaign will focus solely on the Texican Whopper sandwich and will not feature any characters or the use of the Mexican flag" (Ruggless).

Burger King's highly caricatured portrayal of a small-statured *luchadore* and unconventional renderings of the Mexican flag can be construed as conscious attempts to generate media hype. Notably, the campaign's timing is somewhat suspect considering its 2009

launch came as relations between the U.S. and Mexico had not yet fully mended following the intense and divisive debates on illegal immigration that raged across North American communities in 2007 and 2008. Within this heightened atmosphere, it is probably unsurprising that depictions of Mexican cultural identity, no matter how venerated or cartoonish, can become minor political flashpoints when associated with American fast food brands like Burger King. Although the spots were quickly pulled or retooled after their limited European release, they are still accessible to U.S. and other viewers via Internet sites such as YouTube.

Cross-Border Politics and Meat Market Advertising

In the years after 2009's "Texican Burger" controversy, comprehensive immigration reform continued to elude U.S. politicians despite the Obama administration's efforts to remedy the situation through select executive action. Legislation that once and for all clarified the legal status of those 11 million or so undocumented aliens living and working stateside remained highly unfeasible, given ongoing Congressional gridlock and vocal grassroots opposition. At times, the lack of forward progress on this issue exacerbated relations not only between the U.S. and Mexico but also between the Federal Government and those states most directly affected by illegal immigration.

Within this contentious political climate, deep red states such as Arizona and Alabama effectively doubled down on anti-immigrant sentiments by passing some of the country's most stringent, if not punitive, measures in 2010 and 2011, respectively. These so-called "show me your papers" laws, coupled with then-Texas governor and two-time U.S. presidential candidate Rick Perry's dispatch of National Guard troops to the Mexican border to stem a 2014 surge of mostly Central American teenagers and unaccompanied children attempting to cross into the U.S. without authorization, heightened tensions already underlying this highly contentious national debate. The rise of so-called "sanctuary cities" in predominately blue states further complicated the deeply partisan nature of immigration politics within contemporary American life. By the time the 2016 presidential primary season rolled around, U.S. voters appeared as deeply divided on this issue as ever.

Amid such political polarization, Carl's Jr. released its salacious "Borderball" commercial to a general public by now well acquainted with company depictions of minimally clad models like Paris Hilton, Jenny McCarthy, and Kim Kardashian suggestively eating fast food

in lingering slow motion. Indeed, the chain's 2015 Super Bowl ad starring a seemingly nude 21-year-old Kate Upton-lookalike Charlotte McKinney chomping down on an oversized burger was viewed by an audience of more than 114 million (Weisman). By turns audaciously off-beat and unapologetically politically incorrect, these gratuitous blends of libidinous females and low-cost fast food push the envelope by effectively challenging notions of what is currently suitable for broadcast. With few exceptions, all ads seem to follow a simple recipe in which double-entendres, smoldering looks, and risqué attire are openly embraced.

For the past decade, the restaurant chain has showcased various specialty sandwiches through this "sex sells" marketing strategy. Such promotional efforts aim to resonate with the sensibilities and appetites of 18- to 34-year-old males just as they strive to offend almost everyone else. Whether aired on television or Internet sites like YouTube, the response Carl's Jr. ads typically receive are anything but tepid. In this way, the company's calculated approach to burger advertising overlaps considerably with Burger King's "coolness offensive." Both chains narrowly target clientele of Millennial males without much consideration for how such "bro-centric" content plays among other market demographics. According to Andrew Puzder, CEO of Carl's Jr. and Hardees parent company CKE Restaurants, if the ads do not provoke sufficient viewer complaints, then he knows something is wrong. "If you don't complain, I go to the head of our marketing and say 'What's wrong with our ads?' Those complaints aren't necessarily bad for us. What you look at is, you look at sales. And sales go up" (Taylor).

Los Angeles-based advertising outfit 72andSunny holds the Carl's Jr.'s marketing account. Named Agency of the Year two years running by *Advertising Age* and *Adweek* in 2013 and 2014, the firm crafts stylized television and web spots for Carl's Jr. that, besides lingering camera pans across female cleavage, often feature both casual and explicit references to America and how select menu items exemplify aspects of U.S. national character. Although such "patriotic" allusions come across almost uniformly as tongue-in-cheek, they cannot be easily dismissed as totally inaccurate or insincere. Indeed, as CEO Puzder states, "I like our ads. I like beautiful women eating burgers in bikinis. I think it's very American" (Taylor).

Disorder on the Border

Perhaps nowhere does this emphasis on national identity come into sharper focus than in Carl Jr.'s now notorious "Borderball" commercial.

With little in the way of subtlety or nuance, this erotically charged promo for the new “Tex Mex Bacon Thickburger” leaves little to the imagination as it combines cross-border politics with ample depictions of female anatomy, all in an effort to pitch a new hamburger hybrid. Set along the heavily regulated boundary separating Texas from Mexico, the ad is based on an actual cross-border volleyball game that takes place every year between residents of Naco, Arizona, and Naco, Sonora (Flanagin). This annual “Wallyball” competition has been a part of the sister communities’ larger “Fiesta Bi-Nacional,” an event aimed at fostering positive transnational relations, since 1979 (Flanagin).

Carl’s Jr.’s “Borderball” commercial features a team of blonde American swimsuit models sporting red, white, and blue spandex two-pieces battling against their olive-skinned and dark-haired counterparts donning red, green, and white beachwear à la “Just a Little Bit” over a border fence cum volleyball net. The crux of this fictitious competition centers on which “Thickburger” ingredients are more essential: the “Tex” or the “Mex.” Elle Evans, a Texan model who gained exposure in Robin Thicke’s “Blurred Lines” music video, states “Black Angus beef and bacon? So Tex.” Mexican model Alejandra Guilmant responds to this apparent provocation with “Fire roasted peppers and onions? It’s Mex.”

Thronged fans from both sides of the border quickly descend upon the game, including a Mexican cowboy and his Texan equivalent who trade knowing remarks to each other over the border fence as the on-court action unfolds. Amid shots of an American team member dousing her top with a water bottle and close-ups of a Mexican player flashing hand signals on her mostly exposed backside, this cutthroat game of “Borderball” resembles nothing so much as a TV-MA beach scene out of *Baywatch*. After the American cowboy gets hit in the head with a stray volleyball and a Mexican player approvingly slaps her teammate’s buttocks, the commercial culminates with the observation “When Tex meets Mex, it’s a win-win.”

Doubtless as intended, the burger ad sparked considerable disapproval throughout the Internet and Twittersphere for reasons both apparent and unexpected (Latino Rebels). The commercial was widely panned by media pundits and feminists over its hyper-sexualized depictions of female athletes (Pittman), particularly its role in perpetuating “fiery Latina” stereotypes (Nunez). No less significant, the promo drew heat for suggesting that a multi-ethnic society like the U.S. is best represented by a leggy volleyball team that is uniformly Nordic in appearance. This is an especially salient point considering

that the areas along the Texas border where the commercial is supposedly set are populated predominately by those with Mexican heritage. Writing about the “Borderball” ad, *Los Angeles Times* reporter Dexter Thomas notes that “Hispanics were nearly 39% of the state population in Texas in 2014. Non-Hispanic whites barely edge them out with 43.5%. In some border counties like El Paso, Hispanics are more than 80% of the population.”

Perhaps more than anything else, Carl’s Jr. was taken to task for inserting itself somewhat ham-fistedly into America’s current immigration debate. Besides seemingly making light of the crisis’s human dimension, the “Borderball” commercial subjected the chain to accusations of deliberately appropriating politically potent imagery such as a U.S.-Mexico border wall as a way to generate company profits and publicity. Considering that constructing a militarized security fence along America’s southern border is a move with decidedly partisan overtones, particularly given the tone of some the red meat soundbites offered up during the 2016 presidential campaign, it is hard to dismiss such criticism as unfounded.

For its part, Carl’s Jr. categorically denied any suggestion of co-opting the immigration debate to bolster its image and/or bottom line. Such claims came across as unconvincing and self-serving for many, given both the timing of the commercial’s airing with election season underway and some candid statements by those involved (Nudd; Thomas; Nunez). Even as a representative for Carl’s Jr.’s parent company, CKE Restaurants, told *Fox News*, “If a connection was made between the ad and politics—it was certainly not our intention” (Nudd), one of the commercial’s Latina stars, Kara Del Toro, described the ad to a *Fox* affiliate as a “bold move” that is “playing up on what’s going on politically right now with immigration” (Nudd).

Even if Carl’s Jr.’s denial is taken at face value, the company still peddles superficial and outmoded notions about Mexico and Mexicans within the cross-border politics of unauthorized immigration. Conflating America’s neighbor to the south with the lone source of illegal aliens obscures many unresolved complexities informing today’s migrant crisis. If anything, the diminishing role Mexicans currently play in such matters, as more border detainees originate in Central American countries such as Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, renders this kind of one-dimensional foregrounding even more problematic. Just as some 2016 presidential candidates espouse this kind of simplistic or sensational thinking, given its political expediency among primary voters, so too does the “Borderball” ad

distort the role of Mexico and its citizens for strictly commercial purposes. The fact that the commercial situates Mexican nationals in an adversarial role with those from a deep red state like Texas only compounds the political dynamics at play.

Synthesis

It hardly seems coincidental that the controversial “Borderball” commercial, with its cross-border political subtext and nods to American nativism and Texas exceptionalism, came so quickly on the heels of Donald Trump’s remarkable ascendancy to the top of the Republican presidential field in summer 2015. For more than three decades the Donald has cut an outsized figure in American life that is largely based on his willingness to actively court publicity through extreme or outrageous statements. Such tendencies seem to gratify something within his larger-than-life personality, just as they showcase many real estate and commercial ventures associated with the Trump brand. As he states in his 1987 bestseller *Trump: The Art of the Deal*, “I play to people’s fantasies. I call it truthful hyperbole. It’s an innocent form of exaggeration—and a very effective form of promotion” (Trump 58). Such an approach not only resonates within the political arena but is also on display in the attention-grabbing content of the two burger ad campaigns examined herein. Both the “Texican Whopper” and “Borderball” promotional efforts rely heavily on over-the-top imagery and one-dimensional narrative elements as a way to reach a select audience of fast food consumers.

Similar to how those seeking to clinch their party’s nomination for the 2016 presidential election tailor their message to the sensibilities of their core constituencies, so too do fast food chains like Burger King and Carl’s Jr. strive to create advertising that resonates deeply with their primary clientele of 18- to 34-year-old males. The often bombastic red meat rhetoric animating recent presidential primaries in no small way mirrors the texture and tenor of marketing efforts promulgated by these quick-service eateries. The fact that both have embraced superficial and simplistic portrayals of Mexicans and Mexican cultural identity hints at how prevailing political views are represented and reified through the optics of popular culture (Giroux 10).

Considering that few other policy issues have generated as much partisan debate within the national conversation over recent years as those related to illegal immigration and border security, it is not altogether surprising that Burger King’s “Texican Whopper” and Carl’s Jr.’s “Borderball” ad campaigns followed such similar

trajectories, much less received the green light from chain executives. Both promotional efforts reinforce a rather narrow perspective on immigration politics whereby Mexico and its citizens are simplistically foregrounded without much concern for how other nations and citizenries figure into this ongoing problem.

Conclusion

The “Texican Whopper” and “Borderball” ad campaigns are not the first U.S. marketing efforts to either co-opt or distort aspects of Mexican cultural and political identity for commercial purpose. That said, both stand out from previous adverts like Frito Lay’s “Frito Bandito” and Taco Bell’s talking chihuahua commercials in their apparent willingness to court controversy through such highly subversive approaches as Burger King’s “coolness offensive” and Carl Jr.’s “sex sells” approach. These boundary-testing tactics lend these fast food promotions a decidedly unconventional or cutting edge feel that can easily slip past or offend non-targeted clientele.

This tendency to increasingly up the ante in terms of what is aired for broadcast appears symptomatic of today’s highly competitive and hyper-mediated market environment. Burger King’s satirical send up of Mexican cultural icons, not to mention Carl’s Jr.’s embrace of cross-border politics to promote novel hamburger hybrids, reveals the extremes to which some companies now go to make an impact on viewers or distinguish themselves commercially. In this way, they are not all that dissimilar from the red meat rhetoric espoused by 2016 Republican presidential hopefuls as a way to gain notice in such a historically crowded slate of candidates.

Notes

- 1 Among other things, such schemes included the construction of a meters-high border fence stretching from California to Texas funded entirely by Mexico and the mandatory deportation of all 11 million undocumented immigrants and their families, whether they are American-born or not.
- 2 For example, 1980s popular music featured two notable cases whereby the plight of Mexican immigrants served as the inspiration for two Top 50 hits. The lyrics, music, and video for the 1984 single “Illegal Alien,” by prog-pop legends Genesis, featured an array of Mexican stereotypes, including “drunkenness, panchos, laziness, Mariachi horns, bushy mustaches, sneakiness, nonsensical Spanish gibberish” (Hyden), all sung in a lighthearted Mexican accent. Similarly, the celebrated stoner comedy duo Cheech and Chong released the single and accompanying music video “Born in East L.A.” in 1985. Both recounted the erroneous deportation

and eventual return of a Mexican-American man mistakenly identified as an undocumented immigrant. The song spoofed Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the U.S.A." and subsequently become a feature film.

- 3 The original red-bearded corporate mascot was initially called the Marvelous Magical Burger King. Not unlike Ronald McDonald, this cartoon monarch ruled over a make-believe realm known as Burger King Kingdom in various commercials before being phased out in the late 1980s. His latest incarnation has the hipper and abbreviated moniker, the King. With an over-sized head, exaggerated grin, and eerily mute presence, the King is, reportedly, something that many viewers find inscrutable, if not downright unsettling (Stevenson; Horovitz).

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Will the Real American Please Stand Up:
Character as Reflection of Culture in Joan Micklin Silver's
Hester Street

Lucy Bednar

From 1880 to 1920, approximately 23 million immigrants came to the United States from everywhere in the world. Beginning in the 1890s, most were from Eastern and Southern Europe. Two million were Eastern European Jews. All of those who chose to stay had to grapple with what it meant to become American. Their struggles to forge new identities reveal features of American culture important to a genuine understanding of who Americans are and what we value. The characters in Joan Micklin Silver's debut film, *Hester Street* (1975), embody various aspects of American culture. All are American in one way or another. However, one of those characters, Gitl, is arguably more genuinely American than the others.

Hester Street is based on Abraham Cahan's novella *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto*, published nearly eighty years earlier in 1896. Cahan, who came to the United States from Lithuania in 1882, was instrumental in founding the *Jewish Daily Forward* and served as its editor for many years. In his novels and stories, "Cahan interpreted American life to immigrants, and interpreted the immigrant experience to the American people" ("The Encounter with America: *Hester Street*" 44). *Yekl*, considered the first American novel written by an immigrant about the immigrant experience, was published with the enthusiastic help of William Dean Howells. In an 1898 review of Cahan's work, Howells says, "No American fiction of the year merits recognition more than this Russian's stories of Yiddish life, which are so entirely of our time and place, and so foreign to our race and civilization" (qtd. in "Encounter" 45). In this statement, when Howells refers to Yiddish life as "so entirely of our time and place," he acknowledges the increasing impact of immigrants on American culture. At the same time, when he refers to Yiddish life as "so foreign to our race and civilization," he highlights the inevitable clash between Old World and New World ways.

Both the novel and the film focus on the problems of a young Jewish couple attempting to adapt to life in America after emigrating from Russia in the late 19th century. When Silver adapted Cahan's novel for the screen, she shifted its focus from the husband, called Yankel in the film, to the wife, Gitl. The story unfolds on the Lower East Side of Manhattan—at the time the most densely populated space in the world—and specifically on Hester Street, “a place that is emblematic of a whole cultural phenomenon” (“Encounter” 45). That phenomenon, the creation of an ethnic community within a larger, sometimes hostile culture, has repeated itself throughout U.S. history and into the present. Yankel (Steven Keats) has been in the United States for three years, working in the needle trade, when he learns that his father has died in Russia. His father's death makes it necessary for Yankel to bring his wife, Gitl (Carol Kane), and young son, Yossele (Paul Freedman), to America. Jake, as he now calls himself, is clearly upset by this necessity. He has largely forgotten his old life as a blacksmith back in Russia, and he does not want any reminders of it intruding on his new sense of identity, which now includes Mamie Fein (Dorrie Kavanaugh). She, also an Americanized Jewish immigrant from Eastern Europe, works at one of the many ethnic dance halls popular at the time, Joe Peltner's Dancing Academy, where a sign on the wall proclaims, “No Yiddish Spoken Here.” However, Jake has little choice but to go to Ellis Island on the day of Gitl and Yossele's arrival and bring them to his apartment, part of which he rents to a co-worker and fellow immigrant named Bernstein (Mel Howard), who sleeps behind a curtain in the living room.

From the moment he sees her, audiences know that Jake is embarrassed by Gitl. She seems frightened and unsure of herself, she does not speak a word of English, her clothes are anything but fashionable, and she wears a *sheitel*, or wig, a common practice in the villages where married Jewish women were not allowed to show their own hair and were required to wear a *sheitel* or a kerchief. To Jake she appears unbearably old-fashioned and Old World, nothing like the fashionable and self-reliant Mamie. To make matters worse, Yossele, who is about five or six years old, wears a yarmulke and has *payess* or earlocks. His family's appearance screams *greenhorn*, an identity that Jake has completely rejected. “I'm an American fellah,” he boasts at one point in the film, “a Yankee, that's what I am, and that's all.” Ironically, his declaration is made in a pronounced Yiddish accent. The day after his family's arrival, Jake unceremoniously cuts off Yossele's earlocks, ignoring Gitl's screams of protest. With obvious pride, Jake

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marvels, “Look at him! A little Yankee!” He then insists that Yossele will now be called Joey.

Despite Gitl’s obvious distress over Jake’s insistence that she abandon the culture she has known her entire life and somehow effortlessly adopt a new one, he continues his clumsy and insensitive program of Americanization. Gitl attempts to please Jake, but it becomes increasingly evident that she cannot do so. In Cahan’s novel, Jake’s state of mind is presented as a conflict between two realities:

During the three years since he had set foot on the soil, . . . he had lived so much more than three years—so much more, in fact, than in all the twenty-two years of his previous life—that his Russian past appeared to him a dream and his wife and child, together with his former self, fellow characters in a charming tale, which he was neither willing to banish from his memory nor able to reconcile with the actualities of his American present. The question of how to effect this reconciliation, and of causing Gitl and little Yossele to step out of the thickening haze of reminiscence and to take their stand by his side as living parts of his daily life, was a fretful subject from the consideration of which he cowardly shrank. He wished he could both import his family and continue his present mode of life. (27)

The film dramatizes this internal conflict. Jake’s attempts to reconcile two incompatible realities are ultimately futile, but they do shed light on his often exasperating behavior. Perhaps because of the confusion and frustration he feels at being dragged back to a life he thought he had escaped, Jake asks too much of Gitl, too fast. He is critical of Gitl when she clings to Old World ways *and* when she attempts to be American. Inexplicably, he wants her to be the Gitl he knew back home *and* a transformed Gitl. He is not content with either, however, and it becomes increasingly evident that their relationship will not survive.

Jake and Gitl’s plight was not an unusual one. Divorce and desertion were common in the Jewish immigrant community of the time. In fact, the *Jewish Daily Forward*, the very paper that Abraham Cahan edited, ran a regular feature called the “Gallery of Missing Men,” where women could post photos of absent husbands along with pleas for their return (Antler 180). Immigrant husbands and

wives acculturated at different rates. "Husbands often migrated first; many assimilated so rapidly that they felt estranged from spouses who came later. Since husbands, as breadwinners, usually experienced the family's first regular contacts with Americans, the acculturation gap was felt even by couples who migrated together" (Antler 180). This gap is keenly felt by Jake, but he has neither the common sense nor the patience to wait for Gitl to catch up, believing perhaps that she never will.

Jake embodies a number of American qualities, some admirable and some potentially destructive. He is strong, self-reliant, and hard-working. Although he has no formal education and does not know how to read or write, he has learned English well enough to speak fluently if not correctly. He has survived and prospered in the New World. However, in the process of adapting to his new life, Jake has cast off the person he used to be and has refashioned himself so as to conform to the image of what he thinks an American must be. Many of his actions reveal that he does not, in fact, have a very good understanding of the identity he so eagerly assumes.

He has changed his name, and he has changed his appearance. He no longer wears a beard, and his clothes are quite fashionable. "Look on me. Give a look on me," he says to Gitl and Bernstein. "Am I a Jew or a Gentile? Just by what you see? What do you say?" They both laugh, and Bernstein says, "A Jew is a Jew," to which Jake replies, "Ahhh, what do you know?" Jake bases his identity "on show and performance" (Haenni 513). He is always aware of how he looks to others. He wants to appear American, but his idea of being American is based on imperfectly understood observations about what clothes to wear and what slang to use, how to swagger and how to be flippant. His religious identity no longer exists; at least it is not visible. When he asks, "Am I a Jew or a Gentile?" his question implies more than one layer of meaning. Ostensibly he is calling attention only to his appearance, but viewers of the film can also hear in this question a self-interrogation about identity. In effect, Jake is willing to abandon religion itself along with its outer manifestations in his quest to become "an American fellah." He has no patience with Gitl because she spoils the carefully crafted impression he attempts to make. Of course, Jake does not realize that he is all flash and no substance. His adopted American identity is largely a façade. Behind the façade he knows little about himself as an individual. Having abandoned the identity he had in Russia, he has replaced it with a new, supposedly American one.

During an outing to the park, Jake teaches Joey how to play baseball, a game Jake has adopted as part of his new identity, an identity he wants for Joey as well. As Jake and Joey play baseball, Gitl and Bernstein look on and speak nostalgically of a culture more familiar and more understandable to them. All immigrants to the U.S. become American to one degree or another, sometimes quickly, sometimes very slowly. Jake wants to assume his new identity very quickly; Gitl and Bernstein are more cautious, more suspicious of the new culture in which they find themselves. Ironically, Jake does not understand that in America he can create an identity that is genuinely new. In Russia, he had to conform to social norms imposed on him by political, religious, and cultural exigencies. In the U.S. he is less restricted but still adopts an identity that has been crafted for him, only now he does so willingly.

Jake is a very public person in that he is not afraid to speak his mind or to show off how much he knows—or thinks he knows. In a scene that calls into question how well he understands his adopted country, Jake says to Bernstein, “This son of mine gonna be president United States, nu, Bernstein?” Bernstein is quick to correct him, “No. The president must be American-born. It’s written in the Constitution.” Jake is deflated for a second, then quickly turns the tables by teasing Bernstein about not having a wife. Bernstein, who knows how to read and write, is often the target of Jake’s jibes. Jake’s American identity, says Hana Wirth-Nesher, rests in part on “his not being a bookish Jew, like Bernstein” (59). “His Americanization is tied in with his anti-intellectualism, his physical abilities, and his self-declared masculinity” (59).

Jake exhibits many qualities that have been and still are evident in American culture. He is overly concerned with appearance, he has a strong anti-intellectual bias, and he is willing to adopt an identity without questioning its foundation. Consider the “My kid can beat up your honor student” bumper sticker—funny at first glance but disturbing when its real import hits home. If he were alive today, Jake might be wearing a t-shirt featuring an American bald eagle, claws extended in attack, soaring over a mindless patriotic cliché. If questioned about his beliefs, his answers might very well be paraphrases of sentiments and ideas he has overheard or been told. Because Jake does not forge an identity but accepts one from elsewhere, he has no real independence in spite of what he thinks, and he is easily manipulated, especially by Mamie, who uses her sexual appeal and financial freedom to convey to Jake that she does not need him to get by—also a façade, as it turns

out. “Eager to impress, Jake is easily impressed himself” (Haenni 513), not always by what is worthwhile. It becomes clear that his independence is not as strong as it might first appear.

When he declares, “I don’t care for nobody,” he is asserting a quality that has always been integral to an understanding of American culture, the importance of the individual. In “Self-Reliance,” Ralph Waldo Emerson urges, “Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist . . . Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind” (243). Emerson’s point of view advocates a pure brand of individualism, the ability “to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across [the] mind from within” (240). Over the years this vibrant form of individualism has morphed into something harsher. The United States ranks as one of the most individualistic cultures in the world. An individualist culture is one in which the interests of the individual prevail over the interests of the group, and a collectivist culture is one in which the interests of the group prevail over the interests of the individual (Jandt 169). In the United States people are expected to look out for themselves, a lesson Jake has learned well. However, Jake also embodies a contradiction evident in American life: the belief that we are individuals when, in fact, we are all too eager to conform and to belong, even when we tell ourselves that our conformity is actually a form of rebellion—whether it involves backing a candidate for political office, flashing the latest technology update, or adopting a fashion trend. Jake captures this contradiction, and in this sense, he is being American.

In reality, if Jake were as individualistic as he claims to be, he would probably leave Gitl and Mamie behind and do the quintessentially American thing: pull up stakes and start over again somewhere else. Yet he cannot do so. Jake’s behavior throughout the film makes clear that he depends heavily on others’ perceptions of him to define himself. He is, therefore, a reflection rather than a source of light. Certainly Mamie’s opinion of him matters a great deal because he wants to impress her, and he imagines a future with her. However, even though he rejects Gitl and all that she represents, her opinion also matters to Jake because at some level he is and always will be the blacksmith he was in Russia. He exhibits a form of what W.E.B. DuBois calls “double consciousness,” the dilemma of having to reconcile two different identities into a unified whole. Jake’s juggling of two identities is yet another embodiment of the contradictions that characterize America. In *Making America: The Society and Culture of the United States*, Luther S. Luedtke asks, “Can a people . . . be simultaneously

idealistic and materialistic? Conformist and individualistic? Law abiding and violent? Dedicated to both work and leisure? Religion and science? Agrarianism and industrialism? Competition and love?" (24). Luedtke says that not only do Americans exhibit such apparent antitheses but most can hold them in some form of suspension (24). We bomb a country one month and send humanitarian aid the next. We loathe a public figure one year and congratulate that person the next. We emphasize the importance of health and attractiveness but routinely consume supersized portions. American culture is rife with contradictions, which many Americans simply do not see as such.

Early in the film, when a young man just off the boat says he is looking for his cousin, Jake quips, "He'll soon find out that in America there's no such thing as relatives." His flippant remark is meant to sound savvy. He has been in America long enough to know that families here operate differently than families in the Old Country. Here you look out for Number 1. As viewers, we are prompted to ask how accurate this point of view is. In reality, some Americans have a strong sense of family, and others do not, depending in large measure on ethnic heritage, upbringing, and social and economic factors. Jake fails to realize that America is not a monolith, nor is it static. He fails to comprehend how integral diversity and change are to American identity.

Jake's foil, Bernstein, is a former yeshiva student who now works next to the former blacksmith in a sweat shop. Early in the film the sweatshop boss says, "I wasn't no boss in Lithuania. No sir. Give a guess what I was." Bernstein, who has heard this shtick before, answers wearily, "A peddler." In feigned surprise, the boss replies, "I told you already? Some country, America, huh? The peddler becomes the boss, and the yeshiva *bucher* sits by the sewing machine. Some country, huh, Jake?" To which Jake answers, "You betcha!" Bernstein, quiet and contemplative by nature, has little choice but to remain silent.

Certainly, audiences can applaud the egalitarianism that the sweatshop boss and Jake benefit from, but they must also acknowledge the importance of what Bernstein represents. Despite the strain of anti-intellectualism that has always run through American culture, Americans do know the value of education—especially as the means to a better material life. Jake is threatened by Bernstein, "whose literacy is a sign of manhood in the Old World" (Wirth-Nesher 54). Despite his mockery and bravado, at some level Jake knows that Bernstein's intellectual abilities will permit him to achieve a kind of success not available to the uneducated. Nonetheless, although

intelligent, Bernstein is not a man of action, and he does not know how to take advantage of possibilities. As a result, he seems woefully ineffectual next to Jake. Throughout the film, Bernstein is obviously attracted to Gitl, and once it becomes clear that she and Jake will split, audiences expect Bernstein to show a little initiative in making his feelings known. He does not, however, and if not for Gitl's newly acquired gumption, Bernstein would never have the wife he wants, nor the freedom that comes with the little business Gitl envisions.

Although it sounds counter-intuitive to say so, given the status of women at the time, the women in *Hester Street* emerge as the characters with the most power. Mamie has no difficulty manipulating Jake, who is impressed with her good looks, savings, and confident demeanor. For Jake, Mamie represents the American woman, a perfect partner for his Americanized self. Because she makes him look good, he convinces himself that their relationship is solid and that they have a promising, prosperous future, even though the basis for that prosperous future, most of Mamie's nest egg, goes to Gitl as the price for her compliance when Jake asks for a divorce.

In spite of her power over Jake, Mamie is also vulnerable. Before Gitl's arrival, Jake never tells Mamie that he is married, and when he asks to borrow \$25 to buy furniture for a place of his own, she assumes that the request is prelude to a proposal, an error Jake sees but does nothing to correct. Mamie gladly lends him the money. Despite her confident demeanor and her show of independence, Mamie's identity, like Jake's, lacks substance. Like Jake, Mamie has become, at least outwardly, what she thinks an American should be, mostly through a show of social, financial, and emotional independence. Mamie appears to be a self-possessed young woman, one who would never behave subserviently. Her fashionable hairstyle and clothes contribute to this impression. Nonetheless, audiences can see that she has not completely abandoned Old World values. All she really wants is marriage and a family, and early in the film she boasts about saving money for a dowry: "I got quite a bit saved myself already. An orphan got to get her own dowry." When her friend Fanny asks in disbelief, "Dowry? I thought this was America," Mamie responds with indignation, "I don't want no man to say I had to take her just as she was—without a penny." Like Jake, Mamie also exhibits a contradiction: She wants to use the money she has saved, which represents her independence, as a dowry, which signals a *loss* of independence. Like Jake, she never sees a contradiction in her behavior, nor does she realize that her identity is a front. Jake's good looks, masculinity, and Americanness make him

the perfect choice for a husband. Mamie never looks beyond his flashy façade, because she is trapped in a sense behind her own.

Although Mamie isn't consciously aware of it, she is caught, as is Jake, between two identities, unable successfully to integrate them—the Old World identity, which cannot easily be discarded, and the New World identity, which is only imperfectly understood. The imperfectly understood New World identity wins out. The importance of appearance and of appearing American preclude any real personal growth. Mamie sees herself as Gitl's superior, but in the end, it is Gitl who triumphs, largely because she *can* integrate the Old World identity and the New World identity, making it possible for her to remain who she is *and* become someone new. When Gitl first arrives in the U.S., she is surprised by Jake's appearance. She tells him that he looks like a nobleman, an annoying reminder to Jake of the stratified society he left behind, a stratification that does not exist in the New World, or so he chooses to believe. "Here, a Jew is a mensch," Jake insists. "In Russia we was afraid to walk within ten feet of a Gentile." In a teasing way, Gitl responds, "Yankel, where in America is the Gentiles? Huh? I go with Mrs. Kavarsky—Livingston St., Delancey St.—everywhere Jews. The Gentiles keep in another place, huh?" Bernstein recognizes the truth in Gitl's words and nods his assent.

At first, Gitl finds it nearly impossible to abandon the traditions that have always governed and defined her life. These traditions influence everyday cultural realities, including her appearance, her use of Yiddish, and the extent to which religion is integrated into her daily tasks. Her subservient demeanor and her appearance, especially her insistence on covering her hair at all times, anger Jake. "I won't go in my own hair like a Gentile woman," she insists. However, Gitl's insistence on maintaining Old World ways begins to crumble when she realizes that Jake will never be interested in her again unless she becomes Americanized. Initially, her attempts are clumsy and a bit comical. She attempts to buy a love potion from an elderly traveling salesman. With the help of Mrs. Kavarsky (Doris Roberts), a neighbor who is sympathetic to her plight, she tries wearing more stylish clothing. "You wanna be an American," Mrs. Kavarsky asks playfully (and perhaps prophetically), "you gotta hurt." After a long day of wearing a large hat with feathers and a corset under her clothes, waiting and waiting for Jake to come home, she goes into the bedroom and loosens the corset. Her sigh of relief eloquently conveys exactly what she thinks of becoming the kind of American Jake wants.

Gitl's ambivalence about becoming American is also revealed in

her interactions with Bernstein. From the first, she is impressed with his ability to read and write. "You're a scholar!" she says. Bernstein tries to set her straight: "I sit at a sewing machine just like your husband." "Still," Gitl answers, "To study Torah is to love God." "Not here," Bernstein says. "When you get on the boat, you should say, Goodbye, O Lord, I'm going to America." Nonetheless, Bernstein begins to teach Joey how to read and write. Gitl looks on with approval, her response a reflection of an Old World attitude toward learning as well as a New World realization. Whether she is aware of her realization, Gitl knows that Bernstein has a kind of potential that Jake does not, one grounded in intellect, not physical ability, one that will invariably generate more opportunity. In addition, Gitl and Bernstein share a clear-eyed view of America. They know that it is not the egalitarian paradise that Jake insists on seeing. Bernstein admits to Gitl that he came to America reluctantly because he did not feel worthy of being a teacher or a rabbi. At the end of the brief conversation, he mumbles, "*A klug tzu kolumbitsen*. [A pox on Columbus]." Gitl is amused by the assertion and repeats it.

In a pivotal scene near the end of the film, Jake and Gitl's relationship reaches a point of no return. When Jake enters the apartment to find Gitl nervously touching her own hair, now stylishly arranged thanks to Mrs. Kavarsky, he flies into a rage and tries to pull off what he thinks is a wig. Gitl, who is completely caught off-guard by his reaction, begins to sob and takes refuge in the bedroom. Mrs. Kavarsky, who has been watching the relationship deteriorate, walks in on the turmoil and chastises Jake: "Another man would thank God for such a wife. Look how she keeps the place. Like a mirror. With a flower in the window even." Jake fires back that Gitl looks like a "wet cat." Mrs. Kavarsky then confronts Jake with the real problem: "With one *tuchus* you can't dance at two weddings. You think you're better off with the dancing girl?" This admonition carries a double meaning if viewed through the lens of Jake's dual identity dilemma. Without realizing it, Mrs. Kavarsky has forced Jake to acknowledge what he has heretofore been repressing. The reference to Mamie elicits a genuinely threatening response in Jake, who insists, "I don't care for no dancing girls. I don't care for nobody, especially that one, that *shnooza* [nagging wife]." Jake's declaration of independence, however, is hollow at its core. He does care; he simply cannot choose whom he cares for most. At this point, Gitl emerges from the bedroom, and with surprising vehemence tells Jake, "You and your Polish whore can jump out of your skins." Mrs. Kavarsky attempts to make peace between husband and wife, but

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to no avail. Jake leaves the apartment in exasperation. Mrs. Kavarsky soothes Gitl by saying, “He will be back that one, don’t worry,” to which Gitl responds quietly but with conviction, “I don’t want him back. Enough.” With that simple statement, Gitl makes clear that she will no longer let someone else dictate who she is.

In this scene, both Jake and Gitl resolve the identity conflict that has tormented each since their reunion. Jake’s identity crisis erupts in an outburst that puzzles viewers as much as it puzzles Gitl. Is she not doing exactly what he wants? Apparently not. In that moment he must make a choice. He chooses to reject Gitl, even though that rejection includes a rejection of Joey as well. Although Jake may seem at first glance like a one-dimensional character, a brash, self-centered young man, audiences can see him in a more sympathetic light when they consider how difficult his decision must be. He cannot continue to be two different people, and he cannot meld his two identities into a single unified one. He must give up something very precious to him to resolve the dilemma. Gitl must also reject Jake, the person he has become as well as the person he was. Such a rejection includes a reassessment of her former self. Having seen her struggles, audiences can appreciate with what difficulty she says, “I don’t want him back.” Is she left without an identity? Perhaps she feels that for a while. In reality, Gitl has been evolving all along. Her response to Jake is an epiphany of sorts; it constitutes the nudge she needs to act decisively. Over the course of the film, viewers see Gitl become someone new. Although she might not be able to articulate or analyze the arc of her experiences, she has, in fact, reinvented herself. That process and the resulting person make Gitl’s acculturation to America a deeper and more complex process than that experienced by the other characters. It is noteworthy that she never considers returning to her old life in Russia.

Gitl’s metamorphosis into a genuine American, which takes the form of her quiet assertion of a new individuality, is also evident in a scene that follows her dramatic confrontation with Jake. A lawyer comes to offer Gitl some money for agreeing to a divorce. The lawyer begins by offering a paltry sum: “You agree to a divorce, Miss Mamie Fein is giving you \$50.” He then magnanimously increases the offer: “All right. You got a little one. What can I do? What can I do? What can I do? \$75. \$75, you’ll get a new husband—one, two, three!” At this point, Gitl, expressionless, rises from the table and goes to the window. The lawyer, clearly annoyed, says, “What kind business we got here, missus? All right, \$100. \$100! What am I saying! It’s out. I said it. That’s all. It’s finished. \$100! You’re a rich lady! *Mazel tov!*”

Gitl does not utter a word throughout this scene. She simply looks at the lawyer as though every word out of his mouth is an affront to her intelligence and dignity. Later in the film, audiences learn that Gitl settled for \$300, almost all of Mamie's savings. She has learned a thing or two about self-sufficiency, and she has learned it well. In effect, she out-Mamies Mamie.

All characters in *Hester Street* qualify as Americans, but because they are also immigrants and new to American life, they are, as Jules Chametzky points out, "people controlled by clichés [and] stereotypic figures as they discard an old heritage but have no masterful, nuanced, acculturated grasp of the new" (49). Chametzky's observation applies most obviously to Jake and Mamie, who have adopted identities that require discarding their Old World selves in favor of an assumed American identity. Bernstein cannot discard his Old World self, and despite his intelligence and devotion to learning, he lacks the initiative to take advantage of the possibilities America offers. Only when Gitl enters his life does that point of view change. Although Jake, Mamie, and Bernstein grapple with the internal and external conflicts associated with shaping a new identity, they remain relatively static throughout the action of the film.

On the other hand, Gitl, who is forced into a process of self-discovery, forges a new identity grounded in her ability to integrate two different ways of seeing the world. It can be argued that Gitl is at the mercy of the changes that are forced upon her. However, Gitl is not defeated by circumstances, even though for a time it appears she will be. She learns to accept change while maintaining a genuine sense of self. Gitl succeeds in a distinctive way because she is capable of integrating the old and the new into an identity that permits her to live with ambiguity and to accept that life in America is fluid. Gitl is able to become an American without discarding the person she was before. She retains a core identity as "a good daughter of Israel" while developing the survival skills her new culture demands. She adapts to America without abandoning the culture she had to leave and without unthinkingly adopting the one she now inhabits. She has mastered the art of becoming part of a community while remaining an individual. Her ability to live with the resulting ambiguities gives her a flexibility that will serve her well. Gitl understands that the future, which she cannot predict with certainty, is nonetheless one that offers possibilities for someone who is alert to them.

At the end of the film, after she and Jake receive a divorce from a local rabbi, she no longer looks like the greenhorn who stepped off the

boat, and when Mrs. Kavarsky calls her son Yossele, she corrects her: “No. His name is Joey.” In the film’s penultimate scene, audiences see Jake and Mamie on their way to City Hall for a marriage license. Their plans to open a dancing academy of their own are no longer realistic, and Jake must go back to the sweatshop because, as Mamie says, Gitl has skinned them alive. When Jake suggests taking the El, Mamie says they can walk: “Two nickels is two nickels. It’s money, ain’t it?” In the film’s concluding scene, Gitl, Bernstein, and Joey stroll through the bustling streets of the Lower East Side, making plans to open a small grocery. When Bernstein says that he knows nothing about running a grocery, Gitl tells him not to worry. He can read books in the back; she will run the store.

Audiences are, of course, invited to wonder what the future will be like for each of these couples. Will Jake’s flashiness and Mamie’s frugality result in an ongoing tension between them? Will they ultimately be disappointed in one another? Or will they settle into a comfortable division of roles? Will Bernstein settle into passivity and obedience? Perhaps so, but viewers must remember that Bernstein is an educated man and a good influence on Joey, and as such he commands Gitl’s respect. Each couple stands a good chance of being successful, even if their lives will be far different from what they ever imagined. “What is implied then is a continuing dialectic in American life, and a continuing process of *becoming*—a synthesis of pluralistic and unitary impulses” (Chametzky 47).

In the process of forging a new identity in a new land, each character in *Hester Street* reflects a facet of American identity. However, Gitl qualifies as the “real American,” or perhaps more accurately, as the ideal American, because she comes to understand that America is a process, a discourse, an ongoing search for identity. It offers possibility, but to realize possibility one must accept that change is a constant and contradiction the norm. In “Americans and Their Myths,” Jean-Paul Sartre says, “Americanism is not merely a myth that clever propaganda stuffs into people’s heads but something every American continually reinvents in his gropings. It is at one and the same time a great external reality rising up at the entrance to the port of New York across from the Statue of Liberty, and the daily product of anxious liberties” (178). This eloquent statement neatly captures a truism about American life—especially the reference to “anxious liberties,” with its suggestion that freedom comes with a host of complex and unspoken provisos, about how freedom is achieved and how it plays out in everyday life.

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“If This Is America, This Is for Me”: Immigrant Representations in the Studio-Era Film Musical

Kristi Rowan Humphreys

From the stage and film versions of *Oklahoma!* (1943/1955), to Southern writers like William Faulkner and composers such as Aaron Copland, the arts commonly provide individual reflections on the question of American nationhood and have wide-reaching appeal to mass audiences. Indeed, Americans connect pride for their country through art forms of their era. For some, this pride might be found in listening to jazz, with its rich heritage in African-American experiences; reading passages by Amy Tan, who writes of Chinese-American toils with tradition and new ways of life; seeing Broadway revivals of *West Side Story* (1957), a musical that presents the experiences of Puerto-Rican immigrants making a life in America; or watching *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), with its story of the underdog individual taking on American institutions. As some of these examples reveal, to many, the role of the immigrant is central in defining what it is to be American. Many film musicals, too, were created, written, produced, and portrayed by artists, composers, directors, and performers from immigrant stock, whose immigrant experiences or heritage influenced the musical.

Whereas it would be no new endeavor to analyze the treatment of race in film musicals, no thorough scholarly analysis of the role of the immigrant in film musicals exists to date. An examination of the role of the stranger, or, more specifically, the American immigrant, in film musicals of the studio era (i.e., those produced between the coming of sound in 1927 and the television era of the mid-1950s) reveals how immigrant influences and representations contribute to the film musical as a reproduction of the values of the mainstream culture it addresses.

American studies of immigration have involved a general “classical” conception of assimilation. As succeeding generations of immigrants progressively adopt the traits of their surroundings—social and cultural values, networks, and norms—the qualities of individual ethnicities gradually blur and ultimately disappear (Morawska 189). Between 1900

and 1930, more than 19 million people entered the United States, but only around 700,000 arrived between 1930 and 1945 (USDHS 5). This sharp decrease in immigration is the effect of the Immigration Act of 1924, which limited the annual number of individuals allowed to enter the country, as well as to the Great Depression. Nevertheless, millions of first- and second-generation immigrants had already planted roots in the United States during the first few decades of the twentieth century. These individuals likely arrived with hopes of new beginnings, of new opportunities, and perhaps, of endless possibilities—sentiments that parallel the hopes and dreams of the fresh-off-the-train chorus girl looking to make it big on Broadway, one of many popular formulas for film musical plots. The significance of immigrant representations in studio-era film musicals can be explained in three ways. First, immigrant assimilation, which is achieved through individual ambition and achievement—concepts that are often considered essential to American success—suits the musical’s penchant for furthering myths of integration and for satisfying an inherent national desire for community. Next, Americans of the 1930s and 1940s likely were drawn to immigrant representations because they naturally associated immigration with times of opportunity and prosperity. Perhaps, in moments of national economic stress, they felt comforted by the idea that others still sought opportunities in the United States. Finally, with the advent of synchronized film sound in *The Jazz Singer* (1927), the Hollywood film industry provided numerous jobs and opportunities to immigrants, who would eventually become some of the writers, producers, directors, and actors creating these films.

Film Musicals and National Identity

Considering film is an enormously influential medium, current generations learn much of what they know about history, literature, theatre, and politics from film, which is often viewed as encompassing an effective reflection of racial, political, cultural, and historical issues. In many ways, the twentieth century witnessed an evolution in American film storytelling that paralleled that of the nation. Whereas the needs and desires of an evolving nation have informed the films produced, film itself has, in turn, crafted a visually adept society, a society bursting with “visual learners.” It is the experiences of the American people that inform numerous Hollywood narratives and characters, while these same narratives and characters often inform the American people in their actions, wardrobe, hairstyles, dialects, political viewpoints, and moral decisions. This relationship can be

said of films throughout history; the relationship between film and its audiences is symbiotic, as each is somewhat responsible for the other. Yet it is not uncommon to exclude the film musical in scholarly studies of the influence of film on American culture, possibly because of the unrealistic nature of the genre and its conventional romantic plots. Film musical scholars such as Rick Altman and Jane Feuer, however, have revealed the film musical to be a lens through which our national identity can effectively be examined in terms of community and individual identification.

Altman claims that in order for the spectator to recognize the ways in which the film musical serves as a symbolic representation of a culture, the spectator must first be familiar with the culture. If the film musical's popularity can be equated with a spectator's understanding of the musical's symbolic function, then why has the film musical been inextricably linked to so many numerous immigrant experiences, while ultimately fulfilling the demands of largely “American-born” audiences? The musical is ultimately about assimilation, and this assimilation occurs through song and dance. Moreover, the film musical has satisfied an American fascination with exotic lands and cultures—a fascination that has informed its representations of immigrants and immigrant experiences. This fascination is evident in numerous early film musical examples such as *The Jazz Singer* (Alan Crosland, 1927), involving first- and second-generation Jewish immigrants; *Up in Central Park* (William A. Seiter, 1948), about Irish immigrants; *The Dolly Sisters* (Irving Cummings, 1945), centered on Hungarian sisters wanting to make it big in America; *Music In My Heart* (Joseph Santley, 1940), concerning an English singer facing deportation; *New Moon* (Robert Z. Leonard, 1940), involving French immigrants in New Orleans; and *Neptune's Daughter* (Edward Buzzell, 1949), about South American polo players in America. These films constitute only a small sampling of the many film musicals that reflect immigrant experiences, and few of these titles are commonly recognizable today, which likely has much to do with the decline of the film musical's popularity in general—a decline that occurred because of the increasing popularity of television, the influence of rock and roll music, and the changes to Hollywood studio policy. Today, other contemporary vehicles, including television, now address these issues. American society continues to be engaged by issues of assimilation, yet the musical is no longer the foremost vehicle for reflecting these issues. It is thus essential that the studio-era musical be examined in an effort to explain this shift between genres and the issues they tend to address.

Community Ideal and American Spirit

In *The American Film Musical*, Altman suggests that Hollywood's bottom line-driven need to "seek structures acceptable to the entire audience has a unifying effect on the audience itself" (329). In an effort to produce musicals efficiently, Hollywood was, in turn, asking audiences to forget the numerous nationalities, traditions, and classes that make up American society. While Altman claims that "as a genre, the film musical satisfies the spectator's desire to escape from a humdrum day-to-day existence, each musical subgenre meeting this need for a fuller life in a different way," he later emphasizes the process of identifying with the community that is forced upon the spectator in addition to personal identification, which is at the heart of the musical's popularity (272). In this way, the film musical responds to the American dichotomy that celebrates individuality, while upholding a community ideal. "City dweller and farmer, suburban doctor and factory worker, Southern gentleman and Irish immigrant are stripped of their qualitative differences as they laugh together at a screwball comedy, thrill together in the western wildness, or leave a musical humming the same tune" (329). So, whereas film viewing is a communal experience, these films emphasize the celebration of individual ambition and achievement.

In *The Hollywood Musical*, Feuer further emphasizes the importance of community, claiming that film musicals bridge the gap between producers and audiences by presenting the idea of community as an ideal concept (3). Whereas both Altman's and Feuer's works weave discussions of how nationalities, traditions, and classes, as they are represented in the film musical and as they are understood to be represented in audiences, contribute to individual and community identification with film musicals, neither scholar thoroughly examines specific immigrant portrayals as related to other texts and contexts, or for the musical's continued interest in the immigrant and his/her place in American culture—something that has much to do with individual assimilation and community ideals.

Immigrant Assimilation, Ambition, and Achievement

In recognizing the alienation that occurs naturally between performer and audience, the musical, as a genre, attempts to bridge this gap by putting up "community" as an ideal concept (Feuer, *Hollywood Musical* 3). In the film musical, the mechanism whereby the stranger is able to assimilate into the community involves individual effort and achievement—ideals with which American audiences could already

identify. The popular characters in film musicals are those who sing and dance well enough to garner acceptance from others. The “stranger” is no longer treated as a “stranger” when she reveals her extraordinary talents, and the established community accepts her as part of their community because she has earned her place through individual achievement. Plots involving immigrants in this capacity often present a talented foreigner who has dreams of making it big in America.

In *Music in My Heart*, Englishman Bob Gregory (Tony Martin) is an understudy in a Broadway musical, anxiously awaiting his opportunity to take the stage. Bob thinks he is an American citizen but soon discovers his parents forgot to fill out the necessary paperwork. The immigration department decides he will need to leave the country by midnight. That evening, the show’s lead performer fakes illness, and Bob has an opportunity to perform before his deportation. Afterwards, he is rushed to the shipyard to leave the country, when he runs into Patricia O’Malley (Rita Hayworth), who is hurrying to the same shipyard to meet her soon-to-be wealthy groom, whom she does not love. Bob falls for Pat, and after missing their boat, she takes him back to her culturally diverse neighborhood, where we meet a variety of immigrant characters, including Sascha Bolitov (George Tobias) and her Uncle Luigi (George Humbert). To highlight Bob’s role as the “stranger,” when a local politician approaches Pat and Bob in the town square and offers him a cigar in exchange for his political support, Pat says, “He’s not from the district.” The politician takes back his cigar and moves on.

The film emphasizes the idea that Bob has not yet assimilated successfully to this community. Soon, however, a neighbor’s monkey climbs a pole and will not come down. Bob begins to sing to the monkey, and not only is the monkey drawn to him, but the community is as well. His spontaneous singing elicits an instant spontaneous audience of random community members. Because officials have now issued a warrant for Bob’s arrest, the community decides to allow him to hide out in the basement of Sascha’s restaurant. The community accepts and protects Bob as one of their own after he reveals his ability and willingness to entertain, and he and Pat soon fall in love. Feuer finds that successful performances such as Bob’s well-received spontaneous singing for the community “are intimately bound up with success in love, with the integration of the individual into a community or a group, and even with the merger of high art with popular art” (“Self-Reflexive Musical” 463). Bob, the immigrant non-citizen, the fugitive, the “stranger,” has assimilated successfully through individual

achievement—his singing and dancing—and the community “ideal” is upheld.

Similarly, in *The Dolly Sisters*, Uncle Latsie (S.Z. Sakall) immigrates to America from Hungary with his two talented twin nieces, Jenny and Rosie Dolly (Betty Grable and June Haver). Once they arrive, still wearing immigration tags attached to their clothing, they seek out a restaurant with a sign reading “Little Hungary: A Family Institution,” as they are looking for a family friend who is a theater booking agent. While Uncle Latsie plays cards with the friend, the girls remove their immigration tags and approach the stage to begin performing with the café band. The theater booking agent is impressed, and the girls are talented enough to earn positions as regular dancers in the restaurant and as members of the local community. Years later, the girls begin to accept traveling gigs in order to help pay for their Uncle’s gambling debts. When they meet Harry Fox (John Payne), a handsome actor on the train to an out-of-town gig, they say, “We don’t know a soul, but we love to sing and dance.” Again, these immigrants are able to assimilate successfully into the established community through song and dance, and, eventually, singing and dancing become the standard “tools” for integration, as the sisters admit to being “strangers” but anticipate acceptance based on individual achievement and ambition.

Furthermore, films such as *New Moon* and *Neptune’s Daughter* reflect similar treatments of immigrants and assimilation. In *New Moon*, Marianne de Beaumanoir (Jeanette MacDonald) immigrates to New Orleans from France in order to take her position as the new mistress of her grandfather’s plantation. During her trip, she shares a boat with several military personnel and bondsmen, one of which is Charles (Henri) Duc de Villieres (Nelson Eddy). As they sail, Marianne is asked to sing, and when she does, she sings of being a “stranger” in Paris. She meets Henri and is interested but dismisses him once she discovers he is a bondsman. However, as Henri begins to sing while he works, the servant “community” accepts him, as does Marianne. In *Neptune’s Daughter*, Eve Barrett (Esther Williams) is determined not to let her sister Betty (Betty Garrett) be wooed by a member of the South American Polo Team. Eve immediately stereotypes the captain of the polo team, Jose O’Rourke (Ricardo Montalban), by stating that she will not allow her sister to take a “South American detour.” This stereotype is fostered, thus furthering his role as a “stranger,” when he teaches Jack Spratt (Red Skelton), the local masseuse, how to seduce a woman. Eventually, Eve begins to fall in love with Jose when he sings to her one night outside the stables. In both films, the foreigners

gain acceptance through entertainment. This filmic formula—immigrants seeking opportunities in America and integrating into established communities through talent—functions as ritual—ritual that celebrates “shared values and beliefs” (Feuer, “Self-Reflexive Musical” 469). The immigrant then represents a national spirit that longs to discover common ground in a pluralist society and uphold shared American values, beliefs, and sense of community.

Immigration and Times of Prosperity

Whereas history tells us that immigrants have often been regarded by Americans as further competition for employment, contributing to Nativism and to the establishment of legislation like the Immigration Act of 1924, in times of economic stress and war, Americans were likely drawn to these filmic rituals of integration because they sought to be reminded that their pluralist society indeed still functions as a community—still reflects a unified national spirit. The perpetually optimistic dialogue of the immigrant captures and reflects nostalgic sentiments of America as a country of hopes, dreams, and opportunities. For example, in *Music in My Heart*, Bob and Pat are discussing their future together in America when Bob says, “It’s a great country—so easy to get rich.” Bob has just begun a new job as a singer and mentions the practicality of Pat’s marrying a more financially stable man. Whereas this point should make sense to American audience members, instead, they find that they are now rooting for Bob. As Bob assimilates into his American community, audience members assimilate into the filmic theatrical community from which they previously had been alienated as spectators. Appropriately, Pat responds to Bob by saying, “Impractical people have all the fun,” and the making of a stable couple parallels the making of a stable community—a trend Feuer observes about the folk musical subgenre in general (*Hollywood Musical* 15).

Similarly, *Up in Central Park* presents two Irish immigrants, Rosie Moore (Deanna Durbin) and her father Timothy Moore (Albert Sharpe), on a boat bound for America. While on the boat, the film introduces various immigrant characters who listen attentively when Rosie says, “The thing that makes America such a marvel is the people that come here. They’re all full of dreams, and with so many dreams around, some of them are bound to come true.” Another immigrant joins the conversation in saying, “Ever since I was a boy, I hear it. In America, there is plenty of everything, and everyone gets his share.” Another immigrant agrees, “And everyone has fine manners and lives

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in fine houses.” “And in America, every girl gets married. It must be a wonderful place,” says a nearby woman. “I’m thinking I’m liking to stay in the U.S.A.,” they say. When Rosie begins to sing, her lyrics capture a similar spirit: “Oh, say can you see what I see? If this is America, this is for me. Opportunity knocks ‘til it breaks down the door!” Additionally, these song lyrics reflect nationalism intertextually as they echo the beginning of the “Star Spangled Banner.” The predicament of the immigrant parallels the predicament of many Americans during the thirties and forties, and this reflects the need of the individual to maintain an optimism that perhaps many had lost in difficult times. There is a shared communal comfort in knowing that others have a similar need for hope. In reality, every immigrant coming to America is potentially taking a job from a current resident, but the immigrant’s optimism trumps this realization, as the immigrant embodies the quintessential hope for the American dream.

The immigrant embodiment of American hopes, dreams, and individual ambition and achievement is perhaps best captured by the character of Jakie Robinowitz (Al Jolson) in *The Jazz Singer*. Jakie’s parents are Jewish immigrants living in New York City, and five generations of Rabinowitz men have been cantors in the local synagogues. Jakie’s father is a gifted cantor, who wants Jakie to follow in his footsteps, but Jakie prefers to sing Ragtime and Jazz in local clubs. This causes Jakie’s father to disown him, and he begins to make a living as a jazz singer in various places around the world. He is hopeful, ambitious, and talented—all of the qualities immigrant characters tend to embody in the film musicals—and he eventually finds himself back in New York City with a lead role on Broadway. He visits his parents for the first time in a very long time, but his father still wants nothing to do with him. However, when his father is on his deathbed, Jakie’s mother begs him to fill in as the cantor on the very same evening as Jakie’s opening night on Broadway. American audience members likely appreciated Jakie’s ambitious spirit; even when he had nowhere to turn, he remains faithful to his dreams, maintained hope, perseveres, and assimilates successfully into the theatrical community through individual achievement—a process that is so appreciated by Americans that it is often regarded as being quintessentially “American.” In this regard, the immigrant representation reminds Americans in a time of financial stress or war that the American dream can still be captured through hope, ambition, and individual achievement, and that the manifestation of this American dream is community.

The Film Industry and Immigrant Job Opportunities

At the turn of the century, the Hollywood film industry would have provided numerous jobs to immigrants seeking new opportunities in America. In fact, with regard to California and Los Angeles specifically, historian Ewa Morawska finds that “the loose economic structure, still in the making at the turn of the century, permitted new European immigrants who ventured there to take up job opportunities created by the emerging industries” (198). The Hollywood film industry certainly would have been one of these “emerging industries,” and by providing employment to so many first-, second-, and third-generation immigrants, the studio-era film musical was fed by immigrant influences in multiple ways.

In the six films found in this study alone, at least twenty major players of casts and crews are first-, second-, or third-generation immigrants. In *The Jazz Singer*, lead actor Al Jolson immigrated from Lithuania, actor Warner Oland from Sweden, actor Yossele Rosenblatt from the Ukraine, actor Otto Lederer from Prague, and actor Eugenie Besserer is a second-generation French-Canadian immigrant. *Music in My Heart* presents Rita Hayworth, whose father immigrated from Spain; Tony Martin, whose grandparents immigrated from Eastern Europe; and actor George Humbert, who was born in Italy. In *Up in Central Park*, the brother-sister team of writers, Herbert and Dorothy Fields, were children of Lew Fields, who was a member of the great vaudeville comic duo Weber and Fields—famous for their “dialect acts” involving comic routines of immigrants trying to fit into American society. Furthermore, the composer Sigmund Romberg immigrated from Hungary, lead actress Deanna Durbin from Canada, lead actor Dick Haymes from Argentina, actress Mary Grant from Wales, and actor Albert Sharpe from Ireland. Similarly, *The Dolly Sisters* involves actor S.Z. Sakall from Hungary and actor Sig Ruman from Germany. In *New Moon*, composer Sigmund Romberg immigrated from Hungary, actor George Zucco from England, actor John Miljan from Serbia, and writer and lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II is a third-generation immigrant from Germany. Last, *Neptune’s Daughter* presents lead actor Ricardo Montalban, a first-generation Mexican immigrant.

In functioning as an emerging industry at the turn of the century, Hollywood created an environment where immigrant influences could feed the film musical in multiple ways: immigrant writers and composers create vehicles based on personal and familiar experiences; actors and actresses introduce native dance and vocal styles, etc. This “melting-pot” film factory provided the perfect answer to America’s fascina-

tion with exotic lands and cultures, while simultaneously satisfying the needs of a complicated nation: one that wants to celebrate individual achievement, yet uphold the community ideal at the same time.

Conclusions

Ultimately, immigrant representations in studio-era film musicals function as archetypes—symbolic or mythic interpretations of experience. Whereas American audiences of the twentieth century may not have been first-, second-, or even third-generation immigrants, the issue of generational differences is one all individuals can understand and to which all audiences can relate. The immigrant functions as a manifestation of generational tension. Regardless of origin, all human beings experience some level of generational differences. The immigrant experience highlights these differences in a compelling way in that the immigrant entertains a unique struggle between old world and new world/traditional and modern/past and present. *The Jazz Singer* functions as a perfect exemplar of this tension. Jakie Rabinowitz resists his father's urges to push him into singing for the church by saying, "You're of the old world! If you were born here, you'd feel the same as I do!" In defending his initial decision to perform jazz for the new world versus being a cantor for the old world, Jakie says, "I'd love to sing for my people, but I belong here." Jakie still refers to the old world as "his people," while recognizing that he's assimilated into a community of the new world—a world in which he feels comfortable and accepted. The action of immigration has created a divide within the family unit and has isolated one generation from the next. Whereas the American audience can sympathize with Jakie's father in recognizing the importance of tradition, they simultaneously long to celebrate Jakie's individualism and ambitious spirit and seek to assimilate into the theatrical community through Jakie's assimilation, in an effort to achieve the ultimate goal of community. This process contributes to the way film musicals, as Altman claims, meet the individual's need to live a fuller life.

Still, this leaves unanswered the question of why other contemporary genres and television now address these issues as opposed to musicals, while the present fascination with strangers and the tensions surrounding them is somewhat heightened. The answer, again, lies with the issue of assimilation. Sociologists, journalists, and historians have put forward various theories regarding assimilation vs. ethnic survival, but, as historian Maxine Seller argues, by mid-century, "the second

and third generations had acculturated, that is, they adopted the language, dress, technology, and general life style of majority America . . . but they had not assimilated” (220). Whereas immigrants of the early twentieth century sought to lose the hyphens in their titles—Irish-Americans, Scottish-Americans, German-Americans, etc.—and ultimately desired to be just “American,” the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century individuals seek to celebrate and maintain these ethnicities. If one is to argue that film musicals are all about assimilation and that immigrant assimilation fulfills that function most effectively, then it is no surprise that in an age where American society upholds ethnic diversity versus a “melting pot” ideal, the musical’s popularity has diminished. However, reality television potentially has picked up where the musical left off. Presently, American viewers can watch any number of reality television shows—*American Idol*, *The X Factor*, *America’s Got Talent*, *The Voice*—and witness a celebration of ethnic diversity, as contestants regularly speak candidly of how ethnicity and “being different” has defined them and made them who they are today. Some even describe stories involving sacrifices of immigrant parents and grandparents, all working toward the same “American dream.” The musical no longer needs to function in this way. Whereas the genre has certainly witnessed a drastic decline in popularity from its heydays of the studio era, it remains a quite compelling example of how works of art—works that, themselves, remain unchanged over time—can teach us something about ourselves based on how our reactions to such works change over time. Examining the ways in which the function of a genre, such as the film musical, has changed over time reveals how *we* have changed.

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Agatha Christie in the American Century

Judy Suh

In many accounts, Agatha Christie's novels have been cited as blinkered rejections of twentieth-century modernity in Britain. David Grossvogel, for instance, cites her apparent nostalgia for upper-class country house settings, anti-semitism, and slavophobia to claim that her success can be attributed to her ability to identify "accurately her middle-class audience and its hankering for an Edwardian gentility" (4-5). In her analysis of women's detective fiction, Cora Kaplan more or less agrees, arguing that the genre "in general upholds conservative social values" and that "our queens of crime," including Christie, have been "good royalists, often defending a social order in their fiction that is decidedly on the wane if it has not actually disappeared" (18). In more recent years, however, Christie has been critically recovered; many have woven more textured readings of her approaches to modernity to challenge her reputation as a nostalgically reactionary popular writer. Calling attention to the pervasive atmosphere of anxiety in her novels, Alison Light argues that it would be a mistake to "imagine that Agatha Christie never addresses any sense of social disturbance: on one level her writing speaks to nothing else" (97). Of *N or M?* (1941), her wartime spy thriller, Gill Plain observes that "its combination of espionage and detection offers a direct engagement with the cultural and political anxieties emerging from the Second World War" (43). Far from insular, Christie appears here as thoroughly engaged with her time.

In these recoveries, Christie has entered new contexts, including feminism, interwar trauma, and critical representations of Empire. With regard to the last, recent critics have juxtaposed Christie's novels set in the Middle East with Orientalism and European women's travel writing to illuminate her critiques of pre-World War I imperial jingoism. Susan Rowland argues that Christie, like other Golden Age crime writers such as Dorothy Sayers, deploys the "racist rhetoric" of modern Orientalism strategically, so that "the projection of Englishness through an overtly Orientalising psyche . . . becomes one method of destabilising and parodying English stereotypes" (68). Merja Makinen

also discusses Christie's self-conscious uses of stereotypes of Arabic cultures and peoples, which are then repeatedly challenged by female protagonists and narrators (168). Finally, Phyllis Lassner argues that Christie satirizes Orientalism as well as America as a rising global power in the novels she sets in the Middle East and Eastern Europe. Alongside these critics, I believe that Christie's novels critically assess the British imperial discourse of Orientalism. My focus, however, is with the specific contexts and effects of this critique in Christie's post-World War II writing. In particular, her anticolonial spy novel *They Came to Baghdad* (1951) records the anxieties and consolations at play in the postwar processes of decolonization.

They Came to Baghdad conveys Christie's currency with regard to this postwar context. Victoria Jones, the plucky protagonist, travels from London to Iraq in romantic pursuit of Edward, an affable young former RAF pilot whom she meets on a park bench just after losing her detested job as a mediocre typist. Soon after her arrival in Baghdad, a spy named Carmichael stumbles into her hotel room and dies of a stab wound. She is soon hired to take over his mission to uncover a massive world conspiracy of Nietzschean supermen. Victoria is a born spy, a gifted improviser and performer. After Edward helps her to get a job at his own workplace in Baghdad, the Olive Branch, an organization akin to the British Council, she discovers that he is actually the mastermind behind the conspiracy.¹ In concert with another secretary from New York whom she meets only at the conclusion, she manages to expose the conspiracy's main players and goals. In the course of her adventures, Victoria joins an archaeological dig, work she finds agreeable enough to return to at the novel's conclusion. Readers leave her at the start of a congenial but less thrillingly romantic relationship with a young scholar working at the dig.

High, Low, and Middle

In the attempt to determine where Christie stands in relation to modern imperialism in the Middle East and specifically in relation to official British representations of Iraq, her status as a popular "middlebrow" author matters. Vilified by the interwar avant-garde as awkwardly poised between the pleasures of pulp literature and the artistic pursuits of the highbrow, the popular middlebrow as it emerged in the 1920s was often associated with middle-class materialism. Virginia Woolf famously claimed that it "ambles and saunters now on this side of the hedge, now on that, in pursuit of no single object, neither art itself nor life itself, but both mixed indistinguishably, and

rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige” (180). In recent decades, however, the category of middlebrow fiction has acquired a great deal of critical esteem, and in several ways Christie meets descriptions that elevate the popular middlebrow to a crucial role in forming a new middle-class ethos in twentieth-century Britain, one that defined the national ideal as domestically-minded and egalitarian and whose anticolonial significance is still under-discussed.

Light has attributed the rise of popular middlebrow literature in interwar Britain to the pervasive mood of weariness with regard to masculine war and imperial heroics. British middlebrow novels by women evince a coherent anti-heroic logic of social relations in their concern with the middle-class “world of objects and knowledge about household order and management,” which lay the groundwork for social analysis (119). Nicola Humble, in discussing middlebrow literature from the 1920s to the 1950s, writes that it was deeply invested in differentiating itself from the highbrow and lowbrow not by wholly excluding their attitudes, but by assimilating and reworking them. The middlebrow was interested in “incorporating highbrow experimentation, language, and attitudes almost as soon as they were formulated, and combining them with a mass accessibility and pleasurable appeal” (29). For both critics, British women’s popular middlebrow fiction played a crucial role in consolidating a distinctly twentieth-century form of middle-class hegemony.

Christie’s works give these literary strategies and middle-class ideology an anticolonial thrust. Specifically, she repurposes and scrutinizes both the mystified high modernist imagination of the Middle East which was shared and indeed created by spy-administrators, as well as the xenophobia of mass market popular culture. In this foreign space often associated with intrigue, war, and sexual drama, Christie’s protagonist is an unabashed tourist, a conspicuously unheroic figure that appears in much of her fiction. Her invention of a tourist-spy perspective shares much with the strategic mid-century transformations of British imperialism in the Middle East. The novel’s achievement is in its direct challenge to Empire and its reliance on colonial stereotypes. Nevertheless, it insists on the reinscription of the Middle East under a new type of global hegemony led by Britain and the U.S. in the Cold War.

Christie was, in fact, extremely knowledgeable about Iraqi affairs, having spent much time there throughout the 1930s assisting her archaeologist husband in fieldwork. Given this expertise, her critical narrative strategies—though in many ways formulaic and

reminiscent of those in her earlier novels—are nonetheless absorbing in a postcolonial context. In 1936, she had published a detective novel set in Iraq, *Murder in Mesopotamia*. However, Iraq was largely mere backdrop for a classic “closed” detective mystery in which the British and American characters are largely confined to the setting of an archaeological expedition and their interactions with Iraqis limited to those with servants. *They Came to Baghdad*, in contrast, features a relatively large cast of British and Iraqi characters across the class spectrum in public spaces and workplaces, and the modern living city of Baghdad is described in fuller, more exuberant detail. This fuller canvas enables an oblique challenge to some unique features of British imperial rule in Iraq and looks forward in a Cold War context to a global free market led by a U.S.-British coalition.

From 1920 to 1932 Britain ruled Iraq as a spoil of war won from the dismantled Ottoman Empire. In this important acquisition, Britain was under considerable pressure to mitigate the language of overt imperialism and accordingly defined Iraq and other new imperial holdings as *mandates* rather than as colonies or imperial outposts, a term that acknowledged newly universal ideals of the sovereign state, pressure by the new League of Nations, and critical public opinion at home.² Nevertheless, political agitation against British rule in Iraq was immediate. Revolts organized against the mandate as early as 1920 shocked many British administrators. One reason behind their failure to foresee this reaction was that, in the early twentieth century, the region had been belatedly imagined as a neo-romantic canvas by the British.

Territory in the Middle East, much more so than other imperial holdings, was imagined as a space that could not be easily mapped and surveilled through scientific means. Priya Satia argues that the Middle East was constructed through the lens of the “Desert Sublime,” which required British agents to imagine and then to emulate supposed native practices of an “intuitive, mystical knowledge” in “participative rather than distancing ways” (135). These attempts to emulate led to a less insistent othering of Arabs in Arabia than the colonized in either Africa or Asia. British spy-administrators, in other words, believed that they should seek to embody the Arab natives and learn to see the desert as the natives did, in order then to rule them effectively. T. E. Lawrence’s *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1922) and Gertrude Bell’s *Syria: The Desert and the Sown* (1907) describe the dynamics at work in this Desert Sublime; both works vividly narrate in mystical mode what it is like to see and feel as the natives (presumably) do.

The most powerful intelligence officers in Arabia also had high

literary aspirations and visions of themselves as actors in the region in accordance with this prevailing mystique. Satia notes that, in addition to T. E. Lawrence and Gertrude Bell, St. John Philby and the aptly named William Shakespear had all been deeply affected by popular Edwardian spy fiction, novels in which the male spy had been characterized as an honorable, public-school educated “gentleman.”³ Like Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim*, a character particularly inspirational for these officers, spies were represented as “liminal figures capable of ‘passing’ and with a taste for life on the lam” (Satia 77). Inspired by popular spy fiction, this nostalgically-minded romantic imperialism comes under fire in *They Came to Baghdad* in several ways.

Orientalism in Popular Spy Fiction

Christie challenges Edwardian spy attributes in *They Came to Baghdad* and in the process shifts the imperial mission from one of domination to one of development. The character Carmichael fulfills conventional Edwardian expectations of the literary imperial spy. Born in Kashgar, raised in Arabia, and educated at Eton, his “childish tongue had lisped various dialects and patois—his nurses, and later his bearers, had been natives of many different races. In nearly all the wild places of the Middle East he had friends” (42). Like Kipling’s *Kim*, who bears the nickname “Friend of All the World” and whose upbringing on the streets of Punjab enables him to slip easily between Urdu, Hindi, and English and between racially and religiously marked identities, Carmichael is a gifted chameleon. He shifts ceaselessly between Eastern and Western habits of mind and bearing. In describing this ability, the narrator resorts to stereotypes of Eastern fatalism: “For a moment he longed intensely to be a man of Eastern and not of Western blood. Not to worry over the chances of success or failure, not to calculate again and again the hazards, repeatedly asking himself if he had planned wisely and with forethought. To throw responsibility on the All Merciful, the All Wise. In sha Allah, I shall succeed!” (43). Reminiscent of both *Kim* and T. E. Lawrence, who wrote in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* that the experience of leading the Arab revolt during World War I had “quitted me of my English self, and let me look at the West and its conventions with new eyes,” Carmichael epitomizes the wily British spy whose commitment to the Empire is both hidden and expanded by the ability to emulate the Oriental when necessary.

Makinen notes these Orientalist descriptions of character in Christie’s Middle Eastern novels, but she vindicates her invocations of this stereotype of Arab fatalism by citing Carmichael’s affection for

a Marsh Arab, and vice versa, and his “openness to experiencing the Eastern viewpoint” (169). Yet “openness” and “admiration,” far from challenging the mechanisms of covert empire in the Middle East, were often the most valuable instruments of control and surveillance. Edward Said’s *Orientalism* makes ample room for the European admiration of the Orient in discussing the structural conditions of Orientalism; he emphasizes not the affective stance of Europe towards the Orient but the discursive insistence on difference: “European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self” (3).

Christie challenges Orientalist characterization not through describing Carmichael’s affinity for the Orient; instead, she puts this particular species of imperial affect under critical scrutiny by killing off Carmichael fairly early in the novel and replacing him with Victoria, who offers a different approach to the other in this spy-space. This unusual cancellation of familiar generic allusions accords with new critical observations regarding Christie’s use of stereotypes. Whereas it had long been dismissed as a means to pander nostalgically to lost or wholly imagined forms of Englishness, some critics, to the contrary, have insisted on her effective use of type to expose the prevalence of modern performativity. Nicholas Birns and Margaret Birns, for instance, argue that in her continual focus on “a general doubleness in the human character” and “emphasis on the ‘staged’ quality of reality,” Christie can be firmly situated in “the modernist turn against the Romantic stress on the priority of an unhindered, expressive self” (123). Rowland even insists that, far from the common critical assumption, Christie’s simultaneous invocation and cancellation of English stereotypes indict “upper-middle-class cultural dominance” (68).

Likewise, in losing Carmichael as the spy-hero and putting Victoria in his place, Christie questions the validity of Edwardian spy fiction’s notorious xenophobia and the mystical bent of its narration. She also departs from the association of Englishness with Empire to valorize instead an alternative definition of Englishness as “common sense” and “reasonableness.” Diverging from the ideal scholarly orientation of the British spy-administrator, Victoria works more or less from scratch and without knowing a word of Arabic or even one fact of Iraqi history. That the learned British spy is replaced by a typist with a radically inferior education and a conspicuous lack of elite credentials implies a turn away from the official imperial construction of Iraq. Victoria repeatedly emphasizes the readily apparent similarities (rather than differences) between British and Iraqi cultures and peoples, resulting

in a worldview that dispenses with the spy-administrator view that it takes strenuous effort and deep learning to achieve an affiliation between British and Arab “states of mind.”

Moreover, in *They Came to Baghdad*, the leader of a grand conspiracy for world domination is unexpectedly British; the destructive mastermind is revealed to be an RAF pilot. That in *They Came to Baghdad* the dashing RAF hero meets his demise and is transformed into an arch-villain implies an ethical duality in British military heroism. Light notes the relentless critique of war heroics throughout Christie’s fiction. For instance, she points out that in *The Mystery of the Blue Train* (1928), “even the wounded war hero (that ultimate object of sanctification) is a dubious character” (95). In the resolution of *They Came to Baghdad*, Victoria dismisses Edward’s “glamour act” and vows that the next man she falls for might well be “bald or wears spectacles,” yet he must “be interesting—and know about interesting things” (277). As a scholar takes the place of the dashing RAF pilot in Victoria’s affections, Christie’s portrait of desirable masculinity accords with the work of many interwar middlebrow novelists who, according to Light, simultaneously debunked received notions of heroism and “gung-ho expressions of national confidence.” She argues that Christie’s “popularity suggests a readership who liked to think of themselves as more pacifically minded, tolerant and happy-go-lucky” (85). With feminist reverberations in *They Came to Baghdad*, the spy’s and soldier’s qualities of adventure are placed on trial when exercised in the context of war and eventually transferred to the quest to prevent war and to two urban secretaries who embody thoroughly modern female types.

Feminist Protagonists

In this respect, it is worthwhile to offer a context from Christie’s own *oeuvre* in order to gauge the effectiveness of the novel’s combination of feminism and anti-imperialism. The differences between the character of Victoria Jones and Anne Beddingfeld, a similar adventurer in her 1924 spy thriller, *The Man in the Brown Suit*, are instructive insofar as they demonstrate significant shifts in Christie’s approach to imperialism. The divergences demonstrate a much stronger critical and historical thrust in *They Came to Baghdad*. Like Victoria, Anne is a fearless but inexperienced traveler. She journeys from London to South Africa in dual pursuit of a murderer and a job. Much more sweepingly romantic in the mass market sense, the plot has her eventually falling in love with one of the main suspects

and vindicating his innocence. In the process, she becomes a reporter, then marries and makes a home in the African wilds, self-consciously rejecting the role of the English domestic housewife. Victoria and Anne are both enterprising modern women who begin their narratives as unemployed, penniless orphans and lift themselves into prominence by way of adventure. In both novels, male adventurer types—Colonel Race in *The Man in the Brown Suit* and Carmichael in *They Came to Baghdad*—are present but are dispatched to the background or eliminated. They are replaced by these British adventuresses, but Victoria goes much further to modify and temper imperial rhetoric. In *The Man in the Brown Suit*, Anne regrets her earlier desire to emulate a heroine such as the one in the popular movie, *The Perils of Pauline*, after her adventures turn potentially deadly. The cultural allusions that Victoria eventually rejects after finding herself in danger are much more historically and culturally particular.

After being chloroformed and kidnapped, she contemplates the excessively melodramatic and literary nature of her foolish adventures in Baghdad: She “had seen a man murdered almost before her eyes, had become a secret agent or something equally melodramatic, and had finally met the man she loved in a tropical garden with palms waving overhead, and in all probability not far from the spot where the original Garden of Eden was said to be situated” (151). Victoria’s disillusionment confronts very specific elements of the stubbornly persistent and contradictory imperial imagination of the Middle East in both mass market and highbrow interwar British culture. Early in the text, Victoria declares that “The whole world, it seemed to her, had suddenly become Baghdad conscious” as she notices “a few lines of print about students in Baghdad,” *The Thief of Baghdad* playing at the local movie theater, and “in the high class highbrow bookshop . . . a New Biography of Haroun al Rashid, Caliph of Baghdad” (33). Prepared in this way by competing representations of Iraq available in Britain, Victoria’s narrative of disillusionment requires her disavowal of both mass market and highbrow Orientalism and their insistence on Arab difference. In other words, she argues for a popular middlebrow perception of the Middle East.

The literary mass market construction of the Middle East as a space associated with release from European repression is perhaps best epitomized by E. M. Hull’s sensationalistic best-selling romance *The Sheik* (1919), in which the frigid British heroine, Lady Diana Mayo, is kidnapped and repeatedly raped by Sheik Ahmed Ben Hassan. After months of captivity in the desert, she eventually falls in love with her

inexplicably sophisticated and Europeanized captor. Just as she is in the process of realizing her changed feelings, she is kidnapped by another sheik whose revolting Arab filthiness and degeneracy serves as a contrast to underscore Ben Hassan's worthiness and superiority. The plot eventually reveals that Ben Hassan, although raised as an Arab, possesses titled European bloodlines. Combining both the romanticized exotic projection of the Middle East and the dehumanizing stereotypes of "unregenerate Oriental instincts" in which Arabs "are thought of as camel-riding, terroristic, hook-nosed, venal lechers whose undeserved wealth is an affront to real civilization" (Said 108), Hull's novel participates in the contradictory inter-war representations of Arabs in the popular press. In the previous passage, Christie highlights a divergence from the melodramatic qualities of Victoria's adventure, in which the stereotyped elements "the man she loved" and "tropical garden with palms waving overhead" serve to foreground Victoria's initial imagination as one coded by the artifice of popular Orientalism.

In her reference to "the Holy Land," Christie also confronts the highbrow literary representation of Iraq as a spiritual palimpsest prevalent in the official construction of Iraq as a spy-space. As Satia notes, the British references to Arabia as first and foremost a "spiritual place, where the syncretic, polytheistic, iconoclastic world of the occult survived, despite the monotheistic civilizations that serially held sway over it" were reinforced by "discoveries of ancient Babylonian myths, in which were recognized earlier versions of Biblical tales" (86). This view has a long genealogy in Orientalist thought, reaching back to the eighteenth century. As Said notes, "one of the important impulses toward the study of the Orient . . . was the revolution in Biblical studies stimulated by such variously interesting pioneers as Bishop Lowth, Eichhorn, Herder, and Michaelis" (17). Victoria barely acquires any knowledge about the ancient religious history of Baghdad over the course of the novel, instead taking note of its natural beauty in the here and now. Indeed, Victoria's perception of Iraq repeatedly insists on the pleasantness of the modern (rather than formidable ancient) Baghdadi landscape and people. For example, during a daytrip to an "idyllic spot" not far from Baghdad, Victoria delights in the "small wooded copse surrounded and pierced by irrigation streams. The trees of the copse, mostly almond and apricot, were just coming into blossom" (239). Christie emphasizes here the need for the material rather than the textual perception of foreign spaces.

Archaeology and Everyday Life

Accordingly, in Christie's imagination, archaeology rather than the weak cultural exchange implied by the Olive Branch—an organization that is clearly analogous to the British Council in its emphasis on the arts and literature—holds the institutional capacity to establish world peace. The Olive Branch attempts to foster the excitement of “encountering a different point of view” through the deployment of British drama, art, and poetry. The head of the organization, Dr. Rathbone, explains to Victoria that “at the Olive Branch . . . Russians, Jewesses, Iraqis, Turkish girls, Armenians, Egyptians, Persians, all meet and like each other and read the same books and discuss pictures and music” (107). As Victoria reports, however, “Regrettably, instead of . . . creating friendly international feelings,” the Olive Branch “seemed to be having the opposite effect as far as she was concerned” (103-104). Much stronger as a medium of cultural exchange is archaeology, which better enables the likenesses between former colonizers and colonized to emerge in more immediate material evidence, and is thus a far superior way of creating the perception necessary for postwar global peace.

The relatively new discipline of archaeology, in fact, was a direct challenge to highbrow religious and literary modes of understanding in the Middle East. Billie Melman writes that, from the inception of their discipline in the late nineteenth-century, archaeologists lay the “stress on empirical study and field work” and emphatically “preferred artifacts to texts and material remains to literary ones” (257). They were unremitting in their insistence on material rather than spiritual reality. Melman also notes the stress on “the ordinary artifact for the daily use of ordinary men and women” over and above the “rare and extraordinary work of art” as a value in the archaeological dig, an activity that in its early years leant itself to female participation because “no primary knowledge was required of the excavator/classifier, only a great deal of work and meticulous care about detail (characteristic traditionally perceived as ‘feminine’)” (257).

Victoria presents the worldview formed by her contemplation of the ordinary domestic artifacts uncovered by archaeological work as a strong counter to Edward's creed of world domination. After he explains his plans of conquest to her, her thoughts turn to the lessons of the archaeological dig:

a remembrance of that three thousand years' old coarse pottery bowl mended with bitumen flashed across Victoria's mind.

Surely those were the things that mattered—the little everyday things, the family to be cooked for, the four walls that enclosed the home, the one or two cherished possessions. All the thousands of ordinary people on the earth, minding their own business, and tilling that earth, and making pots and bringing up families and laughing and crying and getting up in the morning and going to bed at night. They were the people who mattered, not these Angels with wicked faces who wanted to make a new world and who didn't care who they hurt to do it. (243-244)

The everyday life uncovered by archaeology comprises a worldview grounded in common sense and middle-class ordinariness, the hallmarks of middlebrow writing. For Victoria, the perception of human equality is tutored by archaeological work, which speculates on the ordinary functions of household items and methods of domestic management across time and space. While Christie's archaeological worldview aspires to the universal acceptance of all cultures, it actually assimilates found cultures to the category of a seemingly timeless European middle-class ideal.

This tendency toward assimilation is also visible in her memoir of the archaeological excavations she had undertaken in Syria and Iraq with her husband, Max Mallowan. *Come, Tell Me How You Live* (1946), published just five years before *They Came to Baghdad*, evinces a remarkably similar set of observations about the significance of archaeology. In the foreword, Christie highlights the mistaken assumptions of absolute difference that she encounters in Europeans with regard to the Middle East: "This book is an answer . . . to a question that is asked me very often. 'So you dig in Syria, do you? Do tell me all about it. How do you live? In a tent?' etc., etc." (xxi). Archaeology asks similar questions in the same curious spirit but with the assumption that what will be found "with picks and spades and baskets" will respond with assertions of likeness rather than contrast. She imagines ancient Iraqis and Syrians responding to these very questions with ordinary British inflections:

"These were our cooking pots." "In this big silo we kept our grain."
"With these bone needles we sewed our clothes." "These were our houses, this our bathroom, here our system of sanitation!"
"Here, in this pot, are the gold earrings of my daughter's dowry."
"Here, in this little jar is my make-up." "All these cook-pots are of a very common type. You'll find them by the hundred. We get

them from the Potter at the corner. Woolworth's, did you say? Is that what you call him in your time?" (xxi)

The real interest of archaeology therefore lies not in a melodramatic insistence on the exotic difference of Middle Eastern cultures but rather in "the everyday life—the life of the potter, the farmer, the tool-maker, the expert cutter of animal seals and amulets—in fact, *the butcher, the baker, the candlestick-maker*" (xxi). Like Victoria, Christie here transposes the ancient life of Syria and Iraq into the context of English domestic life, creating a further homey familiarity with the citation of a nursery rhyme. With characteristic modesty, she warns her readers that what will follow "is not a profound book—it will give you no interesting sidelights on archaeology, there will be no beautiful descriptions of scenery, no treating of economic problems, no racial reflections, no history. It is, in fact, small beer—a very little book, full of everyday doings and happenings" (xxi). The memoir, like *They Came to Baghdad*, is very much a celebration of ordinary workaday domestic life, which is perceived as the basis of a moral recognition of others through time and space. In retaining this goal, Christie later contemplates a "broken fragment of a clay pot, hand-made, with a design of dots and cross-hatching in black paint," which represents both "the beginnings of civilization," and "the forerunner of the Woolworth cup out of which this very morning I have drunk my tea" (41). The prosaic comparison of the ancient drinking vessel with a Woolworth cup elides the vast differences in the conditions of production, economic systems, environmental surroundings, and historical contexts.

Markets, Trade, and Tourism

In this respect, Christie's critique of British spy culture looks forward to a form of less violent and despotic internationalism that hinges on the fundamental similarity rather than difference between races and cultures. As Christine Klein has shown, this style of imagining a postcolonial global peace was deployed most coherently not in Britain but in the U.S.: "The distinctive form of Orientalism that middlebrow Americans produced and consumed during the early Cold War period must be seen, then, as working through a logic of affiliation as well as through one of difference" (16). Klein describes the importance of the market in this Cold War rhetoric. Under American leadership, peace and liberty would be guaranteed by "an internationally integrated free market economic order, in which each

nation would have unrestricted access to the markets and raw materials of all the others, while capital, goods, and people would move freely across national borders” (25). This economic order and America’s leadership role within it had been anticipated during World War II. In his 1941 essay, “The American Century,” the influential magazine magnate Henry Luce urged Americans to accept their inevitable role as the new prevailing world power: “It is for America and for America alone to determine whether a system of free economic enterprise—an economic order compatible with freedom and progress—shall or shall not prevail in this century” (65). In this context, Christie describes and approves an American-led narrative of free trade and economic development in lieu of historical European colonialism.

In *They Came to Baghdad*, Christie imagines U.S. and Britain as partners in vanquishing the ideology of free trade as she imagines an allegorical partnership between Victoria and Anna Scheele, a powerful American financial secretary who is also working undercover to expose Edward’s conspiracy. Anna Scheele is directly attached to American capital as an employee of a New York firm of international bankers (Morgantha, Brown, and Shipperke), and during a visit to London, she “represent[s] Dollars” (23) wherever she goes. Morally upright and highly competent as an undercover agent, she stands in stark contrast to insensitive, imperious, controlling American women such as Louise Leidner, Mrs. Boyton, and Linnet Doyle, who inhabit Christie’s interwar Middle Eastern novels.⁴ On the contrary, her “remarkable financial brain” enables her to describe in the denouement “the vast financial network that had drained money from circulation, and poured it into the financing of activities that should tend to split the civilized world into two opposing factions” (273). In concert with Victoria, she prevents another world war. The shifting terms of “special relationship” between Britain and the U.S., in fact, were actively explored by a wide range of popular narratives in Britain. As Adam Piette has noted, Graham Greene’s (and Carol Reed’s) film noir *The Third Man*, for instance, evinced “a politics of deep resentment at [American] superpower privilege,” was “profoundly suspicious of American policies abroad,” and deployed “clichés about America . . . as naïve, ignorant and idealistic” (34).⁵ In *They Came to Baghdad*, by contrast, British resentment is entirely absent as the cultural investment in imperial Orientalism is gladly shed and the special relationship benefits equally from American financial expertise and British common sense.

As the novel dismantles the framework of the imperial spy

thriller in this partnership, Victoria, too, represents a new female type appropriate in the context of the emergent economic order. Richard, her new love interest, asks her where she might place herself as a typical female character in the genre established by “Phillips Oppenheim, William LeQueux, and several distinguished imitators since”: “are you the persecuted heroine, or the wicked adventuress?” (229). Of course, she is neither, because she does not passively await a masculine hero and has become the powerful spy working at the center of the counter-conspiratorial network working for world peace. Yet in the context of typical female identities, Victoria’s most significant revision is her embrace of tourism. Indeed, despite her inhabitation of the role of a spy-adventurer, Victoria does not perform as a native in the manner of T. E. Lawrence or Carmichael but remains a conspicuously European tourist, as do many of Christie’s protagonists in novels set abroad.⁶ Except for a very brief episode when she masquerades as an Arab woman to elude the enemy’s grasp, she remains an outsider, almost stubbornly so—linguistically inept and often culturally bewildered. Light reads the prevalence of the tourist as a figure in Christie’s fiction as evidence of her democratic anti-snobbery; her sympathetic tourists tend to be middle-class or lower-middle-class. Young female tourists such as Jane Grey (a hairdresser’s assistant in the 1935 novel *Death in the Clouds*) and Victoria are celebrated as emblems of modernity (Light 76-77). Christie’s famous detective, Hercule Poirot, is a constant tourist who attests to the author’s valorization of “a social life apparently indifferent to power and centred upon leisure” (Light 86). Christie’s readers, Light argues, dream of tourism as a postcolonial identity, aspiring to “be in the class of luxury cruisers, rather than empire builders or missionaries” (86).

In *They Came to Baghdad*, tourism is elevated to a coherent worldview that enables the perception of similarity between consumers across the world. From Victoria’s tourist perspective (as opposed to the Edwardian spy’s), Iraq loses the qualities of mysticism, timelessness, and exoticism to reveal itself instead as a thriving modern market-space. During her journey, the glamour of travel is thoroughly dispelled as she finds Baghdad initially disappointing, “entirely unlike her idea of it” (99). What she eventually finds fascinating in lieu of exotic difference is the globalized marketplace that signifies an already achieved hybridity and impressive levels of cultural exchange: “Slowly a kind of fascination came over her, the fascination of assorted merchandise coming from all over the world to meet the strange assorted and varied wants of a mixed population”

(100). What is most remarkable is that the marketplace transforms the familiar into the exotic and vice versa:

Here European merchandise took on a totally different guise, in the arched cool darkness it had the exotic quality of something from overseas, something strange and rare. . . . The wares were thrust at her, close to her nose, with vehement urgings to buy. Victoria walked in a happy dream. This was really seeing the world. At every turn of the vast arched cool world of alleyways you came to something totally unexpected—an alley of tailors, sitting stitching, with smart pictures of European men's tailoring, a line of watches and cheap jewelry. (101-102)

In some ways this is a complete banalization, yet it gives readers a picture of global harmony that trumps the “milk and water” endeavors at cultural exchange undertaken by the Olive Branch (155). The description of the market accords with the postwar discourse of economic development that insisted on its own anti-colonial foundations and denied its own forms of coercion. Because American global supremacy “was predicated on the principle of international integration rather than on territorial imperialism, it demanded an ideology of global interdependence rather than one of racial difference” (Klein 16). This discourse, an official one in the U.S. and increasingly shared by Britain in the postwar period, became a powerful means of gaining consensus for the narrative of economic development and tolerance of its considerable economic and human costs. Rhetorically replacing the need for overt conquest—although, as we have seen, often accompanying (and indeed rationalizing) invasion and occupation—the development narrative “assumed that all nations could and should replicate the U.S. model of economic, political, and cultural ‘development’” (McAlister 30). Under its auspices, the “need for new consumers” spurred “government support for business expansion” (McAlister 30).⁷ Christie's descriptions of the bazaars accord with this narrative of commercial expansion. Baghdad here appears not first and foremost a spy-space as it had been for British spy-administrators; instead, it appears as a wonderful place to shop.

Conclusion

Christie's homogenization of people and spaces depends less on othering than the old ways of Empire, to be sure, and speaks to a crisis of imperial legitimacy that had begun in Britain after World War I

specifically in relation to the Middle East and particularly Iraq. As the Middle East quickly became a key site of the Cold War ideological competition between the U.S. and the Soviet Union after World War II, it also became an opportunity to define American global leadership as an explicit rejection of European colonialisms (McAlister 47). The new American supremacy as a superpower necessarily shifted the imperial imagination of Iraq and the Middle East and emphasized the creation of markets and consumer-citizens. By insisting to her readers of more significant similarities between Arabs and Europeans in their love of home and everyday life, visible in archaeological artifacts as well as in the transformation of Iraq into a marketplace already underway, Christie reassures readers of a peaceful future in which war-minded Europeans such as Edward are vanquished.

In *They Came to Baghdad*, Christie systematically revises the conventions of imperial spy fiction and its grounding in intrigue and melodrama to advocate the perception of ordinary, material exchange in its stead. By attenuating the genre's seductive romanticization of Orientalism, she enacts a distinctive critical capacity of popular middlebrow literature. Recent critical work has described the middlebrow capacity to challenge imperialism and fascism between the wars by deploying realist skepticism against melodramatic, bombastic, and heroic modes of speech and narrative. Christie's challenge to Orientalism and colonialism is part of a larger popular middlebrow project that extends from the interwar to postwar period. One of my critical objects here has certainly been to challenge the critical tendency to dismiss Christie as a product of the escapist mass market culture industry. At the same time, Christie's feminist and anti-colonial trajectories should be regarded as nonetheless working in accordance with the emergent Cold War rhetoric of free trade and the large-scale historical shifts that brought the U.S. into global supremacy in the era of decolonization.

Notes

- 1 R. A. York traces the prevalence of this type in Christie's fiction, writing that in *Destination Unknown*, the villain "denounce[s] Christianity and the slave race and praise[s] the superman. In this book, to be sure, Nietzscheanism is forcefully rejected; it is associated with the Nazism which at the time was seen as the offspring of Nietzsche, and the Nietzschean characters are shown not as supermen but as mere puppets of a cynical money-mad master-criminal" (54).
- 2 Imperial ideals were widely debated in Britain throughout the 1920s and 1930s, a period marked by growing protests abroad and at home to the very idea of territorial imperialism. With Britain facing limited resources

- after World War I, public enthusiasm for imperial projects in the Middle East plunged. See William R. Polk's *Understanding Iraq* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005).
- 3 Clive Bloom discusses the "alarmist period" of the Edwardian era as the historical backdrop for the inception of the spy thriller, a genre that quickly became a "useful propaganda machine to feed paranoia about foreignness (the waves of immigrants who were looked upon as a sinister lumpenproletariat)" (2). Michael Denning stresses the figure of the spy as a "defender or subverter of the nation in the face of the other, the alien. The spy story appears in Britain in the wake of the heroic novels of imperial adventure and narrates the threat to the Empire" (13).
 - 4 These characters are from *Murder in Mesopotamia*, *Appointment with Death*, and *Death on the Nile*.
 - 5 Piette argues further that underneath the rhetorical antagonism ran a great deal of cooperation in preserving imperial continuity. The free trade and global expansionism that came to be associated with the Eisenhower administration had already been undertaken by the British Empire in its later stages. He notes of the "special relationship" between the two nations that "the British government . . . convinced the United States to get involved in Europe and the Middle East in an effort to resolve the UK's strategic and economic crises in the immediate postwar" (36).
 - 6 As York has observed, the local landscapes in *Murder in Mesopotamia* and *Cat among the Pigeons*, also set in the Middle East, are regarded "from the view of the European outsider"—diplomats, tourists, archaeologists, or the "luxurious holiday maker" (136).
 - 7 The consumer/development narrative also had its roots in the history of the British Empire. Anne McClintock identifies commodity imperialism as a key behind the liberal "narrative of imperial progress" (33) in Britain during the height of Empire in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this narrative, through consumerism, "Domesticity and empire merge as a necessary element in the formation of the liberal imagination" (178).

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The Lazarus Phenomenon: Resurrecting the Green Arrow

Lisa K. Perdigao

Peter Brooks writes, “Any final authority claimed by narrative plots, whether of origin or end, is illusory It is the role of fictional plots to impose an end which yet suggests a return, a new beginning: a rereading” (109). While Brooks argues that the evasion of the “deathlike ending” is symptomatic of all narrative, superhero comics provide a unique performance of this plot. Fans are familiar with the concept of the “comic book death,” one of the genre’s central conventions. As A. David Lewis writes, “[S]uperheroes are generally assumed, generally expected, to return from the dead” (38). Characters such as Superman, the Phoenix, the Flash, Green Lantern, and Captain America have died and returned, some repeatedly. While the prevalence and persistence of this storyline encourage an “expectation of return after an ending,” the sequentiality and seriality of the genre reinforce it (Lewis 38). Visually and narratologically, individual issues and entire series resist closure, indefinitely sustaining both character and narrative.¹ Comics and their adaptations are perpetually poised for returns, new beginnings, and rereadings. In 2016, the introduction of the *DC Universe: Rebirth* series gave new life to classic characters, reinventing them for the twenty-first century. Beyond the comics’ pages, in the Marvel Cinematic Universe and DC Extended Universe, superheroes are granted a new kind of afterlife when reanimated on big and small screens.

The CW television series *Arrow* (2012-present) highlights how resurrection figures in the history of the Green Arrow character and its network’s strategy for reanimating the character in a new medium. It is coded into the narrative from the beginning with Oliver Queen’s (Stephen Amell) return from the dead. In his opening monologue, Oliver says that he was discovered on the island Lian Yu (Mandarin for *purgatory*) after being stranded there for five years. The storyline featured in the CW series is adapted from Andy Diggle’s 2007 comic *Green Arrow: Year One*, and the television series’ relationship to its source material is presented in its diegesis: the hero is brought back

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to life after five years spent in “purgatory” since the 2007 publication of the comic. *Arrow* begins with a figurative resurrection, literalizing the five-year moratorium since *Year One* as it stages the character’s return from the dead. As *Arrow* progresses, it returns to and evolves its resurrection plot. In Season Three, the series recalls the Green Arrow’s literal resurrection in Kevin Smith’s *Green Arrow: Quiver* (2001) following the character’s death in Chuck Dixon’s *Green Arrow* Vol. 2 #101 (1995). *Quiver* is an important antecedent for the CW series because it explores the aftermath of the Green Arrow’s absence and the necessity of his return in print. The CW series follows suit by making a case for resurrecting its hero again and again on the small screen.

In Season Three, Oliver faces a formidable opponent in the leader of the League of Assassins, Ra’s al Ghul (Matt Nable) and certain death. The midseason finale “The Climb” becomes a literal cliffhanger: Oliver lies dead on a cliff ledge after being defeated by Ra’s al Ghul. Oliver’s death and resurrection in Season Three represent an important transition for the character and series. Arrow’s death leads to the rebirth of the iconic Green Arrow, signifying a new beginning for the series in Season Four. In his Season Three monologue, Oliver acknowledges that he is not alone. At this point, other superheroes have “joined [his] crusade.” Oliver’s assessment of his situation extends beyond his immediate story-world to the landscape of network television. DC and Marvel superheroes have followed him to the small screen in *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (ABC: 2013-present), *Gotham* (Fox: 2014-present), *The Flash* (the CW: 2014-present), *Agent Carter* (ABC: 2015-2016), *Supergirl* (CBS; the CW: 2015-present), *Daredevil* (Netflix: 2015-present), *Jessica Jones* (Netflix: 2015-present), and *Legends of Tomorrow* (the CW: 2016-present). However, like its hero, the CW’s *Arrow* becomes “something else.” It presents a metacommentary on how resurrection is central to the hero’s survival on network television.

The staging of Oliver’s death in the midseason finale expands upon Lewis’ notion of the “subtle programming” implicit in comics’ sequential and serial nature that “create[s] an expectation of end-followed-by-continuation” (39). A different kind of programming is at work in the CW series. True to the nature of television programming, Oliver is positioned to return after the winter hiatus. Upon hearing reports of her ex-boyfriend’s demise for the second time, Laurel Lance/Black Canary (Katie Cassidy) echoes the viewers when she says, “He’s been back before. He’ll be back again” (“Left Behind”). While Oliver’s return from the dead was regarded as imminent by both characters and viewers, the mechanism for his resurrection was

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less certain. During the month-long hiatus before the series' return with "Left Behind," fans speculated on how Oliver would survive. One theory involved the Lazarus Pit featured in DC comics, which is the key to Ra's al Ghul's restorative powers. The Lazarus Pit does not play an immediate role in Oliver's resurrection, but it becomes a key plot device and symbol in Seasons Three and Four. Here the series bares its device: *Arrow*, in effect, becomes the Lazarus Pit, a source of regeneration for its characters and narratives. *Arrow* is a unique example of the Lazarus Phenomenon on the small screen, presenting an ever-evolving, ever-transforming hero that exists in a liminal space between past lives in print and future on television.

Like the comic book heroes before him, the CW character fits within a long tradition of archetypal hero figures that Joseph Campbell traces back to the ancient world. Campbell's pairing of lines from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the *Bhagavad Gita* highlights a classical foundation to myth that emphasizes regeneration over time. Ovid writes, "All things are changing; nothing dies. The spirit wanders, comes now here, now there, and occupies whatever frame it pleases For that which once existed is no more, and that which was not has come to be; and so the whole round of motion is gone through again" (qtd. in Campbell 29). Ovid's lines suggest what is at work in contemporary reimaginings of classical heroes, particularly in the digital age. The comic book character appears as a shape-shifter within the print medium as well as in his reincarnation in other media, such as television series. He migrates from one frame (comic book panel) to another (television screen). Similar to Ovid's statement that "nothing dies," the *Bhagavad Gita* depicts the self as interminable, as "Only the bodies, of which this eternal, imperishable, incomprehensible Self is the indweller, are said to have an end" (qtd. in Campbell 29). The CW's *Arrow* embodies Campbell's eternal and imperishable hero, awaiting resurrection in a new form. Each season presents a new version of its character: Oliver Queen transforms into the Vigilante, Hood, Arrow, and Green Arrow. Each incarnation is forward- and backward-gazing, signaling the character's history in print and future on screen.

In "The Myth of Superman," Umberto Eco turns to an iconic character to explain how the superhero is positioned in and out of time. He writes, "Superman, then, must remain 'inconsumable' and at the same time be 'consumed' according to the ways of everyday life. He possesses the characteristics of timeless myth, but is accepted only because his activities take place in our human and everyday world of time" (Eco 111). The television superhero is particularly

bound by these conditions. Discussing the “narrative eschatology” of Joss Whedon’s television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (the WB: 1997-2001; UPN: 2001-2003), David Lavery identifies the series’ “variety of ‘little deaths’ . . . the distinctly televisual ends, allowing for commercial breaks, that come within the narrative itself; the ending of each episode . . . ; the endings of narrative arcs; the ending of each season” (3). Drawing upon Frank Kermode’s argument in *The Sense of an Ending*, Lavery writes that “We strive, always, to convert ‘chronos’—mere ‘passing time’ or ‘waiting time’—into ‘kairos’: ‘the *season*, a point in time filled with significance, charged with a meaning derived from its relation to the end” (1). Arrow, like Buffy before him, transcends time but is also bound by the conventions of network television, its structuring of time. The death and resurrection of Buffy, the character and series, is suggestive of what is at work in *Arrow*. Season Five of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* ends in Buffy’s self-sacrificial plunge into the abyss, death, and burial before a Season Six rebirth on a new network.² The character’s death and resurrection indicate the forces of production behind the series, similar to *Arrow*’s rendering of the five-year moratorium of the *Year One* character. Also similar to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Arrow* utilizes the conventions of the medium—here, the midseason hiatus—to leave the audience expecting the character’s return. However, in contrast to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Arrow* exemplifies Brooks’ argument that “The sense of a beginning, then, must in some important way be determined by the sense of an ending” (94). Oliver Queen’s evasion of death positions him as the eternal and imperishable hero at the start of his narrative.

Both *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Arrow* can be identified as part of the “new mode of television storytelling” emerging in the past fifteen years that Jason Mittell identifies as “*complex TV*” (3). Mittell writes that “television’s storytelling possibilities and practices have undergone drastic shifts specific to the medium,” including “Expectations for how viewers watch television, how producers create stories, and how series are distributed” (2-3). According to Mittell, “We can learn much about how complex serials work by considering how they strive toward their final episodes and what happens when they manage to reach them” (319). He turns to the television “resurrection” as one such model, which involves the return of an already-concluded series on television or in another medium (Mittell 321). He identifies three Whedon series, *Buffy*, *Angel* (the WB: 1999-2004), and *Firefly* (Fox: 2002-2003), as examples, noting that the motivation for continuing them in new forms “seems to be having more stories left

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to tell and the freedom to tell them differently in another medium” (Mittell 321). However, Stacey Abbott’s categorization of Whedon’s film *Serenity* (2005) complicates Mittell’s: she considers *Serenity* to be a regeneration rather than resurrection of the *Firefly* television series (229). The implication is that the resurrection is the reembodiment of the familiar narrative whereas regeneration involves the creation of new stories. The CW’s *Arrow* makes a similar distinction in its presentation of the Lazarus Pit. Ra’s al Ghul says that the Pit is a source of regeneration, not resurrection. The effects of the Lazarus Pit appear to be similar to those depicted in Smith’s *Quiver*, where resurrection leads to the return of a “Hollow” Oliver Queen to earth while his soul resides in the “hereafter.” The implicit risk of using the Lazarus Pit is recycling the same narratives over and over again. The CW’s reappropriation of the Lazarus Pit from DC comics involves a reconfiguration of its terms: the regeneration of its hero and narrative becomes paramount.

Resurrection and regeneration are suggestive terms for the adaptation of narrative from one medium to another; however, in the case of comics, a third term has specific applications and resonances: reanimation. From its beginning, the CW’s *Arrow* appears to be haunted by past incarnations of the Green Arrow. Ovid’s description of a spirit that “wanders, comes now here, now there, and occupies whatever frame it pleases” (qtd. in Campbell 29) can be traced in the CW’s experiment with the character’s history in print. In “Honor Thy Father,” the police sketch of the “mysterious hooded vigilante” appears on a television screen. While Arrow’s appearance on the small screen foreshadows the celebrity that the character will become, it also recalls the history of the iconic character, as the sketch is a comic book rendering by Mike Grell (writer and illustrator of *Green Arrow: The Longbow Hunters* [1987]). The DC logo at the end of each *Arrow* episode features another one of Grell’s illustrations of the character. Despite its acknowledgement of the Green Arrow’s history, the CW series charts a new course. Initially, it resists calling the character the Green Arrow. In the Season One episode “Year’s End,” after Oliver says, “I think the vigilante needs a better code name than ‘the Hood,’” Queen family friend and Arrow’s nemesis Malcolm Merlyn (John Barrowman) suggests “Green Arrow.” Oliver replies, “lame” (“Year’s End”).³ However, the series later concedes that point: by Season Four, Oliver has fully embraced the mantle of the Green Arrow, along with a redesigned suit. The Green Arrow’s revival on the small screen illustrates what Geoff Klock describes

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as the “*bricolage* of the character’s previous narrative” (118). The character has an extensive history, and his past lives in print inform his present appearance on screen.

Most directly, the source material of the CW series is Diggle’s *Year One* comic. *Year One* sets the stage for the television series’ resurrection plot: it depicts Oliver Queen’s figurative resurrection after being stranded on an island and left for dead by his bodyguard and friend Hackett. In *Year One*, Oliver realizes that he is “dead to the world” (38) and decides to leave the “old Oliver Queen” behind and become something new. In the comic, Diggle represents the transformation as an awakening and rebirth. After renouncing his former identity, Oliver says, “I don’t think I’ve ever felt this . . . whole . . . this alive. I was supposed to die here. So either this is paradise . . . or I’m born again” (49). When Hackett encounters Oliver again, he says, “That’s twice now you’ve come back from the dead, Ollie” (127). Oliver replies, “I plan to make a habit of it” (127). The CW series continues this tradition, making a habit of the resurrection plot.

After Oliver Queen’s return is announced in the pilot episode of the CW series, the Season One episode “Honor Thy Father” explores the difficulties of his reintegration into a world that has continued without him. Oliver appears in court in order to void a “death in absentia” judgment and become “legally resurrected” (“Honor Thy Father”). Oliver’s stepfather Walter Steele (Colin Salmon) says that all Oliver needs to do is appear in court to provide a “simple proof-of-life declaration,” but the episode shows that his return is quite complex (“Honor Thy Father”). In the CW series, Oliver is haunted and changed by his experiences on the island; he is no longer the billionaire playboy that everyone remembers. Even after he has left the island, Oliver remains in purgatory, unable to move on from his traumatic experiences. As Oliver tells the story of his survival in court, the flashback scenes revealing what had happened to his girlfriend’s sister Sara Lance (Jacqueline MacInnes Wood⁴) and his father Robert Queen (Jamey Sheridan) belie his “simple” narrative. Paradoxically, Oliver’s resurrection necessitates the burial of his secrets. This idea is highlighted in the contrast between the present-day and flashback scenes: Oliver’s grave is disinterred as he buries his father on the island. When Oliver places the last stone on his father’s makeshift grave, he is immediately struck by an arrow. Before Oliver falls, he sees a man that resembles the iconic Green Arrow, a glimpse of what Oliver will soon become. The sequence emphasizes that Oliver was brought back to life in order to honor his father and become a hero.

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The superhero is marked and shaped by death; his resurrection provides the hero with meaning and purpose.

In *Arrow*'s third season, the resurrection plot of Season One is revived. The first episode of Season Three, "The Calm," highlights the significance of the character's death and resurrection, foreshadowing the course of the second half of the season. In "The Calm," Oliver recalls the earlier narrative when struggling to regain control over his family's company. He tells the board members, "Two years ago the people of Starling City thought I was dead. I came back. And so can Queen Consolidated" ("The Calm"). Oliver's rival and soon-to-be superhero the Atom Ray Palmer (Brandon Routh) offers a complementary yet competing description of the series' resurrection plot when he says, "This city still needs saving. And that is my vision for this company: to not only see it rise from the ashes but to take this city with it to that new horizon" ("The Calm"). In the two pitches, Queen Consolidated is cast as the Phoenix, but Ray's vision has larger implications for the narrative. He suggests that resurrection and regeneration are distinct concepts. Oliver promises to resurrect the company, restoring it to its former glory. However, Ray suggests that it needs a new vision for it to survive. This scene can be read as a metacommentary on what is happening within the series more generally: whether to restore the character in a familiar narrative or generate something new. Ray's reference to the Phoenix can also be read as a nod to DC comics—Jean Grey's regenerative character—a symbol, perhaps, of what Oliver will become.

The CW's *Arrow* can be considered an example of the "revisionary superhero narrative" that Klock identifies in Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), which involves, in the Bloomsian sense, a "re-aiming or a looking-over-again, leading to a re-esteeming or a re-estimating" (117). Like Miller's comic, *Arrow* accounts for and comments on the character's and comics' history. The Green Arrow that appeared in *More Fun Comics* (1941) was a response to and adaptation of the Batman comics, and, in Season Three, the CW series continues the tradition of sampling from that pool with its appropriation of the Ra's al Ghul character and Lazarus Pit. Klock reads Miller's lines, "First we get a steady supply of water. There's a spring right beneath," in *The Dark Knight Returns* as an "imparting of the fecundity of the Batman mythos to future writers" (131). Klock concludes that *The Dark Knight Returns* "becomes the *fons es origo* (the fountainhead and the origin) of the revisionary superhero narrative" (131-132).

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Following the Dark Knight's example, the CW series introduces the *fons es origo* of the revisionary superhero narrative in its mise-en-scène with the appearance of the Lazarus Pit. The Pit represents the origins of the Green Arrow as well as the network's methods of regenerating its source material.

Season Three's resurrection of Oliver and the appearance of the Lazarus Pit introduce magic and the supernatural, charting a new course for the series. In an interview, *Arrow* executive producer Marc Guggenheim said of Season Three, "When we started out this year, if last year was about bringing superpowers into 'Arrow,' this year's about bringing magic into 'Arrow,' and it opens up a lot of opportunities and choices for us" (Prudom). Although Oliver's resurrection is not facilitated by the Lazarus Pit, it is drawn from another mystical source. Maseo Yamashiro (Karl Yune), Oliver's handler during his time in Hong Kong and a present-day member of the League of Assassins, takes Oliver's body to his estranged wife Tatsu Yamashiro (Rila Fukushima). In comics, Tatsu Yamashiro is the DC character Katana, who first appeared in *The Brave and the Bold* #200 (1983) and became a member of the Outsiders and the Birds of Prey. Most recently, the character premiered in print in her own series *Katana* (2013). While Tatsu's methods are concealed in the CW series, in the comics Tatsu possesses a mystical sword, the Soultaker, which captures the souls of its victims. The Soultaker is the key to a reincarnation ritual in the comics; however, in *Arrow*, it becomes a symbolic concept, signifying the risk of the Lazarus Pit. After Ra's al Ghul kills Oliver's sister, Thea Queen (Willa Holland), he offers to bring her back to life if Oliver takes the mantle as the next Ra's al Ghul ("The Fallen"). With the Lazarus Pit, resurrection is revealed as a possibility, but it comes at a price. Malcolm's warning about its aftereffects, "The waters change a person. In the soul," is realized for Thea immediately after she reemerges from the water with little memory of her former life and violent tendencies ("The Fallen").

While the plotline draws from the Batman comics, the name of the Lazarus Pit evokes an ancient source and figure that the series addresses, if only in a line. Arrow team member John Diggle (David Ramsey) asks, "Lazarus, as in from the Bible Lazarus?" ("The Fallen").⁵ However, Malcolm quickly supplies an alternate story for the existence of the Pit. The series locates the Lazarus Pit in Nanda Parbat, the home of the League of Assassins, although other Pits are referenced in the narrative. The Pit has kept Ra's al Ghul alive for more than a hundred years, and in rare instances it can resurrect the dead.

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While the other characters question the possibility of the mystical and the supernatural, Oliver verifies their existence and powers when he responds, “The Pit’s real. I’ve seen it” (“The Fallen”).

In the Season Three episode “The Offer,” Ra’s al Ghul gives a history of the Lazarus Pit that dates back to the ancient world. He says, “It was Herodotus who first wrote of these waters. And Ponce de Leon traveled the earth in search of them. And their discovery by Al-Khidr is chronicled in the Quran. And they have permitted me to live way beyond my time” (“The Offer”). However, he acknowledges that its power is not limitless, and “[M]an can only evade death for so long” (“The Offer”). He tells Oliver that the waters’ powers are losing their effect on him, and he needs to find a successor. Episode writers Beth Schwartz and Brian Ford Sullivan appear to be inspired by Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Ra’s al Ghul’s lines “My time is almost over, but my legacy won’t be just ash and bone. It will be history” (“The Offer”) recall those from the *Bhagavad Gita*: “Only the bodies, of which this eternal, imperishable, incomprehensible Self is the indweller, are said to have an end” (qtd. in Campbell 29). Ra’s al Ghul says that Oliver is marked for the role and legacy: “You survived my sword. Your resurrection wasn’t a gift from these waters, rather by force of your own will. And what better heir to immortality than someone who has already claimed victory over death?” (“The Offer”). Despite Oliver’s objection—“I didn’t defy death just to become an instrument of it” (“The Offer”), Ra’s al Ghul is convinced that Oliver has already been transformed by his near-death experience.

Ra’s al Ghul supplies an alternate narrative for the Arrow character and series. Oliver does not merely survive (twice); he is, as Ra’s al Ghul puts it, an “heir to immortality” (“The Offer”). Challenging the monologue that defines the series, Ra’s al Ghul asks him, “Then why confine your crusade to a single city . . . when I can give you a whole world to save?” (“The Offer”). Ra’s al Ghul’s lines point to the limited scope of Oliver’s quest in contrast to his grand heroic design. According to Campbell, the hero’s passage is inward, “into depths where obscure resistances are overcome, and long lost, forgotten powers are revived, to be made available for the transfiguration of the world” (29). Applying Campbell’s formula, Ra’s al Ghul’s character is consistent with the heroic tradition. Although Oliver initially rejects the offer, Ra’s al Ghul’s description of the hero informs the character’s transformation in Seasons Three and Four. Oliver will not become that hero as the next Ra’s al Ghul, but Ra’s al Ghul leads him to the hero that he was always destined to become.

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By defying death at the hands of Ra's al Ghul, Oliver is positioned to become something else. In "Broken Arrow," Malcolm and Arrow team member/Oliver's love interest Felicity Smoak (Emily Bett Rickards) tell Oliver that his days as Arrow are "finished" and "There is no more Arrow. Ra's took that from you." However, Ra's al Ghul marks a different path for the hero when he announces the end of Oliver's "past life" "in the name of something new" ("The Fallen"). As Ra's al Ghul declares that "Oliver Queen is dead, eventually to be reborn as Ra's al Ghul. For now only the Arrow, Al Sah-Him, shall remain," the camera reveals Oliver dressed as a member of the League of Assassins ("The Fallen"). For now, Oliver will remain the Arrow, but the substitution of the Arabic for the English name signals a change for the character: he has become part of an older tradition.

Ra's al Ghul's plot calls for Oliver to "unleash" the Alpha and Omega bioweapon in Starling City, severing all ties to the city that he had sworn to save and the mantra that defines the character for three seasons. The Alpha and Omega name extends beyond the effects of the weapon to signal what is at work in the series. Demonstrating Brooks' argument that "The sense of a beginning, then, must in some important way be determined by the sense of an ending" (94), the Alpha and Omega device symbolizes the reciprocal relationship between the two concepts. The end of Season Three deconstructs the series' original terms. Ra's al Ghul's offer simultaneously represents a beginning and an ending for the character, no matter which path he chooses. After Felicity figures out that Oliver has evaded a sacrificial death, recalling the ending of Dixon's 1995 comic, she offers Oliver a new mantra that restores the teleology of the series when she says, "Don't fight to die. Fight to live" ("My Name is Oliver Queen"). Revising the scene in "The Climb," when Oliver faces Ra's al Ghul and (un)certain death on top of the Starling City Dam, Ra's al Ghul notes a change in Oliver, telling him, "Your will to live burns brighter, and yet you rejected my offer of eternal life" ("My Name is Oliver Queen"). This time, Ra's al Ghul is killed by Oliver's sword ("My Name is Oliver Queen"). Although Ra's al Ghul's death proves that "[M]an can only evade death for so long" ("The Offer"), Oliver proves himself to be the "heir to immortality," the eternal and imperishable hero awaiting a return in Season Four.

At the end of Season Three, Oliver self-consciously reflects on his—and the series'—trajectory. He tells his assembled team,

When I started this, I wanted to keep you as far away from it

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as possible, because that has always been my instinct . . . to go it alone. But the truth is that we won tonight because I wasn't alone. I thought that this crusade would only end with my death. But even if I had died tonight, it would live on because of you. And you. Oh. And you. ("My Name is Oliver Queen")

When Laurel replies, "It's true. This city isn't lacking masks," Oliver adds, "Heroes" ("My Name is Oliver Queen"). Borrowing from Ra's al Ghul's script, Oliver acknowledges the importance of the legacy that he has established. His speech also recalls Campbell's description of the hero whose powers are "revivified, to be made available for the transfiguration of the world" (29). Despite its refrain of "Oliver Queen is alive only in the past. He is forgotten" ("Al Sah-Him"), Season Three restores Oliver Queen at the expense of Arrow. Revising Felicity's line (borrowed from the monologue), Oliver says that "It is time for [him] to be . . . something else" ("My Name is Oliver Queen"). Season Three appears to be the series' end, a fitting conclusion to the character's arc, as Oliver and Felicity ride off into the sunset.

Mittell writes, "Every television series begins, but not all of them end—or at least not all series conclude" (319), and the return of *Arrow* in Season Four is a new beginning for the series. Although Diggle, Laurel/Black Canary, and Thea/Speedy appear to be doing a better job fighting crime without Arrow than they had in the previous season, the team requests Oliver and Felicity's assistance early in the first episode ("Green Arrow"). Oliver initially resists the return to action, favoring domestic life (and soufflés), but he decides to reenlist in the fight to save the renamed Star City before the episode concludes. Already politicking for the rebooted series, Oliver says, "Six months ago, the Arrow died. But what he stood for didn't. It lived on in the heroes who took up his mantle. . . . [T]onight, I am declaring my intention to stand with them, to fight for this city, to be the symbol of hope that the Arrow never was" ("Green Arrow"). Oliver's declaration, "I am the Green Arrow," may not have been much of a surprise for many fans. Brooks' sense of an ending that "suggests a return, a new beginning: a rereading" (109) is met in Season Four of *Arrow*; it delivers the Alpha and Omega evaded in Season Three. The end of the Arrow character is a return to the beginning, the iconic Green Arrow.

The Lazarus Pit remains a renewable source in Season Four, at least for a time. Although Malcolm's warning that "[T]he Thea you get back will not be the one you lost" ("The Fallen") is affirmed by her

behavior immediately following her resurrection and in the episodes that follow, the characters see the Lazarus Pit as a potential site for restoring what was lost. Guggenheim said, "I'm sure that after the events of ['The Fallen'], there will be a lot of, 'Get Tommy in the pit. Get Moira in the pit.' We don't have any plans to do that, but we have an explanation for why that is the case" (Couch). However, the Lazarus Pit is important to the future of the series. The attorney in "Honor Thy Father" says that "The Queen family is only entitled to one miracle, I'm afraid," but Laurel's sister Sara Lance/White Canary (Caity Loitz), who, like Oliver, disappeared during the shipwreck and was reported dead, is also resurrected in the series. In the Season Two episode "Time of Death," Oliver throws her a "coming back from the dead" party, which he refers to as a "Queen family tradition." Before Sara appears to die for a second time in "The Calm," Oliver asks her, "Is this permanent, you being back?" and she replies, "I hope so." After Laurel dons the Black Canary costume, trying to fill the void left by her sister's death and convince her father that Sara is still alive, she attempts to resurrect her dead sister. In the Season Four episode "Restoration," Laurel and Thea take Sara back to Nanda Parbat and the Lazarus Pit.

When Laurel and Thea approach the new Ra's al Ghul, Malcolm Merlyn, he and the former Ra's al Ghul's daughter and Sara's love interest Nyssa al Ghul (Katrina Law) reassert the risks of the Lazarus Pit. Malcolm tells them, "What you are asking for hasn't been done since ages past. Even then, only in legend" ("Restoration"). Malcolm repeats his warning about Thea, saying "Who . . . what came out of the Pit would not be Sara" ("Restoration"). Nyssa warns Laurel of the "dark price" that her father paid for the Pit's regenerative powers, a price that she suspects Thea is currently paying. When Laurel insists that she has to try, Nyssa responds, "To what end? To have your sister return to you a monster?" ("Restoration"). However, Laurel says that she believes her sister's spirit—the part that the two women love—will come back. Here *Arrow* appears to be drawing from myriad sources—Katana and the Souttaker storyline as well as Smith's *Quiver*.

Drawing on Eco's sense of the superhero's "immutability," Lewis writes, "Since superheroes cannot endure change, death is not considered a permanent change for a superhero—it is merely an existence elsewhere" (26). In *Quiver*, a resurrected Oliver Queen wakes up in limbo, replete with black panels, to find Hal Jordan/the Green Lantern and answers as to why he has no memories of the past ten years and more recent changes to the DC Comics universe. Oliver

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asks Hal, “How am I alive?” (144). Hal tells him that although he had turned against everyone, “[B]efore he closed the book on what [he] assumed would be [his] final legacy,” he attempted to make things right again, by raising Oliver from the dead (147). However, recognizing that he was still “trying to play God,” Hal only brought Oliver back in body, not soul, restoring him to a time before Grell’s *Longbow Hunters*. In *Quiver*, Smith plays with the teleology of the different *Green Arrow* narratives; as he says, it pays “deep, deep homage to all the other great Arrow-heads of the past” (5). It poses complex questions about what Oliver has become and what it means to fully restore him to the narrative.

Although the CW series does not directly draw from *Quiver*, it introduces a similar metaphysical crisis. The aftereffects of the Lazarus Pit continue to ripple through Season Four, evidencing how “The waters change a person. In the soul” (“The Fallen”). The series ventures into “uncharted waters” (“Restoration”) when it resuscitates a character who dies and is buried in the previous season. Although Nyssa announces that “[T]here will be no coming back” after she destroys the Lazarus Pit as a preventive measure (“Restoration”), two episodes later, an unlikely character appears in the CW series: John Constantine (Matt Ryan), protagonist in the DC *Hellblazer* comics and the eponymous character of the canceled NBC television series.

Constantine (NBC: 2014-2015) suffered what Mittell characterizes as a “cessation,” “leaving the narrative world in a state of perpetual limbo and awaiting a possible return” (321). It is fitting that Constantine, a character that exists in the liminal space between the living and the dead, is given second life in *Arrow*. In the Season Four episode “Haunted,” Constantine delivers magic into *Arrow*’s story-world. When an incredulous Oliver watches him perform a spell, Constantine asks, “What, you’ve never seen magic before?” (“Haunted”). Constantine is brought into the present-day narrative when the characters realize that they are facing a *Quiveresque* crisis. Oliver tells the group, “The Pit is not supposed to be used on the dead. It brought Sara’s body back, but all of this is happening . . .,” and Laurel responds, “Because it didn’t restore her soul” (“Haunted”). The Pit resurrects Sara only in bodily form. She is *Quiver*’s “Hollow,” a shell. Constantine tells Laurel that her sister needs a “restitutionum,” “the restoration of her soul to her body” (“Haunted”). The ritual delivers Constantine, Oliver, and Laurel to the “other realm,” a version of *Quiver*’s black panels redrawn as Nanda Parbat, in order to rescue Sara from the Pit. Although Constantine’s restoration in *Arrow*’s

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narrative is short-lived, he appears to open up a new path for the series in Season Four.

In its fourth season, *Arrow* is revealed to be one of the “places of nexus,” a site of mystical energy, that Constantine describes. Season Four is populated by an antagonist possessing supernatural powers, Damien Darhk (Neal McDonough), and his army of Ghosts. The gritty and realistic *Arrow*-world depicted in Seasons One and Two is radically altered by Season Four, and the Green Arrow struggles to understand his role and powers within it. The loss of the Lazarus Pit reintroduces a relative certainty of death. The teleology of Season Four leads to it: departing from its characteristic flashbacks, in a flashforward, Oliver is depicted mourning at an undisclosed gravesite. With the reintroduction of death into the narrative, and the hero’s inability to overcome it, the series undercuts the magical elements of Season Four with the possibility—and probability—of the “deathlike ending.”

Oliver has experienced significant losses over four seasons: his father Robert Queen, his best friend Tommy Merlyn (Colin Donnell), his mother Moira Queen (Susanna Thompson), his love interest Shado (Celina Jade), and Shado’s father and Oliver’s mentor Yao Fei (Byron Mann). However, the Season Four episode “Eleven-Fifty-Nine” reveals a devastating loss for the character, team, and audience. Darhk stabs Laurel/Black Canary to send a message to both the Green Arrow who opposes him and Laurel’s father, Captain Quentin Lance (Paul Blackthorne), who betrays him. Although it initially seems like Laurel will survive, her last-act death represents a turning point for the season and series. After learning of his daughter’s passing, Captain Lance is in denial, thinking that they can restore her with the Lazarus Pit. The characters are forced to admit that they cannot bring her back to life. The reality of the hospital room and presence of Laurel’s corpse are stark contrasts to the magical returns of Seasons Three and Four. In the episode that follows, “Canary Cry,” Captain Lance demands that he see his daughter’s dead body in the morgue in order to prove that she truly is gone. He had thought that he lost his younger daughter Sara/White Canary twice, only to learn that she had survived. Laurel’s death not only demonstrates a significant shift in the television series regarding the finality of death; it also severs its connections to the comics where Oliver and Dinah Laurel Lance remain lovers.

The episode “Canary Cry” introduces a copycat Black Canary into the narrative and prevents the characters from moving toward closure. Evelyn Sharp (Madison McLaughlin), who had lost her parents to Darhk’s H.I.V.E. organization, steals Black Canary’s costume and

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“Canary Cry” device to aid her in her revenge plot. Evelyn causes Oliver to reflect on those whom he had failed and the legacy that he and Black Canary leave behind. Evelyn is representative of what is at work in Season Four: a series of returns to the past. According to Brooks, “Repetition creates a *return* in the text, a doubling back” and “appears to suspend temporal process, or rather, to subject it to an indeterminate shuttling or oscillation that binds different moments together as a middle that might turn forward or back” (100). In the Season Four episode “Broken Hearts,” Carrie Cutter/Cupid (Amy Gumenick) returns after a Season Three appearance in “Draw Back Your Bow” as Arrow’s fangirl and copycat archer. Following “Broken Hearts,” in “Beacon of Hope,” Brie Larvan (Emily Kinney), who first appears in *The Flash*’s Season One crossover episode with *Arrow*, “All Star Team Up,” returns to steal a bio-mechanical chip designed by Palmer Technologies. Even Darhk’s masterplot, “Project Genesis,” is arguably a repeat performance of earlier season-ending terror: Season One’s “Undertaking,” Season Two’s “Siege,” and Season Three’s “Outbreak.”

In the 1967 essay “The Literature of Exhaustion” and the 1979 essay “The Literature of Replenishment,” John Barth discusses the possibilities of regenerating narratives. After surveying the field of postmodernist fiction in “The Literature of Replenishment,” Barth returns to his earlier essay and writes,

The simple burden of my essay was that the forms and modes of art live in human history and are therefore subject to used-upness, . . . that artistic conventions are liable to be retired, subverted, transcended, transformed, or even deployed against themselves to generate new and lively work. (205)

Barth notes that many people, including Jorge Luis Borges, whose “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote” is cited as an example, “mistook [him] to mean that literature, at least fiction, is *kaput*; that it has all been done already; that there is nothing left for contemporary writers but to parody and travesty our great predecessors in our exhausted medium—exactly what some critics deplore as postmodernism” (205). According to Barth, postmodernist fiction is the “literature of replenishment,” the next best thing after the exhaustion of the aesthetic of high modernism. Barth’s concepts of exhaustion and replenishment are particularly well-suited to a medium that is dependent upon ratings and market shares. The continuation of television narrative is

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dependent upon its ability to generate and sustain interest.

Arrow's Season Four received mixed reviews from fans and critics.⁶ Many reviewers commented that the series had lost its way, deviating from its foundation in a grounded world and character. In the Season Four finale, "Schism," Oliver is able to defeat Darhk and avoid worldwide destruction by inspiring hope in the citizens of Star City. The finale also depicts team members divided about their loyalties: Thea says that she needs to leave the team before she loses too much of herself; Diggle re-enlists in the Army to "figure out where [he] went off track and how to get back on"; and, after losing his position on the police force, Lance leaves Star City with his love interest, Felicity's mother Donna Smoak (Charlotte Ross) ("Schism"). "Schism" ostensibly offers two paths for the viewers: remaining hopeful for Season Five or moving on. Merrill Barr acknowledges that Season Five will be a turning point for *Arrow*:

No longer is it a foregone conclusion the show will continue. Up until now, renewals were mandatory to create a syndication friendly episode package. Last year, the show crossed the necessary minimum of eighty-eight episodes. This year, it will cross the even friendlier one-hundredth episode mark. This means ratings need to hold true for the series now more than ever.

Barr's assessment provides another lens for analyzing the "expectation of return after an ending" (Lewis 38) that is a feature of both comic and television media. In the case of network television, the market determines it. The end of *Arrow*'s run on the CW would signal a new beginning for the series in syndication.

However, the promotion of Season Five tells a different story, a recurring narrative of resurrection and regeneration. In an interview at San Diego Comic-Con, Stephen Amell noted that the new season will involve a refocusing of the series, a "back to basics" approach that is more consistent with the first two seasons.⁷ Although the series plans to move away from the magic of Seasons Three and Four, the Lazarus Pit has lasting effects. According to DC writer Grant Morrison, the DC and Marvel universes "were not like closed *continua* with beginnings, middles, and ends"; the fictional universe was an "evolving, learning, cybernetic system that could reproduce itself into the future using new generations of creators who would be attracted like worker bees to serve and renew the universe" (117). Morrison's description of the comics has implications for the medium of television. The network,

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a “place of nexus,” is another “evolving, learning, cybernetic system that could reproduce itself into the future” (Morrison 117). With *Arrow*, the CW becomes a renewable source, the *fons es origo* of the revisionary superhero narrative on the small screen.

Notes

- 1 Lewis refers to Scott McCloud’s analysis of closure in *Understanding Comics*.
- 2 The WB and UPN are the two networks that would later become the CW in 2006, the future home of *Arrow*.
- 3 Here again is a nod to Grell, who had called the name “stupid.” Grell only refers to the character as the Green Arrow in the titles of his comics.
- 4 Jacqueline MacInnes Wood is replaced by Caity Lotz in the role of Sara Lance in Season Two.
- 5 The character’s name, John Diggle, is an allusion to Year One creator Andy Diggle.
- 6 Ratings were an “all time low” for the series, averaging 2.9 million viewers overall, compared to Season Three’s 3.52 million average (Barr).
- 7 As for the magic of Season Four, Amell says that “it was important but it also taught the show a lesson: . . . we are better when we are a little bit more grounded” (Yeoman).

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Chuck Palahniuk's *Beautiful You*, Alfred Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, and the Commodification of Female Sexual Desire

David McCracken

In her *New York Times* review of Chuck Palahniuk's *Beautiful You*, Paula Bomer states,

Palahniuk is a novelist of ideas, I suppose, but that doesn't necessarily mean they're good ones. . . . A vast majority of the book's endless descriptions feel extremely clinical. It's as if the reader is vicariously experiencing a particularly uncomfortable gynecological exam. And while the novel delivers moments of awkward humor and some nominally feminist plot twists, the language and the ridiculousness of this particular concept remain hard to digest. Palahniuk is a novelist of ideas, I suppose, but that doesn't necessarily mean they're good ones. (34)

On the contrary, Palahniuk masterfully weaves together realism and fantasy in *Beautiful You* to create a more complex novel than Bomer gives him credit. Palahniuk has established himself as one of the premier American transgressive writers, and a novel about world domination through the control of the female orgasm, by its nature, seems transgressive, but this story is in many ways a traditional hero tale about good overcoming evil. The representative evil character is C. Linus Maxwell, who develops a line of Beautiful You products that provide women incredible sexual pleasure. Through a "bright pink plastic dragonfly" (92), Maxwell implants microscopic robots into women's vaginas that allow him to make any woman writhe in painful ecstasy at the touch of a button. Eventually, Maxwell controls almost every adult woman on the planet. The representative good character is Penny Harrigan, who foils Maxwell's plan by defeating him at his own game by learning his secrets through sex guru Baba Gray-Beard. In her review, Bomer ultimately asks, "How can a book about the female orgasm be so resolutely and profoundly unsexy?" (34).

Actually, Palahniuk does not appear to be aiming at a “sexy” book, nor does he seem to be presenting a sexually transgressive novel, either. Instead, he resolutely and profoundly addresses the issue of patriarchal control of female sexual desire, and *Beautiful You* is not intended to be “sexy” just because it includes descriptions of vaginas, vibrators, and orgasms. Instead, Palahniuk displays how each person should not give into media or commercial prescriptions of what is sexy or desirable but should determine the parameters of both of these individually, without outside interference or external coercion. After leading readers through the realistic and the romantic strains of sexual desire, Palahniuk allows readers to witness Penny’s construction of her own epitome of sexiness, a youthful Ron Howard, her individually created sexual paragon. Needless to say, Bomer probably does not share Penny’s attraction toward Ron Howard, and this disagreement about what is sexy leads precisely to Palahniuk’s point. No one should manipulate, persuade, or force another person into desiring anyone other than his or her own version of a man-hunk, eye-candy, hot-pants, sex-totem (or any other descriptor for desirability) Ron Howard. Unfortunately, Bomer overlooks that *Beautiful You* is primarily about this choice, the individual decision associated with desire, and not entirely “about the female orgasm.”

Essentially, transgressive writing reacts against established ethical and moral societal standards; exposing the darker shades, bleaker terrains, and rougher contours of humanity than presented in most mainstream fiction; focusing on the nihilistic and existential vicissitudes associated within the human experience.¹ Transgressive fiction often includes content that is considered obscene, vulgar, and profane; it frequently raises questions concerning what is proper or improper, acceptable or unacceptable, and even right or wrong. Simply put, *Beautiful You* is a transgressive text that is not entirely a transgressive text.

To get to Penny’s eventual service as Baba Gray-Beard’s protégée, Palahniuk parodies the entire enterprise of female sexual stimulation, making it about as scientifically unappealing as reading a college-level Human Sexuality course textbook. The seminal authority in this area is, of course, Alfred Kinsey, and his monumental 1953 report *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* set the standard in this field. Palahniuk parodies Kinsey and his assistants’ descriptions of female genitalia, female stimulation, and ultimately female orgasm, and this enables Palahniuk to develop his hero story with Penny serving as Maxwell’s adversary. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon

defines parody's function as demonstrating similarity but emphasizing difference: "What I mean by 'parody' . . . is *not* the ridiculing imitation of the standard theories and definitions that are rooted in eighteenth-century theories of wit. The collective weight of parodic *practice* suggests a redefinition of parody as repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signaling of difference at the very heart of similarity" (26).

In the first half of this novel, Palahniuk imitates Kinsey's research to lay the groundwork for Maxwell as sexual scientist; in the second half, he plays off of this to situate Penny into the position of feminist defender against patriarchal sexual domination. Through this process, Palahniuk moves his story from the realistic into the mythic. Palahniuk does not intend for the sexuality in the first half of his novel to be provocative, titillating, or erotic. There might be places that are sexually appealing or interesting, but these are interspersed within sterile and antiseptic references to female physiological arousal. In the second half of the book, however, Palahniuk changes directions in his narrative toward the fantastic. If one refers to Kinsey's now-archaic study as transgressive, then this designation perhaps applies to *Beautiful You*, but most readers would not find Kinsey's presentation in the least sexually enticing and nothing more than referential, objective, and informative. Kinsey's content may more aptly be comparable to mid-twentieth century seventh- or eighth-grade health class puberty instruction, the kind of language and type of nomenclature that makes sexuality abstract and esoteric, a coverage that is pedagogically pragmatic and utilitarian, coitus for the sake of biological procreation. In *Beautiful You*, Palahniuk parodies Kinsey's study so readers can better understand his greater purpose, presenting the battle between Maxwell and Penny for complete control of feminine desire. Even though Maxwell says this fight is not "boys versus girls" (188), Palahniuk basically depicts another version of the traditional conflict between patriarchal power and feminist solidarity. In his limousine, attempting to intimidate Penny, Maxwell comments, "Women are the new masters . . . but now I am master of women" (188). He then confesses, "This isn't about boys versus girls. This is about power. We live in an age when women hold the bulk of the power. In government, in consumer purchase decisions, women steer the world, and their longer life spans have left them in control of the greatest wealth" (188).

Critical reception of *Beautiful You* is typical for Palahniuk's novels after *Fight Club*, which was published in 1996 (although *Survivor*, published in 1999, is less transgressive than Palahniuk's

later fiction).² Critics generally treat Palahniuk as a maniacal lunatic writing off-center, along the social periphery or situated on the cultural margin, and they warn readers regarding explicit sexuality or satirical irreverence for the sanctity of the American mainstream, no matter that Palahniuk usually selects subjects that are sensationally popular and thus relevant in American culture at the time of publication. Palahniuk is definitely unafraid to tackle topics that others would consider too controversial, regardless of their mass social appeal. In short, many critics do not really understand the transgressive element in his fiction, and they certainly do not grasp the significance of his application of parody to provide necessary social commentary.

Perhaps more so than he has admitted for his preceding novels, Palahniuk has been upfront about *Beautiful You* as parody. He commented in an interview with John Nicol, reacting to the premise this book functions as a *Fight Club* for women, that he “cribbed elements from popular ‘chick lit’ books and cobbled them together, until the novel’s working title was ‘Fifty Shades of the Twilight Cave Bear Wears Prada.’” Palahniuk adds, “So, it’s a ‘slash mash-up’ wherein Andrea from *The Devil Wears Prada* has hot, wet lady-on-lady sex with her elderly boss, Miranda Only on the top of Mt. Everest And with references to tons of fashion designers.” Palahniuk reiterates this in an interview with *The Talks*. When questioned about the novel’s similarity to *Fifty Shades of Grey*, Palahniuk responds, “It’s true, the working title of the book was *Fifty Shades of the Twilight Cave Bear Wears Prada*. I’m fascinated by the whole issue of arousal addiction, but to do it in a comic, off-hand way, by depicting it with women, the population least likely to be subjected by it. I also wanted to borrow from all of those kinds of ‘chick lit’ books and use all of those tropes that are viewed so seriously.” Concerning the comparison between *Fight Club* and *Beautiful You*, Tracy Clark-Flory asserts,

Palahniuk has referred to this book as the female “Fight Club,” but in truth, there is no comparison. “Beautiful You” won’t resonate with legions of women the way “Fight Club” did with men. That’s because it doesn’t address a female desire—even though it is, ostensibly, at least at first, about female pleasure. Instead, it is centered—just as with “Fight Club” and most of Palahniuk’s books—around extreme male anxiety. This is his specialty: the neuroses experienced by supposedly feminized, emasculated men in corporate, capitalist and “post-feminist” America.

Although critics such as Caroline Leavitt have identified Palahniuk's parody of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, no one has fleshed out the more obvious comparison between *Beautiful You* and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, and Palahniuk does not openly acknowledge strong allegiance to Kinsey as his source during interviews. Nonetheless, Palahniuk clearly parodies Kinsey's documentation of female arousal and draws on this academic study of femininity as a vehicle to promote Penny's apotheosis that eventually morphs her into a defender of all human rights, not just a champion of female sexuality or simply a crusader advocating agendas associated with race, gender, or economics. To this end, Palahniuk relies once again upon transgressive narrative strategies to get to the core of essential human motivations, but the transgressive style ironically drives the mechanical sexuality that is central to Palahniuk's parody of *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*.

Before the critical implications of this parody are addressed, how Palahniuk lays out the two particular halves of novels must be explained, and these two parts are almost equal portions within *Beautiful You*. Readers are set up for almost a medical treatment of sexuality right after Penny's first date with Maxwell. The narrator points out,

Penny wasn't a prude. . . . During her coursework in gender studies she'd learned that roughly 30 percent of women are entirely nonorgasmic, and that seemed to be the case with her. Fortunately, there were other pleasures in life. Salsa music, for example. Ice cream. Tom Berenger movies. It made little sense to court herpes, venereal warts, viral hepatitis, HIV, and unwanted pregnancy in pursuit of unattainable sexual fulfillment. (39)

When she and Maxwell are sexually intimate, Maxwell's touch is "almost clinical," similar to "a doctor or a scientist," and he records everything in his notebook, which is "almost an appendage" (45). Then the detached, passionless descriptions begin. Maxwell tells her, "Look at yourself. You have a textbook vagina. Your labia majora are exactly symmetrical. Your perianal ridge is magnificent. Your frenulum clitoridis and fourchette Biologically speaking, men treasure such uniformity. The proportions of your genitalia are ideal" (48). As they engage in intercourse, Maxwell responds with scientific precision: "He petted her inner thighs and clitoris. With his hips, he made infinitesimal adjustments in the angle and speed of his thrusts. Gauging her reactions, he calibrated the depth of each stroke" (50). He

constantly checks her pulse and respiration (51), her pupil dilation (51), and her body temperature (52). After Penny has explosive orgasms resulting from Maxwell's douche-like concoction, he explains her G-spot: "That . . . is your perineal sponge, a mass of erectile tissue that connects through the pudendal nerve to your clitoris" (53). With his entire hand inside of her, literally pointing out features of her anatomy, Penny becomes so excited that her ejaculate runs down Maxwell's arm and drips off of his elbow. He exclaims after licking the taste of it, "Enzymes, . . . from your Skene's glands. That's why it vents from your urethra instead of your vulva" (54), and then he shoves his fingers into Penny's mouth so she tastes her own excretions. Penny is compared with Edison's Menlo Park laboratory and Henry Ford's workshop (60), Maxwell mumbling to himself, "The *nervi pelvici splanchnici* branches here near your *nervi erigentes*," noting that her coccygeal plexus is dislocated two centimeters yet is "within normal variable parameters" (60). Later, Maxwell reveals to Penny the extent of his sex study: "I've collected data about sexual responsiveness of high school girls, college coeds, young professionals. I have studied erotic tricks of Tajikistan temple prostitutes . . . German sex therapists . . . Sufi belly dancers. The women you know of, the rich and powerful, are only the tip of my sexual iceberg. By the time I bedded them I was already very well rehearsed in a thousand ways of providing pleasure" (77). Maxwell then summarizes, while intimately stroking Penny, several of his test sessions with ordinary and common women just like Penny (80-84).

The Kinsey Institute's study of female sexuality is reported in an objective, detached, and calculated tone. Readers of *Beautiful You* should assume within the context of the narrative that Maxwell would be very familiar with Kinsey's 1948 study of male sexuality as well as his study of female sexuality, and when he instructs Penny about her own physiology, there are echoes of what Kinsey presents in his extensive survey of data collected from around 8,000 female subjects. Kinsey's description of the labia minora, for instance, could serve as a model for Palahniuk's treatment of this subject:

The inner lips of the female genitalia, the labia minora, are homologous with a portion of the skin covering the shaft of the penis of the male. Both the outer and the inner surfaces of the labia minora appear to be supplied with more nerves than most other skin-covered parts of the body, and are highly sensitive to tactile stimulation. The gynecologic examinations for this study

showed that some 98 per cent of the tested women were conscious of tactile stimulation when it was applied to *either* the outside or inside surfaces of the labia, and about equally responsive to stimulation of either the left or right labium. (576-577)

Concerning orgasm, the Kinsey Report offers a list of characteristics that Palahniuk may refer in one way or another in the dialogue exchange between Maxwell and Penny:

The responses which an animal makes when it is stimulated sexually constitute one of the most elaborate and in many respects one of the most remarkable complexes (syndromes) of physiologic phenomena in the whole gamut of mammalian behavior. The reactions may involve changes in pulse rates, blood pressure, breathing rates, peripheral circulation of blood, glandular secretions, changes in sensory capacities, muscular activity, and still other physiologic events As a climax to all these responses, the reacting individual may experience what we identify as sexual orgasm. (594)

Maxwell frequently caresses Penny's clitoris and inserts fingers inside her vagina. Kinsey offers this information in regard to that form of stimulus: "a high percentage of all females who masturbate use techniques which involve some sort of rhythmic stimulation of the clitoris, usually with a finger or several fingers or the whole hand. Such techniques often involve the stimulation of the inner surfaces of the labia minora as well, but then each digital stroke usually ends against the clitoris. When the technique includes rhythmic pressure on those structures, the effectiveness of the action may still depend upon the sensitivity of the clitoris and of the labia minora" (575). Equally emotionless is the Kinsey portrait of the clitoris:

The clitoris, which is the phallus of the female, is the homologue of the penis in the male The shaft of the clitoris may average over an inch in length. It has a diameter which is less than a pencil. Most of the clitoris is embedded in the soft tissue which constitutes the upper (i.e., the anterior) wall of the vestibule to the vagina. The head (glans) of the clitoris is ordinarily the only portion which protrudes beyond the body. In many females the foreskin (the hood) of the clitoris completely covers the head and adheres to it, and then no portion of the clitoris is readily apparent. (574)

Many of Palahniuk's meticulous descriptions of the female anatomy seem to correspond with Kinsey's. In this manner, the fictional Maxwell assumes the persona of the real Kinsey.

In fact, Palahniuk seems to take a couple of points directly from Kinsey. The first relates to the demeanor of Penny while she is in the midst of sexual stimulation. Penny's consciousness is completely manipulated through Climax-Well's (his media nickname) techniques for heightened sexual sensitivity, and she (as is beautiful movie star Alouette D'Ambrosia and United States President Clarissa Hind) is totally at the mercy of his capricious decisions to activate her sexual receptors. When Penny is close to achieving momentous orgasm for the first time, Maxwell unromantically requests that she tell him what she is experiencing as "feedback" (50). Penny is portrayed as almost comatose: "Penny nodded. She was barely in the world. As pleasure drowned her, there was no past and no future. Nothing existed outside of this moment of peaking sensations. There was no other than the energy surging in her body" (51). Afterward, she tries to erase "The filth that had poured from her mouth [that] was totally degrading" (53). Kinsey notes that many women are oblivious while they undergo this process: "some may remain unconscious or only vaguely aware of reality throughout the spasms or convulsions which follow orgasm. Consequently few persons realize how they behave at and immediately after orgasm, and they are quite incapable of describing their experiences in any informative way" (628). The second corresponds to when Alouette is murdered through excessive sexual stimulation, suffering a brain aneurysm caused by Maxwell's inflicted orgasm while she accepts an Oscar Award. Naked from the waist down and humping the air, Alouette acts as if she is tortured: "To Penny, the five-time Oscar winner clearly looked deranged. She twisted her head violently from side to side, lashing the stage with her long hair. Her eyes rolled up until the whites showed. Her chest heaved, and back arched, thrusting her hips into the air as if to meet a phantom lover" (98). Kinsey claims such a response indicates orgasm: "The face of the individual who is approaching orgasm similarly and for the same reason presents the traditional aspect of a person who is being tortured. . . . an individual who is really responding is as incapable of looking happy as the individual who is being tortured" (606). The Kinsey Report includes this now politically incorrect commentary about orgasmic facial expression: "Prostitutes who attempt to deceive (jive) their patrons, or unresponsive wives who similarly attempt to make their husbands believe that they are enjoying their coitus, fall into an

error because they assume that an erotically aroused person should look happy and pleased and should smile and become increasingly alert as he or she approaches the culmination of the act" (606). There are other notable places where Palahniuk appears to be drawing from Kinsey, such as descriptions of dilations, secretions, erections, and a host of other body functions.

Illustrations of these are Maxwell's tedious medical recordings of Penny's vital signs during her orgasms as well as those experiences of his previous clinical specimens. Snooping into her new lover's preceding sexual examination sessions, Penny persuades Maxwell to read the exact details in his journal that record his Bakersfield church subject's reactions to genital stimulation, the occasion when Maxwell needed a rather large woman in particular to try out his Burst Blaster vibrator containing four compartments to saturate the vagina with coffee, medicine, or other fluids mixed with chemicals (83). While the volunteer pleasures herself with the device, Maxwell meticulously pays attention to every facet of the masturbatory exercise. Maxwell reads, "The test subject's heart rate accelerated rapidly to a hundred and fifty-seven bpm . . . Her skin conductivity increased dramatically" (84). Concerning blood pressure, he reports, "It was at the zenith of her climax—respiration twenty-five breaths per minute" (84). Maxwell notes, after the elders of the church had, to both their own and to the unfortunate woman's embarrassment, surprisingly interrupted Maxwell's clinical observation, "For the record, the test subject must've boasted an exceptionally large *corpus spongiosum*. Upon the entrance of additional parties to the scene, she expelled a copious stream of ejaculate from her urethra, thoroughly drenching them" (84). Similar in shock value to scenes in some of Palahniuk's other transgressive fiction, this woman sprayed the church school leaders with her orgasmic fluids. As Maxwell reveals to Penny what occurred, he "knuckleballs" her by rubbing his knuckles against her extremely aroused and therefore blood-engorged clitoris.

Disgusting in description yet practically clinical in presentation, this scene imitates Kinsey's notations concerning feminine ejaculation. Kinsey uses these measurements to describe a woman's standard blood pressure during orgasm: "diastolic blood pressures which have normally been as low as 65 may be raised to 160, and systolic pressures may be raised from 120 to 250 or more at the time of orgasm" (599). To document female tumescence, or the circulation of blood in the genitals during excitement, there is this information: "The labia minora, which are usually limp and folded, may become swollen and

prominently protrudent” (603-604). Similarly, there is the following about respiration during stimulation: “In the earlier stages of arousal the breathing becomes deeper and faster, but with the approach of orgasm the respiration becomes interrupted. . . . effected with prolonged gasps, and expiration follows with a forceful collapse of the lungs” (605). Although there is not an exact discussion of a female squirting fluids with the same velocity or dispersion as in Palahniuk’s account, as Kinsey never refers to anyone getting drenched from female genital secretions during orgasm, there are details about what physiologically takes place: “The Bartholin glands, which open in the vestibule just outside the entrance to the vagina . . . are the source of a clear, quite liquid, and somewhat slippery secretion . . . not [to] be confused with the usually thicker and often more colored secretions which frequently come from vaginal or cervical infections, or which constitute the so-called uterine discharges” (607). Of course, Palahniuk’s transgressive depictions of female orgasm do not entirely mimic Kinsey’s objectively neutral explanations of feminine sexual response, but Palahniuk is undoubtedly drawing on Kinsey’s initial documentations of human sexuality as the basis of Maxwell’s notebook citations. This at least appears to be the logic behind Palahniuk’s decisions related to how sexual stimulation is portrayed, although readers must watch out for Palahniuk’s tricks and deceptions.

In the interview with Nicols, Palahniuk reveals that a couple parts of Penny’s vagina sound authentically biological but are actually fictitious and named after Palahniuk’s friends. When asked about his knowledge of sexual history, Palahniuk confesses that the Chilean magnet stones and two names are strictly from his imagination. He states,

The internet has made research so easy. The storytelling game has become: what new, interesting premise can you make existing facts support? Also, never be afraid to make shit up. . . . I invented two new parts of the female anatomy and named them after friends. To raise money for charity, I’d originally planned to auction off fictional glands and nodes and whatnot. As it is, my friends were thrilled to see their names immortalized in Penny Harrigan’s sexy innards.

The second half of this novel begins, however, with Penny no longer assuming a passive position as test subject and actively fighting Maxwell for control of what is at its core female power. Penny becomes the embodiment of third-wave feminism, particularly as pronounced

by recognized feminist advocate Naomi Wolf, who explains that as females mature in a male-dominated society they repress the “bad girl” in favor of the “good girl.”³ The feminine “inner child” basically conforms to societal expectations of how a female should act and provides attitudes and behaviors to meet those established gender preconceptions.

This describes exactly what occurs to Penny in *Beautiful You*. As Wolf mentions, the inner child is good and is associated with compassion (318). She adds that this inner child has another side, one that is a “mischievous, boisterous, unregenerate twin, the inner *bad girl* lurking in the female psyche” (318). Wolf describes the bad girl in this manner: “Every molecule of the child seeks every pleasure. She is sensuous, grasping, self-absorbed, fierce, greedy, megalomaniacal, and utterly certain that she is entitled to have her ego, her power, and her way. For the few years between her first consciousness and the curtailment of all her badness, her dreams are more vivid and her world more saturated with passion and apparitions and ecstasy than it will ever be again. She has no manners. She is a very naughty girl” (319). Wolf claims this bad girl is sacrificed for the good girl, and to become empowered, the bad girl must be acknowledged. Wolf instructs her female audience:

Now imagine that you can reach her when you need to. Imagine that you can lay claim to the force of her desire, to her sky-high self-regard, when you are fighting for your rights, negotiating about sex or housework, or putting a price on your labors. Amplify her wishes to adult scope: the respect she wanted on the playground, and in her fantasies of recognition, you want from Capitol Hill. Do not call it “masculine,” that will to power in yourself, that desire to transform the world and be *seen*. That is *in* us. It always has been. Use it to walk through this historic door. (320)

While describing Penny’s background, Palahniuk depicts her as the “good” girl:

The truth was, Penelope Anne Harrigan was still being a good daughter—obedient, bright, dutiful—who did as she was told. She’d always deferred to the advice of other, older people. Yet she yearned for something beyond earning the approval of her parents and surrogate parents. With apologies to Simone de

Beauvoir, Penny didn't want to be a third-wave *anything*. No offense to Bella Abzug, but neither did she want to be a post-*anything*. She didn't want to replicate the victories of Susan B. Anthony and Helen Gurley Brown. She wanted a choice beyond: Housewife versus lawyer. Madonna versus whore. An option not mired in the lingering detritus of some Victorian era dream. Penny wanted something beyond feminism itself. (5)

The narrator comments about twenty-five-year-old Penny, "She hadn't found her dream as a well-behaved daughter, nor had she found it by regurgitating the hidebound ideology of her professors. It comforted her to think that every girl of her generation was facing the same crisis. They'd all inherited a legacy of freedom, and they owed it to the future to forge a new frontier for the next generation of young women. To break new ground" (6). Palahniuk then emphasizes how Penny only wants to promote her own ideology, not one affiliated with others: "She'd never trusted her own natural impulses and instincts. Among her greatest fears was the possibility that she might never discover and develop her deepest talents and intuitions. Her *special* gifts. Her life would be wasted in pursuing the goals set for her by other people. Instead, she wanted to reclaim a power and authority—a primitive, irresistible force—that transcended gender roles. She dreamed of wielding a raw magic that predated civilization itself" (6).

In the second half of the novel, Palahniuk ceases using a style similar to that of Kinsey when he develops the conflict between Maxwell and Penny. Palahniuk moves from realism into fantasy as he shifts from the clinical Max who obsessively studies feminine sexual arousal to the maniacal Max who implants 98.7% (187) of the adult female population with nanobots, which he controls remotely through his super-smart phone. This delineation in the novel allows Palahniuk to transition from seemingly good Maxwell, who only wants to help women such as Penny, whom he says he has chosen as his helper because she is, in fact, so average (61), to patriarchal power-hungry Maxwell, who acknowledges that women control power at home, at work, and in the marketplace, but who paradoxically enslaves them by giving them unlimited hedonistic orgasmic opportunities through his Beautiful You products. In this way, Maxwell dupes women into believing that they have gained sexual power; conversely, he has taken sexual power away from them through their addiction to ceaseless orgasms. By activating the nanobots in these women's bloodstreams, Maxwell precipitates their orgasms, but he instills in

them the false impressions that their masturbations are leading to their self-determined pleasure. These females believe they have power over their own desire; they feel as if they are capable of deciding when, where, and how often they will orgasm. In truth, Maxwell controls their desire, their pleasure, and their orgasms. He exposes the extent of this female hubris by controlling other desires as well. With a flick of a button, he can motivate women to purchase a vampire novel (114), clunky shoes (138), soap and dog food (118), or any other product which his company, DataMicroCom, produces through subsidiaries. Ultimately, sexual desire becomes connected with consumer desire, and Maxwell has commodified sexuality into a vehicle to market mass-produced junk. In short, Maxwell exploits arousal addiction (130) in women who self-deceptively believe they facilitate their own orgasms. These women are genuinely, as Penny observes, “dying from pleasure” (124).

When Penny decides as a “coresearcher” (135) to compete legally with Maxwell over the patent rights concerning Beautiful You products, contending she was more like a guinea pig than a girlfriend (93) in their testing, she goes from being Wolf’s “good girl” to “bad girl.” Penny’s experimentation with Maxwell initiated her from a Midwestern sexual conservatism into a cosmopolitan sexual liberalism that provided her with a new-found self-confidence concerning her body and her feelings. Penny clearly took chances with Maxwell that she never would with the college Sigma Chi men, whom she consistently references in regard to sexual encounters. After she is worn out from all of Maxwell’s testing, Penny thinks about love in contrast to the lustful acts in which she has been engaging: “Penny wanted to believe that making love was more than just fiddling with nerve endings until harum-scarum chemicals squirted around limbic systems. Real love, she knew, was something lasting and soulful. It sustained and nourished a person. The ‘love’ that Max engendered seemed to evaporate as her orgasms petered out” (73). Penny learns from Baba Gray-Beard, called this because her gray pubic beard stretches all the way to her feet, love is the only force that can repel Maxwell’s nanobot technology. As a mystic of the tantric arts, one believing sex and orgasm lead to divine enlightenment and spiritual energy, Baba Gray-Beard advises her, “The way food drives waste from your body, you must use love to displace the sex magic Max is practicing. Focus on what you love, and you can deflect his erotic spell” (162). Penny then reflects how her 136 days with Maxwell were devoid of love: “Max had taught her about pleasure without love. But

her weeks cloistered in the Baba's dank cavern had taught her that such profound ecstasy could coexist with an even stronger affection" (170). This reliance upon love is what allows Penny to defeat Maxwell. When Maxwell attempts desperately to control her during their marriage ceremony, when the entire world learns his secret that Penny is a clone of his dead first wife Phoebe (209-215), Penny thinks about what she loves, and those feelings neutralize the nanobots and allow her to express her own power, which takes the form of a sonic boom sounded through her vagina (211). Ironically, Maxwell dies from a vibrator missile—his own product—impaling his crotch (216). Comparable to Wolf's message of "power in yourself," Baba Gray-Beard instructs Penny to believe "What is done to you, you can do in return" (161). In this way, Baba Gray-Beard reiterates Wolf's message.

At the end, readers probably do not realize how subversively Palahniuk has used sexuality as the vehicle for Penny's ascension as heir apparent to the master sexual guru. Although readers may begin *Beautiful You* with prejudice toward Palahniuk's reputation as a transgressive writer and, therefore, go into the narrative with clearly defined assumptions about the sexuality—notably that descriptions will fall into the category of low-brow bad taste, edging into grotesque satire and disgusting lampoon—they are left with an optimistic twist on the typical good-wins-over-evil plotline. Readers might even accept all the sexuality as matter of course for the particular content of the story, becoming insensitive, calloused, or numb to all of the sexual references that in totality appear blasé but in isolation could be taken as lewd, salacious, or pornographic. Readers may unconsciously finish the novel associating sexuality with consumerism, treating sex as simply another economic agent marketed by a corporate entity to exploit the purchasing masses. In this sense, sex could be replaced with any addictive force that excises power over the general consumer population. In short, Palahniuk manipulates readers into accepting sex as a panacea for societal ills instead of the catalyst that both literally and figuratively leads to social disease. Put another way, Palahniuk demonstrates how sex heals (when embraced for its vitality within the confines of relationships) as well as corrupts (when commodified for its pleasure-producing properties for individuals). This might be why Palahniuk divided his story into a realistic account, similar to the Kinsey study of female sexuality, and then a fantasy story, a romance related to good Penny defeating "Evil Max" (204). Penny finally accepts the "erotic legacy of the ages" (216) as a sex lamia high in the Himalayan mountains, assuming the role of master teacher

for any student wanting “erotic education” (216): “She, Penelope Anne Harrigan, would accept the torch passed to her by the likes of Baba Gray-Beard and Bella Abzug. She’d liberate women from having to go to men for fulfillment. This legacy—not clothes, not jewelry or practicing law—this was the destiny she had long sought. Hers was a power based on carnal pleasure. Her kingdom a realm beyond interpersonal politics” (216). Palahniuk offers a quite fitting way to end this novel with Penny—who would “reign over the world, a benevolent lady dictator, awarding well-deserved pleasure to the multitudes” (22)—experiencing her own sex vision without the influence of any nanobot: “And a handsome Ron Howard swaggered boldly toward her” (222). Penny had taken advantage of her love for Ron Howard (211) earlier in the novel to defeat Maxwell. Going to back to Bomer’s question how this novel could be so unsexy, a reader has to laugh at this image. Does anyone really think Opie Taylor or Richie Cunningham is sexy? Palahniuk ends his novel about sex—but which is not really about sex—with an appropriate vision.

This is exactly what points to the brilliance of Palahniuk’s craft. There is so much sex in this novel that he literally defuses the potential eroticism of the subject matter, essentially counteracting what Michel Foucault calls the repressive hypothesis. Foucault contends attention is paradoxically drawn toward sexuality at the same time attention is attempted to be cast away from it. In this way, as writers try to repress sexuality, they inadvertently emphasize sexuality by causing readers to ponder its absence. In other words, when something is publically forbidden and intentionally neglected, people naturally desire whatever it is more than they would if there had never been any mention of its existence. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues economic and religious ideologies, among other influences, have paradoxically increased the literary promotion of desire even as they have attempted to repress it:

We have not only witnessed a visible explosion of unorthodox sexualities; but—and this is the important point—a deployment quite different from the law, even if it is locally dependent on procedures of prohibition, has ensured, through a network of interconnecting mechanisms, the proliferation of specific pleasures and the multiplication of disparate sexualities. It is said that no society has been more prudish; never have the agencies of power taken such care to feign ignorance of the thing they prohibited, as if they were determined to have nothing to do with

it. But it is the opposite that has become apparent, at least after a general review of the facts: never have there existed more centers of power, never more attention manifested and verbalized; never more circular contacts and linages; never more sites where the intensity of pleasures and the persistency of power catch hold, only to spread elsewhere. (49)

As a result of all the references to sexual products and the consumerism attached to and attracted by desire for these commodities, Palahniuk leads readers by the end of *Beautiful You* into forgetting about any oppositions they might have had initially toward explicit descriptions of sexuality. Readers have been given so much information about female orgasm, from its Kinseyian schematics of the chemical and physiological responses and reactions, that they no longer prudishly reject references to sex from a puritanical perspective. Consequently, they applaud the morally inverted Disney-like finale with Penny assuming the role of sex witch and her willingness to educate a sexually uninhibited and liberated population toward mystical transcendence through their ejaculations. Case in point is personifying Ron Howard as a sexual icon. Palahniuk has masterfully inverted the repressive hypothesis to demonstrate how readers can become in effect inured to graphic depictions of sexuality—there is so much sex that they literally ignore the sex—and are so saturated with all of the sexual description that additional mentioning of genitalia would just be too much to tolerate, not because it is in fact sexual, but simply because they are tired of reading about it. Through this approach, Palahniuk has successfully revised the classic heroic monomyth for twenty-first century readers who are shown multifarious images of sexuality continuously throughout mass media. Penny is the good sex witch, and everyone lives happily ever after in a sexually liberated world where even Ron Howard (or anyone else who contradicts the current media-generated archetype of American beauty) has the potential to become an object of desire.

This is simply where Palahniuk does his best work. In an interview for *The Talks*, Palahniuk discusses how people unfortunately form identities through products, and he mentions how some have such strong affiliations with brand names that they have company logos embossed into their tombstones. Palahniuk says he could have had the John Deere label engraved into his father's grave marker, and he views the notion of "people living their lives through a series of experiences provided by products" as horribly tragic yet nevertheless frequent occurrences.

In a way, *Beautiful You* is almost the anti-parody of *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*. Instead of Palahniuk empirically exploring the processes that arouse, titillate, and excite humans during intimate moments of passionately sensual connections with others, he really illustrates how humans obsessively, hedonistically, and selfishly crave onanistic pleasure through manufactured technologies. For the most part, Palahniuk displays through realism in the first half and romance in the second half of his novel how humans fundamentally desire sexual pleasure in any way possible. Palahniuk claims during an interview with Ed Cumming that “Pornography is the giant thing in the internet age that nobody will talk about. It’s a big secret that is generating so much traffic, at the leading edge of the new Wild West. It is a pure, nonverbal example of commodified experience; books are another example. Commodified formulae for a fake sense of intimacy.” In this sense, pornography’s omnipresence on the Internet demonstrates the opposite of Foucault’s repressive hypothesis: explicit sexual images are so prevalent in online media that viewers are desensitized to what twenty years ago would have had ignited serious fires related to censorship and decency issues. As a result, people no longer care about online pop-ups or marginal advertisements revealing men and women in overtly sexual postures and poses. These sexual images are perhaps now even expected at the bottom of standard newspaper and magazine Internet sites. Moreover, people look through the sexual images toward the messages beneath the media surfaces, looking into the substance of what is masked by the provocative visual stimulus that is designed to attract attention. Palahniuk exposes how sexual desire is currently so broadly commodified and then subsequently broadcast continuously through various American media that it has lost all of its surreptitious and furtive appeal. In other words, sex is losing much of its taboo and is therefore no longer repressed but openly and voraciously distributed throughout American mass media. Furthermore, most Americans are now complacent concerning the proliferation of sexual codes, regardless of the increase of sensitivity toward sexual harassment in the workplace and Title IX in higher education.

Even though the setting of *Beautiful You* takes place in the future, much of what occurs relates to the present. The sex toy industry is a booming and lucrative market. As Dawn Heineken states in a *Studies in Popular Culture* article precisely about the marking of sex toys, “One form of party—known as a ‘fantasy’ or ‘passion’ party—has become a commonplace female bonding ritual in neighborhoods across the US. . . . Such parties are for ‘personal care’ products that

your twin-set and pearl clad Avon lady probably never mentioned—vibrators, dildos and other ‘adult novelties’” (23). Heinecken cites that, in 2005, sales of adult toys exceeded \$30 billion in America, and she mentions that home sex toy parties “are not only a profitable, but trendy, cultural activity today” (23). Although, as in the novel, women openly pleasuring themselves on street corners with cordless devices is not a reality, sexual addiction to both male and female-directed masturbatory tools and obsessive viewing of easy-access online pornography are indeed problems many address through traditional twelve-step recovery programs. Significantly, Palahniuk mentions the addictive tendency of high-speed Internet pornography within the context of other autoerotic sexual stimulation (130). In the interview with Cumming, Palahniuk again comments, as he has done in other venues, that he perceives himself as more a romantic than a nihilist because he tries to write stories that promote community rather than individualism. Nothing is perhaps more individual or more personal than masturbation; most would agree masturbation is certainly not a communal activity. In this novel, there certainly are sections of stereotypical good old boy, dirty joke, and misogynistic rape fantasy scenarios, but Palahniuk uses these as tropes to display how far from intimacy sexuality has become in the twenty-first century. Sexual desire is no longer repressed; if anything, the commodification of sexual desire is more vastly open to free enterprise and capitalistic consumerism than it has ever been. There are undoubtedly real-life C. Linus Maxwells controlling power in many American corporations, and they are sustaining dominance through products essentially designed to please, comfort, and satisfy their well-researched and extensively tracked target population (followed not through nanobots but cyber cookies that map consumer navigation through the Internet). Actually, devices designed to satiate sexual appetite may in turn enervate and isolate, initiating more social separation than closeness.

What Palahniuk shows readers in *Beautiful You* is how to take ownership of sexual desire, to combat the forces that manipulate consumers into believing the fallacy that self-identity is purchased from without instead of cultivated internally from within their own souls. In other words, Palahniuk demonstrates through Penny how self-actualization is developed from inside each person and is not determined through manufactured technologies. Penny taps into her inner power to defeat Maxwell and all that he represents; she looks deeply into her own internal soul—not outward toward external products—to find what she truly and genuinely desires. Again, to

Penny's idiosyncratic taste, this is a sexy Ron Howard, and Palahniuk could not end his novel with a better example of how a single person takes control of his or her own desire. Each reader has a Ron Howard, a vision of the entity that personifies only what he or she desires. *Beautiful You* may be considered transgressive, but through his parody of Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, Palahniuk helps readers better understand the way to determine these entities for themselves. The objects of their desires should be their own, not media or commercially produced for them, constructed through their own imaginations, not created through mass marketing consumerism.

Notes

- 1 In her 2008 *New York Times* review of the novel *Snuff*, Lucy Ellmann writes a blistering indictment of Palahniuk's transgressive style that represents the derisive criticism typically given to his work:

What in the hell is going on? The country that produced Melville, Twain, James now venerates King, Crichton, Grisham, Sebold and Palahniuk. Their subjects? Porn, crime, pop culture and an endless parade of out-of-body experiences. Their methods? Cliché, caricature and proto-Christian morality. Props? Corn chips, corpses, crucifixes. The agenda? Deceit: a dishonest throwing of the reader to the wolves. And the result? Readymade Hollywood scripts. . . . Instead of any real creative effort, Palahniuk chucks at us every bit of porno-talk he can muster. But not in a good way. This is no celebration of a field in which America excels—the hatching of new vocabulary—but an exercise in deadening the English language.

In what could serve as a response, in “The Power of Persisting: An Introduction,” the first essay in his 2014 publication *Burnt Tongues: An Anthology of Transgressive Stories*, Palahniuk comments that a “hallmark of a classic long-lived story is how much it upsets the existing culture at its introduction” (3). Palahniuk has no problem upsetting critics such as Ellmann and Bomer though his transgressive writing.

- 2 Most reviews of *Beautiful You* are negative. Alice Stephens comments, “If you are squeamish about the subjects of masturbation, sexual arousal, orgasms, and anatomical analyses of female genitalia, then *Beautiful You* is not for you. Even if you are interested in these subjects, this book is likely not for you.” Burana Lily asserts, “In a book so heavily invested in the pursuit of the female orgasm, it's hard to resist the criticism that Palahniuk appears to be faking it. *Beautiful You* feels phoned-in, a master satirist's dip in standards.” Cameron Woodhead writes,

Despite (or perhaps due to) his prolific output, it's been downhill for Chuck Palahniuk, fiction-wise, since *Fight Club*. . . though he's attracted a cult following and many of his other works have something to recommend them. Not *Beautiful You*. . . . Ostensibly a satire on erotic fiction, rape culture and third-wave feminism among other things, Palahniuk's antics seem sneering and inane.

Trying to decide whether or not to send Palahniuk a letter in which he pledges allegiance to Palahniuk's writing post-*Fight Club*, Jason Sheehan admits after finishing *Beautiful You* that he no longer has a reason to send the correspondence: "By that point, I just wanted the book to be over. And now I just can't write that letter — because with *Beautiful You* just a distasteful and thoroughly insulting cheap-shot memory, I can no longer make myself care enough about Chuck Palahniuk to bother." Some reviews are indeed positive; for instance, Carolyn Darr praises Palahniuk's treatment of post-feminism:

Each year, women are leveling the playing field socially and economically. With recent campaigns for women's rights including the prominent #YesAllWomen, equality between the sexes is more in focus than ever before. In fact, the idea of a woman as president of the United States may not be that far off. Palahniuk uses his female characters to magnify the struggle for women's rights in a fictional post-feminist society. He attempts to show what could happen once women really do have it all and how easily it could be undone. In its own twisted way, *Beautiful You* creates a commentary on feminism where the intersection of sexual liberation and dangerous overstimulation is dissected and questioned.

Brian Truitt writes, "The novel is full of explicit sex used for narrative and lampooning purposes, and not in an erotic way. Palahniuk wants sex to be uncomfortable and weird. His graphic storytelling is bound to ruffle puritanical feathers, but it's essential to the societal takedown." Peter Petruski mentions, "Casual readers will be hard pressed to find anything else like it on the shelf. Highly recommended for everyone except the prudish or readers of actual romance novels."

- 3 In my book, *Chuck Palahniuk, Parodist* (McFarland, 2016), I compare Penny's transformation in *Beautiful You* to Madison Spencer's similar transformation in Palahniuk's 2011 novel *Damned*. I apply Naomi Wolf's popular theory of the "bad girl" and "good girl" to explain how both female characters learn to trust their own intuitions and instincts and rebel against patriarchal forces working against them. Penny and Madison strive to take control of their own destinies by learning to cultivate their "bad girl" psyches.

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Book Reviews

Degiglio-Bellemare, Mario, Charlie Ellbé, and Kristopher Woofter, eds.
Recovering 1940s Horror Cinema: Traces of a Lost Decade.
 Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015. 378 pages.

The concept of “recovering” a whole decade of cinematic genre material raises several key questions, not least amongst which are “Is there a decade which requires recovery?” and “Can such a vast investigation be mounted in a sustained and thorough manner within one text?” Whilst research on horror cinema of the 1930s golden age proliferates and the 1950s has frequently been cited as the decade from which to research the horror genre, the 1940s horror film has largely been overlooked or undervalued from an academic standpoint. This is the premise from which the editors of this book are operating, with the intention of furnishing the reader with a reframing of the “pervasive devaluation of 1940s horror” using the lexicon of the Gothic to provide “in-depth explorations” of a “lost” decade.

The first three sections of this book are dedicated to the Gothic themes of interventions, hybridity, and history, and they provide a sound platform for the examination of subjects including Gothic Realism, Proto-Slasher Cinema, the demise of the zombie, and monstrous psychologies. They impress upon the reader the importance of this period as a creative force within cinema at large, during a time the editors aptly describe as one of “significant experimentation.” Rather than positioning the 1940s as the poor relation to the preceding decade or as less adventurous than the 1950s, the opening sections of this book champion the unique nature of cinematic representations within this decade via readings of the monster, the body, the mind, and gender in relation to very specific cultural associations. The final section of the book offers an illuminating celebration of Poverty Row cinema, whose B-movies have often been regarded as the epitome of post-1930s cinematic decline, but which are treated with a revisionist approach to establish their worth from an academic standpoint and to bring their importance in line with that of the productions of the major studios.

Vampires, ape men, and body snatchers number amongst the monsters under discussion in *Recovering 1940s Horror Cinema*, but it is the monstrosity of war which most stands out in this volume. An exploration of films produced in the shadow of the Second World War or its aftermath cannot be made without referencing the pervasive effects of warfare upon the artistic output of those at war. As such, this

book deftly deals with topics including wartime horrors, Nazi-occupied France, and the American horror film in the aftermath of the war. If one criticism could be leveled here, it might be that a full section was not reserved for the dissemination of this area of study; however, that would admittedly alter the tone of the entire text. Another potential, but minor, criticism might be that the chapters referencing different aspects of the war were not featured in a chronological manner, thus slightly skewing the historical timeline in question.

Recovering 1940s Horror Cinema is equally suited to an academic looking for a gateway text for further research into period horror cinema or a student researcher seeking an expansive investigation into 1940s genre horror. It thoughtfully foregrounds an oft-maligned and neglected decade in genre cinema and successfully sustains its investigations throughout, despite covering a voluminous topic. It does so in such a way that it could easily be considered as a definitive coverall text on the period due to its analysis of culture, history, and economy. In this book, 1940s horror cinema is reborn, and its history is recovered and reinstated, in true Gothic fashion.

Jane M. Kubiesa
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Beeler, Karin, and Stan Beeler, eds. *Children's Film in the Digital Age: Essays on Audience, Adaptation and Consumer Culture*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2015. 202 pages.

Children's literature and pop culture are genres currently under-examined in the academic world. They often get lumped in with other "popular" forms of fiction considered "simple" and unworthy of deep analysis. This is why books like *Children's Film in the Digital Age* are welcome because they attempt to fill in the large gap that currently exists in our academic culture.

Edited by Karin and Stan Beeler from the University of Northern British Columbia, *Children's Film in the Digital Age* is a collection of essays that examine films aimed at younger ages from various angles ranging from the academic (such as gender and race studies) to the mundane (such as sales analysis). The strength of the book lies in its breadth of content. There are thirteen essays in here, and none of them overlaps in any significant way, each possessing its own approach. Although there are technically three different sections that the essays are grouped into, the reality is that the selections in each group are only vaguely related to one another, providing a good, broad overview

of the subject matter.

However, this leads to the main problem with the book: it does not know what it wants to be. There are thirteen different essays and thirteen different takes on the subject, but, aside from the fact that they all analyze some aspect of children's film in one way or another, there is no true central theme to the book. This translates to a lack of a central message for the reader to take away. The book is called *Children's Film in the Digital Age*, but, while children's film is very prevalent in here, the "*in the Digital Age*" portion of the title gets very little play. This is quite possibly due to what I mentioned about the overall lack of academic analysis of children's writing, but it does lessen the overall impact that the book could have.

For example, the first section ("Childhood, Adults and Films for Dual Audiences") has an essay titled "The Fantastic Childhood Imagination Through an Adult Lens: A Todorovian Approach to Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland*" by Heather Rolufs. This essay examines how adult perspective can color so-called childhood innocence using Burton's recent adaptation of Carroll's novel as the basis for her arguments. The book immediately follows with the essay "Asterix & Obelix vs. Hollywood: A Pan-European Film Franchise for the 'Family' Audience" by Noel Brown, an analysis of the attempts of French studios to mark their own independence by creating their own Hollywood-style blockbusters based on the popular *Asterix* comic series. Both essays are well-written and argued, but the complete shift in focus (despite still being in the same section) is jarring, failing to create any sort of overarching conceptual message about the medium, and, again, lessening the overall impact that the essays could have achieved.

This leads to the other, somewhat related, issue with some of the essays chosen for this book: the distinct lack of reflection on the "Children's" part of "Children's Film" in some of them. I am willing to accept that some of this might be a result of my own expectations rather than a flaw of the book, but I would like to have seen more discussion of how the topics discussed in these essays impact the audience. Certainly, there are essays that deal with this. Michael Bouchard and Tatiana Podyakova's "Russian Animated Films and Nationalism of the New Millenium: The Phoenix Rising from the Ashes" is a fascinating examination of how Russian Nationalism influences the Russian children's film industry and what impact that has on the beliefs and expectations of Russian children. Lydia E. Ferguson's "Branding Blackness: Disney's Commodification of Black

Culture in *Song of the South* and *The Princess and the Frog*” is a powerful statement on the problematic dichotomy Disney has created in their approach to black characters and culture in their movies when compared to the revenue they create from those approaches, and how that dichotomy impacts the understanding and beliefs of African-American children. On the flip-side are selections such as Brown’s aforementioned “*Asterix*” essay and Lincoln Geraghty’s “An Evolutionary Journey: *Pokemon*, Mythic Quests and the Culture of Challenge.” Both are perfectly fine essays, but the only relation they have to the rest of the book is that a children’s property happens to be at the center of their argument. Otherwise, Geraghty’s article is a literary study of the idea of “the quest” in the *Pokemon* franchise, and Brown’s essay is an examination of French cinema. These, and a few others, that use children’s properties to discuss otherwise non-children-related issues feel out-of-place.

The result is a book whose parts are greater than the sum of the whole. There is not one essay in this book that I regret reading, but the overall effect of the book is that it lacks a cohesion that might have helped it have a more significant impact. It is certainly worth a read if you are interested in this area of study, but do not expect to find some larger truth.

Mark Thomas
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Levine, Elana, ed. *Cupcakes, Pinterest, and Ladyporn: Feminized Popular Culture in the Early Twenty-First Century*. Champaign: U of Illinois P, 2015. 296 pages.

Cupcakes, Pinterest, and Ladyporn brings together thirteen essays and a brilliant introduction by editor Elana Levine to provide accessible, critical analyses of a glorious range of contemporary pleasures deemed feminine by gendered cultural norms. Whether pinning crafts on Pinterest, Instagramming food, or Facebooking baby photos, “feminine” traditions have found renewed life through social networks, blogs, and other virtual communities constructed around practices such as makeup, creating the “perfect party,” and guilty pleasures such as the Kardashians. While these pop customs are associated with femininity, they can also—as these essays suggest—be (re)claimed and recast as feminist.

Critical analyses of hyperfeminine practices considered trivial based on associations with femininity despite their utilitarian value is a common theme throughout the text, whether regarding gossip

mags or pregnancy apps. The title of the collection is a nod to the dismissive naming of feminine-based practices, including terms such as “mommyblogs” and “ladyporn,” bedrocks of popular culture constructed as “lightweight, frivolous, and excessively emotional” (1). However, as the collection demonstrates, such practices are more powerful than their content may belie.

The convergence of the individual with the communal is uniquely characteristic of internet culture, and *Cupcakes, Pinterest, and Ladyporn* illuminates the various ways that spaces based on traditionally feminine interests, whether mothering, nail polish, or erotic fantasy, enhance relationships between the personal and political, made more explicit when filtered through public media forums. These essays subvert the notion of femininity as frivolous by emphasizing the powerful force of popular cultural practices, whether because they disrupt normative ideals, educate, foster sisterhood, or serve to promote pleasure through the mundane—there is nothing simple about domestic roles or the necessity of escapism in the face of such.

Core themes include consumerism, pleasure, power, and their association with postfeminism—the prepackaged, simplified feminine sensibility wrapped in a feminist dress emblazoned with lipgloss. If feminism is contested terrain, postfeminism is its irritating younger sister who insists that things are better due to her inexperience. It seems these siblings are dueling in the essays, highlighting an oft-noted but not often challenged tension.

The intersectionality (ideally) inseparable from contemporary, third wave feminism is another prominent feature shared throughout the essays. However, despite representations of African-American femininity on prime time television, Latina “maids” with their own reality show, and the intended focus on race and class, the texts overridingly emphasize privileged femininity and a self-conscious awareness of such privilege, as certain practices require both leisure time and funds, whether a crafty Pinterest project or choreographed cupcake stands.

Ultimately, the combination of essays speaks to the power of private practices in public spaces to foster feminist domestic possibilities—whether cooking, crafting, or blogging, or an entrepreneurial combination of all of the above. Balancing the public and private is a challenge women face as femininity and social constructions of gender are still grounded in traditional expectations around appearance and behavior. As the collection implicitly suggests, we may not topple patriarchy by painting our nails, but an assumed postfeminist culture

increasingly demands that our nails look good while holding the hammer.

Leandra Preston-Sidler
University of Central Florida

Ehrlich, Matthew C., and Joe Saltzman. *Heroes and Scoundrels: The Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture*. Champaign: U of Illinois P, 2015. 256 pages.

In Dan Gilroy's 2014 feature film *Nightcrawler*, petty thief Louis Bloom (Jake Gyllenhaal) begins taking pictures of freeway accidents and murder victims and builds a photojournalism business by manipulating crime scenes, exploiting a local network news producer's need for high ratings, and satisfying her audience's appetite for salacious pictures. In this modernization of Maupassant's *Bel Ami*, the nocturnal denizens of recession-era Los Angeles swim or drown in the shifting currents of public opinion, palely gleaming beneath the mercury vapor lamps of a desperate Southland as if their aura of moral decay were a kind of bioluminescence, and as if the murk of mass corruption were their element. The only thing the film leaves out of its gloomy and hilarious vision of contemporary life is an image of the consumer of news, the vampiric presence that haunts every scene yet never once emerges from behind the ratings to show its face—and it gradually dawns on the viewer that we ourselves are the spectral beholder who is so weirdly absent from the story: by drawing us in with its atmosphere, and then implicating us, the movie makes us see.

With a conclusion that's so generalized as to verge on cliché ("the works reflect the interests of those who created them and the times in which they were produced"), with a conception of society as a congeries of believers in various myths about themselves ("history cannot be isolated from a culture's master stories"), and with a lack of any aesthetic framework beyond an unexamined social realism ("uncover the truth and serve the public interest"), Matthew C. Ehrlich and Joe Saltzman's groundbreaking survey *Heroes and Scoundrels* lays the foundation for the academic study of the artistic representation of journalists in popular culture, a study that proves unequal to the task of interpreting such artworks as *Nightcrawler* or *Bel Ami*, not to mention more challenging ones, like Antonio Tabucchi's 1997 novel *The Missing Head of Damasceno Monteiro*—pieces, in short, whose meaning resides elsewhere than in whatever usefulness might be fabricated on their behalf: a meaning which evaporates when reduced

to a diagram of its orientation vis-à-vis “society.”

Beginning from the premise that “complex portrayals [...] are comparatively rare,” the authors identify a pervasive contrast between, on the one hand, depictions of “official” journalists (“altruistic professionals,” “pillars of the community,” and “upstanding decent members of society”) and, on the other hand, depictions of “outlaw” journalists (“ambulance chasers,” “scummy lowlifes,” and “scruffy bohemians”), linking this apparent difference of opinion among artists to a conflict internal to the business of reportage which has been brought on by a trend toward professionalization in a post-global media industry.

Praiseworthy though *Heroes and Scoundrels* is in its concentration on the interpretation of images, other scholars will have to decide to what degree a single glaring omission renders the book’s method irrelevant from the outset: the consolidation of news outlets in the control of fewer and fewer corporations during the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first—Gannett, to take only a minor example, owns over a hundred local daily papers and more than a thousand weeklies: and this is to say nothing of the very few conglomerates that dominate the market. The censorship implicit in this uniformity of perspective is antidemocratic insofar as American corporations enjoy the legal status of persons whose governance is nevertheless inaccessible except to stakeholders. In all but a few truly independent news organs, top-down control of content is the rule in our time. The authors of *Heroes and Scoundrels* note these conditions incidentally while dealing with the disagreement between *60 Minutes* producers Lowell Bergman (Al Pacino) and Mike Wallace (Christopher Plummer) over the airing of testimony by Brown & Williamson whistleblower Jeffrey Wigand (Russell Crowe) in Michael Mann’s 1999 film *The Insider*; but the lack of viewpoints dwelling off of the narrow spectrum of opinions acceptable to advertisers is a function of the corporate model of modern news production and is an efficient cause of the proliferation of bloggers, freelance journalists, and independent news outlets today.

Although *Heroes and Scoundrels* ventures no position as to the nature of American society itself, and although it overlooks the potential of the image of the journalist in pop culture to be a metaphor for the human condition, the book’s uncritical proximity to its subject matter is its strength: this study takes stock of art that “provides insights into journalism’s self-image at different historical moments while simultaneously pointing to contradictions within that self-

image.” *Heroes and Scoundrels* will provide scholars in this nascent microfield with a set of tools and a list of sources.

Erik Noonan

Porter, Lynnette. *Van Gogh in Popular Culture*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2016. 244 pages.

Van Gogh in Popular Culture is a compelling and comprehensive portrait of the 19th century artist Vincent Van Gogh, who author Lynnette Porter describes as “one of the world’s most beloved—and possibly . . . most misrepresented—artists” (1). By cataloging Van Gogh’s influence on subsequent artists who document his life, fictionalize that life, curate his art, and pay tribute to him in a variety of ways, Porter is not merely presenting examples of the myriad representations of Van Gogh, but she is also offering an analysis of their origins and their significance today. Thus, she both curates a comprehensive and impressive number of Van Gogh representations and analyzes the influences, historical and contemporary, that have impacted those artifacts. In other words, Porter does not offer yet another compendium of biographical and artistic information but, instead, navigates for the reader the breadth and depth of the artist’s influence. She presents Van Gogh as a man and as an artist, while acknowledging the public’s curiosity surrounding the “ear incident” and “apparent suicide” (3). The result is a compelling text that is sure to be of interest to popular culture, art, or, specifically, Van Gogh enthusiasts.

Porter’s decision to present information chronologically within each chapter is underscored by the fact that she begins with what is actually known about Van Gogh from his own letters. Specifically, in her first chapter, Porter establishes that it is his letters and self-portraits that provide the “autobiography” from which all known biographical information arises. Remarkably, these artifacts exist because, after his death, his brother Theo’s wife, Johanna, collected and collated all of Vincent’s letters, paintings, and sketches which were in her husband’s possession. Porter then stresses how ubiquitously Van Gogh biographers and scholars have depended on these legacy items for written texts such as novels, biographies, children’s books, graphic novels, and comic strips.

From the analysis of the written texts and their autobiographical source, Porter transitions to Van Gogh’s art. Museums, galleries, and art institutions, she argues, are the places where visitors expect to learn about art and artists, as well as the correct interpretation of

specific works. It is these “institutions [that] . . . have become the guardians of Van Gogh’s legacy and the catalyst for attempting to dispel misconceptions about the artist . . . the origins and history of individual works, and his place within art history and among his contemporaries” (53). Porter asserts that a viewer’s perception of Van Gogh and his art is influenced by the way in which a particular exhibition or museum curates his work.

With Van Gogh’s own letters and art framed as the sources of existing interpretations, Porter’s centerpiece chapters (3-7) provide an overview of the wealth of theatrical, movie, television, and musical representations of Van Gogh and/or his work which focus on a variety of concerns that shaped the artist’s life and art. Efforts to access Van Gogh’s mystique and genius aren’t limited to visual mediums alone, and, in Chapter 6, Porter posits that Van Gogh’s “sadness” “often acts as a touchstone for musical artists feeling melancholic” (156). The final centerpiece chapter offers Porter’s assessment of Van Gogh’s contemporary impact—his online presence—which includes fan sites, institutions, businesses with an educational intent, as well as those offering merchandise. Here Porter indicates that the internet is perhaps the best gauge to judge Van Gogh’s continued popularity, and, after listing many of his paintings that have become better known through the internet, she asserts that it isn’t simply commercialism that drives his online presence but also educational and aesthetic interest.

Porter’s concluding chapter, “Continuing Fascination with Vincent,” does more than summarize her text. By posing the question “Why are people continually fascinated with the painter?” and providing a two-part answer—first, that his “art transports viewers to meet people and see places that, especially in the 21st century, are removed from daily experience (e.g., a dying windmill on the outskirts of Paris) but imply a universal experience (e.g., taking a walk in the suburbs)” and second, that “his life provides something for everyone to study or with which to empathize” (199)—Porter makes a case of legitimacy for what will no doubt be a continued interest in Van Gogh. This artist, who was ultimately “‘Other’ . . . during his lifetime” (199), who “was . . . outside the mainstream, a man suffering a variety of illnesses, someone misunderstood and often difficult to like” (200), a man who wanted to be a minister, who was unable to sustain a relationship with a woman, who was afraid of losing his mind was fully human, and this makes him even more intriguing today. “To study Van Gogh or any of his many artworks is to study ourselves—because [he] continues to capture the public’s imagination” (216),

Porter argues. Thus, what is most compelling about Van Gogh and his art is that we learn not only about the man or even someone like him, but about ourselves as well.

Just as *Van Gogh in Popular Culture* guides the novice reader toward a greater understanding of the artist and his impact, it also facilitates a more in-depth appreciation of his impact for those already familiar with the man and his work. Porter's text doesn't assume a deep knowledge of Van Gogh or his art but does strive to explain the public's interest in him as indicated by the lasting popularity of his work. The result is an immanently interesting and educational text.

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Mayer, Sophie. *Political Animals: The New Feminist Cinema*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2016, 272 pages.

Political Animals: The New Feminist Cinema is a valuable contribution in the field of film studies for undergraduate and postgraduate students, tutors, and people outside academia. It provides insights into the vast and largely unknown domain of new feminist film production and brings to the fore Sophie Mayer's wealth of research. In so doing, it effectively deconstructs the myth of the non-existence of female directors and voices in the film industry. Simultaneously, it uncovers the processes that have, for years, led to the silencing and marginalization of such voices in favor of male, patriarchal narratives.

As Mayer explains in the introduction, and as we can see while reading, *Political Animals* covers "nearly 500 films by filmmakers who identify as female, trans*, intersex, non/binary, and/or Two-Spirit (among other non-Euro Western gender identities), from 60 countries" (2). This quote is quite telling in relation to the usefulness and the innovativeness of this book, which can be seen as a rich archive of contemporary feminist filmmaking that does not remain restricted within Western Euro-American, heteronormative, white boundaries.

Human/animal relationships, water shortage, and climate change as gendered issues, racial and sexual abuse, disability, mental illness as associated with the feminine, queer politics, state violence as performed in prisons, war rape on a global scale, and problematic mainstream representations of the home and motherhood are some of the issues the book introduces. Mayer shows how these are infiltrated through feminist perspectives and performed via film, which can be

accessed in alternative, low-budget means that facilitate the exposure of women directors' work.

Political Animals is divided into ten chapters in addition to its introduction and conclusion. Initially, Mayer explains that the films under discussion deal with a strong desire to "reclaim and redo childhoods that have been, at best, subliminally delimited by patriarchy and, at worst, actively deformed by gendered violence, whether physical, sexual, emotional or psychological, particularly when intersecting with racist, colonialist, ableist, homophobic, transphobic, and/or classist violence" (2). Together with the aforementioned aim, she provides an autobiographical account of how feminist film has influenced her own becoming as a feminist (and a) film scholar, thus making the book itself personal, and thus, also political. Lastly, she opens up an invitation for readers to participate as active viewers in the effort to change the word by transforming our understanding of it through access to narratives performed in contemporary feminist film.

In the first chapter, Mayer explains that "feminist film scholarship has been critical in maintaining an awareness of inaccessible films, rather than seeking to institute a canon" (16). This is, indeed, what the following chapters do. In a language that is accessible to a variety of readers—students or not—they introduce unknown contemporary work that goes outside prescribed narratives of what it is to be a woman and a girl. In reading the book, we become familiar with the multiplicity of genres of new feminist film spanning from documentary to heritage and costume drama and contemporary feminist retellings of fairytales and from porn to alternative romantic films that reconfigure master-narratives like that of *Romeo and Juliet*. Through our exposure to Mayer's discussion, we come to understand ourselves not as distinct gendered individuals, but as political animals, parts of the larger global body, which can be changed through our access to feminist perspectives on history.

The chapters are accompanied by visual illustrations that aid readers' understanding of particular scenes. While foregrounding the wealth of contemporary feminist film, the book lacks complicated theoretical engagement, and this is what makes it accessible for a broad readership. Additionally, it does not include extensive close film reading, as that would have prevented reference to such a variety of films. Nevertheless, in the instances when Mayer performs close reading, it is quite effective and illuminative. This is precisely why she calls for further research into new feminist film that will reach outside the scope of *Political Animals*, as it will simultaneously expand and

enrich the work done therein.

Overall, the book shows how animals of all kinds can be political through film creation and by telling their stories. It celebrates plurality and diversity, and it opens the door to what Virginia Woolf described as the “room of one’s own” when she was talking about women’s literary production early in the twentieth century (36). As *Political Animals* underscores the need for what Mayer calls “girl’hood,” a woman’s space to exist, it also points to the necessity to open its doors, to allow permeability and accessibility so film narratives stemming from that space can reach people outside of it (133).

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Olga Michael
UCLan Cyprus

Matthieu J. Guitton, ed. *Fan Phenomena: Mermaids*. Bristol, UK: Intellect Books, 2016. 150 pages.

Fan Phenomena: Mermaids is an unexpected and more than welcome surprise in today’s landscape of critical volumes, a dive into refreshing originality after a terrestrial walk among known subjects. The volume’s subject itself is indeed extremely original because mermaids have not received much critical attention in the past decades. Alexander Skye’s *Mermaids: The Myth, Legends, Folklore* (Adams Media, 2012), for instance, is one of the few specific studies on the subject present on the market. Elizabeth Bell, Linda Haas, and Laura Sells’s *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender and Culture* (Indiana University Press, 1995) includes a single chapter on Disney’s *The Little Mermaid*. D.J. Conway’s *Magickal [sic.] Mermaids and Water Creatures* (New Page Books, 2005) and Patricia Saxton’s *The Book of Mermaids* (Shenanigan Books, 2005) are instead two examples of the concise volumes and booklets generally directed to a younger audience which summarize the basic information on mermaids (such as living habits and love adventures) and are filled with colorful illustrations.

Merfolk (a term used to indicate both the female and male members of this fictitious species) are hybrid amphibious creatures combining opposed characteristics (such as human and animal traits

or sensuality and predatory/carnivorous instincts) and manifesting different abilities, from longevity to magical powers and an alluring voice. As the editor Matthieu J. Guitton indicates in the introduction, mermaids, already existing in the most ancient traditions and myths of the world (from Homer's *Odyssey* to the Haitian deity "La Sirène"), have been popularized in contemporary culture by literary texts such as Hans Christian Andersen's 1836 *Little Mermaid* (the first to introduce a romantic view on the figure) and by successful films such as Ron Howard's *Splash* (1984) and Disney's 1989 adaptation of the fairytale.

The seven contributors examine the many facets of the mermaid phenomenon in popular culture, from the virtual seas of the Internet and the communities created by social media to cosplaying and steampunk accessories. They thus explain how a great community of fans is captured, is structured, and interacts throughout the world. Mermaid fandom (also defined as the merfolk community) is therefore presented in its multi- and trans-generational richness, and some of the chapters report the direct interviews of its representatives. Enlightening testimonies are indeed offered by blogger Cynthia Rivers and by Hannah Fraser, a model for underwater photography and videos who is also actively involved in environmental campaigns. One of the phenomena that is probably less known by the general public is mermaiding—swimming with a monofin and thus literally enacting mermaids—which led to the foundation of numerous mermaid(ing) schools since 2012. Such a phenomenon now involves certified fitness instructors and thousands of students and implicates also the commercialization and lucrative business behind the manufacture and sale of monofins. Absolutely astonishing is also the revelation that online merfolk communities use "mermish," a specific language progressively and spontaneously evolved over the years that is practiced as a powerful sign of affiliation.

Color illustrations are an excellent addition to the volume and include contemporary representations of mermaids through various media, from the paintings of the dark-complexioned "La Sirène" and the images of Japanese anime such as Seiju Kishi's *My Bride is a Mermaid* (2012) to the photos of real-life persons wearing monofins. The books and films under examination include Paul DiFilippo's *Steampunk* trilogy (1995), Robert Rankin's *The Japanese Devil Fish Girl* (2010), Sebastian Gutierrez's *She Creature* (2001), Rob Marshall's *Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides* (2011), and Milan Todorovic's *Mamula* (2014). Unfortunately, the numerous texts studied by the volume's contributors are not all-inclusive: cases

such as music videos are not taken into consideration, for example, (Madonna's "Cherish" and Lady Gaga's "Yoü and I" are indeed notable absences). Moreover, the volume could have benefitted from a more detailed introductory history of mermaids in myth and folklore. Nevertheless, the contributors' analysis is very lucid and generally devoid of intricate academic jargon. The book is a perfect blend of fan perspectives and scholarly studies: the seven chapters are illuminating and intriguing for both readers who are familiar with the subject and readers who shall "immerse and swim" into it for the first time.

Antonio Sanna

Eve, Martin Paul. *Password*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. 160 pages.

Martin Paul Eve's work *Password* is a complement to the Bloomsbury Academics Object Lessons series. Eve offers enough historical, technical, philosophical, and cultural approaches to satisfy even the pickiest of readers. The breezy prose, not bogged down with unnecessary jargon, makes this book a good fit for a bookstore's main display and sure to delight academics and general interest readers alike.

This trailblazing study of passwords—the chosen character combinations we use daily if not hourly in our computer-driven lives—proves they are more than mere mechanisms of authentication and identification. Rather, as Eve shows, they expose a broader set of problems concerned with human identity, knowledge, and the body. Yet, how many of us consider a password's relevance beyond its intended purpose?

Eve discusses passwords in a historical context, arguing the Ancient Crete mythological story of Theseus journeying deep into Daedalus's labyrinth to slay a ferocious half-man, half beast called the Minotaur and the eventual cracking of the maze was an early example of a password designed to identify friend from foe through a restriction of knowledge. It was also, perhaps, the earliest example of a hacker or cracker. The main takeaway is that a password is essentially just that—an attempt to distinguish friend from foe and not a representation of one's complete identity.

Eve pans his historical lens into Ancient Rome's elaborate system of *watchwords* through which a prerequisite of knowledge would allow or restrict access; thus the canonical challenge *Halt, who goes there?* comes to mind. By way of this password, a bilateral prong existed when a misidentification occurred, which would also initiate

a response.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, when Francisco utters the challenge for Bernardo to "unfold" himself, is also presented. Eve uses additional phrases that have stayed with us over time, such as *open sesame* from *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, and parlays this into our modern usage of passwords to show their utility and purpose over time, and also to explain that a password has not necessarily always been a word. It could be a maze or a hidden wall or door at a speakeasy. Again, the importance is that the password attempts to identify through exclusion. Eve proves this through various forms of literature. Harry Potter fans are sure to enjoy this book because it presents theoretical assessments of passwords in the magical terms from the imagination of author J.K. Rowling.

The narrative ascends by usage of historical military examples to explain two of the most prominent secrets found in classical society: *arcana imperii* and *secretum*. In other words, *arcana imperii* is a password no one knows exists, whereas *secretum* is a password that people know exists but don't have. Eve uses Ancient Rome to explain this important distinction and the dual nature of the secret of the password. The military is an excellent choice since, throughout human civilization, they have been the central users of passwords and technology. In a contemporary example, the Internet as we know it began as part of a military initiative, as did many of the technologies we use daily.

Each chapter wraps up in a circular, complete fashion, which allows for a deeper and more complete understanding of the material. Missing from the discussion was the historical usage of hand signs as a form of passwords, most notably in the secret Masonic handshakes, passwords, and grips.

Eve builds his thesis to prove how various institutions in the 20th century displaced risk away from themselves and onto the genuine user when a password challenger's misidentification occurs. Their failure to identify a remote party based on a password system is displaced through the usage of the contrived term "identity theft." Eve concludes this is a deeply flawed way of thinking about passwords. In all of Eve's summations, passwords do not verify someone's identity; rather they are never more than an approximation for identity.

Eve concludes with a serious discussion on the limitations of passwords, exposing their weaknesses and the potential of mass destruction. He notes in a world that relies on remote identity verification, a small breakthrough in contemporary mathematical

theory could make secure communication through authentication by way of passwords unusable.

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