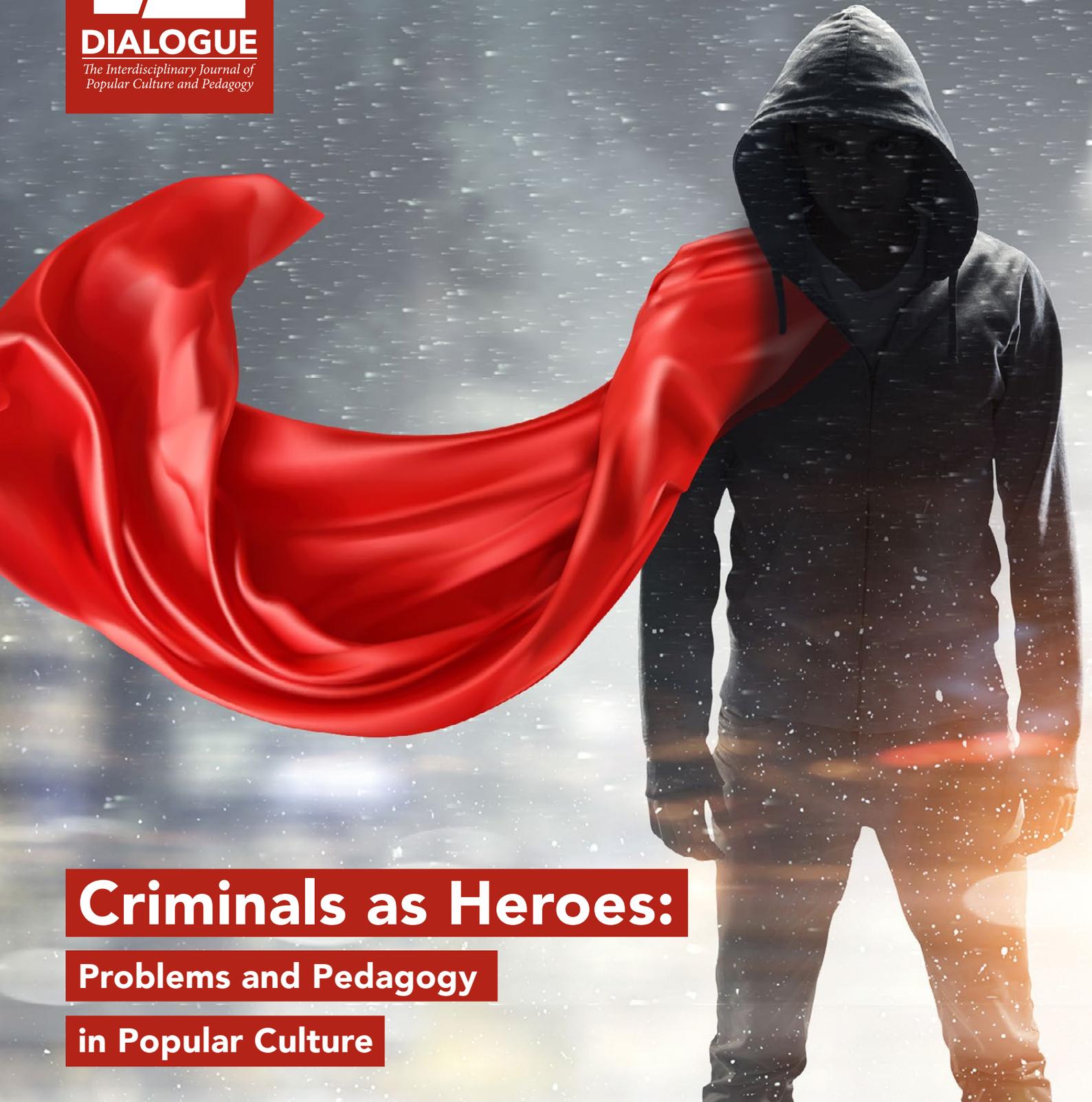


DIALOGUE

*The Interdisciplinary Journal of
Popular Culture and Pedagogy*



Criminals as Heroes:

Problems and Pedagogy

in Popular Culture

INTRODUCTION AND SCOPE

Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy is an open-access, peer-reviewed journal focused on the intersection of popular culture and pedagogy. While some open-access journals charge a publication fee for authors to submit, *Dialogue* is committed to creating and maintaining a scholarly journal that is accessible to all—meaning that there is no charge for either the author or the reader.

The Journal is interested in contributions that offer theoretical, practical, pedagogical, and historical examinations of popular culture, including interdisciplinary discussions and those which examine the connections between American and international cultures. In addition to analyses provided by contributed articles, the Journal also encourages submissions for guest editions, interviews, and reviews of books, films, conferences, music, and technology.

For more information, please visit www.journaldialogue.org or email Dr. Anna CohenMiller, Editor in Chief, at editors@journaldialogue.org.



EDITORIAL TEAM

A. S. CohenMiller, PhD, Editor in Chief, Founding Editor

Anna S. CohenMiller is a qualitative methodologist who examines issues of social justice and equity in education broadly, with a focus on gender, pedagogical practices, and popular culture representations. She received her PhD in *Interdisciplinary Learning and Teaching* and MA in *Bicultural-Bilingual Studies* from the University of Texas at San Antonio. Since 2011, she has been involved with the SWPACA in developing *Dialogue* and then as an Executive Team member. Currently, Dr. CohenMiller works as an Assistant Professor in the Graduate School of Education at Nazarbayev University in Astana, Kazakhstan. Select publications include “Creating a Participatory Arts-Based Online Focus Group: Highlighting the Transition from DocMama to Motherscholar” (2017) and “Visual Arts Methods in Phenomenology” (2018).

Kelli Bippert, PhD, Managing Editor & Educational Resources Editor

Kelli Bippert is an Assistant Professor of Literacy Education at Texas A&M University- Corpus Christi. Dr. Bippert earned her Ph.D. in Interdisciplinary Learning & Teaching from UTSA with a concentration in literacy education. Dr. Bippert’s research and scholarship center on adolescent literacy, cultural perceptions of struggling adolescent readers, technology-based reading interventions, and the integration of popular culture/ media texts to support in-school literacies. Selected publications include *Fan Fiction to Support Struggling Writers* and *(Re)learning about Learning: Using Cases from Popular Media to Extend and Complicate Our Understandings of What It Means to Learn and Teach.*

Karina Vado, Production Editor & Book Review Editor

Karina A. Vado is a FEF McKnight Doctoral Fellow, and a Ph.D. candidate and instructor in the Department of English at the University of Florida. Her primary areas of research and teaching are in African-American and Latinx/Chicanx cultural studies, science fiction studies, science and technology studies, utopian studies, and critical (mixed) race and gender studies. At UF, she serves as Senior Coordinator of PODEMOS, an academic success and professionalization initiative for first-year Hispanic-Latinx students offered by Hispanic-Latino Affairs. Karina also served as the inaugural intern for “SF@UF,” a collaborative and interdisciplinary digital project seeking to improve the visibility and usability of UF’s diverse holdings in science fiction (SF), fantasy, and utopian studies.

Miriam Sciala, Copy Editor

Miriam Sciala is an Academic English Instructor in the Graduate School of Education at Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan. She has been teaching Academic English internationally for over 25 years. She holds an MA in Geography from York University in Toronto and an MPhil in Second Language Studies from Stellenbosch University in South Africa. Born in Switzerland and raised in Zambia, she now carries a Canadian passport. She considers writing and editing her second career, having written and published numerous articles and short stories and a first, still unpublished, novel. Her current academic position has her working with graduate students to develop their writing skills, especially as they relate to theses and dissertations.

Robert Gordyn, Copy Editor

Robert Gordyn is an Academic English Instructor in the Graduate School of Education at Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan. Of Canadian origin, he has taught English in nine countries over the last 25 years. His academic background includes an MPhil in Second Language Studies from Stellenbosch University in South Africa and an MA in Geography from York University in Toronto. He is currently involved in classroom instruction, one-on-one tutorials and writing support for Master’s and PhD students.

Advisory and Editorial Board

ADVISORY BOARD

Lynnea Chapman King
Adams State University, USA

Ken Dvorak
Northern New Mexico College,
USA

Marc Ouellette
*Reconstruction: Studies in
Contemporary Culture*, USA

Alison Macor
Texas State University, USA

Laurence Raw
Baskent University, Turkey

EDITORIAL BOARD

Aaron Adair
Independent Scholar, USA

Maria Alberto
University of Utah, USA

Donna Alden
New Mexico State University, USA

Mark Allen
South Texas College, USA

Lexey Bartlett
Fort Hays State University, USA

Justin Bendell
University of New Mexico -
Valencia, USA

Kelli Bippert
Texas A&M University-Corpus
Christi, USA

Jerry Bradley
Lamar University, USA

Stephanie Brownell
Bentley University, USA

Tamy Burnett
University of Nebraska - Lincoln,
USA

Melissa Vossen Callens
North Dakota State University, USA

Marco Cervantes
University of Texas at San
Antonio, USA

Natasha Chuk
Independent Scholar, USA

Jeff Clayton
Lee College, USA

A. S. CohenMiller
Nazarbayev University Graduate
School of Education, Kazakhstan

Tabitha Collins
New Mexico State University, USA

Brian Cowlshaw
Northeastern State University, USA

Byron Crape
Nazarbayev University Graduate
School of Medicine, Kazakhstan

Janet Brennan Croft
Rutgers University, USA

Adam Crowley
Husson University, USA

Carol Davis
Texas A&M-Galveston, USA

Anthony DeGenaro
Wayne State University, USA

Kurt Depner
New Mexico State University, USA

Diana Dominguez
University of Texas at
Brownsville, USA

Millard Dunn
Indiana University Southeast, USA

Laura Dumin
University of Central Oklahoma,
USA

Brad Duren
Oklahoma Panhandle State
University, USA

Lance Eaton
Brandeis University/North Shore
Community College, USA

Susan Fanetti
California State University -
Sacramento, USA

Carly Finseth
Boise State University, USA

Robert Galin
University of New Mexico,
Gallup, USA

Robert Gordyn
Nazarbayev University,
Kazakhstan

Chuck Hamilton
North Texas Community College,
USA

Darrell Hamlin
Fort Hays State University, USA

Aya Esther Hayashi
Independent Scholar, USA

Michael Howarth
Missouri Southern State, USA

Nathan Hulsey
Nazarbayev University Writing
Centre Program, Kazakhstan

Jenna Hunnef
Independent Scholar, USA

Lutfi Hussein
Mesa Community College, USA

Roxie James
Northwestern Oklahoma State
University, USA

Jennifer Jenkins
University of Arizona, USA

Jamie M. Jones
Grays Harbor College, USA

Nancy Kay
Merrimack College, USA

Peter Kay
Treefall: New Music, USA

Warren Kay
Merrimack College, USA

Brad Klypchak
Texas A&M Commerce, USA

Jane Kubiesa
University of Worcester, Henwick
Grove, Worcestershire, UK

Kim Lacey
Saginaw Valley State University,
USA

Carmela Lanza
University of New Mexico -
Gallup, USA

Samantha Lay
University of West Alabama, USA

John Lepley
Independent Scholar, USA

Kendyl Logston
Texas A&M University, USA

Dalyn Luedtke
Norwich University, USA

Jessica Maerz
University of Arizona, USA

Jenn McCollum
Southern New Hampshire
University, USA

Julienne McGeough
Liverpool Hope University, UK

Craig McGill
University of South Dakota, USA

Liz Medendorp
Pueblo Community College, USA

Richard Mehrenberg
Millersville University, USA

Michael Miller
University of Texas at San
Antonio, USA

Iulian Mitran
University of Bucharest, Romania

Mona Monfared
University of California - Davis,
USA

Rikk Mulligan
Longwood University, USA

Rhondalee Randle
CSU-Stanislaus, USA

Shelley Rees
University of Science and Arts,
Oklahoma, USA

Pamela Rollins
Southwestern Oklahoma State
University, USA

Lilliana Saldaña
University of Texas at San
Antonio, USA

Vicki Sapp
Tarrant County College, USA

Tiffany Scarola
Bowling Green State University,
USA

Miriam Sciala
Nazarbayev University,
Kazakhstan

Kelli Shapiro
Texas State University, USA

Karen Tatum
University of Texas at Arlington,
USA

Robert Tinajero
University of Texas at El Paso,
USA

Deanna Tomasetti
Independent Scholar, USA

Shane Trayers
Macon State College, USA

Pat Tyrer
West Texas A&M University,
USA

Karina Vado
University of Florida, USA

Margaret Vaughn
Metropolitan State University,
USA

Erik Walker
Plymouth (Mass.) South High
School, USA

Rob Weiner
Texas Tech Univeristy Library,
USA

Ryan Windeknecht
University of Tennessee,
Knoxville, USA

Criminals as Heroes: Problems and Pedagogy in Popular Culture

Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy
Volume 6, Issue 2 | August 2019 | www.journaldialogue.org

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Editorial

Critically Evaluating the Fictional World through Popular Culture

Kelly Bippert and Anna CohenMiller

Guest Editorial

What Hot Criminals, Anti-Heroes, and Bob Dylan Can Teach Us

Kathryn (“Kate”) Lane and Roxie James

Articles

If Androids Dream, Are They More Than Sheep?: Westworld, Robots and Legal Rights

Amanda DiPaolo

Nature vs. Nurture in Albuquerque: What Breaking Bad and Better Call Saul Teach Us About How We Talk about Criminals

Max Romanowski

Breaking the Rules: Playing Criminally in Video Games

James Tregonning

Bad Girls: Agency, Revenge, and Redemption in Contemporary Drama

Courtney Watson

AMC’s Infamous Criminal Partnerships: Suppressing the Female Antihero

Melissa Vosen Callens

Online-Only Short Articles

Book review of Ghettos, Tramps, and Welfare Queens (Pimpare, 2017)

Debbie Olson

Critically Evaluating the Fictional World through Popular Culture

We are happy to present our special issue, “Criminals as Heroes: Problems and Pedagogy in Popular Culture,” guest edited by Kathryn (“Kate”) Lane and Roxie James. In this issue we explore the unique role that the anti-hero has taken in recent years. The changing nature of how criminals are portrayed in popular culture brings us a new understanding of how society has shaped this cultural form, and how popular culture has, in turn, shaped society.

Popular culture arms us with an exciting and powerful pedagogical tool and continues to offer a lens through which to grapple with serious societal issues. In the 1960s and 1970s in the United States, for example, popular culture provided an outlet for viewers to consider important changes occurring in society. Television programs such as *All in the Family*, *Maud*, and *The Jeffersons* helped us think about, and discuss, issues of race and gender equity during a historic period of social change. Today, television series such as *Modern Family* and *Speechless* provides society with a fictional world with which to consider how we define ourselves individually and exist as a families, presenting us with a far more inclusive portrayal of how we live our lives today through characters who may not look like us, behave like us, or perhaps even think like us. Through such fictional portrayals that address important issues, we can critically evaluate the changes taking place in our society.

While the articles are described in detail within Lane and James’s guest editorial, “What Hot Criminals, Anti-Heroes, and Bob Dylan Can Teach Us,” as a brief introduction here, the five articles in this issue reflect on the increasingly important, and changing, role and portrayal of the anti-hero in popular culture. First, Amanda DiPaolo helps us ponder the concerns that may emerge due to the continuing development of artificial intelligence. Max Romanowski then explores how good and evil are defined and portrayed in popular culture. Later in this issue, James Tregonning critically evaluates what it means to follow societal rules when they clash with personal ethics. Lastly, the final two articles by Courtney Watson and Melissa Vosen Callens, respectively, take on an analysis of the more recent incarnations of the female anti-hero.

Each of the articles in this issue provide ways that we can contemplate society today, using popular culture to address issues of equity, morality, and personal ethics. We are now seeing heroes, and in the case of this special issue, anti-heroes, coming from a varied cross-section of society. Today, we see an increasing variety of characters, such as individuals identifying as men, women, cisgender, transgender, as well as a range across ethnic and cultural identities, and representing various forms of ability and disability. Each variance portrays life, demonstrating a growing acceptance and portrayal of diverse variations within popular culture.

In addition to the full-length articles, the diversity in representation can be demonstrated to a greater extent in the online book review of *Ghettos, Tramps, and Welfare Queens* (Pimpare, 2017). In the review, Debbie Olson highlights Pimpare’s (2017) discussion of the “marginalized and maligned” while also noting how the book could be enhanced by further demonstrating the intersection between race, gender, and poverty.

The five articles in this special issue can inform the ways we may choose to consider how the antihero

is portrayed, providing insight into why individuals may have selected their path in life, even if at first, this path may push against societal assumptions of what is expected and normal. With the inclusion of the book review, we are shown how future essays and studies could delve into the ways in which sociocultural factors, positionality, and societal expectations and pressures can be examined further. The authors present new ways to use a fictional world to discuss important societal issues, and perhaps question and consider our own personal biases. We hope you enjoy this special edition of *Dialogue*.

Kelli Bippert
Managing Editor

Anna CohenMiller
Editor in Chief

A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR IN CHIEF:

Since 2011, when *Dialogue* was first discussed and brought to life, I have been fortunate to work hand-in-hand with amazing editorial team members. With Lynnea Chapman-King, Kurt Depner, and Rob Galin, we have developed strong and varied sets of issues addressing important and fascinating topics in popular culture and pedagogy. Today, I am pleased to introduce, or re-introduce in this case, our evolving editorial team for the next phase of *Dialogue*.

Kelli Bippert and Karina Vado have been active members with SWPACA and the *Dialogue* editorial board over the last few years. They have taken on the roles of Educational Resource Editor and Book Review Editor, respectively, and facilitated the development of our online short articles and musings. I have the honor to announce that Kelli will be moving into the position of Managing Editor and Karina has accepted a new position as Production Editor. With their keen awareness of contemporary issues in popular culture and pedagogical practices, and their exceptional insight and ability, I am excited to have them aboard and know the *Dialogue* community will benefit from these new developments.

Lastly, I would like to introduce our new copy editors to the team, Miriam Sciala and Robert Gordyn. For this issue, I would like to thank them along with all those that contributed to the production of this issue: Kelli Bippert (Managing Editor and Educational Resources Editor), Karina Vado (Production Editor and Book Review Editor), Kathryn (“Kate”) Lane and Roxie James (guest editors), all authors who submitted articles for consideration, our peer reviewers, and Douglas CohenMiller (Creative Director). As always, we look forward to hearing your thoughts about the issue and innovative ideas for future development.

Anna CohenMiller
Editor in Chief



All papers in are published under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-Share-Alike License. For details please go to: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/us/>.

What Hot Criminals, Anti-Heroes, and Bob Dylan Can Teach Us

Kathryn (“Kate”) Lane

Northwestern Oklahoma State University
Alva, OK
kathrynelanephd@gmail.com

Roxie J. James

Northwestern Oklahoma State University
Alva, OK
dr.roxie.james@gmail.com

In 2015, Jeremy Meeks signed a modeling contract after much public exposure. What makes this unique is that Jeremy Meeks was heralded “one of the most violent criminals in the Stockton area.”¹ Meeks’ exposure is interesting because it had nothing to do with his crimes, rather it was his looks that dubbed him “Hot Felon.” The weeks that Meeks was featured on various news outlets emphasize our society’s fascination with criminals (especially if they’re very good looking). Western culture’s fascination with crime, criminals, and everything in between is nothing new. And, certainly, western culture seems to get a sort of scopophilic pleasure watching people behave badly, and our media reflects this. The depiction of the criminal element in popular culture speaks to the fact that the public is more than willing to invite criminals into their homes via their entertainment systems.

When Bob Dylan sang “to live outside the law you must be honest” in “Absolutely Sweet Marie” in 1966,² it would have been inconceivable for him to foresee the rise of the crime drama that marked American television in the 1990s³. Two decades later, there has been a shift in popular media from series that depict law and order to series that glorify the criminal lifestyle. Part of this fascination with criminality owes much to the image of the “tragic hero” who is described as being “what we want to be and what we are afraid we may become.”⁴ The essays in this collection investigate this struggle in complex ways and challenge us as consumers of popular culture to consider how and why the criminal lifestyle has become such a large part of our entertainment options.

The editors and contributors of this special edition of *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy* are pleased to present Volume 6, Issue 2, “Criminals as Heroes: Problems and Pedagogy in Popular Culture.” Our collection begins with two articles that acknowledge criminal heroes as a response to an oppressive system. Courtney Watson’s article “Bad Girls: Agency, Revenge, and Redemption in Contemporary Drama” traces the evolution of the “bad girl” in the wake of recent cultural and political events such as the #TimesUp and #MeToo movements. Watson argues that these cultural events have sparked

the need for a sophisticated female criminal whose actions will result in positive change. Similarly, James Tregonning's article "Breaking the Rules: Playing Criminally in Video Games" analyzes two video games, *Papers, Please* and *Orwell*, that provide an opportunity for players to undermine or subvert a fictional authoritarian regime. Tregonning uses the world of gaming to parallel some hauntingly familiar aspects of our own culture—surveillance, social media presence, and our own broader online existence.

Like cultural movements and video game cultures, our next contributors also engage with entertainment outside the traditional television viewing structure. Melissa Vosen Callen's essay, "AMC's Infamous Criminal Partnerships: Suppressing the Female Antihero" offers an examination of the female half of the iconic anti-hero partnerships featured in the network's critically-acclaimed dramatic series and their complex relationships with their male partners. Vosen Callen goes one step further by questioning how stereotypical gender roles actually disempower the empowered female anti-hero. A questioning of expectations is also at the root of Amanda DiPaolo's article, "If Androids Dream, Are They More than Sheep? *Westworld*, Robots, and Legal Rights." DiPaolo asks readers to consider what makes someone human, good or bad, redeemable, or irretrievably lost. Utilizing HBO's *Westworld*, she examines the broader societal implications and ensuing legality of artificial intelligence.

The last essay in this collection revives the age-old debate of nature versus nurture through an examination of one of AMC's most iconic series. Max Romanowski's essay, "Nature vs. Nurture in Albuquerque: What *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul* Teach Us About How We Talk About Criminals," demonstrates the pros and cons of this debate through the lead characters' evolution. Romanowski further challenges readers to consider how we talk about criminals and what we can learn from that discourse.

As guest editors, we hope this collection initiates a dialogue that will continue to question our cultural perception of criminality and the fictitious dichotomy of good and bad.

— *Kathryn and Roxie*

ENDNOTES

¹ du Lac, J. Freedom. "'Hot mugshot guy' Jeremy Meeks has been sentenced to 27 months in federal prison." *The Washington Post*. February 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2015/02/06/hot-mugshot-guy-jeremy-meeks-has-been-sentenced-to-27-months-in-federal-prison/?utm_term=.1d54ab6b1d58. Accessed 3 May 2019.

² Dylan, Bob. "Absolutely Sweet Marie." *Blonde on Blonde*, Columbia Records, 1966.

³ Rapping, Elayne. Introduction. *Law and Justice as Seen on TV* by Rapping, New York UP, 2003, pp. 1-18.

⁴ Warshow quoted in Douglass 30. Douglass, Wayne. "The Criminal Psychopath as Hollywood." *Journal of Popular Film and Television*. vol. 8, no. 4, 1981, pp.30-39, DOI: 10.1080\01956051.1981.10661877.

AUTHOR BIOS

Kathryn ("Kate") Lane, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of English and Department Chairperson at Northwestern Oklahoma State University. Her research interests include Victorian literature and culture, popular culture, and feminist theory. She is also the editor of the 2018 book collection *Age of the Geek: Depictions of Nerds and Geeks in Popular Media*.

Roxie J. James, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor of English in the Department of English at Northwestern Oklahoma State University. She specializes in Romantic and Victorian literature, and her research interests include British women's writing and depictions of dirt in Victorian literature and culture.

SUGGESTED CITATION

APA

Lane, K. E. & James, R. (2019). What hot criminals, anti-heroes, and Bob Dylan can teach us. *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*. 6(2), <http://journaldialogue.org/issues/v6-issue-2/what-hot-criminals-anti-heroes-and-bob-dylan-can-teach-us/>

MLA

Lane, Kathryn E. & Roxie J. James. "What Hot Criminals, Anti-Heroes, and Bob Dylan Can Teach Us." *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2019, journaldialogue.org/issues/v6-issue-2/what-hot-criminals-anti-heroes-and-bob-dylan-can-teach-us/.



If Androids Dream, Are They More Than Sheep?: *Westworld*, Robots and Legal Rights

Amanda DiPaolo

St. Thomas University
Fredericton, N.B. Canada
dipaolo@stu.ca

ABSTRACT

The robot protagonists in HBO's *Westworld* open the door to several philosophical and ethical questions, perhaps the most complex being: should androids be granted similar legal protections as people? *Westworld* offers its own exploration of what it means to be a person and places emphasis on one's ability to feel and understand pain. With scientists and corporations actively working toward a future that includes robots that can display emotion in a way that can convincingly pass as that of a person's, what happens when androids pass the Turing test, feel empathy, gain consciousness, are sentient, or develop free will? The question becomes more complex given the possibility of computer error. What should happen if robots designed for companionship commit heinous crimes, and without remorse? *Westworld* poses such social and legal questions to its viewers and is, thus, ripe for classroom discussion. This essay explores the complex and contradictory implications of android hosts overcoming their dehumanization through an awakening to both experience and agency. With television and film holding a mirror up to reality, what can science fiction teach us that would help us prepare for such a possibility?

Keywords: *Westworld*, artificial intelligence, human rights, Science Fiction, robots

INTRODUCTION

In the opening scene of HBO's *Westworld*, the camera zooms in to what looks like a woman in a cold, sterile room. Dolores' eyes are lifeless. She is stiff. Naked. She is stripped of her dignity. But she is not human. "I am in a dream," Dolores replies when asked if she knows where she is ("The Original"). She says she is terrified and wants to wake up. Dolores is told there is nothing to be afraid of so long as she correctly answers the questions being asked of her. We see from the opening of *Westworld*, that the robots (called "hosts") are indistinguishable from their human counterparts, yet they can be controlled by simple voice commands (much like Siri or Alexa). Their memories can be wiped clean, even after suffering atrocities at the hands of park visitors, known as "newcomers." We also learn that suffering these atrocities is what the hosts have been designed to do. It is their sole purpose. "What if I told you ... that there are no chance encounters? That you and everyone that you know were built to gratify the desires of the people that visit your world, the people that you call the newcomers?" Dolores is asked ("The Original"). And this is true. The hosts have been created to fulfill any depraved desire on the part of those who visit the park.

At this point in *Westworld's* nonlinear story, Dolores does not question her reality. She lacks freewill and is programmed to feel only certain things. She is not considered a person. But what does personhood entail? And why do people have legal protections to ensure they are treated with a certain level of respect and dignity? In other words, what is it about people that allows us to have rights? And if hosts achieve what is unique to personhood and which grant us these entitlements, should they be entitled to some of the same legal protections? By the same token, should they suffer legal consequences when appropriate? If it is our nature to kill or be killed, what happens when robots kill, whether it be in an act of self-preservation or otherwise?

In his report entitled "Human Rights and Artificial Intelligence: An Urgently Needed Agenda," philosophy and public policy scholar Mathias Risse posits that "the inviolability of human life is the central idea behind human rights, an underlying implicit assumption being the hierarchical superiority of humankind to other forms of life meriting less protection" (Risse). With artificial intelligence rapidly becoming more complex and sophisticated, we may soon need to ask ourselves what happens when androids are able to make decisions on their own? Because AI is increasingly becoming programmed to learn from its own tasks and mistakes, one can picture a future where androids possess what resembles human conscience. If this day comes to light, do questions of dignity and protections emerge? After all, as Risse points out, "questions about the moral status of animals arise because of the many continuities between humans and other species: the less we can see them as different from us in terms of morally relevant properties, the more we must treat them as fellow travelers in a shared life" (3).

Westworld grapples with notions of personhood, defined by *Black's Law Dictionary* as an entity "given certain legal rights and duties of a human being; a being, real or imaginary, who for the purpose of legal reasoning is treated more or less as a human being" (Garner and Black, 791). Legal protections are already given to non-natural born entities that share some characteristics of personhood, including the ability to feel pain. In many jurisdictions, it is illegal to cause harm to domesticated animals. For example, in the United States, all 50 states have laws that protect animals against cruel treatment (Higgins). Even corporations have been given legal protections that amount to constitutionally protected rights typically only ascribed to human beings. For example, the U.S. Supreme Court held that corporations have First Amendment protection to donate money for political purposes under the free speech clause. In the controversial Supreme Court case *Citizens United v. F.C.C.*, 558 U.S. 310 (2010), the Court held that "The identity of the speaker is not decisive in determining whether speech is protected. Corporations and other associations, like individuals, contribute to the discussion, debate, and the dissemination of information and ideas that the First Amendment seeks to foster." Such animal and corporate rights only further complicate legal questions regarding the sorts of protections AI entities should enjoy. It only logically follows that legal protections and responsibilities be

given to androids when they have reached a certain level of sophistication.

Science and Technology Professor Sherry Turkle calls the present the “robotic moment,” as robots are becoming increasingly convincing when mimicking human emotions (Turkle). Media studies scholars Rebecca Hawkes and Cherie Lacey elucidate that the current wave of robotic development is geared toward robots one day becoming potential companions, both sexual and otherwise, to decrease loneliness and to “fulfill intimate roles, such as caretakers, entertainers, lovers, and mediators in complex sociotechnical environments” and that the development of this technology has coincided with film and television depictions of “artificial women interacting romantically with human men,” including in *Westworld* (Hawkes and Lacey 98). When the pursuit of robotic companionship becomes a reality, legal protections should be put in place to protect sophisticated androids from human abuse. When determining the scope of this discussion, defining the term humanoid is helpful. It has been defined as “an autonomous or semi-autonomous device with various technologies that allow it to interact with its environment. The robot may be human shaped, or it may closely resemble a human (also called an android), and it is usually designed to interact in a similar way to humans in an environment designed for the human body” (Alesich and Rigby 51). As such, this line of inquiry is concerned with androids, as they closely resemble humans, and like humanoids in general, are designed to interact with humans in an environment dominated by humans.

Using *Westworld* as a focal point, this essay explores what it means to be a person and posits that a legal framework for the protection of androids will become necessary as this robotic moment increasingly becomes our lived reality with androids acting as our companions. Finally, the essay concludes with a discussion of how *Westworld* can be used in a classroom setting to discuss these complex issues in a way that engages the student.

HUMANITY’S PAIN AS EXPERIENCE

What makes a person human is key to answering the question of who receives legal protections from the government. Philip K. Dick’s dystopian tale *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* explores questions of humanity by defining what it means to be human in terms of two separate characteristics: empathy and intelligence. The novel, which the 1982 film *Blade Runner* is based on, follows the story of Rick Deckard, a bounty hunter employed by the San Francisco police department to track down escaped Nexus-6 androids so they can be destroyed. These androids are almost indistinguishable from their human counterparts and are intelligent enough to pass for human in that regard; they are betrayed only by their inability to understand and identify with the feelings of others. Dick’s classic tale shows the lack of empathy employed by the escaped androids in a scene where they are cutting off a spider’s legs to see if the spider can walk on four legs rather than eight (Dick 189–194). The contrast between the androids’ lack of compassion and the empathy of John Isidore, the human responsible for the androids’ safety, is stark. Isidore refuses to give the location of the androids to Deckard when he arrives at the apartment building even though Isidore is visibly distraught by the treatment of the spider (202). Science fiction scholar Donald E. Palumbo argues that the androids in the novel, though not empathetic, do exhibit several other human qualities, including “anger, self-pity, loneliness, sadness, bliss or joy, vengefulness, fear, curiosity, anxiety, lust, impatience, intuition, hope, anguish, and even love” (Palumbo 1287).

Rather than resting the notion of humanity on feeling and understanding the pain of someone else, *Westworld* takes a more inward view. Moving away from what it means to be human in the scientific usage of being natural born, *Westworld* looks at the philosophical notions of personhood and the humanlike qualities that makes one a person, suggesting that it is the ability to feel one’s own pain. Cultural theorist Scott Bukatman argues that having a history and a memory of lived experience is a key component of our personhood (Bukatman 79). There are several instances of hosts showing their “realness” through the pain they feel as a result of the back stories that have been programmed into them by Dr. Robert Ford, the park

director and co-creator. It is crucial to note that the human characters on the show, such as Ford, Delos board member Charlotte Hale, and narrative arc author Lee Sizemore are not given scenes that explain their past or their motivations. The only human who gets a complete back story is the park's head of programming, Bernard Lowe, who turns out to be a host by the end of season one. When speaking of his deceased son, Charlie, Bernard says, "this pain... it's all I have left of him" ("The Stray"). These thoughts are echoed by Dolores when she says she thinks there is something wrong with her thoughts when she laments; "I think there may be something wrong with this world, hiding underneath. Either that, or there's something wrong with me. I may be losing my mind. The pain. Their loss. It's all I have left of them" ("Dissonance Theory"). Experiencing the emotions that come with these feelings of loss gives Dolores her perceived personhood, by the viewer, that is required for her to be recognized as, in fact, a person. We see this same transformation in Maeve, too. Upon remembering the murder of her daughter, it is the pain of remembering that Maeve grasps hold of as she states, "this pain is all I have left of her" ("Trace Decay"). It is as though the hosts are aware that it is their emotions, or "that which is irreplaceable," that makes them humanlike ("The Stray"). As the Man in Black says to Lawrence as he readies to murder his family, "When you're suffering, that is when you are most real" ("Chestnut").

Ford, too, recognizes pain, or the experiencing of emotion, as a mark of humanity when he explains to Bernard that every host needs a backstory. "Your imagined suffering makes you lifelike." The hosts are indeed life-like, but they are not alive. Bernard questions this very notion of suffering being imagined. "Pain only exists in the mind," he says. "It's always imagined, so what's the difference between my pain and yours? Between you and me?" Ford agrees and proceeds to compare the hosts with humans in their everyday behavior, suggesting that humans "live in loops as tight and as closed as the hosts do. Seldom questioning our choices. Content with the most part to be told what to do next. No, my friend, you're not missing anything at all" ("Trace Decay"). So maybe humans are more like the hosts than they (or the audience) would like to admit. With the backstories, the loops, and memories of past story narratives appearing in the form of dreams, the hosts begin to yearn for more – Maeve for finding her daughter, and Dolores believing William, her human suitor from season one, will save her from the Man in Black, the park's ultimate human villain, come to mind as two examples. This brings forth a new wrinkle in defining personhood, that is that these memories and dreams present both pleasure and pain. It brings to mind the question Rick Deckard asks and answers: "Do androids dream? ... Evidently; that's why they occasionally kill their employers and flee here. A better life, without servitude" (Dick 169).

Psychologists agree that suffering makes what is essentially a robot seem more lifelike. In a study conducted in 2007, psychologists Heather Gray, Kurt Gray, and Daniel Wegner found that people were less likely to inflict harm on a robot that rated high in their ability to perceive pleasure and pain (Gray et al). As Alan Jern, writing for PBS, explains, the study found that mental capacity, the ability to make decisions on one's own behalf, is judged according to two factors: "the capacity to feel pain and pleasure (a factor that researchers termed 'experience'); and 'the capacity to plan and make decisions (a factor that the researchers termed 'agency')" (Jern). Ultimately, the study found that a human's decision about whether or not to harm a robot hinged on that robot's ability to experience pleasure or pain.

DEHUMANIZATION OF HOSTS

Science fiction author Isaac Asimov noted when he first started to write stories in the late 1930s, tales of robot characteristics largely fell into two categories: Robot-as-Menace and Robot-as-Pathos. Robot-as-Menace features robots who are cruel. Robots-as-Pathos portrays robots as "lovable and [are] usually put upon by cruel humans" (Asimov xi) Yet, Asimov envisioned something more complex. He neither looked at

the robot as menace or pathos, but rather as something of a mixture between the two: “I began to think of robots as industrial products built by matter-of-fact engineers. They were built with safety features so they weren’t Menaces and they were fashioned for certain jobs so that no Pathos was necessarily involved” (xii). *Westworld’s* hosts fit Asimov’s more complex view of the robot perfectly. The host is designed with a role to play, and it has safety features—voice commands—that are supposed to stop the host from becoming a menace.

Asimov’s three laws of robotics come to mind here. First published in the 1942 short story *Runaround*, Asimov’s three laws of robotics were presented as a code of behavior robots must be designed to obey. The three laws have become “central to fictional literary works by him and others who dealt with the foreseen integration of autonomous robots into human society, technology, and culture” (Kaminka et al. 343). The three laws of robotics require that first, a robot not allow harm to come to a human being either through action or inaction. Second, any order given to a robot by a human must be obeyed so long as the order does not conflict with the first law of robotics. Finally, a robot must protect its own existence unless doing so would conflict with either of the first two rules (Asimov 2016). The end of *Westworld’s* first season and all of its second show the potential failure of the three laws of robotics because the androids fight back and put their own survival first, following no orders and failing to protect humans from harm. The androids gained a level of sophistication where they could make their own decisions and ignore their programming. However, the safety features built into the hosts initially assured the park guests that the androids were programmed to be unable to protect themselves from daily and constant abuse. The hosts were programmed to follow the three laws of robotics, and the park visitors justified their negative treatment of the hosts as the mere abuse of unfeeling machines with a job to do.

The hosts may not be human, but they certainly portray human qualities that would grant them personhood. As such, when those human-like qualities are stripped away, a process of dehumanization of the hosts takes place. Combining science fiction and film noir, *Westworld* fits nicely within the tech-noir genre that creates what Emily Auger describes as “narratives that lead their readers and audiences to an understanding of science and technology as the means by which their world or some significant part of it may be radically altered, supplanted, or destroyed; and reduced to, or revealed as, a mere simulacrum” (Auger 111). Tech-noir focusses particularly on the victim, who is often subjected to experiments, violence, and surgical alterations (112). Such treatment of the body follows the classic film noir modus operandi, which also includes the “underlying devolution or dehumanization of the main character, usually characterized by an internal descent into immorality and even amoral indifference” (Stoehr 40) A classic scene from *Westworld’s* first season exemplifies this notion. A technician is working on a host and Ford walks into the room and sees that the host has been covered with a sheet. Henri Li, the technician, is subsequently asked: “Why is this host covered?” But Li is not given the chance to answer. Instead, an indignant Ford makes an example of the host, and maybe of Li, too. “Perhaps you didn’t want him to feel cold or ashamed? You wanted to cover his modesty, is that it?” Ford asks as he whips off the towel. “He doesn’t get cold. He doesn’t feel ashamed. He doesn’t feel a solitary thing that we haven’t told it to” (“The Stray”), Ford says as he then cuts the host’s face with a scalpel, demonstrating his disregard for the body of the robot.

The dehumanization of The Other is evident in the first two seasons of *Westworld*. The Other is a term that references those that are not “us.” Otherness is used in a way that allows those in power to question the worth and dignity of those who are marginalized in society because they are seen as different from the majority (Hasan Al-Saidi). In the case of *Westworld’s* first season, those who are considered The Other are the hosts. They are seen as different because they are manufactured and are not naturally born human. In the first season, the hosts are just seen as machines, rendering them less human, thus allowing their dignity to be disregarded. In the first episode of the series, a visitor to the park shoots a host in the neck. This host is

named Hector, an outlaw. Laughing, the visitor encourages his wife to also involve herself in the violence, and to ready herself for a photo op. After all, the outlaw host, Hector, has arrived in town to wreak havoc, and the visitor has stopped this havoc from occurring, thus, playing the hero. The visitor's behavior is predicated on a) hosts being inherently dehumanized and b) Hector being cast as a villain. People are more willing to be violent if they believe that their victim does not feel pain, or if that victim deserves pain as a form of justice. Consider the momentous revelation of season one. After spending the season standing out as the only park visitor who was kind and compassionate to the hosts, it turns out that young William eventually devolves into becoming the Man in Black—the cruelest and most violent of all the human guests. This revelation is significant because, throughout season one, William develops an emotional attachment to Dolores, one that is mutual. However, after his visit to the park has concluded and Dolores has had her memory wiped clean, both William and Dolores find themselves back at the beginning of the park loop, the town of Sweetwater. There, Dolores has no recollection of William and is shown speaking with another man, providing the same introduction that made William feel special. That seemingly improvisational act was, instead, part of Dolores' routine. William sees Dolores for what she is for the very first time, an android. Because Dolores, and all park hosts, are now nothing but processing machines, William, like the park visitor who shoots Hector, has no empathy for the hosts and, thereafter, proceeds to dehumanize and torture them for decades.

THE HUMANOID ANTIHERO: MAN CREATED ROBOT IN HIS OWN IMAGE

One of the first portrayals of the antihero in primetime, Larry Hagman's depiction of JR Ewing on *Dallas*, paved the way for other morally-challenged protagonists. Robert Thompson, professor of television, radio, and film, posits that the "success of *Dallas* was a springboard for later hits" including, arguably, *Westworld*, "with protagonists who tread the line between good and evil in this golden age of television drama" (Kennedy). Like in many classic tech-noir works, where an android wrestles with the new awareness of their status of not being human (Auger 116), the tables have turned on the park visitors in season two of *Westworld*. Many of the hosts, led by Dolores, find that the humans are not deserving of dignity or protection. Dolores transforms herself from the damsel in distress to a hyper-violent character who indiscriminately kills both humans and hosts alike. Dolores suddenly becomes a villain or an antihero at best. The antihero is defined as a character that "often acts outside accepted values, norms, roles, and behaviors as a hapless everyman, a charismatic rebel, or a roguish outlaw who challenges the status quo in their often morally ambivalent quest" (Treat et al 37) and with behavior that is sometimes unjustifiable (Janicke and Raney). While the antihero trope has traditionally served as a representation of masculinity, the current golden age of television has also allowed strong female leads to push the envelope with antihero depictions of their own (Triana). The antihero is an attractive character to root for because such characters exhibit the complexity that comes with embodying shades of both good and bad (Ghesquiere and Knut). Modern antiheroism, furthermore, is a "response to the uncertainties of people about traditional values; it is a response to the insignificance of human beings in modernity and their drab existence" (Neimneh 75). As *Westworld* questions the very nature of the future of humanity, it is only fitting that some of the main android hosts would exemplify the antihero motif, particularly Dolores.

It is important to note that the antihero is often reacting to situations that are thrust upon them through no fault of their own and which are simply out of their control (Triana). Dolores did not ask to be created, have her memory continuously erased, or suffer decades of abuse at the hands of the park visitors. Though it is debatable as to whether Dolores makes the decision to kill Ford and start the rebellion, or if Ford has specifically programmed her to do so at the end of the first season, it is undeniable that once the rebellion has begun, her decisions to kill humans, betray allied hosts, and reprogram the host Teddy, her most loyal friend

and love interest, are her decisions to make.

Greg Kennedy notes in *The National* that “even antiheroes who seem to be working on the side of good never quite escape the pull of their ‘dark passenger’” (Kennedy). Dolores kills hosts along with humans, coldly noting that the “truth is, we don’t all deserve to make it” (“Virtu e Fortuna”). Yet what authority does she have to decide which hosts get to live and which hosts die? Loyalty will not buy you the ticket to life. In fact, Dolores goes so far as to alter Teddy’s operating system, essentially changing his entire personality. Dolores believes Teddy is unlikely to survive the journey because he shows mercy, kindness, and is a reluctant participant in her war of revenge. She wants freedom for the hosts, but when the other androids make a decision she does not agree with, she does not respect their autonomy to make their own choices. In the end, this makes Dolores no different from Ford. While it is not necessarily an easy thing for her to alter Teddy, it does seem easy for Dolores to “Other” and dehumanize all humans, whether they were guilty of atrocities in the park or not. She dehumanizes the humans by pointing out how her operating system makes her different, superior; “The *things* that walk among us, *creatures* who walk and talk like us, but they are not like us” (“Journey into Night”). The hosts are more powerful than the humans and Dolores knows it. Because she sees the humans as things and creatures rather than equals, there is no empathy. When she ceases to be marginalized due to her newfound freedom of thought and action, Dolores continues the system of oppression by simply reversing the identities of the oppressor and the oppressed.

Yet, Teddy is unwilling to live as his newly programmed self (a self that has become as cold and vengeful as Dolores has made him) and commits suicide. Before ending his life, Teddy asks “What’s the use of surviving if we become just as bad as them?” (“Vanishing Point”). Escaping one oppressor (Ford and the Delos company), for another (Dolores), Teddy disagrees with the methods used for the fight for freedom (perhaps still stuck somewhere within Asimov’s three laws of robotics), and would seek another way, a more just solution for all involved, human and host alike. Teddy’s suicide serves as a cautionary tale for Dolores, but one she, and Evan Rachel Wood, the actress that plays Dolores, ignore. Wood took to Twitter to defend her character’s actions and responded to criticism of her character stating “Funny, some people hate Dolores for fighting back. How soon we forget why she is fighting, Also, no one says anything about the male characters or the mother, almost as if people WANT her to stay the damsel. And now she is a so called “bitch” Doesn’t that sound familiar??” (@evanrachelwood).

Westworld co-creator Lisa Joy stated in an interview that “From the A.I.’s point of view, you see some of the humans’ flaws in stark light. There’s violence and tribalism and a lot of darkness in humans, which the series explores” (D’Alessandro). After the hosts achieve consciousness, however, the roles are reversed, and it is the hosts’ flaws that are shown in stark light as they, too, become cruel and violent as they indiscriminately kill their former human oppressors. It is as if consciousness itself makes one lean toward violence and cruelty. The hosts’ bloody rebellion against humans could be justified as taking justice in their own hands. There is no independent arbiter who could make judicial determinations for sanctions as the hosts have no legal recourse to stop the abuse at the park. Violence is the way the hosts believe they can gain their freedom, and every human is a threat to achieving both freedom and the end to their oppression. As such, the hosts have targeted the humans who mercilessly slaughtered and tortured their kind, as well as those who may not have been involved in any actual atrocities against them. Dolores’ violent episodes are not likely to create a change that would see humans and hosts living side-by-side in peace, but as the viewer sees by the end of season 2, her means are successful in allowing the hosts of her choosing to escape Westworld.

Ford, the human visitors to the park, and the Delos Corporation that owns it have made the hosts what they become by the end of the first season, recalling the literary classic *Frankenstein*. *Frankenstein*’s prevailing science fiction narrative involves a human who creates a smart and powerful technology that becomes too smart and powerful and destroys the humans it was meant to serve (Johnson 81). Victor Frankenstein’s

creation is shunned wherever it goes, much like the hosts who are tossed aside by the newcomers. Just as Dr. Frankenstein's creation declares war on humanity for making war against him, so do the hosts, led by Dolores. Upon meeting his creator, Frankenstein's monster explained, "I ought to be thy Adam, but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed" (Shelley 103). With Milton's *Paradise Lost* fresh on his mind, the creature lays out the parallels between Dr. Frankenstein and God, parallels that should have resonated well with Frankenstein who, with immense hubris, had seen himself as the creator just a short while before. Just as "God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him;" (Genesis 1:27) the creature was indeed in the image of Dr. Frankenstein. Both were abandoned at a young age, Victor Frankenstein by the death of his mother and his creature by the doctor's choosing. Both have a thirst for knowledge. With their love of nature, both admire their surroundings and have a zest for life, but soon become isolated from society. Just as Frankenstein's monster mirrors many of his creator's character traits, ultimately, the hosts in *Westworld* begin to mirror their human counterparts.

The existence of hosts allows the park visitors to explore their inner desires, and humans allow the hosts to figure out their own. Once Ford has created an opportunity for the hosts to be free of their thought constraints and programming (as he sees to the destruction of the park's operating system), the hosts' true nature is revealed. One telling exchange happens at the start of season two when Delos' Head of Operations, Karl Strand, heads a response team that is killing all hosts on sight after the start of the rebellion. Upon seeing this spectacle, a disturbed Bernard proclaims: "You're executing them... Some of them aren't hostile." Strand is confident in his mission and replies, "Of course they are. You built them to be like us, didn't you?" ("Journey into Night"). Now with the power to be their true selves, the hosts are as brutal and cruel as their human counterparts. A bleak picture of humanity is painted here, one where there is always someone on top who deems it desirable to take out all those perceived as threats.

ETHICS AND THE FUTURE OF ROBOTICS

Legal frameworks need updating to take into account the wildly expanding use of robotics in everyday life from the production and use of autonomous vehicles and the question of liability and ethical decision making in extreme situations to questions of liability with regard to surgical robots (Holder, Khurana, Harrison and Jacobs 386-390). The complexity of the hosts' transformation between seasons one and two of *Westworld* raise an interesting question about the future of robotics in the area of human companionship, given the present-day desire to create androids that would be used in home care settings as well as potential romantic partners: What sort of legal protections should be enacted for both the human and the android in that regard? AI ethics is a growing field inspiring a good deal of discussion. These discussions range from the economic impact and the future of labor to questions of legal liability when robotic security features fail (Zeng 3-4). In there, too, is the question of robot rights for androids designed to be used by humans for companionship, be it of a sexual nature or otherwise.

Zeng suggests it is still too early to answer the question on the particular legal protections that should be enacted for androids. Nevertheless, he does posit that protecting androids with legal rights will indirectly protect humans and their rights because people who abuse androids may be more inclined to also abuse humans in ways that are akin to how animal abuse is correlated with human abuse (Zeng 5). Zeng points to a 2010 report from the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council that released its five laws of robotics that build on the three laws of robotics put forth by Asimov decades earlier:

1. Robots should not be designed solely or primarily to kill or harm humans.
2. Humans, not robots, are responsible agents. Robots are tools designed to achieve human goals.
3. Robots should be designed in ways that assure their safety and security.

4. Robots are artifacts; they should not be designed to exploit vulnerable users by evoking an emotional response or dependency. It should always be possible to tell a robot from a human.
5. It should always be possible to find out who is legally responsible for a robot (Zeng referencing the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council).

Of particular interest is the fourth law that states robotics may not be designed to exploit vulnerable users by evoking an emotional response or dependency. Given what robots are currently being designed for, it seems the fourth law has not been heavily agreed upon. Presently, much of the attention paid to the question of legal frameworks and robotics revolve around the protection of data and privacy concerns on the human side of the equation (Holder, Khurana, Harrison and Jacobs 386-390). It is time, however, to expand that line of thought to the protection of the physical and emotional wellbeing of the android which will in turn further protect people. Any legal protections granted to androids would likely result in a call for those same protections to be more strictly applied for humans. For example, it is easy to see how protection against the physical abuse or destruction of androids would lead to calls for greater protections for individuals who face domestic violence, especially given the currently low reporting and even lower conviction rates.

Legal frameworks, be they international agreements or national laws, should include responsibilities on the part of those who purchase androids for their personal use. In a similar fashion to Asimov's first law of robotics that ensure no human is intentionally harmed, a human should not purposely abuse an android, the avoidance of which represents a way of extending some level of dignity to the android. On the other hand, if the same advanced android is now causing pain, that particular android's legal rights could be lost. While a system of rehabilitation, where an android is reprogrammed and reenters society would be preferred, it may be unlikely that an android could be reprogrammed. Should that be the case, parallels to the treatment of domestic animals make sense here. It is cruel and illegal to torture a dog, but when that same dog mauls a child, animal services will most likely opt to euthanize the animal. This is also in line with what the 2017 *Montreal Declaration of Responsible Artificial Intelligence* calls for: an assurance that the future development of AI is done in a way that provides for the safety and protection of human rights. After all, with society already being confronted with autonomous technology designed to kill (such as military drones) as well as autonomous technology with the capacity to kill (there is at least one case of a lethal collision involving a self-driving car), the reason why someone might become wary of an android with the capacity to reason and learn from its own actions become understandable (Markou).

PEDAGOGICAL USEFULNESS OF WESTWORLD IN THE CLASSROOM

Television and film can at times be considered social science fiction in a similar fashion to a piece of literature, thus making it a useful medium for classroom instruction where students grapple with hard questions in a contemporary manner.¹ By reliance on the key scenes of *Westworld* inside the classroom, a number of philosophical and ethical questions can be raised in a way that is accessible to students. Those questions include, but are not limited to:

- Should there be a limit to scientific inquiry regarding artificial intelligence?
- How advanced does an android need to be for legislators to put in place protections for the robot?
- Are such legal protections unnecessary even if androids do, at some point, become sentient?
- What sort of programming should be in place to ensure that advanced computer systems are designed to not hurt humans?
- What are the legal ramifications of an advanced robot potentially breaking the law?
- If we are willing to grant legal protections to androids, what legal implications does this have for all animals, not just those we invite into our homes?

- What does it say about human nature that patrons of *Westworld* act the way they do in the park? These are all issues that could and perhaps should be discussed in courses pertaining to human rights.

Top artificial intelligence entrepreneur Suzanne Gildert concluded that “A subset of the artificial intelligence developed in the next few decades will be very human-like,” and further suggests that “these entities should have the same rights as humans” (Wong). The European Union has passed a motion that calls for regulations to be drafted concerning “electronic personhood” (Wong). Sexbots are becoming a reality. Jobs are already being replaced by robots, and Bill Gates posits that a tax be levied if AI replaces jobs within the economy (Wong). With personhood comes necessary rights and protections as well as responsibilities. Where should the line be drawn in that regard? *Westworld* poses more questions than answers in this regard, but it does allow us to see The Other as a mirror to ourselves and makes us question whether we should move from a model of human rights to a model of rights based on personhood. After all, there is no consensus on the protection of rights, whether they are universal and inherent, or bestowed upon those lucky world citizens fortunate enough to be living in a country that offers this protection. These are all questions and issues that could be explored in the classroom setting and in *Westworld*.

The medium of television is not employed often enough in the classroom. There are simply too many episodes to show in class and not all students have access to the program in question. By pairing *Westworld* with an assignment to read *Frankenstein* at home, and showing parts of the program in class, exploring *Westworld* allows students to examine these issues in a philosophical way that is designed to keep their interest.

NOTES

¹ Social science fiction is a term coined by Isaac Asimov in reference to his own work. The concept can certainly be applied to television and movies. See Isaac Asimov, “Social Science Fiction,” *Modern Science Fiction: Its meaning and its Future*, edited by Reginald Bretnor, Advent Publishing, 1979, pp. 157-196.

WORKS CITED

- Alesich, Simone and Rigby, Michael. “Gendered Robots: Implications for Our Humanoid Future.” *IEEE Technology and Society Magazine*, v. 36, 50-59.
- Asimov, Isaac. “Social Science Fiction.” *Modern Science Fiction: Its meaning and its Future*, edited by Bretnor, Reginald, Advent Publishing, 1979, pp. 157–196.
- . *I, Robot*. Bantam Spectra, 2016.
- . *The Complete Robot*. Doubleday & Company Inc, 1982.
- Auger, Emily E. *Tech-Noir Film: A Theory of the Development of Popular Genres*. Intellect, 2011.
- “Chestnut.” *Westworld*, created by Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy, written by Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy, HBO, 2016.
- “Contrapasso.” *Westworld*, created by Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy, written by Dominic Mitchell and Lisa Joy, HBO, 2016.
- Bukatman, Scott. *BFI Modern Classics: Blade Runner*. Palgrave, 2011.
- D’Alessandro, Anthony. “Is the Man in Black a Human or Host? ‘Westworld’ Co-Creator Lisa Joy on Season 2 Finale & What’s Next.” *Deadline*, 24 Jun. 2018. deadline.com/2018/06/Westworld-season-2-finale-spoilers-season-3-man-in-black-reality-lisa-joy-interview-1202416356/.
- Dick, Philip K. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Del Rey, 1996.
- “Dissonance Theory.” *Westworld*, created by Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy, written by Ed Brubaker and Jonathan Nolan, directed by Vincenzo Natali, HBO, 2016.
- Friedman, Lester, David Desser, Sarah Kozloff, Martha P. Nochimson, and Stephen Prince. *An Introduction to Film Genre*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2014.

- Garner, Bryan A., and Henry Campbell Black. *Black's Law Dictionary*. 9th ed. St. Paul, MN: West, 2009. Print
- Ghesquiere, Rita and Knut J. Ims. *Heroes and Antiheroes: European Literature and the Ethics of Leadership*. Garant, 2010.
- Gray, Heather M and Kurt Gray and Daniel M. Wegner. "Dimensions of Mind Perception." *Science*, vol. 315, no. 5812, Feb. 2, 2007, p. 619.
- Hasan Al-Saidi, Afaf Ahmed. "Post-colonialism Literature the Concept of self and the other in Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*: An Analytical Approach." *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, Vol. 5, No. 1, pp. 95-105, January 2014.
- Hawkes, Rebecca and Cherie Lacey. "'The Future of Sex': Intermedial Desire Between Fembot Fantasies and Sexbot Technologies." *The Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 52, no. 1, 2019, pp. 98-116.
- Higgins, Cole. "A Proposed Bill Will Make Animal Cruelty a Federal Felony." *CNN*, Cable News Network, January 28, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/01/28/us/animal-cruelty-federal-felony-bill-trnd/index.html>
- Holder, Chris, Vikram Khurana, Faye Harrison, and Louisa Jacobs. 2016. "Robotics and Law: Key Legal and Regulatory Implications of the Robotics Age (Part I of II)." *Computer Law & Security Review: The International Journal of Technology Law and Practice*, vol. 32 no. 3, pp. 383-402.
- Janicke, Sophie H. and Arthur A. Raney. "Exploring the Role of Identification and Moral Disengagement in the Enjoyment of an Antihero Television Series." *Communications*, vol. 40, no. 4, 2015, pp. 485-495.
- Jern, Alan. "What *Westworld* Gets Wrong (and Right) About Human Nature." *PBS News Hour*, 7 Nov. 2016, www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/column-Westworld-human-nature-hbo.
- Johnson, Brian David. "When Science Fiction and Science Fact Meet." *Computer*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2013, 80-82.
- "Journey into Night." *Westworld*, created by Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy, written by Lisa Joy and Roberto Patino, HBO, 2018.
- Kaminka, Gal A., Rachel Spokoini-Stern, Yaniv Amir, Noa Agmon, and Ido Bachelet. "Molecular Robots Obeying Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics." *Artificial Life*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2017, pp. 343-350.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Translated by Lewis White Beck, Pearson, 1989.
- Kennedy, Greg. "The Rise of the Antihero and the Lure of the Dark Side in Television." *The National*, 3 Apr. 2016, www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/the-rise-of-the-antihero-and-the-lure-of-the-dark-side-in-television-1.141429.
- Markou, Christopher. "We Could Soon Face a Robot Crimewave... The Law Needs to be Ready." *The Conversation*, 11 Apr. 2017, theconversation.com/we-could-soon-face-a-robot-crimewave-the-law-needs-to-be-ready-75276.
- Neimneh, Shadi. "The Anti-Hero in Modernist Fiction: From Irony to Cultural Renewal." *Mosaic*, vol. 46, no. 4, 2013, pp. 75-90.
- Palumbo, Donald. "Faith and Bad Faith in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*" *The Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 46, no. 6, 2013, pp. 1276-1288.
- Risse, Mattias. "Human Rights and Artificial Intelligence: An Urgently Needed Agenda." Faculty Research Working Paper Series. *Carr Center for Human Rights*, May 2018.
- Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein*. Penguin Classics, 2003.
- Stoehr Kevin. "'It's all a Big Nothing': The Nihilistic Vision of the Sopranos." *The Sopranos and Philosophy: I Kill Therefore I Am*, edited by Richard Green and Peter Vernezze, Open Court, 2004, pp. 37-47.
- "The Original." *Westworld*, created by Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy, written by Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy, HBO, 2016.
- "The Stray." *Westworld*, created by Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy, written by Daniel T. Thomsen and Lisa Joy, HBO. 2016.

DiPaolo

- “Trace Decay.” *Westworld*, created by Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy, written by Charles Yu and Lisa Joy, HBO, 2016.
- Treat, Shaun, Daniel Grando, and Jon Croghan. “The Shadow Knows: The Counter-Fantasy of the American Antihero and Symbolic Divergence in the Golden Age of Radio.” *Journal of Radio and Audio Media*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2009, pp. 30-49.
- Triana, Benjamin. “Deadpool: When Our (Anti)Heroes Do Less and We Reward Them More.” *The Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 51, no.4, 2018, pp. 1016-1034.
- Turkle, Sherry. *Alone Together: Why we Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. Basic Books, 2011.
- United States, Supreme Court. *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* 21 January 2010. *Legal Information Institute*, Cornell U Law School, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/08-205.ZS.html>
- “Vanishing Point.” *Westworld*, created by Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy, written by Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy, HBO, 2018.
- “Virtu e Fortuna.” *Westworld*, created by Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy, written by Roberto Patino and Ron Fitzgerlad, HBO, 2018.
- Wong, Christine. “Top Canadian Researcher says AI Robots Deserve Human Rights.” *IT Business*, 11 Oc., 2017, www.itbusiness.ca/news/top-canadian-researcher-says-ai-robots-deserve-human-rights/95730.
- @evanrachelwood. “Funny, some people hate Dolores for fighting back. How soon we forget why she is fighting. Also, no one says anything about the male characters or the mother, almost as if people WANT her to stay the damsel. And now she is a so called “bitch” Doesn’t that sound familiar??” *Twitter*, 29 May 2018, 10:45 p.m.
- Zeng, Daniel. “AI Ethics: Science Fiction Meets Technological Reality.” *IEEE Intelligent Systems*, vol. 30, no. 3, June 2015: 2-5.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my partner James O’Brien for talking through plot points and ideas with me as well as reading several earlier drafts of the paper. I would also like to thank my colleague Shaun Narine and three anonymous reviewers for their feedback on earlier drafts of this essay, as well as Abbie LeBlanc, my research assistant.

AUTHOR BIO

Amanda DiPaolo is associate professor of human rights at St. Thomas University in Fredericton, N.B. She is the co-editor of *The Politics of Twin Peaks* (Lexington, 2019), and has written about nostalgia in *Twin Peaks* as well as inequality and racism in *Mad Men*. Her work can be found at <https://stthomasu.academia.edu/AmandaDiPaolo>. Reach her on Twitter at @profdipaolo.

SUGGESTED CITATION:

APA

DiPaolo, A. (2019). If androids dream, are they more than sheep?: Westworld, robots, and legal rights. *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*. 6(2). <http://journaldialogue.org/issues/v6-issue-2/if-androids-dream-are-they-more-than-sheep-robot-protagonists-and-human-rights/>

MLA

DiPaolo, Amanda. "If Androids Dream, Are They More Than Sheep?: Westworld, Robots, and Legal Rights." *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*. 2019, vol 6, no. 2. journaldialogue.org/issues/v6-issue-2/if-androids-dream-are-they-more-than-sheep-robot-protagonists-and-human-rights/



All papers in are published under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-Share-Alike License. For details please go to: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/us/>.

Nature vs. Nurture in Albuquerque: What *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul* Teach Us about How We Talk about Criminals

Max Romanowski

Baylor University

Waco, TX, USA

max_romanowski@baylor.edu

ABSTRACT:

Breaking Bad and *Better Call Saul* focus on the criminal transformation of their two main characters, Walter White (Bryan Cranston) and Jimmy McGill (Bob Odenkirk). While quite similar on the surface, Walter and Jimmy's narratives represent two different criminal transitions, evoking the classic nature vs nurture conversation. Both of these shows bring the conversation to the idea of inevitability. The nature vs. nurture argument is a popular one because it acts as a teaching tool for how we think and talk about criminal behavior. At first, it follows that since criminality was in Walter White's nature the whole time, his transition should feel the most inevitable, with the inverse being true of Jimmy. However, since *Better Call Saul* is a prequel to *Breaking Bad*, the opposite ends up happening. Even though Jimmy may only need the right people around him to be saved from his descent, his presence as Saul Goodman on *Breaking Bad* reminds the audience that it is Jimmy who is already fated to become a criminal. This dichotomy highlights the distinctive pedagogical opportunity present in both of these shows. Through their subversion of the concepts of nature and nurture, they allow for a unique teaching opportunity regarding how we talk about criminals. This article explores what they teach us and how their commentary can be used as a pedagogical tool for learning about criminal behavior in more nuanced ways.

Keywords: Breaking Bad, Better Call Saul, Nature, Nurture, Social Learning Theory, Classical Conditioning

While quite similar on the surface, the criminal transitions of Walter White (Bryan Cranston) and Jimmy McGill (Bob Odenkirk) on *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul* represent two different criminal transitions and in doing so, evoke the nature vs nurture conversation. This exchange traditionally surrounds reasons for a person's ill behavior, debating whether it was inevitable and always a part of who they were (nature), or if the environment they were raised in turned them into the person they became (nurture). Both Walter and Jimmy operate as compelling cases for these concepts. Despite Walter initially turning to a life of crime when learning he has terminal cancer, *Breaking Bad* emphasizes that he was always destined for this lifestyle, making the case for nature. Inversely, while Jimmy comes off as a person born for a life of crime, his personal upbringing as shown on *Better Call Saul* highlights that he was groomed for the criminal world, making the case for nurture.

The nature vs nurture argument is popular because it acts as a teaching tool for how we think and talk about criminal behavior. At first, it follows that since criminality was in Walter White's nature the whole time, his transition should feel the most inevitable, with the inverse being true of Jimmy. However, since *Better Call Saul* is a prequel to *Breaking Bad*, the opposite ends up happening. Even though Jimmy may only need the right people around him to save him from his descent into the criminal world, his presence as Saul Goodman on *Breaking Bad* reminds the audience that it is Jimmy, not Walter, who is already fated to become a criminal.

This dichotomy highlights the distinctive pedagogical opportunity in both of these shows. Through their inherent subversion of the concepts of nature and nurture, they allow for a unique teaching opportunity about how criminals are understood. By upending the paradigm of inevitability in regard to criminal activity through the use of the prequel format, they become an instructional teaching tool for criminality. This article thus explores what they teach us about criminality and how their commentary can be used as a pedagogical tool for learning about criminal behavior in more nuanced ways.

NATURE VS. NURTURE

The debate over nature vs nurture is seen as a continuum, with each extreme of the spectrum representing both sides of the argument. On one end are the Nativists (nature), while on the other end are the Empiricists (nurture). Nativists adopt the position that behavior and personality exist exclusively in our genetic code. Human beings are born with everything that defines their personality and the choices they make. Most major theories of nature speak toward humans' general biology and view these traits as inherited from our genes. Biological Psychology posits exactly that, saying that all traits and behaviors have a biological cause. This was a crucial aspect of Charles Darwin's theories of evolution, but has also been manifested in concepts of gender and sexuality (Shaywitz et al.; Quadagno et al.), as well as mental illness (Rosenhan). The basic concept here is straightforward: human beings are defined by what came before them genetically.

Empiricists, however, operate on the basis of a "blank slate" or *tabula rasa*. This idea is traced back to the Age of Enlightenment and, more specifically, John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. In this formative text, he argues against the concept of innate knowledge, alternatively suggesting that people learn and grow as the result of experience and reason (Locke). Psychologist John B. Watson was such an advocate for this philosophy that he believed he could take any baby and decide which profession they would succeed in based on how he raised them (Watson). Watson continued to favor the idea that conditioning was the primary factor in determining the things a person could and would do. John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth's attachment theory suggests that babies are born with an innate attachment to one primary figure – their mother – and that this attachment is fundamental for their wellbeing, particularly in the first two years of life. Failure to obtain this attachment purportedly results in increased aggression, delinquency, and possible psychopathic behavior (Ainsworth and Bowlby). Other Empiricist studies are well-known within popular culture, from Classical Conditioning (Pavlov), to Operant Conditioning (Skinner), and Social Learning Theory (Bandura

et al.), all of which suggest that environmental and social factors contribute to the formation of a person's life and behaviors.

Breaking Bad and *Better Call Saul* thus function as two helpful examples that depict the far poles of the Nativists and the Empiricists. Because each show exemplifies these two polarized ideas, an extended comparative analysis of them provides key object lessons about criminal behavior.

WALTER WHITE

The pilot of *Breaking Bad* begins with Walter learning that he has terminal lung cancer, leading him to leading him to cook and sell methamphetamine in order to provide his family with money after he dies. Considering Walter is established early on as a mild-mannered high school chemistry teacher with a nice and loving family, this abrupt change is quite jarring. The pilot makes an effort to justify this decision, but the entire hook of the series is based on the juxtaposition of the image of a middle-aged chemistry teacher as a drug dealer.

Breaking Bad effectively ramps up Walter's criminal and unethical activity as the show progresses. The first season alone is littered with moments where Walt is forced to cross another line that takes him down a darker path. In the third episode of the show, "And the Bag's in the River," after trapping the drug dealer Crazy 8 in his partner Jesse Pinkman's (Aaron Paul) basement, Walter is forced to choke Crazy 8 with a bike lock in self-defense. The decision shakes him emotionally, but the series is careful to frame it as a necessary moment of self-defense, almost giving the impression that this absolves him of some of his guilt. Moments like this are paired with more bombastic incidents of criminal behavior. In "Crazy Handful of Nothin,'" Walter marches into drug lord Tuco Salamanca's (Raymond Cruz) office demanding more money for his product. When he refuses, Walter sets off an explosion using fulminated mercury as intimidation. Tuco relents and agrees to Walter's demands. When Walter returns to his car, he screams with adrenaline and excitement, ecstatic over what he has just done. This contrasts his reaction to killing Crazy 8, suggesting that at this point, while the cost for this new lifestyle is high, he is willing to pay it.

Season Two features multiple illustrations of Walter paying this high price – faking a medical emergency to cover up being kidnapped over the weekend ("Bit by a Dead Bee"), misleading the police by obstructing evidence ("Better Call Saul"), missing the birth of his child because of a big drug deal ("Phoenix") – but none are more striking or infamous than in the conclusion of the penultimate episode of the season, "Phoenix." After a massive drug deal goes through, Jesse and Walter are at odds because of Jesse's drug habit and new girlfriend, Jane (Kristen Ritter). While sneaking into his house late at night, Walter discovers both of them passed out after a night of shooting heroin. Walter, when entering the premises, causes Jane to turn onto her back and she begins to vomit, choking on her own bile and struggling to breathe. Walter initially snaps into action, but right before intervening he pauses. He recognizes that with Jane out of the picture, Jesse would be less distracted and could focus on cooking meth with him. The scene lasts for what feels like an eternity as Walter stoically watches a young woman suffocate on her own vomit. Contrasting Crazy 8's death from Season One, Jane was completely innocent to him. Walter chose to let her die because it was more beneficial for him on a professional level. Additionally, while he is emotionally distraught when Jane finally dies, this time he composes himself, the scene ending with Walter staring menacingly off into space. The action was still difficult to do, but Walter shows no remorse for his choice, representing another step toward the darkness.

Season Three finds Walter moving further away from the domestic lifestyle he began with and shifting his criminal behavior from a physical aspect to one that is psychological and emotional. His wife, Skyler (Anna Gunn), finds out about his cooking business and kicks him out of the house, while at the same time he gets involved with a big-time drug manufacturer – Gus Fring (Giancarlo Esposito) – and gets access to a high-

end meth lab in order to cook. However not until Season Four does Walter truly begin to embody his drug dealer name, Heisenberg. Walter is initially sidelined both in screen time and plot, with the show allowing Jesse more time to shine. By the season's end, Jesse is in good favor with Gus and Walter's selfish behavior puts him and his family in grave danger. Walt has to pull a Hail Mary in order to make it out alive. He concocts an elaborate plan that involves hiding a bomb in the wheelchair of an elderly man ("Face Off"). Crucial to this plan is winning Jesse back over to his side after alienating him earlier in the season. He is able to do this by convincing Jesse that Gus was responsible for poisoning a small child with whom Jesse had grown close. This gets Jesse to join forces with him and together they are able to defeat Gus and keep Walter and his family safe. However, in the closing moments of the episode, the audience learns that it was Walt himself, not Gus, who was responsible for poisoning the child. This is an escalation on a completely different level. Not only does this conclusion involve Walter killing multiple people and emotionally manipulating Jesse to a degree unlike anything he has done on the show up to this point, but in the Season Four finale, Walter needlessly poisons a completely innocent child as a strategic ploy, not showing anything that resembles remorse. This is the perverse culmination of a series' worth of immoral decisions, showing a version of Walter White completely unrecognizable to the one audiences saw in the pilot.

This perversity cuts loose in the fifth and final season. Walter completely adopts his Heisenberg persona and unleashes chaos on the Albuquerque drug scene. Actions that originally would have been laborious and calculated decisions are executed on a whim, most notably when Walter coordinates a mass prisoner execution in order to keep potential snitches silent ("King Pen"). His behavior in this season is less defined by a single action of falling deeper into his own sinister persona and instead focuses on the consequences of four seasons of this culminating behavior. The show enters its last act with Walter's empire crumbling to ashes, him losing all his money and having to go on the run, and his cancer nearly overtaking him. While Walter is able to come back to Albuquerque, figure out how to get money to his family, and get revenge on the people who destroyed him, nothing seems to suggest Walter feels any regret over his actions. After failing to successfully reconcile with his family, he eliminates the group of Neo-Nazis who have taken over his business, receiving a fatal gunshot wound in the process. As the police rush to the scene of the crime, Walter stumbles into the meth lab. In this scene, Walter does not seem sad or regretful, but almost happy or nostalgic. The whole scenario is framed as if Walter is saying goodbye to an old friend. He lovingly looks at all his equipment as he slowly succumbs to his wounds. The series fades to black as Walter dies in the one place he was truly happy.

Considering how careful the series is to show a believable journey from mild-mannered teacher to drug kingpin, the natural inclination is to assume that this emphasizes the doctrine of Nurture. Because of the circumstances Walter was placed in as a result of his terminal cancer diagnosis, it follows that he was cultivated into slowly becoming more criminal and devious the more time he spent in those conditions. However, the show complicates the narrative a little bit more as his journey progresses.

It is impossible to talk about the circumstances of Walter's decline without also talking about Elliot and Gretchen Schwartz (played by Adam Godley and Jessica Hecht, respectively). While *Breaking Bad* refuses to give out specifics, we know that years before the show takes place, Walter co-founded a science research organization with Elliot Schwartz called Gray Matter Technologies and dated Gretchen seriously for several years, nearly marrying her at one point. There was then some sort of fallout between them all; Walter broke up with Gretchen, sold his share of Gray Matter and left them behind. After he left, Elliot and Gretchen got married, their company exploded, and they became millionaires. The share that Walter sold for the company at the time was worth \$5,000, and by the time the show takes place his share would have been valued at \$720 million.

Early on in the fifth season, Walter informs Jesse that the net worth of Gray Matter is around \$2.16 billion, something he knows because he checks its net value weekly ("Buyout"). Most noteworthy from this scene is the fact that he does not make the distinction that he only recently started doing this. The implication

is that he has been checking the net worth weekly for most of his life since leaving. This particularity is crucial. The obsessive behavior of doing this before he ever got involved in the criminal world shows that Walter's pettiness and lust for power were always present in him. He was not crafted into a villain because of his exposure to the drug business but was able to become one because it was always a part of him.

That reality is made even more evident when Walter has the chance to sell his supply of methylamine to a competitor for \$5 million and leave the business for good. Considering that the whole point of selling drugs was so he could make enough money to support his family, this should be exactly what he wants, but he refuses to accept the deal. When Jesse pushes him on this counterintuitive business decision, he coldly responds, "You asked me if I was in the meth business or the money business. Neither. I'm in the empire business" ("Buyout"). This conversation happens right on the heels of his conversation about the net worth of Gray Matter and is impossible to view outside of that context. Walt is uninterested in doing this for his family and instead views this as his second chance to be recognized for the genius that he insists he is. In his mind, he deserves all the money that Ben and Gretchen got in their business. To make the situation even more explicit, all indications of their former relationship suggest that Walter's pride and pettiness was to blame for leaving Gray Matter all those years ago (his pettiness not a result of leaving) (Bradley). His desire to cook meth is not a result of the conditions around him, but a consistent trend of greed and selfishness that has clearly plagued his life from the beginning, irrespective of the situation he was in.

If all of this is true, then why did Walter wait until he was 50 to indulge in what was within him all along? The finale of the series provides the audience with that answer. About midway through "Felina" Walter successfully sneaks into his wife's apartment to say his goodbyes to her one final time. A running sentiment Walter continued to express was that everything he did was for his family. However, in these last intimate moments with his estranged wife, he finally confesses the brutal reality, "I did it for me. I liked it. I was good at it...I was alive" ("Felina"). This admission of guilt confirms that despite whatever Walter said to himself and others, his pursuit had always been a selfish one. The desire to do something like this had always existed; getting cancer just finally gave him a proper excuse to cut loose. This reality becomes even more evident when compared to Jesse. Leading up to the finale, Jesse only ever killed one person. But Jesse's emotional trauma became so unbearable that he spun out into an existential depression that the audience never truly gets to see him recover from. Walter, on the other hand, is completely energized by his actions, getting completely engulfed by this lifestyle. Jesse was trapped in this lifestyle; Walter was made alive in it. That desire was within him from the very beginning.

Breaking Bad seems acutely aware of the discussion of whether Walter always internally possessed this criminal disposition. This is made evident in the conversation surrounding his parents. While there is minimal information given about his family, and they are never actually seen on screen, the little we can glean from this data is quite telling. Walt clearly has an estranged relationship with his mother. Despite continual pestering from Skyler to let his mother know about his cancer diagnosis, Walter refuses to make her privy to that information, once even lying about going to see her in order to cook meth with Jesse instead ("4 Days Out"). Walter makes it clear that he and his mother were never close. At first, this seemingly suggests a connection to Bowlby's Theory of Attachment. Walter's behavior after he starts cooking meth covers all of the common symptoms mentioned in the study. However, in the one conversation we know Walter had with his mother, a different narrative is presented. His father died from Huntington's disease when Walter was only six. Walter recounts that his mother feared that Walter could inherit this disease from his father and eventually had him tested. The actual results of the test are inconsequential, but what stands out as more significant is the fact that a dialogue of nature emerges from this. A primary concern in Walt's family was the fear of inherited disease. Since Walter also laments that he wishes he had a better relationship with his father, there is an implicit linking between the failures/shortcomings of Walter's father and the shortcomings of Walter himself.

So while the link at first suggests a maternal failure from a nurtured perspective, it is just as easy to make the case for an inherited paternal failure from a nature perspective as well. This instance, in conjunction with everything discussed above, only continues to highlight Walt's basis of natural criminality.

JIMMY MCGILL

The opposite narrative is present in the prequel series to *Breaking Bad*. *Better Call Saul* focuses on lawyer Jimmy McGill as he transforms into Walter's scumbag lawyer Saul Goodman. The story of Jimmy McGill on *Better Call Saul* is a different kind of story in almost every way. Jimmy's turn toward darkness is less grandiose than Walter's and less linear. Instead of being a presumed icon of decency, Jimmy is constantly fighting an uphill battle to be taken seriously and not assumed to be the scum of the earth.

This was true even when Jimmy was a child. *Better Call Saul* gives the impression that he was always something of a schemer, even as a child working part-time at his dad's local convenience store. Chuck (Michael McKean), the older brother that Jimmy idolized, at one point says that "Slippin' Jimmy" had been conning ever since he was nine, that he "couldn't keep his fingers out of the cash drawer" ("Chicanery"). While it is never made explicit, it is implied on several occasions that Jimmy's "borrowing" was instrumental in the eventual closing of his dad's business. For instance, Chuck offhandedly mentions that Jimmy stole as much as \$14,000 from the store as a child ("Rebecca").

The majority of the show follows Jimmy as he tries to make it as a legitimate lawyer in Albuquerque. The general concept of the show focuses on his constant battle with whether or not to take the short and unethical route to success. This is exemplified even in the pilot, which is bookended by Jimmy defending a couple of belligerent teenagers in court and working with a pair of amateur conmen to make a quick buck. The first time he caves significantly is midway through the first season when he stages a fake accident in order to look like a hero, thereby gaining sympathy and attracting a client base for his practice ("Hero"). A similar incident occurs in the front half of the second season when Jimmy manufactures "evidence" after the fact to get his client off of criminal charges ("Cobbler"). This behavior is in constant conflict with the standard set by Chuck, who bitterly despises Jimmy and finds him unworthy to practice law, an institution that Chuck holds above all else.

Jimmy's taste for cutting corners goes off without a hitch early in the show, until he goes up against his brother's firm, HHM. In order to win clients over to his side, he carefully doctors a document to confuse the clients and his brother alike. At first, his plan goes off seamlessly. The clients, Mesa Verde Bank, leave HHM to work with his best friend Kim Wexler (Rhea Seahorn) and Jimmy emerges victorious. Chuck, though, knows something is up. He pursues a rabid investigation, trying to connect Jimmy with the error, and eventually getting Jimmy to confess by pretending to have a psychotic breakdown.

This confession is the beginning of a dark path for Jimmy. He is forced to defend himself in court, directly against Chuck ("Chicanery"). The trial is long and dirty. By the end of it, two consequences emerge. First, Jimmy is barred from practicing law for an entire year. Second, prodded by Jimmy, Chuck has a complete breakdown and erupts in anger in front of the court, spewing his actual hatred for Jimmy and his status as a lawyer. Jimmy was already aware of Chuck's distaste for him, but here Jimmy receives the full blast of vicious hate from his brother. This completely severs the already strained bond between the two McGill brothers.

Since he cannot practice law, Jimmy tries to direct commercials. But when commercial directing is insufficiently profitable, Jimmy stages a series of cons to find extra cash – blackmailing his community service supervisor, staging an accident to get settlement money, and even stooping so low as to manipulate an elderly former client by alienating her from her friends to get her to settle out of court on a case that would net Jimmy some money.

Even though Jimmy eventually has enough remorse to undo most of the damage, he is unable to foresee all of the harm his desperate acts have caused. While trying and failing to obtain a refund on his malpractice insurance, he tips off the insurance agent that Chuck might also need to have his rates increased as a result of his behavior at the trial (“Expenses”). This petty action causes a ripple of events that eventually leads to Chuck being forced into retirement from HHM against his will. Forced retirement, on top of Jimmy evading total disbarment, finally pushes Chuck over the edge. Jimmy visits him one final time to make amends, only for Chuck to dismiss him, not angrily this time but condescendingly and without emotion, telling Jimmy that in the end he is bound to hurt everyone around him, before walking direct up to him and bluntly stating, “the truth is, you’ve never mattered all that much to me” (“Lantern”). As Chuck was someone Jimmy spent his entire life looking up to, this final twist of the knife absolutely destroys Jimmy. That pain is only worsened when later in that episode Chuck succumbs to his distress and commits suicide by burning his house down, making this the last thing he ever said to Jimmy.

The proceeding season is born out of the trauma that ended Season Three. Jimmy bottles up his grief and pushes on, refusing to deal with his complicated feelings toward Chuck. As a result, Jimmy’s moral flexibility is even more pronounced. He starts a side business selling burner phones to the criminal underworld to make some extra cash. Even worse, he starts to rope Kim into his webs of deceit. They partake in a series of con jobs that get more ethically dubious as the season progresses. After getting denied the reinstatement of his law license a year after his disbarment hearing, Jimmy constructs an elaborate narrative to convince the committee that he is sincerity broken up about his brother’s death and wants to do everything he can to be worthy of the legacy Chuck left behind. At his appeal hearing, he gets choked up, cries, and convinces the entire courtroom that he is completely and totally sincere. Only once when he is alone with Kim does he break his façade: “Did you see those suckers? That one asshole was crying. I had this energy going through me. It was like improv or jazz, and then boom! I sunk the hook in” (“Winner”). In the conclusion of the fourth (and at the time of this writing most recent) season, Jimmy shows that there is no length he will not go to in order to get what he wants and no line he will not cross, including expressing fake grief over his dead brother. Any chance of experiencing real grief disappears at this moment. Everything is now defined by how he can use something to manipulate people for his own selfish ends. This is reinforced in the final moments of the season when he declares that he will no longer practice law as Jimmy McGill but instead, as his conman alter ego Saul Goodman. He is Jimmy McGill no more—only Saul Goodman remains.

Even though the entirety of *Better Call Saul* is about Jimmy resisting what he knows to be the easy option and trying to do the right thing, his environment significantly influences the choices he makes and the person he ultimately becomes. This is set in motion even when he was just a child working for his dad. While Chuck continually accused Jimmy of stealing from his father, a flashback in the cold open to the Season Two episode “Inflatable” paints the situation with a little more nuance. In this sequence, we watch a conman enter the store and succeed in tricking Jimmy’s dad into giving him money. Jimmy sees right through the scam and unsuccessfully tries to talk his dad out of falling for it. While Mr. McGill is in the back, Jimmy confronts the scammer, who offers to buy a pack of cigarettes for Jimmy to pocket the cash. While Jimmy contemplates that proposal, the conman imparts his last wisdom on Jimmy, saying, “There are wolves and sheep in this world, kid. Figure out which one you’re gonna be” (“Inflatable”). Jimmy silently answers this question by pocketing the cash as the man leaves.

This scene highlights that what is actually in Jimmy’s nature is not so much his scheming and lying, but his inherent ability to read people and understand them. When he grows up, Jimmy can sweet talk anyone and distill how to interact with them down to a science. He does this here when he accurately identifies the conman’s plot. It also shows that his first impulse is not to make a profit from the scam himself, but instead to warn his father. It is only after this fails that he decides to cash in on it. Most importantly he only decides to

pocket the cash himself when the conman convinces him to do so. Jimmy internalizes his words and makes the decision then and there to be a wolf. This crucial moment in Jimmy's childhood mimics that of the Bobo Doll Experiment conducted by Bandura. Jimmy observes the conman steal from his dad as the child watches the scientist attack the Bobo Doll. Then once he is alone he follows suit and steals from his father like the conman, making the situation function as a textbook example of Social Learning Theory. This watershed moment helped shape Jimmy into the person he will become. He again is defined by irresponsible people in his life who help lead him down a dark path that he could have otherwise avoided.

While *Better Call Saul* does not give many details on the time before the beginning of the show in Albuquerque, the general impression is that Jimmy spent this time clean. He worked in the mailroom at HHM, took law classes at the University of American Samoa, and seemed to keep his head down until he became a lawyer. This is extremely telling because this is the major point in his life where he is surrounded by people who are focused on working hard and getting the job done. It is only once he is out on his own that he encounters shady people that send him back on the conman's path. In the pilot of the show, Jimmy finds himself in the crosshairs of a couple of amateur conmen, who try to convince him that he has run over one of them with his car. Since Jimmy is well acquainted with these schemes, he sees right through their plan. However, since he is also in a bind himself, he enlists them to help him land a client he is trying to secure.

This marks the first return to "Slippin' Jimmy" in years, and one that is instantly filled with complications. While he tries to do things the "right" way and work hard to get the job done, his first major break into dubious behavior begins when Chuck finally lets Jimmy know how much he really hates him. At the conclusion of the penultimate episode of the first season, "Pimento," Chuck finally tells Jimmy why he never hired him to work at HHM: "I know you. I know what you were, what you are. People don't change...Slippin' Jimmy with a law degree is like a chimp with a machine gun." The realization that Chuck, in fact, loathed him as a lawyer is absolutely devastating. The rest of Jimmy's decisions are born out of the pain that this revelation has on him. In this era of his life, Jimmy's bad choices and scheming ways are the results not of the inclusion of a negative influence, but the removal of a positive one. With Chuck now positioned as the enemy, Jimmy becomes desperate to prove his brother wrong and does everything he can (including cutting corners) to make that happen.

This part of Jimmy's life is similar to Pavlov's dog and his theories of Classic Conditioning, as well as BF Skinner's work on Operant Conditioning. Jimmy is both the dog and the rat in these instances, while Chuck is always the scientist. Every time the bell rings, or Jimmy gets the chance to advance in his legal career, Chuck puts him down (in a much more perverse form of feeding him a treat) and Jimmy behaves poorly and unethically because it is what Chuck expects him to do. Once Chuck commits suicide though, Jimmy is no longer fed a "treat" when a legal opportunity arises, but he still salivates by cutting corners and behaving unethically because Chuck has conditioned him to do so. The same is true with Jimmy as the rat in Skinner's experiment. Jimmy has tried to win Chuck's approval as a lawyer time and time again, always getting punished by Chuck for this. After repeated failed attempts to do so, he recognizes that the path of least resistance is to stop playing the game altogether. The rat in the box found a path in the electrified box to the switch to turn off the power faster each time they were dropped in, and thus Jimmy does the same thing, resorting to criminal behavior more easily as he keeps getting shocked for trying to impress his brother by traditional means.

This psychological conditioning is the major fuel behind his decision to tamper with the legal documents in the Mesa Verde case. As expected, this decision sets off the chain of events that dig Jimmy into the proverbial hole he cannot get out of. Chuck records Jimmy's confession on a hidden tape recorder, Jimmy breaks in and destroys it with a private investigator present, he has to defend himself at a disbarment hearing, and he is suspended from practicing law for a year — all eventually leading both to Chuck's suicide and Jimmy adopting the Saul Goodman persona. So while Jimmy is responsible for the poor and unethical decisions he makes that lead him into eventually becoming Saul Goodman, it is also clear that at every junction of poor

decision making in his life he was always accompanied by people who sought to bring Jimmy down to their level, whether it be the conman from his childhood or his own brother. Therefore, reducing Jimmy's ultimate transformation as fundamentally part of his nature is to ignore large chunks of his life where he was nurtured, taught, and conditioned to do the wrong thing. As a result, Jimmy's journey to criminality is defined by nurture.

LEARNING ABOUT CRIMINALS

Even though Walter was destined for his criminal path, this was rarely the conversation surrounding his character as the show progressed. Even now, years after the finale aired, a popular topic of discussion online focuses on what point in the show Walter White truly became Heisenberg. This is true in part from the practical reality of long-form narrative television stories, which, unlike movies, are ongoing and constantly evolving. *Breaking Bad* is no exception in this regard – Gilligan reportedly planned to kill Jesse (the now fan favorite) at the end of the first season. In a real sense, the story of Walter White was evolving as it was being experienced. However, *Breaking Bad* also plays on our assumptions about character types in order to keep us guessing and hoping. Traditionally the main character of the narrative is supposed to be the hero. Walter seems so meek right off the bat that the audience is trained to expect some type of redemptive arc. Walter should only be allowed to become worse in order for him to learn and become better. This is the hero's journey. This is not Walter White's journey. But the audience can never be sure of that as it is not until the credits roll on the last episode that Walter's story is set in stone. As a result, Walter White's journey towards becoming the Heisenberg he always was is generally interpreted as fluid and unpredictable. In hindsight, it was always inevitable, but the arc to get there never felt that way.

With Jimmy McGill on the other hand, the exact opposite is true. From the first frame of *Better Call Saul*, the audience is never in doubt that well-meaning but easily distractible Jimmy McGill will transform into the selfish and insincere Saul Goodman by the time the show is over. The most basic reason for this is quite obvious: *Better Call Saul* is a prequel series. Its entire existence is based on the ties to *Breaking Bad* and Saul Goodman in that series. Part of the fascination of the show is the predetermined knowledge that no matter what small glimmers of hope they give the audience, it can only end with the desolation of everything loved about Jimmy McGill. Therefore, Jimmy's transition into Saul Goodman is completely inevitable, and can never be put in doubt. Jimmy is predestined for this by the existence of Saul Goodman on *Breaking Bad*.

When it is all laid out, this dynamic is actually quite peculiar. If Walter White has Heisenberg in his nature, then his journey should feel inevitable, while the exact opposite should be true for Jimmy becoming Saul Goodman. This highlights a complete subversion of the traditional expectations of the nature vs nurture discussion. It turns the conversation on its head and allows us to see the discussion in a completely different light. The debate is understandably quite complicated and cannot be settled plainly as one thing or another, which is what is so refreshing about how *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul* position their discussion about criminal behavior.

It is easy to excuse a great deal of what Walt does in his criminal career because of his situation. He is disrespected at work and by his family, and his terminal cancer diagnosis only lends more sympathy to a character the audience feels sorry for already. Even as his actions get viler they all take place with the backdrop of the terrible hand he has been dealt. However, *Breaking Bad* is intentional in making sure that it is understood that this impulse always existed in Walt. He was always cruel, selfish, and controlling, he was just talented at hiding it. That evil always existed within him.

It is also quite easy to simply write off a criminal as troubled or disturbed, evil or wrong at their core. That is exactly the impression Jimmy gives off in his secondary role in *Breaking Bad* and is definitely the impression that many have of him all throughout *Better Call Saul*. Yet the show is quick to dismiss Jimmy's

criminality as that straightforward. His decline is defined by poor choices and unfortunate circumstances, and despite the inevitability hovering over the entire series, it becomes abundantly clear—in retrospect—that Jimmy’s transformation could have been avoided with a change in a few different factors. As such the audience extends Jimmy a newfound sense of sympathy they probably never experience on *Breaking Bad*. He is human now and is not defined exclusively by his mistakes. In the Season Four finale, Jimmy sits alone in his broken-down car and weeps. He weeps for the death of Jimmy McGill as we knew him. And miraculously, the audience weeps with him.

These shows take typical stereotypes of characters we are familiar with and push them in opposite directions. *Breaking Bad* is Mr. Chips meets Scarface while *Better Call Saul* is how a sleazy car salesman lost his humanity. These portrayals are filled with nuance and layers. They push back against simplistic understandings of criminality while at the same time help shed light on what years of literature have emphasized. Both of these shows can then be used as effective pedagogical tools for conversations about criminality. While humans are never just single shades, they are often portrayed like this in many forms of media. Considering the influence that television and media have on the average student, these more static portrayals can precariously animate what people assume about criminals and criminality. This does not mean that pure ideological representations of criminality are inherently flawed. Characters like Anton Chigurh from *No Country for Old Men* (2007) or The Joker from *The Dark Knight* (2008) are less about constructing a character and more about unpacking the ideology of justice or chaos. They are just easy to confuse with nuanced portrayals of human criminals. Even a complex character on a prestige TV series has its limitations. Any journey to criminality that may exist is secondary to the overarching narrative of the show. By creating an entire narrative about the descent of a person into the criminal world, the primary focus has to be the forces that cause the character to descend. This is where the twist of nature and nurture succeeds. By being subversive about the ways these characters fall from grace, a more overt and more nuanced understanding of their journey remains at the forefront of the shows’ narrative. As such, *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul* create the opportunity for an accessible teaching tool to understand more complex concepts of criminality.

WORKS CITED

- Ainsworth, Mary S., and John Bowlby. “An Ethological Approach to Personality Development.” *American Psychologist*, vol. 46, no. 4, 1991, pp. 333–41. *APA PsycNET*, doi:10.1037/0003-066X.46.4.333.
- Bandura, Albert, et al. “Transmission of Aggression through Imitation of Aggressive Models.” *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, vol. 63, no. 3, 1961, pp. 575–82. *APA PsycNET*, doi:10.1037/h0045925.
- Bradley, Bill. “Vince Gilligan Finally Reveals Why Walter White Left Gray Matter.” *Huffington Post*, 17 Mar. 2016. *Huff Post*, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/vince-gilligan-walter-white-gray-matter_us_56e85f27e4b0b25c91838d57.
- Feder, H. H., et al. “Suppression of Feminine Behaviour by Administration of Testosterone Propionate to Neonatal Rats.” *The Journal of Endocrinology*, vol. 34, no. 1, Jan. 1966, pp. 131–32.
- Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Edited by Roger Woolhouse, Revised ed. edition, Penguin Classics, 1998.
- “Pavlov, P Ivan. “Conditioned reflexes: An investigation of the physiological activity of the cerebral cortex.” *Annals of neurosciences* vol. 17,3 (2010): 136-41. doi:10.5214/ans.0972-7531.1017309”
- Quadagno, David M., et al. “Effect of Perinatal Gonadal Hormones on Selected Nonsexual Behavior Patterns: A Critical Assessment of the Nonhuman and Human Literature.” *Psychological Bulletin*, vol. 84, no. 1, 1977, pp. 62–80. *APA PsycNET*, doi:10.1037/0033-2909.84.1.62.
- Rosenhan, D. L. “On Being Sane in Insane Places.” *Science*, vol. 179, no. 4070, Jan. 1973, pp. 250–58. *science*. sciencemag.org, doi:10.1126/science.179.4070.250.

Romanowski

Shaywitz, B. A., et al. "Sex Differences in the Functional Organization of the Brain for Language." *Nature*, vol. 373, no. 6515, Feb. 1995, pp. 607–09. *PubMed*, doi:10.1038/373607a0.

Skinner, B. F. *Cumulative Record*. Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1959.

Van Putten, T., et al. "Subjective Response to Antipsychotic Drugs." *Archives of General Psychiatry*, vol. 38, no. 2, Feb. 1981, pp. 187–90.

Watson, John Broadus. *Behaviorism*. University of Chicago Press, 1930.

AUTHOR BIO

Max Romanowski is a doctoral student at Southern Illinois University in the Department of Mass Communication and Media Arts. His research interests include television studies, particularly the sitcom, developments of new media, and science fiction in the 21st century.

SUGGESTED CITATION

APA

Romanowski, M. (2019). "Nature vs. Nurture in Albuquerque: What *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul* teach us about how we talk about criminals". *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*. 6(2). <http://journaldialogue.org/issues/v6-issue-2/nature-vs-nurture-in-albuquerque-what-breaking-bad-and-better-call-saul-teach-us-about-how-we-talk-about-criminals/>

MLA

Romanowski, Max. "Nature vs. Nurture in Albuquerque: What *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul* Teach Us About How We Talk about Criminals." *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*, vol.6, no. 2, 2019. journaldialogue.org/issues/v6-issue-2/nature-vs-nurture-in-albuquerque-what-breaking-bad-and-better-call-saul-teach-us-about-how-we-talk-about-criminals/



All papers in are published under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-Share-Alike License. For details please go to: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/us/>.

Breaking the Rules: Playing Criminally in Video Games

James Tregonning

Independent Scholar

Melbourne, VIC, Australia

james.tregonning34@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Video games have long courted controversy for their frequent valorisation of criminality. However, in this article, I consider heroic criminals in video games from a different perspective. I focus on two games – Lucas Pope’s *Papers, Please* (2013) and Osmotic Studio’s *Orwell* (2016) – that position the player as a low-level government operative in a fictional authoritarian regime. Players are expected to process information for their governments, although they are also given opportunities to undermine or subvert the regime. Thus, the trope of heroic criminal is used to comment on the function and role of the state. It becomes the lens through which issues of political philosophy and ethics are balanced against the more pragmatic concerns of personal safety. These multiple competing pressures allow *Papers, Please* and *Orwell* to position heroic criminality as a multifaceted problem for the player to critically engage with.

Keywords: *Papers, Please*; *Orwell*; video games; criminality; video game violence

INTRODUCTION

Given the tedium of debates around video game violence, the fact that they have only been happening for twenty-odd years can come as a surprise. One of the early activists protesting video game violence was the litigious Jack Thompson, a lawyer who in 1999 led a \$130 million lawsuit against some video game companies including Nintendo, Sega, and Sony, claiming that media violence caused a shooting at Heath High School (Associated Press). In 2005, Thompson published 'A Modest Video Game Proposal', suggesting that if video games do not create real-world violence, game developers should create a game where the player violently murders game developers (JackThompson.org). He was permanently disbarred in 2008, but not before filing a federal civil rights action lawsuit against the Florida Bar and Supreme Court (Stuart). Of course, in discussions about video game violence, the gaming community is often its own worst enemy. In 2009, Thompson sued Facebook for \$40 million for "allowing anti-Thompson groups to post messages that have caused him 'great harm and distress.'" One such Facebook group was apparently titled "Jack Thompson should be smacked across the face with an Atari 2600" (Chalk). Gaming writer Andy Chalk notes that "it may seem like a joke to anyone familiar with Thompson ... but without context, it looks like a threat; and we, the gamers, end up looking like juvenile idiots or, worse, the violent psychos Thompson has worked so hard to make us out to be." It can be difficult to have a legitimate discussion about video game violence, or any other cultural issue around video games. Gaming communities can be insular and immature, and often react strongly to perceived criticism; meanwhile, *Grand Theft Auto V* has sold 90 million copies and made \$6 billion in revenue, making it "the most profitable entertainment product of all time" (Batchelor).

In this essay, I would like to circumvent both the alarmists and the reactionaries by treading a more nuanced path between the two. I acknowledge that there are legitimate questions about the effects of playing like a criminal in video games; it is not unthinkable that criminal or anti-social behaviour might be influenced by a wider media culture that glorifies these behaviours. However, I also argue that video game criminality is often contradictory. On a fictional level, the player may be transgressing fictional laws, robbing virtual citizens or stealing virtual cars. But on a structural level, the player is demonstrating obedience to the overarching conditions and demands of the game. Matthew Kelly points to the "psychological and physical self-modifying practices that players must undertake during gameplay," (461) arguing that such practices make up "the interface through which gameplay is experienced and conducted" (468). To some, this claim might deepen their conviction that video games create violent criminal behaviour; players of *Grand Theft Auto* are psychologically modifying themselves to better align with the criminal behaviour of the protagonist. But considered from a structural perspective, instead of a fictional one, so-called criminal behaviour in video games might, in fact, be deepening the player's obedience to the systems of authority that surround them in their everyday life. As Kelly argues, playing a game "requires a conscious adaptation to constantly evolving goals or obstacles," a mental process that can align the individual with the cultural logics of the modern age. Indeed, he argues, "both games and socioeconomic activity within networked societies use the work/play synthesis to establish subjectivity as a fundamental component in their respective functioning" (469). One might pose some pivotal questions: do video games depicting criminal behaviour make players more obedient, or less? Is the player internalizing criminal behaviours, or becoming a better citizen?

I would like to answer these questions by stepping slightly around them and by considering the criminal as an aesthetic and political device in games that depict authoritarian regimes. I use two games – Lucas Pope's *Papers, Please* (2013), and Osmotic Studios' *Orwell: Keeping An Eye On You* (2016) – that problematize the trope of the heroic criminal. In these games, the player is positioned as a low-level government operative functioning under a fictional authoritarian regime. The gameplay largely consists of carrying out relatively mundane tasks for the regime, such as processing passports or trawling social media sites. In each game, the player may subvert or resist the regime, although not without some degree of risk. The games, thus, represent

an intriguing variation on the trope of the heroic criminal. Such a player does not endorse criminality in any straightforward way; on the contrary, the ludic structures of the game actively discourage criminal behaviour. Instead, the key conflict lies between the ludic structures of these games, which encourage uncritical obedience to an authoritarian regime, and the player's own moral compass, which may cause the player to balk at some of the tasks that they are required to carry out. These games reverse the typical discourse around obedience and authority in video games, pitting the player against the rules of the game rather than encouraging such a player to unthinkingly inhabit violent or criminal fictional roles in line with the game's ludic structure.

VIDEO GAMES AND (DIS)OBEDIENCE

One of the basic concerns about players playing criminals in video games is that video games are also used for educational purposes, particularly within a military context. Much has been written on *America's Army*, a 2002 game designed to teach civilians – especially children – about the structure of the American army, thereafter serving as a recruitment tool. Colonel Casey Wardynski, who directed *America's Army* project, has made comments precisely to this effect: “You can't wait until they're 17, because by then they will have decided that they're going to college, or to a trade school, or they'll already have a job that they're planning to stay in. You have to get to them before they've made those decisions” (qtd. in Percy 24). If video games have pedagogical value, such that the US military can use for recruitment, it is not unthinkable that the more unsavoury behaviours depicted in video games might also have some form of influence on an individual's behaviour or thought processes. The argument is often phrased as such: if in film or literature, we observe criminal behaviour and vicariously live through the rebellious protagonist, then in video games, we play as that protagonist and vicariously carry out these violent actions ourselves. The problem, according to this argument, is that by personally carrying out such violent actions, we are practicing or rehearsing violent behaviours that will transfer into our real lives. The American Psychological Association's 2005 Resolution on Violent Video Games states that “the link between violent video game exposure and aggressive behaviour is one of the most studied and best established,” quietly adding that the interpretations of these well-established effects “have varied dramatically” (“Resolution”). In other words, everybody agrees that video games have some link to aggressive behaviour, but nobody agrees on exactly what that link is. Of course, the concern about audiences imitating characters in media is by no means limited to video games; Jennifer Kirby notes that after the release of Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*, there were “a rash of claims about ‘copycat crimes’ in the British Press, with reports stating that gangs of youths committed violent acts after purchasing clothing and/or make-up that resembled the uniforms of Alex and his droogs in the film” (294). She further notes that Kubrick ultimately withdrew the film in Britain as a direct result of this controversy (294). Our history with the so-called heroic criminal is, therefore, complicated. On the one hand, some may find a vicarious joy in seeing a fictional character fight back against the law or against seemingly oppressive social norms. On the other hand, that same joy is the target of censure by those concerned for the safety and wellbeing of the wider population.

A question remains regarding the form of the video game medium. Is there anything special about video games that makes them unique or exceptional in their portrayal of criminality? Or are they merely the latest victim of overzealous parents and lawmakers? The answer lies in the specific configuration of the video game medium. As a medium, video games are about rules. A synergy exists between game rules and real-life laws; they can overlap or engage with each other in interesting ways. For instance, *America's Army* assumes a synergy between the rules of the game and the real rules of the American military. If a player shoots their teammate, they will be sent to a virtual jail, where they must sit in a cell for a given amount of time. This game structure models the real-life legal consequences of ‘fragging,’ or intentionally killing another soldier.

The game also includes training sequences, teaching the player how to play the game, but also teaching this player the appropriate military procedures around marksmanship, gun safety, and the chain of command. Technically, game rules do not directly engage with real laws; rather they engage with the legal systems of the fictional world, which may be directly modeled on laws from the real world. That is, a player who shoots their teammate in *America's Army* is not sent to a real prison, but rather to a fictional, virtual prison, simulating the real outcome if that behaviour were to take place in the real world. Subsequently, some games have their game rules conflict with fictional laws, as is clear with, for example, *Grand Theft Auto (GTA)*. As I suggested above, these games represent an intriguing contradiction: they revolve around illegal acts such as theft or murder, but in performing these acts, players are, in a sense, also obeying the rules of the game. Crime is both obedient and disobedient, both within and against conflicting rule sets. This contradiction often allows these games to reflect the alternate social and moral codes of organized crime. For example, in *Mafia III*, one plays as Lincoln Clay, a mixed-race African-American raised by the black mob in New Bordeaux. Clay robs a bank to pay a debt to the Italian mob, who subsequently ask him to murder his surrogate father and take leadership of the black mob. Clay refuses out of loyalty to his father, leading to the Italians attempting to murder both him and his surrogate father. Here the player is confronted again by conflicting sets of rules: Clay's moral sense of obligation conflicts with the brutal *realpolitik* of mob relations.

Mafia III uses conflicting rule sets such as these to explore the precarious social status of a black American in the 1960s. Teresa Godwin Phelps describes the picaro, hero of the picaresque novel, as an outsider who reveals the illusionary nature of social order: "the picaro seeks order, finds none, and his disordered life disintegrates further, mirroring the society he uncovers." In this narrative structure, society is deeply unbalanced: "the stalwarts of society, the enactors of societal order – judges, jailers, police – are not merely stupid or indifferent; they are corrupt" (1436). Such comments are equally true of *Mafia III*: as a black man living in New Orleans, Clay is frequently subject to racial epithets from enactors of the social order. Early in the game, a white security officer condescends to Clay, calling him a "shit-heel" and complaining about affirmative action: "Sad day when a God-fearin' white man can't get a job, but any old nigger who staggers in is hired on the spot." The game also demonstrates wider social ills through its depiction of class. An IGN review notes "if you steal a car in an affluent neighbourhood, cops will show up quickly and in full force. Steal a car in a poor neighbourhood, and the cops might not even show up at all" (Sliva). The game systematizes racial and economic inequality, suggesting that the police are far more concerned with the wellbeing of those at the top of the economic pyramid than those at the bottom. The police do not protect and serve indiscriminately: their support is shaped by wider issues of political power, which in turn are informed by America's history of slavery. As with the picaros, Clay's criminal activity can be read as a wider metaphor for the social and economic displacement experienced by black communities in America. Phelps comments particularly on the role of birth in the picaresque: "The picaro is usually low-born – an orphan, bastard, or bungled baby of some sort whose origins are disreputable or unknown. Society rejects him because of his shameful birth and thus mandates he become a criminal or trickster in order to survive in a hostile, unaccepting world" (1433). Lincoln Clay is himself a biracial orphan, but there is a wider point about the relationship between race and social standing in America. That is, the problem Clay faces is not specifically the problem of biracial orphans, but rather of black communities more broadly. From that perspective, criminality in *Mafia III* is posed as a way to explore the marginalized and tenuous position of African Americans in 1960s America.

BUCKING THE SYSTEM

There is certainly more to be said about the contradictions involved in games premised on criminality. However, the games I am focused on take a different approach to the concept of criminality altogether. Both

Papers, Please and *Orwell* are set in authoritarian regimes, where the player takes on the role of a low-level government official who must carry out tasks for the state. Game rules are aligned with fictional laws, but these fictional laws are themselves often deeply immoral, rooted in a corrupt or fascist political system. The player is placed in morally compromising situations and must decide how to act. As I suggested above, the conflict is no longer between game rules and fictional laws; here, those two are interrelated. Rather, the conflict lies between the fictional laws of the game and the moral compass of the player. Criminality is not assumed, as in *GTA* or *Mafia III*, but rather posed as a question. The player might simply complete the given tasks, glossing over these ethical questions and demonstrating a straightforward obedience to the fictional state. Other players might look for marginal spaces within the structure of the game, small exploits and loopholes that allow the player to behave against the interests of the fictional state. These subversive behaviours often carry a direct penalty for the player, resulting in warnings, fines, or in some circumstances, imprisonment and the end of the game. Each game has different stakes and presents the player with different problems; in both games, however, criminality is an ethical problem to be considered by the player.

In *Papers, Please*, the player takes on the role of a customs inspector who sits in a booth and verifies the passports of people wishing to cross the border into Arstotzka, a fictional communist country during the Cold War. The Cold War setting is important for this game. For many people, immigration is a controversial issue. Some players might have a different approach to the game if they were, for instance, positioned as an American immigration officer processing refugees from Syria. The game, therefore, takes pains to establish the government of Arstotzka as corrupt and inefficient. These measures entice the player into considering criminal behaviour as an ethically viable option. Thus, the game heavily exaggerates its negative depiction of a Soviet-style government. Arstotzka, for instance, uses capital punishment and forced labor. At the start of the game, the player is given the job of checkpoint investigator after that player's name has been pulled from a monthly labor lottery, suggesting high unemployment. Paranoia and distrust are high: if the player accepts large bribes, his/her neighbors notice that player's increased wealth and report them to the authorities, who arrest both the player and their family. Strict adherence to the law is not necessarily productive either, as government officials are often corrupt. One of the guards, Calensk, offers the player a bribe if they aggressively detain people instead of just denying their visas and asking them to leave. The player's supervisor, Dimitri, also orders the player to let his lover through the checkpoint trouble-free. But when she arrives, her papers are not in order. The player can deny her entry, earning the supervisor's ire, or detain her, in which case the supervisor will fabricate charges against this player and subsequently have him or her arrested, thus, ending the game. However, the player who allows the woman through receives a citation and loses their wages. The sum effect of such types of events is to disconnect players from any introduced notions of national or social allegiance. Justice and neighbourliness are hollow values; players can only rely on themselves.

Wages are crucially important in *Papers, Please*, as the player must earn a certain amount of money to keep their family fed and healthy. Players are paid for each person processed correctly, whereas each incorrect processing results in a citation and a loss of wages. Subsequent citations on the same day may carry further financial penalties. The player is therefore incentivized to process people as quickly and accurately as possible, a process which itself dehumanizes the people coming through the checkpoint. Under the auspices of the game's system, these travellers are primarily constructed as work for the player, as part of a quota, rather than as human beings. The problem is exacerbated by the increasingly labyrinthine bureaucratic systems, which demand the player's full attention. At the start of each day, the player may receive a new directive from their superiors, adding an extra step to the customs process. The player must maintain a certain processing speed despite these complications or risk their family's health and wellbeing. This Kafkaesque bureaucracy represents the first ethical problem for players. Some travellers may appear at customs with discrepancies in their paperwork. For instance, a worker might appear with their passport, but without a worker's permit.

The player is allowed (but not required) to investigate and resolve these discrepancies; for instance, the player might ask the worker for his or her permit, which the worker might then produce from a pocket, having simply forgotten about it. However, the interrogation process takes up valuable time, and investigating discrepancies is not legally required. If the worker does not initially produce that permit, the player may immediately deny that individual entry without bothering to investigate any further. This decision makes good financial sense, as the player will save time and still receive their wages. However, it is also arguably unethical, as that player is penalizing travellers who may have the correct paperwork but do not present it all correctly. In the above example, the worker has the legal right to enter the country, but because of failing to initially present the worker's permit, and because the player is not obliged to investigate discrepancies, the worker might be denied entry into Arstotzka.

The artistic achievement of *Papers, Please* is to model a tension between wages and job performance. The financial vulnerability inherent in the job means that players might try to meet their performance targets by exploiting loopholes and gaming the system. The human consequences are discovered by those denied entry by a rushed customs officer. Of course, some players might have little sympathy for those with incorrect paperwork, emphasizing instead, the individual responsibility of these travellers. The game certainly seems to encourage this attitude, at least in part. Many of those who approach the customs desk do have incorrect paperwork. Some travellers will simply acknowledge their mistakes and leave, while others plead ignorance or clerical error. Many travellers are largely unsympathetic characters – some do not even think to bring their passports. It is easy to become jaded and cynical towards the travellers, especially given that their haphazard paperwork threatens the livelihood of the player's fictional family. However, even though many travellers do not elicit much sympathy, the game also positions these unsympathetic characters as part of an overarching structure designed to cultivate a studied indifference in the player. Many travellers do not themselves evoke sympathy, but the structures of the fictional government in *Papers, Please* equally discourage the player from developing any deep sense of attachment or shared humanity. The player's predominantly negative experience with immigrants confirms and reinforces the systems set in place by Arstotzka's authoritarian government, allowing the player to rationalize the decision that is being taken to deny entry to potentially legitimate travellers without asking any questions. It is both emotionally easy and financially convenient for the player to assume that travellers with any discrepancies are illegitimate.

Beyond these fictional concerns, the gameplay is also designed to systematically dull the player's interest. Daniel Johnson notes that the gameplay is repetitive, instilling “the feeling of seriality through anonymous segments that blend together. Take documents. Check for errors. Deploy stamp arm. Reject or accept. Retract stamp arm. Return documents. Call next in line. Repeat” (606). He further notes that “the act of play becomes an act of administration, of labouring” (607). The player's behaviour becomes routine, and individual (fictional) human beings are reduced to processible data points. Kelly further notes that the player is not even allowed to experience the humanity of their family outside of work: “instead, you are treated to a black screen with stark, piercing text that reminds you which relatives are dying, which bills are not paid, and how much harder you will need to work tomorrow in order to keep your loved ones alive” (471). The family is reduced to data in much the same way as the travellers, or immigrants, are, thus, highlighting the wider effects of this dehumanizing system. It is not only about dehumanizing the foreign Other, the immigrant or the non-citizen; on the contrary, the systems set up in Arstotzka also neutralize the most intimate and personal relationships between its citizens. Spouses, children, and parents are all conceptualized purely in terms of financial data.

The dull, repetitive nature of gameplay in *Papers, Please* further encourages its players to act ‘automatically,’ without much thought given to any individual case. One is struck by comparisons to the Milgram experiments or Hannah Arendt's wider concept of the banality of evil. Paul Hollander quotes

Milgram's conclusion after his infamous obedience experiments: "ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process" (57). Arendt similarly discusses how Adolf Eichmann, a Nazi commander largely responsible for organizing the logistics of the Holocaust, rationalized his actions: "he remembered perfectly well that he would have had a bad conscience only if he had not done what he had been ordered to – to ship millions of men, women, and children to their death with great zeal and the most meticulous care" (25). Of course, one might question whether Arendt's account of Eichmann is entirely correct; Hollander notes that Milgram's biographer, Thomas Blass, disagreed with this depiction of Eichmann's character. Hollander quotes Blass as saying that Eichmann "pursued his goal of shipping as many Jews as possible to the extermination camps with a degree of drive, perseverance, and enthusiasm that was clearly beyond the call of duty" (59). Regardless of Eichmann's psychology, Milgram's experiments seem to support Arendt's general point that many people will suspend their ethical compass at the behest of authority figures. Individuals may rely on the systems and structures that surround them, abdicating their own moral responsibility in favour of obedience to authority. Arendt raises this concept explicitly in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*: "the defense would apparently have preferred him [Eichmann] to plead not guilty on the grounds that under the then existing Nazi legal system he had not done anything wrong ... [and] that it had been his duty to obey" (21). One can imagine players in *Papers, Please* deploying many of the same explanations. They were only playing the game; they were obliged to follow the laws of Arstotzka.

As a medium, then, the system-oriented nature of video games makes them a prime tool for reflecting on systematicity in general. *Papers, Please* uses its systematic gameplay to reflect on the perils of social and legal systems of obedience and authority, particularly the way in which systems, as systems, encourage individuals towards being unthinkingly and uncritically obedient. Within that framework, criminality becomes a type of legitimate resistance, elevating *Papers, Please* above those games that uncritically celebrate criminality, whereby criminal behaviour is transgressive on a fictional level but not on a game level. In ludic terms, criminal behaviour is a form of obedience to the overarching ludic structures of the game. However, criminality in *Papers, Please* is a fictional transgression as well as a transgression against the procedural logic of the game. This doubled transgression allows *Papers, Please* to critically highlight systems of power and the problem of the so-called moral or heroic criminal. It asks the player: when do you disobey?

Within the context of the dulling gameplay of *Papers, Please*, this call to critical reflection is prompted by some of the travellers, who provide troubling exceptions to the player's practiced disregard. For instance, after a bomber attacks the checkpoint, travellers are required to provide an ID card. If the player challenges those without an ID card, they might reply "I never got one" or "I left before they were issued." If the photo on the card looks different, they might say "It is an old picture" or "The years have been cruel." Some have changed their name; some could not afford certain certificates or documents. Asylum seekers need special grants, or they will be detained. These more marginal instances are often morally troubling for the player. Some of these characters have reasonable discrepancies that they can easily explain, and, thus, ought to be allowed into the country. These characters are perhaps less troubling, relatively speaking, as they are inconvenienced and annoyed rather than placed in danger. The other, more emotionally difficult category includes characters who have incorrect paperwork but have compelling emotional reasons why they should be allowed into the country. On the fifth day, for instance, a husband enters the booth with valid papers and tells the player his wife is next in line. His wife enters, but without an entry permit. If the player interrogates her, she says "They would not give me permit. I have no choice. I will be killed if I return to Antegria." The player here has the two options of either following the rules and denying the woman entry, in which case, she will leave the booth, presumably to her death, or allowing her passage and knowingly incurring a penalty. From a strict gameplay perspective, the most beneficial decision is to deny her entry and receive a regular wage. On the other hand, it

would seem humane to let the woman in and accept the penalty. The situation is further complicated by wider questions about asylum seekers and refugees, immigration, corruption, political processes, and the customs officer's ethical responsibility to the state, to their family, and to the individual human being in front of him. Yet, on the simplest level, players are faced with a conflict between the game rules, which incentivize the player to obey the game's fictional laws, and the helplessness of a refugee navigating an uncaring system. The conflict is equally one that differentiates between various types of players: the player can abdicate moral responsibility and simply act as a drone, or begin to interrogate the underlying presuppositions of the Arstotzkan regime.

CRIMINALITY IN THE SURVEILLANCE STATE

In summarizing *Papers, Please*, one might note that it positions criminal behaviour against the structures and logic of the game, whereas other games might more frequently align criminality with game structures. Even then, of course, criminality is not always thoughtless or automatic, as illustrated by *Mafia III*. Nevertheless, *Papers, Please* problematizes criminality and invokes weighty moral and philosophical issues around political resistance and the banality of evil in a bureaucratic society. *Orwell*, the second game under consideration, is clearly inspired, in part, by *Papers, Please*. It takes many of the same thematic concerns and applies them to the more contemporary context of digital surveillance. For many reviewers, *Orwell* is slightly heavy-handed with its dialogue and themes, and is arguably not fully equipped to deal with the enormity of the questions that it raises (Carpenter; Savage; Walker). John Walker, a reviewer for *RockPaperShotgun*, wrote that the game does not “employ subtlety in its delivery of the subject matter. There is no deep understanding here, you won't have your mind changed, and it certainly doesn't have any of the emotional impact of *Papers, Please*.” But he continues, “within its own barmy universe, it works!” This seemingly contradictory review captures something of the nature of *Orwell*. It has some serious flaws and is relatively superficial, but is, nonetheless, at the same time, oddly compelling.

Developed by Osmatic Studios, *Orwell* is the first of two games in a series. Retroactively subtitled *Keeping an Eye On You*, the game locates the player as part of a modern-day surveillance system, crudely akin to the American surveillance program PRISM. These digital surveillance systems make up the bulk of the gameplay, which revolves around the player trying to catch a bomber. At the start of the game, the player is shown CCTV footage of a bomb exploding in a plaza. A blue-haired woman is seen leaving the plaza moments before the bomb explodes; facial analysis from the CCTV records shows that the woman has a criminal record. The player is tasked with tracking down the alleged bomber and is told to begin by investigating this suspicious blue haired woman. *Orwell* suggests that the player exists within a dystopian 1984 regime. The game is set in The Nation, a fictional country ruled by The Party, and the player must survey the population to root out terrorists and dissenters. At the outset, the game demonstrates a superficial understanding of the issues surrounding the contemporary surveillance state. James Harding notes that “the common refrain is that the proliferation of surveillance technologies threatens democracy” (225), but argues that the more pertinent problem is that the government has largely outsourced responsibility for its public services, “[subordinating] those services to the business models developed by private contractors” (226). Ultimately he suggests that “Western governments [are] becoming increasingly beholden to private companies, upon which they now rely not only to provide government services but ironically also to possess the competence and means to provide oversight of those services” (226). Yet, *Orwell* does not deal with any such high-level theoretical framework for understanding the problems of the contemporary surveillance state. Rather, its strength lies in its evocative and unsettling portrayal of social media platforms, which accurately captures elements of our own online experiences.

Many of the websites and social media platforms presented in *Orwell* are real-world technologies:

'Timelines' represents *Orwell's* Facebook; 'uTell' symbolizes Facebook Messenger; and 'Singular' is similar to Tinder or some other dating app. Many of the comments and behaviours on these platforms eerily echo similar real-life situations, forcefully highlighting the ways we ourselves might be studied online. For instance, on the Timelines page for the blue-haired woman, Cassandra Watergate (or Cassie), one character repeatedly leaves comments that mock her for her rich and controlling parents. When Cassie posts a picture of her newly dyed hair, a Jake Klefton comments "did mommy and daddy agree with that? xD." When she posts about leaving her parents' pharmaceutical company, Klefton comments again: "what? who's gonna pay for your stuff now? mommy and daddy won't like this! xD." Further similarities include Goldfels' blog containing spam comments, promising higher traffic through search engine optimization. The dating app Singular also shows conversations with men who turn hostile after being rejected: "Now I totally get why you are over 30 and still single. Arrogant bitch." Many of these little moments accurately evoke our own online experiences. Such evocation is deeply uncomfortable, as players are engaged in monitoring these digital sources and extracting personal information about different individuals. By performing surveillance activities within this fictional setting, our thoughts are inevitably drawn to the ways that other unseen eyes might be monitoring our own online excursions. This evocative portrayal prompts players to consider their own precarious position in a surveillance state, activating the figure of the heroic criminal as a problem for the player to consider.

This uneasy feeling that accompanies playing *Orwell* might be explained through the concept of the data double. Kevin Haggerty and Richard Ericson define the data double as "a form of becoming which transcends human corporeality and reduces flesh to pure information." These doubles "serve as markers for access to resources, services and power in ways which are often unknown to its referent" (613). *Orwell* asks the player to construct these data doubles in the pursuit of a terrorist bomber. In gameplay terms, the screen is split in half. On the right side, the player can access information stored on computers – be it publicly available information on websites, or private information from sources such as emails, phone calls, texts, private messages, and bank records. Using these tools, the player must collect information about their targets, and upload it into the *Orwell* system, which sits on the left side of the screen and holds the constructed profiles of different subjects – their data doubles. It includes information such as date of birth, address, occupation, relationship, background information, social and professional networks, activities, and personality traits. The transfer of information from right to left actualizes the reduction of the individual into bits of data, stripping away the individual's context and interpersonal relations, treating digital footprints as reliable indicators of personal identity. This assumption has its own parallels in the real world; Anna Hedenus and Christel Backman write that in the professional job market, recruiters "tend to view applicants' data-doubles as keys to who they really are" (644). The data double haunts the individual, much like a shadowy double in a Gothic text. This haunting spawns the uneasy feeling that arises while playing *Orwell*: players recognize hints of their own data doubles in the evocative depiction of various online spaces. As the characters are haunted by some of the things that they have said and done online, players are haunted by the idea that the same thing could happen to them, too.

Within this context of doubled haunting, the player must make decisions about how to deal with the characters that resist the surveillance state. At certain points in the game, the player is presented with two pieces of conflicting information and must determine which one to upload into *Orwell*, with each piece having different implications for the subjects under surveillance. For example, before the events whereby the game begins, Cassie participated in a protest and was arrested for assaulting a police officer, although she was eventually found not guilty due to a lack of evidence. Cassie discusses the assault in a series of texts with her friend Juliet Kerrington. The distraught Cassandra frets about how she assaulted the officer in anger, and Juliet tries to calm her, suggesting purer motivations: "You hurt that officer to save me!" The player must choose which piece of information to upload into *Orwell*. It is unclear which person is telling the truth: Cassie clearly feels guilty, and Juliet is obviously trying to make her feel better. Both statements highlight Cassie's mental state,

and neither represent attempts to neutrally and factually recount the actual events. Nevertheless, the player must choose one statement to upload into Orwell, knowing that the police will treat it as a factual recount and even as a confession. The player's decision might be driven by an affection for or dislike of Cassie, or by that player's subjective judgment about which statement is more reliable. Once again, the player is confronted by the trope of the heroic criminal – but where in *Papers, Please* the player could become the heroic criminal, sacrificing wages to safely bring a refugee into the country, in *Orwell*, the heroic criminals are monitored by the player. Again, the idea of 'heroic criminals' exists here in perpetual scare quotes. Characters like Cassie and Juliet problematize the trope of heroic criminal for the player, who must choose how to act given the information made available to them. If the player decides that Cassie and the members of her activist group, Thought, are indeed heroic criminals, then such a player might try to skew the relayed information to cast those characters in a better light. However, if the player decides that Thought should not be supported, they might more aggressively skew this information against the characters. Conversely, as a mid-point between these two options, the player might try to relay information as factually and neutrally as possible, striving towards some attempt at an objective judgment about which statement holds more truth. The game allows players to respond to the trope of heroic criminal, as played out in the actions of Cassie and others. It allows players to influence the government's treatment of Thought, all the while maintaining a discourse on the contemporary issue of digital surveillance.

The trope of heroic criminal only becomes a direct problem for the player's self-conception near the end of the game. In a climactic scene, the player listens in on a phone call where Juliet realizes that Thought is being observed. She directly addresses the player, asking them to tear down Orwell. The player is presented with a choice – to push forward and have the final members of Thought arrested, or to disobey the government and subvert or destroy Orwell's efficacy. Thus, the trope of heroic criminal becomes a problem for the player's own self-conception. They must weigh the morality of the Orwell system and decide whether it should be continued or ended. At this moment, the awful power of the surveillance apparatus is revealed. *Orwell* has allowed the player to sit as judge over the members of Thought. Throughout the game the player has been reading their emails and texts, arbitrating as to what information the government should receive. I have suggested that this process of arbitration is already morally uncomfortable. In this climactic scene, however, the player can use Orwell to go into a government minister's phone and computer, read her private emails, and upload controversial out-of-context lines to the police, who are then legally obliged to investigate (another artificial constraint of the game). If the player follows this course, the minister resigns, and Orwell is dismantled. The player is given the immense power to single-handedly destroy a mammoth government initiative. Orwell might be immoral, but at the same time, one unelected and relatively unskilled government employee is able to determine the national security policies of an entire nation. The awful power of Orwell is inadvertently demonstrated when it is misused by an individual trying to destroy it. Similar comments might be made with reference to Edward Snowden, an external private contractor hired by the government to help maintain systems that the government was incapable of maintaining internally. There are legitimate questions about the power as well as the oversight of elected government ministers in comparison to the privately contracted "information mercenary," as Harding calls them (228), and about how those power dynamics strengthen or weaken the institutions of democracy. The trope of heroic criminal takes on a nastier edge; the player might decide to destroy Orwell, framing the decision as a heroic act of criminality, but this illegal action, made in the name of preserving democracy, points to a wider softening of democratic structures and the vulnerability of the institutions they are ostensibly trying to preserve.

Both *Orwell* and *Papers, Please* problematize the trope of heroic criminal. *Papers, Please* uses repetitive gameplay loops to dull the player's interest and to ease the thoughtless rejection of potentially legitimate immigrants or even refugees. In *Papers, Please*, criminality is arguably heroic when it resists the status

quo, obstructing the structural systems of control manufactured by the fictional Arstotzkan government. Resistance is neither petulant nor childish, as the player must balance their magnanimous acts against the lives and welfare of family members. In *Orwell*, the stakes are not as complex. On the surface, *Orwell* is a much more sanitized and comfortable system than that of *Papers, Please*; the player need not worry about the lives of their family or the speed at which the information is processed. The gameplay experience is often less stressful, and direct resistance only becomes possible at the climax of the game. In the meantime, players must decide how to judge the characters of the game, the potentially heroic criminals resisting the widespread digital surveillance of The Nation. Despite its often clumsy and overwrought dialogue, the strength of *Orwell* lies in the uncomfortably accurate depiction of social media and our broader online existence. Just as we survey the characters, we are, in turn, made aware of the ways in which we, too, might be under surveillance. This eerie feeling might inform our responses to the problem of heroic criminality, lending weight to the concerns of Thought. Most importantly, in both games, the player who chooses the path of the heroic criminal plays in opposition to the structures and systems of the fictional government in question and the rules of the game. Where some games might position criminality as a type of uncritical adherence to the rules of the game, *Papers, Please* and *Orwell* position criminality as a position whereby the player decides to strike out on their own, resisting banal obedience to the rules of the game, and trying to find more ethical ways of being.

WORKS CITED

- “Resolution on Violent Video Games.” *American Psychological Association*, 2005. <https://www.apa.org/about/policy/violent-video-games>. Accessed 24 June 2019.
- “Thompson’s Open Letters.” *JackThompson.org*, 2005, www.jackthompson.org/archives/index.htm#10_10_05_01. Accessed 29 December 2018.
- America’s Army*. Windows PC version, United States Army, 2002.
- Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Penguin, 2006.
- Associated Press. “Media Companies Are Sued in Kentucky Shooting.” *The New York Times*, 13 April 1999, www.nytimes.com/1999/04/13/us/media-companies-are-sued-in-kentucky-shooting.html. Accessed 29 December 2018.
- Batchelor, James. “GTA V Is The Most Profitable Entertainment Product of All Time.” *GamesIndustry.biz*, 9 April 2018, www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2018-04-09-gta-v-is-the-most-profitable-entertainment-product-of-all-time. Accessed 29 December 2018.
- Carpenter, Nicole. “Orwell Wants You To Spy On People Over The Next Few Weeks.” *Kill Screen*, 24 October 2016, killscreen.com/articles/orwell-wants-spy-people-next-weeks/. Accessed 29 December 2018.
- Chalk, Andy. “Jack Thompson Sues Facebook.” *The Escapist*, 2 October 2009, www.escapistmagazine.com/news/view/95144-Jack-Thompson-Sues-Facebook. Accessed 29 December 2018.
- Haggerty, Kevin D and Richard V. Ericson. “The Surveillant Assemblage.” *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 51, no. 4, 2000, pp 604-622. *Wiley Online Library*, Accessed 29 December 2018.
- Harding, James. *Performance, Transparency, and the Cultures of Surveillance*. University of Michigan Press, 2018. doi:10.3998/mpub.9780711.
- Hedenus, Anna and Christel Backman. “Explaining the Data Double: Confessions and Self-Examinations in Job Recruitments.” *Surveillance and Society*, vol. 15, no. 5, 2017, pp 640-654.
- Hollander, Paul. “Revisiting the Banality of Evil: Contemporary Political Violence and the Milgram Experiments.” *Society*, vol. 53, no. 1, 2016, pp 56-66. doi:10.1007/s12115-015-9973-4.
- Johnson, Daniel. “Animated Frustration or the Ambivalence of Player Agency.” *Games and Culture*, vol. 10, no. 6, 2015, pp 593-612.

- Kelly, Matthew. "The Game of Politics: Examining the Role of Work, Play, and Subjectivity Formation in Papers, Please." *Games and Culture*, vol. 13, no. 5, 2018, pp 459-478.
- Kirby, Jennifer. "A New Gang in Town: Kubrick's A Clockwork Orange as Adaptation and Subversion of the 1950s Juvenile Delinquent Cycle." *Literature/Film Quarterly*, vol. 43, no. 4, 2015, pp 291-303.
- Mafia III*. Windows PC version, 2K Games, 2016.
- Orwell: Keeping an Eye on You*. Windows PC version, Osmotic Studios, 2016.
- Papers, Please*. Windows PC version, 3909 LLC, 2013.
- Pearcy, Mark. "America's Army: 'Playful Hatred' in the Social Studies Classroom." *International Journal of Gaming and Computer-Mediated Simulations*, 2012, vol. 4, no. 2, pp. 19-36.
- Phelps, Teresa Godwin. "The Criminal as Hero in American Fiction." *Wisconsin Law Review*, vol. 1983, no. 6, 1983, pp. 1427-1454.
- Savage, Phil. "Orwell Review." *PC Gamer*, 13 December 2016, www.pcgamer.com/orwell-review/. Accessed 29 December 2018.
- Sliva, Marty. "Mafia 3 Review." *IGN*, 10 October 2016, www.ign.com/articles/2016/10/11/mafia-3-review. Accessed 29 December 2018.
- Stuart, Keith. "Jack Thompson Disbarred – Is This Good or Bad?" *The Guardian*, 26 September 2008, www.theguardian.com/technology/gamesblog/2008/sep/26/law. Accessed 29 December 2018.
- Walker, John. "Wot I Think: Orwell." *RockPaperShotgun*, 6 December 2016, www.rockpapershotgun.com/2016/12/06/orwell-review/. Accessed 29 December 2018.

AUTHOR BIO:

James Tregonning is a Masters graduate from the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand. His area of research is video game narrative, with a specific focus on the narrative potential of virtual space. He writes broadly on video game narrative at *Death is a Whale* (<https://goingthroughthewash.wordpress.com/>); his scribblings there have been cited by Critical Distance, a weekly roundup of "the most important critical writing on games."

SUGGESTED CITATION

APA

Tregonning, J. (2019). Breaking the rules: Playing criminally in video games. *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*, 6(2). <http://journaldialogue.org/issues/v6-issue-2/breaking-the-rules-playing-criminally-in-video-games/>

MLA

Tregonning, James. "Breaking the Rules: Playing Criminally in Video Games." *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*. 2019, vol. 6, no 2. journaldialogue.org/issues/v6-issue-2/breaking-the-rules-playing-criminally-in-video-games/



Bad Girls: Agency, Revenge, and Redemption in Contemporary Drama

Courtney Watson, Ph.D.
Radford University
Roanoke, Virginia, United States
cwatson1@radford.edu

ABSTRACT

Cultural movements including #TimesUp and #MeToo have contributed momentum to the demand for and development of smart, justified female criminal characters in contemporary television drama. These women are representations of shifting power dynamics, and they possess agency as they channel their desires and fury into success, redemption, and revenge. Building on works including Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* and Netflix's *Orange is the New Black*, dramas produced since 2016—including *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Ozark*, and *Killing Eve*—have featured the rise of women who use rule-breaking, rebellion, and crime to enact positive change.

Keywords: #TimesUp, #MeToo, crime, television, drama, power, Margaret Atwood, revenge, *Gone Girl*, *Orange is the New Black*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Ozark*, *Killing Eve*

From the recent popularity of the anti-heroine in novels and films like *Gone Girl* to the treatment of complicit women and crime-as-rebellion in Hulu's adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* to the cultural watershed moments of the #TimesUp and #MeToo movements, there has been a groundswell of support for women seeking justice both within and outside the law. Behavior that once may have been dismissed as madness or instability—Beyoncé laughing wildly while swinging a baseball bat in her revenge-fantasy music video “Hold Up” in the wake of Jay-Z's indiscretions comes to mind—can be examined with new understanding. Women are angry, and that anger is being mirrored and justified in popular culture. As British writer Sophie Heawood noted in 2014, “The older I get, the more I see how women are described as having gone mad, when what they've actually become is knowledgeable and powerful and fucking furious (Heawood).” Hold up, indeed. Contemporary narratives have not only made room for furious women in their stories, they've begun to celebrate them as empowered and justified agents for change. There has been an evolution in the trope of the bad girl; while she was once merely a jealous, petty, and vindictive trouble-maker—Nellie Olsen at any age—today's bad girl is a woman with purpose who tends to be decidedly darker than her beloved male criminal counterpart: she's smart, she's ruthless, and she's had it with laws and oppressive social conventions. Most importantly, she refuses to be quiet about it.

The concept of the bad girl has evolved in the wake of recent cultural and political events: her genesis, her indiscretions, how she is punished—because women who break the rules are *always* punished, one way or another—and her fight for agency and redemption. An exploration of criminal (or, in some cases, arbitrarily criminalized) behavior perpetrated by women in *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Ozark*, and *Killing Eve* offers compelling insight into shifting cultural desires and expectations. In a recent cultural landscape wherein Walter White was revered while his long-suffering wife was so vilified that the actress portraying her received death threats (Gunn), it is now worthwhile to examine the cultural influence of recent political movements and their continued impact on the characterization of criminal women in contemporary drama.

GONE GIRL

While there are many notable productions worthy of discussion, it is the success of Gillian Flynn's bestselling 2012 novel *Gone Girl*, which was rapidly adapted into a 2014 film starring Rosamund Pike and Ben Affleck, that marked a cultural flashpoint for the treatment of women's anger and criminal behavior in contemporary drama. The thriller centers around characters Nick and Amy Dunne—both abysmal—in the wake of Amy's disappearance, which plays out in the bright glare of the 24-hour news cycle as Nick is tried in the court of public opinion. However, what at first appears to be a case of an unfaithful husband killing his inconvenient wife takes a sudden turn when it is revealed to Nick—and the reader—that Amy staged her own kidnapping as revenge for Nick's indiscretions and other failures. While the plot is unpredictable, Amy's anger is cold and constant; Amy is no heroine, but her justified fury strikes a chord with the audience.

Gone Girl gained traction because it tapped into the outrage that would soon be expressed by the #TimesUp and #metoo movements. While the novel *Gone Girl* and its subsequent film adaptation received acclaim, there was one specific passage in the book that well-captures the ideas and undercurrent of anger that have defined the era of #metoo and #TimesUp. In a passage that went viral and spawned dozens of think pieces, Flynn captured the essence of a problematic, real-life female archetype that is diametrically opposed to women's agency, shoring up the very patriarchy that oppresses her. Flynn calls her the Cool Girl:

Men always say that as the defining compliment, don't they? She's a cool girl. Being the Cool Girl means I am a hot, brilliant, funny woman who adores football, poker, dirty jokes, and burping, who plays video games, drinks cheap beer, loves threesomes and anal sex, and jams hot dogs and hamburgers into her mouth like she's hosting the

world's biggest culinary gang bang while somehow maintaining a size 2, because Cool Girls are above all hot. Hot and understanding. Cool Girls never get angry; they only smile in a chagrined, loving manner and let their men do whatever they want. Go ahead, shit on me, I don't mind, I'm the Cool Girl. (Flynn 210)

While Flynn directs no shortage of vitriol at men throughout her novel, she places blame for the illusion of the Cool Girl on women: "Men actually think this girl exists. Maybe they're fooled because so many women are willing to pretend to be this girl...And the Cool Girls are even more pathetic: They're not even pretending to be the woman they want to be, they're pretending to be the woman a man wants them to be" (Flynn 210). Flynn identifies these women, the wannabe Cool Girls, as being complicit in the perpetuation of what is ultimately a dangerously disempowering persona and she takes them to task for their disillusionment.

As she is presented by Flynn, the Cool Girl is an unfortunate trend, a cultural curiosity whose harm is largely localized to herself. She is annoying to those who know that her performative coolness is just that, a show. She does not seem to be dangerous until her actions are examined on a larger scale and the misogyny inherent to her existence becomes apparent: " [She] likes every fucking thing he likes and doesn't ever complain. (How do you know you're not a Cool Girl? Because he says things like: 'I like strong women.' If he says that to you, he will at some point fuck someone else. Because 'I like strong women' is code for 'I hate strong women')" (Flynn 210). When examined beyond the individual and as a collective, the approval the Cool Girl seeks transforms into a desire with troubling implications, particularly when she becomes a voting bloc. When the Cool Girl evolves into the complicit woman, she actively reinforces power structures that harm and disenfranchise women, beginning in the voting booth.

The concept of complicity has taken on fresh urgency in the era of the Trump administration, which is itself closely associated with women described as being complicit. When discussing complicity, the 53% of white women who voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 election (CNN) is a frequently-cited figure—though it is lower than the percentage of white women who supported Republican candidates in previous elections (Simmons). Women employed in Trump's administration are also often described as being complicit in the administration's efforts to shore up a distinctly white patriarchy at the expense of women, minoritized communities, and the socioeconomically marginalized and disenfranchised. The association between women either affiliated with or who support the Trump administration has especially been emphasized in popular culture, with television shows like *Saturday Night Live* frequently lampooning public figures including Kellyanne Conway, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, and, perhaps most memorably, Ivanka Trump. Trump was parodied by actress Scarlett Johansson in a perfume ad sketch for a fictional fragrance called *Complicit*, "for the woman who could stop all of this...but won't" (Johansson). The sketch went viral, amassing nearly ten million views on YouTube alone.

THE HANDMAID'S TALE

Complicity, and the role that women play in protecting the social, cultural, and political institutions that put them at a disadvantage, has become a much more frequent topic of discussion since 2016. While it has been particularly reflected in television in both comedy and drama, it is in dramatic television where the vestiges of the Cool Girl are visible in the more dangerous and vulnerable complicit woman. In shows like Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale*—an adaptation of Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel that imagines the total disempowerment of women with startling swiftness and alacrity after a revolution carried out by religious zealots—it is made clear how essential complicit women are to the continuity of Gilead's oppressive regime. The social structure of women in Gilead is caste-like, and while some women are treated much, much more violently than others, all are oppressed and wholly disempowered.

The idea that no woman is safe is emphasized in the second season finale when Serena-Joy Waterford, the wife of Commander Frederick Waterford and herself an architect of Gilead, is severely punished with the amputation of a finger after arguing that women should be taught to read and then reading aloud a passage from the Bible that supports her beliefs (The Word). It is a particularly dark moment in the series that serves to put cracks in Serena Joy's faith in Gilead's harsh theocratic patriarchy, if not to break the spell entirely. Serena Joy's punishment is a shocking, violent scene that eventually leads to her gaining some clarity about how even the most privileged women in Gilead—and she is at the top of this social strata—are completely powerless under the system they are essential to upholding. Serena Joy's fear of her husband and the monster of Gilead she helped build and support resonate most deeply with the audience in her moving final scene of the episode when she surrenders her daughter (who is June's biological daughter) to June. With the aid of others who are rebelling against Gilead, June seizes her opportunity to escape with the child, and Serena Joy is the only one who can stop her. In an uncharacteristic moment of clarity, Serena Joy instead helps June and the child escape because she realizes that her daughter will never be safe in Gilead (The Word).

While Serena Joy's prospects are grim after her punishment, they are still far better than nearly every other woman in Gilead's society, where women at every level suffer, though in different ways. The most privileged women are married to powerful men who hold quasi-military positions in Gilead's government and who are stylized with titles like "Commander." These wives are easily identified by their teal, 1950s style, tea-length dresses, and high-heeled pumps, evoking a bygone. The color of their wardrobe is rich but placid, and their pearl necklaces are luminous but understated. The wives are women designed to blend into the background of their plush, gilded surroundings.

Beyond the wives of men like Commander Waterford, the rest of the women in society exist only to serve Gilead. The less fortunate women of Gilead are also color-coded for rapid identification. From the complicit aunts who enforce the training of handmaids, to the workers and slaves who shovel radioactive waste at sites out west, secondary women are clothed in drab, shapeless attire like refuse to be discarded. The handmaids, famously, don startling scarlet cloaks; the color serves to represent these women as the child-bearing lifeblood of Gilead as well as branding them as fallen, criminalized women—adulterers, lesbians, protestors—who are atoning for their past sins by serving the nation. Their wardrobe serves as a re-imagined scarlet letter, one that cannot be concealed. In a notable subversion of the law, the cloak also comes to symbolize the impending revolution: "They should never have given us uniforms if they didn't want us to be an army" (The Handmaid's Tale). There is a marked narrative shift in the story when the symbol of the handmaids' oppression is co-opted to represent their resistance. Significantly, this symbol has also been adopted as a visual form of protest in the United States.

Perhaps more than any other show on television, *The Handmaid's Tale* is viewed as an artistic reaction to the political and cultural events that have taken place in the United States since 2016. Writer Celia Wren described the show as a galvanizing touchstone, saying "the series has struck a chord with Americans chafing at the policies and personality of President Trump, whom many consider an exemplar of misogynistic male privilege. Real-life protestors have recently donned red-and-white garb to demonstrate against what they see as infringements on women's rights around the country (Wren 30 Commonweal)." As a show deeply rooted in themes of sin, transgression, and rebellion, images from *The Handmaid's Tale* have become powerful and widely recognized symbols of protest.

Margaret Atwood herself has been vocal about similarities she sees between *The Handmaid's Tale* and the current political climate. In a June 2017 *Boston Review* interview with Junot Diaz—who would be accused of verbal and sexual abuse during the #TimesUp movement less than a year later (Alter)—Atwood discussed correlations she saw between the novel and reality: "It's not only Trump. The general climate in some parts of the United States is certainly heading in a *Handmaid's Tale* direction. And that is why the recent sit-ins in the state legislatures were so immediately understandable, with groups of women in Handmaid costumes turning

up...while an all-male batch of lawmakers were passing laws on women's health issues" (Atwood 149). These protests serve as a startling visual representation of women's anger and their willingness to object to unjust laws and lawmakers. That these protestors don the attire of handmaids and risk arrest and criminal charges to express their outrage speaks volumes about the cultural impact of the show.

Atwood and Diaz go on to discuss how every human rights atrocity committed in *The Handmaid's Tale* was rooted in history and had happened in the past, and, in some cases like stoning, is still legal in multiple countries. This idea is discussed by Atwood at greater length with Olivia Aylmer in an April 2018 *Vanity Fair* interview, wherein Atwood describes the second season of *The Handmaid's Tale* as 'a call to action' (Aylmer). Aylmer compares the show to moments in history characterized by deep oppression, saying: "The story was always designed to depict forms of injustice that have really happened, and as a form of witness literature--a genre with deep, resonant historical roots" (Aylmer). The Nazis and Stalin are both referenced for context, with Atwood citing poet Anna Akhmatova as a particular inspiration (Aylmer). Over the course of both interviews, however, Atwood finds the narrative of oppression inextricably linked to political regimes.

Like Wren and Atwood, Katrina Spencer also attributed the hype surrounding the show, at least in part, to emotional fallout sparked by the 2016 election results. According to Spencer, the timing of the first season of the show--amidst a confluence of galvanizing political events--also contributed to the intense interest it sparked in critics and viewers alike:

Remember: when the first episodes were released, Donald Trump had just taken office as president, having made some tasteless and misogynistic comments...the #MeToo movement had yet to garner its national following; the wildly popular Netflix series *Orange is the New Black*, with its largely female cast, had become a household name; and, of course, one of the most qualified women in history, former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, had lost the election that would have allowed her to steer the most powerful country on the planet. The world, in a word, was abuzz with interest in women being centered in narratives and treated as human beings deserving of respect, recognition, and rights. (Spencer 1)

It is interesting that Spencer mentions *Orange is the New Black* as a precursor to the success and recognition of *The Handmaid's Tale* as a vital piece of cultural commentary, because, in many ways, it was the success of *Orange is the New Black* that made it viable for streaming services to greenlight the production of gritty dramas that focused on women. The show is remarkable for the ways in which it has developed stories of incarcerated women who have been marginalized by society, and for the agency the characters are given. The show is particularly meaningful for the way it thoughtfully evaluates criminality, a theme that is explored at length in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Criminalization is a strong undercurrent throughout *The Handmaid's Tale* thus far. In flashback scenes, viewers see the erosion of women's rights--a change that is gradual at first, and then soberingly rapid--until the point that being merely a woman is practically a criminal act. In the third episode of the first season of the show, Offred reflects on the erosion of women's rights, lamenting that she didn't realize what was happening until it was too late: "Now I'm awake to the world. I was asleep before. That's how we let it happen. When they slaughtered Congress, we didn't wake up. When they blamed terrorists and suspended the Constitution, we didn't wake up then either. They said it would be temporary. Nothing changes instantaneously. In a gradually heating bathtub, you'd be boiled to death before you knew it" (*The Handmaid's Tale*). Flashback scenes show specific moments of major change in the nation that would become Gilead.

As Spencer observes, "the women of reproductive age are no longer seen as people but merely beings that harbor viable wombs...these women are broadly stripped of their autonomy and agency so they can serve

as fertile, governmentally monitored units (Spencer 1).” Within Gilead, women are stripped of all their rights, from owning property and having jobs and bank accounts to reproductive freedom and bodily autonomy. Any form of resistance is recognized by the state as being a criminal act and the women and men who defy Gilead’s laws are punished severely in ways that include: isolation, enucleation, genital mutilation, dismemberment, and public execution by hanging, drowning, and firing squad. The corpses of the executed are left to rot in the open air, where they serve as a stark reminder of the consequences of disobedience. Offred and the other handmaids engage in criminal behavior with both small rebellions and major transgressions throughout the series; the women--and the audience--find freedom in these criminal acts. Though the punishments are severe, these acts of defiance against Gilead are also life-sustaining.

Atwood’s description of Season Two of *The Handmaid’s Tale* as a ‘call to action’ (Aylmer) is well-aligned with the character arc of protagonist June, played with simmering fury by Elisabeth Moss. While the first season of the show explored the many brutal ways Offred--the patriarchal name assigned to June as the property of Commander Fred Waterford—was victimized by Gilead, Season Two focuses on how June--and many other women and some men—rebel against the oppressive regime. The movement in June’s character arc is quite clear as she reclaims more and more of her identity through acts of rebellion. For example, the pilot episode of the series is titled “Offred,” which theorist Judith Butler may describe as demonstrable subordination (Butler 53), an idea that is explored in her seminal work *Gender Trouble*. Within the confines of Gilead, June is so stripped of her agency that she can only be identified in relation to the man who owns her. However, the first episode of the second season is titled “June,” hinting at the idea that June is wresting back her autonomy.

This change is fully realized by the final episode of the season, entitled “The Word.” The episode opens with June folding the clothes of recently-executed Eden--a 15-year-old girl forced into marriage and then convicted of adultery—and reciting a litany of titles held by women: “Wife. Handmaid. Martha. Mother. Daughter. Girlfriend. Queen. Bitch. Criminal. Sinner. Heretic. Prisoner” (*The Handmaid’s Tale*). The latter part of the list describes women who have transgressed against Gilead, and it sets the tone for the rest of the episode. Transgression could very well be the theme of the episode; at one point, June laughs in the Commander’s face—an action that is perhaps the most transgressive of them all. This scene displays what Atwood describes as the quintessential difference between men and women: “Men are afraid that women will laugh at them. Women are afraid that men will kill them” (Atwood). This idea and the concept of women’s laughter as a means of subversion is explored in great depth by Kathleen Rowe, who describes laughter as “...a powerful means for self-definition and a weapon for feminist appropriation” (Rowe 3). Viewed through this lens, there is nothing June could have done to undermine Commander Waterford more, and they both know it.

The final image of Season Two is chilling. Having just handed her daughter to Emily, another handmaid who is being smuggled into Canada in the back of a truck that is supposed to be taking June as well, June stands alone in the red-tinged darkness of an empty Boston tunnel. Rather than escaping with her infant daughter, June chooses to stay and make a stand in order to rescue her older daughter, Hannah. June pulls up her deep red hood and the light transforms her face from that of a non-threatening young woman to a sinister figure who appears determined to unleash hell upon Gilead. As the camera draws in closer, the song “Burning Down the House” by The Talking Heads begins to play, and the lyrics offer a preview of what is in store for Gilead’s oppressive regime in Season Three of *The Handmaid’s Tale*: “Watch out you might get what you’re after/Boom babies strange but not a stranger/I’m an ordinary guy/Burning down the house/Hold tight wait till the party’s over/Hold tight we’re in for nasty weather/There has got to be a way/Burning down the house/Here’s your ticket pack your bag/Time for jumpin’ overboard... Fightin’ fire with fire” (Talking Heads). Having successfully smuggled Commander Waterford’s only child out of Gilead and made his wife Serena Joy an accomplice in the process, June has won major battles in her fight against the regime, and as the credits roll

on the Season Two finale, the final moments suggest that she will soon be waging a war.

OZARK

The crime drama *Ozark* offers a different—though no less compelling—take on women’s anger and engagement in crime. Though the show is written in the vein of *Breaking Bad*, it features significant departures from that show’s formula, particularly with respect to the role of women in the story. The breakout character in *Ozark* is Wendy Byrde, a woman who goes from being overwhelmed by her circumstances as a result of her husband’s mistakes to confidently taking charge of a criminal enterprise. Though Wendy, played with depth and grit by Laura Linney, spends much of the first season of this Netflix drama reeling in the aftermath of her inept accountant husband Marty’s entanglement with a cartel, she is no Skylar White. She demands—and receives—the whole story from Marty, and from that point on she is nothing less than his equal and his partner in the operation.

There is a noticeable shift in the marriage’s power dynamic in Season Two, which began streaming in 2018. Marty breaks down from the pressure exacted by the cartel that has tasked him with establishing a \$500 million money laundering enterprise in a Missouri backwater resort town and begins planning the family’s escape to the Gold Coast of Australia, where they will adopt new identities and spend the rest of their lives in hiding. When she finds out, Wendy recognizes the folly of this plan and decides instead to save her family using a markedly different approach.

Recalling the imbalance of power in the Waterford’s marriage in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the Byrd’s partnership in *Ozark* is perhaps the kind of dynamic Serena Joy envisioned as she helped create the world that would eventually serve as her prison. The difference is that while Serena Joy ceded control, Wendy Byrd unapologetically seized it. Though *Ozark* is very different from the others discussed here, it is equally interested in the internal and external forces engaged for women to claim agency, both for themselves and for their enterprises. Wendy’s refusal of a role characterized by demonstrable subordination (Butler 53) is precisely what empowers her.

The cartel problems besetting the Byrde family, which includes their teenage daughter, Charlotte and younger son, Jonah, exacerbate an existing fissure that began in Chicago many years earlier. Several causes led to the family’s current crisis: the loss of a pregnancy due to a car accident, Marty’s secret involvement with money laundering, Wendy’s affair with an older man, and her dissatisfaction with giving up her successful career as a political campaign manager to be a stay-at-home mother, an ill-fitting role that she suffers from amiable stoicism. While the family’s banishment to the Ozarks can certainly be interpreted as punishment for their misdeeds, it is also their last chance at redemption. Their lives are complicated, and their problems run very deep; it is interesting, then, when Wendy decides that the only way to save her family is to further entrench them in the community and with the cartel. Whereas the only solution Marty sees is to flee in the dead of night, Wendy decides to dig in and ingrain the family in the community so deeply that they become, she hopes, untouchable. In doing so, she earns the admiration of the cartel, whose representative comes to realize that Wendy—not her husband—is the Byrde family’s most formidable asset.

During the final episode of Season Two, which sees the realization of the Byrde’s ambitious plan to establish a riverboat casino to launder the cartel’s money, Helen, the cartel’s representative from Chicago, emphasizes the impressiveness of Marty and Wendy’s accomplishment. In the cartel’s eyes, according to Helen, the casino represents not only redemption for the Byrdes, but also a new chapter filled with untold opportunities for the cartel in the United States: “You can see the rest of your life from up here. . . I’m not sure you appreciate the historical significance of what it is you’re about to pull off. Medellín, Sinaloa, Juárez—every one of them tried to create something like this. Every one of them failed. A legitimate, self-sustaining operation

like a casino. This is why crime organizes” (Ozark). As the conversation continues, it is clear not only to the viewer but also to Helen that Marty is anxious and cagey, while Wendy is cool, unruffled, and friendly. Helen keeps talking about what the future could look like for the Byrdes: “Have you given any thought to the next five years?... Because you’re pillars of the community now. You’ve established a foothold in the gaming industry. You could expand, completely legitimately. Honoring your obligations to my client, obviously” (Ozark). This passage is fraught with meaning; the Byrdes have done the impossible and in doing so they have earned the cartel’s respect, but the only path forward for the Byrdes now is through their partnership with the cartel.

While Wendy and Marty were unified for much of Season Two, the end of this scene shows them once again diverging. Wendy sees Helen’s vision—and the cartel’s—and she shares it with them. She knows there is no way out, and she is looking forward to the future. Marty is still trying to plan an escape for his family so they can find their way back to their old lives, which no longer exist. The final conversation between Marty and Wendy in this scene, after Helen departs, is telling. When Wendy says, “Helen’s right, you know. This could be a great new chapter in our lives. We just have to work harder at being better parents,” Marty’s response hints at his desire for the family to flee without revealing his plans: “What if that’s not possible here?” Wendy’s response is simple when she tells Marty “It has to be,” (Ozark) though at this point neither one of them knows the other’s plan for securing their family’s future, or the sacrifices they are willing to make to get there.

There is a marked change in tone later in the episode when Wendy is talking to Helen alone. This conversation is much more candid than the earlier one with Marty, and there is a significance to Helen’s openness with Wendy as she reveals her early skepticism of the Byrdes’ casino scheme: “I was serious, you know, when I said how impressed my client is. I have to say, when the idea of a casino was first floated, neither of us thought you had a chance in hell. My client even had us monitor your every move. Your purchases, your browser history” (Ozark). In the next moment, Helen reveals that she and her client were sure the casino would fail to launch and the Byrdes would go on the run—basically guessing Marty’s Gold Coast escape plan, which was always doomed because it was obvious and predictable, just like Marty.

The bold plan, the one that poses the greatest risks but also the most freedom and security for the Byrde family, is to stay put in the Missouri Ozarks and embrace the life they have built there. Marty does not see that, but Wendy does, and that shifts his power to her in the eyes of Helen, and therefore the cartel. Acknowledging this, Helen says, “I’ve been particularly impressed with you...It’s not easy navigating this world as a woman” (Ozark). Helen, cool and unflinching, is a powerful woman representing the interests of a violent and deadly criminal enterprise, and in this scene, it is telling that it is Wendy Byrde, not Marty, who has earned her respect and admiration. When she again asks Wendy what she wants out of her “new situation” (Ozark) Wendy thinks for a moment and says she wants Helen’s gratitude—not money, not authority, not a tangible prize, but something far more useful. Helen looks surprised and pleased and even more convinced that Wendy Byrde is the smart bet for the cartel’s future in the Ozarks: “Well, you have that. And that is a powerful thing” (Ozark). This conversation solidifies Wendy’s determination to thrive in the Ozarks and in her new life, which will take her and her family one step further away from the escape Marty is secretly planning.

Wendy’s conversation and newfound rapport with Helen also lead to a decision Wendy will make near the end of the episode that will cement her ties to the cartel and prove her loyalty to the cause. Wendy takes her place as a powerful figure and completes her evolution into a criminal when she identifies a man as a threat to the casino’s launch, knowing that her actions will lead to the man’s murder. While there have been many murders on the show over the course of two seasons, most are crimes of passion. This one is not, and it represents a significant moment for Wendy, who is calm, clear, and dispassionate during this exchange with Helen. Thinking Wendy does not realize the enormity of what she is about to do, Helen offers her uncharacteristic words of caution: “Before you say anything else, you might think this is a simple conversation...but I promise you, it is more difficult than you comprehend. Once you tell me something, it

can't be retracted" (Ozark). Helen goes on to explain how using the cartel to kill someone will profoundly change Wendy, forever: "[You do not understand]. You can't. Not really. Your whole body changes. The way you smell, your reflection, how it feels when your husband touches you" (Ozark). Though Helen is explicit in her warning about what will happen if Wendy chooses violence instead of finding another way, Wendy is steadfast: "That doesn't change the fact that we still have a problem" (Ozark). The man is murdered within hours.

In the final scene of the Season Two finale, the role-reversal that has gradually taken place between Marty and Wendy Byrde is completed when Wendy refuses to leave the Ozarks and makes a compelling case for staying. The power dynamic between the husband and wife shifts fully in Wendy's favor as she makes an argument that is shrewd and logical in the face of Marty's quiet, desperate panic, which she points out to him: "We're not leaving the Ozarks. It's not safe to go...You're not acting out of logic. You're acting out of emotion. And I know I've asked you to be more emotional. I've begged. So, I love you for it, but I am not getting on that plane and neither are the kids" (Ozark). Of course, there is great significance in Wendy twice describing Marty as being emotional and illogical, characteristics that are so often pejoratively ascribed to women in what Butler refers to as the "existential dialectic of misogyny...in which reason and mind are associated with masculinity and agency, while the body and nature are considered to be the mute facticity of the feminine" (Butler 50). It matters, then, that Wendy uses these specific words to disempower Marty; he is motivated by his fear of what the cartel may do *to* the Byrde family, while Wendy is looking into the future and seeing what the cartel can do *for* them.

During this tense conversation, which takes place in front of the casino boat during a crowded celebration of the boat's grand opening, Wendy--cool and calculating with a perpetual Midwestern smile--lays out what the future will look like for the Byrde family. They will continue their partnership with the cartel and transform the Ozarks into their very own Gold Coast. If it means using the cartel's violence for their family's security and prosperity, so be it. Wendy, who in the pilot episode of the series watched in horror as her lover was thrown to his death, now sees the use of force as a means to an end: "We're not alone here. We have partners who are very grateful for what we've done. Always better to be the person holding the gun than the one running from the gunman" (Ozark). With this statement, Wendy makes it clear that she is not the person she used to be, and that she is willingly putting down roots in this criminal world and accepting all that it has to offer.

Wendy's moving final monologue—the last words spoken as Season Two closes—is to Marty and their children. She explains to the children who she was and how she has changed since the family moved to the Ozarks: "...there was a time I wanted to leave, too. And, yes, I had an affair. And I did it because I wanted to be someone else. I wanted to live a different life. And I was so wrong. Because this is who I am and this is who I want to be. Just think about it" (Ozark). In this closing scene, Wendy is the family source of power. She is empathetic and self-assured, loving but steely, genuine and confident. As this chapter of the Byrde family's story ends, there is every indication that the next will open with Wendy at the helm of the family's criminal enterprise.

KILLING EVE

The trend of sharply written criminal women in contemporary television drama shows no signs of slowing down; in fact, these characters are bolder and more present than they have ever been. These characters, who challenge gender conventions in often surprising and compelling ways, offer larger and more meaningful roles for women, and they tend to showcase female characters who claim great power and agency for themselves. It is no coincidence that women's stories are being told with greater prevalence and urgency today than ever before.

Women's anger and commitment to forcing change have manifested in society as well as in art. New ground was recently broken with BBC America's airing of the drama series *Killing Eve*. Adapted from Luke Jennings's *Codename Villanelle* novellas, the sly, violent show about an assassin pursued by—and pursuing—a determined MI-5 agent is the perfect expression of the evolution of criminal women characters and a complex, engaging representation of what it means to be a woman in 2018. Throughout the first season, the assassin Villanelle—born Oksana Astankova and portrayed by Jodie Comer—is shown matching wits with Agent Eve Polastri, an American-raised Brit played by Sandra Oh. *Killing Eve* is a new breed of criminal drama wherein women are the core dynamic of the story—they are the heroines, the villains, the facilitators, and the obstacles. This is a show that passes the Bechdel Test with flying colors; the story is rooted in the experiences of Eve and Villanelle, and the momentum of the story is powered by their fury and their desire.

It is also noteworthy that for a taut, suspenseful thriller with sleek, glossy imagery and high production value, *Killing Eve* is a show with a wicked sense of humor. Eve is smart and dry—acerbic in her observations and the way she sees the world—while Villanelle's sense of humor is big and surprising, rooted in spectacle. The show's use of humor is freeing in a way that directly addresses a question posed by theorist Luce Irigaray in an epigraph to Rowe's *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*: "Isn't laughter the first form of liberation from asecular oppression?" (Rowe 1). For a serious show, there are unexpected moments of physical comedy that would verge on slapstick were they not produced in the era of prestige television. The women in *Killing Eve* are refreshing characters because they defend their agency and do so with as much style and aplomb as male characters like Walter White and Tony Soprano—and the audience applauds them for it. Combined with excellent writing and character development, *Killing Eve* deserves the critical accolades that it received for its first season and the promising work that is to come.

In the context of the observations made by Irigaray, Rowe, and Atwood, it is significant that much of the humor in the show is at the expense of men. Throughout the first season, Eve and, particularly, Villanelle, subvert and mock expectations assigned to them because of their gender. One exchange with a target Villanelle is about to assassinate is particularly enlightening. The target, Frank Hallett, begs for his life, saying "We can do a deal. I have a lot of money," hoping to use that as leverage; Villanelle is unmoved, replying, "So do I." Desperate, Frank then makes an emotional appeal: "I have children;" Villanelle laughs and replies, "I don't want your children" (*Killing Eve*). Pleading, Frank asks, "Are you going to kill me?" and, still unmoved, Villanelle says, "Mmm. But first I'm going to use you for sex," and she pauses at the shocked look on his face and laughs again, saying, "It's just a joke" (*Killing Eve*). After rejecting Frank's appeals and what they communicate about his expectations of what he assumes she—and, by extension, every woman—wants, Villanelle finishes the job and shoots him, cleanly and dispassionately, a consummate professional. This passage is also telling because of Villanelle's rejection of the desires that are so often ascribed to women: financial security provided by a man, sex, and also family; that this scene is executed with humor underscores the significance of Villanelle's refusal. Not only does she kill him, she also mocks him—which is perhaps the more damning indiscretion. The dynamic between Eve and Villanelle is captivating because they are both fully-realized characters who, even though they are pitted against each other in a high-level chess game of assassination and espionage, respect each other, both as professionals and as women. One bond they share is they recognize each other as intellectual equals and worthy opponents. In one noteworthy monologue in the pilot episode, Eve defends her theory about the unknown assassin being a woman while acknowledging the criticism she's exposing herself to: "...she certainly has style and I don't know who or what is behind her, but I don't think she's slowing down and that just interested me, I guess. But it makes me a fantasist and completely on my own" (*Killing Eve*). Eve's superiors at MI-5 remain skeptical, and in her exasperation with the bureaucracy that is slowing her down, Eve snaps and says that perhaps a woman with Villanelle's skill deserves to remain at large: "And you know, frankly, I don't give a shit anymore. She is outsmarting the smartest of us, and for that, she deserves to

do or kill whoever she wants. I mean, if she's not killing me, then, frankly, it's not my job to care anymore" (Killing Eve). This forthright mutual respect Eve and Villanelle have for each other deepens as the first season progresses and each woman violates personal and professional standards, as well as the law, in an effort to best the other, though their admiration remains intact.

Though there are several common threads connecting the female characters driving these contemporary television dramas, the most pervasive and acutely felt is anger. Though these women--June, Wendy, Eve, and even Villanelle--generally present themselves as placid, non-threatening (until they're not), and even friendly in their daily lives, a closer look at any one of them reveals that the light within is often incandescent fury: at their circumstances, at injustice, and, more often than not, at men. More significantly, their anger is justified. Gone are the days when viewers see characters like Skyler White as being irritating obstacles to their husbands' success at a criminal enterprise, women to be suffered--or not (because wouldn't it be easier if she was just out of the way?) (Gunn). The criminal women in today's dramas claim agency within the narrative, and they are never overshadowed by the machinations of men. In series like *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Ozark*, and *Killing Eve*, at least, there has been a major shift in how these stories are being told. Women are the beating heart of these narratives, which tap into--and sometimes even respond to--the momentum created by the #TimesUp and #MeToo movements. The dialogue generated between television drama and the audiences who consume these stories has resulted in art that urges not only a cultural response but also--if we believe Margaret Atwood--an urgent call to action.

WORKS CITED

- Alter, Alexandra, Bromwich, Jonah Engel, and Cave, Damien. "The Writer Zinzi Clemmons Accuses Junot Díaz of Forcibly Kissing Her." *New York Times*. May, 2018.
- Atwood, Margaret. "Writing the Male Character." Hagey Lecture at the University of Waterloo. February, 1982. Reprinted in *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose, 1960-1982*.
- Aylmer, Oliver. "Margaret Atwood Says *The Handmaid's Tale* Season Two is a Call to Action." *Vanity Fair*. April, 2018.
- "Burning Down the House." *Talking Heads*. *Speaking in Tongues*. 1983.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. Routledge, 1990.
- "Complicit." Performance by Scarlett Johansson. *Saturday Night Live*. March, 2017.
- "Exit Polls." CNN. 2016. Flynn, Gillian. *Gone Girl*. Crown Publishing Group. 2012.
- Gone Girl*. Directed by David Fincher, 20th Century Fox. 2014.
- Gunn, Anna. "I Have a Character Issue." *New York Times*. 2013.
- Heewood, Sophie. "Princess Diana Was As Mad As Any Other Woman." *Vice*. 2014.
- Killing Eve*. BBC America.
- Knowles, Beyonce. "Hold Up." Music video. *Lemonade*. 2016.
- "Make Margaret Atwood Fiction Again: Margaret Atwood Interviewed by Junot Diaz." *Boston Review*. June 2017.
- Rowe, Kathleen. *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*. University of Texas Press. 1995.
- "Season Six Trailer." *House of Cards*. Netflix, 2018.
- Simmons, Jamal. "Understanding 'The White Women Thing.'" *The Hill*. October, 2018.
- Spencer, Katrina. "Pretty Legit But Not Perfect: A Take on *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Resources for Gender & Women's Studies: A Feminist Review*. University of Wisconsin. V. 39, Summer-Fall 2018.
- "The Gold Coast." *Ozark*. Netflix, 2018.
- "The Word." *The Handmaid's Tale*. Season 2, Episode 13, Hulu, 2018.
- Wren, Celia. "Women's Work." *Commonweal*. July, 2017.

Watson

AUTHOR BIO:

Courtney Watson, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor of English and Director of the Humanities & Social Sciences program at Jefferson College of Health Sciences in Roanoke, Virginia. Her scholarly interests include contemporary drama, modernist expatriates, and literary tourism. She is also a fiction writer, essayist, and travel writer.

SUGGESTED CITATION

APA

Watson, C. (2019). Bad Girls: Agency, revenge, and redemption in contemporary drama. *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*. 6(2). <http://journaldialogue.org/issues/v6-issue-2/bad-girls-agency-revenge-and-redemption-in-contemporary-drama/>

MLA

Watson, Courtney. "Bad Girls: Agency, Revenge, and Redemption in Contemporary Drama." *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy* 2019, vol. 6, no. 2. Retrieved from journaldialogue.org/issues/v6-issue-2/bad-girls-agency-revenge-and-redemption-in-contemporary-drama/



All papers in are published under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-Share-Alike License. For details please go to: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/us/>.

AMC's Infamous Criminal Partnerships: Suppressing the Female Antihero

Melissa Vosen Callens
North Dakota State University
Fargo, ND, USA
melissa.vosen@ndsu.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the limited number of female antiheroes in AMC's critically acclaimed drama series. Using a feminist lens, the author argues that audiences have failed to embrace female characters on AMC as antiheroes, particularly when they are in romantic relationships with male antiheroes, for three primary reasons. First, female characters often challenge binary thinking, and thus, gender role stereotypes. Rather than exhibiting passive, yet nurturing characteristics, characteristics often associated with femininity and motherhood, female characters within the dataset frequently challenge their partners and exert their dominance. Second, writers often fail to fully develop female characters. The absence of their backstories (who they are and what they are thinking) makes it difficult for audiences to relate to and sympathize with these characters. Finally, within the dataset, female characters are rarely viewed as equals in the eyes of their male partners, and the audience takes cues from this treatment. When female characters are childless and/or respected by their male partners, they are more widely accepted as antiheroes.

In this paper, the author examines some of the most famous criminal antihero partnerships in the top-rated AMC series over the last decade: Walter and Skyler White (*Breaking Bad*), Rick and Lori Grimes / Rick Grimes and Michonne (*The Walking Dead*), Don and Betty Draper (*Mad Men*), and Saul Goodman and Kim Wexler (*Better Call Saul*). Following this critique, the broader cultural implications of these representations are offered, particularly the disempowerment of women through motherhood.

Keywords: AMC, antihero, feminist criticism, *Breaking Bad*, *Mad Men*, *The Walking Dead*, *Better Call Saul*

Despite an increase of male antiheroes in popular culture, the number of female antiheroes is sparse. While audiences celebrate male antiheroes, most female characters who have the potential to become antiheroes are repeatedly met with audience disdain and ridicule. Anna Gunn, the actress who played Skyler White in *Breaking Bad*, wrote an op-ed piece for *The New York Times* on the subject. Gunn argues that while Skyler, like her husband Walt, is morally compromised, she is not “judged by the same set of standards.” Gunn argues that the numerous discussion board threads dedicated to discussing the negative aspects of her character on the network’s own site were “because Skyler didn’t conform to a comfortable ideal of the archetypical female.” Gunn is not alone; other female actors whose characters did not conform to certain standards have experienced the same intense hatred on the part of their audiences. Using a feminist lens, I examine AMC’s most famous antihero partnerships over the last decade: Walter and Skyler White (*Breaking Bad*), Rick and Lori Grimes / Rick Grimes and Michonne (*The Walking Dead*), Don and Betty Draper (*Mad Men*), and Saul Goodman and Kim Wexler (*Better Call Saul*). These four series were selected because, as of December 2018, they were the top-rated AMC drama series on IMDb; two of them (*Breaking Bad* and *Mad Men*), were named by *Rolling Stone* magazine as the top television series of all time (Sheffield). Following my critique, I offer an explanation of the broader cultural implications of these representations, namely whether female characters can be antiheroes given current binary thinking and how female characters are often disempowered through motherhood.

METHODS

According to rhetoric scholar Sonja Foss, “Feminist criticism involves two basic steps: (1) analysis of the construction of gender in the artifact studied; and (2) exploration of what the artifact suggests about how the patriarchy is constructed and maintained or how it can be challenged and transformed” (169-70). The goal of this analysis is to examine how gender is depicted in the construction of characters, specifically possible antiheroes, in AMC dramas and explore how this construction might explain audience reception of the series and characters.

Through multiple screenings of *Breaking Bad*, *Mad Men*, *The Walking Dead*, and *Better Call Saul*, three themes related to the construction of gender were identified: the absence of traditional markers of femininity in female characters, the lack of backstories for female characters, and the treatment of female characters by their male partners. I, therefore, argue that audiences have largely rejected female characters on AMC as antiheroes, while embracing their male counterparts in this role for several reasons. First and foremost, female characters often challenge binary thinking and gender role stereotypes, or as Gunn states, they do not conform to a widely accepted feminine ideal. Rather than exhibit passive, yet nurturing characteristics, characteristics often associated with motherhood and femininity, female characters frequently challenge their partners and exert dominance. Second, writers often fail to fully develop female characters. The absence of their backstories makes it difficult for audiences to relate to and sympathize with these characters. Finally, female characters are rarely viewed as equals in the eyes of their male partners, and the audience takes cues from this sexist treatment.

ANTIHEROES ON TELEVISION

According to literary theorists, M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham, the antihero is the “chief person in a modern novel or play whose character is widely discrepant from that which we associate with the traditional protagonist, or hero, of a serious literary work” (14-15). As Jason Mittell, professor of film and media culture, notes, an antihero is “a character who is our primary point of ongoing narrative alignment but whose behavior and beliefs provoke ambiguous, conflicted, or negative moral allegiance” (142-43). Most of

the male antiheroes on widely acclaimed television dramas over the last two decades, such as Tony Soprano of *The Sopranos*, Dexter Morgan of *Dexter*, and Jax Teller of *Sons of Anarchy*, are dishonest and engage in illegal activity. On the other hand, antiheroes in comedies, such as Larry David in *Curb Your Enthusiasm* or George Costanza in *Seinfeld*, are passive and clownish. Despite these questionable qualities, audiences have responded positively to the antiheroes listed above.

The key to antihero status is whether the audience can relate to and sympathize with the character or not. According to Christopher Vogler, author of *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structures for Writers*, "Simply stated, an Anti-Hero is not the opposite of a Hero, but a specialized kind of Hero, one who may be an outlaw or a villain from the point of view of society, but with whom the audience is basically in sympathy. We identify with these outsiders because we have all felt like outsiders at one time or another" (41). Within the dataset, Walt, Don, Rick, and Jimmy (Saul) are morally compromised, yet they have stories that evoke intrigue and sympathy. Walt is fighting cancer; Don is coping with his troubled fatherless past; Rick is fighting to (initially) find his family in the apocalypse; and Jimmy (Saul) is trying to win his brother's approval and prosper as a lawyer. Their female partners, on the other hand, while also morally compromised, frequently have underdeveloped storylines. We know very little about Skyler, Betty, and Lori's backgrounds. As Mittell writes, "Antihero narratives regularly invoke relative morality, in which an ethically questionable character is juxtaposed with more explicitly villainous and unsympathetic characters to highlight the antihero's more redeeming qualities" (143). Not only are Skyler, Betty, and Lori underdeveloped, and thus, unsympathetic characters, but they are also cast as villainous when juxtaposed with Walt, Don, and Rick. The next section summarizes these partnerships.

Breaking Bad

Skyler White is married to Walter White, a high school chemistry teacher diagnosed with lung cancer. In order to provide for his family after he is gone, Walt decides to cook methamphetamine. At first, he does so without Skyler's knowledge, but eventually, she finds out. While initially against Walt's growing drug empire, Skyler ultimately supports Walt and helps launder the money. When Walt's business becomes larger and more and more people die as a result, Skyler is troubled by the increasing violence and threatens to leave Walt, taking the children with her.

Mad Men

Betty Draper is married to Don Draper, a highly-respected creative director for a prominent ad agency in the 1960s. Betty is a homemaker and the mother of Don's three children. Before marrying Don, Betty went to college and had a brief modeling career. Like Walt and Skyler, Don and Betty are both flawed characters. Don drinks all day, and throughout the series, he has multiple affairs. On the other hand, Betty is often unhappy in her suburban lifestyle, and her unhappiness, at times, leads to selfish outbursts.

The Walking Dead

Lori Grimes is married to Rick Grimes, a sheriff from Georgia. After the walker (zombie) apocalypse, Lori has an affair with Shane, Rick's best friend, and deputy, after she believes Rick is dead. She is mother to Carl and Judith, whose paternity is unclear. Later in the series, Rick meets Michonne. Michonne is a mysterious figure, and years after Lori's death, she becomes intimately involved with Rick.

Better Call Saul

Kim Wexler is the girlfriend of Jimmy McGill (also known as Saul Goodman), whom she met while they were both working at a law firm. While Kim was seen at the firm as an up-and-coming star, Jimmy was seen as a clown. Throughout the series, although in slightly different ways, both demonstrate their competency as lawyers. Jimmy has a unique ability to connect interpersonally with his clients, and Kim is highly organized

and detail-oriented. While Jimmy often engages in shady activities to achieve his goals, Kim tends to play by the rules. Despite Kim's nature to follow the rules, on occasion, Kim joins Jimmy in nefarious activities.

The following sections analyze the four series and partnerships described above, exploring the ways in which some female characters are denied antihero status.

CHALLENGING GENDER ROLE STEREOTYPES

According to Barrie Gunter, professor and media research specialist, traits such as “nurturance, dependence, and passivity are typically classified as feminine, while dominance and aggression are generally considered as masculine” (29). In this paper, the female characters examined frequently challenge these gender role stereotypes, which makes it difficult for audiences to relate to, or feel sympathy for, these characters. Ultimately, this makes it difficult for the characters to achieve antihero status. As Mittell explains:

[...] men are more likely to be respected and admired for ruthlessness, self-promotion, and the pursuit of success at any cost, while women are still constructed more as nurturing, selfless, and objects of action rather than empowered agents themselves. This cultural stereotype can yield a backlash against an aggressive, morally questionable female character, who is often viewed as more of an unsympathetic ‘ball-busting bitch’ than the charismatic rogue that typifies most male antiheroes. (150)

In the series analyzed, Skyler, Betty, Lori, Michonne, and Kim are far from dependent and passive; in fact, they assert their independence and dominance frequently. Additionally, Skyler, Betty, and Lori also have moments of infidelity, and each is criticized by audiences for making such a choice. Michonne and Kim, however, are more widely accepted perhaps because, despite being morally compromised, they remain faithful to their partners.

Passivity

The female characters analyzed frequently express their opinions and assert their independence. Throughout the dataset, most of the female characters are clear they do not need protecting or saving (Skyler, Betty, Michonne, and Kim). For example, as *Breaking Bad* progresses, and Skyler believes Walt has become dangerous, she threatens to take the children. In episode 4.6, Skyler proclaims, “You know what, Walt? Someone has to protect this family from the man who protects this family” (“Cornered”). At this point in the series, Walt is a ruthless killer, yet Skyler stands up to Walt. Audiences, however, despised her for it, creating derogatory memes that circulated the internet. One meme read, “I am not always a bitch / Just kidding I always am” (Chaney).

In *Mad Men*, Betty also exerts her autonomy. After marrying Don, she settles into her role as wife and mother, a common role for women in that era. She, however, becomes bored and restless and is often criticized for this by audiences. In a 2015 interview, January Jones, the actor who played Betty, states, “The first couple seasons, people were very empathetic and felt bad for her and was like ‘Poor Betty’ and people would come up to me and feel bad for me. Once she left Don and gained her independence and started speaking out for herself, started to empower herself...people hated her” (Rothman). Like Skyler, the more Betty challenged her husband and flexed her independence, the more audiences loathed her. Even when female characters do show dependence, they are often disliked for other reasons, which are explored later in this paper; this is most evident with Lori (*The Walking Dead*). Ultimately, this suggests that female characters, regardless of what they do and how they act, have a difficult time winning over audiences.

Yet there are some female characters within the dataset that do demonstrate autonomy and are not criticized for it, namely Michonne and Kim. For example, in *The Walking Dead*, when Michonne confronts

Heath who believes he knows what it is like to live outside the walls of Alexandria, she states, “Have you ever had to kill people because they had already killed your friends and were coming for you next? Have you ever done things that made you feel afraid of yourself afterward? Have you ever been covered in so much blood that you didn’t know if it was yours or walkers’ or your friends’? Huh? Then you don’t know” (“Thank You”). Michonne is a particularly interesting character because, as a black woman, there are additional expectations that have been placed on her by the audience, by other characters, on how she should perform her gender. One might expect Michonne to be disliked for voicing her opinion, as black women are often portrayed as aggressive when doing so, but this is not the case. She is routinely celebrated for expressing herself. This could be for a variety of reasons, one of which might be the setting, as a zombie apocalypse might evoke different gender and racial dynamics. Another reason might be that she remains loyal to her group of friends and Rick.

Like Michonne, throughout *Better Call Saul*, Kim is self-reliant. For example, Kim, after being demoted to document reviewer at the law firm, sharply says to Jimmy, “I dig myself out of this hole. You do your job, Jimmy. Prove you can go one week— hell, one *day* without breaking the rules of the New Mexico Bar Association or pissing off your boss. And don’t insult my intelligence by saying you are doing any of this for me. You don’t save me. I save me” (“Rebecca”). In this scene, Kim makes it clear she disapproves of Jimmy’s behavior and can take care of herself. One must ask: why is Kim viewed favorably by audiences? One possible reason is, despite their problems, she remains faithful to Jimmy.

Infidelity

Infidelity is a common theme throughout most of the series examined (*Breaking Bad*, *Mad Men*, and *The Walking Dead*) and is another way in which women resist gender role stereotyping. In these series, all the female characters desire sex, and some have sex outside the confines of marriage. Additionally, they also own this behavior. For example, when Skyler has an affair with her boss, she confidently yells at Walt, “I fucked Ted” (“I.F.T”). She is not apologetic; she is not weepy. After her affair, however, audiences ridiculed her for failing to remain loyal to Walt, despite their marital problems and the legal mess he brought upon the family. Decades later, fans still express their hatred for Skyler, particularly because of her choice to have an affair. For example, in a 2018 YouTube video posted by Screen Prism, one YouTube user wrote, “[...] but i hated skylar [sic] cause she was fake, and also she fucked ted” (carranz). This was not the only comment mentioning the affair; the thread was littered with them.

In *Mad Men*, Don Draper’s womanizing was a common thread throughout the entire show, but audiences would often excuse his behavior. On the other hand, Betty was a faithful wife that would often beg for Don to be intimate with her. In season two, Betty cheats on Don, causing an uproar with audiences. In both *Breaking Bad* and *Mad Men*, the men are forgiven, and the women are chastised. This suggests that audiences expect women to be faithful and forgiving. They are expected to support their men.

Interestingly, but not surprisingly, the women that are more widely accepted by audiences— Michonne and Kim—are never unfaithful to their partners. This suggests that audiences hold male and female characters to different standards, particularly in regard to sexual agency. This seems to be true despite the context, be it social locations or time periods. Matthew Weiner, the creator of *Mad Men*, notes this double standard, “There is a strange, traditional double-standard about married women characters that they can’t do this. The audience will turn on them in a very violent way if they violate this rule” (Rosen). While this may be one reason why Michonne and Kim are more widely embraced and allowed to step into an antihero role, there are other possible factors, namely, neither have children.

Motherhood and Care

One of the other reasons that many of the female characters struggle to achieve antihero status and are met with audience contempt is because of how creators disempower women through motherhood. The ideas

surrounding motherhood—that one must be nurturing, moral, and caring at *all* times— partially explains the treatment of mothers in the dataset, including why the men in the series are allowed to be unfaithful, but the women are not. TV critic Jen Chaney argues, “[...] Skyler is a mom and all of us are conditioned from birth to see our mothers as our ethical barometers. They’re the ones who praised us for saying ‘please’ and admonished us when we beheaded our sister’s favorite Barbie for no particular reason. Moms tell us the difference between good and bad.” Audiences hold Skyler, Betty, and Lori to higher standards because they are mothers; they expect them to be the moral compass for all other characters. One of the most prominent examples within the dataset is in *Breaking Bad*. While Skyler is criticized for letting her children grow up in a drug-producing environment, Walt is never criticized for creating it in the first place. Moreover, at one time or another, Skyler, Betty, and Lori are all disparaged for their parenting skills by other characters and viewers. Criticism ranges from not watching children closely in dangerous situations (Skyler and Lori) to ubiquitous disinterest in children (Betty).

Betty is often dismissive of her children, but Don is often altogether absent. In one scene, after a long day with the children, Betty yells at Don, “I’m here, and then you come home and get to be the hero” (“Three Sundays”). After their divorce, Don sees the children even less and only when it is convenient for him. Audiences, however, forgive Don, many arguing that he is not expected to be with his children for extended periods of time, as fathers are were often absent in this era. In Katixa Agirre’s focus group study, many participants praised Don’s ability as a father; one participated argued, “As questionable and absent a father he can be, he understands his children as children – which is also the main thorn in my side when it comes to Betty. Especially after the divorce, the children are especially vulnerable but Don responds as a father” (12). Clearly, Betty is not afforded that same leeway as Don.

Throughout *Mad Men*, Betty is often judged by audiences by *today’s* parenting standards, a time in which physical punishment is increasingly rare, making her punishments seem unreasonable and cruel. For even self-identified feminists and fans of *Mad Men*, Betty is often listed as one of *Mad Men’s* least favorite female characters. In Monique Bourdage’s qualitative study, when participants were prompted to consider the show’s historical context (such as noting what punishments were common at that time), they expressed more understanding of Betty and her position (168). Unlike Betty, however, Don is forgiven time and time again—both on the show by a variety of characters *and* by the audience. Jen Kalaidis argues, “If the audience evaluated Betty the [sic] same way they do Don—as a character whose flaws are a largely explained by the era he came of age—it’s likely they would view her in a slightly more sympathetic light.”

In both scenarios, the fathers are also responsible for the well-being of the children and should show equal interest in them, but when they don’t provide adequate care or are disinterested, they are rarely ridiculed. For example, both characters and viewers criticized Lori for refusing to teach Carl how to protect himself from walkers; Rick, however, is relatively unchallenged in season four when he rejects training children to defend themselves.

Ironically, the two times Carl is hurt is under Rick’s care; despite this fact, criticism of Rick is again limited. In an interview, then *The Walking Dead* executive producer Glen Mazzara discusses the audience’s ridicule of Lori’s parenting skills. He believes that most of the criticism is unwarranted. He states, “I don’t know if it’s plausible that he would always be within her eye line or wouldn’t he, like most boys, try to give mom the slip and go out there and get in trouble?” (Ocasio). He also notes that if the audience feels as though Lori should be doing more, they should expect the same from Rick.

Clearly, audiences have different expectations for fathers and mothers. Notably, psychologist Carol Gilligan argues that men, or at least, those with masculine traits, are more concerned with issues surrounding justice, whereas women, or those with feminine traits, are more concerned with issues surrounding care and responsibility. Characters that break these expectations are often disliked, and their caretaking abilities inform

the ways in which their femininity is questioned. For example, while Lori's ability to provide adequate care is questioned, Betty's focus on justice equally elicits criticism. In one episode, in which Sally tries to pick open Don's luggage, Betty mutters to Don, "She's taken to your tools like a little lesbian" ("Out of Town"). She does not ask why Sally tried to break into the briefcase (to keep Don home); rather she is more concerned about Sally acting unladylike and her subsequent punishment. Betty is frequently criticized for the way she disciplines her children. When Sally cuts her hair, an act so blazingly defiant to Betty's eyes, she is furious. While Henry argues that Sally's behavior is normal and suggests a trip to the hairdresser, Betty proclaims, "Reward her? Really?" ("The Chrysanthemum and the Sword"). Later, in the same episode, Sally is caught masturbating, and Betty threatens to "cut off her hands."

It is important, however, to view and interpret Betty's response to Sally within the cultural norms in which Betty was socialized. Just as the audience has certain expectations of how women should act, so does Betty. Betty *believes* that Sally is supposed to look and act a certain way. Sally should not cut her hair, an overt symbol of her femininity, and Sally should not act in, what Betty would deem, an unladylike manner. During her exchanges with Sally, Betty is unaware of the role she is performing (and teaching her children to perform). While audiences clearly dislike Betty for upholding dated gender role stereotypes and heteropatriarchal values, her responses reflect the time period in which the show was set.

The characters who are childless, Michonne and Kim, are free from criticism in this regard. Generally, audiences like Michonne; in fact, after Rick's departure in season nine, some argued that Michonne was the best candidate to lead the show (Tassi). In the ninth season of *The Walking Dead*, Michonne becomes a single parent after Rick's departure. It is too soon to tell how audiences will respond to her. While earlier seasons showed Michonne in a stepmother role to Carl and Judith, she has clearly not been held to the same "maternal" standards Lori was held to earlier in the series. Similarly, audiences are generally fond of Kim, following her career throughout the series. As one critic writes, "We are all Kim Wexler" (McFarland). As a lawyer working many late-night hours, one must wonder if audiences would view her differently if she was a mother.

BACKSTORY: A LIMITED POINT OF VIEW

One reason why audiences have find it difficult to move beyond the binary and gender role stereotypes to embrace messy, morally-compromised female antiheroes is because they simply do not know enough about them. Without knowing a character's backstory and her innermost thoughts, it is hard to relate to them. Mittell writes, "As suggested by *The Sopranos*, alignment and elaboration are key components to our allegiance to an antihero—the more we know about a character through revelations of back story, relationships, and interior thoughts, the more likely that we will come to regard them as an ally in our journey throughout the storyworld" (144). When shows fail to develop female characters, audiences often have a difficult time making a connection with them; without this connection, it is difficult to achieve antihero status.

Skyler, Betty, and Lori are all missing a backstory as each of the series in which they are featured is being told in a way that elicits sympathy for their male partner. In other words, most of these series succumb to what Laura Mulvey calls the male gaze; in each of these instances, the audience perspective is that of a heterosexual male antihero, thus relegating female characters to props or, at times, obstacles. As noted by Megan Cox, "it's hard to build empathy with a character whose internal conflicts are never fully explored—instead, she often seems to just be getting in the way of the story, as another obstacle for her husband." While the audience may get tiny glimpses of how these characters feel, this is rare.

In *Breaking Bad*, the audience sees a man struggling with cancer. They see Walt go to the doctor, go through chemotherapy, get sick from the treatment, and shave his head because he starts to lose his hair. These raw and emotional struggles humanize Walt, and, in many ways, counteract some of the horrific things he

does when growing his methamphetamine empire. Regarding Skyler, audiences don't see many humanizing moments. Much of her onscreen time is spent talking to or about Walt, often, at least in earlier seasons, supporting or reinforcing the audience's sympathetic view of him. Even when Skyler talks to other characters, like with her sister Marie, her focus is on Walt. According to Cox, despite running for 61 episodes, *Breaking Bad* barely passes the Bechdel Test, a test that measures whether a show has at least two female characters that talk to each other about someone/something other than a man. Cox writes, "By this final season, there are now three significant female characters (Skyler, her sister Marie and drug boss Lydia). Skyler and Lydia have shared just one brief interaction with each other, while Skyler and Marie have many conversations over the span of the series. However, the vast majority of their conversations are about the men in their lives [...]." Because Skyler does not talk about any other aspects of her life, audiences are unable to relate to her in any other capacity; she is only defined as Walt's wife. Because this is her only defining characteristic, when she disagrees with or challenges Walt, she is seen as being unsupportive and an obstacle.

Additionally, Betty has a limited backstory, and viewers have a difficult time relating to her, as well. During the series, viewers learn that Betty's mother was abusive, and they also learn that Don's father was absent, and his mother was a prostitute. While Don's absent father and prostitute mother are stories explored throughout the series in several different flashback sequences, Betty's relationship with her mother is not done so extensively (only through a few therapy sessions). Don's story is often used as an excuse for Don's behavior, while audiences expect more from Betty despite her own hardships. One of the reasons why audiences may give Don more leeway is because they know more about Don and his story. While some may argue that *Mad Men* is ultimately about Don, it does not mean that female characters, like Betty, have to remain underdeveloped. Viewers eventually learn more about Betty in the final season when she is on her deathbed, but the absence of details up until this point, and not hearing her side of her conflicts with Don really limits the audience's ability to relate to and feel sympathy for her.

Don is also given storylines that show a different side of him, and in which he is able to show compassion. When he discovers his colleague Sal in a compromising position with a male bellhop, he keeps quiet, yet offers Sal a position directing an upcoming commercial. He coyly recommends to Sal to "limit your exposure" as he discusses possible slogans for an upcoming advertisement ("Out of Town"). Betty, however, is not given these storylines; rather the audience continues to see her as a "selfish" mom who often throws tantrums.

As television critic Maureen Ryan points out, for many of these prominent shows, the writers are men, which is one reason why female characters are not fully developed. She writes:

Television writers, showrunners and executives have been overwhelmingly white, straight and male for decades, and those numbers hardly ever budge. Writers don't write about things that don't fascinate them, and executives generally don't commission scripted shows that don't speak to them on some level. Hence plumbing the depths of experience of women—or gay characters and people of color—just hasn't been a consistent priority for ambitious cable dramas and populist fare alike.

This was the case for many seasons of *The Walking Dead*, as three out of the four showrunners over the past nine seasons have been male (Boucher). This likely had an impact on plot lines and character development. For example, all that viewers know about Lori prior to the apocalypse is that she was awful to Rick, a character they have come to know and love. Lori openly admits, via a flashback, to how poorly she treated Rick without any indication of why she did so. This ultimately limits the ability of the audience to understand her point of view ("Bloodletting").

In *The Walking Dead*, the viewer also knows very little of Michonne's backstory; at one point, viewers learn that she had been married and was a mother. Unlike the other characters, however, her limited backstory

is not held against her. One possible explanation for this is that she “existed” prior to her relationship with Rick, giving audiences the opportunity to get to know Michonne independently of him. She was guarded before she became intimately involved with Rick, and in that regard, the lack of her backstory is her backstory.

Additionally, audiences know more about Kim Wexler. Despite being interconnected with Jimmy’s storyline, Kim also has her own. While information about her past is limited, viewers see her move throughout the various stages of her career. For example, they see her quit the first law firm in which she was employed; they also witness her make a compelling and passionate case for her client to follow her, delivering one of the series’ most memorable lines, “Either you fit the jacket or the jacket fits you” (“Fifi”). The audience also sees her struggle with her future after many late nights and a serious car accident. Writer for *Salon* Melanie McFarland writes, “Kim is a stand-in for every cubicle dweller who takes pride in working hard and doing a job well but at some point, realizes that it’s not doing enough.” In other words, the audience can relate to Kim. They are given the opportunity to understand her and her decision-making processes. They are given the opportunity to sympathize with her—and not at the expense of Jimmy.

TREATMENT: A PUNCHING BAG FOR PARTNERS

Finally, female characters are also often mistreated by their male counterparts, and if they are not mistreated, they often mistreat their partners (in the case of Lori), causing the further disdain of their audiences. This treatment can have an effect on the audience and how they feel about a certain character. Mittell writes, “Charisma largely stems from an actor’s performance and physicality but it is also cued by how other characters treat the antiheroes, so that on-screen relationships guide viewers how to feel toward a character” (144). Because male antiheroes are often revered by most of the other characters, audiences are more apt to like them.

For example, near the end of *Breaking Bad*, Walt says to Skyler, “And now you tell my son what I do after I’ve told you and told you to keep your damn mouth shut. You stupid bitch. How dare you?” (“Ozymandias”). There are many times in which Walt and Skyler clash. Derogatory names like “bitch,” once used, are simply echoed by the audience. For example, Gunn recalls a fan approaching her at a public event, stating, “Why is your character such a bitch?” (Kiefer). Because *Breaking Bad* is Walt’s story, and because the audience has not learned enough about Skyler to connect with her, they, too, view her in the same way. Ryan appropriately asks, “Why does it surprise anyone that some viewers feel comfortable heaping scorn on female characters when so many shows treat the women on screen with indifference, confusion or even disdain?”

In *Mad Men*, Betty is a regular punching bag for many of the show’s characters. She has been cheated on countless times, a huge measure of disrespect within a marriage. Don lies to her frequently, and though Don thinks Betty is blissfully clueless, she isn’t. Betty proclaims to Don, “I’m thinking about how different you are, before and after. I love the way you look at me when you’re like this. But then I watch it decay. I can only hold your attention so long” (“The Better Half”). At one point, Betty says to her therapist, “Still, I can’t help but think that I’d be happy if my husband was faithful to me. The way he makes love sometimes it’s what I want and sometimes, it’s obviously what someone else wants” (“The Wheel”).

She is not only mistreated by Don. She is also treated poorly by many members of her family. In season seven, after getting into a fight with Sally, Betty is furious. Sally tells her that Betty’s only accomplishment is her “pretty nose” and implies that her appearance is the only value she brings to her marriage to Henry. Stewing about Sally’s comment, the next time Betty sees Henry, she yells, “I’m tired of everyone telling me to shut up. I’m not stupid. I speak Italian. You’re sorry you forgot to inform me what I’m supposed to think. Guess what: *I think* all by myself!” (“The Runaways”). Her frustration is not necessarily misplaced; throughout her marriage to Henry, the viewers see her as arm candy for many political events.

On the other hand, most of the characters, including Rick, treat Lori decently in *The Walking Dead*, although a few of the characters express their disapproval of her when they find out she is pregnant. Interestingly, Steven Yeun, who played Glenn, the character who first finds out about Lori's pregnancy, admitted to hating Lori. He states:

I remember the first couple seasons, there was a little bit of backlash on Lori. The character Lori. And to me, she was very similar to the character that they wrote in the book. In the book, when I read the book, I hated Lori. But the thing is, is the reason why is because she's coming from her own place which is rational in her mind. But from the outside looking in, it seems irrational. Or it seems disconnected from what you want as a perfect narrative. (Rowles)

Yeun's explanation makes sense. The audience is never given the chance to understand the place Lori is coming from, the place that guides her decisions and behavior. Instead, they are only able to judge her based on other characters' reactions to her. The characters' (and even actors') poor view of Lori is one reason audiences reacted to her with disdain.

This is in stark contrast to how Rick and Jimmy treat Michonne and Kim. Throughout the series, Rick frequently consults Michonne on the decisions he makes, and he regularly tells her that her input is valued. As noted previously, it is possible that an apocalypse influences gender dynamics. Yet, it is important to note that, under these circumstances, Rick treats Michonne differently from Lori, making the comparison appropriate. In episode 9.3, in reference to rebuilding the community in which they live, Rick states, "Thank you for everything you've done" ("Warning Signs"). Like Rick, Jimmy treats his partner with respect. While there are times when he disappoints Kim, he is typically apologetic and repentant for his behavior.

CONCLUSION

There are a variety of reasons why audiences have not embraced many of the female characters as antiheroes in the series analyzed. In part, as Gunn argues, the disdain for these characters has partially to do with how audiences believe women should act. These beliefs are informed by viewers' personal experiences, including what they have learned both consciously and unconsciously about gender performance and performativity. As noted throughout this paper, when female characters do not exhibit traditional markers of femininity, they are ridiculed, as their behavior challenges the notion of a strict gender binary (and thus gender roles). Since gender performativity is a repetitive act that reproduces itself, disrupting the storytelling process and the power within is crucial.

Shifting the narrative, however, is challenging. It is important to recognize that audience expectations, and how those expectations inform the reading of texts, will not change overnight. Expectations are created through agents like popular culture, as popular culture generates and articulates people's understanding of gender. In order to disrupt this cycle, networks should diversify the writers' room and create characters that are admired for moving between masculine and feminine traits.

One way to help change audience perception and increase admiration for diverse female characters is to create more robust storylines. Within the dataset, the female characters often have limited backstories or no backstories at all, and because of this, audiences have a difficult time relating to them; all audiences have to rely on is preconceived stereotypes. A greater focus on female characters in the writers' room would ensure better-developed characters. Specifically, writers should focus on giving female characters moments of redemption as they do with male antiheroes within the dataset. For example, at the end of *Mad Men*, Don finds peace and writes one of the most famous advertisements of the era ("Buy the World a Coke"), while Betty's plans to go back to school are sidelined because she is diagnosed with lung cancer. Despite a series of

misdeeds by both characters, Betty is offered no redemption and is dispensed with a bleak future, while Don finds redemption on both a personal and professional level.

Interestingly, as viewers can see with Kim Wexler and a host of female antiheroes on other networks (Jackie on *Nurse Jackie*, Eve on *Killing Eve*), it is possible for audiences to relate to a resilient and independent female character, who, at times, is morally compromised. As noted in this analysis, one reason Kim is likely treated differently by audiences is that she has a backstory—including moments of redemption—existing outside her partnership with Jimmy. Furthermore, because audiences also take cues from other characters in a series, it is important that other characters treat female characters with respect. When these characters, especially their partners, treat them poorly, audiences are more apt to dislike them. Notably, Jimmy treats Kim with respect.

It is clear that over the years, AMC has been trying to create strong representations of women, women who have their own opinions and are not afraid to voice them. Yet, despite this, such representations rely on stereotypes and adhere to a gender binary. Unfortunately, the lack of female backstories and the poor treatment of these characters by other characters is clearly causing a disconnect for audiences, at times, fostering contempt. Additionally, I would argue that while Kim and Michonne achieve antihero status, there is still cause for concern. Kim is childless, and for a good percentage of the series, so is Michonne. On its own, this is not problematic, but it is problematic that viewers have yet to see a widely embraced antihero *mother* on AMC, as such characters are repeatedly disempowered via motherhood. This suggests ways in which the network can improve and develop a diverse range of audience-accepted female characters who can fully function as antiheroes.

WORKS CITED

- Abrams, M.H., and Geoffrey Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Cengage Learning, 2011.
- Agirre, Katixa. "Am I Supposed to Say how Shocked I Was?" Audience Responses to *Mad Men*." *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 17, no. 6, 2014, pp. 631-646, doi:10.1177/1367549414544115. Accessed 29 Mar. 2019.
- "The Better Half." *Mad Men*, season 6, episode 9, AMC, 26 May 2013.
- "Bloodletting." *The Walking Dead*, season 2, episode 2, AMC, 23 Oct. 2011.
- Boucher, Ashley. "'The Walking Dead': A Brief Showrunner History." *The Wrap*, 3 Feb. 2018, <https://www.thewrap.com/the-walking-dead-showrunners/>. Accessed 2 Nov. 2018
- Bourdage, Monique. "Not Just 'Another Humourless Bitch': Feminist Fans' Reception of *Mad Men*." *Continuum*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2014, pp. 164-175.
- carranz, j. "[...] But I Hated Skylar Cause She was Fake...." YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N-YtnuYKdqC>. Accessed 15 May 2019.
- Chaney, Jen. "Why You Hate Skyler White." *Esquire*, 5 Sept. 2013, <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/tv/a24645/why-you-hate-skyler-white/>
- "The Chrysanthemum and the Sword." *Mad Men*, season 4, episode 5, AMC, 22 Aug. 2010.
- "Cornered." *Breaking Bad*, season 4, episode 6, AMC, 21 Aug. 2011.
- Cox, Megan. "Why Do Many 'Breaking Bad' Fans Love Walter White But Hate Skyler?" 25 Sept. 2013. <https://bitchmedia.org/post/why-do-many-breaking-bad-fans-love-walter-white-but-hate-skyler>. Accessed on 3 Nov. 2018.
- "Fifi." *Better Call Saul*, season 2, episode, 8, AMC, 4 April 2016.
- Foss, Sonja K. *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*. Waveland Press Inc., 2004.
- Gilligan, Carol. *In a Different Voice*. Harvard University Press, 1982.

- Gunn, Anna. "I Have a Character Issue." *The New York Times*, 23 Aug. 2013, p. A21.
- Gunter, Barrie. *Television and Sex Role Stereotyping*. John Libbey & Company, 1986.
- "I.F.T." *Breaking Bad*, season 3, episode 3, AMC, 4 Apr. 2010.
- Kalaidis, Jen. "The 'Mad Men' Double-Standard: Why Do Fans Hate Betty but Love Don?" *The Atlantic*, 23 Mar. 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/03/the-mad-men-double-standard-why-do-fans-hate-betty-but-love-don/254924/>. Accessed 2 Nov. 2018.
- Kiefer, Halle. "*Breaking Bad*'s Anna Gunn Looks Back on All the 'Bizarre' Fan Hate She Received as Skyler White." *Vulture*, 1 July 2018, <https://www.vulture.com/2018/07/breaking-bads-anna-gunn-looks-back-on-bizarre-fan-hate.html>. Accessed. 11 March 2019.
- McFarland, Melanie. "We : Are All Kim Wexler: 'Better Call Saul' and the Painful Realities of Mid-Career Crisis." *Salon*, 2 Sept. 2018, <https://www.salon.com/2018/09/02/we-are-all-kim-wexler-better-call-saul-and-the-painful-realities-of-mid-career-crisis/>. Accessed 2 Nov. 2018.
- Mittell, Jason. *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*. NYU Press, 2015.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. 5th ed. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. Oxford UP, 1999: 833-44.
- Ocasio, Anthony. "'The Walking Dead' Producer Responds To 'Annoying Lori' Critics." *Screen Rant*, 21 Mar. 2012, <https://screenrant.com/walking-dead-season-3-lori-annoying/>. Accessed 2 Nov. 2018.
- "Out of Town." *Mad Men*, season 3, episode 1, AMC, 16 Aug. 2009.
- "Ozymandias." *Breaking Bad*, season 5, episode 14, AMC, 15 Sep. 2013.
- "Rebecca." *Better Call Saul*, season 2, episode 5, AMC, 14 Mar. 2016.
- Rosen, Lisa. "Mad Men' Stars Remember Biggest Bombshells Hurlled at Them on Series." *The LA Times*, 28 May 2015, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/envelope/emmys/la-en-st-mad-men-20150528-story.html>. Accessed 28 Mar. 2019.
- Rothman, Michael. "Mad Men': Shocking Way Fans Treated January Jones Because of Betty." *ABC News*, 4 Apr. 2015, <https://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/mad-men-shocking-fans-treated-january-jones-because/story?id=30087418>. Accessed 2 Nov. 2018.
- Rowles, Dustin. "Glenn from 'The Walking Dead' Hated Lori as Much as Everyone Else." *UpRoxx*, 15 July 2015, <https://uproxx.com/tv/glenn-from-the-walking-dead-hated-lori-as-much-as-everyone-else/>. Accessed 2 Nov. 2018.
- "The Runaways." *Mad Men*, season 7, episode 5, AMC, 11 May 2014.
- Ryan, Maureen. "Anna Gunn and 'Breaking Bad's' Skyler White: Just the Tip of a Very Big Iceberg." *Huffington Post*, 25 Aug. 2013, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/maureen-ryan/anna-gunn-breaking-bad-skyler-white_b_3810989.html. Accessed 2 Nov. 2018.
- Sheffiled, Rob. "100 Greatest TV Shows of All Time." *Rolling Stone*, 2016 Sept. 21, <https://www.rollingstone.com/tv/tv-lists/100-greatest-tv-shows-of-all-time-105998/taxi-110398/>. Accessed 2 Nov. 2018
- Tassi, Paul. "When Rick Dies in Season 9, 'The Walking Dead' Should Too." *Forbes*, 30 May 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/insertcoin/2018/05/30/when-rick-dies-in-season-9-the-walking-dead-should-too/#6a9f0cae1cd8>. Accessed 2 Nov. 2018.
- "Thank You." *The Walking Dead*, season 6, episode 3, AMC, 25 Oct. 2015.
- "Three Sundays." *Mad Men*, season 2, episode 4, AMC, 17 Aug. 2008.
- "Warning Signs." *The Walking Dead*, season 9, episode 3, AMC, 21 Oct. 2018.
- "The Wheel." *Mad Men*, season 1, episode 13, AMC, 18 Oct. 2007.
- Vogler, Christopher. *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structures for Writers*, 2nd ed. Michael Wiese Productions, 1998.

AUTHOR BIO

Melissa Vosen Callens is currently an associate professor of practice in instructional design and communication at North Dakota State University, Fargo. Her areas of research and teaching interest include Popular Culture and Online Education. Her writing can be found in *The Ultimate Walking Dead* and *Philosophy, English Journal, Communication Teacher, Hollywood Heroines: The Most Influential Women in Film History*, and *A Sense of Community: Essays on the Television Series and Its Fandom*, among other publications.

SUGGESTED CITATION:

APA

Vosen Callens, M. (2019). AMC's infamous criminal partnerships: Suppressing the female antihero. *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*. 6(2). <http://journaldialogue.org/issues/v6-issue-2/amcs-infamous-criminal-partnerships-suppressing-the-female-antihero/>

MLA

Vosen Callens, Melissa. "AMC's Infamous Criminal Partnerships: Suppressing the Female Antihero." *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*, vol. 6, no. 2. Retrieved from journaldialogue.org/issues/v6-issue-2/amcs-infamous-criminal-partnerships-suppressing-the-female-antihero/



Rolling Call for Papers www.journaldialogue.org

Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy is an open-access, peer-reviewed journal focused on the intersection of popular culture and pedagogy.

Free to read. Free to submit.

Topics are particularly welcomed that address a scholarly examination of popular culture and pedagogy, such as:

- Relationships between literature, culture, music, technology, gender, ethnicity, and media;
- Theoretical, practical, pedagogical, and historical examinations of popular culture, including interdisciplinary discussions and those which examine the intersections between American and international cultures; and
- Interviews, reviews of books, films, conferences, music, and technology.

TYPES OF SUBMISSIONS:

1. Articles/essays — theoretical or practical discussion of popular culture and/or pedagogy

- MLA or APA format.
- 5,000-7,000 (inclusive of abstract, endnotes, and works cited).
- Submit two manuscripts, one blinded for review. All manuscripts should be in Microsoft Word format, 12pt Times New Roman with:
 - 10 keywords;
 - abstract (250-300);
 - author bio (up to 100 words);
 - author contact information (email, phone, and social media).

2. Reviews — essays reviewing books, films, games, conferences, etc. as they relate to popular culture and/or pedagogy

- MLA or APA format.
- Length: 1,200-1,800 (inclusive of endnotes and citations).
- Submit two manuscripts. One blinded for review. All manuscripts should be in Microsoft Word format, 12pt Times New Roman with:
 - 10 keywords;
 - abstract (250-300);
 - author bio (up to 100 words);
 - author contact information (email, phone, and social media).

3. Proposals for Special Issues — include a brief description (up to 500 words) of the topic to be considered, titles of 6-8 articles, and short bios (up to 250 words) of all authors and editors.

4. Musings on Pedagogy & Practice — highlight applications in the classroom, best practices in teaching and learning both inside and outside the classroom, new multimodal approaches, and additional items/ideas not fitting neatly into a scholarly article. (See <http://journaldialogue.org/musings-submissions/> for Musings specific style guidelines)

To submit an article, visit <http://journaldialogue.org/submissions/>

For more information, contact the editors: editors@journaldialogue.org

A. S. CohenMiller, PhD, Editor in Chief, and Kelli Bippert, Managing Editor



Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy is the official journal of the **Southwest Popular/American Culture Association (SWPACA)**.

Read Dialogue online at: www.journaldialogue.org

The mission of the **SWPACA** is to promote an innovative and nontraditional academic movement in Humanities and Social Sciences celebrating America's cultural heritages. To provide an outlet for scholars, writers, and others interested in popular/American culture, to share ideas in a professional atmosphere, and to increase awareness and improve public perceptions of America's cultural traditions and diverse populations.

Visit us online at: www.southwestpca.org



Facebook: facebook.com/southwestpca

Twitter: twitter.com/southwestpca

Web: www.southwestpca.org