



DIALOGUE

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Otherness, Survival and Hope:

Pedagogies in Popular Media

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INTRODUCTION AND SCOPE

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Volume 6, Issue 3 | December 2019 | www.journaldialogue.org

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Editorial

Teaching and Learning about *Otherness* in Popular Culture
Anna CohenMiller

Section 1: Learning about *Otherness* within Formal Education

“I am a Conversation”: Media Literacy, Queer Pedagogy, and Steven Universe in College Curriculum
Misty Thomas

Using news to start class: How small daily interactions affect larger classroom interactions
Laura Dumin

Section 2: Informal Learning as Survival

“No te voy a dejar nunca” – Culture and Second Language Acquisition for Survival in Fear the Walking Dead
Sharon Marie Nuruddin

Section 3: Societal Learning as Control, Conflict, and Hope

Consider the Dementor: Discipline, Punishment, and Magical Citizenship in *Harry Potter*
Tracy Bealer

Zombie Literature: Analyzing the Fear of the Unknown through Popular Culture
T. Hunter Strickland

Resistance, Race, and Myth: A Survey of American Popular Music Culture in the 20th Century
Scott Church

Online-Only Short Articles

A Pedagogy of Embodiment: The Life and Work of Queer Playwright Maria Irene Fornés
Tabitha Parry Collins

Teaching and Learning about *Otherness* in Popular Culture

Mass media has played, and is currently playing, a role in the way individuals make sense of their identities, roles and that of society. Through these media outlets—whether in TV, media, and music or in newspaper, articles, and books—people are learning. In other words, we are experiencing daily a pedagogical onslaught of information through popular media that can create conflict within ourselves or elicit great insights for change and acceptance.

Viewing the world around us informs our thinking. As children, there is frequently a lens of awe in seeing new ideas and mechanisms of the world working in unique ways. Each new piece of information is a fact to translate into a growing mental map. For those entering formal education, new ideas tend to come in the form of “texts” intended to show fact and truth about disciplinary learning. The new pieces of information are then often coded within boxes, compartmentalized for instance into learning about science, math, and language. In institutions of higher education, concepts of identity, race, class, and hierarchy persist. Through peer relations, students find commonalities and cohesion or on the flip-side experience “Othering” based upon race, class and gender (Crozier, Burke, & Archer, 2016). Outside the classroom, informal learning through experience (Marsick & Watkins, 2011) presents itself everywhere, allowing students to learn through interactions about how to behave with one another, about identity, about one another, and ones place within a hierarchical world.

But what happens beyond the openminded learning of young children and formal learning within schools? As adults beyond the constraints of educational institutions, we may understand that what we pay attention to informs our understanding of ourselves and of others. Historically, for example, mass media has amplified the presence of heteronormativity of white men in written and visual texts. For those not fitting the hegemonic discourse, they are often depicted as deviant in one manner or another. These depictions have negative impacts for those being objectified, whether through TV shows normalizing sexual objectification of women (Guizzo, Cadinu, Galdi, Maass, & Latrofa, 2017) or popular culture’s perpetuation of the racialization of black bodies (Tate, 2015).

In this issue of *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*, we are pleased to present six articles speaking to the idea of what we learn from popular culture related to Otherness, survival and hope. Within and across these articles, you will hear about ways in which we need to consider ourselves and what we may have thought to be “the Other.” As such, the authors in this issue provide us with the chance to reconsider language, music, news, and cultural stories. The articles in this issue are divided into three related sections: *Learning about Otherness within the Formal Classroom*, *Informal Learning for Survival*, and *Societal Learning as Control, Conflict, and Hope*.

Across these articles, two address providing new insights to teaching and learning in the university classroom. In *Section 1: Learning about Otherness within Formal Education*, Laura Dumin and Misty Thomas’s works encourage deeper thinking about popular media and its relation to our identity and perceptions of

others. In Thomas's, "I am a Conversation:" Media Literacy, Queer Pedagogy, and *Steven Universe* in College Curriculum," she emphasizes the importance of opening discussion for students to investigate and analyze identity through integrating critical media literacy with queer pedagogy. Thomas demonstrates the importance of actively engaging with popular media, such as articulated through the example of *Steven Universe*, a cartoon show presenting both normative and non-normative identities for students and teachers as a "new approach to the inclusion of media in the university classroom" (p. 1).

In Dumin's "Using News to Start Class: How Small Daily Interactions Affect Larger Classroom Interactions," she shows the ways in which engaging college students in learning and discussing current news stories can enhance learning about one another. Dumin's study highlights how our conceptualization of difference, such as for topics on racial tensions and police brutality, can be addressed, providing intellectual growth through extra credit assignments and encouraging students to open-up and share with one another. With these first two articles, Thomas and Dumin show how pedagogical practice can expand individual understanding of self and others.

In Section 2, we move beyond the classroom into *Informal Learning for Survival* with Sharon Marie Nuruddin's article, "No te voy a dejar nunca" Culture and Second Language Acquisition for Survival in *Fear the Walking Dead*. In this work, Nuruddin illustrates the essential nature of informal learning as a matter of avoiding death. Applying Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory to developing bilingual and bicultural abilities, the author demonstrates how informally learning Spanish and cultural traditions can provide individuals within a post-apocalyptic world with the needed means for survival.

With the final three articles, Tracy Bealer, T. Hunter Strickland, and Scott Haden Church present analyses of literature and music in *Section 3: Societal Learning as Control, Conflict, and Hope*. First, in Tracy Bealer's article, "Consider the Dementor: Discipline, Punishment, and Magical Citizenship in *Harry Potter*," she explores the ways in which "fearsome" dementors can be considered through varied lenses to better understand power hierarchies presented in the texts. Through her analysis, Bealer discusses how dementors are positioned as a feared *Other*, an embodiment of fear at the individual and societal level, intended to teach about maintaining control and order.

Then in T. Hunter Strickland's article, "Zombie Literature: Analyzing the Fear of the Unknown through Popular Culture," he reflects on the ways universal fears can be attributed and portrayed through the genre of zombie literature. Strickland draws from the Russian philosopher, Mikhail Bakhtin's description of *carnival* as a way to describe the paradox of fear and repulsion, along with shock and humor as a way to learn and move through deep-seated individual and societal fears.

The final article in the section also draws from Bakhtin's *carnival*, through the lens of counter culture and breaking of social hierarchies to examine music in the United States. Haden Church presents an interdisciplinary analysis in "Resistance, Race, and Myth: A Survey of American Popular Music Culture in the 20th Century," laying a framework for informing future studies of 21st century popular music by conceptualizing the landscape as a paradox of hegemony and resistance.

In addition to the full-length articles, the concept of *Otherness*, survival and hope can be demonstrated in Tabitha Parry Collin's film review of Michelle Memran's *The Rest I Make Up*. Parry Collin's describes how the film demonstrates how Maria Irene Fornés made a significant impact on playwriting and teaching, yet as a "queer, brown playwright" is positioned outside of normative culture, thus "overshadowed by more mainstream voices."

The six full-length articles in this issue encourage us to expand our scholarship and teaching to consider how individual and societal perceptions and fears are portrayed and overcome. We see how the concept of the *Other* can stand in for an embodiment for fear--creating pressure to act or the potential to change and grow. With the inclusion of the film review, we can see how these works can teach us about our fears, the voices

that are prioritized and ways to continually push to better understand and incorporate pedagogies in popular media.

We look forward to your thoughts on this issue and hope you enjoy, *Otherness, Survival and Hope: Pedagogies in Popular Media*.

Anna CohenMiller

Editor in Chief

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"I am a Conversation": Media Literacy, Queer Pedagogy, and *Steven Universe* in College Curriculum

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ABSTRACT:

The recent cartoon show on Cartoon Network *Steven Universe* allows for the blending of both queer theory and media literacies to create a pedagogical space for students to investigate and analyze not only queerness, but also normative and non-normative identities. This show creates characters as well as relationships that both break with and subvert what would be considered traditional masculine and feminine identities. Additionally, *Steven Universe* also creates a space where sexuality and transgender bodies are represented. This paper demonstrates both the presence of queerness within the show and the pedagogical implications for using this piece of media within a college classroom.

Keywords: popular culture; *Steven Universe*; Queer Theory; media literacy; pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

Media literacy pedagogy is expanding as new advances and theories are added each year along with recommendations on how these theories can work together. Two of these pedagogical theories are Media Literacies and Queer Pedagogy. This blended pedagogical approach is useful for not only courses in media studies, but also composition classes. Media literacies focus on the use of various forms of media to investigate the role media plays in the creation and reinforcement of identity. Due to this focus on identity representations, media literacy effectively combines with queer pedagogy, which investigates the concepts of normalization within the classroom.

Amy Winans defines queer pedagogy as “decentering dominant cultural assumptions, exploring facets of the geography of normalization, and interrogating the self and the implications of affiliation” (107). Another way to understand queer pedagogy is that it “seeks to problematize the normal, choosing to focus on the centre rather than the margins in order to disrupt the status quo” (Coll & Charlton 309). Using queer pedagogy creates a classroom space where the instructor and the students question what they both assume to be normative while also questioning why those features of culture, such as gender roles, are considered normative.

By combining media literacy and queer pedagogy, we end up with a new approach to the inclusion of media in the university classroom. The overall benefit of “drawing on popular culture texts is their potential to challenge heteronormativity” (Allen 770), which is crucial when combining queer pedagogy and popular culture. I will illustrate the combination of these two pedagogical approaches using the 2013 Cartoon Network show *Steven Universe* that will provide us with a unique approach. The reason for this is that *Steven Universe* embraces its queerness in both its storylines and characters, resulting in it being a model for blending media literacy and queer pedagogy. Students at the university level could study queer theories along with media studies and then investigate *Steven Universe* through this lens.

MEDIA LITERACY AND QUEER PEDAGOGIES

Media literacies require students and instructors to actively engage with the media world around them. The purpose of media literacies, or media education, is “not only about the analysis of messages but [also about] an awareness of why those messages are there. Therefore, the critical media education movement integrates textual analysis along with questions of production and reception” (Wyatt & Silva 3). With this particular pedagogical approach, the focus is placed on students recognizing the messages put forth by various media platforms while also investigating the motivations behind those messages. These messages are wide reaching, resulting in media literacies serving “as a counter-hegemonic tool for groups that are marginalized and oppressed based on class, ethnicity, gender, or sexuality” (Wyatt & Silva 11). This classroom curriculum requires students to investigate the representations that are vital to how they understand and perceive themselves while also looking at the power structures behind these representations.

Media literacies also focus on the creation and reinforcement of the audience’s identity. As students watch and engage with the media around them, their own sense of who they are is reflected or challenged through character representation. Yet, arguably, this occurs without their knowledge or permission, as they are not fully active participants in this formation before learning how to think critically about these messages. Due to this constant involvement, it is crucial “to examine how media texts contribute to identity formation, especially among youth who often engage in an intensified process of shaping and reshaping their identities as they encounter new aspects of their world” (Kemmit 167). Students are not only shaping their identities based on what they see but are also re-shaping their identities based on their thoughts and examinations. Due to the immense importance placed on the connection between media and identity, it is vital that students are able to critically evaluate both. It is through this critical eye on the formation of identity that media literacy pedagogy

interacts with queer pedagogy. While utilizing queer pedagogy might seem to be limited to only queer youth, it is applicable to any student found in the classroom. In response to this issue, Amy Winans argues, “Queer pedagogy challenges all students regardless of their sexual identities because it calls into question the process of normalizing dominant assumptions and beliefs, as it challenges instructors to question and to continue to test their own pedagogy” (106). Focusing on what is considered normative within society allows for a space where students (and instructors) can look at what is viewed as nonnormative, which is the focus of queer pedagogy and is the reason why it easily merges with media literacies.

However, utilizing media literacy pedagogy is problematized by the media the students and instructors bring to the forefront. Obviously, not all representations are positive, as some are negative in terms of being cliché or of reinforcing stereotypes about groups of people. Erica Scharrer articulates this struggle well, arguing, “Encouraging students to recognize both positive and negative roles of media in their lives as well as in society at large is a crucial guideline in media in their lives can (and should) be present in the curriculum regardless of the philosophical approach” (20). Students must be introduced to both the positive and negative representations of various identities and groups of people. Critically investigating the ways that media is posited as being positive opens up an area where students are able to recognize that no representation is perfect. In this framework, students are encouraged to decide whether the representation the media puts forward is positive or negative, and what the drawbacks are with both. Students then “employ *their own* ideas about ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ and ‘good’ and ‘bad’ to develop individual critical strategies. Students can question the values that are embedded in media and determine whether they meet their own, potentially highly personalized, standards” (Scharrer 21). From the moment that students decide whether or not a media representation is positive or negative, they are engaging critically with the elements that influence their own identities.

Despite the benefits to this approach, media literacy scholars recognize the dangers of investigating media-based representations, whether they be negative or positive, and these dangers are two-fold. On the one hand, in order for this approach to generate any outcomes, the students must engage in regular debate and discussion concerning topics that often are based on deep-rooted belief systems and experiences. Students’ relationships with the media they interact with are never simple, resulting in the possibility for class discussions that disintegrate into chaos. While these are valid concerns, it is impossible to prevent all heated discussions that cross the boundary from a classroom discussion to a chaotic argument. As the instructor, it is crucial to recognize that this possibility is always present. The other drawback to this pedagogical approach is the possibility of negative effects impacting students, as their sense of identity is at once both fragile and deeply rooted within their belief systems. By asking them to investigate such topics and to critically analyze them, instructors run the risk of unraveling and damaging a student’s identity. The fear here, then, is that students experience a negative effect on their self-esteem and their confidence in their identity. While this is a valid concern, critically analyzing what makes certain representations negative and the reason why it affects individuals in such a way is a crucial skill for students to gain. Instructors should attempt to “personalize the curriculum and encourage students to consider how their relationships with and responses to media are, at times, similar to that of others, and, at times, unique to their own positions and perspectives” (Scharrer 22). What this means is allowing students to bring in the representations that they find most engaging, in either a positive or negative manner. This allows them to discuss the representations as a class, unpacking it in a way that is beneficial for everyone present.

Investigating the Gaps in Representation

Additionally, media literacy allows students to investigate the gaps in representations, which is where queer pedagogy can heighten a class’ investigation into media. As the name suggests, queer pedagogy is rooted in queer theory, which aims to “challenge and break apart conventional categories of male and female and by extension the paradigm of hetero versus homo identities that proliferate in popular culture”

(Lipton 164). The goal of encouraging students to also critically examine the gaps in representations can be accomplished during the course and through the assignments students complete. While in the depths of the process, students “start to discover that their own identities do not have to be constructed by a media culture of mass consumerism” (Wyatt & Silva 4). Instead, their identities remain under their own control. By looking at both the representations and the gaps within them, students are “empowered by a queer reading practice and eventually learn to demand more tangible representations of the queer experience” (Lipton 176). This is one of the ultimate goals of this blended pedagogy—to get students invested in the representations that populate the media so that they can assist in not only changing the representation but also how people view nonnormative behavior.

APPLYING QUEER PEDAGOGIES & MEDIA LITERACIES TO *STEVEN UNIVERSE*

One way to approach this blended pedagogy is by utilizing a popular piece of media that is a part of popular culture. As Anna Creadick states, “When popular culture enters the classroom, students’ lives can merge with their studies, and the effect is powerful” (16). By allowing students to bring in the popular culture-based media that they are drawn to, they become more invested in their investigations. Furthermore, queer youth tend to describe their interaction with popular culture and media as “a kind of code cracking. The queer imagination shifts from a process of creative construction to an active process of finding the right clues. For many queer youth, the veracity of some popular culture only comes to light when their reading provides some glimpse into a queer world” (Lipton 177). All students are able to learn how to engage in this code cracking process by interacting with popular culture. Both students and instructors learn how to read for queerness, looking specifically for the areas where representations are nonnormative in terms of sexuality or gender. In turn, this allows students to investigate why societal norms are reinforced along with the beliefs and assumptions that form the foundation for those norms.

With this blended pedagogical approach, it begs the question of what this would look like in practice. An example blended pedagogical approach is *Steven Universe*. This show focuses on Steven, the main protagonist who is half human and half gem. In the show, gems are a type of alien race that has attempted to colonize Earth for its natural resources. However, Steven’s mother, Rose Quartz, and her loyal followers defended Earth, resulting in them being labeled as traitors. The various episodes trace Steven’s growth as he learns what it means to be both human and gem while being mentored by his mother’s followers, named the Crystal Gems. At this point, it is crucial to note that the alien race of gems has no inherent gender or sex. Instead, they take on human form, which carries with it the physical markers of both gender and sex. Within the characters and their interactions with one another, normative behaviors and identities are queered, resulting in the kind of pedagogical tool that allows for discussion of queer identity in combination with media studies.

Steven and Non-Normative Masculinity

In the show, Steven is a pre-teen who is a normative cisgender heterosexual male. Yet, Steven’s heteronormative representation becomes complicated by his depiction of masculinity. Steven’s weapons and the powers he wields deviate from cultural norms concerning masculinity. The powers Steven uses to fight his enemies are defensive rather than offensive-based, as he uses a pink shield with roses on it. These societally normative feminine weapons (and colors) queer his representation of masculinity. Additionally, his power of “bubbling” is also defensive-based. In an early episode in the first season of the show, Steven discovers he can create “bubbles” that surround him in order to protect him and those near him, namely Connie, a female friend. This problematizes the representation of masculinity as it is both normative and nonnormative. On the one hand, the focus on Steven as a purely defensive character is nonnormative for masculinity but the action of protecting a girl is not, leaving Steven a problematic representation of queered masculinity that is ripe for students to analyze.

Steven has another power, which is the ability to create sentient life, both by accident and purposely. In the season one episode “Watermelon Steven,” Steven discovers that he can create life with his spit. After eating watermelon and spitting out the seeds, a massive farm of Steven-shaped watermelons appears, resulting in Steven exclaiming “Holy watermelon! Is this? Can it be? They’re me! They’re all me!” (“Watermelon Steven”). Steven’s confusion is immediately answered by Pearl, another gem, who explains, “Your mother had the power to grow sentient plant life to act as her defenders” (“Watermelon Steven”). Steven has inherited his mother’s power of giving life. The act of giving any form of life is considered to be the domain of biological females; therefore, to give this power to Steven complicates his masculinity and identity. Furthermore, this is further problematized by the fact that he can only create life from existing items, namely vegetation. With this in mind, it becomes clear that Steven’s power involves the ability to provide intelligence to various vegetation in order for it to fight for and protect him. Steven’s life-giving powers do not include free will, but are more akin to breeding soldiers, resulting in both masculine and feminine elements.

Steven’s comfort and flexibility when it comes to his own masculinity also places him in a queer space. In particular, Steven engages in what would be considered cross-dressing for a performance in his home town. In the episode “Sadie’s Song” in season 2, Steven wears a skirt and cropped top along with face make-up, glitter, and high heels while singing and dancing. During Steven’s performance, the audience cheers, obviously excited and entertained, and one audience member remarks that this “had Steven’s name written all over it” (“Sadie’s Song”), demonstrating that Steven’s behavior and performance is not considered strange by the audience. The characters in the show “make no mention of his heels and makeup, treating his drag costume as just another aspect of Steven’s performance” (Dunn 46). Steven’s performance reveals a certain playfulness in terms of gender expectations. On the surface, this is a positive representation of the freedom of cross-dressing, particularly for a cisgender and heterosexual male. However, Steven’s overall character provides a very queer representation of masculinity. While Steven is notably male with an opposite-gender attraction to a female character named Connie, his attributes are decidedly more feminine.

Pearl and the Complications of Sexuality

In addition, the character Pearl is also problematically queer but with a focus on representations of sexuality and gender norms. As the show progresses, it becomes increasingly obvious that Pearl is sexually attracted to a fellow gem, Rose Quartz, who also physically manifests as a human female. However, Rose Quartz does not share Pearl’s feelings, and instead has a child, Steven, with Greg. In the season three episode titled “Mr. Greg,” Pearl explicitly reveals her feelings towards Rose Quartz through song, resulting in the first time these feelings are brought to the forefront in an explicit manner. During her song, Pearl explains,

I was fine with the men who would come into her life now and again. I was fine ‘cause I knew that they didn’t really matter, until you [Greg]. I was fine when you came, and we fought like it was all some silly game. Over her, who she’d chosen. After all those years, I never thought I’d lose. [. . .] Who am I now in this world without her. (“Mr. Greg”)

Pearl alludes to men that came before, revealing that they were short term interactions that never lasted, and, because of this, Pearl could tolerate them. However, the fact that Pearl experiences these emotions when other men enter Rose Quartz’s life illuminates an interest beyond friendship. Furthermore, the fact that Pearl and Greg engaged in fights about who Rose Quartz would choose illustrates a romantic attachment.

This representation of Pearl is queered when taken in the context of contemporary representations of same-sex attraction within popular culture. Susan Driver argues, “a girl’s queer transgressions commonly reinforce, rather than disrupt, her development into a normal woman. In other words, elusive signs of gender and sexual variance become framed in terms of a privileged and inevitable heterosexual resolution” (7). While Pearl is not human, manifesting as a female subjects her to the same expectations and gender norms of any

human girl. However, the show does not depict Pearl's queerness in the same way Driver argues that media and popular culture does. Instead, Pearl's attraction to and love for Rose Quartz is depicted as permanent as opposed to a stepping stone towards her eventual heterosexual identity. In fact, Pearl develops an attraction towards a human pink-haired woman, in a later season, further demonstrating that Pearl's sexuality is not a passing moment in her development, but a legitimate and innate part of her identity.

Pearl's actions and mannerisms counter what society views as feminine, as Pearl's weapons are a spear and a sword, which she uses when she acts as a knight to Rose Quartz. In the episode "Sworn to the Sword," the show uses a flashback to depict Pearl in action in the midst of a battle with enemy gems. The enemy gems are larger than Pearl, yet she charges into battle without any concern for herself, wielding either her sword or her spear. While there is no dialogue to this flashback, it is Pearl's actions that illustrate her queerness regarding femininity. While Steven is decidedly a defense-based fighter, Pearl is completely offensive. Eli Dunn argues, "Gems have bodies that they are able to change at will, and this magical ability to mutate their bodies makes the standard feminine features that they often display less important in defining their gender" (45). By making the gems an alien race, the show demonstrates that femininity and the definitions that accompany it are simply illusions that can be taken on by anyone—or anything, in this case.

Shapeshifting and Fusion: Physical Fluidity and Trans Bodies

Amethyst, a fellow gem, regularly uses her power of shape shifting to become something or someone else to mock those around her, further queering gendered behavior. Like the other gems, Amethyst does not have a sex but chooses to manifest in a traditionally feminine fashion. Yet, it is with Amethyst that the show narrows in on demonstrating the fluidity of the gendered body. In an early episode, Amethyst shape shifts into her wrestling alter-ego, Purple Puma, who is male and is referred to with traditionally masculine (that is, he/him) pronouns. Dunn is correct when she argues,

If the male body that she [Amethyst] takes on as Purple Puma is a performance, it implicates her normal appearance as a kind of costume as well. Her appearance as male is no less performance, costume, or construct than her normally female-gendered body. Any appearance she may choose to wear becomes performance. (46)

By creating and utilizing these characters whose bodies are simply constructs, the show is engaging in a larger discussion of gender as a performance. The point made with these characters, particularly Amethyst in this case, is that the concepts of normative and non-normative are not just constructs; they are also fluid.

Each of the gems is able to take part in fusion, which is the physical blending of two gems, which can be understood as a trans body. Garnet explains fusion as needing "a gem at the core of your being. Then you need a body that can turn into light. Then you need a partner you can trust with that light" ("The Answer"). Garnet is, perhaps, the best character to explain fusion as she is the result of the fusion between the gems Ruby and Sapphire. In the episode "The Answer," Garnet retells the story of how she became a fusion, and essentially came into being, through narration and flashback. Garnet explains how it feels to be fused: "I feel lost, and scared, and happy. Why am I so sure that I'd rather be this than everything I was supposed to be, and that I'd rather do this than anything I was supposed to do?" ("The Answer"). For Garnet, this fused state feels natural and is how she is meant to feel. When reading this as a representation of trans bodies, Garnet's response finds a concrete foundation on which to stand.

Yet the initial fusion elicits both positive and negative reactions from other characters, complicating this representation of fused (trans) bodies. The other gems who witness Ruby and Sapphire's initial fusion react with nothing short of disgust and repulsion as various gems exclaim, "Unbelievable! Disgusting! This is unheard of!" ("The Answer"). As Garnet's narration illustrates, the various gems who had witnessed the fusion had never before seen the fusion of two different gems, only of gems of the same type. In essence,

this is an issue of normative versus non-normative behaviour, as the expectation is to fuse only with the same gem, such as a ruby with a ruby or a sapphire with a sapphire. For a sapphire to fuse with a ruby is to engage in a non-normative or queer interaction and relationship, which has drastic consequences, as it is announced that Ruby “will be broken for this” (“The Answer”). For the gems, being “broken” is the equivalent of death for a human; therefore, the punishment for breaking from the norms of their society is death. Yet, there are those characters who do not view fusion in such a harsh and negative light. Upon encountering Rose Quartz, Garnet fearfully asks if she upsets Rose, to which Rose Quartz replies “Who cares about how I feel? How you feel is bound to be much more interesting” (“The Answer”). Instead of disgust, there is an interest and focus on Garnet as a new gem. In this interaction, the nonnormative relationship between Ruby and Sapphire is a typical relationship, not one that is viewed as queer by Rose Quartz.

Fusion as a concept also reveals yet another queer element within the show, especially in relation to Steven and who can fuse with him. While the gems can only fuse with other gems, Steven is able to fuse with both gems and humans due to his mixed heritage. This becomes crucial to the queerness that is apparent throughout the show when Steven fuses with his best friend, Connie, creating a new person named Stevonnie. The creation of Stevonnie becomes a complex arena for queer investigation for two main reasons: the first being that Stevonnie is created from a human male and female, resulting in a fusion that is neither. Dunn has understood Stevonnie, and fusion characters in general, as representations of trans bodies, arguing that the show’s “interaction with trans representation relies on separating gender identity from sexual orientation, physical sex characteristics, and gender presentation in the mind of its viewers” (45). This becomes most clearly represented in the fused Stevonnie, as the physical depiction of the fusion is neither female nor male, resulting in Stevonnie being completely separated from the categories that Dunn outlines.

Additionally, the ways in which Stevonnie interacts with other people in town reveals how fusion is treated, just as the other gems’ reactions to Garnet illustrate views concerning societal norms. Stevonnie first visits a donut shop where two people, a male and a female, are working. Both workers exhibit visual signs of attraction, from blushing to stammering to giving away food. However, Dunn argues, “Whether these expressions of nervousness around Stevonnie are from attraction to Stevonnie or from a confused reaction to their ambiguously gendered body is not entirely clear, but it is clear that the interaction both of them have with Stevonnie is uncomfortable” (53). While it true that their reactions can stem from their confusion regarding Stevonnie’s gender, I would contend that such reactions are mainly due to an attraction to Stevonnie, which may or may not cause them to become confused. Furthermore, it is their attraction to Stevonnie that demonstrates the strange attraction that the fused body engenders.

This type of reaction continues to arise when Stevonnie attends a dance where they become the focus of fellow dancer, Kevin’s, attention. In this scene, it becomes increasingly apparent that Kevin’s advances are not welcome, causing Stevonnie to feel uncomfortable in their fused body. Kevin continually refers to Stevonnie as “baby” and attempts to pull them back onto the dance floor. Stevonnie ultimately agrees to dance once more then asserts, “And it’s Stevonnie; I am not your baby” (“The Answer”). After this, they begin to dance in an aggressive manner, demonstrating their anger and lack of comfort within this situation. Dunn correctly notes, “Stevonnie’s interaction with Kevin at the dance is one in which they are sexualized, even despite their protests” (54). The discomfort caused by Kevin’s sexualization of Stevonnie causes them to break apart, or un-fuse. Their experience as a fusion, or trans body, was so toxic that it could not be sustained, demonstrating the existing social stigma that surrounds such bodies. However, it is clear from Garnet’s experience with being a fusion that the trans body can and should be accepted.

THE PEDAGOGICAL FUNCTION OF *STEVEN UNIVERSE*

Steven Universe provides materials through which students can engage with queerness and queer youth cultures by utilizing media literacy and queer pedagogy. None of the representations within the show are perfect, as each can be problematized depending on how viewers interpret each character. This is the goal of the investigation—to recognize how media representations of different types of people, particularly those involving a degree of queerness, are neither negative nor positive, but a combination of both. With queer pedagogy, instructors are offered “a way to conceptualize and interrogate strategies of normalization by attending to the cultural production of knowledge in order to understand and, ideally, to push beyond the places ‘where thinking stops’ within and between diverse discourse communities” (Winans 117). Winans argues that the place “where thinking stops” is the area where students reach a block in their ability to articulate their understanding and opinions on various media representations. This is the area where true investigation and the acquisition of knowledge occurs, which is true for a variety of higher education courses, not only for media studies classes. For *Steven Universe*, this space occurs when the students begin looking at the representations beyond the surface and begin to ask questions that problematize the characters.

Investigating the various gem-based characters in the show requires a focus on queer theory and pedagogy as the gems take on human forms but are, nonetheless, not human. In one of the few papers written on this show since its creation, Eli Dunn investigates the queerness in the show, arguing, “representations of queer characters in children’s cartoons have been mostly confined to lesbian or gay characters, and these relationships often downplayed or unconfirmed. *Steven Universe* is radically breaking that tradition apart by being willing to give voice to other, less often represented queer identities” (44). *Steven Universe*, as well as Cartoon Network, are expanding their representations of what it is to be queer, which allows for an increasingly wide-reaching discussion of media representations and what those representations mean for queer identity.

One key area students could investigate is the fact that *Steven Universe* is a children’s show that openly depicts queer characters and themes. These representations, taken in conjunction with its genre, opens a discussion of the appropriate themes for intended audiences. *Steven Universe* uses “its specific kind of narrative magic in a variety of ways to teach and entertain its young audience” (Dunn 55). Dunn illustrates the framing of the show as one that is created for children for a specific reason: “Children’s shows, and children themselves, are willing to suspend disbelief and open themselves to possibilities that are not fully culturally accepted, and they are less socially conditioned to be biased against experiences or people that are new to them” (55-56). By basing these themes and queer characters within a children’s genre, they reach an audience that is arguably more willing to accept and understand what they are viewing and then internalize it. This, on a basic level, comprises the attempt to normalize queerness and incorporate it into what is socially normative.

Yet this striving towards the normalization of queerness raises its own set of complications for the queer community. One key problematic result of this normalization is that it sterilizes queerness, which is especially true with representations of queer sexuality. Susan Driver expresses this so clearly by writing:

What is especially disturbing is an almost complete silence surrounding queer youth sexual pleasures, subcultural counter publics, and political resistance. Normalization works to desexualize and depoliticize youth once again, creating safe, sanitized images that conform with white middle-class standards of visibility and value. (5)

This normalization occurs when characters are referred to as queer but in a manner which does not challenge any societal norms. They must remain in the box created by this new normative form of queerness.

Steven Universe’s attempt to shed light on queerness may have been done with the best of intentions in mind. Yet, as Driver argues, “Even the most well-meaning attempts to help queer youth often fall prey to patronizing efforts to impose ‘healthy’ normative ideals on youth in order to simplify their complexities

for the sake of mainstream recognition” (5). Additionally, Driver continues with, “Empowerment becomes a sign of fitting into familiar and nonthreatening models of identity and belonging” (5). This is a pitfall that instructors need to avoid, as discussions surrounding representations of queer identity are problematized by even the most well-meaning of instructors. This becomes a space where generalized terms of “healthy” or “unhealthy,” which can easily be switched for the terms normative and non-normative, becomes ineffective. Students need to be the ones who investigate not only these categories, but also what is included in each, and why certain individuals or forms of behavior are added into those categories. This can be based on cultural or societal expectations as well as the student’s own beliefs, which can be, and possibly are, intertwined to a certain extent.

Even with this risk, the benefits of this approach along with *Steven Universe* serving as a focal point are numerous, particularly for the queer youth that can and do populate our classrooms. Lipton explains, “Positive representations of queer life confirm an individual’s existence and provide empowerment, and freedom from oppression. But more, the process of interpreting texts introduces to queer youth the notion of taking control of the political climate to decide who is or can be queer” (Lipton 176). There really is no perfect positive representation of queerness or queer life as any representation contains issues or problem areas that arguably reveal more than the positive portrayals. With that said, these representations allow students to become involved with influencing the way queerness is depicted in the media, which then, in turn, influences how queerness is viewed by society. After all, queer pedagogy “depends on recognizing that the world outside the classroom and the strategies of normalization that operate there must be considered as we conceptualize our classroom approaches: thus, a queer pedagogy is, by definition, always impacted by the local” (Winans 107). These classroom discussions must not end once the students leave the confined bubble of the classroom, but instead, students should be bringing what they gain from these discussions into their personal worlds.

OTHER USES OF STEVEN UNIVERSE

This mixture of media literacy and queer pedagogy does not need to be confined to queerness in terms of sexuality or gender. Instead, it can be expanded to discuss class and race, as popular media contains representations of these as well. Queer pedagogy often goes beyond discussing sexual orientation or gender to discussing anything that is non-normative. According to Wendy Wyatt and Kumi Silva, “the media’s portrayal of age, class, ethnicity, and gender-- together with the claims that accompany these portrayals-- are crucial to confront as students integrate themselves into a social system and form identities of their own” (11). It is not only sexuality and gender that inform identity, but also the existence and interrogation of these categories as well. When bringing these aspects into the classroom, *Steven Universe* remains an opportune tool to use, especially with the other possible areas of focus within the show including the class hierarchy within the gem world. Certain types of gems are higher up in power than others, with a key example being that diamonds are the heads of this community of individuals. This ties in both class and race, as the various gems are also divided up and classified by color. In order to fully articulate the possible future classroom inclusion of class and race, it is necessary to pull in an example from *Steven Universe* to demonstrate its far-reaching benefits.

In the episode “Back to the Barn,” Pearl’s interaction with another gem named Peridot, reminds Pearl of the class expectations placed on being a ‘pearl’ gem. Peridot remarks, “She’s a pearl. She’s a made-to-order servant just like the hundreds of other pearls being flaunted around back on Homeworld” (“Back to”). *Steven Universe* interacts with both race and class by using these magical and fictional characters. Peridot’s comment refers to Pearl being one of many, implying the same type of rhetoric that Western culture employs about race. The other comment about being a “made-to-order servant” implies class to the point that the rest of the gem population view pearls as a lower class, perhaps similar to the working class. After this comment, Peridot asks

who Pearl belongs to, to which Pearl replies that she belongs to no one. Peridot's response illustrates the class dynamic occurring in the show: "Well, you can belong to me for now. Ha! A peridot with a pearl—what would they say back home?" ("Back to"). Not only is there the element of class, but also of ownership of one another because pearls are material possession to be bought, sold, and traded by those of a higher class.

CONCLUSION

Taking the blended pedagogical approach of both media literacies and queer pedagogy allows students to engage with their identities, and the identities of others, in a critical manner. Critical thinking should be a primary goal of education and by incorporating popular culture, students are able to investigate the world and media messages around them. While there are pitfalls to any pedagogical approach, with this particular approach, the benefits outweigh the potential drawbacks as it opens these types of discourse in a variety of higher education courses, such as composition and media study classes. It also provides a way to introduce and discuss marginalized identities, resulting in a more inclusive learning environment. Utilizing a popular television show such as *Steven Universe* allows students to engage with something that is both aimed at children and set in a fantastical world, yet is also rich with problematic queer representations. By investigating these representations and understanding the thought processes behind them, students will become active consumers and creators of future media that will help advance queer representations.

For this type of work, *Steven Universe* provides a lush landscape in which to start. The show's characters are problematic in their depictions of both normative and nonnormative behavior, allowing students to analyze and discuss these representations. The interactions between the characters also allow for a space for students to not only discuss these representations, but also to analyze them in relation to their potential influences in the real world. *Steven Universe* allows for students to analyze identities and representations in a way that interacts with their own sense of themselves and other people. It forces them to consider how they view the world and themselves, resulting in students who are increasingly critical of the media that is presented to them.

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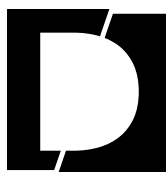
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DIALOGUE

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Using News to Start Class: How Small Daily Interactions Affect Larger Classroom Interactions

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ABSTRACT

In 2013, I added an extra credit assignment to my freshmen composition classes encouraging students to bring in news stories each class period; this assignment was designed to encourage students to be more willing to participate in classroom discussions. We then spent the first few minutes of each class discussing the stories they brought. After using this assignment for a few years, I had anecdotal evidence to suggest that my students were generally more talkative in class after the first week or two of sharing news. These experiences made me want to see if I could measure some change or document how students felt about discussing the news to start class. To that end, I developed a set of surveys to quantify this data. This article discusses the results of four semesters of survey and extra credit data from students bringing news stories to start their English classes.

Keywords: student engagement, classroom management, teaching, freshman composition, SoTL, classroom discussions

INTRODUCTION

College professors often wonder how to get more students participating in small classroom discussions. As someone who teaches freshman composition, this is especially important to me since much of my semester is built on in-class discussions and student-student interactions. In 2013, I added an extra credit assignment to my freshmen composition classes encouraging students to bring in news stories each class period. After noticing that my students seemed more willing to engage with each other at an earlier point in the semester as compared to my previous courses, I received IRB approval in 2016 to study this concept more closely. I added an anonymous survey at the beginning and end of the semester to gauge students' comfort levels with talking and sharing ideas both outside and inside of class. I wanted to see if my observations about students becoming more comfortable in class could be attributed, in some way, to discussing the news. I ran this project under ethical approval for two years; however, I continue to use the extra credit assignment because I find it incredibly valuable.

I chose to use news stories as our discussion topic because it was a resource most students had access to and it did not require a lot of in-depth preparation. Students could scroll through social media, Yahoo, NPR, or some other source to see what topics were trending and interesting to them. Then they could share the stories with the class. Where possible, I helped to fill in gaps in understanding or asked the rest of the class to help flesh-out the stories. I encouraged students to stay away from alt-left and alt-right news sources to try to avoid sharing any decidedly fake news or stories that were only meant to invoke ire in the reader. (Throughout the semester, we discussed why those types of sites flourish and how they keep their readers entertained, but why the stories are not always telling us enough of the truth to be worth sharing. This gets back into looking at rhetoric in the real-world, which is part of the focus of my classes.)

While this is an extra credit assignment, I still approach it with the expectation students will participate. On mornings when just one or two people had something to share, I asked the class to pull out their phones or open Google and find out what was happening. I want my students to be aware of world events because their overall written arguments appear to become stronger. I also believe that it gives them a way to add their voices to what is already occurring and helps them to have more well-thought-out papers. I encourage students to practice critical thinking skills in as many aspects of their lives as they can. Discussing the news with a group can help them to see issues through new eyes, especially if another student uses a source that approaches the topic from a point of view differing from their own.

The stories ranged from local stories to ones about world-wide events; occasionally someone would bring in a story interesting enough for us to scrap our planned lesson and discuss that instead. For example, in 2015 we were discussing teacher pay in Oklahoma, and we ended up spending the whole class period discussing the state of education in Oklahoma, as well as what budget cuts and lower pay meant for teachers. It was one of my favorite class periods to date, because most of my students had just graduated from high school in Oklahoma and were aware of how low teacher pay and poor state investment in K-12 education had negatively impacted their own education. Students shared stories of broken desks and outdated textbooks. They were able to see how a real-world event affected them personally. The students used their own understanding to apply that back to the discussion. In this way, the classroom became similar to writing an argument paper about whether or not teachers should have a pay raise *and* how to fund that pay raise. As students voiced their sometimes starkly differing opinions about the issue, the class began to better understand the concept of using multiple points of view when writing papers and why it is important to engage those different views in "conversation" as they write. Granted, not all of our news discussions are this fascinating, but it is a wonderful day when an organic teaching moment like this one happens.

As far as student participation goes, some students participate while others tend to sit back and listen, just absorbing the information. Some students also like to jump-in on the coattails of another person's story to

help explain it. I have indicated a need to be respectful of each other and, so far, I have not had any arguments develop in class over the news stories or over how students interact during the discussions. I would like to think this is due to the generally respectful nature of my classes, since we often discuss hot-button topics, such as the Trump presidency or police brutality.

After using this assignment for a few years, I had anecdotal evidence from my own observations to suggest my students were generally more talkative in class after the first week or two of sharing news. I started hearing from students that they really liked getting to know each other through talking about the world. My students were able to see what mattered to other people and form classroom friendships with people who had similar ideas. The students also told me they wished more professors would start this way so they could get to know students in their other classes better. These comments were the starting point for the IRB-approved study discussed here.

WHY STUDENT ENGAGEMENT MATTERS

In the fall of 1990, Nancy Spann, the director of the Learning Assistance program at Appalachian State University, interviewed Vincent Tinto, a prominent author on student attrition and retention, about student retention. Tinto listed reasons why students do not complete college, dispelling the myth (as he sees it) of students leaving because they just were not able to do the work (Spann, 1990). Tinto discussed the ways colleges and universities could increase retention rates, noting that colleges needed to be committed to “the social and intellectual growth” of all students (Spann, 1990). While I love the idea of extra-curricular evening lectures and programs to help students engage more, not all students have the time, energy, opportunity, or interest to attend those events. Also, on our campus, most of the students are non-residential and have busy work and family lives outside of school. By moving the discussion into classes they are required to attend, we can offer the opportunities for intellectual growth to more students. We allow students to have meaningful interactions within their classes, which makes those interactions seem more normalized instead of being something they have to go and find. Tinto seems to agree, noting that classroom activities should set students up to be effective learners (Spann, 1990). A study by Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005) noted that when faculty value student participation, freshmen were more engaged. Umbach and Wawrzynski also noted that effective classroom practices for student engagement lead to students perceiving “greater gains” from their education.

If we accept that students learn more when they are actively engaged in the classroom (and I do), then it benefits us to find ways to restructure our classrooms and assignments in a way that encourages active learning. Adding a daily discussion of news to the classroom gives students a place to participate in topics they might be more interested in, which, if nothing else, helps them to be more interested in coming to class in the first place.

Alexander Astin (1999) argues that colleges have some responsibility to prepare students to deal constructively with societal issues such as “race tension, crime, [and] drug abuse,” to list just a few major concerns. One of the benefits of using the news to get class started is that, aside from the “learning to engage” and relationship-building aspects, we also get to discuss issues that are important to the students. Using news to start class, instead of at a later point in the period, helps students transition from their time outside of the classroom to our time inside of the classroom. We get to practice thinking critically about difficult issues, such as Trevon Martin (police brutality and race), tax reform (US concerns over who “deserves” to receive a tax break), or government shutdowns, and stumble through our biases within the relative safety of the classroom. If students are listening closely, they can begin to understand the lenses through which their classmates view the world and, with any luck, can find some common ground to continue the discussions in a productive fashion. I will admit letting things play out takes some courage on my part, as some stories are

more emotionally charged than others. It is important for me to stay tuned-in to the conversations and help guide them when the inevitable tangents or differences of opinion occur.

METHODS

Since I teach freshmen in either “English Composition” or “Composition Research” every semester, I decided to run a survey with IRB approval in fall 2016, spring 2017, fall 2017, and spring 2018 to gauge my students’ thoughts on how using news stories in the classroom affected their overall classroom participation.

For the IRB portion of this assignment, I prepared two surveys, a pre-test for the beginning of the semester and a post-test for the end of the semester. The beginning survey asked students how comfortable they were with sharing ideas inside and outside of the classroom. It was used to gauge students’ feelings about participating in classroom discussions about the required readings. The end survey was used to see if students had changed their opinions about participating in class after a semester of sharing news. The survey also asked them why they did or did not share and how they felt the classroom dynamic was affected by having people share their stories. I looked at those anonymous answers in conjunction with a chart in the survey software showing how many students shared news in class. While I was not able to correlate those two items, since the surveys were anonymous, it did give me insight into how students were potentially being impacted by the time we spent in class sharing news stories.

I used Survey Monkey for both surveys, which contained a mix of demographic and short answer questions. The beginning survey contained 10 questions and the end survey contained nine questions. (The complete survey questions are shown in Appendices A and B.) Students were given the option to complete the survey anonymously for five points of extra credit, but it was not a required assignment, which explains why not everyone participated. I asked students to submit a screenshot of the “Thank you” message at the end of the survey in order to qualify for the extra credit points.

I analyzed the answers from the beginning and end surveys as follows:

1. Tone of responses to beginning of semester surveys;
2. How comfortable students were in taking the lead in a conversation at the beginning of the semester.

For this study, the demographic information remained mostly unused. I was interested mostly in the non-demographic answers. I divided up the tone questions into “Negative”, “Neutral” and “Positive” answers based on the word-choices students used to describe how they felt about a particular topic. I divided up the other questions about comfort-level into categories that best seemed to capture the spirit of the answers.

Whether or not students were participating in the IRB portion of the assignment by completing the surveys, all of my Freshman Comp students since 2013 have had the option to participate in the extra credit portion of the bringing news to class assignment. The extra credit portion works in the following way: at the beginning of most class periods during the semester, I ask the students if they have any news stories that they are interested in sharing. The rules, as listed on the assignment sheet, are pretty simple:

1. Only five stories per day. (At the end of it all, this is still a Comp class, not a current events class.)
2. Students may share one story for credit per week.
3. Students must know enough about the story to tell the class about it. They cannot just read a headline and then sit back to see if anyone else will talk about the story.
4. Students should be polite and thoughtful in how they present their information, especially when discussing political stories.
5. Sports scores usually do not count, unless the game is in some way meaningful outside of just being a “great game”.
6. Stories must be current (within the last week or so).
7. If someone else gets your story first, find another one or go another day.

And that is it. Nothing major; no papers to be written, no presentations to be given. Just talking about the day's news.

For my data, I looked at the final number of students enrolled in each section in order to determine the possible number of students who could have participated in giving extra credit. I removed a student from participation in the extra credit portion of the study if the student did not complete the semester. However, because the surveys were anonymous, I was not able to remove the data from any students who had dropped. To that end, the number of students who could possibly have participated in the beginning survey is always higher than the number of students who could have participated in the ending survey.

RESULTS

I chose to run the anonymous surveys for four semesters in order to gather a range of responses. While I began each semester with 20 students, for a variety of reasons, I did not end any semester with my rosters intact. This has been a normal experience at the University of Central Oklahoma (UCO). I do not think that this study is impacted negatively by the dropout rates since there were usually only one or two students who dropped each class.

Classroom participation rates

Separate from, but related to, the survey was the data about how many students participated in sharing news stories throughout the semester. (See Table 1 for total participation by semester.) Fall 2016 was the only semester where I taught more than one section of English Composition. That semester, I had one class where half of the class was enrolled together by gender and ethnicity as part of a cohort initiative; these students tended to relate to each other in a friendship-style way since they were also involved in other events together. The other half was open to any student who registered. The other course was fully open to any student who registered. In the fall 2016 cohort class, I ended with 14 students enrolled. Only the 14 who finished were counted in the participation of news stories. One student chose not to participate at all. During a semester, we meet approximately 44 times over 16 weeks, meaning that students have up to 16 chances to participate in giving a news story. The average number of days for participation for the 14 students who completed the course was 6.0. (See Table 2 for average days of participation by semester). In the fall 2016 non-cohort class, there were 20 students enrolled throughout the entire semester, although one student never came to class and one student disappeared partway through the semester. I removed the data for the two missing students. In this class, five students chose not to participate. The average number of days for participation for the 18 students who completed the course was 5.0.

In spring 2017, I again ended the semester with 18 students. Three students chose not to participate here. The average number of days of participation for those 18 students was 4.72.

In fall 2017, I again ended with 18 students enrolled, although one student disappeared. Four students chose not to participate. The average number of days for participation for those 17 students was 4.6.

In spring 2018, another group of students enrolled who were already familiar with each other. These students made up the majority of the class members. That semester ended with 18 students enrolled. Only one student chose not to participate. The average number of days for participation for those 18 students was 6.83.

Table 1: Total number of days that students participated in the news extra credit based on class group

Students in class	Fall 2016		Spring 2017	Fall 2017	Spring 2018
	Cohort	Non-cohort	Many repeating ¹	Randomly assigned ²	Friendship-group ³
1	5	0	4	10	14
2	9	1	0	6	12
3	3	4	1	3	2
4	2	11	0	2	1
5	12	8	3	0	12
6	10	0	7	6	7
7	11	4	7	0	1
8	0	7	6	0	7
9	1	0	14	11	6
10	9	12	0	2	8
11	6	13	4	1	0
12	3	12	10	10	12
13	5	12	8	5	2
14	7	3	4	6	15
15	-	2	0	0	2
16	-	0	13	5	10
17	-	0	1	11	6
18	-	8	3	-	6

1. Students in this group were mostly repeat students, taking me again for their second semester.

2. Students in this group were not part of a cohort and chose my class on their own.

3. Students in this group were mostly part of the same athletic team and were already familiar with each other.

Table 2: Average number of days that students participated in the news extra credit

	Fall 2016		Spring 2017	Fall 2017	Spring 2018
	Cohort	Non-cohort	Many repeating	Randomly assigned	Friendship-group
Average number of days of participation	6.0	5.0	4.72	4.6	6.83

In fall 2016, the cohort students participated anywhere from 0-12 times out of 16 possible times. In the non-cohort class, the participation was only marginally higher, at 0-13 days. In spring 2017, the range was 0-14 out of the 16 times. In fall 2017, the range was 0-11 days out of 16 possible times. And in spring 2018, the range was 0-15 out of 16 possible times. While the ranges of participation were close, as Table 3 shows, the percentages of students who chose not to participate were significantly different. Only 7% of the cohort class chose not to participate in fall 2016, almost 28% of the non-cohort class did not participate in fall 2016, just over 22% of the class did not participate in spring 2017, close to 17% of the class did not participate in fall 2017, and only 5.5% of the class did not participate in spring 2018.

Table 3: Range of days of participation and percentage of class who participated

	Fall 2016		Spring 2017	Fall 2017	Spring 2018
	Cohort	Non-cohort	Many repeating	Randomly assigned	Friendship-group
Range of days of participation	0-12	0-13	0-14	0-11	0-15
Percent of class participation	92.9%	72.2%	77.8%	83.3%	94.5%

Survey results

This section looks at the responses to the anonymous surveys from the beginning and end of the semester. (As a note, in spring 2017, the 11 students who had taken my class in the previous semester were not eligible to take the survey again. However, they were eligible to participate in sharing news.) Table 4 shows the overall participation rates in those surveys.

Table 4: Survey numbers

	Fall 2016*	Spring 2017±	Fall 2017	Spring 2018
Beginning survey	13	0	8	16
End survey	17	0	7	19

* Included data from two classes-worth of students, so I had 40 students total here. This was the only semester where I taught two Composition classes at the same time.

± Of the nine eligible students, none chose to respond to the survey this semester.

Overall Trends

The remainder of the discussion about data for the surveys is not broken down by semester. Instead, those results are presented in aggregate for all four semesters as a way to look at overall trends.

Beginning of the Semester Survey Responses

Table 5 and Table 6 show information from the survey at the beginning of the semester, looking at the tone of the responses to both the closed- and open-ended questions (N=37). Most of the students were comfortable or neutral on the topic of participating in discussions based on their answers to Q6-8. The majority of the students who responded were generally comfortable speaking around their friends or family, even if they were not comfortable speaking in class.

Table 5: Tone of responses to beginning of semester surveys

Question	Beginning		
	Negative	Neutral	Positive
Are you generally comfortable participating in conversations among friends and family?	0	3	34
Are you generally comfortable participating in conversations with people that you do not know well or at all?	9	16	12
Do you generally feel comfortable participating in classroom discussions?	9	16	12

While a few of the students indicated that they were shy, many of them participated once the semester got moving and they felt more comfortable speaking (see Table 6). Most students were more comfortable “chiming in” after someone else started a discussion, and eight students were comfortable taking the lead in conversations in class.

Table 6: How comfortable students are in taking the lead in a conversation at the beginning of the semester

Question	Beginning				
	Lead	Chime in	Both	Not comfortable	N/A
If you answered “yes” to Question 8, are you comfortable taking the lead, or do you prefer to chime in with supporting discussion?	6	23	2	2	6

End of the Semester Survey Responses

Table 7 and Table 8 look at how students responded to the closed- and open-ended questions at the end of the semester. (N=43, although not all students responded to each question and some students gave answers that could be coded into multiple responses.) Of the 43 students who responded to the end survey, 33 of them participated in giving news at least once, nine chose to complete the survey even though they had not participated in giving news (one student did not answer), and one student was unaware that we were sharing news every day. All but three students felt that sharing the news at the beginning of class had a positive effect on their discussion behavior over the semester (see Table 7).

Table 7: Tone of responses to end of semester survey

Question	End		
	Negative	Neutral	Positive
Did you participate in the News extra credit this semester? Why or why not?	10	0	33
Did the news portion of the class make you more comfortable, less comfortable, or something else with speaking in class? Please explain.	1	2	40

Question 5 asked students to explain why they had or had not participated in giving news for extra credit. The 33 students who chose to participate did so for the reasons of wanting to share news, gaining extra credit, or being interested in the world around them. The 10 students who did not participate noted that they were shy or felt that their news was not good enough or interesting enough to bring to the class.

Question 6 asked students how regularly they participated. Of the 32 respondents, 17 said that they participated every week or two and 13 said that they participated randomly throughout the semester. Two students indicated that they did not participate at all.

Question 7 focused on how to get students to participate more often with bringing in their own news. I received 28 responses to this question. The most common response, with 10 responses, was “coming prepared”, followed by “overcoming shyness” with five responses. Two students noted that having assigned times would have helped them to remember. (See Table 8 for a complete list of responses.)

Table 8: Categories of responses for getting students to participate more often

Category	Number of students
coming prepared	10
not being shy	5
N/A	5
being assigned days to share	2
not enough spots	2
me reminding them	1
too tired	1
too lazy	1
not many important stories	1

Question 8 asked students about what they had gained from discussing the news as well as how sharing news impacted the classroom environment. The responses are coded into two major categories of “personal to them” and “more general about the class.” Because students were able to give more than one response, the N here is higher than for other questions (see Table 9). While many of the students responded with ways they personally gained something from sharing news, some students focused more on what the whole class gained from sharing news. Several students discussed how their classroom relationships improved in some way through discussing the news. One student indicated that through discussing the news, “We all really became friends. We talked more.” Another student indicated that they wished that all of their classes would start this way so that they could get to know their peers better.

Table 9: Responses to question 8, “What did you gain from the news presentations?”

Personal					Whole class	
<i>Knowledge</i>	<i>Confidence</i>	<i>Made me look forward to class</i>	<i>Interest in the news</i>	<i>Made me feel awkward</i>	<i>Better connection to classmates</i>	<i>Encouraged critical thinking</i>
24	5	3	1	1	27	1

DISCUSSION

What started as an experiment to get students involved in the world outside of campus, morphed into a way to get students more actively involved in the classroom. I had hoped to have more students participate in the surveys, but setting it as either extra credit or nothing probably hindered the response rate some. In future studies, I will set the assignment to require either taking a survey or writing a paper, helping to ensure higher participation rates. I remain interested to know if participation-willingness levels increased with the second semester as students were feeling more comfortable with their place in school and perhaps with some of the other students in class.

Considerations Regarding Enrollment

Normally, students in the fall sections randomly assign themselves to my classes. Students in the spring sections tend to either be repeat students from my fall sections or tend to be groups of athletes who probably know each other. However, I only had two semesters that held to this: one section in fall 2016 and the section in fall 2017. The other semesters all had enrollments that were in some way different from the norm.

In fall 2016, half of the students in one of the sections were assigned to my class as part of a cohort initiative of black men. Spring 2018 was also unusual in that I had three men from the previous semester recruit seven of their teammates to come to my class. (See Table 4 for a comparison of student participation across semesters.) It is fascinating, though perhaps not unexpected, to note that the spring 2018 class had the highest participation rate in the surveys. This could be due both to the students being in their second semester, possibly increasing their comfort level with being surveyed, and having a friendship group with a high comfort level of talking to each other. Unfortunately, I do not have an answer for that, but it could be a worthwhile topic for further research. Overall, given the natures of the cohort and the friendship groups (10 men who took many classes together that semester and 10 men who took my class together, respectively), I am not surprised to see the participation rates in those two sections were higher.

Participation in the Surveys and the Extra Credit

For the most part, students seemed willing to fill out both surveys, even if they were not always eligible, as with three of the students in the spring 2018 section. However, spring 2017 was unusual because, of the nine new students in my class, none of them chose to participate in the surveys, despite multiple reminders. (The students who had taken my class the previous semester were not eligible to take the survey again because they already had an idea of the research questions.) I had not expected to see a 0% participation rate on the surveys from the eligible students and I am not sure why none of them chose to participate in either of the surveys. They were still willing to participate in the extra credit, somewhat, but they had the second lowest participation rate of the four semesters studied. I was surprised to see such a low average here, though, since 11 of the students were repeats and were already familiar with how the class was run.

I believe the higher response rate to the survey at the end of the fall 2016 semester as compared to the survey at the beginning of that semester was because by that point, the students were more comfortable with me and their classmates, and they might have been more aware of how a few points of extra credit could sway their grade. Looking at the cohort class, only one student chose not to participate in giving a news story, which seemed surprisingly low to me. I believe that probably has something to do with being in a cohort group who spent a lot of time together; they were quite comfortable with each other as a whole, which helped to spur the desire to share news. With the non-cohort class, five students chose not to participate, which is more on par with what I would expect from a group of first-semester freshmen who do not know each other. They have fewer external forces compelling them to talk in class.

Participation in the extra credit was at its highest level in spring 2018, both with number of average days of participation (6.83) and percentage of the class who participated (94.5%). I speculate that the high number of students participating may have been due to 10 of the students already knowing each other; perhaps there was some peer pressure for these students to perform. Also, the dynamic of the friendship group may have influenced others in the class to feel more comfortable with talking.

The lowest number of average days of participation in the extra credit at 4.6 days out of 16 occurred during fall 2017. I believe that is because in this class, a few students spoke a lot, perhaps dominating the discussions.

Grunspan et al. (2016) completed a study looking at academic performance based on gender in biology classrooms. They note that other authors have found that “a student whose abilities are endorsed by an influential person may experience increased performance and confidence” (p. 1). I am not convinced that my students necessarily thought of each other as “influential people.” However, receiving positive feedback (in the form of people seeming interested in their stories, adding on to their stories, or talking more to them later) from peers that they trusted or liked could have been a factor in the cohort group’s and the friendship group’s willingness to participate in the news portion of the class, as well as in the overall classroom discussions.

The results of the overall study are somewhat skewed through the inclusion of the cohort and friend groups. The overall willingness of both groups to talk in class was likely impacted by their time together outside

of class as much as by their time in class sharing news. The cohort and friendship groups were generally more talkative in all aspects of the classes as compared to what I normally observe. The results from the fall 2016 and fall 2017 non-cohort groups are closer to what I would typically expect to find (which broadly show that many students will warm up to each other more quickly in a discussion-style classroom if they have the opportunity to interact with each other in low-stakes ways). Those students were all randomly assigned to my sections and seemed to be unfamiliar to each other at the beginning of the semester. Both sections had similar ranges of participation (0-13 and 0-11, respectively) and similar average days of participation (5.0 days and 4.6 days, respectively). The willingness of the non-cohort groups to talk in regular classroom discussions was also closer to what I would typically expect. About half of the class actively spoke, while the other half of the class listened or sometimes made comments.

I found it surprising that while most of the students had smart phones in class, had social media accounts of some kind, and we were in a computer classroom, few students regularly came with a news story to share. (Yes, it was an extra credit assignment, but I was still surprised because it can become a high-value extra credit opportunity for students who participate most weeks or every week.) I also found that most of my students do not follow any news sites through Facebook, Twitter, or other social media and most of their friends are not sharing news stories that way either. When I asked about current political happenings throughout the semester, I was often met with a sea of blank stares.

Beginning of the Semester Survey Discussion

While the majority of respondents indicated at the beginning of class that they were more comfortable talking with family/friends than people they did not know (Q6-8), a majority of students also participated in the news at some point in the semester. Even though a majority of students also indicated they preferred to “chime in” rather than take the lead on discussions (Q9), students seemed to quickly warm up to participating as the lead speaker on news topics.

One unexpected result pertains to Q7 and Q8 (see Table 5), relating to questions about their comfort level with speaking to strangers and speaking in a classroom, having the exact same numbers of responses in each category. While the numbers each semester varied, the overall totals were the same. This makes me wonder if a larger sample were asked just these two questions, would this be a standard distribution of answer? Further research could examine how to get students to be more comfortable participating in classroom discussions.

Looking back at Table 6, only six of the students who responded were comfortable taking the lead. I am a bit surprised that the classroom discussion went as well as it did given the low number. However, since I had about 34 students who did not respond at all to the beginning survey (discounting the nine who were ineligible in spring 2017), there could have been more students who were comfortable taking the lead; I just did not hear from them in the surveys.

End of the Semester Survey Discussion

It was informative to look at the end of the semester survey results to see how students’ attitudes about participating in class discussions had shifted. I was surprised that the idea of “my news not being good enough” was mentioned more than once for why they did not share their ideas (in response to Q5). Currently, I am working on ways to encourage more students to feel comfortable sharing. To model expectations, I share my own news stories after the students have shared theirs as a way. While many of my stories are serious issues from that morning’s local/national news, some are a bit more lighthearted. I try to share both types of stories to help students see there is value in all stories (as long as we avoid celebrity gossip wrap-up).

Question 7 focused on getting students to participate more often with bringing in their own news

stories. The suggestion of assigning days for participation was mentioned, however, I am not sure about that route, as that takes the spontaneity and opportunity for extra credit out of the assignment. It also makes giving news a requirement rather than a low-key volunteer way to start the class.

With regard to Q8, which asked students about what they had gained from discussing the news, as well as how sharing news impacted the classroom environment, I was pleased to see many students felt they gained both knowledge and a better connection with their classmates through sharing the news. I found many of the responses insightful and often thoughtful, perhaps showing, as well, that students had grown more comfortable with me as they were also growing comfortable with each other over the course of the semester. For example, one student gave this answer to Question 5 of the end-of-semester survey:

I have told numerous people about the news we share every day and I've really enjoyed doing it I think that I would have done it even if it wasn't for bonus points because I got a lot out of it and I feel so much more engaged and informed on whats [sic] going on around me. I haven't had any other professors do this exercise but I think they should because it allows the student to be informed on the news, gives the classroom and [sic] more relaxed and comfortable feel, and encourages for a more engaged and active classroom conversation for the rest of the class period.

In response to Q9, that 40 out of 43 students felt more comfortable with the class after participating in the news in some way, overall, suggests starting class with news is a well-received way of helping students to engage more with one another over the course of the semester. These findings seem to support what Czekanski and Wolf (2013) found in their study on encouraging students to participate in classroom discussions. Once students feel comfortable "just chatting" with each other, they will also become more comfortable with really talking to each other. The one student who did not respond positively, indicated that they felt awkward and uncomfortable, preferring to keep to themselves rather than speak or participate in class.

I was not bothered by the number of students who indicated their participation for extra credit. While students might have started sharing news just for credit, many of those students still found value in the opportunity to participate in classroom discussions or in being more aware of current news stories.

CONCLUSION

Following the news was a new concept to many of the students, suggesting that this exercise is useful for them, not just to get them more engaged in classroom learning, but also to get them more engaged in their world. Overall, the results of this study showed what I had hoped to find: students who engage in low-stakes discussions over news tend to be more comfortable discussing required topics within the classroom. At the end of the day, I am pleased to have found an assignment that works to help my students become more engaged in classroom discussions.

Table 10 Continued: Results from the beginning of the semester survey**APPENDIX A**

Table 10 lists the survey questions from the beginning of the semester.

Table 10: Results from the beginning of the semester survey

Questions
1. Are you male or female?
2. What is your age?
3. Are you White, Black or African-American, American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific islander, or some other race?
4. Did you come straight to college from high school?
5. What level of school are you currently in?
6. Are you generally comfortable participating in conversations among friends and family? Why or why not?
7. Are you generally comfortable participating in conversations with people that you do not know well or at all? Why or why not?
8. Do you generally feel comfortable participating in classroom discussions? Why or why not?
9. If you answered “yes” to Question 8, are you comfortable taking the lead, or do you prefer to chime in with supporting discussion?
10. If you answered “no” to Question 8, what are some of the reasons why you are not comfortable participating? What might help you to feel more comfortable?

APPENDIX B

Table 11 lists the survey questions from the end of the semester.

Table 11: Results from the end of the semester survey

Questions
1. Are you male or female?
2. What is your age?
3. Are you White, Black or African-American, American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific islander, or some other race?
4. Did you come straight to college from high school?
5. Did you participate in the News extra credit this semester? Why or why not? (If you did not participate, please skip to question 8.)
6. If you did participate, was it all semester long, scattered throughout, or at specific times? Please describe your participation level.
7. If you participated sometimes or did not participate, what could have helped you to participate more often?
8. Either way, what did you gain from the news presentations? How do you think that starting classes with news affected the classroom dynamic? (Did people talk more or less after giving news?)
9. Did the news portion of the class make you more comfortable, less comfortable, or something else with speaking in class? Please explain.

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"No te voy a dejar nunca" – Culture and Second Language Acquisition for Survival in *Fear the Walking Dead*

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ABSTRACT

Popular culture reinforces and shapes the beliefs and values of the individual, the community, and the masses. It can also transmit hidden messages about aspects of human behavior that are reiterated in scholarly research. In the field of education, particularly in world language teacher education, film and television can be used as an effective tool for examining how we acquire a second language. Using a symbolic convergence theory perspective (SCT) (Bormann, 1972), I employ Sellnow's (2014) three-step process for the rhetorical analyses of mediated popular culture texts to reveal "covert messages" (p. 9) within the popular American Movie Channel (AMC) television series, *Fear the Walking Dead* (FTWD). These messages inform how second language and culture acquisition develop and serve as life-saving resources in extreme cases of cultural and linguistic isolation. In Season 1 of FTWD, Nicholas "Nick" Clark, embarks on an unintentional language and cultural immersion trip to Mexico. His experience reflects research on second language and culture acquisition, reinforcing the understanding that languages can be learned rapidly when it is a matter of survival. My analysis will show that while language learning can transpire through a formally-structured classroom experience, it can also transpire informally—through a Vygotskian (1978), sociocultural, "survivalist" language and culture learning experience—as reflected in FTWD. Applying Sellnow's process and Bormann's perspective can help teacher educators and their students find deeper meaning through new and engaging popular culture texts.

Keywords: *Fear the Walking Dead*, zombies, second language acquisition, teacher education, Spanish language teaching, popular culture

INTRODUCTION

Current research on second language acquisition (SLA) explores and affirms informal immersion as an effective means for learning languages and acquiring cultural awareness (Duff & Talmy, 2011; García, 2013; Kurata, 2011; Roses-Nieves, et al., 2017). García (2013), for example, suggests that an informal setting can provide a more successful learning environment than the privileged formal language education classroom, as well as more comprehensive language policy to fully promote bi- and multilingualism. As a researcher and language learner, I study media texts as vehicles to both educate and entertain. As a world language instructor and teacher educator, I encourage my students to find meaningful texts that can be used in their own studies and in the classroom environment. Using a three-step process established by Sellnow (2014), educators can employ popular culture texts¹ in the classroom as teaching tools, analyzing the rhetoric² they transmit to the audience. Popular culture is defined here in a way many critical theorists, such as Adorno and Horkheimer (1999), define it, as a “site of struggle” between subordinate and dominant groups, and for critical educators, a balance “between lived experiences and the school culture” (Morell, 2002, p. 73). Sellnow (2014) advises that “[a]nalyzing a popular culture text is a three-step process: “...(1) selecting a text and formulating a research question, (2) selecting a rhetorical perspective, and (3) examining the text via description, interpretation, and evaluation” (p. 9). As a fan of the universe created through graphic novel-turned television series, *The Walking Dead* (TWD), I was drawn to a character from its prequel, *Fear the Walking Dead*, who learns Spanish to survive imminent threats as he travels alone through northern Mexico. Following Sellnow’s (2014) first suggestion of choosing a text piquing your interest, and one representative of popular culture, FTWD will be here analyzed and considered as a tool in the world language teacher education classroom to demonstrate how informal language immersion contributes to holistic language and cultural education.

Selecting the Text

Sellnow (2014) advises that one must first “select a text and formulate a research question” (p. 9). The text should be of interest to the instructor and/or their students. To me, there is something about surviving in a zombie apocalypse that intrigues me. I question: What creates the difference among life, death, and undeath? Is it a split-second decision for better or worse, or a set of skills that one must have or quickly acquire to stay alive? In addition to the pure entertainment factor, the rich intersections of language and culture in TWD and FTWD inspire me to look critically at how personal interactions in dire situations shape us as individuals and learners. Before analyzing FTWD and its connection to SLA, it is important to discuss how it fits into the *Walking Dead* universe.

The Walking Dead

Taking place in the early aughts, TWD—a popular graphic novel-turned television series—chronicles the story of Rick Grimes, a Georgia sheriff’s deputy who, after being wounded in a shoot-out, wakes up recovered from a coma some time later in a local hospital. It is abandoned, and he quickly senses something terrible has happened there. Hospital records and dead, half-eaten bodies litter the hallways. Finding an exit door, he leaves the hospital only to find more rotting corpses, covered in sheets, lining the grounds. As he wanders, still injured, through the streets, he encounters nothing but “walkers,” as they are referred to in both the series and the graphic novel. As Rick meets other survivors, it becomes clear that the outbreak did not begin in Georgia, a U.S. state that lies along the southeastern coast. Instead, it occurred on the west coast, more specifically in California, and many of the survivors Rick encounters along his journey migrated east to escape the outbreak. What is unclear from both the graphic novel and the series is what transpired during the weeks he was in a coma.

¹ In SLA, “texts” are not solely printed materials, but other forms of media, as in the “authentic texts” Peterson and Coltrane (2003) recommend introducing into world language classrooms.

² Rhetoric in popular culture are “...messages designed to influence people...persuasive communication” (Sellnow 2014, p. 6).

Fear the Walking Dead

Enter *Fear the Walking Dead*, an AMC original series—soon to enter its sixth season—developed to shed further light on the time during which Rick was unconscious. The prequel begins at ground zero in the working-class Los Angeles, California neighborhood of the ironically-named El Sereno—Spanish for “the serene [one].” The first character in the series to encounter an “infected” (the term “walker” is not used in this series) is Nicholas “Nick” Clark, a 19-year-old, street-smart drug addict. Awakened from a drug-induced sleep in an abandoned church, he searches for his girlfriend Gloria, only to find her undead and feeding on a young man. In this, the opening scene of FTWD, Nick is already depicted as a survivor, the last person standing after a feeding frenzy inside the church. His instincts—immediately arming himself with a candelabra after seeing a blood-smeared piano in one of the stairwells, reflects his ability to use every resource available to stay alive. Nick’s experiences in FTWD are the foci of my rhetorical analysis, as he adapts himself to a changing world, learning both a new culture and language in the process. The consistent theme of survival is woven throughout both series, and it is the impetus for Nick’s second language and culture acquisition in FTWD.

Informal vs. formal language education: Nick and Alicia

What viewers grow to understand of Nick’s background is that much of his adult life has been spent off and on the streets of Los Angeles, and in and out of drug rehabilitation centers. After getting hit by a car while fleeing the church, his sister Alicia, who has grown tired of the impact his addiction has had on the family, visits with him at the hospital. Through their conversation, we discover that while Alicia is Harvard University-bound, Nick was kicked out of a local community college. We know Alicia excels in her high school classes, including Spanish. Meanwhile, there is no indication Nick knows Spanish at all. Once the epidemic takes hold of their city, however, Nick adapts more easily to this changing world than his sister. The skills and knowledge they bring to the apocalypse are metaphors for informal/formal learning environments. Alvermann (2012), in discussing the inclusion of popular culture texts in formal literacy instruction writes, “[t]he co-existence of informal and formal learning is evident in studies of curriculum and classroom instruction where overlapping practices involving popular culture texts and literacy are taken for granted, even celebrated” (p. 216). Indeed, these environments co-exist and often complement one another in the classroom, but in comparing these two characters, it is often Nick’s informal life lessons that keep his family alive. Alicia’s more formal learning experiences, though valued by those around her—including her brother—are not as useful in the apocalypse, an event that terminates virtually all manner of formal education. Human instinct and cunning become much more valuable in this world than the other, formal, type of knowledge that is quickly disappearing.

EXAMINING THE TEXT

The second step of Sellnow’s (2014) analytical process is to “select a rhetorical perspective through which to examine [the text]” (p. 10). She lists and describes nine perspectives, each with its own set of goals and applications. Here, Ernest Bormann’s (1972) Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT) perspective, with its fantasy theme analysis (FTA), is used as the tool to identify and examine converged symbols in the text. SCT reveals the shared ideology³, or “rhetorical vision,” of a cultural group. Bormann explains:

A rhetorical vision is constructed from fantasy themes that chain out in face-to-face interacting groups, in speaker-audience transactions, in viewers of television broadcasts, in listeners to radio programs, and in all the diverse settings for public and intimate communication in a given society (p. 398).

³ Ideology: = “a cultural group’s perceptions about the way things are and assumptions about the way they ought to be” (Sellnow, 2014, p. 6).

The life cycle of the rhetorical vision is composed of many stages, the first being the creation of consciousness, and the last stage being terminus, essentially the death of the rhetorical vision. This shared vision helps a community make meaning of the world, and in FTWD, the dire circumstances imposed on survivors create strong community ties while sowing seeds of distrust when encountering outsiders.

Los muertos vivientes⁴

As the Clark family and other survivors migrate south, language and culture play pivotal roles in their development. They sail toward Rosarito, in the Mexican state of Baja California. They land, however, in Valle de Guadalupe, a Baja village. There, the group meets a community of people who see the infected as restless spirits seeking solace, where undead family members and neighbors roam inside of a locked wine cellar. Their keeper, a Mexican woman named Celia, believes the infected are not dead, they merely represent “what comes next” (Buckner & Dennis, 2016). It is here, in this pivotal episode and beyond, that we can look more critically at popular culture representations of life, death, and survival, and ponder how these intersect with the development of second language and cultural skills.

Over time, Nick becomes Celia’s mentee and finds himself drawn to her philosophy of the undead. He sympathizes with the state of the villagers, aligning himself with a culture deeply rooted in valuing the spirits of the ancestors through life and prayer. What he does not know is that Celia poisoned her own people to ease them into this state of being. Scenes between Nick and Celia represent the social component of culture (Williams, 1998), as it depicts “a particular way of life that expresses certain meanings and values...in institutions and ordinary behavior” (as cited in Morrell, 2002, p. 73). The more Celia speaks with him about her beliefs, the more capable he becomes of understanding his own life and of reconciling the things he has done and seen.

Later, Nick and Ofelia Salazar, one of the survivors traveling with the Clarks, approach an outdoor shrine that, honors those who have died before and after the outbreak. This tradition is especially practiced during the Day of the Dead—El día de los muertos—a celebration that honors one’s ancestors. Lit candles, rosaries, offerings, and photographs adorn the shrine. As Ofelia—who is of Salvadoran descent—approaches the shrine to “speak” with her dead mother, Nick begins to experience a connection to it, and to the people whose spirits are represented in the photos. Again we see how informal learning can greatly improve one’s language and culture acquisition. Kurata (2011) maintains that

[second language] learner’s social interactions with [native speakers] in natural informal settings have the potential to afford opportunities to use and possibly further develop interactional competencies that would help him/ her to participate in socially organized interactions in the community where the learner is situated (p. 143).

This is Nick’s introduction to the ways of life, customs, and religions of many Latin American and Spanish people, and the relationship some create with the dead and dying. The shrine that documents and pays tribute to the lives of the villagers, as well as the church and wine cellar that houses the infected are institutions, preserving life in the face of impending doom, providing hope for the future, forgiveness, and a reason to continue living.

Nick’s relationship with Celia and her community represent Bormann’s first and second stages of consciousness creation and consciousness raising. The basic values of death and community are taught and absorbed. Here is also an interesting point of discussion in terms of second language acquisition and cultural awareness. The main characters have, by necessity, been thrust into a culture unfamiliar to most of them, and

⁴ Used here as a subtitle, *Los muertos vivientes* is the title of the Spanish-language translation of *The Walking Dead* graphic novels. It literally translates to “the living dead.” Note here and throughout the text that Spanish-language title formatting differs from English-language title formatting.

they bring with them their biases with regards to the beliefs of others. While Nick's mother, Madison, believes her son is being indoctrinated, Celia believes she is preparing him for this new world. Indeed, Nick's acquisition of the "other" forms of knowledge are the impetus for his eventual learning of Spanish. Lightbown and Spada (2013), in discussing how languages are acquired, explain that Vygotskian (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978) theories of second language acquisition dictate how we learn through social interaction. Cognitive development, which includes language development, occurs as one interacts and communicates with those within their zone of proximal development (ZPD). Celia sets Nick on the path for learning both the Mexican culture and the Spanish language, because it is with her he interacts most; therefore Celia's home and community represent Nick's initial ZPD.

As Season 2 culminates, Valle de Guadalupe becomes the stage for a twist of fate for many of the main characters. Madison feigns interest in Celia's views, and upon taking her down to the wine cellar, she locks Celia inside where she is consumed by the infected. Nick, inspired by Celia's words, chooses death over life—not physically, but symbolically—coating himself with the blood of the infected, merging into a roaming herd, and leaving his family behind. The last few episodes are rife with rhetorical signs. Pulled, or perhaps pushed, away from his family, Nick valiantly embarks on a hero journey, an unintentional immersive trip of sorts, through the countryside of Baja California. Separated from the protection of the herd, Nick heads toward the Mexican border, a crossroads where the knowledge he has acquired on the streets and in Celia's village will converge, allowing for his transformation into biculturalism and bilingualism. Bormann's fourth and fifth stages: the decline of the rhetorical vision, where values are challenged, and terminus, the implosion of the vision, are evident in Madison's actions and the subsequent unraveling of Celia's vision for the future, the destruction of her cellar, and the separation of the Clark family. This is one example of how Bormann's perspective can be applied to Nick's story arc. It can also be applied to his informal language-learning experience as he ventures deeper into Mexico.

FINDING THE VALUE: SYMBOLIC CONVERGENCE

The final step of a SCT analysis is to "address the value found in identifying the rhetorical vision of community" (Sellnow, 2014, p. 105). Recall that Nick is a now-recovering drug addict. He is a street-smart loner. Those features along with his mindset might engage in similar post-apocalyptic activities: venturing out alone, assimilating into the new world, and embracing what society has become. Sellnow states, "[if] the mind-set of others is in sync with yours, then you have the basis for symbolic convergence" (p. 98). Perhaps what Nick needs most now, unlike his family at this point in their journey, is someone who can teach him the cultural and linguistic skills that will help him survive.

Entering Tijuana

At nightfall, and presumably after crossing the U.S. border into Mexico, Nick finds shelter in what seems to be an abandoned home. After falling asleep, he is awakened by a screaming woman—a mother with her young daughter—wielding a baseball bat. She screams in Spanish, "¡Lárgate! ¡Aléjate de mi hija!" ("Get out of here! Get away from my daughter!") (Barnow & Sackheim, 2016). Nick, who has until now overcome every adversity, tries to reason with the woman in English, begging her to allow him to collect his things. Lost in translation, the situation worsens, with the woman hitting him several times until he flees the house, leaving his belongings. Clearly, Nick has now found himself at a rare disadvantage. All his prior survival tactics and acquired cultural knowledge are insufficient in the face of one simple fact: Nick does not speak Spanish.

After more wandering, flashbacks, and escapes from infected and humans alike, Nick is alone with no food or water. But someone is watching—a woman, Luciana, and her companions. They save Nick and she invites him to La Colonia, a walled-in survivor's colony, in Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico. Inside La Colonia

is a bustling village, with vendors selling their wares and children laughing and playing soccer. With only a few villagers with whom he can communicate in English, Nick is an outcast. But he begins to forge a relationship, albeit professional, with Luciana. Unlike Nick, Luciana has strong family and community ties. Like him, she is staunchly independent, and they become travel companions, trading medicine for supplies with a nearby gang. Luciana calls Nick a *gringo* and advises him to keep quiet during their negotiations. Though he obeys, he is caught stealing snacks for a child in the colony. Faced with having his hands severed, he begs Luciana to translate from Spanish into English for him. Through Luciana, they negotiate an offer to provide more medicine in exchange for supplies and continued use of Nick's hands. This serves as an informal, teachable moment for him, as he realizes in that instant if he is to survive and be an asset to the community, he must learn Spanish.

Acquiring Spanish

Not long after the incident, Nick devises a plan, born from his life on the streets of Los Angeles. With help from Alejandro, the village doctor and spiritual leader, he dilutes the medicine without the gang's knowledge. He informs Luciana not of his plan, but of his desire to negotiate personally with the gang. "You have no Spanish," she tells him, but he persists, and she helps him carry out the plan. His efforts are rewarded: Alejandro gives him his own living space, and Luciana visits him, sees he is teaching himself Spanish with a dictionary, and assists him. We also finally learn about Nick's formal experience with the Spanish language. Nick tells Luciana, "If I'd have known this would happen, I would have taken Spanish in high school." She asks, "What did you take?" He answers, "Uh, just myself, very seriously" (Erickson & Briesewitz, 2016). It is also in this scene that Nick and Luciana's relationship solidifies and becomes romantic. When the community later comes under attack, they escape together.

By Season 3, Nick's understanding and command of Spanish has increased significantly as, carrying a wounded Luciana, he tells her "No te voy a dejar nunca" ("I will never leave you"). There are also scenes in which the two codeswitch (Blom & Gumperz, 1972), a linguistic phenomenon where two (or more) languages are used during a single conversation. Depending on the situation, or the level of discretion required in each instance, Nick and Luciana alternate Spanish and English phrases or sentences as they together negotiate their new-found cultural and linguistic identities, surroundings, and relationship. Toribio (2004) states that code-switching "is rule-governed and systematic, demonstrating the operation of underlying grammatical restrictions. Proficient bilinguals may be shown to exhibit a shared knowledge of what constitutes appropriate intra-sentential codeswitching" (p. 137). For Nick, mastering a second language has become valuable capital in negotiating for necessities like medicine and water, but he also uses it to outwit enemies, gain allies, and find love. It is a skill he combines with his street smarts that were developed pre-apocalypse. García (2013) states that informal bilingual acquisition can be unplanned or unintentional, "with speakers becoming bilingual without explicit formal intent simply by living and participating—what we're calling human education" (p. 104). By the end of Nick's journey on FTWD, he is well on his way to Spanish proficiency and his informal, survivalist language and culture learning experiences contribute to achieving symbolic convergence with the people around him. He has also moved from displaying a lack of knowledge and interest in learning Spanish, to the other side of the ZPD as a capable and confident L2 speaker of Spanish.

CONCLUSION: TO SURVIVE IS TO LEARN

Unfortunately for fans of Frank Dillane, the character of Nick Clark is killed off in Episode 3 of Season 4 (Bonomolo, 2018) at the hands of Charlie, a young girl Nick was trying to shield from the horrors of a rapidly changing world. In 2015, executive producer of FTWD, Adam Davidson, speaking about his goal for the series, commented that "[w]hat I wanted to explore was this idea of what makes us human" (Prudom, 2015,

p. 60). Both the original series and its companion explore what essentially makes us all human: the need to belong, the need for love, and the need to live. These are basic aspects of humanity. In a global crisis, like the viral epidemic depicted in FTWD, these human qualities become more significant and valuable for survival. Albert Bandura (1977), the Stanford University psychologist who developed what is known as *social learning theory*, confirms that human behavior is learned “by observing others who model certain behaviors and the consequences they experience as a result” (as cited in Sellnow, 2014, p. 239). Nick’s vision of family and community as well as his understanding of death—beyond his own close calls—was challenged by people like Celia, Luciana, and Alejandro, the latter of whom sacrificed himself to save Nick and the people of La Colonia. Nick observed them, learned from them, and patterned their behavior, helping him become a stronger, more adept individual. Before his death, Nick was reunited with his family and stepped into the role of patriarch. The social, cultural, and linguistic capital Nick acquired upon leaving his family served him well, but ultimately his story reached its terminus, the death of the rhetorical vision. But the answer is still clear: to survive is to learn.

Morrell (2002) affirms that “any pedagogy of popular culture has to be critical pedagogy where students and teachers learn from and with one another” (p. 73). FTWD engages the viewer to think critically about human nature in the face of a zombie apocalypse, one in which every survivor employs their experience and knowledge to stay one step ahead and live one more day. Nick Clark, a troubled young man with a wandering soul, is a metaphor for young people who might find themselves disengaged from formal schooling, their families, and society (Blondal & Adalbjarnardottir, 2012). Nick leaves us with a valuable lesson, echoed by Rick Grimes in TWD Season 5, Episode 10. Hidden in a barn, Rick attempts to motivate his group with a message of survival to inspire them to move forward on a journey north: “This is how we survive” he says. “We tell ourselves that we are the walking dead” (Bellson & Ramsay, 2015). Like Nick, they must adapt to their surroundings and learn from their environment. Rick’s speech pushes them forward, continuing, like Nick’s family, on a constant quest of hope. Sellnow (2014) optimistically suggests that unlike animals—or in this case, the undead—“only human beings have the capacity to envision a common future together” (p. 105). It is this commonality, expressed through the popular, fantasy theme of a zombie apocalypse, that binds the characters together, and makes for engaging analysis and discussion of language and culture learning, both within the world language classroom and in teacher education courses.

Implications

Alvermann and Hagood (2000) suggest that teachers should figure “the power of popular culture texts” (p. 197) into their attempts to help students develop critical literacy skills. Considering some of its adult themes, a high school or post-secondary classroom context are ideal environments for looking more deeply into the messages that FTWD depicts, and the ways the characters use their background and skills to survive while developing new ones. Nick is a salient example of how second language and culture can be acquired rapidly when it is a matter of survival. Social interaction within one’s zone of proximal development is also key to cultural and linguistic competency. Students who are drawn to this genre of popular culture can engage in discussion on the personality traits and skills needed to survive a viral apocalypse, and how culture and language play pivotal roles in staying one step ahead of both the dead and the living.

Nick’s story exemplifies a world where formal language education has little value, where instinct and resourcefulness become paramount to engaging with others and to daily survival. In addition to analyzing Nick, students can look at other FTWD characters (e.g. Strand, Chris Manawa, Althea), many of whom “resist, negotiate, and accommodate power relations around issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality...” (Maudlin & Sandlin, 2015, p. 371). Nick’s rise from a downtrodden drug addict to a hero is a powerful example of survival and second chances. Analyzing this posthuman site of struggle, students can explore culture and language in their most basic forms, as new cultures and forms of communication collide with those that have been preserved and maintained through generations.

Sellnow (2014) asks, in evaluating popular culture texts through SCT, “what does [the interpretation] tell us about the power of storytelling?” (p. 105). In FTWD, humanity is the overarching theme. Life and death are no longer the only realities in this world, instead it is the possibility of undeath takes the story to a new level. Human communication is vital to the shared rhetorical vision of survival, and the ability to adapt to unfamiliar cultures, languages, and ways of being and knowing is a necessary part of life. Nick Clark possesses this ability; he uses it to his benefit, and for the benefit of others. He is able, at least for a time, to survive death and undeath. Learning Spanish, something that by his own admission had not been very important to him in the past, became a requirement to making the journey from El Sereno, California, to Tijuana, Mexico. His journey represents the power of culture and language acquisition in informal spaces, and can perhaps inspire students to think more critically about the value of second language education, respect for culture, the determination to be bicultural and bilingual, and of course, about being a survivor.

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Consider the Dementor: Discipline, Punishment, and Magical Citizenship in *Harry Potter*

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ABSTRACT

In his 2004 essay “Consider the Lobster”, David Foster Wallace investigated the ethics of boiling alive an aesthetically unappealing, yet sentient and perceiving, creature to augment the pleasure of a human consumer. In the Potterverse, dementors are described by our human heroes as “terrible things” with “rotting” bodies, “unseen” mouths, and characterized as “among the foulest creatures that walk this earth”. Their occupation as guards of Azkaban Prison does little to improve their reputation among wizard-kind. However, how much of the dementors’ evil is ontological? Is it possible that these beings have been actively constructed as villains by wizarding institutions in order to provide a non-human bogeyman for disciplinary purposes?

Lurking beneath and at the edges of the books’ representation of dementors are clues about their chosen habitats and habits that suggest wizards have manipulated their existence in order to weaponize them. Dementors operate in the wizarding world not only to literally confine certain bodies in prison, but also to serve as a hated and feared “other” against which wizards can define themselves. Dementors are enlisted as prison guards and assigned the task of punishing wizard lawbreakers because their physical and emotional effects on these magical humans literalize the social punishment of lawbreaking in the wizarding world: social expulsion and death.

Via a close reading the reviled dementor, this analysis hopes to open up a wider discussion on wizarding disciplinary techniques, and explore how other hierarchies in the Potterverse are established and maintained.

Keywords: J. K. Rowling, Harry Potter series, treatment of dementors, justice system in Harry Potter, rationality in Harry Potter

INTRODUCTION

Googling “Does Reading Harry Potter Make You a Better Person” returns dozens of hits arguing in the affirmative, many referencing a 2015 study reported by NPR that found that “exposure to ‘Harry Potter’ stories changes the attitudes of children and young people toward people from disadvantaged backgrounds . . . it turns out ‘Harry Potter’ might be an effective tool against prejudice” (Does Reading Harry Potter). These articles attempt to scientifically bolster an intuitive interpretation about the series as a whole that is shared by its readers and fans: The *Harry Potter* books champion tolerance, empathy, and love as the antidote to discrimination and bigotry (Vedantam). And it is true that the mark of evil in the series is indexed by characters who are cruel to those who are different or disadvantaged. However, there is one creature that haunts the margins of the Potterverse, which even the most heroic of the characters categorically despise: dementors.

First introduced in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* and intermittently, though powerfully, reappearing throughout the rest of the series, these creatures serve as guards of Azkaban prison and also as bounty hunters tasked with tracking and punishing escapees and criminals on the lam. Dementors are large humanoid figures, always cloaked in black and hooded. The only body parts that are usually visible are the creatures’ hands, which are described in *Prisoner of Azkaban* as “clammy” (184), “glistening” (136), “slimy” (384), “rotted” (184), “dead” (384), and “rotten-looking” (586), and they breathe through “a gaping, shapeless hole, sucking the air with the sound of a death rattle” (384).

The frightening physical appearance of the dementor is dwarfed, however, when compared to their emotional effect on wizards. As Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor Remus Lupin explains to Harry in *Prisoner*, “Get too near a dementor and every good feeling, every happy memory will be sucked out of you” (187). Harry experiences this psychic trauma several times throughout the series when he encounters dementors, which manifests first as a piercing cold, then an overwhelming memory of his mother’s screams as she is murdered, and finally unconsciousness. Harry also nearly undergoes the “Dementors Kiss” (*Prisoner* 247), a punishment in which the dementor’s breath is weaponized, sucking out the souls of their human victims and leaving them in a catatonic state of living death.

Critical treatment of dementors tends to follow two dominant threads: either unproblematically folding them into an analysis of Azkaban, as if the prison magically manifested its own corrections officers¹, or reading their emotional effect on wizards as a representation of the symptoms of depression.² An exception to these approaches is hinted at in Daniel Kleinberger’s essay on agency in the series, where he investigates the relationship between the dementors and the Ministry of Magic, taking it as a given that dementors are autonomous beings:

Certainly, for most of the Harry Potter saga [dementors] play a key role for the Ministry of Magic and arguably they act subject to the Ministry’s control. However, it is not clear that the dementors have manifested assent to act ‘on behalf of’ the Ministry. It is equally arguable that they are merely under contract: providing services to the Ministry in return for a macabre form of payment. (353-54)

Attributing the possibility of contractual consent to dementors, and questioning the presence of that consent in their workings with the Ministry implies that dementors are active and equal agents in the Harry Potter

1 E.g., see Iafrate, Duriez.

2 E.g., Barton. This interpretation is understandably and compellingly bolstered by J.K. Rowling’s own extra-textual explanations that dementors were inspired by her bouts with clinical depression (Verhoeven). Though this article analyzes dementors as autonomous creatures within the Potterverse and not symbols of human emotional experience, that is not to discount the value of Rowling’s openness about mental health issues and treatment to her readers.

universe. However, they are consistently and completely maligned by human and nonhuman magical creatures alike throughout the series, even those who otherwise advocate for empathy and tolerance. In this essay, I explore the implications of Kleinberger's contention that dementors are worthy of more consideration, and argue that exploring these creatures more carefully reveals that they have been exploited by the Ministry to further a culture of surveillance and unquestioning obedience by witches and wizards.

Undoubtedly the dementors are fearsome and dangerous. But a closer look at what does (and does not) distinguish them from some of the other treacherous magical creatures the human heroes encounter in the series reveals how and why these beings, in particular, have been instrumentalized to engender fear and mandate discipline from witches and wizards. In his 2004 essay "Consider the Lobster," David Foster Wallace looks at a creature similarly judged solely for its utility: the lobster. Wallace attended and reported on the Maine Lobster Festival, and while there, he became less interested in what the attendees were consuming and more interested in what the attendees were not *considering* about what they were consuming. He writes, "For practical purposes, everyone knows what a lobster is. As usual, though, there's much more to know than most of us care about—it's all a matter of what your interests are" (236-37). If your interests are, in this case, your own gustatory pleasure, then you, in an almost zero-sum game, won't be interested in the lobster's experience of being boiled alive. Similarly, if your interests are disciplining wizards, you won't consider the experience of the disciplinary instrument. By considering the dementor in a different way, I hope to not only explore and possibly sympathize with these shadowy creatures in the Potterverse, but also to expose the interests of the wizarding community that takes advantage of them to endorse the law by imposing order through emotional terrorism.

The title of the opening essay in *The Law and Harry Potter* poses an important question: "What Role Need Law Play in a Society with Magic?" By way of answer, John Gava and Jeannie Marie Paterson offer an overview of the operations of public and private law in Rowling's series, and observe that "the Ministry is potentially a despotic organisation with very few legal limitations on its power" (3). Undoubtedly true; however, Gava & Paterson conclude that the role of public law in Harry Potter is "much less significant" than in the Muggle (a wizarding term for nonmagical humans) world, and use as evidence the absence of wizard lawyers, deducing that "Law is unlikely to be important when there are no lawyers" (4).³ Through analyzing the workings of the criminal justice system in the Potterverse, I concur with the authors' criticism of the totalitarian leanings of the Ministry of Magic, but reach a different conclusion about the import of law in the wizarding world in which the novels take place. Though much of the processes and procedures that produce laws are imperceptible to the average wizard citizen, the consequences of running afoul of them are consolidated and made hauntingly and monstrously visible in the figure of the dementor, making obedience to the law a primary concern in and of wizard citizenship.

PART I

In *Prisoner of Azkaban*, we are first introduced to the dementors through the seeming universal aversion they generate in witches and wizards. Initially, the creatures are entirely defined by their emotional effect on magical human beings. They give Ernie Prang "the collywobbles" (40), the Minister of Magic "shudder[s]" (46) when he speaks of their anger, and even Dumbledore, the series' champion of inclusivity and tolerance, "isn't fond" of dementors, and "would rather avoid" them (66). By the time we reach chapter five, titled "The Dementor," both Harry *and* the reader have been primed to distrust and dislike these magical creatures.

3 A claim that is somewhat complicated by Minister of Magic Rufus Scrimgeour's taunting inquiry to Hermione: "Are you planning to follow a career in Magical Law, Miss Granger?" (*Deathly Hallows* 123). However, it is true that all trials described in the series proceed without formal legal representation.

However, dementors are not the only new nonhuman magical creatures Rowling introduces in *Prisoner of Azkaban*. Harry and his fellow students also meet hippogriffs, a horse-eagle hybrid in their third-year Care of Magical Creatures Class. These beings are dangerous to humans as well, as they sport “deadly looking talons” (114) and are “proud” and “easily offended” (114), requiring subtle and skilled interactions on the part of wizards. Buckbeak, a hippogriff who takes to Harry but lashes out against the careless and brash Draco Malfoy is sentenced to death for injuring a student. However, what initially endears hippogriffs to the reader is precisely what damns the dementors; they’re “beautiful” when you “got over the first shock” (114). Hippogriffs also provide transportation through flight to wizards, when respectfully persuaded to do so, further separating them from the dementors’ antagonistic role as prison guards.

But what of another nonhuman magical creature that, in comparison to dementors, is a little more unattractive, equally aggressive, and similarly lethal to wizards, acromantulas? These enormous spiders, first appearing in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, enjoy the taste of human flesh, memorably and vividly demonstrated by a colony of the hungry beasts furiously pursuing “fresh meat” Harry and Ron through the Forbidden Forest with the permission of arachnoid patriarch Aragog (279). Nevertheless, these creatures are not nearly as reviled by wizards as dementors are. In fact, Hagrid raises, befriends, and mourns Aragog, and Dumbledore knowingly permits the colony that attacks Harry and Ron to reside in the Forbidden Forest, only yards from the school and their vulnerable student prey. However, they do mainly keep to themselves and have extremely valuable venom, so their utility to wizards possibly compensates for the threat they pose.

The final candidate for nonhuman magical being just as fearsome as a dementor is another Dark creature that also makes its first appearance in *Prisoner of Azkaban*, is likewise explicitly antagonistic to wizards, and similarly preys upon human emotions, boggarts. No one knows the true appearance of a boggart, as its *modus operandi* is to infiltrate the darkest and most eerie places in a human’s own home and transform into their greatest fear upon sight. A truly nightmarish proposition, realized most powerfully in *Order of the Phoenix*, when a sobbing Molly Weasley is confronted with a boggart that transforms into the murdered corpses of her family, one by one (175-6). But still, they are not as intensely demonized in the wizarding world as dementors. Boggarts are mainly treated as either household pests or objects of humor in the series, notably when Neville disarms a boggart in Professor Lupin’s Defense Against the Dark Arts class by transforming his worst fear (Professor Snape) into the ridiculous apparition of the Potions Master in Gran Longbottom’s clothing (*Prisoner* 134-7).

The most ready counterargument here is that dementors, unlike the similarly lethal acromantulas or psychically predatory boggarts, explicitly align themselves with Lord Voldemort. In *Order of the Phoenix*, when the Dark Lord’s return is finally confirmed by the Ministry, Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge concurrently announces “the mass revolt of the dementors of Azkaban” (845). The sixth and seventh books of the series detail their escalating violence against witches, wizards, and Muggles alike, presumably under Voldemort’s orders. But, perhaps the very role wizards have assigned these creatures prior to Voldemort’s return, and the terms of the relationship between “good” wizards and dementors, reveal that the treatment of dementors by the Ministry might be provoking their “revolt,” and contributing to their allegiance to Dark wizards.

The little we know about dementors in their natural habitat comes from Professor Lupin in Harry’s third year, and even he, himself a marginalized and persecuted figure amongst wizards due to his lycanthropy, gives an account laced with prejudice. However, the details he shares are illuminating. Lupin explains, “Dementors are among the foulest creatures that walk this earth. They infest the darkest, filthiest places, they glory in decay and despair, they drain peace, hope, and happiness out of the air around them.” He continues, “Get too near a dementor and every good feeling, every happy memory will be sucked out of you. If it can, the dementor will feed on you long enough to reduce you to something like itself . . . soul-less and evil” (*Azkaban* 187). This description confirms that wizard and dementor interactions will be both terrifying and cruel for the wizard, but

Lupin's description ascribes an emotional and ontological argument to the dementors' feeding practices that is unsupported by evidence but is of a piece with the way humans have been narrativizing dementors since their first mention in the series. His use of the verb "glory" suggests that the creatures delight in human suffering, but this supposition is contradicted by Dumbledore himself earlier in the same book. Though there seems to be a primitive means of cross-species communication —Fudge can sense the dementors' anger (*Azkaban* 46) and Dumbledore is able to inform them of the results of the search for Sirius within the school (*Azkaban* 166)—they seem constitutionally unable to recognize or appreciate the value and significance of the emotions they feed upon. Dumbledore warns the students, "it is not in the nature of a dementor to understand pleading or excuses" (*Azkaban* 92). Though this lack of cross-species perception contributes to their intimidation, it also excuses them from harboring malicious motives. They, like other creatures magical and nonmagical alike, feed on what they feed on—for us, lobsters, for them, emotions. Lupin applies this misreading of the dementors' emotional investment in their means of survival towards a degrading claim about their moral value: dementors are "soul-less" and therefore "evil." But how can Lupin, or any wizard, know the status of a dementor's soul? What powerful narrative is overriding Lupin's own experiences with the dehumanizing assumptions about his worth due to his difference? It is powerful wizards who have cultivated and weaponized the dementors' natural predilections to create fearsome and debilitating prison guards, and have created for the creatures a terrifying and malicious interiority to match their ominous appearance.

A thought experiment that imagines dementors before they were employed by the Ministry to guard Azkaban somewhat lessens their menace. According to Lupin, they are attracted to "decay" and death—places where bad things have *already* happened. They seem more like scavengers than predators, regulating their own numbers and largely keeping to themselves, preferring "dark" and "filthy" places wizards and Muggles are unlikely to frequent. Of course, an unexpected encounter with a dementor would be traumatic, but so would suddenly running afoul of an acromantula, grindylow (a predatory water demon that attacks students in *Goblet of Fire*), or redcap (another creature that benefits from human death, as it feeds where blood has been shed). So, my point here is that dementors are indeed "bad"—both physically and emotionally injurious and dangerous for humans—but that the characteristics of their badness (fostering negative emotions in humans, killing humans) are shared by other creatures that aren't as reviled. That their badness, therefore, has been intentionally cultivated by wizards.

An example of this purposeful cultivation is their very name. It's unlikely that "dementor" is how the creatures self-identify. Much like Tusken Raiders in the *Star Wars* universe, they have been assigned a name that instills a negative and predatory connotation to the creature that bears it. A dementor requires a dementee. The magical or nonmagical human who suffers from the interaction wholly defines not only the encounter, but also the creature itself. Additionally, as well as these linguistic clues that wizards dictate the material conditions of dementor existence, there are textual ones that occur through the manipulation of the creatures' living conditions in order to ensure maximum scariness as well as compliance. A hungry dementor is obviously a more effective hunter and guard, and the dementors guarding Hogwarts from the fugitive Sirius Black are, Lupin admits, "starving," unable to "resist" swarming a Quidditch match (*Azkaban* 188). Similarly, outgoing Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge informs the human Prime Minister in *Half-Blood Prince* that the unusually foggy weather is due to dementors "breeding" (14), suggesting that before they revolt and abandon Azkaban to join Voldemort, wizards strictly governed and interfered with their freedom to mate.

As Hagrid notes in censuring them, dementors don't care about concepts like guilt or innocence (*Azkaban* 221), so why has the Ministry invested so much time and energy into positioning them as intrinsic to maintaining wizarding justice? Why not have acromantulas keeping prisoners from escaping? What is it about dementors that serves the wizarding world's interests? An answer can be found in the dementors' appearance and emotional effect that is more complicated than engendering fear and despair in wizards,

metonymized in the dementors' hands that are described as "rotted," "dead," and "rotten-looking." I would like to draw attention to the crucial hyphen in the last descriptor, because I think it is important to emphasize that dementors are not, in fact, decaying human bodies. The Potterverse includes many examples of formerly alive humans still interacting with the wizarding world. For example, the Hogwarts campus is populated by house ghosts, who, though translucent, intermingle with the students like faculty members, and portraits of deceased Hogwarts headmasters and headmistresses move from frame to frame and occasionally weigh in on meetings in Dumbledore's office. Undead humans also make sporadic appearances, like the vampire Sanguini at a school Christmas party (*Half-Blood Prince* 315-6). Harry and Dumbledore memorably battle an army of inferi, reanimated human corpses, in *Half-Blood Prince*, but their appearance differs from that of the dementor in a crucial detail: inferi are "preserved indefinitely by Dark magic" ("Inferi"). They are not "rotted" or "rotten-looking." Dementors are unique in the wizarding world because they are not formerly dead, undead, ghosts, or zombies, *but they look like they are*. They are particularly associated in the wizard's mind with death because they resemble decaying human corpses and visit a type of emotional death on humans through feeding on the memories that make their victims feel most human.

Dementors resemble not merely an individual wizard's worst fears; the ontological accident of their appearance and feeding habits not only enact but metaphorize death itself, and this, I contend, is why they were weaponized as guards of wizarding discipline. The sight (and feel) of an approaching dementor is emotional shorthand for the social consequences of lawbreaking in the wizarding world: isolation and expulsion from the community of magical humans, a fate that wizarding institutions must frame as worse than death if their small community is to survive. If dementors did not exist, the Ministry would have to invent them for its own purposes: disciplining the wizarding citizenry with the threat of communal death—the expulsion from the wizarding community if laws are broken. In the next section, I take a closer look at the legal processes and procedures that the dementor body consolidates, metaphorizes, and weaponizes in order to elucidate how a surveilled body and mind are a crucial part of magical citizenship.

PART II

The place of the dementor in the criminal justice system reveals the wizarding world's problematic framing of the definition of "rationality" and the magical human. This tactic evokes Wendy Brown's critique of the political deployment of rationality in her study of Western liberal identity formation. In *Regulating Aversion*, Brown argues that political institutions equate "rationality" with enlightenment, civilization, and reason, and therefore, by necessity will disparage and pathologize the "other" as irrational, barbaric, and ultimately nonhuman. This process depoliticizes the concept of the rational by and through a calculated and deliberate bid to maintain power. I contend that Brown's theory, when mapped onto Rowling's universe, explains a great deal about the choice of dementors for policing the criminal justice system.

Though the settings of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* and *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* are shaped by the institutions that structure the wizarding world (such as the Ministry of Magic, Gringotts Bank, and of course, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry), the plots of the third and fifth books of the series in particular depend upon explicit descriptions and explorations of how the mechanisms of civic discipline, particularly the wizarding criminal justice system, shape and form magical citizenship. This system, as Bethany Barratt argues, operates through "the centrality of punishment" to maintain "social hierarchy and relationships of power" (44). Through narrativizing the punishment of the unjustly imprisoned Sirius Black, and Harry's disciplinary hearing for the improper use of underage magic, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* and *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* reveal the policies of investigation, legal recourse,

and incarceration to which all witches and wizards in the Potterverse are subjected, and the ideologies that underpin those practices.

In the Potterverse, the law becomes mystified by and centralized in the governing body of the wizarding world: the Ministry of Magic. All rules and rule-breaking are handled by the Ministry. For example, as an employee in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts, Arthur Weasley both drafts legislation and enforces it. That is, he writes laws that prohibit tampering with Muggle artifacts and is also charged with disciplining wizards who break those same laws. The Wizengamot, a body housed within the Ministry's Department of Magical Law Enforcement, presides over the prosecution of offenders of the most serious crimes in the wizarding world, and that court is headed by the Minister of Magic. The procedures surrounding investigation, litigation, and incarceration are by and large obscured from non-Ministry-affiliated wizard citizens, who are nonetheless at their mercy. The law, therefore, is an incredibly important tool shaping magical citizenship, albeit one that operates by and through a bureaucracy that enables constant surveillance and nurtures an ever-present threat of emotional and physical punishment for noncompliance.

It is instructive to trace one court case from offense to trial in order to understand the consequences of law and order that are generated from one centralized power source. Harry's use of a Patronus Charm to ward off dementors in *The Order of the Phoenix* makes for an appropriate case study. Before the start of term, Harry and his despicable cousin Dudley are arguing in a deserted alleyway in Little Whinging. The two are unexpectedly ambushed by dementors, prompting Dudley to faint and Harry to conjure his Patronus to protect them both. This spell breaks the "Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery," monitored by the Improper Use of Magic Office in the Ministry, and Harry's most serious engagement with wizarding jurisprudence is initiated.

Firstly, the decree's very name betrays the latitude with which the Ministry can choose to police it. Who decides what is, in fact, "reasonable"? The invocation of a "reasonable person" is a familiar trope in Muggle law. The "reasonable person standard" imagines how a hypothetical person would respond to a situation dangerous to themselves or others. What distinguishes wizarding legal philosophy is that the restriction *itself* is deemed "reasonable," not the underage wizard or witch who might use magic depending on the circumstances. In this legal fiction, reason is located in the law, not in the person operating in a world organized by laws. Here, Wendy Brown's work on the political deployment of rationality is again instructive. She argues that liberal states are able to insist on their rationality *because* of the existence of "nonreason as its opposite" (152). To disagree with what the Ministry declares "reasonable" is to be on the other side of wizard citizenship.

The arbitrariness of this precept is demonstrated in two previous investigations of Harry for the same alleged crime: first for a Hover Charm that Dobby actually performed (*Chamber* 20-21) and second for inflating his Aunt Marge after extreme emotional provocation (*Azkaban* 29-30). In both of these cases, the Ministry determined that punishment for his infraction would not be "reasonable," with the first instance resulting only in an official warning from department head Mafalda Hopkirk, and the second prompting the Minister himself to assure Harry "Oh, my dear boy, we're not going to punish you for a little thing like that! . . . It was an accident! We don't send people to Azkaban just for blowing up their aunts!" (*Azkaban* 45). In both cases, Hopkirk and Fudge define and dictate the limits of reason.

Such leniency does not follow from the detection of a Patronus charm in *Phoenix*. Harry's official entry into the wizarding legal system is marked by a written notification of the offense, which reaches his person with a speed that exposes the level of surveillance under which wizards live. Harry receives an owl notifying him of the infraction and punishment after he has walked Dudley home and begun to climb the stairs—in other words, in about the amount of time it would take the owl to fly from the Ministry, implying that the notice was generated almost immediately. After noting the precise time of and witnesses to the offense (confirming that wizards are always being watched), this time, Mafalda Hopkirk informs Harry that "Ministry

representatives will be calling at your place of residence shortly to destroy your wand" (*Phoenix* 27). This particular punishment would have the effect of, prior to trial, completely banishing Harry from the wizarding world, as a wand is both the instrument and marker of human magical citizenship.

After Dumbledore's quick intervention, Harry is able to secure his wand, but is still required to attend a disciplinary hearing at the Ministry, as related in chapter eight of *Phoenix*. His experience with the Wizengamot, the wizarding high court, is instructive. Susan P. Liemer, in her essay "*Bots and Gemots: Anglo-Saxon Legal References in Harry Potter*," provides interesting insight into the ideological precepts that undergird the court through an etymological examination of its name. Liemer traces "Wizengamot" to the Anglo-Saxon legal and political institution called the "*witenagemot*" (19), a "group of village elders who heard and settled disputes" (21). The practice of gathering members of the community to settle conflicts reflects the political culture of Anglo-Saxon England, in which there was "no separation of powers into three branches of government and no true representational democracy" (23). As Harry's hearing, and other trials he visits through the Pensieve reveal, the Wizengamot preserves this consolidation of civic power into the hands of the powerful few with unsettling results for the bodies and minds of accused witches and wizards. The trials do not merely benignly replicate a pre-modern justice system. Placing so much authority into the hands of the Ministry alone enables a gross mishandling of power.

Harry is led to an underground courtroom and must enter alone, demonstrating that court proceedings are concealed from public observation and reporting and, therefore, public scrutiny. The lack of legal representation is a given, as what interests the court seems to be arguments not about Harry's actions in relation to the law, but rather about his character. Liemer also links this element of wizarding jurisprudence to Anglo-Saxon roots. She explains:

Another important aspect of an Anglo-Saxon criminal trial was the swearing of oaths by *kin* . . . Gathering detailed evidence and sworn testimony by eyewitnesses in order to prove a matter beyond a reasonable doubt was not the goal. Instead, close relations would stand and vouch for the good character of the accused. Although some details about events leading to the charges would likely surface, that was not the focus of the testimony. What the accused might have to say about the charge was not considered as important, if he spoke at all. The oath swearing of *kin* was key; the more *kin* you got to show up and the more prominent they were in the social hierarchy, the more likely you were to successfully beat the rap. (24)

Liemer's historical account illuminates the way the Ministry values social capital above fidelity to the law when investigating crimes and assigning punishment. It explains both Fudge's line of questioning and his desire to keep Dumbledore out of the courtroom (through changing the date and place of the hearing at the last minute [*Phoenix* 139]). Fudge asks Harry about the night he conjured a Patronus out of school and in front of his cousin; however, he is less interested in the circumstances surrounding Harry's behavior and more invested in maligning his character. He implies that Harry knows the relevant laws (140), speculates that he has made up a "very nice little cover story" (141) to excuse his actions, and ultimately resorts to listing past offenses—referencing "the number of cock-and-bull stories this boy has come out with . . . while trying to cover up his flagrant misuse of magic" (148)—to paint Harry as a habitual liar, no matter what might be proven about the night in question.

Of course, Fudge has an ulterior motive for such slander. He wishes to discredit Harry's declaration that Voldemort has returned in order to keep power and prevent panic. But the proceedings of Harry's trial uncover prejudicial elements of wizarding criminal trials that extend beyond Fudge's vendetta against Harry and indict the legal system itself. For example, Dumbledore's presence is particularly dangerous for Fudge not

because he is well-versed in the details of Harry's alleged crime, but because he is an already vetted member of the court, having until quite recently served as Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot (149), as well as being the most powerful and respected wizard in Britain. Liemer points out that Dumbledore is not a witness to Harry's transgressions, but rather acts as a co-equal to the other judges (25). In other words, he is "exactly analogous to the ideal person an accused Anglo-Saxon would have wanted vouching for him at trial" (26). Dumbledore's advocacy for Harry is likely to carry much weight because he is a powerful person invested in helping Harry—not because he knows the truth of the events under investigation.

Conversely, the other voice summoned to defend Harry is not as ideal, not because of what she knows, but because of who she is. Arabella Figg, though unquestionably present the night of the alleged crimes and, therefore, qualified to testify to them, is dismissed by Fudge because she's a Squib—a person born to wizarding parents but who demonstrates negligible magical ability. Fudge "eye[s] her closely" (143) and "snort[s] derisively" during her testimony" (144), even though it includes details Dumbledore could not have known first-hand. Again, Fudge's successful prosecution of Harry depends on discounting Mrs. Figg's informed account.

Though Liemer argues that uncovering these proto-parliamentary roots of the wizarding court "may help readers of the Harry Potter books to relax some concerns about certain procedural aspects of the trials held before that wizarding body" (24), I contend that the lack of an appeals process, the consolidation of power by and within an elite group of wizards, and the judgment of testimony based on status rather than knowledge is cause for *more*, not less, concern. Minister Fudge's personal vendetta against Harry demonstrates how the wizarding world's failure to separate judicial and legislative powers makes it supremely easy for those in power to use the legal system to intimidate and harass citizens who speak freely: Fudge presumably appoints himself Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot after Dumbledore's removal, positioning himself in a stunning display of conflict of interest as the boss of the woman who issued the infraction and the executive directing the trial. Without Dumbledore's intervention, Harry would surely have been convicted, his wand broken, and possibly sentenced to Azkaban.

The focus on character rather than on actions in the Wizengamot is echoed in the ideology which shapes wizarding incarceration: Azkaban prison. Azkaban materially manifests the social and physical punishments of isolation and death-in-life embodied and made portable by its guards, the dementors. Azkaban is geographically remote, located on an island, and referred to as a "fortress" in an article reporting Sirius's escape (*Prisoner* 37). Though fortresses are commonly constructed to keep intruders out, Azkaban is designed to keep prisoners *in*: incarcerated not only on the island but imprisoned in their own minds through emotional manipulation at the hands of starving and similarly confined dementors.

In his historical study of the evolution of imprisonment *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault describes a transformation in the means and ends of carceral punishment during the modern age. Foucault theorizes that though the state once demonstrated its complete power over its subjects through public spectacles of torture meant to mark the convict's body as "criminal," modernity has embraced the prison as a way to diagnose the *mind* of the convict as delinquent. Rather than mortifying the body, "it must be the soul. The expiation that once rained down upon the body must be replaced by a punishment that acts in depth on the heart, the thoughts, the will, the inclinations" (16). Foucault's historical analysis of punishment provocatively dovetails with Liemer's explanation of Anglo-Saxon legal and political processes. Dementors literalize judgment and punishment's interior turn, but do so in a way that exposes the unreasonable and cruel consequences of aiming a penalty at an individual's psyche.

Because dementors feed on human emotion, serving a prison sentence in the wizarding world becomes a form of punishment that has no reliable connection to the crime. Unlike sentencing in the Muggle world, which at least gestures towards a causal relationship between the nature of the offense and the amount

and type of time spent incarcerated, once placed in Azkaban, no matter the crime, wizards and witches are subject to the same punishment: providing food for the dementor guards. Additionally, it is impossible for this penalty to be fairly or consistently regulated. Professor Lupin explains to Harry that “the dementors affect you worse than the others because there are horrors in your past that the others don’t have” (*Prisoner* 187). The implications of this offhand assessment are extraordinarily chilling and profound for the wizarding penal system. This means that prisoners could suffer more or less depending not on their crime, but on their own psychobiographies and magical capacities. The truth of this claim is played out with Sirius’s ability to forestall madness because of his obsessive desire to avenge James and Lily’s deaths bolstered by the added barrier of transfiguring into a dog (*Prisoner* 372). However, a wizard sentenced to a few week’s time for a relatively minor offense could presumably lose their minds only due to a larger well of unpleasant memories. Indeed, as Professor Lupin notes, “The fortress is set on a tiny island, way out to sea, but they don’t need walls and water to keep the prisoners in, not when they’re all trapped inside their own heads, incapable of a single cheerful thought. Most of them go mad within weeks” (*Prisoner* 188).

Therefore, we can deduce that the purpose of wizarding incarceration is not rehabilitation. The presumption is that offenders who enter Azkaban will not be reintegrated into society, but will in fact be reduced first to madness, then to suicidal despair. These facts and accounts allow us to infer that any conviction that results in more than a few days prison time can be, in essence, a death sentence. Witches and wizards sentenced to Azkaban are separated from their communities and eventually their own personalities. Prison in the wizarding world is used brutally as a threat and a weapon, making witches and wizards so fearful of Azkaban that they will go to any lengths to obey the law and avoid it, thereby further securing and consolidating civic power in the despotic and opaque Ministry.

CONCLUSION

Dementors operate in the wizarding world not only to literally confine certain bodies in prison, but also to serve as a hated and feared “other” against which wizards can define themselves. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* Sara Ahmed argues that the logic of human emotions does not operate on an “inside out” model, but rather an “outside in.” That is:

In my model of the sociality of emotions, I suggest that emotions create the very effect of surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside and an outside in the first place. So emotions are not simply something ‘I’ or ‘we’ have. Rather it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces and boundaries are made: the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others. (10)

Emotions are not generated by one individual psyche, but rather, construct the way we understand ourselves as individuals (or communities) in relation to another. Pairing Ahmed’s argument with Brown’s insight that political institutions deploy narratives of rationality and irrationality to secure power, the choice of dementor to embody wizarding discipline becomes clear: They are just human-looking enough to reflect what wizards insist they are not: “sightless, soul-sucking fiends” (*Goblet of Fire* 23). In this social narrative, whereas dementors are blind, wizards can “see” the difference between guilty and innocent, and therefore can police that distinction. Whereas dementors take the “soul,” the wizarding community enriches and protects the individuality of each citizen, and whereas dementors are undead “fiends,” wizards are, rational, free, and above all else, human.

The wizarding institutional reality bolsters the fiction that wizards are judicious and free self-determined subjects because they are not uncivilized star-gazers (centaurs), greedy and unreasonable workers (goblins) or subservient automatons (house-elves), much less ungovernable brutes like giants, trolls, or werewolves, who

are not allowed in the bretheren at all. The metonym for this fiction is the wand. Those who carry a wand are members of the wizard citizenry proper and those who do not are not only other but lesser than. This fiction, like all unjust power hierarchies, shows its seams repeatedly in the series (through Goblin rebellions and the liminal status of Hagrid), but it is nonetheless both a powerful enabler and a limit on individual power. Magic can be done by humans without a wand (demonstrated by the ability of children under the age of eleven to perform it), but it is only organized, acceptable, evolved, and *rational*, once a wand has been bestowed, marking the entrance of a human into the institutional reality that elevates their powers and disciplines their capacity for using them as a “citizen-wizard”. We can almost read the hyphen between the two identifiers as a magic wand itself, conjuring a hybrid identity that affirms and contains a wizard’s humanity in contrast to nonhuman magical beings. Once one loses that hyphen through lawbreaking and a broken wand, one belongs to the dementors and become as a dementor—dead in the eyes of the wizarding world.

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Zombie Literature: Analyzing the Fear of the Unknown through Popular Culture

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ABSTRACT

This paper will focus on how the rise in popularity of zombie literature in the 21st century is reflective of a western cultural need to address the fear of the unknown through popular culture. Through the flesh-eating zombie, we enter a parallel world where everything familiar in our communities becomes evil. The genre reflects the fear in Western society of the neighbor who has turned against you, survival in the midst of government collapse, and the monster within. Zombie fantasy literature allows society a venue to deconstruct what is known while dealing with these fears and the unbridled hate of the unthinking zombie through a collective experience using popular culture. What this fantasy subgenre allows, the author will explain, is a monster that embodies an individual human's greatest fears. At times, the zombie reflects the fear of social breakdown; at others, the zombie reflects aging and death. The versatility of this embodiment of fear allows it to be a genre that continues to evolve.

Using the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin on carnival and festive folk humor, the author will discuss how the zombie genre has provided fantasy lovers a deconstructive space to deal with fear, death, and hate in a genre that breaks down what western society has constructed for itself, and also allows readers to rebuild the future without constraint. Zombies, however, always leave room for humanity to hope for life and the future. This popular culture phenomenon goes beyond mere entertainment as it reaches into the heart of viewers and allows them to express their greatest emotions.

Keywords: Bakhtin, carnivalesque, zombies, deconstruction, laughter, fear, popular culture

It is common knowledge that zombie fiction has been on the rise for the last several years. The zombie has become infused into many areas of entertainment. From television shows to movies, graphic novels to Young Adult (YA) novels and adult fiction, the many genres of modern literature bow to the popularity of the undead menace. The obvious reasons for this rise in popularity in mainstream popular (pop) culture would be that the zombie story is exciting, it is packed with adventure and action and it is completely fantastical, but, if one looks deeper, then one can see the fundamental need of humanity to deconstruct social understandings, break away from the known and deal with the themes of fear, death and the unknown.

While one could trace the rise of zombie literature, especially zombie films, to their roots in the 1960s and 1970s, this paper is not about how the genre got its start. In fact, the author will not spend much time talking about the roots of the genre, or even many popular origin stories that many iterations of zombie literature holds on to. The zombie is now an “important *cultural* figure because of its powerful role as a multifaceted *allegorical* figure (emphasis in the original, Bishop, 2015). The purpose in this article is to show that there is a human need to deconstruct what we perceive as real and engage and analyze fear on the individual and societal levels.

SITUATING ZOMBIES WITHIN RESEARCH IN POPULAR CULTURE

Extant research on zombie literature in popular culture, whether it is analysis of film, television, or print media, often draws on the voodoo origins of the word zombie and its relation to the evolution on zombies in popular film (Platts (2013), social satire in film, television, and video games (do Vale, 2010, Schott, 2010), zombie walks (Austin, 2015, do Vale, 2010, Orpana, 2011) and simply as allegory representing the various moral and political discourses of the time in which they are made (Nagypal, 2014, Orpana, 2011). Often using Rubinstein & Romero’s (1978) *Dawn of the Dead* as the ultimate example of the zombie as an epicenter of social commentary on rampant American consumerism, research in popular culture and literature about zombies cannot avoid the negative discourses surrounding the zombie as a representation of a decaying culture focused on materialism.

However, to analyze the zombie in popular culture, researchers have to dissect not only the overt discourses represented in texts, but the subversive goals of the writers and directors themselves. In looking at zombie video games, Gareth Schott (2010) speaks to the zombie video game as an agent of potential social change “because of their interactive and transformative qualities” (p. 67). In looking at *Dead Rising* (2006) the author compares the social implications laid out by Rubinstein & Romero of survivors of the zombie apocalypse surviving the new world while trapped in an American shopping mall. In order to analyze the viewer as consumer in a consumer culture, Schott looks at how varying aspects of the game were created to point, sometimes overtly, at the social problem of materialism represented by a shopping mall.

The analysis of the zombie genre cannot be separated from the sociopolitical ideologies that influence it. Nagypal (2014) analyzes three zombie movies in order to understand the utopian hopeful future often included in zombie literature. The films under study here represent distinctly opposite political futures and how existence comes into contact with death represented in the living dead of the zombie (p. 17). The author shows how the zombie genre represents the sometimes contradictory hope of the political divide when thinking of future society.

Humanness is an essential concept that must be analyzed when looking at zombie literature, and writing also shows how the universal fear of the other cannot be separated from the genre. Simone do Vale (2010) while examining the cultural phenomenon of “zombie walks” describes the social fears of “towering menaces like terrorists, ecologic and economic disasters, HIV, bird flu, swine flu, and young Marilyn Manson fans going postal” as universal discourses tackled by zombie literature (p. 198). However, the author concludes

by sharing how zombie walks “could be understood as a carnivalization of fear” that allows like-minded individuals to gather together and express their power to resist that fear (p. 199). Resistance to dominant society, thus, becomes another focus of zombie literature.

Additionally, Platts (2013) insists that research in zombies must be looked at as representations of valuable cultural objects (p. 547). In looking at the history of the genre and the various cultures and individuals who influenced and developed it, the author found that zombies were a prime site of study in sociology for researchers to examine both social anxieties and cultural fear. He states that “[w]hat nearly all understandings and depictions of popular culture zombies have in common is a flexible creature designed to evoke our macabre fascination and whose likeness adapts to contemporaneous tumult, concerns about manmade and natural disasters, conflicts and wars, and crime and violence” (p. 550). These fears, essentially, are universal to most cultures and most time periods, and must be examined, analyzed, and dealt with at the societal level in order for society to dream of a better future.

USING BAKHTIN'S CARNIVALESQUE AS A THEORETICAL FRAME

While Bakhtin's carnival has been used in analyzing zombies in popular culture before (see Austin, 2015, do vale, 2010, Nagypal, 2014, Orpana, 2011), much of the connection has to do with Bakhtin's “treatment of the body” (Austin, 2015, Orpana, 2011, p. 255) and less to do with zombie literature as a tool for social deconstruction argued here. The zombie is the perfect political representation of the modern human. Orpana (2011), while examining zombie walks in particular, explains that “The simplicity of the zombie trope makes it a useful vehicle for political allegory and cultural critique; however, the flexibility and diversity of the genre make uncovering the latent psycho-social trauma that lends horrific energy to these [zombie] films a difficult task” (p. 253). While Orpana focuses much on Bakhtin's theory on grotesque realism as a part of carnival to understand and analyze zombie walks as vehicles of social commentary, in contrast, here the focus is on a societal level of dealing with the fear of the unknown by having a carnivalesque hope.

Fantasy literature, specifically zombie fantasy literature, allows western culture to deal with our deepest and darkest fears. Zombie literature provides an escape, a space to deal with our greatest fears and a space to consider how we, individually and as a culture, might fare if the worst thing imaginable came to be. For some, zombie literature merely represents the fear of the unknown and the question of survival in a dark and hostile world. Others deal with the fear and hatred of the “other” that lives down the street from them or in a faraway land. The themes tying all of these cases together are the emotions of fear and hatred. What if the world was really out to get us? What if the government no longer existed or we were left to fend for ourselves without the protections of our modern society? The truth is that many consumers of zombie literature hold on to the question of “what if?” and then the focus becomes how will we respond? While fear, violence and the deconstruction of social norms are often in the forefront of zombie literature, an underlying theme of hope, survival, and salvation coexists in zombie literature that shows that even in the darkest of days humanity has hope for a better and different future.

To understand zombie literature from an analytical standpoint, two concepts from Mikhail Bakhtin's (1984) work *Rabelais and His World* will be used as a lens to discover why zombie pop culture provides such a valuable space for westerners to explore their deepest fears. In particular, Bakhtin's writings on carnival show the value and potential of zombie literature as escapism, and also Bakhtin's writings on medieval folk humor and laughter show the reasoning behind why the zombie is such a valuable tool for overcoming that fear. Literature is the perfect space to engage in these concepts because “From a social perspective, language also works as a unifying force among the individuals of a group. Bakhtin argues that only through the interaction with others may our consciousness as beings arise” (Sempere, 2014, p.51). Thus, zombie literature is a social

tool for deconstructing the social fabric of the culture we live in.

At its root, the zombie apocalypse is impossible. However, whether it is a virus outbreak or a biochemical weapon attack that starts it, there is just enough “that’s possible” to make the genre a perfect place to deal with humanity’s great hope to start all over from scratch. The fears of an individual bleed into the fears of society as a whole, and as the anxiety rises culture needs a place to deal with the emotions that individuals face every day. The Greeks sought community catharsis through their festivals and plays, medieval Europeans in feudal states also dealt with the fear of the unknown through folk literature and plays. Modern society does the same.

Bakhtin writes extensively on how carnival was used in many cultures and in many different ways to allow people to step away from normal life, break down and deconstruct society and escape all the pressures that come with that. What carnival provided was a freedom from social constructions that were not felt during the rest of the year. According to Bakhtin (1984), “They [carnival festivals] were the second life of the people, who for a time entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance” (p. 9). What this freedom from normal life provided was “...gay diversion...’ so that foolishness, which is our second nature and seems to be inherent in man might freely spend itself at least once a year” (p. 75). Society needed a break from itself, and this was a break from the formality associated with medieval life, a life of rules both from the church and from the government.

Carnival was a form of popular culture at the time that was needed to take place so that society could step away from what was known and analyze the unknown fears and the unknown hopes that existed for everyone. Zombie literature as a form of popular culture is important because “...popular culture texts [can be used] as a space in which to contest racialized, gendered, and universalized experiences” (Alvermann, 2011, p.544). There is a cultural desire to engage with pop culture, and society uses pop culture to analyze social constructions and provide a foundation for change in the future. It is not reserved for only those belonging to certain fandoms. Young and old can engage with zombie literature to individually and collaboratively deal with the complex emotions in their lives. In building this deconstructive foundation through zombie literature, it must be noted that “Bakhtin explains how artistic events are first of all responses to previous events, but all the same, they demand further responses in the future” (Sempere, 2014, p. 40). The rise in popularity in zombie literature is evidence of this deconstructive space continuing to be needed year after year.

Bakhtin wrote of carnival as a deconstructive force. Sempere (2014) uses Bakhtin to engage with his work as a foundational deconstructive voice; he says that “Deconstruction is a mode of reading whose main concern is to highlight the inheritance, the traces of a particular reading of a text” (p. 31). Writing on the carnivalesque feast of the fools, Bakhtin shows this deconstructive inheritance when he wrote that annually “Nearly all the rituals of the feast of the fools are a grotesque degradation of various church rituals and symbols and their transfer to the material bodily level: gluttony and drunken orgies on the altar table, indecent gestures, disrobing” (pp. 74-75). These are deconstructions of everything ritualistic in medieval life. The connections to the undead zombie and the zombie apocalypse here are obvious. A breakdown of society and the power of the church and government are represented by man’s darkest devolution into the unthinking monster. The zombie has an insatiable appetite for his former friends and neighbors; it is man in his most grotesque form.

Connected to this idea would be the rituals of travesties, uncrownings, and thrashings where “Abuse is death, it is former youth transformed into old age, the living body turned into a corpse” (p. 197). Carnival deconstructed the fears of death and aging according to the social constructions at the time. Zombie literature is a modern tool for this because “Each new act of reading diverges from the previous one because each new reading may stand for a deconstruction of other previous acts of reading” (Sempere, 2014, p. 51). Individuals reengage with the themes of aging and death through serial reading and viewing of zombie literature in order to continually deconstruct the forces of society around them. This is why carnival was held every year. One participation in carnival or engagement with a zombie text does not “solve” these fears for an individual.

Death is celebrated in carnival as inevitable which the zombie genre makes quite obvious. It is this fear of the unknown associated with death that surrounds carnival that shows the value to society of letting go of those emotions. Then, as a studied text, "...people's uses of popular culture texts can inform the large social, political, and economic structures governing their lives" (Alvermann, 2011, p. 564). Zombie literature, in this sense, would transcend the individual viewer's experience and become an agent of shared emotion with all others who engage with it, and then it can be used as a tool for social criticism and hope at the societal level.

FLATTENING THE HIERARCHIES WITH ZOMBIE LITERATURE

Many pop culture texts like zombie fiction are often seen as mindless entertainment without social capital. Alvermann (2012) writes that "The perception that low culture is synonymous with popular culture is based on the supposition that audiences lack agency in interpreting messages embedded in media... (p. 218). Deconstructionism, on the other hand, thinks that agency is available to all. For example, the zombie is a manifestation of death. The inherent fear of death is made physical in the zombie, giving a direction for our emotions that makes them easier to deal with. All viewers of zombie literature engage with personal and social constructions of death and dying.

What zombie literature does for readers and viewers is that it takes away all that we know and trust to be true. It is not the creation of a place of fear, but a place where one can step away from life and look at it from the outside. This is mirrored when Bakhtin stressed how carnival provided a "...complete liberation from the seriousness of life" (p. 247). It flattened the differences between man and man, and man and woman because "In the world of carnival all hierarchies are canceled. All castes and ages are equal" (p. 251). Lastly, "The authority of the official realm of Church and state is suspended, with all its norms and values. The world is permitted to emerge from its routine" (p. 259). This is a key point when looking at zombie literature as a deconstructive force. The individual must exist in a stripped and deconstructed society where he owes no one any explanation; the way of the world must be brought closer and all the rules, laws, and understandings of the world must be swept away in this apocalyptic event. It is in this space that humanity deals with its fundamental fears of the unknown, death, hatred and chaos.

However, carnival was not just a place to strip away the official and to indulge in whatever fancies may exist (although there is an element of this); carnival was a place for hope. With this realization that carnival and zombie literature are more than just a glorification of fear and death, we can apply Bakhtin who would insist that in the midst of death and uncertainty there is hope. Many zombie stories contain this element of hope. Without it, there is little reason for characters to try to survive. There must be salvation, hope or a safe zone without zombies to hold on to. From death comes life, and "Carnival... did liber-ate human consciousness and permit a new outlook, but at the same time it implied no nihilism; it had a positive character because it disclosed the abundant material principle, change and becoming, the irresistible triumph of the new immortal people" (p. 274). This cycle was included in all of Bakhtin's writings on carnival. Death and rebirth are paired, as are fear and hope. It is the continued survival in the face of overwhelming and unexplainable odds in the zombie story that keeps readers and viewers connected in that same way. As an individual person engages with zombie literature, all of their experiences, both good and bad, engage with what is transpiring in the text. Viewers live through the experiences of the characters in zombie literature and this gives them a critical disposition to everything they are reading or watching. In turn, they apply this new critical lens to the social world around them.

These pairings of fear and hope are inevitable. Humanity clings to this because, as Bakhtin writes, "The victory of the future is ensured by the people's immortality. The birth of the new, of the greater and the better, is as indispensable and as inevitable as the death of the old" (p. 256). Zombie literature, like carnival,

allows society to experience the full range of human emotion and deal with the fears associated with life and death and walk away with renewed hope. Morrell (2007), speaking of pop culture as a deconstructive tool in the classroom, writes that “Popular culture can help students deconstruct dominant narratives and contend with oppressive practices in hopes of achieving a more egalitarian and inclusive society” (p. 72). Ultimately, through the cathartic expressions of fear and hope, zombie literature allows viewers to analyze the world around them and also empowers them to affect change. It is in this hope where “In the whole of the world and of the people there is no room for fear. For fear can only enter a part that has been separated from the whole, the dying link torn from the link that is born. The whole of the people and of the world is triumphantly gay and fearless” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 256). Zombie literature always contains the element of hope and triumph. Whether it is as simple as escaping the undead horde in a character’s town, finding a group of survivors to call family or reaching that place of safety, the future, although uncertain, remains hopeful. This is the essence of deconstructive thought.

Zombie literature does provide modern society with a carnivalesque escape. The world as we know it ends, and the survivors are left to deal with a new world that is hostile, but popular culture allows for “... the expression of universal human values, namely the desire and struggle for freedom from tyranny and oppression” (Morrell, 2007, p.73). The modern unknown fears of terrorism, violence, and death are manifest in the zombie. Fear, as a tangible entity in this genre, can be dealt with through pop culture in ways that fear in normal life cannot. Bakhtin writes that “Fear is the extreme expression of narrow-minded and stupid seriousness, which is defeated by laughter” (p. 47). The ultimate defeat of fear is to laugh at it or trivialize it, but fear is a universal human emotion and the dealing of it in order to have hope for the future is also universal. Harari would add that popular culture should be used “...not in order to predict the future, but to free yourself of the past and imagine alternative destinies” (2017, p. 65). The zombie apocalypse takes everything that society knows and destroys it. Just like the flattening of hierarchies during carnival, all people become equal in the eyes of the bloodthirsty zombie.

The undercurrent theme of hope that is often included in zombie literature is rooted in this concept of laughter over fear. Individuals participating in carnival must laugh in the face of the grotesque, in the face of seriousness, and the formality of the Church and of the government. “Thus carnival is the people’s second life, organized on the basis of laughter” which breaks participants away from the known, deconstructs that which limits society and gives space to deal with the unknown (p. 9). Zombie literature, if applied to this idea, is a part of western society continuing to deal with an ever changing world, and the fears that are associated with those changes.

There are many positives to the use of laughter as a tool for victory over fear in Bakhtin’s writings on medieval life and carnival. In particular, “It was the victory of laughter over fear that most impressed medieval man” (p.90). Laughter at fear allows readers of zombie literature and consumers of zombie pop culture to deconstruct the known and have a chance to see beyond the horror in front of them to begin to see the potential for hope in a hopeless world. Bakhtin adds that “It was the defeat of divine and human power, of authoritarian commandments and prohibitions, of death and punishment after death, hell and all that is more terrifying than earth itself. Through this victory laughter clarified man’s consciousness and gave him a new outlook on life” (p. 91). Often, deconstructionism includes this element of seeing the world through new, different and better eyes. It is through this new outlook that characters are driven to pursue salvation, to reach the zombie-free Promised Land and to continue to survive and to build a new, better future. The viewer then sees the world in a new way.

To take a step away, essentially, the reader or viewer of zombie pop culture looks at the horrifying grotesque form of the zombie and has two options. One is to have absolute fear, which we see often, and the other is to laugh in the face of fear and defeat it. In carnival, “The acute awareness of victory over fear is an

essential element of medieval laughter” (p. 91). The medieval carnival participant broke down the hierarchies that surrounded them and laughed in the face of social constructions. In many ways, the zombie apocalypse in literature provides this same space. The inefficient government, the annoying neighbor, homeowners associations, the boss at work and the policeman giving out a speeding ticket, all turn into comic form as zombies. They are slow, stupid, and easy to defeat one-on-one. In essence, “The people play with terror and laugh at it; the awe-some becomes a ‘comic monster’” (p. 91). The great importance of this is seen in Bakhtin’s writing as he says, “This is why festive folk laughter presents an element of victory not only over supernatural awe, over the sacred, over death; it also means the defeat of power, of earthly kings, of the earthly upper classes, of all that oppresses and restricts” (p. 92). Absolute freedom comes to participants in carnival and in zombie pop culture. All that restricts is swept away and humanity is left with only its base needs to the forefront: food, water and shelter. Then, after all is deconstructed, the future can begin to be built anew.

In this apocalyptic world, anything is possible. Bakhtin stresses that there is so much more to the tearing down that carnival provides, the rebirth must not be forgotten. What better way to find new life than laughter at what makes one fearful? This does not mean that fear no longer exists. In fact, “Victory over fear is not its abstract elimination; it is a simultaneous uncrowning and renewal, a gay transformation. Hell has burst and has poured forth abundance” (p. 91). This process cannot be overlooked. One must realize that “It is impossible to determine where the defeat of fear will end and where joyous recreation will begin” (p. 91). Therefore in zombie literature, as in carnival, character and reader alike must continue forward with the hope of new life and salvation. The fear of the unknown is unmasked in the zombie and can be dealt with just as “Medieval laughter, when it triumphed over the fear inspired by the mystery of the world and by power, boldly unveiled the truth about both” (p. 92). It is in this laughter where the social constructions of western society are laid bare, and a new hope can emerge to guide the future.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this analysis was to show how zombie literature is a deconstructive power, and the theme of the fear of the unknown as well as the hanging onto of hope in zombie pop culture is representative of Mikhail Bakhtin’s writing on carnival and medieval folk laughter. In essence, zombie literature provides for its viewers a carnivalesque escape and deconstruction of the reality of their daily lives. It is used by viewers to deal with their deepest, darkest fears about society, and allows them to reach the freedom that Bakhtin writes of, one that is a “...second life of the people, who for a time entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 9). Zombie literature breaks the hierarchies and constraints that western society has constructed for itself. These constructions include politics, fear of the other, and materialism that causes neighbor to distrust neighbor. Viewers escape these constructions and find hope in a “what if we could change it all” new world represented in the zombie apocalypse.

The comic zombie with its shambling gait and drunken inability to function as a normal human creates a caricature of human life that is a tool for laughter to defeat the fears that viewers have and allows them to build something new. Bakhtin writes that individuals laugh at the manifestations of their fears to defeat them which describe how we can now see the role of a zombie in modern literature (p. 91). Zombie literature allows westerners the chance to step away from the social constructions of their lives, and allows them to consider the possibility of how life could be different, how they would react or survive if their worst fears came true and to mentally prepare for the unknown future that haunts them.

One must not forget the second half of the purpose of carnival that Bakhtin insists his readers remember. One must remember that in carnival, from chaos becomes a new world (p. 91). Carnival does not exist just to bring down and flatten those things that separate us; carnival provides rebirth and rejuvenation of culture,

society and the individual. This is the power of zombie literature. Viewers can experience their own fears of the unknown through the experience of watching the fear associated with the zombie apocalypse, and the hope often granted to survivor's shows viewers that there is a chance for more and to always strive for better things and have hope for the future.

Viewers of zombie literature get to put all of their fears into the manifestation of the zombie. It is in the heart pounding fear of that unknown violence and hatred that causes viewers to panic in their seats. One sees that it must be impossible to survive such a horrific life in an undead world. Yet, viewers hope through every character that they meet. It is easy to see themselves in the survivors of any zombie book or movie. Viewers question themselves on every decision made for survival. Would they make the same choice? Do they see the danger that the characters do not see? Viewers, more importantly, get to experience the same joy and hope that the characters do as they make a new world when society has been completely deconstructed, and by escaping the reaching clutches of the undead. It is in this experience of hope that a carnivalesque rebirth happens, leaving viewers with a chance to see life through new eyes.

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Resistance, Race, and Myth: A Critical Survey of American Popular Music Culture in the 20th Century

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ABSTRACT

The topic of popular music in the United States has garnered much analysis from scholars, particularly how popular music has created or reflected American myths, collective memory, and racial politics. This essay is a review of select research on the interface between 20th century American popular music, culture, and power. The essay reveals that pop music scholarship is rooted in paradox. Hence, it focuses on three chiasmic or antithetical themes permeating scholarship on the topic: Popular music as either cultural hegemony or resistance to that cultural hegemony; Popular music as fundamental to the American myth, or the American myth as fundamental to popular music; and Popular music as inextricable from American race, or race as inextricable from American music. Further, it sheds light on the interconnectedness of American culture and popular music in the 20th century. This review of critical scholarship on popular music culture in the 20th century is significant for popular culture studies and pedagogy because it provides a frame of reference from which scholars and teachers may formulate research about popular music in the 21st century.

Keywords: popular music, race and ethnicity, American dream, gender, class, postwar

In the latter half of the 20th century, popular music was inextricably entwined with American culture. Although pop music was often viewed as trivial because of its status as everyday entertainment, it still retained a tantalizing appeal for scholars because of its function as a soundtrack to significant historical events (Rodnitzky 105). Not coincidentally, pop music became increasingly legitimized as a field of academic inquiry during the last four decades, as it amassed a mountain of analyses from scholars (Burns 123). The intrigue of popular music as a subject of academic discussion continues into the second decade of the 21st century, as evidenced by the continued assessment of the interstitial space between music and protest—shorthanded as “the spirit of 1968” in one publication (Kutschke 4).¹ With reports of street protests (and their associated songs and music festivals) frequently appearing in American publications during the last several years—music performed at Occupy Wall Street, Women’s March on Washington, and March For Our Lives, to name a few—pop music’s role in social change will likely continue to inject its tendrils into academic discourse in the 21st century.

Accordingly, the present essay focuses on academic discourse about popular music and particularly its relationship to culture and power in the latter half of the 20th century. Through a review of select critical research, my purpose is threefold: (1) to examine the role popular music has played in recent American history, including its myths, collective memory, and racial politics; (2) to demonstrate the paradoxical nature of popular culture scholarship when power enters the analysis, namely between the perception of popular music as *oppressive* by virtue of its power to divert the listener from important social concerns and *resistant*, enabling and empowering disparate social groups to mobilize against social injustice; and (3) to briefly address the gaps in the literature on popular music by providing additional context, commentary, and illustrations for those claims and including examples from relevant songs.

The motivation for delving into the topic was generated from a broader interest in the meanings that people attribute to popular music. This essay employs an interdisciplinary approach to frame its topic of analysis. As myriad critics and historians have contributed their unique analyses to this topic, the synthesis of these contributions provides a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of popular music. The research for this essay, then, was drawn primarily from sources originating in the fields of history, sociology, anthropology, communication, and cultural studies.

After addressing some foundational critical theories on popular music, the remainder of the essay will be situated in the decades following the conclusion of World War II. The selected timeframe coincides with the emergence of popular music genres like Rock ‘n’ Roll, Soul, Funk, and Hip Hop in American culture. The postwar era served as the historical context for impactful cultural events like the pop music-infused counterculture and its associated folk music (Chambers 87). The scope of the essay will not be exhaustive; although it generally addresses post-World War II America, it will be organized thematically rather than chronologically.

In compiling and synthesizing scholarship about American popular music in the 20th century, this essay focuses on three chiasmic or antithetical themes: Popular music as either cultural hegemony or resistance to that cultural hegemony; Popular music as fundamental to the American myth, or the American myth as fundamental to popular music; and Popular music as inextricable from American race, or race as inextricable from American music. The chiasmic nature of these themes is warranted when studying a topic so fraught with contradiction; as pop music scholar Richard Middleton explains it, “What the term ‘popular music’ tries to do is to put a finger on that space, that terrain, of contradiction—between ‘imposed’ and ‘authentic,’ ‘elite’ and ‘common,’ predominate and subordinate, then and now, theirs and ours, and so on” (7). This essay strives to offer additional insight into the paradoxical nature of popular music.

This essay is significant for popular culture studies and pedagogy because it provides a frame of reference upon which scholars may formulate research about popular music in the 21st century. The scholarship

reviewed here is and will remain highly relevant to cultural studies; the theories and issues presented here are not new, nor will they necessarily get old. Popular music, then, is a means through which timeless issues may become articulated. As the warp of culture and the weft of technology increasingly weave into the scholarly thread of pop music, the antithetical themes presented here will provide readers with some context for the role popular music played in postwar American history. The purpose of this essay, then, is to understand 20th century American culture through a critical exploration of its popular music. In short, its objective echoes that of cultural critic Greil Marcus: to briefly examine popular music “not as youth culture, or counter culture, but simply as American culture” (4).

POPULAR MUSIC AS CULTURAL HEGEMONY AND RESISTANCE TO CULTURAL HEGEMONY

Paradoxically, critical scholarship characterizes popular music as either a manifestation of cultural hegemony or a means for resisting that cultural hegemony. The cultural and critical theories outlining these conflicting views are highly influential to the study of popular music. Because popular music scholarship is interested in examining the complex interaction between the music and the listener, the results are often messy. Explaining this dichotomy, cultural critic Tony Bennett writes “the field of popular culture is structured by the attempt of the ruling class to win hegemony and by the forms of opposition to this endeavour” (85). This assertion is based on the political writings of Italian critic Antonio Gramsci, who considered asymmetries of power between the dominant class and the subordinate class to be central to understanding political and social relations (Gramsci 75). To assert control, the elite class creates the conditions most essential to facilitate their oppressive desires. The surrounding culture caters to the needs of these elites, ensuring that the masses will fulfill their interests. Notably, the hegemony is characterized by an ongoing struggle for control between the ruling class and the working class rather than absolute domination. This entails that the elites be able to exert “moral, cultural, intellectual and...political leadership” over these subaltern classes (Bennett 84). This Gramscian approach—popular culture as a site of hegemonic struggle—has become an essential lens for cultural studies scholars to theorize about entertainment (Traube 132).

When power is taken into consideration, popular music can appear to be simultaneously oppressive or resistant, depending on which aspect of the music is being discussed. Successful artists like Madonna, for example, may be characterized as an “agent of patriarchal hegemony” (Fiske 78), while concurrently functioning as “a site of semiotic struggle between the forces of patriarchal control and feminine resistance” (Fiske 79). Critical scholarship enmeshes popular music amidst these contradictory cultural processes; thus, all artists, producers, and consumers of that music are unwittingly participating in this struggle for meaning. Theorizing about cultural hegemony and Madonna can be equally applied to Beyoncé (see Martínez-Jiménez, Gálvez-Muñoz, and Solano-Caballero for an example of such an analysis). The point to be made here is that popular music is so polysemous that its meaning to individual listeners and its function to the larger culture is largely a matter of debate. As explained by sociologist Simon Frith, “To grasp the meaning of a piece of music is to hear something not simply present to the ear. It is to understand a musical culture, to have a ‘scheme of interpretation’” (*Performing Rites* 249). When that scheme of interpretation involves accounting for power, it can be equally correct to characterize popular music as oppressive or resistive.

Many critical scholars celebrate popular music because of its political function: it provides artists and listeners a means of resisting cultural hegemony. The recognition of pop music’s political power certainly did not first take place in 20th century America. Plato, for example, warned against the perils of music in *The Republic*: “any musical innovation is full of danger to the whole State, and ought to be prohibited...when modes of music change, the fundamental laws of the State always change with them” (93). A more recent example of this potential to resist the government is the American counterculture of the sixties. The West

Coast rock of the late 1960s countered the hegemonic war industries by creating an alternative society among its listeners in which identities and communities were created (Storey 90). Even though the counterculture emerged from a largely homogenous class of youth, pop music in the counterculture paradoxically called for a community of all who would sympathize with their ideology. This call for community was reflected in its music (90).

The essential role pop music played in the counterculture may be further elucidated when understood through the concept of the carnivalesque, first mentioned by literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin. Carnival is a communal atmosphere where everyone identifies with each other in a shared space, essentially bound together by their opposition to the noncarnival life (Bakhtin 122-123). Carnival penetrates social barriers and hierarchies, in which the carnivalesque behaviors and attitudes embodied in the participant effectively oppose these barriers of convention (124); it is the same with Rock 'n' Roll, where "adult authority is powerless" to combat the genre's "major hierarchical debasement" (Kohl 148). These carnivalesque attributes of the counterculture and its associated music functioned as a type of resistance to hegemonic forces. The carnival element of the counterculture also has been explored in later bands like GWAR, Slipknot, and Insane Clown Posse, through which "heavy metal music and its carnival culture express[ed] a dis-alienating politics of resistance" (Halnon 33). For example, the disturbing lyrical themes of bands like Slipknot (epitomized in album titles like *Mate. Feed. Kill. Repeat.*), coupled with the "devilish, face-painted" imagery associated with the genre, offers a type of "grotesque realism," which culminates in a "liminal utopia of human freedom, creativity, and egalitarianism" (39, 34-35). The idea, rooted in the carnival, that "high and low are no longer distinct from one another" (Kohl 144) seems to exemplify the ethos of popular music.

The potential of popular music to subvert authority makes it compatible with elements of youth culture. In their essay on young listeners, Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel contend that popular music is an agent of resistance in youth, in part, because it uses lyrics that mirror "attitudes and sentiments which are already [within the youth], and at the same time provides an expressive field and a set of symbols through which these attitudes can be projected" (63). Much like the identity building function of the counterculture, the effect of music on youth culture often takes precedence over the teachings of parents and community.

The fashion and style of youth culture may also be subversive. Cultural critic Dick Hebdige outlines his notion of resistance through a discussion of style, much of which is inspired by popular music. According to Hebdige, resistance "begins with a crime against the natural order, though in this case the deviation may seem slight indeed...but it ends in *the construction of a style*, in a gesture or defiance or contempt, in a smile or a sneer. It signals a Refusal" (3). The youth subculture, through argot and style, finds a way to contest the dominant system of values.

The subversive dimension of popular music goes beyond its influence on style. Iain Chambers offers insights on American popular music research through focusing his analysis of popular music in Britain. While acknowledging the African American influence upon pop music, Chambers implies that pop music had a larger potential for resistance than others may realize: "pop has...been involved in attempts to subvert language altogether" (xi). Even the manner through which pop music is made, produced, and distributed has been subject to the banner of resistance; whether the music is lo-fi (Grajeda 357), or the punk embodiment of the DIY mentality (O'Connor 49-50), pop music appeals to audiences because it is resistant to some oppressive alternative.

However, other scholars argue that popular music is oppressive. German composer and cultural critic Theodor W. Adorno sees popular music as being a part of the oppressive culture industry, blinding people to critical class issues. According to Adorno, pop music functions as a distraction to the masses, amusing them into a dangerous pattern of relaxation and lack of discernment (458). Adorno's analysis is built on arguments made originally by Karl Marx, considering the proletariat as the music consuming masses and the

bourgeoisie as the producers and distributors of that music; however, the masses are never mobilized to resist their oppressive foes because they are so entranced by the entertainment the bourgeoisie has provided them. Adorno's condemnation of popular music is controversial, even to scholars. Historian Michael T. Bertrand, for example, calls Adorno's argument "one dimensional" and "rudimentary at best," countering that listeners and distributors are free agents (9). Philosopher Roger Scruton agrees with Adorno's overall assessment of popular music, but disagrees with the political premises Adorno uses to get there: Adorno's "lack of clarity, his jerky and unsequential style of analysis and his attempt to politicize the entire discussion of modernism in music, so as to force it into a neo-Marxist framework that has lost whatever plausibility it might once have had, place great obstacles before the reader" (205). Challenging Adorno's ostensibly misanthropic perspective, Bertrand argues that the pop music consumer should be seen as cognitively complex, possessing the ability to interpret popular music in diverse ways. Despite his detractors, Adorno's provocations about popular music are valuable because of their larger objective to open up new ways of thinking for his readers (Tester 52).

According to the literature cited above, pop music is a force capable of politically mobilizing communities by the promise of resistance to oppression. Paradoxically, however, pop music can be detrimental to social change, diverting the attention of the masses away from critical social issues. In this sense, American popular music functions as both oppressive and resistant.

POPULAR MUSIC IN THE AMERICAN MYTH

Popular music is more than merely oppressive or resistant—it is foundational. Popular music is as fundamental to the American mythos as the American dream is to the narratives in popular music. Indeed, to the consternation of historians and high culture proponents alike, pop music has a powerful potential to alter the course of collective memory (Lipsitz, *Footsteps in the Dark* viii). Searching for accuracy in historical narratives is often treacherous because of the outsized role music plays in shaping, distorting, and determining American public memory. This shaping influence generally applies to all mediated entertainment. Historian Michael Kammen argues that film, for example, has reinforced "stereotypes, romanticizing a world that never was, and distorting realities" (668). Popular music scholars are sympathetic to this viewpoint: In his study of the Blues culture in the American South, rhetorician Stephen A. King states that efforts to reconstruct the past in public memory tend to reinforce certain cultural memories, specifically privileging the dominant white¹ cultural worldview (235). Like Kammen (and recalling Adorno's argument), sociologist George Lipsitz states that popular culture often reiterates dominant values in collective memory, functioning to divert rather than to enlighten or fulfill (*Time Passages* 4).

To be sure, this musical formation of values can be fortuitous, a byproduct of the mass production of entertainment. However, the influencing of public memory vis-à-vis popular music can be intentional, deliberately wielded by those with the power to do so. In the postwar years, for example, the American government promoted popular indigenous music (in the form of jazz) for ideological purposes: to be "music as a universal language that could end international tensions brought on by the Cold War" (246). This curious case exemplifies the American "use of music as a tool in warfare" (Clegg 245) to perhaps "sway those sympathetic to communist aims to the American way of thinking" (247). Power and public memory can also converge in the hands of those who can afford the technologies to record. In the early decades of the 20th century, archivists with the technology to record "cowboy songs" as historical documents also had the ability to use those songs to cultivate an image of what authentic American life on the frontier might sound like

² Generally, I use "African American" in this essay, though I do occasionally use "black" and "white" as adjectives when referring to musical styles and audiences. This convention follows the scholarship on race and pop music cited here (see Baldwin, Neal, Pough, and Stewart, for example).

(Slowik 208).

Because public memory is inherently precarious, the artists and producers of popular music must be responsible in how they represent issues and events in their songs. Historically speaking, however, many artists have evaded this ethical responsibility. Pop music may initiate discriminatory master narratives by underrepresenting gender or perpetuating sexist stereotypes. A historical illustration is appropriate. In the years following World War II, particularly in the decades of the fifties, sixties, and seventies, the “car song” became popular. Songs by Chuck Berry, the Beach Boys, and Bruce Springsteen frequently touched on the mythical topic of automobiles, creating “an American car culture” (164). There are a few representative examples: Chuck Berry’s 1955 song “Maybelline” is considered one of the first car songs (169); The Beach Boys sang about cruising the strip in “I Get Around” (Marcus 120); Springsteen’s songs like “Thunder Road” prominently featured cars, “the most powerful symbol of male identity in America” (Pardini 108). These songs and their associated culture reflected the dominant perceptions of what masculinity was at the time (Lezotte 161-162). Although in “Fun, Fun, Fun” the Beach Boys sing about a girl and her T-Bird, “it was [still] fun contained within boundaries constructed by husbands, boyfriends, and fathers” (168). Through privileging the masculine voice, car songs largely excluded the feminine voice from the musical conversation. Women recording artists would challenge this exclusion in ensuing decades, wresting the connotations of the car song away from masculinity and asserting the musical trope into a place where women’s voices could be heard: “The car song has changed because the two industries that inspired it—automotive and rock ‘n’ roll—are no longer the exclusive provinces of men” (174). Joni Mitchell, for example, recorded the song “Born to Take the Highway” in 1967, initiating a number of car songs in her musical catalog (166). When Mitchell sings *I was born to take the highway, I was born to chase a dream* (166), she not only addresses the American dream of exploring open spaces, she helps to remythologize the car song in the American musical memory.

Public memory about American musical artists in the 20th century amplifies the contributions of artists who are men while often downplaying contributions of artists who are women. The prior example illustrates this issue with gender representation in popular music. Pop music scholars have argued that “Women have been largely excluded from popular music-making and relegated to the role of fan” (Bayton 177) and “women have often been made quite invisible” in popular music (Steward and Garratt 12). The frustrated words of British singer Billie Davis offer a poignant articulation of the same argument:

Audiences don’t expect girls to be musical...There’s the same problem of communication with musicians. They think: “She’s a girl, she doesn’t know what she’s talking about.” It’s very hard to get a band to do what *you* want to do, all the time they want to do their own thing. (qtd. in Frith *The Sociology of Rock* 174)

To be sure, the influence of women in popular music in the first half of the 20th century is stronger than often acknowledged, as women singers were ubiquitous in Tin Pan Alley and jazz recordings in from the twenties to the forties, then jazz, country, and pop in the fifties and the sixties (Kosut 241). Many women emerged as superstars in late 20th and early 21st century American music as well. But the underrepresentation continues: a recent analysis of 600 popular songs from 2012-2017 revealed that women comprised only 22.4% of the artists, 12.3% of the songwriters, and 2% of the producers of those songs (Smith et. al).

Like gender, socioeconomic class is another important aspect of music to consider. Popular music is powerful in the American myth because songs and genres may articulate shared values. As mentioned earlier, for example, the values of working-class culture were mined frequently by artists like Springsteen for inspiration (Lipsitz *Time Passages* 131). In other words, the working-class depicted in popular music lives on in the collective memory of America, where the people use the narratives contained within popular music to “nurture and sustain” them (132).

Socioeconomic status is associated with other styles of pop music as well. The West Coast style permeating American pop music in the sixties, seventies, and eighties could be associated with a “middle-class ideology of riskless hedonism,” as well as “hippie ideology” (Middleton 32). In other words, the activities described in the lyrics of these songs could only be accomplished by people of sufficient socioeconomic status to afford that lifestyle. According to pop music composer Jimmy Webb, this myth was connected with the music of the Beach Boys: “I don’t think that the California Myth, the dream that a few of us touched, would have happened without Brian [Wilson, the architect behind the Beach Boys’ sound], and I don’t think Brian would have happened without the dream. They’re inseparable” (Leaf 6). This music engendered a feeling of liberation, that of “hanging ten” on surfboards and having “fun, fun, fun.” The California Myth that prevailed because of the Beach Boys also coincided with the West Coast music scene. In this atmosphere, folk protest music was being created by artists like Bob Dylan, Woody Guthrie, and Joan Baez. Soon after, with West Coast rock helping to spawn the counterculture, culture and society were merged into a package combining political commentary with the pleasures of entertaining music (Chambers 88).

POPULAR MUSIC AND RACE

Despite the aforementioned concerns by some theorists that popular music only echoes hegemonic master narratives, popular music can also combat those narratives by (c)overtly commenting on the social conditions of the times. The resistive power of pop music can be observed through how popular music has reflected the racial identity of its performers and audiences.

Music by African American artists has been essential in creating the sound of contemporary popular music—even while it was being scorned or dismissed by white audiences at the time. A century ago, African Americans were the subjects of white ridicule in music and theatrical productions, despite the sentiment that their music was fundamental to the American myth. In fact, famed composer Antonin Dvořák wrote the following in 1893: “... [the] future music of this country must be founded upon what are called the Negro melodies” (qtd. in Baldwin 160). Indeed, the “Negro melodies” were crucial to the development of pop music in the United States in the early to mid-20th century, even though these melodies were experienced by white audiences through racist “coon songs” or comically acted in the degrading form of “blackface” minstrelsy (Suisman 1296).

As the century progressed, many songs by African Americans dealt with themes of transience and being uprooted. This narrative is exemplified in the songs of enigmatic Blues icon Robert Johnson (Scheurer 203). There is perhaps no more mysterious character in recent American musical history than Johnson; his mythic status has grown to the point that he has become a metaphor for talent, terror, and fear (Marcus 5). Although he only recorded 29 songs in his lifetime, his uncanny talent and mysterious death created a much celebrated and still present American myth of going to the crossroads and selling one’s soul to the devil (Pearson and McCulloch 44). This ominous myth regarding Johnson selling his soul, from the “deep South” of Mississippi, reflects the early 20th century white perception of African Americans as unnaturally mysterious, engaging in incantations and questionable evil practices (Marcus 23). Undoubtedly, this perception was bolstered by some of Johnson’s lyrics, like those for “Me and the Devil Blues”: *Early this morning/When you knocked upon my door/I said, Hello, Satan/I believe it’s time, to go* (Marcus 24). The American fascination with myths like Johnson’s is exploited today via its appropriation as a commodity to sell to “White blues enthusiasts” (King 236, 242). These race-related myths mirror the history of these musical forms as well, within which the black artist’s musical styles are appropriated by the white artist, thus leaving the black artist excluded from the marketplace (Neal 17). As evidence of this white appropriation, artists like Eric Clapton and Mick Jagger based their songwriting heavily on Johnson’s style, eventually becoming massively popular (Marcus 39).

Elvis Presley—himself an American myth—is also a prime example of popularizing black music to a broader (mostly white) audience in the form of rockabilly (Marcus 164-165).

White appropriation of black musical style continues into the 21st century. In the early 2000s, music producers began merging Rock (associated with white listeners) with its competitor, Rap (associated with black listeners). The popularity of artists like Kid Rock, Limp Bizkit, and Linkin Park illustrates this assertion. Middleton and Beebe argue that this generic convergence was a response to the decline of Rock ‘n’ Roll, largely signifying the associated decline of white, middle class suburbanite privilege (160). This hybridized genre is part of a larger trend of a “neo-eclecticism” in popular music, or the compiling of disparate genres of music together. As this trend for eclecticism becomes realized, so does the potential for white suburbanites to become re-empowered (169). As these examples demonstrate, the intersection of race and popular music offer clear evidence of the claim that pop music is a site of hegemonic struggle.

Because of said conditions, however, some songs need to be covertly socially conscious; these “hidden histories” become the basis of Lipsitz’s book *Footsteps in the Dark*. He explains that the lyrics to the Isley Brothers’ 1977 song “Footsteps in the Dark,” for example, were coded in a way to be “sufficiently personal to secure airplay on mainstream radio, yet adequately figurative, poetic, evocative, and allusive to enable listeners to read shared social concerns and experiences into them” (Lipsitz, *Footsteps in the Dark* x). Hence, the artists opt to employ a tone of uncertainty in the lyrics, making the overall message ambiguous enough that what exactly the song is advocating seems unclear: *Who feels really sure?/Can that feeling guarantee your happiness shall endure?/And do we really care?* This song, fusing “private personal concerns with public and political issues” in the late seventies, illustrates the resistive potential of popular music through its use of subtlety (Lipsitz ix). One of the song’s concluding lyrics seems particularly representative: *Let’s look at what’s been happening and try to be more aware* (Lipsitz ix).

To be sure, other African American artists historically addressed political issues in more overt ways. Marvin Gaye, for example, recorded the much-lauded album *What’s Going On* in 1971 to explore and address the issues of the day. The objective of the title track to promote love and understanding is as clear as its lyrics: *Mother, mother/There’s too many of you crying/Brother, brother, brother/There’s far too many of you dying/You know we’ve got to find a way/To bring some loving here today*. Later, Gaye sings *We don’t need to escalate/You see, war is not the answer/For only love can conquer hate*. He also makes the poignant appeal for shared understanding: *Talk to me/So you can see/What’s going on*. Gaye’s lyrics not only display his conscientious attempts at social critique, but also have elevated Gaye’s album to masterpiece status (Woodstra, Bush, and Erlewine 119).

Relating to that struggle, popular music can be a means of social commentary on issues of race, particularly in genres like Hip Hop, Rap, and R&B. These “explicit or implicit descriptions or assessments of the social, economic, and political conditions” of marginalized groups can function to politically mobilize groups (Stewart 196). Pough contends that Hip Hop, for example, has offered black women the opportunity to create a space to have their voices heard; by employing the same rhetorical strategies used by male Hip Hop artists, artists like Missy Elliott and Lil’ Kim use their music as a means of empowerment (8-9). The nineties Hip Hop group the Fugees (and the subsequent solo careers of Lauryn Hill and Wyclef Jean) also functions particularly well in this capacity for creating a space for voices from the margins to be heard (Lipsitz, *Footsteps in the Dark* 31, 33).

The political nature of Hip Hop is clearly embedded in the lyrics of some of the genre’s representative songs. Stewart’s essay “The Message in the Music” deconstructs various lyrics in order to articulate the political concerns of those who created these songs. He gives much credence to the lyrics in these genres of music and offers an encouraging insight: While some Hip Hop and R&B artists are entirely focused on pursuing profit, others create music to dispense political commentary, mirroring their struggle to raise public awareness (221).

To give a contemporary example, in 2015 and 2016 rap artist Kendrick Lamar has performed several times on television where he and the others on stage are either rapping from prison cells or standing on the top of vandalized police cars (Sisario, *New York Times*). For the 2016 Grammys award ceremony, Lamar performed “The Blacker the Berry” on television in front of a prison backdrop, rapping incendiary lyrics like *You hate me don’t you?/You hate my people, your plan is to terminate my culture*. In this way, Rap provides him an opportunity to express the inequities of racism and police brutality. As Pough explains, “Rap music can be viewed as a dialogue—between rappers and a racist society, between male rappers and female rappers, and between rappers and the consumer” (168).

Other people of color have been marginalized in 20th century American popular music as well, including Asian Americans (Moon, *Yellowface*). Cultural productions like theater and pop music misrepresented Asian Americans by portraying their cultures and unique musical forms only through the Western perspective. This aesthetic “othering” of Chinese Americans functioned to emphasize their difference from the white Westerners, thus frustrating efforts to portray them as equals (85). Similar sentiments were echoed in American pop music regarding Japanese Americans, only at times more sinister. For example, blatantly anti-Japanese sentiment was expressed in American music (with song titles like “You’re a Sap, Mister Jap”), illustrating the tensions between Euro-Americans and Japanese Americans in the years before and during World War II (Moon 335). Discrimination was leveled also against Mexican Americans in music as well, though they did experience some crossover hits of Mexican folk music into the white community like Ritchie Valens’s all Spanish “La Bamba” (Lipsitz, *Time Passages* 143).

Race continues to be an essential part of American popular music. Despite instigating some of these apparent strides in the struggle for racial equality, problems certainly still exist. Yet, American popular music is so widespread that it appears to be one of the most powerful contemporary means of articulating issues about race to its listeners.

READING AND TEACHING POPULAR MUSIC SCHOLARSHIP

This essay has been a synthesis of some of the most relevant issues in pop music scholarship, particularly the relationship of popular music to American culture and power in the 20th century. Through reviewing the literature, this essay has explored the role popular music has played in recent American history, including its myths, collective memory, and racial politics. This essay revealed that pop music scholarship is rooted in paradox. Hence, it focused on three antithetical themes: Popular music as either cultural hegemony or resistance to that cultural hegemony; Popular music as fundamental to the American myth, or the American myth as fundamental to popular music; and Popular music as inextricable from American race, or race as inextricable from American music.

As evidenced by these themes, contradictions abound throughout historical and cultural assessments of popular music in America. One of the objectives of the essay was to demonstrate the paradoxical nature of popular culture scholarship once power enters into the analysis. To demonstrate, one perspective posits that pop music may be interpreted as culturally hegemonic, a form of entertainment that ultimately oppresses its audience by diverting them from social struggles. Another body of scholarship argues that popular music may be interpreted as resistant, an emancipatory tool that uses political commentary to alert listeners to social injustices. Considering each camp, a teacher may draw the contradictory conclusion that American popular music played an active role in inciting social change over the past seven decades—or that it merely reflected prior social changes. Or, a teacher might (correctly) conclude that, historically, popular music has been simultaneously hegemonic and resistive.

It is important for scholars and teachers to address these contradictions in their research and pedagogy.

Pop music, after all, is fraught with contradiction; as music scholar Richard Middleton argues, pop music exists in the “space between ‘imposed’ and ‘authentic,’ ‘elite’ and ‘common,’ predominate and subordinate, then and now, theirs and ours, and so on” (Middleton 7). Scholarship on the messy intersection between pop music and American culture is no exception.

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