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Introduction: Waiting for *Wicked*

MICHAEL J. BLOUIN

American stands at the brink.

On November 21st, 2025, director Jon Chu's *Wicked: For Good*—the highly anticipated sequel—will be released and audiences will finally experience resolution to the stirring conclusion of the previous installment. I brought my children to the first film, and they fell in love with the saga of Elphaba (Cynthia Erivo), the "wicked" witch, who chooses to combat an authoritarian regime, represented by the Wizard of Oz (Jeff Goldblum). My daughters heatedly debated the role of Glinda the Good (Ariana Grande): would she support her marginalized roommate, or would she serve as a pawn for the regime and help to capture her rebellious friend/enemy? Without a doubt, Chu's *Wicked* (2024) left a mark on my children and they clamored for answers to the pressing questions raised by the film. Of course, they were not alone: the film went on to gross nearly 750 million dollars internationally (Box Office Mojo).

Yet there is a lingering unease among fans of the musical adaptation of the novel because most critics pan the second act of that version. A consensus appears to have formed that the middling second act does not live up to the soaring heights of the first act. The first act tracks the stirring emancipation of Elphaba from her oppression within a system that means to exploit her. She refuses to be trodden upon any longer and, in the first act's closing number "Defying Gravity," she launches into the stratosphere. Cut to credits. An undeniably powerful climax. It speaks to an American proclivity for narratives of individual triumph over government oversight, as Elphaba quite literally defies the laws of the land as well as nature. Such swelling rhetoric stems from a long tradition of American individualism.

The second act, in comparison, raises difficult questions about the nature of power itself. In her oppositional role, Elphaba becomes the very thing she is trying to defeat: a power-hungry manipulator who weaponizes fear. She starts to resemble the Wizard, her political and (spoiler alert) biological father. Can one govern without such Machiavellian posturing? Moreover, the second act reveals that Glinda, who (it must be remembered) has been narrating the entirety of the musical, witnesses Elphaba stage her own death. The circularity of the open and the close underscores the enduring power of propaganda because Glinda has been crafting the entire narrative that the audience has just experienced. Her own rise to power has involved expertly toying with the audience's fears as well as their desire for "good" to win out over "evil." The audience is forced into an uncomfortable alignment with the gullible residents of Oz as everyone hears Glinda's version of things, which apparently includes Elphaba's "resurrection." Is there anything outside of propaganda? What is the truth? Although the first act undeniably appeals to the primal emotions of an American mythos, the second act probes into more difficult questions about what comes *after* the conventional triumph of the individual. Elphaba may light out for the proverbial territories at the close of the musical, but she has left us behind, stuck in our seats, enchanted by the fantasies being spun for us by a pink proselytizer.

Knowing how the musical ends, I wonder, alongside millions of other eager audience members, how *Wicked: For Good* will be received. Given my own interests in American politics

and its intersection with popular culture, I don't care very much about the diminished quality of the songs from Act Two, or the arguably deficient character development; rather, I'm curious how the film (and its audience) will consider these timely matters. At its best, the second act forces its audience to complicate relatively facile understandings of how governments endure as well as the spectator's complicity in maintaining those fictions. If this aspect of the musical "bores" audiences because it lacks the emotional punch of songs like "Defying Gravity," it may be time to re-evaluate that response. Are American audiences generally ready to confront these complex issues and pivot from an era of "don't tread on me" personal politics to an era of self-reflection on the nature of power and politics? Or does the audience prefer a lively but ultimately limited narrative of unrestrained individualism? Indeed, even as Elphaba declares herself to be "unlimited" at the close of Act One, the second act reveals the inherent limitations of her rise to power. The audience must choose whether to continue to believe in narratives of individual escape, or to pose deeper, richer questions about who should rule us.

In a broader sense, the brink between acts recalls the power of popular culture not to impose coherent ideals, be they hegemonic or resistant to the dominant ideology of the day, but to reveal the cracks within collective fantasies. One calls to mind Virginia Woolf's final novel, *Between the Acts* (published posthumously in 1941), which raises similar concerns. As Woolf's novel suggests, it is only the suspension between acts that opens an important space for interrogating one's own limits—to stop feeling "unlimited" (an ideological command in its own right) and start exploring the boundaries of one's limited perspective. It is only at the brink that one can imagine alternatives that exist outside of the status quo. As fans of the musical mill around, waiting on the curtain to rise again, we should ask each other what we want from this fable, really. Before the lights dim, we should reflect together on the political dramas that hold us enthralled and ask what we truly want from the next act. We might also look back upon the emotional highs that punctuated the first act and inquire into the limits of those (impossibly) limitless feelings. Sometimes the real power of popular culture is not what it says, then, but what it does not say.

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Dissolving the Floor: Conversations on Dance and Music

DARRYL K. CLARK and R. CHRISTIAN PHILLIPS

Introduction

As you sit there listening to that song's opening measures, you start to feel something that makes your toes start to tap, your left hip start to move, you arms start to keep the beat. Then you see your favorite aunt, who definitely has no rhythm, out in the middle of the room with other people moving around in joyful abandonment. And you realize that if she is willing to shake her groove thang in public, even when it should not be shaken, you can definitely do better, and you get up to join her. Congratulations! You have succumbed to the allure of dancing and, for however long you want, you have become a dancer.

Some of us only become a dancer when the music hits and we are at an event or space where dancing is encouraged. Some of us know that dance can be a great workout and willingly shell out money to take a dance class or any one of the exercise programs based in dance (like Jazzercise and Tae Bo), especially because we all know that dancing is a lot more enjoyable than lifting weights. Others of us hear the calling and seek out the training to become intimately connected to every part of our body, becoming professionals that soar through the air, metaphorically and literally, taking dance to new heights and pushing the boundaries of what the human body can both achieve and endure. But however you choose to dance, we all understand that our bodies were made to move and the addition of music to that movement to create a dance, whether it is as personal as you and as universal as humanity, is a foundational part of what makes us innately human.

Dance and Popular Culture

In any robust conversation about dance and music, the connection of dance with identity stands large, whether it is self-identity or identifying with one's community and culture. This relationship with dance connects to the music that is

provided for a broad variety of social, sacred, and performative activities. Dance and music occupy all levels of society, from the highbrow art form of ballet to the cheesiest clip of the latest Tik Tok dance challenge. As any person grows into their body, one significant way they learn who they are is through how they can and will move, especially when that movement is made to music. And in learning this, they come to find their own identities, as is explored in the included articles.

This special issue considers the varied, and, at times, volatile relationship between dance, music, and society which has often become foundational in defining a culture, a subculture, or a social grouping. Particularly for Western Culture in the United States, music welcomes both participants and newcomers into so many spaces, from the church to the theatre to the club and even to the streets. Coupled together with dance, these pathways have been used to celebrate an event or milestone, delineate a social hierarchy, provide social commentary, decolonize a mindset, demand change of any kind, or resist oppression; the infinite ability of music and dance to move people and spur action depends only on the time, the place, and the bodies engaged in making the sounds and doing the moving.

The articles in this issue seek to explore the variety of relationships music and dance have built within popular culture in the United States. By considering these relationships, we can gain a clearer and more complete understanding of the individual and the various groups represented by that individual, highlighting the impact identity and expression of identity has had upon popular music, whether it is mainstream or alternative, and the physicalizing of identity to the sound of music. Moving to a beat is one of the first actions we engage in as a child and remains a significant part of social and personal engagement throughout our lifetime. Even for those who cannot do either with any appreciable skill, music and dance have the power to help demarcate their personal identity and provide connections to the groups and cultural markers which add meaning to their lives.

Throughout the years, dance has often been studied, but that study tends to see it as a separate entity, often even separated from the music that is so vital to its performance. Thus, these articles start a larger conversation about the importance of dance and music when considered through their interconnections. These art forms become much greater than the sum of their parts when explored through those connections and in how they build both upon and through each other. Furthermore, these articles explore how integrated and integral dance is within US culture, so ubiquitous that it is often overlooked, seen as nothing more than just

the supporting cast. Whether it is history, politics, economics, entertainment, or any other important cultural element being studied, dance and music have, at some point, made an impact, spurred a change, or been instrumental in its continuation. Without dance and music, any study of culture, popular or otherwise, leaves out an integral part.

The Articles

R. Christian Phillips takes on a historical jaunt across the last half of the 20th Century to understand the significant changes that took place during that time to what he calls the American Social Dance Floor (ASDF). This concept encompasses everywhere we dance socially. This may be at the bar or a pub where they have left some space free and brought in a DJ or a band. And it is what we do after that conference or state dinner. It is the bane of every middle schooler's existence, culminating in those extremely important (at that time) high school dances that begin with that first Homecoming Dance and end in that imperative send-off, the Senior Prom. No American wedding would be complete without a reception that featured food and dancing, and many a party has rolled up the carpets, literally and (more often) metaphorically, for the participants to dance.

To begin his exploration of the ASDF, Phillips begins by musing upon the basic question: "What is Dance?" His answer provides a thoughtful exploration of more than just the basic definition that tells us it is body movements done to music; he seeks to understand why we want to move and why we appear to prefer doing it in groups, from just two people to large mobs. He reminds us that it is as individual and unique as you are and as universal and constant as all of time and humanity.

With social dancing being so ingrained into how we, as Americans, socialize together in groups, whether small or large, we often forget how in tune our dancing can be with what is going on in the world. He takes us on a deeper dive into how the ASDF changed from the end of WWII to the end of the century. Along the way, he reminds us of what was going on in the world and how changes in society and our lives as Americans came to be reflected in how we dance.

Society tends to dictate the innumerable norms of our lives, and the dance floor, of course, falls within this scope. But, as we learn, many individuals have

put aside society's expectations and embraced the freedom that the dance floor can and does represent, using that space to explore something new, something different, something that just cannot be explained with words. Thus, Americans have broken through some of the social strictures placed upon the ASDF to allow it to become a place where you, as an individual, have the freedom to do what you want, how you want, and when you want to whatever music you either hear with everybody else or hear in your head. The ASDF of the 21st Century is definitely a different place than it was for grandparents and great-grandparents, and "Why the American Social Dance Floor Moved from 'The Tennessee Waltz' to 'Dancing On My Own'" will help you understand why these changes have occurred.

Darryl K. Clark provides us with a deep dive into the classic Motown chart-topper "I Hear A Symphony" by the incomparable singing trio The Supremes with his "Dancing A Symphony." Their sixth No. 1 hit, this song represented a noticeable change from their earlier hits and begged the question: how do you dance to it? By exploring the music itself and then how it fits into the overall repertoire of The Supremes, we gain an understand of how important this specific work was to the changing sound of Motown and to the changes in dancing that young Americans were embracing.

Diving into both "I Hear A Symphony" and the album *I Hear A Symphony* provides a way to explore the rich and complex interconnections between the music, the artists, their performance, and the myriad of ways that the audience can and will use their own understanding of these elements to find their individual style and interpretations on the dance floor. How might pretending to be Diana Ross help someone to feel more comfortable in their own skin? How might following the more subtle and restrained choreography done by Florence Ballard and Mary Wilson help a young girl gain more poise and confidence in her own self and her femininity?

As Clark points out, the television performance of "I Hear A Symphony" helped single Diana Ross out from the trio and begin propelling her to superstardom. The choreography and staging established this separation while also providing movements that were elegant and understated, more mature and feminine yet easy to follow. And through this creation, courtesy of choreographer Cholly Atkins, these movements provided a way for young Americans, all young Americans, to explore nuances of themselves on the dance floor. This study highlights the importance slower movements have in the world of dance and

showcases how important these movements can be for those learning who they are and how they want to engage with society at large.

Finally, Tristan Koepke's article "Emotional Tofu: Speculative Masculinities in Post Malone's Dancing" brings us into the 21st Century by exploring how modern masculinity is being reshaped through the "sad boy" aesthetic dancing being done by Post Malone during his live concerts. Tough to compress into any singular musical genre or style, Malone represents a modern take on the "sad boy" cultural archetype, displaying vulnerability, awkwardness, privilege, and emotional fragility as a viable option in presenting masculinity. His music permeates popular culture across styles and his lucrative advertising deals have ensured him a place across all forms of media.

Koepke explores how clips of the little dance breaks Post Malone does on stage at the beginning of various songs have gone viral, providing a new archive of movements to analyze and explore. In this article, Koepke takes us on his own journey mapping these movements and slowing them down to find an understanding of how we can queer Post Malone's dancing to explore alternate ways of embodying masculinity in the 21st Century. Using his own body and those of his collaborators, the choreography for the on-going project *Emotional Tofu* becomes a place of speculative research, highlighting the importance dance plays in helping us come to grips with both our internal and external worlds.

In conclusion, the three articles written for this special edition of the Popular Culture Studies Journal are a blend of the personal and the theoretical. They serve as an introduction to the intersections of movement and music and the imprint that they leave on a person as well as the genre of expression. They spark conversations that reach across the boundaries of lived, felt experience and lofty thought processes and open up the possibility for recognition of dance as form of expression as well as recreation.

Dancing A Symphony

DARRYL K. CLARK

Part One: Overture

In late 1965, the Billboard Top 100 chart's number one recording was “I Hear A Symphony” by Motown singing trio The Supremes. The single held this position for two weeks, giving the esteemed group their sixth number one hit. Success on this level placed the trio in a prime position at the Motown label and it also made them the embodiment of the label's slogan, “The sound of Young America”. “I Hear A Symphony” was also emblematic of a new direction in rhythm and blues music. Berry Gordy, Motown's chief executive, was on a focused mission to put his musical product into the ears of every American, regardless of age or race. This desire for nationwide success also epitomized the pursuit of the American dream of personal wealth through personal effort. The music his staff of writer/producers created became smoother and its mien became quasi-Romantic in tone, harmony and melodic line. “I Hear A Symphony” was very much in this concept; it, and the studio album of the same title, was a world away from its five predecessors. The move from the five hits that preceded it created a kinetic riddle: how did young America dance to it? The purpose of this article is to begin to solve this riddle by analyzing the song as a piece of music and as part of the repertoire of the Supremes. In this analysis, both the recorded performance and the 'live' performance of the group will be considered along with the contributions from such figures as songwriter/producers Eddie and Brian Holland and Lamont Dozier, arranger Paul Riser and choreographer Cholly Atkins. After each has been weighed, it will begin to bring clarity to this situation of a song (and album) that is very listenable, highly enjoyable but does not fit easily alongside other music and performers of the time.

Part Two: The Bass

Instead of starting the journey into this song with an analysis of its choreography, it is best to start with the music itself. The creation of the music was the task of the songwriting trio of Eddie and Brian Holland and Lamont Dozier. Not only did these three men create ten of the twelve number one song the Supremes performed (one

of the ten, “The Happening,” was co-written by famed film and television composer arranger Henry DeVol), but they were also the chief arrangers of much of their output. Brothers Brian and Eddie Holland and their collaborator Lamont Dozier were assigned to create material for the trio after the label’s star producer-performer Smokey Robinson failed with a few well-crafted, Latin-tinged songs that failed to chart. Of these songs, two of them “Your Heart Belongs to Me” and “I’m Giving You Your Freedom” featured an innovative touch: Diana Ross singing in the lower register of her range. Holland Dozier and Holland appeared to take note of this as they tried out a series of tunes on the Supremes. Finally, the producing team created “Where Did Our Love Go” and for Supremes member Mary Wilson, it could not have come at a better time. In a 2009 interview for the television anthology series *Unsung*, she relates:

> “We were very excited because we knew that they were a top-notch writing team. We were on the phone, we were like ‘Hey! No more ‘No-hit Supremes’!”

In voice recordings made for a proposed autobiography, Florence Ballard says:

> “Finally, they wrote ‘Where Did Our Love Go?’ Holland-Dozier-Holland. We said, ‘Hmmmm […] we don’t like this record!’ It didn’t sound like nothing to us. We wanted something like ‘Please Mr. Postman.’”

Wilson’s remembrances continue the disdain of the song by saying that the producer-writers sold the song hard with enthusiastic “No, no, no, no! Trust us. We – we got the bomb!” Wilson did not believe them; neither did Ross. She complained personally to Berry Gordy, who paid a visit to the recording studio, gave it a listen and gave Holland, Dozier and Holland as enthusiastic go-ahead. Working on the song would restrict Ross to singing in the lower third of her range. The producing team would further restrict her from riffing the melody. And, in a portent of the worst to come for Ballard, they would pare down the full-bodied, gospel-tinged thirds in Ballard and Wilson’s background vocals to whispery unison lines that strategically placed Mary closer to the microphone. “Where Did Our Love Go” was released as a single in June 1964. By mid-August, it was at the top of the Billboard Top 100, and Florence Ballard, Diana Ross and Mary Wilson found themselves in the select group of artists that would become closely identified with ‘the sound of Young America” (Betrock 166-68).

“Where Did Our Love Go?” was the first of five consecutive number- one hits for the Supremes. For each song that made it to number one, Holland-Dozier-Holland created a 'hook' that served as more than an introduction; it was an

assemblage of the instrumentalists and a call to the dance floor. Let's consider each number one hit up to “I Hear A Symphony” to appreciate this:

SONG	**HOOK**
“Where Did Our Love Go?”	Handclaps augmented with stomps (2 measures, 4/4 meter)
“Come See About Me”	Drumbeats (2 measures, 4/4 meter; each drumbeat divided into eighth notes; joined by electric guitar in the second measure, 3rd beat
“Baby Love”	5 measures, 4/4 meter, initiated by a pick-up into 1st measure with vibraphone; the vibraphone is supported by cymbals played with sticks; the rhythm section in replaced with two measures of handclaps and Ross' 'Oooo' on a succession of a-e-g-e)
“Stop! In The Name of Love”	1 measure, 4/4 meter, of chromatic 'smear' on the electric organ
“Back In My Arms Again”	1 half-measure, 4/4 meter, bass and saxophone in to 8 measures 4/4 meter of chorus of song, melody played on vibraphone, ended with a 3-count 'ooh' on C5 from Florence Ballard and Mary Wilson

In looking at this this chart, the growing sophistication in the use of instrumental forces is easily noted and the unique combination of theory and creativity is also evident. As the group's popularity grew, the sound became more intricate and layered yet maintained a highly effective simplicity because of the number of musicians in the studio and the eight-track setup Holland-Dozier-Holland used to record the songs.

The album *I Hear A Symphony* brought a layer of complexity to the group's catalog through the efforts of arranger Paul Riser but the framework on which the many embellishments would hang would still be obvious in the title track; in fact, when listening to the album from start to finish, one gains a sense of an overlying theme. The Supremes were not new to this nor, according to Mary Wilson, did they shy away from this type of performance experience. Wilson recounted many instances of the trio’s leaning toward music that was outside the realm of Rhythm

and Blues. She speaks about how the nascent Supremes (at one time, the trio was a quartet called the Primettes) would try out harmonies on pop standards like "Moonlight In Vermont." She also speaks with pride of her friend Florence Ballard offering an astounding performance of Franz Schubert's "Ave Maria" to their classmates in high school.

The group must have been delighted to try other sounds besides Rhythm and Blues. Although they were not referred to as such, the Supremes recorded three albums that were progenitors of 'concept albums'; *The Supremes Sing Country Western and Pop*, *A Bit of Liverpool*, and *We Remember Sam Cooke*. These albums can be looked at as efforts to broaden the audience base of the group (Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder and the Temptations also experimented with other genres and non-Motown songwriters) and the album *I Hear A Symphony* carried this idea to another level. Save the title track, the first side of the album was programmed with a variety of ballads that represented the highest caliber of songwriting from Lennon and McCartney ("Yesterday," a Motown favorite for covering) to Vincent Youmans ("Without A Song"), Rodgers and Hart ("With A Song In My Heart") and Wright and Forrest ("Stranger in Paradise"). It was one of the first albums released by Motown that would incorporate a fully fleshed out orchestral sound with the earthy rhythmic base provided by Motown's famed house musicians, the Funk Brothers. It is a result that is equal to the output of Motown label-mate Kim Weston and British songstress Dusty Springfield. And it relied heavily upon the arranging genius of Paul Riser.

Paul Riser was the key person responsible for the orchestral gloss that permeates every track on *I Hear A Symphony*. His arrangements cover a wide aural terrain from the lush Tchaikovsky-informed splendor of "Stranger in Paradise" to a gentle harpsichord introduction for "Yesterday" to a spooky, sparse atmospheric mien for "My World Is Empty Without You" that predates the minimalist pieces of later 20th Century composers like Michael Nyman. Riser did not receive more training than he was to get in high school years. But, according to Professor Suzanne E. Smith in the documentary *Hitsville: The Making of Motown*, the music training for high school students in Detroit was the finest anyone could receive. This was augmented by regular trips to the Ford Auditorium to hear performances by the Detroit Symphony Orchestra.

Riser took the structural approach devised by Holland-Dozier-Holland to the next level with the track's opening; the Funk Brothers, Motown's house rhythm comprised of some of Detroit's finest jazz musicians, open up the song with four measures of 4/4 with a solid bass line for the ground, a suggestion of the bridge of the song played on the vibraphone and punctuation of the first and third beat from a drumstick rap on the cymbals. The cymbals are replaced with Ross' vocals on the

first stanza:

> You've given me a true love,
> and every day I thank you, love
> For a feeling that's so new –
> so inviting, so exciting [...]

It is here that the confusion I referred to at the start begins. The impulse to hit the dance floor is arrested by this first stanza. This is a love song set to a dance beat and tempo. As the voice that would become the leading voice of the group, Ross' talent has been alternately praised and denigrated, celebrated for its uniqueness while being castigated for its overdone articulations. Her voice served the melodrama of unrequited teenage love that typified the group's subsequent hits and b-sides as well as many other female groups of the time. But there is no drama present in "Symphony." The song showcases Ross' voice is at its youthful best, clear and bell-like with a touch of smokiness. Her enunciation is mostly unaffected, though there is an attempt at a broad Mid-Atlantic dialect-inflected 'a' in the word 'that's'.

Equally striking, and probably unintentional, is a noticed resemblance to the cadence of notes on the words 'thank you love'. This cadence, a descending fourth from g4 to d4, will also be at the end of the first line of the chorus with the word 'symphony'. The cadence is redolent of a descending motif in the opening measures of the second movement of John Ireland's *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra*. The tonic of the movement is B major, a half step lower than that of "Symphony," which is in C major.[1] There is a strong resemblance in the hushed muted strings that play Ireland's melody and Ross' voice singing Holland's melody line. The connection between Holland-Dozier-Holland's composition and a concerto by a lesser-known British composer, whether intended or not, puts the song in a place where many dance songs do not exist, and it heightens the confusion.

The song begins to encourage physicality through dance steps when the drums, the layered hand claps and the piquant electric guitar accenting the second and fourth beats of each measure and trademark, ostinato-like background vocals are added. Ballard and Wilson will support the refrains with:

> "Baby, baby, I hear a symphony
> Oooh, baby baby, when you're close to me,
> close to me"

Ross' responses are the body of the refrain, the expression of a new love that is all-

[1]B major is also referred to as a remote key, due to its distance from C Major but it uses all the black notes in its progression.

encompassing; a total assault on the senses of hearing and touch, an urgent plea for time to stand still in recognition of this love. Each pronouncement separates the 'Baby, baby' of the backing vocals and pulls them forward, making this casual endearment a romantic, intimate one. The sophistication of the arrangement of voices is as much like chamber music as it is the 'call and response' of gospel music and field hollers. It evokes both joy and awe in a listener and returns a listener to this state of confusion of what action to take to show enjoyment.

Part Three: The Hook

With an understanding of the music in place, we can look at the presentation of the group, which includes choreography. Gordy spent a great deal of effort and money on the staff that created the look of each act under contract to Motown. The model for his training ground was closely modeled after the assembly line at the Ford Motor Company, with each act going from room to room in the Hitsville USA complex on Grand Avenue. The Supremes, nicknamed 'the girls' by Gordy, were trained in etiquette by former model Maxine Powell. Slangy behavior such as chewing gum, slouching in chairs during interviews and standing with protruding buttocks was not allowed. Powell also scrutinized every label-mates performance. She was particularly harsh on Ross' over-expressive facial maneuverings with her too wide smile and eyes way too open.

This scrutiny also found its way into staging all the acts at Motown. Choreography for the performances was put together by Cholly Atkins. Atkins was a former vaudeville headliner and featured dancer in Broadway extravaganzas like *The Hot Mikado* and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes.* Serving as chief choreographer at Motown, Atkins created a signature movement style for each act at the label. Some acts, like the Temptations, the Marvelettes and Gladys Knight and the Pips took to Atkins' unique and stylish blend of tap dance and dance club moves; others like the Four Tops and Marvin Gaye were a constant (though entertaining) concern to Atkins. The Supremes stood somewhere in the middle. Group members Diana Ross and Mary Wilson picked up and retained movement phrases while Florence Ballard struggled to keep pace with the other two (Ribowsky 199). Ballard's resistance to performing athletic moves and Wilson and Ross' desire not to boogie as hard as their female counterparts at Motown called for something different. The result created for the trio was a dance language composed of evocative gestures that were synchronized with the lyrics, hand claps on the second and fourth beat of each measure in the song and a reliance on the "Twist," the most easily identifiable step of the decade. These choices were easily made and easily performed by singers

when performed live in concert or on a televised dance and music show when they were expected to lip sync to the pre-recorded track. This palette of movements could be added to with a jazzy flick ball-change of the feet, or a tambourine or a saucy pat of the hip with a sidestep. And, in the case of their fourth number one hit, "Stop! In the Name of Love," the hand gesture was all the group needed to become part of the popular culture iconography of the 1960s. In an interview with Gerri Hirsey, Wilson talks about the amount of nuance that went into refining this one gesture that was inspired on the fly when the Supremes were set to perform the song without a set of moves. She says: "STOP. Oh no, not like that. Bring the arm up close to the body; try not to bend your elbow way out. That's it, palm out. Not in front of your face, girl. They always have to be able to see your face" (Hirsey 179).

The mentioned hand gesture is fun and enjoyable for males and females of all ages. Atkins' inventions for "I Hear A Symphony" were more subtle and much more gendered. As first seen on *Hullaballoo*, the choreography exemplified how Motown's leading acts were being groomed to entertain *Young* America and not just *Black Young* America. As mentioned before, Atkins was more than well-equipped at creating steps for the acts that brought out both the best qualities of the song and the group. In fact, he was so well-equipped and creative, members of the girl groups would chide him, particularly Supremes member Mary Wilson. In his autobiography, Atkins remembers Wilson saying "Cholly, I don't understand how you can do that move better than me and I'm a girl. You've really got to stop. One of these days you're going to walk out, and that's all you'll be doing, those kinds of moves, and people are going to get the wrong idea about you!" (Atkins 130).

Indeed, the choreography for "I Hear A Symphony" was very special; it owed very little to the fad dances of the 1960s and everything to presenting the three young women at their most feminine. In most presentations of this sort, one step could be used throughout the entire song that each member could fall into, regardless of whether they were singing lead or backup. A strong example of this is the Shangri-Las performing a minor hit titled "Right Now and Not Later" (I single this song out because it was written and produced for the East Coast quartet by Motown songsmith Robert Bateman) The girls start the "Jerk" at the outset of the song of each different performance, many of which can now be regularly viewed on YouTube. The best clip for reference was taken from the 1966 music show *Shivaree*, hosted by Gene Weed. This is kinetic tautology in its purest and simplest form. The song suits the step, and the step suits the song. The choreography in the performance consisted of other moves like a simplified cha-cha step that was in keeping with the urbanized image of the group and the chorus of the song was made up of four finger points downward that matched up with the lyric 'right now' and two two-count slashes with the hands across the body on 'and not later, baby'.

These steps do not hinder breathing (should they not be lip-syncing like they were on *Shindig*) and they do not put a crack of any kind in the group's maquillage of dark, skintight pantsuits decked out with fluffy white blouses and tough white go-go boots. And it goes as far as this: if partyers heard the song at a dance gathering, they would automatically start in to the 'Jerk' and not stop until the song ended. To do otherwise would have been possibly viewed as a faux pas on the level of clumsily executing a court dance in the presence of a ruler like Catherine de Medici or Louis XIV.

Atkins' steps were not the same sort of kinetic continuo that the Shangri-Las utilized. That was the last resort that Atkins would take as a choreographer; his creativity was such that he never had to compromise. And luckily, as performers, Ballard, Ross and Wilson were so malleable that they did not have a preconceived idea on how they should move to any of their songs (not to mention, there was not a nascent choreographer among the three) so Atkins let his imagination fly. As televised on the popular music and dance variety show *Hullabaloo*, the entire work—Atkins, Holland-Dozier-Holland and The Supremes—gets an enthusiastic introduction from 1960s singing star Paul Anka. Anka relates how a selection of the number one hits mentioned in this article received a full performance on the stage of Lincoln Center's concert hall by the New York Philharmonic under the baton of Leonard Bernstein. This performance followed a night of classical programming Robert Schumann and Dmitri Shostakovich. The trio takes the stage to thunderous applause and wild girlish shrieks of excitement from the audience. It is now that the result of Atkins' handiwork is seen, staged inside a group of white performers, dressed in black formal wear and holding the instruments of a chamber ensemble – violins, harp, cello. We know that they are performers because their poses require a great deal of focus and discipline to hold for about three minutes. They are not playing the instruments so it is safe to assume that they may not be musicians. Ballard, Ross and Wilson enter the space to applause and assume the position that will highlight Ross at the expense of the other two, with Ross standing slightly away from and to the right of the group. Ross signals to the female designated as concertmistress and the song begins. The three, gowned in sleeveless white satin, stand. Then Ballard and Wilson bevel like Folies Bergere showgirls and Ross sings the verse. The camera will close in on her by the verse's end. Then the three begin their synchronized moves. On each 'Baby, baby' they pull their hands to their hips and 'twist' with the beat ever so subtly. With mention of the word 'symphony' a hand touches the temples and describes an arc. The choreographed phrase is complete when Ballard and Wilson sing 'close to me' and the pulls to the hips slow a bit to match the phrase. That is it. Ross' movements swing out a little more as she sings each verse, but Ballard and Wilson maintain their composure and

stick to the choreography; it is elegant and understated and appropriate for the song. But does it open itself to exploration on a dance floor by a group of teens and young adults? Or does it offer a way for another subgroup of male teens and young adults to explore nuances of the self they have yet to reveal to the world? Or does it offer additional instruction to girls and young women on how to be even more feminine and composed?

The answer to these three basic questions is: yes.

The "twist" is probably one of the three most identifiable dance steps of the 1960s if not the 20th century. It is a genteel, non-aerobic take on the "Twist" but it is suited to the song. The gestures of pulling do support dancing 'couples' style, if one was dancing with someone, they wanted to be close to them. The words of the song, Ballard and Wilson's proud, slightly aloof yet still tangible demeanor and Ross' elegant fervor in performance on nationwide television on a highly popular show gives hope and a voice to all the disenfranchised who were able to watch the performance. No subgroup could have been more separated from the rest of society than gay men of any color. Lastly, the success of the Supremes is the ultimate' rags to riches' story and, as they are performing as themselves and not acting roles, their success reminds young girls it is possible to be famous if you want it. And being ultra-feminine is one of many ways to get to the top.

Conclusion: The Descant

So, the riddle of how to dance to this "Symphony" is mostly solved. The song does lend itself to the popular steps of its time and its melody does reach into all young Americans of its time. On a personal level, a very young boy loved to run around the house and would run faster on each modulation. Sometimes he would have a bath towel tied around his neck. Or, sometimes a sheer nylon head scarf. A few years later, he would try to pirouette and throw his legs as high as the finest dancer in any modern or ballet company of note in the 1980s while the entire album played in the background. And at present, this man plays the song, singing each 'Baby, baby' and 'When you're close to me, close to me […]' and gets through the most mundane moments of the day – the errands, the chores, the class preps, the workouts, the commutes – smiling and dancing a symphony, a tender melody.

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Emotional Tofu: Speculative Masculinities in Post Malone's Dancing

TRISTAN KOEPKE

> "Jumbling all of the feelings into one is a neat trick—whatever someone might be hoping to find is in there somewhere. Post Malone is emotional tofu, a skill, not an accident."
> – Jon Caramanica

During the instrumental codas of his live performances, Post Malone begins to dance. The technical content of these movements is, by most metrics, minimal: a rounded thoracic spine, a loose inward collapse of the torso, thrown arms, and occasional hip thrusts. Across hundreds of fan-circulated clips, a distinctive movement vocabulary emerges: small loops of repetitive gestures, rhythmic walking in tight circles, subtle self-contact, and an oscillation between *mincing*—delicate, effeminate footwork—and *thrusting*—bold and punctuated forward movement of the pelvis—that both exaggerate and undercut masculine bravado.[1] But what matters is not the complexity of his steps—it is the particular quality of his dancing. There is a fragile confidence to the way Post Malone moves, eyes half-closed, as if performing privately in his bedroom mirror, only to realize belatedly that thousands are watching. His dancing is strange and oddly intimate, and it opens up a space of affective ambiguity.

Emotional Tofu, my ongoing choreographic research project, begins by turning attention to the awkward, joyful, and disarmingly vulnerable dance breaks performed by musician and producer Post Malone.[2] Framing these unpolished performances as choreographic proposals, rather than incidental anomalies,

[1] For this project, I have relied heavily on one Instagram account: @smokepost_malone. While higher quality videos of these performances can be found on YouTube, I have primarily focused on studying the shorter clips, typically filmed on a personal phone.

[2] *Emotional Tofu* borrows its name from Jon Caramanica's description of Post Malone's music, as quoted in the epigraph.

Emotional Tofu proposes that Post Malone's dancing is a rich site for embodied research. It asks, what happens when we take Post Malone's dancing seriously as both failed spectacle and an embodied proposition for queering masculinity?

I first premiered *Emotional Tofu* in October 2023, and I continue to expand the project as it takes multiple forms across concert stages and art galleries. The work has appeared in many iterations, such as 10-minute performances in shared dance concerts, two-hour durational events, and films featured in museum exhibitions.[3] Each iteration reconfigures the choreographic material through new spatial, temporal, and relational frames, allowing the project to function as both performance and ongoing inquiry. By slowing down and re-performing Post Malone's viral dance sequences, *Emotional Tofu* attends to the tragicomic register of his dancing—the way humor and pathos intertwine in fleeting, densely textured moments—and investigates how masculinities can be both upheld and unraveled in public performance.

This article seeks to contextualize Post Malone's dancing within discourses of queer theory and performance studies and offers *Emotional Tofu*'s theoretical and methodological underpinnings for choreographic inquiry. Guided by the critical insights of scholars like Jack Halberstam, Clare Croft, and music critic Jon Caramanica, I situate Post Malone's sad boy affect within broader conversations about emotional expressivity, vulnerability, and the possibilities of failing to meet hegemonic masculine ideals. This inquiry is also deeply indebted to the work of BIPOC, trans, and feminist artists and theorists whose practices have long centered the body as a site for reimagining masculinity. Their performances and scholarship articulate frameworks in which softness, ambivalence, instability, and joy become radical tools for resisting normative gender formations. *Emotional Tofu* enters this ongoing conversation through movement: not to define masculinity anew, but to dwell in its contradictions and allow those contradictions to move, touch, and transform.

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[3] *Emotional Tofu* first premiered at Meetinghouse Arts in Freeport, Maine in 2023. At the time of this writing, ten more iterations have appeared publicly, including *Emotional Tofu: Rockland* (performance and visual art installation), *Emotional Tofu: Northampton* (2024), *Emotional Tofu: Iverson* (film, 2024), *Emotional Tofu: Frogmore* (film, 2024), *Emotional Tofu: Greenbelt* (film, 2024), *Emotional Tofu: Lewiston* (performance, 2025), *Emotional Tofu: PCA* (performance, 2025), *Emotional Tofu: Biddeford* (performance, 2025), *Emotional Tofu: Scarborough*, (performance, 2025).

At the same time, I recognize the inherent tension in turning to a White, cisgender male celebrity with significant cultural capital as the initial source material for this queer inquiry.[4] Post Malone is not marginalized in the structural sense, and his image is often commodified, aestheticized, and buffered by privilege. Yet it is precisely this contradiction – between privilege and emotional fragility, visibility and awkwardness – that makes his dancing a compelling and uneasy starting point. I do not aim to redeem or elevate Post Malone, but rather to treat his dancing performances as indicative and strangely porous: as openings through which larger questions about the speculative capacities of performance can be asked. Ultimately, my development of *Emotional Tofu* and this analysis is not about diagnosing or critiquing Post Malone's persona or movements. It is an exploration of what his dancing might teach us about the possibilities of performing masculinity differently. Through this embodied exploration, I suggest that within even the smallest, strangest gestures, new futures for masculinity might be quietly unfolding.

Sad Boy Aesthetics

The "sad boy" is an enduring cultural archetype. It is an update to older figures like the romantic anti-hero, the emo rocker, and the tortured poet. In its current form, particularly within contemporary popular culture, the sad boy aesthetic condenses emotional vulnerability into a *vibe*: muted, melancholic, detached, and often rendered aspirational through aestheticized forms of self-presentation. While this aesthetic is often commodified and depoliticized, it nonetheless performs a kind of refusal that resists resolution or emotional clarity. As queer scholar Jack Halberstam suggests, affective modes that have been rendered as demonstrating failure, such as incoherence, the refusal of mastery, or emotional resolution performed by the sad boy, can themselves be powerful forms of resistance to dominant cultural logics, including those of heteronormative masculinity (2-3).

Post Malone stands as one of the most visible contemporary inheritors of the sad boy trope. Born Austin Richard Post in 1995, he embodies a White masculinity that is both hyper-visible and strangely diffuse, appropriating the

[4] A notable aside: One collaborator, during a rehearsal in which we were studying and replicating Post Malone's dancing, recently reflected that Post Malone was giving off "transmasc energy."

aesthetics and sonic frameworks of Black musical traditions while distancing himself from their racial and political roots.[5] His musical output spans hip hop, pop, rock, country, and trap, resisting easy genre categorization and mirroring the cultural slipperiness of his public persona. His heavily tattooed face and disheveled aesthetic evoke a SoundCloud rapper image, but his candid interviews about anxiety, depression, and substance use add layers of openness rarely associated with mainstream performances of White masculinity.

Music critic Jon Caramanica characterizes Post Malone's sound as genreless, marked by slurry diction, Auto-Tuned vocals, ambient beats, and an emotional tenor that drifts rather than builds. Songs like "Circles," "Sunflower," and "I Fall Apart" do not follow the conventional arc of tension and catharsis; instead, they hover, gesturing toward heartbreak and disconnection without ever fully landing. Post Malone's lyrical world is one of loneliness, anxiety, fleeting pleasures, and existential exhaustion. "Goodbyes" slips into resignation; "I Fall Apart" stages both a public breakup and alcoholic self-soothing; upbeat tracks like "Congratulations" are tinged with a sense of hollowness. Caramanica notes how Post Malone's music "juggles his emotional compass." He follows, "When he's boasting, he sounds miserable, like on 'Saint-Tropez,' on which he sings like he's lost inside a haunted house. And when he's moping – which is often – he renders his darkness with a kind of dignity and beauty."

Post Malone's emotional currents are never fully dramatized or resolved. Instead, the contrasts and contradictions become a point of intimacy, offering listeners a kind of ambient sadness that feels familiar, accessible, and in some ways, demanding. His 2023 tour, titled *If Y'all Weren't Here, I'd Be Crying*, literalized the sad boy identity, framing performance as both emotional outlet and existential plea, begging for his fans' complicity in his own wellbeing.

An Embodied Archive of Post Malone's Dancing

[5] While the performance of race is not the central focus of this article, it is important to acknowledge how his dancing exists within a broader context of cultural borrowing and aesthetic distancing across racial lines. I suggest that this appropriation is one way Post Malone negotiates his fragile White masculinity – one that leans on proximity to Blackness for expressive power, even as it maintains a posture of emotional detachment and self-deprecation. Naming these dynamics is necessary for framing the scope and stakes of *Emotional Tofu*, and for recognizing the tensions embedded in the many layers of Post Malone's movement vocabulary.

While Post Malone's music hovers in a space of unresolved emotionality, his dancing brings that affect into even sharper focus. In viral fan clips circulated via TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, he spirals gently around himself, his arms trailing in soft arcs, hips occasionally jutting out in exaggerated punctuation. He moves with a kinetic logic that feels inwardly directed: pacing in compact circles, tapping or brushing at his own body, tracing soft spirals that rarely extend beyond his immediate physical space. His posture tends to fold in on itself – head bowed, sternum collapsed, hazy eyes often cast down, adrift, or even closed.

Technically speaking, Post Malone's movement vocabulary is spare – marked more by casual motion than by virtuosic steps. There's a kind of uncertain bravado in the way he moves, as if caught in the act of private improvisation suddenly made public – an intimate and unguarded reverie flashing momentarily on the stage. Sometimes, Post Malone seems to linger in sensuality: a slow grind of the hips, a gentle rolling of the shoulders. At other moments, he courts clownishness: stumbling sideways, miming hyperbolic actions of seduction, then smacking his own face in self-deprecation. This oscillation produces a tragicomic effect: the simultaneous invitation to laugh and to feel, to witness both parody and sincerity colliding within the same body. His masculinity, in these moments, appears less as a fixed identity and more as an unstable, improvisational negotiation with his own self-image.

A striking opposition between a light, staccato mincing and a low-slung, assertive thrusting emerges. These two poles – mincing and thrusting – are not reconciled into a coherent whole. Instead, they clash with, bleed into, and destabilize each other. The mincing and thrusting both fail to be fully realized. They stutter, they contradict, they fall short of coherence. But it is precisely this failure that generates their queer potency. Halberstam writes, "the queer art of failure turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being" (88). Post Malone's awkward and excessive dancing demonstrates this quiet losing. It resists virtuosity and dominance, refuses resolution into coherent form, and drifts outside the tightly choreographed codes of masculine performance in mainstream culture. It is not successful in any traditional sense, nor does it conform to popular tropes of masculine confidence, which often included firm footing, clarity of weight, and a puffed-up chest. Instead, it quietly loses. And in that loss, it begins to imagine something else –

another way of being in a body, of feeling and performing masculinity, of moving through spectacle with softness.

From a choreographic perspective, what fascinates me is the tension between internal and external registers. Post Malone is acutely aware of being watched – his performances are staged spectacles, after all – but the dancing often reads as self-directed, almost private. This doubleness creates a charged ambiguity: Is the awkwardness strategic or accidental? Is the sensuality earnest or ironic? In the context of mainstream popular performance, where masculinity is often tightly choreographed into displays of dominance, athleticism, or sexual command, Post Malone's loose and unstable dancing feels radical in its minor key. His movements do not assert power; they hover, falter, oscillate. They resist clean categorization.

This ethic of failure extends beyond choreography into cultural registers. Halberstam writes, "failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world" (2). Post Malone's sad boy dance aesthetic, with its ambient incoherence and refusal of emotional climax, can be understood in precisely this light: as an opening toward other affective and embodied possibilities. His awkward, joyful, and unstable sad boy dance movements operate as propositions – sequences that do not resolve into fixed meaning but instead invite alternative ways of moving, feeling, and imagining masculinity.

As dance scholar Clare Croft suggests in her writing on *productive frictions*, it is often in the gaps, stumbles, and mismatches that political potential and reorientations emerge. She writes, "These reorientations of gender and sexuality are a path toward imagining expansive social possibilities, moving toward horizons of queer potential and revolution" (9). Post Malone's dancing, in all its tragicomic messiness, offers such a gap – a space where sadness, joy, awkwardness, and performativity collide.

Queering Through Slowness

In my project *Emotional Tofu*, choreography functions as a method of speculative research. I consider Post Malone's dance breaks not as anomalies to be corrected or mocked, but as minor archives of alternative masculine embodiment. By studying Post Malone's movements, I seek to amplify their potential—to feel with

them, to move inside their contradictions, to imagine what other masculinities might be possible when one rubs up against Post Malone's sad boy affect. Working in close collaboration with dancer Emilia Bruno, I have developed a practice of inhabiting and reworking Post Malone's dancing – his mincing, thrusting, spiraling, punching – not through direct imitation, but through processes of slowness and repetition. These choreographic strategies are guided by a central question: How might we queer Post Malone's dancing not by altering its content, but by changing its temporal and relational frame?

Slowness has become our most critical tactic. Drawing inspiration from the work of performance theorists and artists such as Rosemary Candelario, Kemi Adeyemi, and Kenneth Tam, we approach slowness not simply as a matter of tempo, but as a radical reorientation of time, attention, and presence. As Candelario suggests in her examination of Eiko and Koma's choreographies, slowness is multifarious, operating aesthetically and politically. Slowness, for Candelario, invites viewers and performers alike to encounter the body as a site of geologic, rather than narrative, change – dense, durational, and always unfolding (4, 7).

Artist Kenneth Tam offers a resonant example of how slowness can be mobilized to trouble normative masculine scripts. Tam is a contemporary interdisciplinary artist whose video installations explore intimacy, vulnerability, and ritual within performances of masculinity, often centering Asian American male subjects. In his 2021 work *Silent Spikes*, Tam reimagines the American cowboy – a hypermasculine, racially coded figure – through the lens of Asian American male bodies engaged in deliberately slowed, intimate, and tender interactions. In *Silent Spikes*, a two-channel installation, time drips, and with it, familiar tropes of masculine performance begin to dissolve. As the camera lingers, the slowness grants viewers permission to feel intimacy without explanation, awkwardness without shame. Slowness becomes a tool of reorientation: a way of touching masculinity differently. In *Emotional Tofu*, I draw on this tactic of deceleration as a method: by slowing Post Malone's movements, we, too, dislodge their original context and create space for them to become unfamiliar.

Applied to Post Malone's dance vocabulary, slowness has a profound effect. Gestures that initially appear casual or throwaway reveal unexpected textures and

contradictions when slowed to a quarter or even an eighth of their original speed.[6] Mincing steps, stretched across long seconds, become both balletic and mournful. Thrusts lose their aggressive clarity, becoming ambiguous oscillations between assertion and collapse. What emerges is a choreographic field of liminal tensions: between softness and hardness, interiority and spectacle, sincerity and irony.

This process of slowing down allows for mutations to occur. We do not aim to "perfect" Post Malone's movements or reconstruct them faithfully. Rather, by stretching time, we allow new possibilities to surface: the arcs of arms become weightier, almost aquatic; a stumble opens into a spiraling floor pattern; a cheek-slap expands into a tender, lingering caress of the face. In these mutations, the tragicomic affect that initially drew me to Post Malone's dancing is amplified and complicated. His choreography is not preserved, but queered – opened to new readings and new relational possibilities that ask what masculine bodies can be, do, and say.

Slowness creates space for a kind of heightened kinesthetic empathy. Moving through Post Malone's physical vocabulary at a slowed, durational pace demands not just technical focus, but an attunement to the textures embedded in the movement. It becomes impossible to rush past the awkwardness. It becomes imperative to dwell in the contradictions, to feel the stickiness of an unstable masculinity, and to allow it to trouble and transform our own. In this way, slowness operates as both a formal device and a philosophical commitment. It allows us to resist the logics of spectacle and efficiency that dominate both popular performance and hegemonic masculinity. It creates room for vulnerability, multiplicity, and queerness to emerge as small, flickering possibilities within the dance.

As dance scholar Kemi Adeyemi notes in her work on Black queer nightlife, slowness can function as a spatial and temporal refusal – a way of existing against the grain of dominant flows (547-9). In *Emotional Tofu*, Bruno and I similarly embrace slowness as a refusal: a refusal to resolve Post Malone's dancing into coherent masculinity; a refusal to flatten its tragicomic affect into simple parody or critique; a refusal to speed past the spaces it opens. As we linger and repeat, Post Malone's viral awkwardness and joyful breakthroughs become portals,

[6] I can think of many examples, such as what we inside the work call "tiny purse hand," or fingers lightly tapping on the sternum in a (queer) polyrhythmic relationship to the stepping feet.

offering us glimpses of what masculinity might feel like when offered allowance and invitation to be strange, unstable, and expansive.[7]

Productive Frictions

Dancing with Bruno, a transmasc non-binary performer, means moving in chorus with Post Malone's gestures through two queer bodies shaped by vastly different histories. Our dancing is not an attempt to mimic Post Malone's movements identically, but rather to enter into a shared score where multiplicity and mismatch become generative. When we perform his looped sequences in unison, the small differences between our bodies – of rhythm, weight, tone, breath – become visible. These differences are not flaws. They are the very material of the work.

Rather than erasing difference, unison amplifies it. When Bruno and I move together through Post Malone's mincing and thrusting sequences, our masculinities intersect and diverge in real time. My movement carries the residue of a soft gay masculinity, shaped by studio dance training and high-performance athletics. Bruno brings a grounded, sly, soft butch presence. In unison, these qualities rub against one another and make friction legible. In *Emotional Tofu*, nodding again towards Croft's productive frictions, dancing in unison becomes a strategy: not to collapse our differences into a single masculine ideal, but to dwell in their dissonance. We do not claim Post Malone's experience or identity. We orbit it. We echo his movements, but our echoes arrive differently – inflected by transness, queerness, softness, and instability. Choreographically, this means embracing imprecision, misalignment, and asymmetry. In rehearsal, we lean into what does not match – moments when one of us arrives at a position just slightly off the beat, or holds a thrust longer than the other, or moves with a different internal rhythm. In this way, our unison neither resolves nor resolves reifies hegemonic masculinity. Instead, it stretches masculinity open. It makes space for something more: always relational, always becoming. It reveals the speculative

[7] Thus far, each iteration of *Emotional Tofu* has concluded without resolution. There is no climax or clear ending. Sometimes the lights simply fade; other times, we exit slowly and without fanfare. This ongoingness is itself a performative refusal of closure that echoes the work's investment in ambiguity. The endings invite audiences to join a queer political ethic of lingering in uncertainty and sitting with incoherence rather than seek its resolution.

excess of masculine embodiment – how it always exceeds the forms designed to contain it.

Like the men in Kenneth Tam's *Silent Spikes*, our dancing imagines new relational scripts for masculinity. Choreographer and performer niv Acosta offers another vital model for speculative engagement with masculinity. Acosta is a Dominican-American, trans artist whose interdisciplinary work fuses Black futurism, science fiction, and queer embodiment. In *DISCOTROPIC*, Acosta constructs a performance environment that queers the boundaries of race, gender, genre, and time. The work stages a futuristic Black trans masculinity that refuses to resolve into fixed form. Acosta's movement oscillates between robotic, trance-like repetition and ecstatic abandon – shifting from stoic stillness to bursts of glittering virtuosity. Through these shifts, *DISCOTROPIC* imagines new temporalities for gendered and racialized embodiment: nonlinear, fantastical, ungovernable. Like Kenneth Tam's slowed rituals, Acosta's futurism offers a model for how performance can move beyond representation and into theoretic proposition. *Emotional Tofu* aligns with this sensibility – not in aesthetic, necessarily, but in ethos. Our movement research does not seek to depict masculinity, but to destabilize it, to live inside its inconsistencies, and to imagine what else it might become.

Like *DISCOTROPIC*, *Emotional Tofu* performs a kind of choreographic transtemporality. We do not simply remix Post Malone's sad boy dancing. We wonder what else it might become. We imagine a masculinity that minces and thrusts, awkwardly, joyfully, earnestly, without needing to decide which one is the "real" version. We dance the contradiction. In this space of friction, the tragicomic becomes a kind of method. It lets us play at the edges of parody and sincerity, humor and heartbreak, presence and distance. Through our unison, we perform masculinities not as identities but possibilities that falter, stumble, soften, and surprise.

I developed *Emotional Tofu* as a layered performance involving movement and text. During performances, voice enters the space alongside the bodies – not to explain the dance, but to accompany it, drift with it, interrupt it.[8] The spoken text operates in counterpoint to the movement, building a research environment that is multisensory, unstable, and queer in both content and form.

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[8] Various iterations have included live or recorded text, alternatingly performed by Miguel Ángel Pacheco, James Andrew Barrett, Cody Cook-Parrott, or myself.

This textual layer was developed iteratively, through rehearsal, writing, and live performance. The text offers movement descriptions that I have written, such as "Two dancers, dressed in hazy purple and amber tie-dyed baseball uniforms. White sneakers. White caps. Soft butch." It also cites Caramanica directly with phrases such as "sleepy eyed absorption is [their] thing." Eventually, the descriptions devolve into poetic wanderings:

> They move slowly, a cyborgean pageant, with a haze in their gaze. Like a transcendent water feature. Slowness is their tactic – disrupt, focus, wonder, and meditate. The mincing. The thrusting. Sad boys. Speculating on a multiplicity of masculinities. Presencing their queer melancholic bodies. Post Post-Malone.
>
> If you were to sketch this dance, you might do it as a time lapse that connects one entity to another through iterations of slight variation. A popstar conveyer belt in late-stage digital capitol. A choreo-crypto-cryptography. Dystopian dissociation – marrying brightness with sleaze (Koepke).[9]

The text functions less as a libretto and more as a companion – a voice that listens, imagines, responds, and occasionally misfires. In *Emotional Tofu*, voice becomes another kind of touch: it reaches toward the dancing body without enclosing it, pointing without pinning down. Sometimes it contradicts the body; other times it drifts, trailing off to let the audience feel the space between word and motion, between meaning and sensation. This instability – speaking from uncertainty, contradiction, or overflow – feels essential to the work's queerness. Rather than striving for coherence, the voice confesses, wanders, and reaches toward intimacy. Choreographically, this layering of voice and movement resists interpretation-as-explanation. The text does not clarify the dance – it complicates it. In a cultural moment saturated with demands for clarity – especially around queer and gender-nonconforming expression – *Emotional Tofu* insists on the value of ambiguity. The voice thickens the dance rather than narrating it, allowing critique and confession, parody and reverence, theory and feeling to coexist. In

[9] This text is a collage of movement descriptions and poetry by myself and collaborators, notably dance and multimedia artist MK Ford, alongside quotations from Caramanica.

this way, the voice becomes another modality for queering Post Malone's tragicomic masculinity. It doesn't fix his dancing in place, but wonders alongside it. Like our choreographic process, the voice is a method of becoming–with: a way of entering into proximity without claiming ownership.

Toward a Speculative Archive

By engaging with Post Malone's viral movements through slowness, repetition, friction, and text, *Emotional Tofu* builds a collection of movements that carry affective and cultural weight. Post Malone's rounded spine, thrusts, slaps, and spirals do not quite fit into the frameworks of concert dance, nor into the aesthetic scripts of hegemonic masculinity. And yet, when re-performed by queer and trans dancers, slowed down and reframed, they become legible as propositions. Not statements, not symbols – but questions, openings, potentials.

In this sense, the project joins a lineage of queer archival practice, as theorized by Halberstam and others, in which performance, subculture, and gesture become primary sites of knowledge and inheritance. Rather than organizing around lineage or mastery, this kind of archive accumulates in fragments. It is built through embodiment, iteration, and improvisation. It is stored in bodies and choreographies, not boxes.

As *Emotional Tofu* continues to evolve – in live performances, durational installations, and its forthcoming expansion, *Transcendent Water Feature* – I remain interested in the porousness of the work.[10] What happens when audiences are not simply watching a performance, but sensing it, feeling with it, speculating alongside it? What happens when other queer and trans dancers take up these movements and make them their own? This is the liberatory potential I hope to trace – not just in Post Malone's tragicomic dancing, but in the space it opens for re-imagining what masculinities can feel like when released from coherence.

Ultimately, *Emotional Tofu* does not seek to redeem the sad boy or resolve his contradictions. Instead, it plays with him. It slows him down. It asks what might be possible in the space between mincing and thrusting, between clown and crooner. It makes room for sadness, joy, awkwardness, and intimacy to share the stage.

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[10] *Transcendent Water Feature* is set to premier at Red Eye Theater in Minneapolis, MN in 2026.

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Why the American Social Dance Floor Moved from "The Tennessee Waltz" to "Dancing On My Own"

R. CHRISTIAN PHILLIPS

What is Dance?[1] Dance, at its core, is a sequence of movements expressing an emotion or concept done to either an internal or an external rhythm, most often produced by music of some kind. It encompasses every possible combination of motions, movements, and contortions able to be performed by the body. It can be natural or stylized, created spontaneously or practiced repeatedly for years, used to tell a story or to express an abstract concept, done in a large group or by oneself, performed on stage under spotlights or in the middle of the woods in the dark of night. The ability to move at least a single part of one's body is the only requirement to dance.

Dance is universal. Toddlers use dance to learn the full range of motion for their various body parts and as a way of interacting with and understanding their growing world. Each new person explores their body by learning the movement available with each joint, but it is through dance that you figure out how to connect motions and propel yourself forward. Thus, dance becomes the natural way for children to inhabit and explore their bodies and the world at large. No one dances more freely or vigorously than a toddler.

Because dance is motion and movement, it can express any and every emotion; however, the most common forms of dance are done in celebration of a positive emotion or concept. Most people associate dance with public yet intimate interactions between a couple seeking or engaging in a romantic relationship. Yet everyone has, at one time or another, done their own happy dance in celebration of something good. Joyful emotions often cannot be contained or fully expressed through vocalization and giant grins; at that point, only movement can truly express the full extent of the emotion being felt.

While dance is individual, it can be interpreted by both the person doing the dancing and by anyone viewing that dance. There are no set, specific, universally acknowledged, generalized meanings to dance; nonetheless, most dances embody some culturally or professionally defined meaning. Yet any accepted meaning can be and will be interpreted based upon how each dancer moves and performs the sequence of motions associated with that specific dance. Two dancers performing the exact same motions can express meanings as divergent as fun and hatred or as

[1] Multiple dictionary definitions of 'Dance' exist, but none encompass the full scope of dancing. All are variations of the theme 'deliberate movements or motions done to music.'

similar as joy and flirtation. One dancer may be using this dance to signal sexual availability while the next dancer may be attempting to 'dance the pain away.'

Once humanity began to form into communities, dance became both more organized and an integral part of social interactions and rituals. In 2003, Magdalenian-era cave paintings dated from 13,000 years ago were found in the Creswell Crags, Nottinghamshire (England), which featured scenes of naked women dancing and singing: with raised arms, outthrust derrières, elongated necks, and open mouth (Clark). Similar scenes feature prominently in cave art from the era across continental Europe and into India. As time rolled on, dances were designed to celebrate major life milestones – birth, coming-of-age, courtship, marriage, and death; annual celebrations – harvests, remembrance festivals, the dawning of a new year, the annual planting; important community activities – completion of a major building project, conquest of an enemy, the repelling of an invading force; and innumerable religious activities.

However, the most popular and enduring reason for dancing remains the romantic barter; nearly every civilization has left some clue as to how they danced to entice a mate, from the Magdalenian artists immortalizing their women dancers through today. Examples abound of dances that specifically highlight a woman's feminine attributes in a flirtatious manner or showcase a man's prowess and masculine abilities. In Scotland, variations of a dance called the Lilt was performed by women at annual festivals for centuries to display their femininity through their dancing skills, while the men displayed their own skills through more military dances like the Highland Fling, the Sword Dance, and the Seann Triubhas. The numerous balls, dances, masquerades, and fetes held by the British nobility in London and other major cities from the 18th to 20th Centuries came to be known colloquially as the Marriage Mart. The common goal of all this dancing was to interest a suitor and highlight each dancer's worth as a possible marriage partner.

In the United States, early settlers held regular community dances as a way to accomplish multiple objectives. Attendees could meet new settlers to the area, reinforce old friendships, build new connections, meet a possible mate, and celebrate an event or milestone, all while blowing off some steam listening to music and dancing with members of the opposite sex. Due to the predominance of colonization by the British and other northern European cultures, the American Social Dance Floor (ASDF) developed from their cultural rules and notions regulating the social interactions between men and women; however, the Americans fostered a casualness not often found within the highly regulated interactions of the British middle and upper classes and their continental compatriots. Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, competence in certain socially mandated dances, by both men and women, became a way to quickly

distinguish the 'civilized' members of society from the more provincial, unlearned brute, while simultaneously ranking a person within a society that eschewed titles and legal designations of hierarchy. Good dancers were considered more attractive, more eligible, and overall better people, whether this was true or not, than those who could only stumble around the dance floor.

From its colonial beginnings, the ASDF followed the larger social trends coming from the dominant European empires. Country and square dancing reigned supreme and resembled the country dances from England, Scotland, Ireland, France, the many German states, Austria-Hungary, and Scandinavia. The first true ballroom dance, the waltz, came into its modern form during the mid-1700s in the area around Vienna and was the first dance to feature a modified Closed position – where the couple faced each other with the man and woman holding each other close (typically clasping one set of hands while his other hand was around her waist and her hand was on or near his shoulder) while they twirled around in fast moving circles. Napoleon's conquest of Europe ensured his soldiers took this new style of dancing back home to France, and the Congress of Vienna's numerous collection of every variation of ball, fete, and masquerade afforded the waltz even greater popularity and global reach.[2] Although considered scandalous by 'good' society for decades, the waltz and its intimate coupling became popular across Europe and the Americas, helping to create a slew of other dances featuring Closed Position coupling, including the polka, the mazurka, and the schottische, among many others. New musical trends and fashion styles often dictated small changes to the country and ballroom dances done on the ASDF, but no other major changes occurred until the 20th Century.

The ASDF from 1900 to 1950

By the turn of the 20th Century, dances based upon a couple grounded in the Closed position had become de rigueur for most social dancing. Whether it was done by Mrs. Astor and the Four Hundred populating New York society's Gilded Age ballrooms or a lumberjack with a harlot in a frontier saloon, social dancing generally brought two people together, facing each other, claiming their space on the dance floor and expecting to be able to make notable movements. Each couple would engage in various planned movements (there was usually a wide array of expected steps for whichever dance went with the music being played and dancers were assumed to already be conversant in at least a few of the basic steps), ostensibly 'led' or guided by the man, that would have them physically circling

[2] The Congress of Vienna occurred from September 1914 until June of 1815, consisting of numerous diplomatic meetings and negotiations to lay out the new political and constitutional order for most of Europe after the downfall of Napoleon and his expansive First French Empire.

each other and around the dance floor itself. Stricter dance floors, such as in the upper class ballrooms, would have definite, regulated, and well-maintained flows to ensure that, in general, the moving couples did not bump into each other (although this did regularly happen), but even the most impromptu dance floor would quickly find its own flow.

Although Queen Victoria died in 1901, the middle class mores and ideals of the British Victorian Era held sway over both Europe and the US until the Great War changed the dominant world order, creating a stronger desire by the average person to have more control over their own life. Coupled with the previous unthinkable horrors encountered during the war, the younger generation who had been most affected and their younger siblings just coming of age would quickly and readily engage in the rebellious actions of the Roaring Twenties. Jazz, that uniquely American sound derived from experimentation by black musicians, exploded onto the social scene and required new types of dances, giving birth to Swing, Jive, the Foxtrot, the Quickstep, and the Lindy Hop, among many others. In the less urban areas of the country, the rising popularity of Appalachian 'hillbilly music,' the sound of the white rural poor featured on radio shows like the "Grand Ole Opry," helped popularize Two-Step and new configurations of American Square dancing. Dances from South America (or advertised as from Latin America) also rose in prominence, including the Tango, the Cha-Cha, the Samba, the Mambo, and the Rumba. Although the US during the Twenties was extremely isolationist and racially segregated, the ASDF grew to become multicultural and highly inclusive of numerous dance forms. The social battle between the older Victorian morality and the new Jazz-based mindset of 'living each day as if it were your last (because it easily could be)' pitted the older generation who merely directed the fighting in WWI against the younger generation who had actually done that fighting and dying. This battle would often be fought on the dance floors of nightclubs, juke joints, roadhouses, saloons, bars, and speakeasies, making a night out dancing until dawn a bright and fun way to protest against a return to the pre-war status quo.

The Stock Market Crash in October 1929 brought all the hard partying of the Roaring Twenties to a crashing halt, but nonetheless, the ASDF continued. Life for most Americans during the Great Depression concerned survival and getting through to the next meal, the next day, the next job, so dancing now took on greater meaning. As a free activity, anyone and everyone could dance, and many used it to 'dance the pain away' to the whatever music you could find, coming out of someone's tinny radio nearby or being made by a hard-up musician practicing in the hopes of getting a gig soon, or even just by humming a tune yourself. No matter how hard life was, dancing with someone could and would often lift spirits and allow a few moments of unencumbered joy. Focused specifically on which

couple could continue moving the longest, marathon dance contests for money and prizes popped up all over the country as a promotional tool for struggling businesses; a national circuit arose which was prominently featured in the 1969 film *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* Furthermore, Hollywood produced a plethora of frothy movies light on plot but heavy on fun, singing and dancing, spectacle, and a clean, magical world of work and stability; hey, movie characters, at least, could still get ahead.

World War II and the unifying fight for freedom, democracy, and the American Way defined the early 1940s. That Jazz-based mindset of 'living each day as if it were your last (because it easily could be)' from the Twenties returned with both a greater urgency in the desperate need to save the world from true evil and a nostalgia visible in the 'we have to do this again?' incredulous undertone of the war propaganda and films created between 1940 and 1945. However, this war unified the country to a national cause with an easily vilified enemy – Hitler and the Japanese Emperor – and became the economic, political, and social boon finally pulling the US out of the malaise of the Great Depression.

The Allies winning the war immediately brought a scramble to figure out the new world order, pitting American capitalism against Soviet communism as the world was divvied up between competing spheres of influence. Speaking at Missouri's Westminster College on March 5, 1946, Winston Churchill declared "[f]rom Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an *Iron Curtain* [emphasis mine] has descended across the Continent." Within five years, the US and the USSR would become competitors and enemies through actions such as the West Berlin airlift, the nuclear arms race, and the 'police action' on the Korean peninsula; by the 1950s, a new Cold War had begun that would dominate domestic politics, foreign policy, the military-industrial complex, and the lives of young men forced to fight in the various proxy conflicts over the next four decades, most notably the Korean and Vietnam Wars.

The US emerged from WWII as the only major world power not physically affected by the destruction of war. In fact, the American home front underwent numerous internal infrastructure improvements and a large-scale modern manufacturing boom during the war years. The foremost problems were how to switch to peacetime operations and how to house, educate, and employ the vast amount of returning veterans. Demobilization began in 1945 and took two years to release over 11 million soldiers back into the American workforce and housing market. This precipitated a modernization of the Victorian ideal woman as ruler of the domestic sphere, happy to be a housewife and mother 'protected' from the horrors of working for a living. With this return to the home,[3] the average

[3] This return to the home by women was more perception than reality. Middle class white women who had entered the workforce to help the war effort returned to being housewives and mother;

American woman's life was constricted from excelling or being an equal member of her marriage, community, or overall society. One of the few places left for a woman to excel and maintain equality was the ASDF: here she was a necessary and equal partner, often the spur 'leading' her husband or partner toward proficiency and enjoyment. Dominated by bands playing all styles of popular music in the new supper clubs and fading ballrooms such as Harlem's Savoy (Abdoulaev), the growing American Middle Class began to finally have fun untinged by war or economic crisis.

1950-1964: Suburbs, Teenagers, and Television Burst onto the Scene

Domestically, the US faced a lack of housing and employment opportunities. The vast number of returning servicemen needed a job and a place to live. Passed in 1944, the Montgomery G.I. Bill built hospitals, covered tuition and other expenses for veterans attending a trade school or college, paid unemployment compensation, and offered low-interest home mortgages. These actions allowed nearly 10 million vets to enter the middle class as skilled laborers and white collar professionals by 1956 (Fohner). Levitt & Sons, a construction company that had rapidly built low-cost housing for the Navy in Norfolk during the war, used this experience to create Levittown on Long Island in 1947, the first modern sub-division in a suburb; within four years over 17,000 single-family homes had been built, housing over 40,000 residents, with a new house being completed every fifteen minutes. The Federal Housing Administration insured bank loans for private contractors to build homes, allowing the government to indirectly spur a housing boom (Pizzigati 274-5), while Veterans Authority (VA) loans ensured veterans could afford to purchase these homes. New sub-divisions of single-family homes in the suburbs surrounding major and minor cities cropped up all over the country. The 1950s saw a mass exodus of white people to the suburbs, where sixty million people, a third of the nation's population, lived by 1960. *Time* magazine exclaimed, "Suburbia is the nation's broadening young middle class, staking out its claim across the landscape, prospecting on a trial-and-error basis for the good way of life for itself and for the children that it produces with such rapidity" (Pizzigati 358).

No less problematic was the volatility of race relations. Over 2.5 million African-American men registered for the draft, with one million serving; African-American women also made up ten percent of the Women's Auxiliary Army Corp

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however, the majority of poor white and African-American women continued as part of the workforce, usually returning to the gendered occupations 'appropriate' for women with the accompanying reduction in pay. In reality, female labor force participation for both white and African-American women steadily rose throughout the late 1940s and the 1950s, especially for married women.

(Taylor). Having repeatedly fought for the US and the concepts of freedom and democracy, Black Americans were still being forced to endure second-class citizen status, often in untenable, violence-prone, and slave-like conditions. Several brutal lynchings in 1946, including a recently returned veteran, prompted President Harry S. Truman to establish and commission the President's Committee on Civil Rights to investigate race relations. Concerns about America's image as the leader of the Free World induced the committee to take a direct and straightforward look at the problem; their 1947 report *To Secure These Rights* "delineated the basic rights and principles of a democratic society and detailed the many ways in which African Americans were denied them," officially condemning racial inequality (Levy 345). Truman desegregated the armed forces shortly thereafter; unfortunately, their other recommendations would not be implemented for nearly twenty years (Levy 345). Nonetheless, the civil rights movement had finally been given some form of governmental respect and took a significant step forward.

Despite these problems, many Americans only foresaw a glorious future because Hitler, the greatest evil in history, had been spectacularly defeated and the US had, for the second time in thirty years, gone into Europe and saved the world for freedom, democracy, and the American Way (cue the national anthem). Home ownership and well-paid employment became a reality for many after years of subsistence, survival, and significant sacrifice. The US economy quickly transformed from its previous wartime footing to the production of construction supplies and consumer products for the US and abroad, becoming the main supplier for the massive rebuilding efforts across Europe and Pacific Asia. Television came to the major US cities and was usually first seen in bars and the front windows of appliance and department stores. A new American Dream blossomed: ownership of a single-family home in the suburbs with a white picket fence, at least one car in the driveway, numerous appliances including a television and an electric refrigerator, and a family solely supported by the father's income. This Middle Class existence became not just the American Dream, but the economic and political reality for an increasing swath of Americans.

The ASDF continued to be the purview of adult society, dominated by young white married middle-class couples living in the suburbs with a couple of children playing in their spacious yards. Adults of all ages would gather at parties, bars, saloons, supper clubs, ballrooms, and juke joints to socialize and dance, with an emphasis on coupled dances done in an intimate embrace moving across and around the floor. Dinner parties with friends would often end in impromptu dancing to records in the living room; respondents to a survey about the ASDF who indicated they had socially danced in the 1950s overwhelmingly stated the

primary reason they and the people they knew had danced was for fun.[4] Dances typically were the ballroom staples – the Foxtrot, Waltz, Polka, and Quickstep; Latin and South American imports – the Rhumba, Samba, Tango, Mambo, and Cha-Cha; and the rowdy nightclub dances from the 1920s – the Jive, the Jitterbug, Swing, Lindy Hop, and the Charleston. Each dance consisted of three to six basic steps and numerous variations derived from those steps, increasing in difficulty with dance expertise. These dances were generally learned from watching movies, at home from older relatives, from watching other dancers, and in the growing industry of social dance studios.

By the early Fifties, the Arthur Murray Dance studio was the most famous social dance school, with 273 locations nationwide (Murray). Claiming to be able to teach anyone to dance a basic step within a single lesson, their popularity soared with the July 1950 premier of *The Arthur Murray Party* hosted by Kathryn Murray from a New York City ballroom. Running until 1960 on all four networks,[5] the show featured men in full dress suits and women in evening gowns and heels; special guests from across the political, entertainment, and sports world; a basic step how-to guide from a traditional ballroom dance; and wide variety of ballroom dancing.[6]

While white middle-class dancing specialized in followed detailed instruction and sequences, African-American dancing applauded improvisation and solo ability within a looser variation of the same dances. Black ballrooms, such as Harlem's Savoy, roadhouses, and juke joints featured fast music and skilled dancers predominantly doing improvisational steps to the Lindy Hop, Swing, Jive, and the Charleston – all dances that had been created by black street dancers shilling for pennies during the 1920s.

The most significant difference between the white and black dance floors of the 1950s was an emphasis on closeness. White dance floors applauded stiffer posture, closer connections, memorization of steps, flawless execution, and communication between the couple with the appearance of the man leading. Black dance floors celebrated individual creativity with couples often staying connected only at one or two points (holding hands, touching a hand to a shoulder or other body part, leaning over a leg, etc.) while performing complementary but individual moves following the rhythm of the music (Abdoulaev 206-7).

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[4] I conducted this survey in January and February of 2017 through Surveymonkey.com. The survey involved 328 respondents, eleven of whom indicated they danced in the 1950s.

[5] ABC, NBC, CBS, and the DuPont television network all broadcast the show throughout the majority of the decade.

[6] This information was garnered by viewing numerous episodes of *The Arthur Murray Party* (195-60) at the Library of Congress in 2017.

Nonetheless, the greatest change to society in the 1950s was television. Created in the late 1920s, full-scale commercial broadcasting became a reality in 1947. By the end of the 1950s, over eighty percent of American households had a television. During this time, local stations and the emerging Big 3 national networks experimented extensively to find commercially profitable programing, with dance programs, such as the aforementioned *The Arthur Murray Party* leading the way.

As the US had made monumental strides in its continuing transformation into a Middle Class nation and society, this transformation gave rise to a significant new phenomenon – the teenager. Before WWII, childhood had typically ended in the early teens when employment and an additional income became necessary for family survival; only the children of the wealthy could attend high school or college without holding down at least one job, if not more. Yet the booming economy and governmental aid would help many achieve middle class status and its accompanying disposable income. The resurgence of Victorian ideals returned the focus onto the American family unit by promoting a single-parent income with a stay-at-home housewife and mother; this new standard allowed middle class teenagers to avoid adult responsibilities far longer than any previous generation in history. Instead of working, this new generation was given allowances and free time to spend on leisure activities. They would become a dominant economic force of consumers demanding movies, music, products, and entertainment noticeably different from that of the adults in their life and society.

By 1955, the children born in the years just before America joined the Allies in WWII were now teenagers attending high school. Seeking their own identity and feeling a need to rebel, teenagers took to the exotic sounds they heard on black radio stations and the rebelliousness they saw perpetuated by movie characters, most notably Marlon Brando in *The Wild Ones* (1953), James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), and the students in *Blackboard Jungle* (1955). The Supreme Court's 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka, Kansas* abolishing the separate-but-equal policy of school segregation not only delivered a huge victory to the burgeoning Civil Rights movement but also propelled the integration of American youth and their version of the ASDF. As schools, public areas, and places of employment were (slowly) desegregated over the next two decades, more and more black and white teenagers began to interact with less of the prejudicial distrust exhibited by their parents and older relatives from both sides of the racial divide.

Based upon earlier radio programs playing dance and popular music, new afternoon TV shows on local stations began to use a format of broadcasting kids dancing to the latest records hosted by a known local personality; this new format would revolutionize television, popularize the new rock 'n roll music, and

significantly begin changing how we dance on the ASDF. Philadelphia's *American Bandstand* was one of the first, premiering in 1952 and moving quickly to the dancing teenagers format, but others soon arose across the country, including *The Buddy Deane Show* in Baltimore (the inspiration for John Waters' *Hairspray*). African-American teens could watch *The Mitch Thomas Show* in Wilmington, Delaware from 1955 and *Teenage Frolics* in Raleigh, North Carolina from 1958 (Delmont). However, the big change came when ABC premiered *American Bandstand* nationwide on August 5, 1957 on sixty-seven affiliate stations; within a year, the show was seen in over 4 million homes with a swiftly growing roster of local stations (Clark, 27).

With the move to network television, *American Bandstand* took this unique opportunity to embody, even if only in a small way, the changes occurring within society. Predominately showing white dancers, a few black faces in each episode show the beginnings of racial integration; both white and black artists, men and women, were featured in most episodes, with the first episode's guests including Billy Williams, an R&B singer who had cross-over fame with "I'm Gonna Sit Right Down and Write Myself a Letter," and the white female group the Chordettes, singing their hit "Mr. Sandman."[7] For many, this show would be the first time they saw a black couple dancing together on television and dancing on the same floor as white couples.

Maintaining the pre-network format of showing regular teens straight from school wearing their own clothes dancing to popular music (despite the network's desire to use more professional dancers), *American Bandstand* quickly became the showcase for teen culture. The show drew millions of viewers and thousands of letters per week and made superstars of it regular dancers. Advertising during *American Bandstand* or gaining Dick Clark's official approval could all but guarantee access into the lucrative teen market, while the approval of the teenagers could make or break an album.

Dancing on the show was driving by tradition, with couples holding onto each other moving in unison or in a complementary manner with the boys leading and the girls following. Variations of the Jitterbug were the most popular form, allowing the dancers a chance to show off some individuality. The dancers moved around the floor, seldom staying in a single spot, even during the slow dances. Moves were predominantly smooth, focusing upon being graceful yet energetic, as each couple spent their time swinging and twirling across the floor. Although the floor was crowded with many dancers (and the bulky addition of television equipment), couples moved around each other, incorporating this necessity into their dancing. When there were not enough boys, the girls would still get on the

[7] This information was garnered by viewing numerous episodes of *American Bandstand* (1957-64) at the Library of Congress in 2017.

dance floor, dancing with each other as a couple; however, two boys never danced together. The vibe from the dancers and the show was all about having fun, enjoying the music, and moving around the dance floor in a cool and energetic manner.

American Bandstand would also help popularize new dances. The Stroll originated as a slow song recorded by The Diamonds in 1957 and created a dance craze updating earlier line dances – such the Cakewalk, the Virginia Reel, and many European country dances. A line of men would face a line of women, all doing the same simple side-to-side step, and then each couple at the top of the line would do a more elaborate dance (of their own choosing) down between the rows of dancers. This dance could be done to any slow song, and multiple songs were recorded specifically for Strolling. The Cha-lypso combined elements of ballroom's Cha-Cha with the Caribbean's Calypso and was created by the kids dancing on *Bandstand* in 1957. Done to a wide range of songs, its popularity spawned several songs specifically written for it (Clark 56). Chubby Checker's remake of Hank Ballard's popular 1959 hit "The Twist" would spawn another dance craze in 1960 when he performed it on the show. Couples would face each other, not touching, twisting their hips and shoulders from side to side, but in opposition (left shoulder would twist toward right hip and vice-versa), while bending their knees and often squatting down toward the floor before returning to a standing position. Each dancer adds his or her own spin on this basic motion as long as the hips and shoulders continue to keep the beat. Unlike the others, the Twist's popularity on the ASDF would not fade for many years to come.

1964-1974: Solidifying the Power of Rebellion

Nineteen Sixty-Three ended with the shocking assassination of President John F. Kennedy (November 22nd), marking a crucial moment in US history and becoming one of the spurs for significant changes across all levels and areas of society. Within three months, the Beatles would make their first trip to the US (February 7th, 1964), launching "Beatlemania" and solidifying the British Invasion in pop music. Before the end of 1964, President Lyndon Baines Johnson had begun to expand the US involvement in the Vietnam conflict after the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution passed Congress; military conscription would greatly expand in 1965 as the US became more embroiled in this Cold War proxy war ostensibly against the threat of communism. Over the next decade, significant laws and court cases, volatile and violent conflicts, and minority equality movements fighting for basic human and civil rights would upend and dramatically change the political and social landscape in the US.

With the plethora of conflict and changes transpiring, the ASDF also began to change, moving away from the dominance of adults and becoming the playground of the more active and activist young adults and teenagers. Ballrooms and supper clubs went out of fashion as more people stayed home to watch TV. Following on the success of the Twist, more single motions became named dances as dancers moved away from the intimate Closed Position embrace. Teens still looked to media for their influences, including *American Bandstand*, to learn the latest dances; these new dances would often mime a specific set of motions that would be indicated by the name – the Hitchhike had a person repeatedly thumbing for a ride, the Swim imitated the breaststroke, and the Batman had dancers masking their eyes with their fore and middle fingers splayed in a horizontal V (Clark 116-17). With the rise of folk rock and the hippie culture's focus on the journey through the music, the "do your own thing" attitude became more widely accepted. Although improvisation had always been a marker of the black dance floors and used as inspiration on the white dance floors, the ASDF of the young quickly began to move away from the structure represented by ballroom and nightclub dances with multiple steps or movements.

By 1964, the pre-war generation who had helped create the first wave of teenagers were now out of college or trade school and beginning their lives as independent adults and the first wave of Baby Boomers were heading to college. This group felt themselves to be different from their parents and other older adults, having built their distinct distinct identity based upon rebellion against said parents and older adults. Being raised to be better and greater than all previous American generations ingrained a belief that they had both the right and the obligation to change society to better reflect their own views. Folk rock emerged by paying attention to injustices and other issues of oppression, speaking directly to those seeking to make the world more equitable. The new music spurred on protests and fueled work in the existing and emerging equality movements.

At the same time, the middle Baby Boomers (born after 1949 and before 1957) would be caught up in Beatlemania and the British Invasion with its more lighthearted pop feel and focus on the positive sides of romance and falling in love. During musical performances on television shows, the kids in the 1950s would move around in their seats but still remain seated and relatively calm; in the 1960s, the kids would get up and dance solo in front of their seat, on their seats, and in the aisles. However, this generation would quickly be engulfed by the chaotic world in which they lived and the maturing and changing music of their idols, even those too young to truly understand what was going on.

This era also produced a number of experimental but lively rock 'n roll television shows. *Shindig!* premiered on ABC in late 1964 and was a pop-music variety show focused on music and musicians; yet it also featured "The Shindig

Dancers," a group of 10 girls doing choreography featuring modern ASDF dances. ABC also produced the rival *Shivaree*, which featured 4 go-go dancers (most notable for including Teri Garr) and focused more on girl groups. *Hullabaloo* was NBC's entrée and featured professional dancers in a coed group of 2-4 men and 4-6 women performing both choreographed modern dance as well as individual freestyle dancing (dancing however they wanted) during the Hulabaloo-A-Go-Go segment of each episode. These shows all featured three major elements that were notably different from earlier music and dance shows: lively music; strong female dancers doing individual movements, even if a male was nearby; and simple repeatable motions and steps which any beginner or moderate dancer could easily repeat and incorporate into their own dancing. Although these shows only lasted for a short two year span (from 1964 to 1966), they left a lasting impression on the ASDF.[8]

As the Hippie counterculture and psychedelia overtook mainstream pop to become the sound of youth in the late Sixties, American culture continued to fracture. Many Vietnam vets sought refuge by either joining the counterculture anti-war movement; attending college on the GI Bill and attempted to imitate their fathers by working, starting a family, and ignoring their undiagnosed Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms;[9] retreating into off-grid solitude; becoming thrill seekers by joining motorcycle gangs and other outlaw organizations; or committing suicide. For those young Americans opposed to the war and rejecting "the establishment," the goal was to find enlightenment and create that higher consciousness, most often by getting physically high on some drug with hallucinogenic properties. However, the majority of Americans, even the youth coming of age, continued to tread the new typical path of high school, trade training or college, work, marriage, and children. The increasing trend of more women attending college after high school, begun in the 1950s, continued with most young women expecting to find employment after graduation.

Despite its amazing popularity in the media and with young people, the Hippie movement only really lasted a few years. The Beatles officially broke up in 1970. The ideas and ideals of the late 1960s began to be co-opted by large corporations as a way to market products to all segments of the Baby Boomer generation. Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, and Jim Morrison of The Doors, all major symbols of the movement, died from drug overdoses. However, 'Peace and Love,' the primary point propagated by the movement, would become engrained

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[8] This information was garnered by viewing all the available episodes for each program at the Library of Congress in 2017.

[9] PTSD was not an official diagnosis until 1980, when its inclusion in the APA's DSM-III caused controversy but filled an important gap in psychiatric treatment, theory, and understanding of how we deal with trauma, especially the sustained trauma incurred during combat.

into the American consciousness, alternatively embraced or ridiculed by each successive generation, musical genre, and cultural movement.

Television and movies continued to inform and shape the dancing of average Americans. In *American Bandstand's 40th Anniversary Special*, Gloria Estefan raved about learning the greatest dances from the show, and Paula Abdul gushed "like every kid in America, I used to tune into *American Bandstand* to catch the latest dance moves.…We'd sit in front of the TV set and mimic every move." Don Cornelius's *Soul Train* burst onto the television landscape in 1971, finally showcasing black dance culture to a national audience for the first time. Dancing was, and would remain throughout its run, the main focus of the show. During the inaugural show, the dancers coupled off but mostly danced without touching each other, either facing each other or moving side-by-side. Within a year, the coupling became less noticeable and solo dancing could be discerned. *Soul Train's* line dancing, similar to the Stroll on *Bandstand*, would become a major showcase for the dancers to show off their own choreography, and over time, it became more intense, acrobatic, and outrageous.[10]

The changes in society and on television would show up on the ASDF. In my "Changes to the American Social Dance Floor" survey, 60% of respondents said "No" when asked if a partner was required to get on the dance floor. Over 70% of female respondents, including those who came danced in the 1950s, stated they had both asked someone to dance and had been asked, showing a strong move toward independence and equality. A similar pattern is noticeable on *Soul Train* episodes during interviews with the dancers; the woman took the lead in answering more often than the men, usually had higher aspirations (wanting to be a doctor or lawyer as opposed to the men who want to have union and blue-collar jobs), and would describe the dance motion they would be showing off. Dancing singularly using one's own moves with no set leader or follower but still coupled off and occasionally touching or interacting became the dominant style, though just barely as many couples still danced close together following prescribed steps or motions.[11]

1974-1981: Rebelling Against Rebellion

"As the sixties ended and the seventies began, an altogether more cynical era took hold; peace, love, and understanding gave way to sex, drugs, and rock and roll"(Jacobson front flap). During the seven years between Nixon's resignation in

[10] This information was garnered by viewing numerous episodes of *Soul Train* (1971-2) in 2017.

[11] Viewed numerous episodes of *American Bandstand* (1964-74), *Soul Train* (1971-74), and eight regional shows from around the country (1968-74).

1974 and the launch of MTV in 1981, five major happenings dominated the American consciousness: the Watergate scandal and its political implications, the US pulling out of Vietnam and the psychological scarring from that war, the energy crisis and the economic phenomenon of stagnation, the surprising popularity of Disco, and the political emergence of conservative Christianity as a response to the growing disillusionment with the perceived secularization of a swiftly changing American society. Societal changes were either happening too fast or too slowly, depending upon which side of any argument one was on, and there were numerous movements and calls for legal and systemic change within every sector of politics, society, and the economy.

Music in the early 1970s began to take on a more cerebral tone, aimed at connecting the listener to a story or a concept as opposed to instilling a desire to move. The driving principle of rock became the "hippie aesthetic" – the principle idea that "a rock musician is an artist who has a responsibility to produce sophisticated music using whatever means are at his or her disposal…[that] should stand up to repeated listening and the lyrics should deal with important issues or themes" (Covach 302). By 1974, musicians of all stripes were employing this aesthetic by putting out concept albums and touring huge shows around the country designed to take concert attendees on long, in-depth, highly stylized journeys aimed at altering their consciousness and forcing them to question their beliefs and reality. The most well-known and longest-lasting of these concept albums and concert journeys is Pink Floyd's *The Wall*, which is still to this day being played as a laser light show in many parts of the US.

However, an underground music and dance movement had been brewing, with the occasional hit entering the mainstream: George McCrae's "Rock Your Baby" (1974), Van McCoy's "The Hustle," and KC and the Sunshine Band's "That's the Way I Like It" (1975), all of which went to number 1 on both the pop and the rock charts (Covach 366). Disco began in Paris in the late 1960s and quickly infiltrated the American black and gay nightclub scenes, which had always been dance-centered, with all-night dance music sessions. Then it burst into the mainstream with the 1977 film *Saturday Night Fever* following the exploits of a Brooklyn teenager working to become king of the disco dance floor as the only chance to escape his bleak reality and future. A throwback to the films and musicals of the 1930s, this story resonated with audiences across the country seeking to forget their reality for a few hours, "dance the pain away," and just have fun. John Travolta's mix of dance skills and highly masculine attractiveness established the standard for a macho disco dancer; the tight and shiny clothing from the film showed where fashion was heading and gave average Americans the desire to adorn themselves with bright, shiny, colorful plumage for a night on the town. The movie grossed over $300 million at the box office and the soundtrack,

featuring numerous Bee Gees songs including their most famous "Stayin' Alive," spent 24 weeks at No. 1 on the pop chart and won Album of the Year at the 1979 Grammys (Smith 141-3). Disco fever swept the nation with disco clubs, roller discos, disco cruises, all-disco radio stations, and disco television shows; by 1980, there were approximately 20,000 discos across the US (Clark 148).

With the "hippie aesthetic" noticeably permeating most commercially profitable forms of pop and rock 'n roll, music worked to continue the greater-than-thou mindset popularized by the artists of the late 1960s, especially those who had overdosed. No longer should you listen to a single song repeatedly, you should listen to the whole album, and maybe sync it up to a movie or play it backward looking for hidden meanings. Large corporations co-opted the ideas and ideals of the peace and equality movements for marketing purposes, helping fund giant arena tours full of flash and glamor that shocked and amazed the attendees while outraging the older generations. Many of the original teenagers from the 1950s now had teenagers who were seeking music and identities significantly different from their (lame) parents, who had sought the same during their youth; those who had come of age in the 1960s were either in college and/or young parents searching for a deeper connection to their world, having lost faith and trust in their politicians, the US government, and the American status quo.

The ASDF became a place where dancers could express themselves in any manner they wanted: no dances or steps needed to be known or done to be allowed on the floor. Freestyle dancing had become mainstream, allowing each dancer to interpret the music individually. Dancers no longer needed to touch each other, though they still danced as a noticeable couple (either fac-to-face or side-by-side), and line dances regained some popularity, both as lines facing each other with a couple dancing between the lines (like the Stroll mentioned earlier) and as individuals performing the same steps standing side-by-side with their partner or a large group (like the Bump or the Electric Slide). *Soul Train's* line dances became a way for the male dancers to show off their plumage (i.e. shiny fabrics, fringe, extensive bedazzling, tight clothing, etc.) while engaging in acts of strength, agility, and extreme flexibility. Jumping from the stage, dropping into a split on one beat and returning to standing on the next beat, and doing other acrobatics became common occurrences. Camera operators began focusing more often on a single dancer as opposed to both dancers in that couple, and the dancers showed off more side-by-side choreography, especially when on the various raised platform stages.[12] Dancers on *American Bandstand* wore more conservative clothing, both is style and shine, and danced less energetically, but freestyle

[12] Viewed numerous episodes of *Soul Train* (1973-77).

dancing, both types of line dancing, and planned choreography dominated.[13] New York's budding Hip-Hop scene produced break dancers, called B-Boys, who isolated different sections of the body and created specific motions for that single section—often from areas not typically spotlighted like the rib cage, wrist, knee, neck, or shoulder; media coverage through the news and small parts as dancers in movies and on TV shows brought this isolation to the mainstream (Jun). However, the extreme athleticism and rejection of female partnering in breaking precluded it from becoming more than a minor part of the ASDF, with the exception of "the Robot" which is easy for anyone of any ability to dance and continues to grace many a dance floor.

Disco captured America in 1977 just as many people pined for something new to believe in and somewhere to escape from their bleak reality and their dismal future prospects. Just like during the Great Depression, a night at the disco became a cheap and straightforward way to escape for an evening of fun and entertainment with the possibility of gaining minor celebrity and cash winnings from the numerous dance contests being held. The music embraced a heavy fast hypnotic beat, even in the slow songs; catchy hooks, repeated often and only slightly changing throughout the song; and explicit lyrics about sex, love, fun, and human connection, ideas often downplayed in the songs following the "hippie aesthetic." Disco dancing called for a return of the embracing couple who could get lost in the lighthearted, upbeat music as they danced different steps within an overall dance, creating a nostalgic return to ballroom style dancing. By learning the numerous steps within the framework of a singular dance, most often the Hustle, dancers had a structure they could rely upon which never let them down. Whenever things began to spin out of control, you could always return to the basic step, start again, and not lose your position or respect on the dance floor.

American Bandstand played many disco songs and featured stars such as Donna Summers and the Village People, but it never transitioned to an all-disco format. *Soul Train,* dominated by R&B, soul, and dance music, had already incorporated disco and was never really affected by disco fever. Local tv shows like *Disco Step-By-Step*, taped at the 747 Club in downtown Buffalo, New York, aired from September 1977 to January 1980 and led the way in teaching disco dancing to the home viewer. A basic step of a disco dance, most often one of the many variations of the Hustle (such as the New York Hustle, the Latin Hustle, or the West Coast Hustle) would be taught in slow motion first from the male side and then the female reversal. Then the viewer would be shown the dancing in real time and encouraged to practice right then, as if they were next to the dancing couple on their screen. Rather than a show to watch and enjoy, like earlier *The Arthur Murray Party*, these shows sought to recreate an actual dance lesson.

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[13] Viewed numerous episodes *American Bandstand* (1974-81).

By now, the ASDF was more fully integrated, with white couples, black couples, and mixed couples, showing the extent to which integration had been occurring within the larger American society. Line dancing of all kinds was regularly seen, but only to songs that called for it. However, even though couples had returned to embracing and moving in tandem, a significant amount of distance habitually arose between the dancers, the couples regularly split apart, and few couples ever traveled any real distance from the spot they had staked on the dance floor.

1981-1991: Video Kills the Radio Star

For most Americans, the 1980s were a time of relative calm and economic growth. President Ronald Reagan, elected in 1980, implemented supply-side economic policies, known as "Reaganomics," reducing tax rates and controlling the cash supply to stimulate the economy, lower inflation, and jolt the US out of stagflation. The stock market rebounded and making money became the quest of the new generation just graduating from college; Yuppies (Young Urban Professionals) arrived with a conservative outlook and a desire to win at all costs. The decade would be alternately known as the "Go-Go Eighties" and the "Me Generation." The fictional character Gordon Gekko encapsulated this mindset in the 1987 film *Wall Street* by stating "The point is, ladies and gentlemen, that greed – for lack of a better word – is good." Reagan would handily win reelection in 1984, with his vice-president George Bush winning in 1988.

The worlds of music and television dramatically changed on August 1st, 1981, with the launch of a new 24-hour music-only cable TV channel. "Ladies and gentlemen, rock and roll" followed by the Buggles' "Video Killed the Radio Star" introduced a new way to listen to music, by watching short videos on television. For years, bands and their record labels had created "clips," short videos featuring a song, for afternoon music programs and evening variety shows; a band and their song could gain free airtime and the possibility of popularity. Clips and music videos had become especially important in the European and Australasian markets where getting on TV usually guaranteed success; thus, UK, Australian, and New Zealand bands already had numerous videos available, with the Buggles 1979 UK hit chosen as the inaugural piece. Initially only seen by a small amount of people, MTV (Music Television) would quickly help popularize cable tv and rapidly move it into new markets across the US (Covach 417). Image would forever become fully intertwined with the music for all musical artists, whether they were new or struggling to stay relative and marketable.

The advent of MTV and the dramatic rise in popularity of music videos marrying music to image allowed artists who were young, stylish, and physically

attractive to take full advantage of this new platform for artistic and promotional expression. Michael Jackson used his considerable dance and performance skills to break away from his childish image from The Jackson Five to create a string of hits that topped both the pop and R&B charts and videos that revolutionized the concept through slick choreography, movie-quality cinematography, and great attention to detail. *Thriller,* released in 1982, would top all the charts, contain seven No. 1 hits, and become one of the best-selling albums in history; the 13-minute video for the song "Thriller" changed music video artistry while showcasing new dance moves that continue to be seen on the ASDF (Edwards). He would earn the title of "King of Pop" with his numerous hits featuring a strong beat and danceability, showcasing his roots in early 1970s black pop and his later experiences with Disco. New Wave and synth-pop began making waves, building a friendlier, toned-down variation of the late-70s Punk music scenes which reveled in outlandish, confrontational, loud, and aggressive behavior by rejecting the "hippie aesthetic" and musically returning to simplicity. Bands like Heart and Blondie feature unpolished vocal stylings with traces of blues and a return to rock 'n roll basics. The Go-Go's came out of the LA Punk scene with a rough-and-rowdy sound combining infectious pop vocals, strong dance beats, loud punk rock guitars, and sweet backing vocals with a hard-partying vibe and reputation which spoke to young women and gay men just coming of age and trying to come into their own as adults. With the 1982 success of "We Got the Beat," their signature song, and their first album, *Beauty and the Beat*, they would be declared America's Sweethearts and praised for being the first all-female band to write, perform, produce, and shape their own music and image.[14]

Discos would rapidly go by the wayside by 1982 as nightclubs followed the return to rock and pop; yet Disco's dance beat, more explicit lyrics, and focus on fun continues to influence music and dance. On *Bandstand,* dancers were noticeably solo, with dancers only coupling up for the Spotlight Dance segment featuring three couples showing off.[15] Slow dancing on *Soul Train* became more sexually explicit, and the line dancing switched to segregated groupings, with a women's set and a men's set. Two lines of women facing each other did a simple side-to-side step while a single woman danced down the middle toward the camera with the lines taking turns; this was duplicated with two lines of me on the other side of the dance floor. The women's dancing was notably more graceful and dramatic, whereas the men focused upon showing athleticism, agility,

[14] The Go-Go's are still the most successful all-female rock band, and the only one to not be controlled in some manner by a man.

[15] Viewed numerous episodes of *American Bandstand* (1981-84).

strength, and power.[16] Although both tv shows would continue through the decade, neither propelled any changes to culture or dance anymore.

Dance would become "the heartbeat of music videos" as music was now primarily digested through the visual medium. The B-Boys from New York's Hip-Hop scene would find work as dancers on music videos, helping bring their jerkier aesthetic to mainstream dancing, especially through Michael Jackson's videos for "Thriller" and "Beat It". Instead of flowing through the music and striving for grace and smoothness, the new electronic sound called for ending a motion on the beat and sending that body part in another direction. For example, a fist pumping into the air above the dancer would hit its highest point on the beat and return downward before moving upward to "strike" the beat at its highest point again; this could be repeated for as long as the dancer wanted. The Robot offers a good example of a dancer ending a movement on the beat and moving in a different direction, then ending that new motion on the next beat. The beat would now be externally kept and shown by multiple body parts moving either singularly or in tandem. Dance became more about doing specific motions as opposed to performing broader connected movements.

Freestyle returned to the ASDF but with a new focus on maintaining stricter gender norms. The fuller separation of couples (more than half of the survey respondents who danced in the early 1980s stated that even when coupled they danced their own moves with only the occasional touch or interaction) and the growing prominence of the Gay Rights Movement and gay visibility served to curtail dancing by men. The average male dancer no longer had a woman in his arms and the automatic assumption of heterosexuality, so he had to proclaim his sexual orientation through his dress, his attitude, and his dance moves. The "White Boy Shuffle" crept onto the dance floor to become the prominent dance move for unskilled male dancers by the middle of the decade; men on both *Bandstand* and *Soul Train* from the era can be seen doing it.[17] This masculine dance is a small side-to-side stepping motion: the left foot steps left with the right foot stepping to meet it, with this motion being repeated in the opposite direction. The feet never cross over each other, and the dancer only moves a foot or two in either direction, depending on how long his legs are and how large a person he is. A man could do a move that was graceful, smooth, or involved twirling, but he had to immediately follow it with either a powerful motion, such as a fist pump; a show of strength or athleticism, such as jumping off or onto a platform; or a return to the "White Boy Shuffle."

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[16] Viewed numerous episodes of *Soul Train* (1981-84).

[17] Viewed numerous episodes of *American Bandstand* (1981-89) and *Soul Train* (1981-91).

Pop music became more dance-oriented as musicians incorporated sharp tight moves, street dancing, and repeatable motions into their videos. Madonna's dance background and close association with the New York club scene would heavily influence her music, videos, and touring shows, garnering her heavy MTV exposure and massive popularity. Her songs focused on controversial issues, her music was imminently danceable, and her videos and tours combined dramatic fashions with creative dance moves to inspire both men and women. Paula Abdul would create choreography for Janet Jackson, herself, and numerous other musicians with a keen sense of the viewer using this medium to learn the hip new dances (just as she had from *American Bandstand*); her moves were professional and extensive but would always include some motion that could be incorporated into the viewer's own dance moves without any training.

Hip-Hop and Rap emerged from the street parties held in New York City's minority communities during the 1970s, going mainstream in the early 1980s to become a staple on popular radio by the middle of the decade. Although the early hits were lighthearted, raw energy and controversial subject matters helped change the tone to more hard-hitting demands and aggressive taunting. The violence raging in America's poorest Black and minority neighborhoods permeated Rap and Hip-Hop, bringing a more violent undertone to dance with the rise of dance battles between "crews" and messages of misogyny, militancy, and revenge (Covach 463-77).

Entering the ASDF now involved claiming a spot on the floor and not moving out of a small invisible box that extended no more than a foot or two in any direction, the Personal Dance Box.[18] The shift away from movement around and across the dance floor to various motions done within your claimed area began in the 1960s with the emergence of Freestyle dancing and single-motion dances. The 1970s mixed single-motion dances and the Freestyle aesthetic of "doing your own thing" with couples moving around the dance floor. Thus, the ASDF became an uneasy place as those moving around the floor now had both moving dancers and "settled" dancers to avoid; whereas those "settled" dancers rarely bumped into anyone but were regularly bumped into by the moving dancers. By the 1980s, couples moving around and across the floor had been supplanted by individuals claiming their Personal Dance Box on the floor. Those who did dance as a couple began to follow the unspoken rule of staying in their area, often only coupling to sway together to a slow song.

1991-1998: The Emergence of the Marginalized Outsider

[18] This term is a creation of my own invention based upon viewing numerous television shows, movies, and personal observation of the ASDF over the last three decades.

The 1990s began with the emergence of Grunge in 1991 and the election of Bill Clinton in 1992 and ended with the rise of the Internet and the splintering of music into easily found niche markets. Throughout the late 1980s, a burgeoning Indie (Independent) and Alternative scene took over the musical underground. Easing the transition from the anarchistic attitudes and hard-biting music of late-70s early-80s Punk to the approachableness of alternative, bands such as the Pixies and R.E.M. and singers like Lisa Loeb and Suzanne Vega spoke with a softer sound that rejected the crass commercialism and trappings of fame and pop music success by embracing a self-conscious scruffiness and do-it-yourself aesthetic. These artists garnered mainstream popularity while maintaining their Alternative and Indie cred.

Nirvana's 1991 album *Nevermind* brought Seattle's Grunge scene to national prominence. Their song "Smells Like Teen Spirit" employed the regular repetition of "Here we are now, entertain us/How stupid and contagious/Here we are now, entertain us" to become the anthem for a passive generation raised on television, advertising, and buying products who had become frustrated with the emptiness of consumer culture but were unable to find a new direction (Smith 214-15). The calculated carelessness of mellow, tortured lyrics in the verses as they drive toward the frenetic intensity of aggressive choruses echoed the bipolar nature of American society and particularly the emerging generation (Covach 482). R.E.M.'s 1991 album *Out of Time* helped solidify this frustration with songs like "Losing My Religion" and "Shiny Happy People" critiquing the dominant 'greed is good' culture and showing a strong desire to leave it all behind. Numerous other bands and solo artists followed this desire, allowing the Indie and Alternative music scenes to become the dominating musical force for the rest of the decade.

The ASDF of the 1990s saw few changes, as the separation of the couple and the dominance of Freestyle dancing allowed for an embracing of highly diverse dance styles and dancers. Mosh pit dancing – done by a large group of people jumping up and down in an enclosed space, directly in front of the stage at a live concert, often with the intention of bouncing off each other with an intensity ranging from gentle bumps to violent crashes between dancers – had been a staple of the Punk and early-80s underground, most notably with slamdancing at CBGB in NYC. It continued in various forms with heavy and acid metal fans, who amped up the violence and sought to draw blood, and head-bangers, who preferred to stand around and nod their heads forward and back quickly and vehemently, effectively "banging" their head. Grunge updated the mosh pit with dancers lost in the music and paying no attention to the other dancers, so that the bumping was more accidental than deliberate. The basic mosh pit sensibility would be folded into the more mainstream ASDF, allowing dancers to do

everything from standing and gently bopping up and down to jumping around ecstatically when the appropriate song gets played.

Madonna's 1990 album *Vogue* and the accompanying video for the song "Vogue" brought Voguing into the mainstream, while the video for Queen Latifah's "Come into My House" from her debut album *All Hail the Queen* further cemented Voguing's popularity on black dance floors. Voguing began in the Harlem gay scene of the late 1960s in opposition to the campiness of drag and as a non-aggressive way to dance battle; the dancers would hit-and-hold poses reminiscent of the perfect lines and flexibility of the models in fashion magazines like *Vogue* (Selby et al.). This hit-and-hold style of dance and the hand motions surrounding the face done by Madonna and her dancers in her video would bring simple versions of Vogue moves and the better-than-thou model attitude onto the ASDF; women and gay men incorporated it into their dancing, while straight men would only do it in an exaggerated comic manner. Dancers would blend the highly stylized grace of Voguing with the more extreme jerkiness of the ASDF in the 1980s to create a smoother, more deliberate style during the 1990s.

1998-Now: Full Freedom of Motion and the Loss of Movement

Irene Cara declared that "I can have it all, now I'm dancing for my life." Daft Punk told us "We're gonna celebrate/ Celebrate and dance so free." Chubby Checker encouraged us to "Twist again, like we did last summer," while Whitney Houston hoped to "dance with somebody/ With somebody who loves me." ABBA nostalgically remembers "the dancing queen/ Young and sweet/ Having the time of [her] life." And numerous artists have told the heartbroken to "Dance the Pain Away."

By the turn of the 21st Century, the ASDF had completed its transition from twirling couples moving around and across the dance floor to individuals staking a spot on the dance floor to perform repetitive motions and dances. This transformation allows dancers to perform any dance style they prefer based upon the music currently being played. The creation of specific single-motion dances provides dancers with a wide array of motions, and the dominance of Freestyle dancing ensures that no one can be excluded for not having a partner, skill, or internal rhythm. Furthermore, easy accessibility to all types of music and dance styles on the internet has splintered the music market, creating a reality where no single style or artist can dominate in the way Elvis and the Beatles did, although Beyonce and Taylor Swift are giving it the old college try. With DJs now "spinning" on computers with access to vast libraries of music, dancers can easily hear music from all genres popular since the 1950s during just a few hours on many dance floors around the country. Social dancing has morphed to become

individual and particular to the song being played as opposed to any specific overarching style, although certain single genre dance floors remain popular, such as those at a ballroom or a salsa club. This catering to all forms of dance and dancers ensures that the 21st Century ASDF will remain the purview of the individual creating a dance that represents the tone and style of the song being played at that moment.

The 1950s ASDF was populated by couples twirling across the floor with good manners dictating regular partner exchanges, while Patti Page lamented that:

> I was dancing with my darling to the Tennessee Waltz
> When an old friend I happened to see.
> Introduced her to my loved one,
> And while they were dancing,
> My friend stole my sweetheart from me.

By the 21st century, the ASDF would be populated by individuals dancing near each other but rarely with each other. Robyn would articulate these changes with her 2010 dance hit:

> I just wanna dance all night […]
> I'm spinning around in circles.
> I'm in the corner […]
> I'm right over here, why can't you see me?
> I'm giving it my all […]
> I keep dancing on my own.

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Analyzing Feminism, Hip-Hop Sexual Scripting and Empowerment in Beyoncé's Discography

MELVIN L. WILLIAMS and TIA C.M. TYREE

Despite the pressures often connected with being a Black, international megastar, mother, wife, and feminist, this article examines how Beyoncé embraces empowering Black and Hip-Hop feminist thinking in her collective discography and lyrically navigates popular historic Black female stereotypes, sexual scripts, and sexual roles that remain pervasive and problematic in the music industry. As one of the entertainment industry's most powerful women, Beyoncé is credited with bringing women's issues in popular culture and society to the attention of a larger audience and trailblazing genre-blending, sonic-shifting opportunities for Black musicians in historically underrepresented musical genres (i.e., Americana, country, dance/electronica, and rock and roll). For example, in 2024, she made history as the first Black woman to chart number one on *Billboard's Top Country Albums* and *Hot Country Songs* charts with her *Cowboy Carter* album and its lead single, "Texas Hold 'Em" (Asker; Torres). More importantly, the 2025 *Album of the Year* and *Best Country Album* Grammy winning *Cowboy Carter* sparked increased public interest in Black country musicians evidenced by a *HBO Max* documentary feature, first-time inclusions of Black country artists at the 2024 Black Entertainment Television Awards ceremony, and *Cowboy Carter* collaborator Shaboozey reaching number one on the *Billboard Hot 100 and Hot Country Songs* charts with his country song, "A Bar Song (Tipsy)" (Rowley; Garcia).

As an artist, Beyoncé possesses a powerful positioning in pop culture, within music history and on the world's stage. She occupies an industry status that earlier generations of Black women entertainers may have never imagined– a singing, dancing, acting, entertainment mogul with over 200 million albums sold worldwide and the most Grammy Award wins by a female artist (Dailey and Nuernberger). She is also a part of a longer lineage of Black women who have used their voices to describe their feelings about being Black women and, through this process, gave other Black women power from their messages as evidenced through thematically curated, musical releases, such as *Lemonade*, *Black as King*, and *Renaissance,* that spotlighted transnational Black women's and Black queer social issues (Bridgforth).

Named by *Billboard* as the "Greatest Pop Star of the 21st Century," Beyoncé is often cited for her over 25 years of musical influence, evolution, and impact, yet she is equally credited for creating significant moments in the advancement of feminism in pop music and culture (Unterberger). While many cite her 2013 self-titled surprise album, *Beyoncé*, as the pop icon's public feminist unveiling and her 2014 MTV Video Music Awards performance, in which she performed with the word "FEMINIST" in large capital letter as the "holy grail" of popular culture "feminist endorsements," Beyoncé's discussions of feminism date as far back as 2010 (Bennett). During a 2010 interview with Jane Gordon, Beyoncé initially declared, "I think I am a feminist in a way," before embracing the identity formally three years later in a *Rolling Stone* interview and describing herself as a "modern-day feminist" (Cubarrubia).

In addition to these public assertions, she advanced other noteworthy indicators of her connections and commitments to feminism and women's empowerment as an artist, appearing on the Spring 2013 cover of *Ms.* Magazine, hiring an all-women's band for her tours, incorporating feminist writers in her lyrics, and penning an open feminist essay entitled, "Gender Equality is a Myth" for *The Shriver Report* (Whittington and Jordan; Knowles-Carter, "Gender Equality Is a Myth"). Her initial public celebration did not stop there. *Time*'s Eliana Dockterman described Beyoncé as "the embodiment of modern feminism for a generation that has been reluctant to claim the word," and Amy Zimmerman credited the singer for making the word *feminism,* "Beyoncé-fied," "empowering and beautiful, trendy, and hyper-relevant" (Dockterman; Zimmerman).

However, it bears noting that Beyoncé's feminist messages were not without criticism. Tia C. M. Tyree and Melvin L. Williams noted, "At the peak of her [Beyoncé's] feminist media discourses, she was both accepted and rejected as a feminist" and "viewed as both empowering and disempowering by feminist theorists" ("Flawless Feminist or Fallible Freak?" 126). For example, Black feminist theory pioneer bell hooks accused Beyoncé of being a terrorist to the feminist movement in 2014, declaring, "I see a part of Beyoncé that is in fact, anti-feminist — that is a terrorist, especially in terms of the impact on young girls" (Takeda). hooks' remarks ignited cultural contentions among Black and hip-hop feminists who countered the terrorist allegation with defenses of Beyoncé. For example, Brittney Cooper classified hooks' label of Beyoncé as "an act of discursive violence" and plain "bullshit," noting the limited support of feminism required a requisite support of those willing to embrace it and urging feminists to

push back on those who reduce Beyoncé's artistic, feminist, and intellectual contributions to a commodity (Crunk Feminist Collective). Ten years following hooks remarks, Montéz Jennings reflected on her criticism of Beyoncé, noting:

> I am not going to say that Beyoncé is without reproach, but neither is bell hooks. I do believe Beyoncé can and should be criticized. There should be a discussion of her relationship to money and product as well as making use of the cultural zeitgeist or as one Tiktoker, Ratchet Intellectual, referred to it as, "the aesthetic" of the moment. (6)

Jennings's remark mirrored Rosalind Gill's sentiments that popular feminist media figures (like Beyoncé) articulated a postfeminist sensibility: a neoliberal relegation of gender inequality to the past (Gill). Undoubtedly, the discourses surrounding Beyoncé's connection to feminism was (and continues to be) multifaceted, contradictory, and reflective of intersectional challenges facing Black women entertainers' feminist identity articulations. However, it cannot be denied that Beyoncé's fierce feminism raises attention and still incites tension within the feminist community.

While such ideological tensions persisted long before Beyoncé's feminist identity articulations, her feminist discussions and increased media visibility prompted significant academic works, including Adrienne Trier-Bieniek's edited collection *The Beyoncé Effect: Essays on Sexuality, Race, and Feminism* and Kinitra Brooks and Kameelah Martin's *The Lemonade Reader,* as well as an assortment of academic investigations in peer-reviewed academic journals. Such works incorporated Afro-futurist, Black feminist, ethnomusicological, gender, hip-hop feminist, popular culture, postfeminist, and sexuality theoretical frameworks in their analyses of Beyoncé's cultural impact, discography, feminist messages, visuality, and women's empowerment impacts on mass audiences.

Specifically, the current study replicates and extends Tyree and Williams's investigation of Black and hip-hop feminist themes in Beyoncé's solo discography. Released as a book chapter, Tyree and Williams analyzed Beyoncé's five studio albums, between 2003 and 2013, and served as the most comprehensive analysis of Beyoncé's discography to date. While impactful, Beyoncé has released three studio albums since Tyree and Williams's analysis; a factor that raises the question, "Has Beyoncé continued to include feminist messaging in her album releases since their scholarly investigation?" Conducting a textual analysis of Beyoncé's eight

solo albums as well as one collaborative album with her husband Sean "Jay-Z" Carter released from 2003 to 2024, this article 1) investigates if Beyoncé's discography aligns with Black and hip-hop feminist theory tenets; 2) identifies prominent themes within her lyrics and pinpoints any shifts in lyrical themes after motherhood, marriage, and the overall maturation of her career; 3) provides an understanding of the alignment of her lyrics with historic Black female stereotypes and sexual scripts; and 4) determines if her work overall supports notions of empowerment.

Beyoncé's Influence in Popular Culture and the Music Industry

Beyoncé's career began in her childhood. Her career began as the lead vocalist for the wildly popular all-girl group Destiny's Child. Selling over 60 million records worldwide, Destiny's Child was ranked by *Billboard* magazine as the ninth most successful artist/band of the 2000s (*Billboard*). Her start in the group is significant because, according to Evelyn McDonnell, girl groups are a "petri dish" for feminism (McDonnell). Moreover, the group released songs like "Independent Woman Part 1," "Survivor," and "Girl," which included messages of empowerment and independence. She continued to embed similar messages in her later solo songs (Moore).

Beyoncé's lyrics aren't simply about sisterhood. An analysis of her first four albums showed consistent themes that also covered love and relationships, and lyrics further supported having financial freedom, controlling her career and life; being sexually free and comfortable with individual flaws as well as being strong enough to voice being mistreated (Tyree and Williams). She is often linked to her husband, Shawn "Jay Z" Carter, who is an equally powerful and successful businessman and rap artist, and her fifth album, *Lemonade*, was a direct reflection of her experiences after infidelity in their marriage. Yet, presenting what could be described as a Utopian vision of healing and community, it put forth a complex set of messages that included Black southern culture; African diasporic memory; gendered, intimate history of racial trauma; and myths related to postfeminism and postracialism (Baade et al.). Intentionally creating content for and about Black women and girls has become more common in her discography and career, and it was arguably first seen in her "Formation" video and subsequent controversial Super Bowl performance, which was satirically labeled as "the day Beyoncé turned Black" (Hargrove 27). Her focus on Black culture continued with her 2018

appearance at the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival. As the first Black woman to headline the festival (Velez), she took the experience as an important moment for her to celebrate Black people and culture. She said this about her festival experience:

> I wanted us to be not only proud of the show but of the process … thankful for the beauty that comes with a painful history…. I wanted everyone to feel grateful for their curves, their sass, their honesty, thankful for their freedom…. We were able to create a free, safe space where none of us were marginalized. (Beyoncé, *Homecoming*)

However, Beyoncé is not always celebrated. Her public image is often rooted in perfection, and it is seen as a reflection of the professional team that crafts her public persona, music promotion, and fan relations (Altayeb). This does not mean there are no connections to stereotypes or imagery problems for Black women and girls. She is said to be a "diva" who presents a highly performative and consciously constructed public image (Loth), which is a longstanding sexual script (Stephens and Few). Sexual scripts are schemas used to categorize norms regarding appropriate sexual beliefs and behaviors (Stephens and Few). She calls herself a bitch and is connected to the Bad Bitch sexual script, which is rooted in a racialized and sexualized representation of Black women's bodies connected to the Hottentot Venus (LaVoulle and Ellison). She strategically capitalizes on her sexuality and has successfully used her body as a commodity (LaVoulle and Ellison), a problematic connection often made by Black women entertainers in US society. Dionne P. Stephens and Layli D. Few assert that "everyday consumption of cultural and interpersonal messages regarding sexual images has a direct impact on young African Americans' sexual self-identity, behaviors, and experiences" (252). Barbara Read argues that seeing Beyoncé's hypersexualized behavior and overexposed image might create damaging, unhealthy, and disempowering behaviors and competition among women and girls.

Beyoncé, Black Feminism, and Theorizing Her Connections to Hip-Hop Feminism and Historic Hip-Hop Sexual Scripts

Beyoncé's embodiment of feminism has received mixed reviews within the Black feminist community, with Black and hip-hop feminists such as bell hooks, Patricia

Hill Collins, Joan Morgan, Brittney Cooper, and Mark Anthony Neal offering rich perspectives on the global pop star. The current section will 1) explore the history and themes of Black feminism, 2) chronicle the rise of the hip-hop feminist movement, and 3) situate Beyoncé within Black and hip-hop feminisms and popular sexual script stereotypes in hip-hop and popular media. Prior to the efforts of Black feminists to identify variations in women's lives, the unique contributions and experiences of Black women were largely misinterpreted in feminist scholarship, resulting in inaccurate assessments of their gender consciousness (Collins, "Black Feminist Thought"). Black feminist thought operates as a critical social theory that conceptualizes Black women's identities as organic, fluid, interdependent, multiple, and dynamic socially constructed locations within specific historical contexts. Describing Black women as a unique group within international social relations, Black feminism both names, in different ways and by different inflections, "the refusal of racialized sexism, transantagonism, anti-Blackness, the gender binary, and a range of other identificatory and sociohistorical vectors tied to hierarchical and fatal hegemonic regimes" (Green and Bey 438). Further, Black feminism investigates how intersectional processes of race, ethnicity, gender, class, and sexual orientation shape Black women's individual and collective actions, consciousness, media representations, and self-definitions.

Patricia Hill Collins locates four major themes in Black feminist thought. First, Black women empower themselves by creating self-definitions and self-valuations that establish positive, multiple images and repel negative, controlling representations of Black womanhood. Second, Black women oppose and disassemble the overarching and interlocking structure of domination in terms of race, class, and gender oppression. Third, Black women interconnect intellectual thought and political activism. Fourthly, Black women recognize a distinct cultural heritage that provides them with the skills needed to resist and transform daily discrimination. Historically, within a capitalist, patriarchal global society, Black women were not respectfully represented in mass media, resulting in unfair juxtapositions about their sexuality and femininity (Stephens and Phillips). In response, Black feminist thought interrogates Black women's media culture and cultural figures (i.e., Beyoncé), articulating a consciousness that gives Black women in and outside of the media an essential tool of resistance against all forms of subordination (Scott).

Black feminist thought indisputably takes elements and themes of Black women's culture and infuses them with new meaning, articulating a consciousness

that gives Black women an essential tool of resistance against all forms of subordination (Scott). However, like the mainstream feminist movement, Black feminism has been critiqued by Black female writers, such as Shani Jamila, Morgan, Gwendolyn Pough, and Brittney Cooper, for failing to address the current realities and needs of a young generation of Black women largely impacted by popular music and hip-hop culture (Peoples). Hip-hop feminism advanced approaches by earlier Black feminists to address the current realities and needs of Black women and women of color largely impacted by popular music and hip-hop culture (Peoples). Coining herself a hip-hop feminist, Morgan initiated a dialogue between two unlikely partners: hip-hop and feminism, referring to it as a feminism brave enough to acknowledge the gray areas of Black women's experiences often unacknowledged and underserved in earlier Black feminist modes of theorizing.

Extending Morgan's work, Whitney Peoples noted three major themes present in hip-hop feminist writing that also resonate in the theorizing of older generations of Black feminists. The themes were 1) empowerment, 2) the importance of images and representation, and 3) Black women's involvement in coalitional politics. Through these themes, hip-hop feminists expanded the Black feminist agenda to include hip-hop culture and pushed forward a transnational model of feminism brave enough to challenge older feminists' perspectives and pioneer inclusive feminist lexicons to include queer, gender non-conforming, and transgendered people of color (Lindsey).

Living under intense media scrutiny, much of Beyoncé's life plays out in binaries that are at the center of many controversies and conversations. The complexities and perceived contradictions about her create a wide range of interpretations of her feminist identity and activities. For example, her halftime performance of "Formation" at the 2016 Super Bowl is just one example of the media and cultural criticism that follow her music and performances. Dressed in a costume reflective of the Black Panther Party, the production caused a national conversation among pop culture critics, feminist and race scholars, fans, and social justice activists, all who watched the performance and saw what was "an assertion of the rebellious Black female bodies" (Ramler 11). It is true that Beyoncé's music has important concepts of womanhood and feminism, as it encourages Black women to embrace their sexuality and personal expression, teaches the importance of being oneself, and works to improve Black women's solidarity to fight patriarchy (Larasati). Yet, her "commodity feminism" is said to perpetuate concepts about girls' and women's individual choices improving society "at the expense of

feminist notions of community, collective action, and combating structural oppression" (Utley 11). This "commodity feminism" potentially dilutes feminist agency and empowerment (Riordan). Is the use of the word by Beyoncé signaling a seismic shift in the feminist movement and a true representation of her understanding of the movement's history, or is it simply a "stunt" designed to call attention to herself and a new word in her self-affirming lexicon (Zimmerman)? Furthermore, some question if Beyoncé's feminist musical proclamations are just about album sales or curating new, trendy marketing angles? In response to such questioning, Lucy R. Short asserts that despite the criticism of Beyoncé's ability to be both a feminist and a pop star, Beyoncé should be honored and respected for the claim. As a human being, she is fallible, complex, and a reflection of her history as a Black woman (Short).

Morgan comparably argues in "Is Beyoncé the Trillest Feminist Ever, or Whatever?" that Beyoncé's embodiment of feminism possesses the pedagogical ability to educate Black women on feminism far beyond the classroom. Further, Beyoncé has constantly engaged in the tradition of Black womanist practices that use extra-theological sources as a means of religious and spiritual expression, freedom, and wholeness (Tyler). Elizabeth Whittington and Mackenzie Jordan describe her unique grassroots style of feminism as "Bey Feminism," a take on her nickname Queen Bey. They assert, "everyday Black women" embrace Bey Feminism to help them with "negotiating, co-creating, reinforcing and challenging" their identities in society. Further, they urge Black feminists to not separate from Bey Feminism but rather work to understand its appeal and ways its replication could overcome oppressive patriarchy (Whittington and Jordan 2014).

Undoubtedly, Beyoncé is a part of hip-hop culture. Her award wins in hip-hop/Rap categories (such as her 2021 Best Rap Performance and Best Rap Song Grammy wins with woman rapper, Megan "Megan Thee Stallion" Pete), behavior, countless collaborations with hip-hop artists, fashion choices, and other aspects of her lifestyle place her well within hip-hop culture. Moreover, she has been commonly cited in discussions of the sexual scripting of women in hip-hop media. For example, Stephens and Phillips note that Beyoncé (along with her R&B group Destiny's Child) is a prototype of their *The Diva* hip-hop sexual script, which describes a high-maintenance woman, an evolution of the foundational Jezebel image, that "required a number of material resources to remain happy and retain their social status" and were "often curvaceous, light-skinned women with long hair" (15–16). As previously noted, sexual scripts are schemas used to categorize

norms regarding appropriate sexual beliefs and behaviors (Stephens and Few).

In addition to the *Diva* hip-hop sexual script, Stephens and Phillips identified others through an analysis of racial and ethnic specific messages about sexuality evident in media forums, namely hip-hop media and music genres. From within hip-hop, *The Diva, Gold Digger, Freak, Dyke, Gangster Bitch, Sister Savior, Earth Mother,* and *Baby Mama* have emerged collectively as unique sexual scripts for African American women (Stephens et al.). Extending Stephens and Phillips (2003) sexual scripts, Tyree and Morgan Kirby conceptualize the *T.H.O.T.* hip-hop sexual script, an acronym for "Them Hoes Over There," which is academically defined as a slang term and women's sexual stereotype perpetuated online by memes, which were created, shared, retweeted, and reposted with relative ease. In Rap music and hip-hop culture, the *T.H.O.T.* represents a social media-created stereotype with deep connections to the *Freak* and *Gold-Digger* hip-hop sexual scripts (Tyree and Kirby). Recognizing the complexities of Black and hip-hop feminist arguments on Beyoncé's feminist identity and her connections to contemporary and historic hip-hop sexual scripts, this study conducts an intersectional analysis of her song lyrics and their connections to Black and hip-hop feminist themes and enduring hip-hop sexual scripts to locate her feminist lexicon and messages of empowerment for Black girls and women.

Methodology

Conducting a textual analysis of her eight albums released from 2003 to 2024, this study replicates and extends Tyree and Williams's analysis of Beyoncé's discography, and it also examines how Beyoncé embraces empowering Black and Hip-Hop feminist thinking in her collective album discography and lyrically navigates popular historic Black female stereotypes, sexual scripts and sexual roles that remain pervasive and problematic in the music industry. Initially, Tyree and Williams's research focused on male and female traits in Beyoncé's albums. However, with changing social dynamics and gender fluidity, its inclusion has the potential to unintentionally evoke sexist and racist connotations. Although hegemonic gender tropes exist in past, present, and likely future academic investigations of Black women entertainers, the authors choose to not incorporate them in this analysis of Beyoncé.

Multiple researchers have investigated Beyoncé's lyrics for a variety of reasons. These include inquiries into multiple albums like that of Maeve Eberhardt and Madeline Vdoviak-Markow who investigated her performative persona across five albums; individual albums (i.e., Beyoncé's *Lemonade* album) like Brooks and Martin's *The Lemonade Reader*, which is an interdisciplinary collection of essays that explore Beyoncé's 2016 visual album, *Lemonade*; as well as investigations of specific songs like Neni Kurniawati's analysis of "Run the World." Tyree and Williams also noted two studies that served as an inspiration for their analysis. Brooks analyzed one album, which was *B'Day*. Short analyzed lyrics from two albums, *Beyoncé* and *4*.

However, this study is significant, for it analyzes all of Beyoncé's album releases as of April 2025, which are *Dangerously in Love* in 2003, *B'Day* in 2006, *I am…Sasha Fierce* in 2008, *4* in 2011, *Beyoncé* in 2013, *Lemonade* in 2016, *Everything Is Love* in 2018, *Renaissance* in 2022, and *Cowboy Carter* in 2024, as well as deluxe and platinum edition releases. It is important to highlight the purposeful inclusion of *Everything Is Love*, as this album was developed with her husband, Jay-Z. With the study's intentional consideration to investigate lyrical ties connected to her personal and professional life, this approach provides the best opportunity to increase the range and scope of songs in the study. This sample did not include "Bow Down," as it did not appear on a final album and was said to be folded into the concepts within "Flawless" on the *Beyoncé* album (Newman; Kornhaber).

Social scientists scrutinize popular lyrics because there is an assumption that useful knowledge can be obtained through the study of lyrics, as they provide insights into societal values, including soul music, which is an expression of Black culture and descriptive of listeners' experiences (Freudiger and Almquist). Lyrics are also important to investigate, as there is little interference related to their analysis. Researchers can focus on just words and meaning and not distractions, such as music videos, tonal emphasis of the singer, dancing, nonverbal cues, and costumes.

In any study, the choice of research question, the historical context from which the question is being asked, as well as the theoretical framework will drive the type of methodology used (Brennen). The best approach for this study was a textual analysis, which is an interpretative tool researchers employ to understand the world, and it is a systematic way to uncover how text creates meaning (McKee; Hallahan). Analyzing lyrics should take into consideration the era in which the song

was made popular, the contexts of the performance, dimensions of class, race and ethnicity, gender and sexual preferences, and how the consumption of the song might impact how audiences read and interpret media culture (Kellner; Denisoff, and Peterson). Therefore, we did not place emphasis on predicting the types of emotional reactions or behaviors that listeners may experience after hearing a song. Instead, the important and much-needed contribution of this study was analyzing her lyrical catalog as a cultural artifact.

As an extension of Tyree and Williams's research, this study utilizes similar approaches in its analysis of Beyoncé's lyrics,[1] soul music, and other hip-hop texts. First, only lyrics sung by Beyoncé are under analysis. Second, each song is a unit of analysis, and themes are established for each song. Third, lyrics are analyzed to determine if they reflect components of Black and hip-hop feminism identified earlier in this chapter. Sexual scripts commonly found in hip-hop music, including the *Freak*, *Earth Mother*, *Gangster Bitch*, and *Gold Digger*, are analyzed. The historic Black stereotypes are those commonly found in mass media, including the angry Black woman, Black lady, and mammy. Fourth, a song is identified as empowering if the overall message rejects the dimensions of knowledge that perpetuate objectification and dehumanization of Black women; highlights Black women's efforts of racial uplift; supports racial solidarity and self-definition; suggests the choice and power to act, regardless of the bleakness of a situation; showcases the desire for Black women to achieve greater equal opportunity and status, including in areas of reproductive rights, politics, and poverty; or emphasizes concerns of legal status and rights, discrimination, and sexual victimization (King; Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, "What's Going On?").

Like Tia Tyree and Michelle Jones's analysis of rap lyrics for elements of philogyny, these findings include "traditional qualitative interpretations and numerical data to further support interpretations," as the usage of more systematic data "solidify what was uncovered in the study as what is being investigated could have a profound impact on future rap and women's studies" (65). Overall, this methodology supports an examination of how Beyoncé embraces empowering Black and Hip-Hop feminist thinking in her collective album discography and lyrically navigates popular historic Black female stereotypes, sexual scripts, and sexual roles that remain pervasive and problematic in the music industry.

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[1] The authors did not receive permission for the use of full lyrics. Thus, summative evaluations or only short snippets are presented.

Findings and Discussion

In total, 153 songs were analyzed for this study. These songs were released a little over a twenty-year period and reflect a time in which Beyoncé was between the alleged ages of twenty-one and forty-two years old. As musical compositions, Beyoncé's albums have customized, distinct narratives, which chronicle the artist's evolution as a woman undergoing major personal and professional life transitions. For example, between her debut solo album, *Dangerously in Love*, and her most recently released album, *Cowboy Carter*, Beyoncé transitioned from being single to a businesswoman, feminist, wife, mother of three children, and genre-blending megastar, who explored country, dance/electronica, disco, hip-hop/rap, pop, R&B, and rock musical selections. While Beyoncé's life transitions create albums with varying overall narratives based on her evolving career success and positionality as a Black woman celebrity in popular culture, comparable to Tyree and Williams's findings, the three consistent themes remain centered on love, relationships, and sex. Of equal importance, her discography's most prominent theme was love; a finding also supported by their prior study. Of the 153 songs under investigation, eighty-seven were related to the topic of love, illustrating a continuation of Beyoncé's adoration of love, romance, and family-related musical discussions.

Beyoncé discusses love in a variety of ways, creating a multilayered discourse about her life through her creativity. From romantic pursuits as well as familial love like that for her husband, children, mother, and father, she conveys very personal and private thoughts, emotions, and experiences within her music. However, with her known marital issues, content around love soured after the *Lemonade* album, leaving Beyoncé's lyrical catalog in a contested space where lyrics came largely from the stances of betrayal, disdain, and heartbreak, creating messages with polarizing extremes about Black womanhood, sexuality, and a newly developed mistrust of women likely generated from dealing with marital infidelity.

The theme of sex is heavily present in her work, as Beyoncé embraces her sexuality on multiple songs to explore her sexuality, celebrates her body, and showcases her sexual prowess. By her fifth album, she asserts her sexual agency in relation to a sex-positive feminist lexicon. On this album, Beyoncé celebrates her sexual exploits and presents a narrative that relates to Carol Queen's views on sex-

positive feminism that pushes women to embrace their sexuality and not "denigrate, medicalize, or demonize any form of sexual expression except that which is not consensual" 94). By her seventh album, nearly every song (87%) contains at least some reference to sex, including directions to her lover ("taste me" and "I like it rough"), confirmations of how good of a lover she is ("When I pull up these jeans, you're mine." and "I'm juicy."), and even explicit sexual intercourse references ("Can I sit on top of you?" and "Head on a pillow, hike it in the air."

Amid the highly sexualized musical themes, Beyoncé upholds a strong reverence for her family, the traditional family structure, and its value system. While Beyoncé's views on her family are initially sporadic references in the first four albums, as she matures, the singer's frequency of discussing being a daughter, wife, and mother increases, including those on "Daddy," "Dangerously in Love," "1+1," "Blue," "Ring Off," "Daddy Lessons," "Daughter," and "Protector." Beyoncé's catalog celebrates her varying family roles and how she influences and is influenced by those around her. She works to develop not only an understanding of her actions but a greater life purpose. This finding is particularly important given Beyoncé's standpoint as a Black woman and its impact on the themes of her music. As noted by Brett Landry, the preservation of the collective family has been pivotal in the pursuit of racial uplift for the Black community. Black women intellectuals and activists hold a wide range of political ideas, intellectual perspectives, and ideological commitments that demonstrate a devotion to improving their communities by working alongside Black men (Watkins), including a threefold commitment to their family, career, and social movement with multiple roles as activists, career women, mothers, and wives, among others (Landry).

Beyoncé's Complex, Contradictory, and Empowering Embodiments of Black Feminism and Hip-Hop Feminism Themes

Beyoncé's lyrical catalog consistently incorporates elements of Black and hip-hop feminism. Each album represents multiple tenets of both areas of feminist thought. The most common concepts in her albums are of the collaborative nature and power of sisterhood, resistance to the oppressive gender roles in love relationships, contestation of the power dynamics present between women and men; need for financial independence and individual freedom, creation of agency for Black women's experiences, and sexual exploration and celebration. However, the complexity of her messages wanes further in her catalog, with a notable decline

occurring after *Lemonade*, which includes "Freedom" and "Formation," two critical songs directly related to Black feminist thought. Much of her work in the latter albums mainly focuses on sex positivity.

In many ways, Beyoncé uses her albums to bring attention to the plight of Black women in the United States as well as shine a light on the many unique experiences of Black women and girls. These expressions occur in overt ways, with lyrics calling out the Freaknik experience, rodeo Chitlin' circuit, Telfar bags, and "Karens" who turn men into terrorists. Further, there are songs like "Listen," in which she contests the status quo by demanding her dreams be fulfilled and refuses to allow them to be sidelined and turned into her lover's dreams. There are also notable songs like "Run the World (Girls)," which is clearly a song about female empowerment. In "Cozy," Beyoncé exclaims she is Black and comfortable in her skin, while transgender celebrity T. S. Madison, who is also featured on the song, addresses colorism issues by proclaiming Black women of all shades are still Black and beautiful. Beyoncé's inclusion of T. S. Madison (and other LGBTQ+ populations) throughout her work also highlights the solidarity of hip-hop feminism as a "transnational politic aimed at the collective empowerment of women, girls, people assigned female at birth and folks who fall into various trans spectrums" (Saunders 180–81). Further, her musical inclusions of the Black LGBTQ+ community function as an extension of her family adoration, for the album, *Renaissance* is a homage to her deceased queer, Uncle Johnny.

Cowboy Carter's "American Requiem" and "Blackbird" as well as *Lemonade*'s "Freedom" and "Formation" all showcase that Beyoncé has found space within her catalog for socially conscious songs, with messages connected to uplift and shining a light on the systemic problems that exist in the United States. "Freedom" is arguably one of the strongest examples of Beyoncé's connection to empowerment, as she not only demands her freedom but also asserts that she could break the chains that bind all by herself.

An important lyrical connection to Black feminist thought is Beyoncé's connection to sisterhood. She calls out for her girls, crew, friends, ladies, and women in multiple songs. Highlighting either her thoughts and experiences or theirs, she acts as a supporter, teacher, and proverbial voice for women. Among the most popular is "Single Ladies," but other examples include "Flawless," "Ya Ya," and "Run the World (Girls)." Evoking her proverbial sisterhood often signals a call-and-response tradition. This type of dialogue has deep ties in the Black community. With its fluidity and reversal of power dynamics, everyone has a voice and is

required to listen and respond to the voices of others to remain in the community (Collins, "What's Going On?").

More specifically, of the songs under investigation in her first four albums, 29 have been labeled as overall having empowering messages to women, which represented 38% (37.66) of her musical catalog. Of the songs in the last four albums, only eight have been labeled as having overall empowering messages for women, which is 20%. Nonetheless, empowerment for Beyoncé means being treated properly in a relationship, preferably as an equal partner. It also comes through messages of financial freedom, including buying her items and those of her lover. Further, empowerment involves Beyoncé speaking her mind, expressing distinct control of her career and life, being sexually free and comfortable with her flaws, and voicing her concerns when being mistreated by other women and the racist and patriarchal systems that exist within the United States. In some cases, empowerment means empathizing with and speaking for women who were being mistreated, as well as acting as a teacher by telling "ladies" and "girls" what to do in certain situations.

As an artist, Beyoncé's music consistently incorporates hip-hop and rap sonics. Thus, her connections to hip-hop culture are evident in her lyrics. Each album has at least one reference to a hip-hop feminist ideal, with empowerment being the most frequent in her lyrics. Beyoncé does what many women in hip-hop do, which is proclaim she is sexually aggressive and attractive, has wealth and power, as well as occupies the top spot within her genre. Beyoncé calls herself the greatest, baddest, a boss, big boss, "that girl," and more. She, too, continues to position herself as the best lover who is willing to not only work to satisfy herself, but also her lover. She speaks of her material wealth as well as how easy it is for her to obtain money, which connects to themes in hip-hop culture.

Unfortunately, with the noted issues within her marriage, other women have become primary targets for Beyoncé. While her catalog is peppered with references to sisterhood, her later work is largely overshadowed with misogyny and an overall mistrust of women in several of her songs. From calling women T.H.O.T.S., tricks, and bitches to seeing women as jealous of other lovers or pursuers of her lover, many lyrics take dark turns, positioning her repeatedly as a scorned, hurt, and protective lover who is quick to pit herself against other women. This finding is problematic, as historically rappers objectify, denigrate, and oppress young Black women through comparably negative language. Furthermore, such behavior is

destructive to Black women's emotions and self-esteem as well as sustains the negative stereotypes present within White patriarchal America (Tyree).

Further, from a hip-hop standpoint, she takes on an aggressive tone and reverses the normal hip-hop discourse of the man objectifying the woman. She calls herself a pimp and invites her lover and haters to suck on her balls. Other examples are found in songs such as "If I were a Boy," "Suga Mama," "Get Me Bodied," "Diva," and "Disappear." Through the role reversals, she acknowledges male privileges and statues often found in relationships. In "If I Were a Boy," Beyoncé notes she could drink beer, hang with guys, and be with anyone she wants to be with and never be confronted, because her friends would stick up for her. She also suggests ways in which she could treat women better. In "Suga Mama," she takes on the role of the "sugar daddy," a longstanding stereotype in which a male exchanges money for sexual favors or companionship with a younger woman. In "Get Me Bodied," Beyoncé is the aggressor in the club, making her "rounds" and trying to find a man. In "Bodyguard," Beyoncé offers to be her lover's bodyguard and is even willing to be physically aggressive.

Religion and God are present in her lyrics, a connection that is strong to hip-hop culture, too (Utley). However, the number and types of references to religion and spirituality significantly increased after the *Lemonade* album. Early in her album catalog, there were sporadic references to her soul, praying, angels, sin, heaven, and being blessed. However, with her maturation came more notable and frequent references, but this finding is not necessarily unique to her. For many older Black adults, there is a lifelong connection to religious institutions, and with this comes stronger and enduring personal relationships within the institutions where there is often social support and a sense of pride and purpose connected to service (Chatters et al.). Beyoncé has been very vocal about her religious background and connections to her childhood church in Houston, Texas: St. John's United Methodist Church. Beyoncé's full catalog contains several songs infused with religious references like "Ave Maria," "Church Girl," and "Amen," but as she moves further into adulthood, she is calling out to God, Jesus Christ, and the Lord in several songs; making multiple references to prayer and praying; connecting herself to being like God and God made; referencing salvation and the washing and cleansing of her sins; singing about her soul and its unbreakable tenacity, and evoking religious figures like angles, demons, and Abraham.

Of the examined albums, *Cowboy Carter* is most infused with religious references, but this, too, should not be a surprise. Despite Beyoncé's March 19,

2024, Instagram post proclaiming that it was not a country album [@Beyoncé], its lyrics, notable country star appearances, song remakes, and other genre-specific features prove it to be otherwise, and references to God and religion are longstanding features of the country music genre (Howell). Furthermore, this engagement of religiosity, as a means of Black cultural celebration, engagement in collational fellowship, and Black women's empowerment, are key tenets of Black and hip-hop feminist theorizing. Such findings deeply steep Beyoncé's discography in the examined Black and hip-hop feminist themes under investigation, as well as enduring narratives of women's empowerment.

Beyoncé's Lyrical Connections to Historic Black Women's Stereotypes and Hip-Hop Sexual Scripts

Beyoncé's labeling as historic Black women's stereotypes and sexual scripts is by no means linear, explicitly manifesting and overlapping in lyrical content. Of the 153 examined songs, she embodies Black women's stereotypes and sexual scripts in 81 songs (53%), with 13 situating her simultaneously as multiple stereotypes and sexual scripts. In these songs, Beyoncé combines messages of marital unity and infidelity, motherhood, religiosity, Texas pride, and women's empowerment with highly sexualized discourses, hip-hop-centric braggadocio and misogyny, and threats of violence against women attempting to seduce her husband, Jay-Z. For example, in "Cuff It," Beyoncé personifies the *Angry Black Woman*, *Freak*, and *Gangster Bitch* sexual stereotypes, as she references going missing with her lover, having passionate sex, and touting about "fucking up" a woman over her lover. Such manifestations illustrate the complexity of Beyoncé's sexual scripting embodiment and how historic Black women's stereotypes pervade her discography, irrespective of the artist's genre choice.

Lyrically, she fits into the following categories: *Angry Black Woman*, *Black Lady*, *Diva, Earth Mother*, *Freak*, *Gangster Bitch*, *Hood Rat*, *Matriarch*, and *T.H.O.T.* Of the eight examined studio albums, Beyoncé is labeled the most in *Renaissance*, with all 16 (100%) songs situating her as a sexual script and complexly categorizing her as *The Diva*, *Freak*, *Gangster Bitch*, *Matriarch*, and *T.H.O.T.* for her Black queer pride discussions, sexual exploits, women's empowerment narratives, and threats to critics of her industry status and wealth. Overall, every album contains at least one stereotype and sexual script. Her two most predominant categories are *The Diva* and *The Freak*; a factor that aligns with

the authors' initial chapter research on Beyoncé's lyrical content (Tyree and Williams).

While Beyoncé explores multiple musical genres (e.g., Americana, country, dance/electronica, dancehall, pop, rap, rhythm and blues (R&B), and rock), her musical messages remain extremely sexual. For instance, in the country song "FLAMENCO," Beyoncé uses the Do-Si-Do Girl Scout cookie brand as a double entendre to reference her vagina and the creamy sensation she experiences during cunnilingus. Comparably, she details her adoration for BDSM[2], sexual role play, and desire to be a "nurse" and "teacher" for her "gangster" man in "SUMMER RENAISSANCE." Consistent with earlier studies, Beyoncé portrays sex as something feminists could enjoy, and she asserts women should embrace their bodies and enjoy consensual sex as a natural and stimulating activity without fears of gendered respectability politics, judgment, or shame (Haglund and Wickman).

What is also worth noting is Beyoncé's connection to the *Angry Black Woman* and *Gangster Bitch* stereotypes and their connections to her delves into hip-hop culture. As declared by Tyree and Williams, an unfortunate trend in her music is the idea of Beyoncé being somewhat male-dependent and an uncontrollable lover who is frequently crazed or disrupted by her lover's actions. Such a representation does not run contrary to the stereotypical imagery of the angry and out-of-control Black woman in mass media. However, Beyoncé's *Angry Black Woman* and *Gangster Bitch* messaging amplifies in the *Lemonade* album and subsequent releases, with misogynistic lyrics and threats to exert violence on men and women over fears of marital infidelity and potentially losing her husband and family structure.

In *Lemonade*, Beyoncé unveils the anger, pain, and struggle of processing her husband's infidelity, betrayal of her trust, and the thoughts of violently retaliating against him for the transgression. Yet, Beyoncé's joint album with her husband, *Everything Is Love*, showcases the singer in this highly misogynistic space best. Throughout the album, she references women in disparaging terms (i.e., bitches, broke bitches, bum whores, T.H.O.T.S.) and warns men and women to be careful when discussing the Carters or face violent consequences. Prominent examples of such discourses are the songs "APE SHIT" and "HEARD ABOUT US." In both songs, Beyoncé exhibits hip-hop braggadocios lyrics about her "bad

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[2] BDSM is a term for a variety of sexual practices related to bondage, discipline, dominance, submission, and sadism (Gilmour et al.).

bitch"/diva status, marriage, and wealth, while threatening to take a Louisville Slugger to the doors of her opposition if provoked. Such findings prompted the authors to investigate the songs' writers, who were Offset and Quavo of the rap trio The Migos, among others.

As previously acknowledged, Beyoncé is often toward men and women when she engages in the rap genre. More importantly, she uses male rappers' (including her husband's) songwriting on her albums. For example, the rapper Future initially co-wrote and recorded "Drunk in Love," while Drake, Jay-Z, Offset, and Quavo (among other rappers) contributed to Beyoncé's discography; a factor that raises the question of authorship and rap authenticity (Smith). Katja Lee noted, "The discourse of authenticity in rap has been and continues to be bound up in the performance of self, although what constitutes an acceptable performance of identity and even what constitutes a legitimate identity have changed over the years" (353). Contemporary executives, record labels, and, in Beyoncé's case, artists, strategically curate, perform, and distribute hip-hop and rap-centric alternative personas (e.g., 'Yonce) and musical releases to mass audiences for crossover appeal and economic profits (Williams and Huertas).

Moreover, the *Gangster Bitch* sexual script, along with the "Rap Bonnie and Clyde" caricature of Black romantic heterosexual relationships, are heavily referenced and used tropes in women's gender relations and representations in rap (Hunter and Soto). Yet, what is often overlooked in scholarly analyses of the *Gangster Bitch* is the topic of authorship and the roles male rappers play in the composition of women entertainers (like Beyoncé) who serve as distributors and figureheads of the musical messages performatively. As a result, the authors question: Is Beyoncé simply an autonomous figure intentionally appropriating a *Gangster Bitch* hip-hop aesthetic, or is she an instrument being used by male rappers and record executives to advance an enduring hip-hop misogynistic agenda? Both questions are beyond this study's research focus yet raise critical concerns for future examinations of her musical works lyrically and visually.

Conclusion

As a Black woman entertainer, Beyoncé is a feminist anomaly whose cultural and musical contributions exceed 25 years. Given such an expansive audience reach and significant impact, this study analyzed Beyoncé's discography to investigate the artist's Black and hip-hop feminist themes, empowerment narratives, and her

overall evolution as a multihyphened entertainer with varying social roles in business, film and television, music, politics, and, most importantly, to Beyoncé, her family. Each of Beyoncé's nine albums had distinctive foci and narratives, signaling the evolution of a woman undergoing powerful life transitions. As noted by Tyree and Williams, "When situated within the history and themes of Black and hip-Hop feminisms, it was apparent Beyoncé could represent both the problem and proposed solution for these feminist movements" (139). On one hand, Beyoncé's discography was ripe with misogynistic lyrics and discourses that evoked historic Black stereotypes and sexual scripts of Black women in mass media and popular music. Additionally, Beyoncé's *Angry Black Woman* and *Gangster Bitch* messaging amplified in the *Lemonade* album and subsequent releases, with misogynistic lyrics and threats to exert violence on men and women over fears of marital infidelity and potentially losing her husband and family structure.

On the other hand, amid her presumed self-objectification, she presented lyrics that opened musical spaces for Black women that have been previously privileged for White musicians, such as the artist's voyage into the country, dance/electronica, and rock genres. Still, every examined Beyoncé album represented multiple tenets of both areas of feminist thought. Beyoncé had multiple elements of Black and hip-hop feminisms that promoted the collaboration and power of sisterhood, expressed resistance to the oppressive gender roles in love relationships, contested gendered power dynamics, raised concerns about the images and representations of Black women, and articulated an increased need for Black women to have independence and individual freedom. However, the complexity of her messages waned further in her catalog, with a notable decline occurring after *Lemonade*, which had "Freedom" and "Formation," two critical songs directly related to Black feminist thought.

Ultimately, this study draws a proverbial line in the sand to determine exactly whether Beyoncé should be identified as a feminist or antifeminist. There are two issues to consider. There are three layers of performance: the real person, the performance persona, and the character (Auslander). Beyoncé plays the part. She is a performer who owns her performance—complex, flawed, and contradictory as it may be. Second, it is about choice. While recognizing patriarchal and capitalistic forces are at play in the media and music industries, no one is technically forcing Beyoncé to do what she does or sing what she sings. Could she present a different, less eroticized Beyoncé with every song being empowering? Sure. Could she be a sell-out, focusing not a single song on topics that speak to,

for, and about experiences relevant to Black women and girls? Sure. Yet, she does not. She is a voice for Black women. Perfect, she might not be, but she is needed, applauded, wildly popular, and bringing attention to the issues of Black women and girls to the world. All may not universally agree upon her approach, but it is Bey Feminism. Flaws and all, Bey Feminism, as evidenced through her musical catalog, might embody a new way to view the intersectional racial politics of feminist performances by Black women musicians as complex, credible, powerful, and worthy of respect.

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Expanding the Arena:
Cinematic Matches and the Evolving Spaces of Sports Entertainment

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In the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, public gatherings were prohibited and businesses not deemed "essential" were forced to close. This unprecedented global health crisis created a dilemma for cultural industries that host live performances: theater, music, and professional wrestling. After weeks of uncertainty, two of the biggest pro wrestling promotions—World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) and All Elite Wrestling (AEW)—were provided a lifeline. On April 14, 2020, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis announced that pro wrestling was an "essential service," stating in a press conference that "people are starved for content" (Rupar). While the announcement allowed the companies to restart production, there was a caveat: WWE and AEW could not utilize a central storytelling device, the live audience.

Pro wrestling thrives on interactive spectacle (Mazer, "Professional Wrestling"). Wrestlers develop their stories and enhance their characters in collaboration with fans: villains (the heels) will mock the crowd to provoke jeers, while the heroes (baby faces) plead for support. When the pandemic removed these narrative elements, producers turned to a rarely-used segment: cinematic matches. Filmed over several hours or many days, cinematic matches are performed without a live audience, on location in unusual settings, and utilize creative production techniques: dramatic lighting, inventive editing, and unorthodox camera angles. While cinematic matches allowed WWE and AEW to continue producing shows during the pandemic (Kröner), we argue that this moment reveals a broader fundamental shift occurring within sports entertainment.

Through critical textual analysis of four cinematic matches performed in 2020 and 2021, we argue that the boundaries of pro wrestling are expanding—moving kayfabe beyond the arena and simultaneously erasing and magnifying the spaces of pro wrestling (Mazer, "The Doggie Doggie"). Kayfabe is a somewhat contested term, but it generally refers to the suspension of disbelief or the "illusion of realness" (Smith 68). Kayfabe mixes elements of fantasy and reality, forcing viewers to question the truthfulness of what they see. Some argue that kayfabe moved beyond the world of pro wrestling years ago: politicians, artists, and celebrities deploy its methods to curate their image across multiple media platforms (Fontaine et al.; Moon).

As the arenas in which athletes and artists perform expand, they are experiencing increasing demands on their time, labor, and bodies. WWE and AEW are global media and entertainment companies that expect wrestlers to self-promote their characters and "sell" their storylines on sports talk radio, social media, and podcasts (Leverette; Canella). Because cinematic matches allow pro wrestlers' personas to exist in liminal narrative spaces, performers feel more "real," detached from the hyperrealism of the traditional wrestling arena (Barthes). Cinematic matches create a contradiction: while live matches performed before an audience put intense physical pressure on wrestlers' bodies, pre-produced cinematic matches allow wrestlers time to pause, rest, and recover. Cinematic matches thus create safer working conditions removed from in-ring violence, yet allow for more textual violence to play out on-screen.

We begin by detailing how the spaces of pro wrestling are evolving, tracing how communication technologies have long shaped the industry's literal and metaphorical territories.

We then detail the textual analysis method we used to analyze these cinematic matches: two AEW "Stadium Stampede" matches; The Undertaker versus AJ Styles in a Boneyard Match at *WrestleMania 36*; and John Cena versus Bray Wyatt/The Fiend in a Firefly Funhouse match at *WrestleMania 36*. We provide a descriptive account of the matches, followed by our analysis, which relies on film theory and production studies to examine how mediatization is influencing the production and circulation of sports entertainment. We conclude by discussing the study's implications and offering suggestions for future research.

The Evolving Spaces of Pro Wrestling

To understand how the COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed an expansion of pro wrestling's boundaries, we focus on the evolving spatial dynamics of performance culture. Space, according to sociologist Henri Lefebvre, "is always, and simultaneously, both a field of action . . . and a basis of action" (191). This framework considers both the physical and digital fields where activities occur, as well as the social relationships among various people in those fields (Berman). The spaces of sports entertainment have been dramatically disrupted in recent years by *mediatization*—a process by which organizations, athletes, and performers use media to create interest in their events and promote their image, often for commercial purposes (Billings and Hardin). Cinematic matches reflect this process because they use film-like, rather than sport-like, audiovisual production techniques to modify pro wrestling's boundaries—complicating how audiences, performers, and producers view and respond to each other.

Mediatization—the interplay of sport, entertainment, and media—is perhaps most visible during mega-events like the Olympics, the Super Bowl, and WWE's WrestleMania (Billings and Wenner). Mega-events materialize their importance through lengthy bidding processes, in which cities petition to host these events; through months of build-up conducted across media platforms; and through economic and political impacts on host cities. The build-up to mega-events is as important as the events themselves: producers traverse across numerous media platforms to hype the upcoming spectacle, hoping to generate viewership—something that is increasingly challenging in hyper-competitive media environments with endless options. Because pro wrestling companies host many mega-events each year, producers and performers are constantly promoting themselves across media. COVID-19, however, interrupted these companies' typical marketing strategies and forced them to produce mega-events with an unusual segment: the cinematic match.

Pro wrestling though, is very familiar with mediatization, and the industry has a long history of adapting to new media formats. Throughout the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, American pro wrestling was organized into regional territories governed by the National Wrestling Alliance (NWA). The NWA's board of directors, which consisted of promoters from each region, sanctioned talent exchanges between territories and protected the integrity of smaller affiliated promotions. Within this system, promoters sought to update their rosters and generate new storylines through trades—moving performers to new regions for brief periods, which often required wrestlers to adjust their in-ring personas to meet the preferences of different geographic regions. In the 1980s, then-World Wrestling Federation Chairman and CEO Vince McMahon disrupted this system's spatial boundaries.[1] McMahon, who foresaw the potential of cable television, violated longstanding industry norms by recruiting wrestlers from rival territories, offering them bigger contracts and the promise of national fame. By marketing wrestlers nationally

[1] The company changed its name from World Wrestling Federation (WWF) to World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) in 2002 following a legal dispute with the World Wildlife Fund.

on weekly TV shows, McMahon sought to create storylines and characters with mass-market commercial appeal. Rather than adjust his characters and storylines to cater to individual territories, McMahon used TV ratings and pay-per-view sales (rather than ticket sales) to determine who was "over" with the fans. The metrics of the industry were changing, as were the social relationships among producers, performers, and fans.

In recent decades, streaming platforms and social media have further complicated pro wrestling's spatial dynamics (Litherland). Performers today boost their brand and market their characters by maintaining kayfabe across myriad spaces. From social media feuds to behind-the-scenes documentaries, performers are increasingly narrating their stories across time and place (Jenkins). Kenny Johnson's documentary about AEW wrestler Maxwell Jacob Friedman (MJF), *Making MJF*, published on YouTube, illustrates this process. MJF mentions in the film that he wants the filmmaker to capture his real-life persona and draw attention to the economic hardships he faced as a child (Johnson). But the film subtly hints that everything is not as it seems, at one point suggesting that the house in which the documentary is being filmed does not belong to MJF: the decor, including family photos and furniture, are merely props. WWE's 2025 Netflix docuseries *Unreal* explodes conventional notions of kayfabe, taking viewers backstage and giving them a look inside the writers' room.

As people increasingly view entertainment online and on demand, cultural producers are reevaluating how best to craft kayfabe. Within the territory era, performers could remove their literal and figurative masks when they left the arena, confident that their real-life personas would not be filmed and published online, compromising their in-ring characters. Now, wrestlers often remain in character well beyond the ring: filming documentaries, producing "web extras" on their phones, and replying to fans in their social media comment sections. Fan/performer interactions are increasingly occurring beyond the arenas in which events are staged. Through immersive media tactics, companies are creating more opportunities to script their stories and manipulate kayfabe. And this spatial expansion is not unique to pro wrestling. As Frandsen argued, digital media have changed the global interdependencies among sports organizations, athletes, and fans—concluding that mediatization must be understood in relation to broader socioeconomic changes, such as globalization, commercialization, and individualism.

The COVID-19 pandemic provides a moment to examine how wrestlers' character "work" is always unfinished in contemporary media cultures. Unlike previous eras, pro wrestlers today perform endless hours of digital labor to construct alternative kayfabe realities (Scholz). Through streaming series and podcasts, wrestlers seek every opportunity to expand their storylines and build rapport with audiences. Attacking a late-night talk show host to boost their heel status or livestreaming their fitness workouts, streaming manipulated reality is creating new social ties among performers and fans.

While narrating stories across media platforms might enhance online engagement for companies and create expansive storylines for fans, the increasing emphasis on the televisual product has a downside for wrestlers: it limits their ability to create impromptu stories in the ring (DeGaris). And although fans have long expected wrestlers to listen to their demands, communication technologies are complicating creative control. Who has it and where is it wielded? Pro wrestling's spatial dynamics have been shifting for decades, but the political economy of the media is magnifying these shifts (Jansen; Jeffries). The cinematic matches we analyzed reflect the evolution of mediatization in sports entertainment, highlighting how culture is increasingly produced across multiple locations and shared on intertextual canvases.

Wrestling Beyond the Arena

We utilized critical textual analysis to review four cinematic matches, situating our analysis within the political-economic and historical contexts in which these matches occurred. Each match was closely observed for dialogue, body language, and production techniques (i.e., camera framing and movement, lighting, and audio). Critical textual analysis is an appropriate method for our study, as we attempt to understand how "media texts present a distinctive discursive moment between encoding and decoding" (Fürsich 238). As the cinematic matches were mediated through screens and streaming platforms and watched by millions of people globally, the meanings that emerged from them were socially constructed. This is an important aspect of critical textual analysis: going beyond simply reading and interpreting the content in order to determine the "implicit patterns, assumptions and omissions of a text" (Fürsich 241). Critical textual analysis doesn't interrogate whether or not a text accurately reflects reality, but rather "what version of reality is normalized" within a particular text (Fürsich 249).

We used a three-step coding procedure (Emerson et al.). During step one, each author viewed the matches and took notes. Step two involved a more rigorous and focused viewing in which each author watched the matches, pausing to transcribe dialogue and write more descriptive notes. During step three, we viewed the matches together a final time, checking our notes to ensure quality and completeness of data. We then read over our notes and discussed our initial findings. We compiled the data, looking for themes and patterns. While seeking patterns, we isolated something "(a) that happens a number of times and (b) that consistently happens in a specific way" (Miles and Huberman 215).

While the pandemic forced pro wrestling companies to utilize cinematic matches to continue their programming, it's important to recognize the history of these matches within the industry (Hill). AEW's "Stadium Stampede" matches, for example, drew inspiration from WWE's "Empty Arena" match between Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson and Mankind, performed by Mick Foley. That match evoked a hybrid cinematic style where the wrestlers blended the traditional structure of the match with pre-recorded cinematic moments. It aired on January 31, 1999, during the height of WWE's Attitude Era, on an episode of "Halftime Heat." The episode coincided with Super Bowl XXXIII, and WWE billed it as alternative programming to the Super Bowl halftime show. The match is known for its finish, where, after several minutes of the wrestlers fighting throughout the Tucson Convention Center, Mankind used a forklift to "pin" The Rock and win the WWE Championship.

Another inspirational precursor to the cinematic matches analyzed here is "The Final Deletion," a match between Jeff Hardy and "Broken" Matt Hardy. On May 17, 2016, Matt Hardy debuted his "broken" persona during his second run in Total Nonstop Action Wrestling (TNA). After losing to his brother Jeff in an "I quit" match weeks earlier, Matt's psyche was "broken" and "the seven deities" were awakened within him. Matt's "broken" character spoke with an eccentric vocabulary and accent, constantly referring to spirits that possessed him and his family. Matt popularized the character through a series of YouTube videos that documented his interactions with family. His feud with his brother Jeff culminated in "The Final Deletion," a cinematic match that took place in the Hardy family compound.

"The Final Deletion" emulated a short film, with much of the screen time dedicated to pre-match interactions between Matt and his family and flashbacks to prior events. "The Final Deletion" was immensely popular among fans, with many considering it one of the defining moments of Matt's career. Likewise, the Empty Arena match between The Rock and Mankind is

considered an important moment in WWE history, due to the fact that a championship changed hands absent of a live audience.

Cinematic Matches During COVID-19

AEW Stadium Stampede Matches

AEW's 2020 and 2021 "Stadium Stampede" matches at TIAA Bank Field in Jacksonville, Florida, were important events for the nascent pro wrestling company AEW, which was founded one year prior to the pandemic, in 2019. This section reviews first the 2020 "Stadium Stampede" match: The Inner Circle (Chris Jericho, Jake Hager, Sammy Guevara, Santana and Ortiz) versus The Elite (Kenny Omega, Adam Page, and the Young Bucks). It then reviews the 2021 match: The Inner Circle versus The Pinnacle (MJF, Shawn Spears, Wardlow, Cash Wheeler and Dax Harwood).

The 2020 "Stadium Stampede" match embraces the space in which it is performed, moving through the open-air sections of the football stadium. As home to the Jacksonville Jaguars of the National Football League (NFL), the performers repeatedly pay homage to the location by using football-related props: the field goal post, football pads, and various on-field equipment. In one spot, Matt Jackson of the Young Bucks uses a ladder to climb onto the goal posts and does a backflip off the structure, crashing into a group of wrestlers below. Chris Jericho attacks Nick Jackson with the first down marker and shouts, "That will move the chains!" After a near fall two-count, Jericho then throws a red challenge flag and asks referee Aubrey Edwards to review the play. The pre-recorded nature of the match affords wrestlers opportunities to perform humorous and unrealistic moves. In another moment, Matt Jackson gives Sammy Guevara a 100-yard suplex. The video edits make it appear as though Jackson continuously suplexed Guevara across the entire length of the football field. These actions tap into the spectacle of sports broadcasting, where off-field actions that legitimize the sport, such as replay reviews and sideline activities, are as much a part of the spectacle as the on-field action. The symbolic references to the NFL reassure viewers that, despite the global health emergency, wrestling can continue providing entertainment and satisfaction for sports fans.

The cinematic techniques used in the 2020 "Stadium Stampede" match created opportunities for AEW wrestlers to continue their on-screen storylines and incorporate subplots throughout the match. One subplot focused on Adam Page, who, after failing to restrain Sammy Guevara, retreats to the Jaguar Stadium club lounge and begins drinking alcohol. Eventually, Jake Hager finds Page drinking alone at a bar. The two sit down and share a drink. Hager says, "I knew I'd find you here," a reference to Page's on-screen drinking issues in AEW's weekly programming, to which Page replies, "Are you here to drink? Or are you here to fight?" The two men begin fighting and Hager eventually gains the upper hand, dragging Page's body across the bar top. Commentator Tony Schiavone exclaims, "How many movies did we see this in Westerns with John Wayne?" Schiavone's comment both acknowledges the absurdity of the on-screen action while connecting it to the pre-constructed nature of Western cinema and film. Eventually, Kenny Omega rescues Page from the assault and the teammates share a toast. Page drinks another shot of alcohol, and Omega drinks a glass of milk. The segment foreshadows the relationship breakdown between Omega and Page, where in the kayfabe storyline, Page is portrayed as an unreliable partner due to his drinking problem. In the future, Page and Omega feud for the AEW championship, following Page's expulsion from The Elite because of his drinking and

unreliability. This moment showcases great character work between Omega and Page, beginning a longer narrative arc. AEW effectively planted the seeds of the inevitable relationship breakdown during "Stadium Stampede," signaling to audiences that their continued investment in AEW programming throughout the pandemic will eventually pay off.

During the 2021 "Stadium Stampede" match, The Pinnacle enhances the pre-match spectacle and makes a dramatic entrance by driving trucks and limousines onto the field. Since the wrestlers are characterized as a group supported by MJF's vast wealth, the entrance reinforces the factions' kayfabe gimmick. Similar to the 2020 match, The Pinnacle repeatedly uses props as they fight throughout the stadium—hitting each other with wet floor signs and megaphones and throwing their opponents through walls and glass doors. These moments were both violent and humorous, revealing how cinematic matches modify pro wrestling's spatial dynamics and amplify the genre's on-screen brutality.

The Inner Circle also leans heavily into the "sports" of sports entertainment during the pre-match entrance. The group arrives on the field wearing football pads and helmets while several Jacksonville Jaguars' cheerleaders are on the sidelines, again highlighting the match's physical location. The match referee, Aubrey Edwards, blows a whistle to signal the beginning of the match, much like a traditional NFL football game. After an initial skirmish, Hangman Adam Page enters riding a horse and gallops towards Sammy Guevara, chasing him to the backstage sections of the stadium, where the fighting presumably continues.

Because this match, like its predecessor, occurred in various locations throughout the stadium (in coaches' offices, locker rooms, and a walk-in freezer), it was filmed over 12 hours and required multiple takes (Casey). This provided the wrestlers and crew time to plan creative and dangerous stunt work typical of a Hollywood film. Through inventive staging, blocking and camera work (discussed further in the next section), AEW heightened the match's production value, escalated its on-screen violence, and likely protected the performers' bodies from serious injury.

Cinematic Matches at WrestleMania 36

The Boneyard Match between The Undertaker and AJ Styles at *WrestleMania 36* was filmed on location in a cemetery. The objective was to literally bury your opponent. This enhanced the story and harkened back to The Undertaker's appearances in buried alive and casket matches. Similar to the "Stadium Stampede" matches, both wrestlers used spectacular entrances: The Undertaker arrived on a motorcycle and Styles, mockingly, arrived in a hearse. In contrast to the "Stadium Stampede" matches, however, the Boneyard Match used out-of-focus and hectic camera shots, simulating the appearance of a live broadcast rather than a segment that was staged and filmed over many hours. WWE added numerous visual elements to enhance the production value: music, fog, background extras, extravagant lighting, and visual special effects. WWE's ability to adjust its programming and produce a high-quality 23-minute match in a few days speaks to its resources as a global media and entertainment company.

Not all of the match's production elements landed, though. When AJ Styles hit Undertaker with a tombstone, the editors used a freeze frame, perhaps attempting to heighten the brutality of the move, but the effect was somewhat awkward. In addition to using editing effects, hits were also obscured through unorthodox camera angles—placing camera operators in positions they wouldn't normally occupy during a live match, as their position would disrupt the action. Styles and Undertaker also used props to violent and absurd effect. When Undertaker shovels a small pile

of dirt on Styles at the bottom of a grave, and the match cuts to Styles' hand sticking out of the grave seconds later, the scene was both graphic and ridiculous. When Styles expressed genuine fear and made intense emotional reactions to The Undertaker, it appeared amusing. Because live audiences cannot read pro wrestlers' facial expressions as closely as audiences watching on screens through zoom lenses, Styles and Undertaker adjusted their performances. The cinematic match amplified and manufactured emotion while attempting to collapse the physical distance between performers and fans.

Lastly, the Firefly Funhouse match between John Cena and Bray Wyatt/The Fiend, also at *WrestleMania 36*, was a mix of wrestling nostalgia, manipulated violence, and absurdity. The match took place in WWE's performance center, and the premise focused on Cena's waning in-ring career and his stepping aside to make room for WWE's emerging superstars. Like the other matches discussed in this section, the match began in dramatic fashion: WWE edited together pre-taped scenes from various angles in the performance center to heighten The Fiend's mystique. Cena then awkwardly walks into an empty arena, leading to a montage of "Welcome to *WrestleMania*" clips from Vince McMahon that were distorted with audiovisual effects, culminating in Wyatt appearing inside the Firefly Funhouse. Because fans were accustomed to Wyatt's taped promos from the Funhouse set in the months leading up to this match, this match relied heavily on these scenes to the point that there was very little wrestling. This match, like the "Stampede" and Boneyard matches, also relied heavily on props and special effects: for example, a Vince McMahon puppet with horns on commentary, and inverted video clips depicting various pro wrestling eras and moments throughout Cena's career.

The match, overall, was a retrospective of Cena's career, with Cena often mocking his previous in-ring personas, including the Doctor of Thuganomics. Callbacks to previous matches and pro wrestling eras highlight the industry's brutality in a comedic way. A Saturday Night "Main Event" scene, in which Cena performs dumbbell curls at a ridiculous pace and Wyatt imitates Hulk Hogan's voice ("Whatcha gonna do, brother?"), references WWE's past reliance on bodybuilder physiques and other cultural stereotypes. Creative editing throughout the Firefly Funhouse match also helped Wyatt transform into various characters from his career (Sister Abigail) as well as notable figures from the industry (Eric Bischoff). As the match neared its conclusion, the editing became erratic, cutting to previous moments from the performers' careers and drawing parallels between them and the wrestlers from whom they've taken inspiration. The disorienting editing finally causes Cena to snap, and he attacks Wyatt, only to discover that he is punching a puppet and that The Fiend is standing behind him in the corner of the ring. The Fiend then chokes Cena while Wyatt slaps the mat to count the pin, again using cinematic techniques to reconstruct space and time.

Following this descriptive review, the next section offers our analysis. We discuss how these cinematic matches and broader trends in media are reshaping the spatiotemporal dynamics of sports entertainment.

Manipulating the Space of Sports Entertainment

Film editors have long used various techniques to manipulate time and space. Some of these techniques are subtle (slowly fading out or dissolving video to signal a transition or lapse in time); while others are fairly intense (modifying the speed or aspect ratio of video). Most film editors working on narrative films use continuity editing (or straight cuts) to create logical and coherent sequences (Bordwell). Continuity editing avoids the use of artificial effects, such as slow fades or

quick jump cuts, to preserve a natural flow of events; it sequences shots so as to mimic the ways in which people observe physical space with the naked eye (Cutting). In contrast, discontinuity editing breaks the flow of space by cutting sporadically from one shot to the next, making it difficult for viewers to understand where objects and locations exist and the relationship between objects. Although it can be effective for drawing the viewer's attention to specific shots or sounds, it can be disorienting and difficult for viewers to accurately reconstruct a location in their mind.

Cinematic matches rely on both forms of editing to suspend viewers' temporal belief in the wrestling broadcast. In a typical pro wrestling show, events often occur in linear order. Most shows include a series of matches, occurring one after the other, with storyline vignettes shown between them—backstage interviews and altercations, pre-taped promos, marketing updates, etc. Although there are times when wrestlers' promos are obviously pre-recorded, these vignettes are inserted strategically into the show in places that serve to conclude narratives or foreshadow upcoming matches. Cinematic matches disrupt this linear model, making it aesthetically unclear for viewers whether the matches were recorded in isolation or in conjunction with other events. AEW's "Stadium Stampede" matches attempted to maintain a *linear kayfabe reality,* in that the matches were broadcast with announcers' commentary narrating the action in "real time." The audience cheering in the background of the cinematic matches demonstrates that fans may not necessarily care if matches are pre-recorded, as long as they are mediated in ways that maintain a linear sense of reality.

AEW maintained linear kayfabe reality through a combination of continuity and discontinuity edits during the "Stampede" matches. Many edits during the hand-to-hand wrestling scenes were straight cuts, similar to what viewers would see during its weekly TV shows. Some edits, however, were illogical. In one scene, wrestlers were shown on the field and then they instantly appeared backstage, with no explanation of how they arrived there. While these moments could be confusing, they invited viewers to play a more active role in the show, requiring them to fill in ambiguous narrative space. In the 2020 "Stampede" match, Guevara returned to the field with no explanation of how he eluded Adam Page, who was chasing him on horseback backstage. Guevara's escape makes little narrative or logical sense, but it develops his character as a villainous heel capable of escaping bad situations.

A series of micro-events throughout the 2021 "Stampede" match used creative film editing to manipulate the match's spatial dynamics and move viewers quickly around the stadium. The fights between Chris Jericho and MJF, Jake Hager and Wardlow, and Sammy Guevara and Shawn Spears were spliced together to give viewers the impression that they were all happening simultaneously, despite the fact that they were filmed at different times over many hours. When the show cut away from Jericho and MJF, viewers can assume that the fight continued off-camera. In the 2020 "Stampede" match, Matt Hardy is dunked into an arena pool by Santana and Ortiz, where he transforms from his "Broken" Matt Hardy persona back into his original WWE Team Extreme gimmick, complete with a wardrobe change. Santana and Ortiz dunk Hardy into the pool again, and he transforms back into his "Broken" persona. Hardy's transformations are presented as in-the-moment acts, both heightening the on-screen action and allowing the performers time to rest and reset between takes.

Continuity editing used in a cinematic match can serve fairly practical purposes. After the Inner Circle descended into the stadium wearing harnesses, producers edited out footage of them removing their harnesses: this compressed the time it took them to approach their opponents, making for a more seamless and dramatic opening sequence of the match. Because COVID-19 restrictions were eased by early 2021, AEW had a small audience at its 2021 "Stadium Stampede"

match. Following the backstage fighting, which was pre-recorded, the wrestlers emerged onto a plaza adjacent to the stadium, where a ring was constructed, surrounded by several hundred fans. This was the first live event since the beginning of the pandemic, and the stage bridged the pre-produced segments with AEW's live entertainment. The transition from pre-recorded segments to the match's conclusion before a live audience served as a metaphor for the return of live entertainment. The move signaled that the pandemic was coming to an end and that the company was excited about reviving the interactive element of pro wrestling.

Although technical production techniques may give performers in cinematic matches additional time to recover and plan for the next scene, the matches we reviewed also required wrestlers to be on set for many hours. As time is manipulated on screen through continuity and discontinuity editing, time is altered for performers filming on location: traveling to set, blocking and staging scenes, and rehearsing. Rather than a continuous 20-minute in-ring contest where the toll on performers' bodies can be punishing, cinematic matches spread these hits over many hours. Because AEW and WWE were adjusting their production schedules on short notice to comply with public health guidelines, shoots that would typically require several days to complete were filmed and produced much more quickly. As both promotions rushed to create content for streaming platforms, the cinematic matches compressed on-screen time while expanding on-set/in-ring time—altering the working conditions for performers and crew.

The visuals of cinematic matches are striking: wrestlers perform moves that are physically impossible within a live sports broadcast due to logistical concerns or safety issues. Cinematic matches, therefore, fully embrace the scripted, unreal, and absurd nature of pro wrestling, allowing wrestlers to express themselves in novel ways and moving pro wrestling somewhat away from the hyper-masculine stereotypes that have historically defined the genre. These matches allow wrestlers who have limited in-ring capabilities, due to their age or history of injuries, to continue performing. As John Cena told pro wrestling fans at Comic-Con Wales, the Firefly Funhouse match at *WrestleMania 36* provided him with unique opportunities to protect his body: "I think I really leaned into the creativity of what we are able to do. And as I get older, I kind of got to rely on those [production] tricks more. So, I really, really, really enjoyed the Firefly Funhouse match. I thought that was pretty cool to express the creative side of stories like that" (Mendhe).

The Boneyard match between The Undertaker and AJ Styles also highlighted the benefits cinematic matches provide for aging wrestlers. Prior to the match, The Undertaker's last one-on-one match was against Bill Goldberg at WWE's "Super Showdown" in Saudi Arabia in June 2019. Many wrestling reporters and analysts considered it one of the worst matches in Undertaker's career (Kelly). In a behind-the-scenes video for WWE, Mark Calaway (the Undertaker) agreed, "I'm just like, 'Man, maybe it's time. Maybe you are out of gas. You got a wife and kids. Am I risking permanent injury?'" (Conway). Since 2019, Undertaker had only performed in two matches, allowing WWE to protect the aging wrestler and limit his in-ring time.

The Boneyard match allowed Calaway to revive and extend his character. Away from the ring and shielded from the scrutiny of a live audience, the pre-recorded match in a cemetery allowed the 55-year-old to present as a powerful and athletic character. The underlying subtext highlights Undertaker's age and the notion that he is on the cusp of retirement. Part of the match features Styles berating the Undertaker, telling him to "retire," at one point saying, "You just don't have it anymore old man… You're just a broken shell of what you used to be" (WWE, 2020). In the climax of the match, Styles throws Undertaker into an open grave and prepares to bury him. At that moment, Undertaker inexplicably appears behind Styles, literally rising from the grave. WWE employed discontinuity editing throughout this match to protect Calaway from injury. We

see Undertaker deliver a tombstone piledriver to Karl Anderson, one of Styles's accomplices, on a rooftop. However, the scene is filmed from ground level, and we don't actually witness Undertaker's knees make contact with the roof.

The cinematic format and the use of creative editing and unusual camera angles helped Undertaker appear stronger and more agile. For 23 minutes, the Undertaker that fans watched in the 1990s and 2000s returned. Undertaker won the match by "burying" Styles. He stands triumphantly over the grave and says to Styles, "30 years is a long time," emphasizing his longevity in the industry. The potential for cinematic matches to protect and perhaps extend the careers of aging wrestlers cannot be understated. The industry takes a heavy toll on its performers' bodies, and there is a dark history of pro wrestlers dying young (Gelber; Djordjevic). Cinematic matches may not be the ideal way to present the genre, because they lack the interactive spectacle and unpredictability of a live event; but through the use of editing, lighting, and special effects, producers are able to manipulate space, alter the production and representation of violence, and decrease the physical toll on wrestlers' bodies.

Calaway retired eight months after *WrestleMania 36*, making his final appearance in November 2020 at "Survivor Series," the event at which he made his debut 30 years earlier. This time, the event took place within WWE's ThunderDome: a studio the company built in August 2020 to simulate the presence of a live audience. The ThunderDome included a ring surrounded by a wall of LED video screens that displayed fans watching via a videoconferencing system. The studio helped WWE maintain audience engagement during pandemic restrictions: more than 650,000 requests were submitted to WWE's online registration system by March 2021 from fans eager to appear on the video wall. It also allowed WWE to showcase fans' reactions to the in-ring performances. Because producers could not utilize fans' real-time computer audio due to a broadcast delay, they created a "virtual audience mix" for the ThunderDome: blending fans' streaming audio with pre-recorded crowd noise (Maglio). The company manufactured fans' approval or disapproval of shows, imitating fan agency while maintaining creative control over the storylines. For Calaway, it was easier to say goodbye to the industry within an artificial arena: "The retirement was during the pandemic, and it was what it was. That was easy. I mean, it was hard for me to say that I'm retiring, but it was easy because there was nobody there" (Mahjouri).

Conclusion

Cinematic matches embrace visual aesthetics and production techniques that reduce pro wrestling's brutality, alter performers' working conditions, and upend long-standing narrative conventions of the genre. As pro wrestling's boundaries expand within contemporary media systems, scholars must recognize how emerging audiovisual and production techniques are affecting performers' time and labor and altering their relationship with audiences.

In January 2024, shortly after WWE merged with the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) to form TKO Group Holdings, the company announced a $5 billion, ten-year streaming deal with Netflix for its weekly TV show "Monday Night Raw" and its premium live events outside of the United States (Otterson). Since then, WWE has had an international emphasis, hosting specials in Australia, Belgium, France, Germany, Saudi Arabia, Puerto Rico, Scotland, and the United Kingdom. In 2025, WWE acquired a controlling stake in Mexico's Asistencia, Asesoría y Administración (AAA, Lucha Libre Worldwide) and began broadcasting its events on WWE's YouTube channel in English and Spanish. Leveraging the latest communication technologies, WWE is once again redrawing the industry's territories.

In addition to these financial deals, WWE's production techniques are also evolving: using steadicam tracking shots for extended superstar entrances and mounted drone cameras to bring viewers inside the ring during matches. New camera technologies and distribution platforms immerse viewers in the show, both simulating and extending the live event.

Political-economic and technological changes are reorganizing pro wrestling's geography, globalizing the industry, and fundamentally changing the social relationships among promoters, performers, and fans. Future research could explore how the consolidation of the industry is affecting wrestlers' media strategies, contract negotiations, and interactions with audiences.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted workers' autonomy and agency in numerous industries, from education to healthcare, delivery, and logistics. When pro wrestling was classified as an essential service in the early months of the pandemic, wrestlers were asked to reevaluate where and through what platforms they perform and connect with fans. While cinematic matches allowed them to continue expressing their characters and telling their stories, these matches were time- and labor-intensive, requiring them to take significant creative and physical risks.

As cultural industries adopt new formats and distribution models, it is important to understand how these choices affect the time and place in which culture is staged and how it is seen. The evolving spatial dynamics of sports entertainment illuminate the changing labor conditions of live and filmed performers, and reveal how different modalities—from screen to stage—influence the production, circulation, and reception of performance art.

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Notes

From *Nobody* to Nurturing: Skeptical Action Heroes Seek (and Find) Different Masculinity

STEVIE K. SEIBERT DESJARLAIS

Heroic male characters spanning late-twentieth- to early-twenty-first-century action films in the U.S. were, by and large, expected to prevail in their many overlapping purposes: protect those who cannot protect themselves, fight off those who would seek to exploit, and use violence against violence to establish peace. Take your pick of action hero and franchise: Mel Gibson in *Lethal Weapon* (1987), Bruce Willis in *Die Hard* (1988), Tom Cruise in *Mission: Impossible* (1996), Matt Damon in *The Bourne Identity* (2002), and Sylvester Stallone (among others) in *The Expendables* (2010)—just to name a few. While this list is not exhaustive, it represents plots that prioritize action sequences carried out by men, not superhumans, in contemporary settings rather than distant historical periods or futuristic landscapes. That these examples are franchises further emphasizes the prevalence of genre formulas, especially those that position leading men as arbiters of the law (or at least the greater good) and as bodies that frequently operate outside of the law for the protection of society from those who would seek to usurp the legal system (or, more broadly put, bad actors).

Within countless American action films lies a hero template that operates "in a world of masculine independence, bodily strength, moral courage, and uncompromised will" (Cohen 79), and this template's influence reaches beyond the screen. Their onscreen victories parallel socio-cultural roles that men were, and are still, expected to play subjects of action. Scholars note that onscreen masculine heroes of the late twentieth century utilize the "Reagan doctrine: negotiate from brute strength" (Cohen 76). Susan Jeffords asserts that "examining one of the chief distributors of images in this country—Hollywood films—offers clues about the construction of American national identity" (6). Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the legitimacy of patriarchy" and adds that "film actors, or even fantasy figures, such as film characters" are often the most visible "bearers of hegemonic masculinity" (77). This illustrates the influence that action films have on perceptions of American masculinity—as "decisive, tough, aggressive, strong, and domineering" (Jeffords 11)—both delineating and defining hegemonic traits for audiences, during the Reagan era and beyond.

The archetypical U.S. action hero persists in characters that are not just symbols of nostalgia but also satisfyingly simple in their representations of the possibility of good winning over bad. This desire for simplicity illustrates what Judith Butler identifies as a growing backlash towards progressive movements and a desire for "the restoration of a patriarchal dream-order" (14). But the claimed historical past can never be returned to, because "the patriarchal order it seeks to restore never quite existed in the form they seek to actualize in the present" (Butler 15). With the abundant evidence of a masculine action film formula, it is important to apply Jeffords's analytical process longitudinally and account for the specific cultural contexts of onscreen characters. As Butler observes, "Precisely because the norms that shape us do not just act on us once, but repeatedly over time, opportunities arise to derail their reproduction. That iterable process opens up possibilities of revision and refusal, which is why gender has a temporality of its own, and why we cannot understand gender well without understanding it as

historically formed and revisable" (32). Connell also notes that "Hegemony, then, does not mean total control… and may be disrupted – or even disrupt itself" (37). Now, decades into the twenty-first century, there are noticeable disruptions in how masculine characters enact their heroics, an indication of increased social attention towards gender. Current action heroes demonstrate a growing skepticism towards the brute strength formula, even if traditional American masculinity remains marketable for film viewers. In the 2020s, self-awareness as a character trait in action heroes is common, enabling audiences to enjoy viewing masculine tropes with mindfulness of the prevalence of recent discourse around men's changing social roles.

American Masculinity Under Construction

New cultural and psychological perspectives have emerged across disciplines that seek to reevaluate the construction and cultural impact of hegemonic American masculinity. Risman notes of the expanding field of gender studies, "Clear consensus exists that there are as many masculinities as femininities, and they differ from group to group, and even within one social context (21). Masculinities research "questions the construction of masculinity across time and space, [with] current research in the field approach[ing] masculinity not as a normative referent but as a problematic, polymorphous, gender construct" (Ulmer 74). Adding to this robust discourse, in 2018, the American Psychological Association issued new guidance for mental health practitioners that demarcates what the organization deems to be healthy and harmful masculine traits. The APA identifies traits associated with traditional American masculinity that have negative connotations— "stoicism, competitiveness, dominance and aggression"— and ties them to a "vision of masculinity [that summons] up an image of a closemouthed cowboy, à la John Wayne" (Pappas). This characterization of traditional American masculinity, which is hegemonic in its context, underscores the influential role of onscreen portrayals of men, particularly as subjects of action.

Notably, the associations between traditional masculinity and cowboys—as typified by John Wayne's roles in mid-twentieth-century westerns—are also easily coded alongside whiteness, heterosexuality, and other markers of dominant identity in the U.S. Appropriately, the APA's guidance recognizes that "When the rules of manliness bump up against issues of race, class and sexuality, they can further complicate men's lives" (Pappas). When dealing in masculine stereotypes, whiteness operates like air—it exists all around and yet is rarely meaningfully commented upon and its influence on masculine performance unquestioned. Though a racial reckoning in the U.S has long been necessary, the effectiveness of efforts to bring substantive conversations about intersecting identities that inform human experience, especially as depicted in popular culture artifacts, remains somewhat dubious. Similar failures persist in contemporary films. According to UCLA's *Hollywood Diversity Report 2024*, less than 3 out of 10 lead actors are people of color (Ramón et al. 13). Moreover, the action genre represented the largest proportion of blockbusters released in 2023 and attracted predominantly male audiences (Ramón et al. 11, 47). Because, as Butler points out, cultural desire for "a restoration of masculine privilege serves many other forms of power, but it constitutes its own social project" (15), critically examining masculinities—especially that of audience-admired hero personas—offers one layer of much-needed scrutiny.

Pop culture images communicate and sustain templates for masculine performance, seemingly leaving historical norms intact. There is an undeniable relationship between APA's characterization of hegemonic American masculinity and the current mainstream media landscape. The pervasiveness of such messaging maintains a system of "power, privilege and sexism [that works] both by conferring benefits to men and by trapping them in narrow roles"

(Pappas). As many action film viewers can attest, after seeing a film in which the hero is physically dynamic but emotionally static, "stoicism and a reluctance to admit vulnerability hamstring men in personal relationships" (Pappas). The APA's articulation of traditional American masculinity captures the power attributed to men in our most convincing pop culture artifacts—and the influence that those portrayals may have on viewing audiences.

Despite the APA's efforts to identify psychological impact, vocal critics have also drawn attention to the potential limitations of its guidelines. Richard V. Reeves observes that "life has not always been rosy for men in traditional families," adding that "[t]here is a certain desolation to a life that is designed for you […] with tightly prescribed roles and oppressive expectations" (34). Reeves acknowledges the heavy expectations that American men carry in pursuit of fulfilling idealized masculine roles. In response to such despair surrounding masculinity, Reeves asserts: "We need a prosocial masculinity for a postfeminist world" (xiii). Hand in hand with acknowledging the limitations of these traditional masculine traits, Pappas notes that the APA guidelines call for "pro-social" behaviors and that "flexibility in the potentially positive aspects ([such as] courage, leadership)" should be encouraged. Reeves retorts, "The guidelines contain not a single reference to these positive aspects of masculinity" (100). Todd W. Reeser similarly calls for "positive models of masculinity in which masculinity operates in a non-hegemonic way, moments in which men break or attempt to break their own hold over power in ways in which purely critical views of masculinity can be supplemented by more positive ones" (14). This gap in understanding leaves much to be studied concerning the specific lived realities of boys and men, which is why the continuous construction and reconstruction of action heroes' masculinity is highly topical—not just as representative of negative traits but also in showing positive potential for attitudinal shifts.

Since hegemonic American masculinity itself no longer gets a pass from scrutiny, even in action films, recent onscreen heroes offer rich material for examining and understanding skepticism towards men's traditional gender roles while also embodying the aforementioned positive traits. While these films still deliver the genre's reliable thrills, the very heroes playing these parts increasingly scrutinize masculine tropes. No longer do the characters silently accept their violent roles; the critique is written into their backstory, dialogue, and overall ethos. While not exhaustive, the selection of mainstream, popular action films analyzed below—*Nobody* (2021)*, The Gray Man* (2022)*,* and *Bullet Train* (2022) —showcase action heroes in moments of self-reflection and self-awareness even while successfully fulfilling their duties (i.e., winning combat sequences and protecting designated lives). These films' leading men consistently act with moral guidance and not in pursuit of individual power or riches. Arguably, they exist to tip the scale of justice towards good and fairness.[1]

The skepticism exemplified by leading male characters like Hutch Mansell of *Nobody*, Lady Bug of *Bullet Train*, and Six of *The Gray Man* signals a pattern in both attitude and behaviors that create openings for mainstream reconsideration of hegemonic American masculinity. At the same time, the risk remains of blockbuster franchises being dismissed as merely offering the same masculine traits for audiences to revere and emulate. The potential to propel broader cultural conversations around masculinity depends on audience reception and

[1] These films also employ recognizable tropes of masculinities that often fail to fully reconcile additional complexities of lived experiences tied to race, class, and other intersecting identities. Instead, these heroes are routinely shaped by their experiences as white men in the U.S., where white supremacy shapes the landscape and dictates who most easily fits the role of hero.

critical engagement. Onscreen skepticism cannot be too subtle for viewers to perceive and thoroughly consider, which is why the extent of these heroes' expressed reluctance and skepticism is notable. Each man grapples with misgivings towards socially expected masculine roles, none more so than Hutch Mansell of *Nobody*. Since it offers a more traditional representation of a leading character with backstory, narration, and a more fleshed-out exploration of Hutch's motivation and purpose, *Nobody* serves as the primary case study. Moreover, *Nobody* resonates with recent APA guidelines on American masculinity in its contrast between Hutch's self-perception of masculinity and the competing social pressures that surround him.

Cultural Expectations of Violent Action

In many ways, Hutch Mansell (Bob Odenkirk) is a masculine lead who does not resemble the muscled physique of twentieth-century action stars like Willis, Cruise, or Stallone, nor does *Nobody* initially offer over-the-top explosions in prolonged sequences. Hutch is a middle-aged white man, married with children and living an underwhelming suburban life. Onscreen, the monotony of his life is shown through the repetition of him missing the garbage truck, slurping lots of coffee, making breakfast for a family too busy to eat it, and taking the city bus to work—all of which prompts looks of disappointment from his wife and teen son. That routine, however, gets interrupted when simmering malcontent boils to the surface during a home invasion robbery. The rest of the film depicts Hutch on a vigilante spree, while the audience quickly learns that his boring life is a hibernation from his previous role as an assassin. As the film's tagline—"Never underestimate a nobody"—suggests, Hutch knows that he is underestimated and devalued because he does not command spaces with physical power or aggression.

Importantly, Hutch does not *desire* to be different from what he is as a family man; he actively chooses to be who he is rather than meet the expectations that others hold for him—or for men writ large. When asked why he didn't fight back against the assailants who broke into his home and threatened his family, Hutch replies, "I was just trying to keep the damage to a minimum." In rapid succession onscreen, responses to Hutch's inaction vary among other male characters. First, while standing in his driveway, a law-enforcement responder asks about the golf club that Hutch had—"Did you even take a swing?"—and then starts to say, "You know if that was my family…" but doesn't finish. The policeman walks away with a smirk. Second, the guy next door jokes, punching the air and smiling, "I heard you had some excitement last night. I wish they'd picked this place, you know. Could've used the exercise." Next, his brother-in-law, Charlie, insists that Hutch should keep a gun at home. As a bombastic parody of hypermasculinity (and who gets characterized by his sister, Hutch's wife, as "a real soldier" who saw combat, unlike Hutch, who calls himself an auditor), Charlie fails to properly use the safety on his own gun and calls the home-invasion "child's play." Finally, Hutch's father-in-law reacts by saying, "I'm thinking that you did the best thing you could. I mean, you being you"—a mild yet undermining assessment of Hutch's masculinity. All these responses convey a strong message about the desirability of certain masculine characteristics. As the man of the house, Hutch should be a protector of his family. Fulfilling this role requires *physical* action, specifically violent confrontation. Ergo, Hutch's measured use of *inaction* falls short of these social expectations of his role as protector. The fact that he succeeded in protecting his family by maintaining calm and de-escalating the situation—that he was able to keep everyone *safe*—fails to garner respect from other men in his life; they see him as less of a man.

One Man's Alternative Self-Perception

Hutch's inclination to de-escalate is one of the earliest and clearest indications of his turn towards a prosocial mentality. In contrast to other male characters, Hutch's self-perception and values as a man, husband, and father are grounded in selflessness. He asserts, "I'm a good man. I'm a family man." Looking at his life through another perspective, the clips of him that convey monotony offer evidence of his selflessness as a family man. He values their safety above his own pride. His dedication to wife and children, and acceptance of the range of feelings that they have—even disappointment and frustration towards him—all show his capacity to care for them and his commitment to their home life. His ego, anger, and feelings are secondary to theirs. Hutch's mannerisms serve as a persistent defense of his choice not to show more anger. Instead of interpreting his measured response as cowardly, viewers later come to realize it is strategic for his goal of ensuring his family's safety.

Hutch's backstory establishes his personal ethic and rejection of systemic uses and glorification of brute force. In a scene where Hutch narrates to a dying henchman while a flashback shows onscreen, he explains his pivotal decision to leave his former, violent profession after checking on a guy he decided to let go, meaning not kill. Hutch says, "I usually pull the trigger before the waterworks begin, but this time I listened. I heard a man who genuinely regretted his choices and wanted nothing more than to shed his wolf's skin and return to the pasture as a lamb. I quietly let Allen go." A year later, he finds Allen in Boise, Idaho, with a wife, kids, a dog, and a stable job. He continues: "I'm no jealous guy but in that moment, I wanted what Allen had. So, I told my bosses I was out of the game." Then, Hutch ends his narration by admitting that he may have "overcorrected." His backstory as an ex-government assassin gives him more experience with violence than any of the supporting male characters who idealize violent action. His status as a middle-aged, middle-class, heterosexual white man living in the U.S. easily lends itself to evaluating his character within the APA's framework of traditional masculinity. With his proximity to hegemonic power—in identity and profession—Hutch's skepticism comes across as a stronger indictment of the broader power system.

Structurally, *Nobody* offers early revelations of Hutch's masculinity before a second arc reinserts him into familiar action sequences. Following the initial onscreen physical confrontations—when he both confirms that the would-be robbers are not the true villains *and* achieves catharsis after confronting a violent gang of young men—Hutch experiences a denouement-like happy ending as his family comes together at the dinner table. The audience infers from this family scene that Hutch's self-discovery about his performance of masculinity has led him to find balance between action and inaction; the necessity for him to act is not mutually exclusive with his potential to emotionally connect with his family. He does not have to play out the masculine tropes that other characters onscreen expect from him, but he also must develop his own sense of self—passivity is insufficient if he wants to build loving family connections. The actions he takes are what his family needs from him, nothing more, not his pursuit of power, money, or fame. Ultimately, we witness him taking a prosocial turn as he makes changes to better communicate with his wife and teen son, especially.

The film's second arc seemingly severs Hutch's early measured de-escalation from the obvious necessity to defend his family. The would-be moment of resolution for Hutch's first arc ends abruptly as a mob descends upon the home and he must face the consequences of his cathartic brawl. Violent action is now necessary to protect his family. In a highly symbolic display of his decision to leave behind the "overcorrection" era of his life, Hutch burns his family home to the ground—with his wife and kids safely evacuated and family photos packed up. This onscreen destruction would seem to undo all the self-reflection and personal revelation

of the early scenes for the sake of a more traditional narrative with relentless action sequences and flimsy character development. While this is a risk—that the audience may fail to fully grapple with Hutch's emotional work—the film's second segment still offers additional opportunities for contemplation of masculine tropes. Even with this necessity for violent action, Hutch's core values stand in contrast with his foil, Russian mobster Yulian (Aleksey Serbryakov).

The difference between Hutch and Yulian—and their masculine identities—can be boiled down to their relationship to domination and violence. In juxtaposition to Hutch's domestic manhood, Yulian gets coded as other. He is not American. He does not have a wife or family to establish heterosexuality or stability. He is not stoic. While his status is tied to the strength of the Russian mob, Yulian's flamboyant and brutal swagger puts his masculine power at risk. For example, his flashy clothing and nightclub performance make a poor impression on the other mobsters. Yulian compensates for this lack of trust with an impulsive and merciless gesture: he smashes a martini glass and uses it to stab a man in the face before cutting his throat. In response to Yulian's attack on his home, Hutch matches the extreme measures of violence only for the sake of his family's safety. Unlike Yulian, Hutch does not want money or power. Hutch finds himself amid violence only because of violent perpetrators like Yulian. This illustrates a key limitation of Hutch's character development: he may desire to end violence, but one man's self-discovery is unlikely to change the larger societal context. Thus, Hutch's actions in the latter portion of the film are tied to obligation, not so different from dutiful heroes of years past, to ensure that bad actors are not free to reign terror. As illustrated by Hutch's observations of Allen, he wants a happy family life: to be a nobody in the eyes of men like Yulian, and, instead, a *somebody* in the eyes of his family.

Hutch's priorities and skepticism towards violence represent an important shift that masculinities scholars view as positive for both the man and the culture. Zooming out to consider a lineage of American hegemonic masculinity, Jeffords observes mainstream media representations in the Reagan era, "what is good for the father is good for the family as a whole" (73). Thus, at that cultural moment, action heroes can frequently be understood in terms of their paternalistic relationships to family and society, all of which serve an individual man's self-actualization. At the edge of the twentieth century, Karen Schneider finds that action films of "the late 1990s signal further development in this trend," that "dad gets to have his cake and eat it too" (5). Schneider marks an interesting evolution of a type of masculine hero that is successful "not because he is muscular and lethal but because he is smart, loving, and committed" (5). The "rearticulation" of mainstream representations of American masculinity during the late 1990s into something less visually imposing and more emotionally demonstrative (Schneider 5) paves the way for current onscreen iterations. These men of twenty-first-century action films—like Hutch—arrive at a meaningful moment of self-evaluation. Hutch openly questions the underlying assumption that fulfilling his desires will have a net benefit for those he cares for—his family.

Hutch's commitment to cultivating a nurturing family—not simply protecting them for his own self-aggrandizement—exemplifies prosocial behaviors, and key among them is his capacity to reflect on his actions and change course. To return to both Reeves's main point and the APA guidance referenced earlier, "pro-social aspects of masculinity" can temper the toxicity of traditionally masculine traits (Pappas). Throughout the film, Hutch processes both the socially constructed gender roles and the expectations he held for himself as a husband and father. Though he says that he may have "overcorrected" in his pursuit of being a family man over his

career as an assassin, he clearly values those social ties more and actively pursues domestic bonds over professional gains. His self-awareness of this conflict between social constructions of masculinity and his own core values is worthy of consideration.

While the film *Nobody* still exhibits many characteristics of typical blockbuster action films, Hutch notably demonstrates reluctance to fully embrace his role as action hero—emphasis on *action*. At nearly every turn, the subtleties of Hutch's decisions and mannerisms move away from "stoicism, competitiveness, dominance and aggression" (Pappas). Schneider regards similar mannerisms on display in 1990s action films as "the ideal American man of the 'postfeminist' age: a cautious but decisive, stoic but tender, thoughtful man of action" (8). These traits, in addition to Hutch's expressed self-awareness and open skepticism, show him to be further along in breaking down the barriers between masculinity and prosociality. He seeks nurturing bonds with family, does not perpetuate competition for power or prestige over others, and is not the aggressor but the defender. The viewing audience is there to be entertained. There will seemingly always be an endless supply of bad actors—men seeking money and power—who embody stereotypical masculine attitudes and behaviors to varying degrees of seriousness and parody. Yet, as spouse and parent, Hutch cannot be reduced to a simple stereotype.

Growing Self-Awareness and Reluctance

As Hutch demonstrates the continued evolution of male protagonists who exemplify apparently traditional masculine traits while simultaneously exhibiting reluctance and skepticism towards their own gender performances, *The Gray Man* and *Bullet Train* similarly depict self-aware male protagonists. These men, who *could* be read as hegemonic male templates, demonstrate marked reluctance toward the status quo, specifically the social expectations for their mannerisms as men. Their reluctance, however, does not inhibit their efficacy in roles that demand those traditional masculine traits; thus, the films still portray action sequences that align with genre expectations. Those traits may be present, but these characters show no enthusiasm for their performances. Rather, the male characters are "socially, politically, economically, and culturally situated" (Ulmer 74). It is against this complex backdrop that they must juggle their own misgivings about the ingrained expectations for them to carry on as action heroes. This backdrop is also the "particular historical moment" (Ulmer 74) that audiences should consider when marking films' meaningful departures from traditional masculinity and potential for change.

Explicit onscreen hesitation towards socially constructed expectations of masculinity signals a tidal shift in cultural attitudes toward conventional gender roles—even in action films. Unlike twentieth-century audiences, twenty-first century viewers have exposure to critical discourse of gender as a social construction, as well as the tools to reconsider stereotypes and performances of roles assigned to the gender binary, and the possibility of more fluid gender performances is mainstream. Genre conventions still demand action, but that no longer precludes appreciation or consideration of *why*. For men offscreen, those who make up the viewing audience, Reeves observes,

> [T]here's a lack of a script, honestly, for a lot of men. They just don't—a lot of men will say they know what they're not supposed to do, but actually when you ask them, "what are you supposed to do?" they don't really ever have a good answer. That creates a massive vacuum, which gets filled, I'm afraid, very often by quite reactionary forces. Because, at least the people on the alt-right and sometimes online, they have the answer to the question, "What does it mean to be a man?" Whereas mainstream culture very often doesn't have an answer. ("Richard Reeves")

Herein lies the possible relationship between such depictions onscreen and our current social dynamics: positive scripts and prosocial behaviors have the potential to enhance understanding of masculinity and the men who seek alternatives to the traditional mode. The subjects of action onscreen are no longer only men, nor are violent actions automatically justifiable. The characters portraying this in-betweenness show movement away from strict adherence to traditional masculine tropes. Instead, these action heroes appear as men leaning into masculine performances that prioritize self-awareness of their roles within social power structures, reluctance to use violence in service of domination, willingness to communicate, and prioritization of nurturing relationships. These shifts demonstrate important breaks from hegemonic masculinity.

Six in The Gray Man

Like Hutch, Six (Ryan Gosling) in *The Gray Man* subverts masculine expectations despite being a trained CIA operative—one who is also off-the-books, no less. Though *The Gray Man* provides little backstory for Six initially, the opening scene offers important biographical details. Before he became known as Six, his name was Courtland Gentry, and he was imprisoned as a teen for committing murder. Six conveys a flippant attitude towards authority—as witness to the failures of the legal system, he has no expectation for anything better, nor does justice seem likely. CIA recruiter Fitzroy (Billy Bob Thornton) persuades Six to join the Sierra program, promising, "We're going to train you to kill bad guys. And since you've already killed one, it shouldn't be too difficult." Six asks, "What makes you think I want to do it again?" Fitzroy, representing both societal and viewer expectations, explains, "You seem like the type," while also acknowledging that, as a social outcast, Six would be "disposable." In this exchange, Six—along with the audience—learns a lot about the paradoxical status of the men who live in the gray—an ambiguous space that permits their extralegal actions for the sake of a so-called greater good. Six does not exist on any government record, which means that his actions, even though ordered by government officials, are not traceable to said government. Men like Six are deemed necessary, within the contexts of action films like *The Gray Man* and *Nobody,* to thwart bad actors, but the men themselves are often assumed to be cut from the same cloth as the bad actors that they police. Even though Six's role is like that of Hutch, *The Gray Man*'s plot and supporting characters amplify his societal ostracization, unlike Hutch with his family. Only later are viewers better able to understand Six's motivations and appreciate his prosocial affinities.

Despite his sophisticated sense of ethics, which prompts him to question the uses of brute force, Six struggles throughout the film to refute narratives about him as a "knuckle dragger" who lacks savvy for twenty-first-century geopolitics. These disparaging characterizations are spouted by corrupt, Harvard-educated men in positions of governmental power. Much like the contrast between Hutch and Yulian, Six's moral fabric stands in conflict with the power-seeking elitism of those leading the CIA. Stories of the Sierra program paint men like Six as one of many "hardened criminals" recruited as "assets [who] were chosen for their skillset, lack of family, and plausible deniability. Identities permanently destroyed. Nameless assassins with limited morality." Six's main assigned purpose is to kill, and he is "freakishly good" at his job. The assumptions made by those who employ him persist; they think he is *only* a hired hand, neither a thinking man nor a compassionate human. These external perceptions assume Six's complete severance from social ties. Onscreen, Six's strategies and interactions with allies while evading those chasing him refute his critics. The film's primary villain, Lloyd (Chris Evans), criticizes Six's "childish sense of morality and eight-dollar haircut." But this statement is meant to ring false given the extent to which Lloyd is written as an utterly unlikeable villain. What these

perceptions intentionally fail to reconcile is Six's consistent moral code to protect "collateral"—innocent lives. The viewing audience can easily see that Six operates by a code of ethics with moral integrity that his counterparts lack. Lloyd's insult conflicts with Six's demonstrated efforts to de-escalate violent situations.

Unlike Hutch, Six better fits the unencumbered action hero type because he lacks many familial and community ties that would complicate his profession as a governmental assassin. Fitzroy becomes a father figure and is one of a few characters whom Six trusts. Fitzroy's niece Claire (Julia Butters), then, becomes Six's only additional social connection. Initially, Six attempts to avoid the familial obligations of protecting Claire, saying to Fitzroy, "You guys taught me how to kill people, not how to care for them." Though he is reluctant to assume responsibility for a child, this is not the first time that Six has been an advocate. In fact, the murder that landed him in prison was an effort to protect his brother from their abusive father. Six explains his upbringing:

> Ok, well, my father fancied himself a real macho man. And he was hell bent on turning me and my brother into the same. Unfortunately, his methods were a little unsound, and he started laying into my brother so hard that at a certain point, it was clear that it was either gonna be my brother or him. So, I decided it would be him. I thought, how noble of me and everyone else thought I should be in jail. (*The Gray Man*)

Six's flashbacks to his father's abuse contrast with moments where he must confront others' brutality, like Lloyd's use of torture and dirty fighting techniques. With this flashback, the audience can appreciate Six's propensity to protect and demonstrate prosocial behaviors but also his suppression of those inclinations because of his incarceration and knowledge of the injustice around him. Six's sarcastic and simple-minded affect belies his self-awareness and competency. He may not be Harvard-educated like his adversaries in positions of power, but he is clean of the corruption that comes from hoarding such power, which also distinguishes Six from the men who pursue individualistic gains.

As with Hutch, it is Six's development of nurturing relationships that provides an off-ramp from the limitations of violent masculinity. Like Hutch, Six chooses social bonds over isolation, and he cares for others rather than pursuing money or power. In his relationship with Fitzroy, he finds the father figure that he lacked. In his relationship with Claire, Six accesses a sense of responsibility from his past: a desire to care and protect. So, while at the onset of the film, Six lacks a personal reason for fighting against power structures and the traditional masculine roles expected of him, by the end, he is committed to caring for Claire. He lets go of his former reluctance to take on the responsibility of familial ties and steps into a fraternal role, replacing Fitzroy's paternal role, in Claire's life. Six unburdens himself of traditionally toxic masculine traits and embraces prosocial bonds.

Ladybug in Bullet Train

Standing out in the ensemble cast of *Bullet Train*, Ladybug (Brad Pitt) exemplifies both self-awareness and reluctance towards the roles expected of him as a man of action. When the audience meets Ladybug, he is on the phone with his handler, Maria (Sandra Bullock). Ladybug's character setup is brief: he has just returned to work as a hired man; he is a non-violent criminal who prefers "snatch-and-grab" jobs. Yet he is no stranger to the prevalence of violence. Ladybug complains to Maria, "My bad luck is biblical. I'm not even trying to kill people, and someone dies." Much like Hutch's routinized domesticity, Ladybug appears unassuming in his bucket hat, oversized glasses, and otherwise bland clothing. He is a middle-aged white man and only somewhat conspicuous in his surroundings. Ladybug bumbles through

a Tokyo train station to complete his job, snatching a case with unknown contents. Ladybug does not exude confidence as the action hero the audience anticipates he will be.

Like Hutch, Ladybug confronts social pressures to perform hegemonic masculinity. As he carries out his job, Ladybug struggles with conflicting advice that would result in him being two dramatically different men. The audience learns that Ladybug has been going to therapy and that he is eager to employ therapeutic strategies in his life. He explains to Maria, "You are getting the new and improved me. Since I've been working with Barry [his therapist], I'm experiencing a calm like never before. Never. I'm less reactive to situations. I'm more accepting of people's shortcomings. I was a little uncertain about coming back to work, but it's like Barry says: 'You put peace out into the world, you get peace back.'" This version of Ladybug is nonviolent and in search of personal growth, which leans towards prosociality. In reaction, Maria reminds him that Barry does not know what Ladybug does for a living, which means that his therapeutic advice does not apply to the job at hand. Maria prefers that Ladybug carry a gun, but he refuses. Her negation of Barry's instruction and Ladybug's desire to de-escalate underscores the impracticality of breaking with his profession's norms, which align closely with hegemonic masculinity.

Despite an open expression of his intent to break with violent masculinity, Ladybug initially struggles to implement changes in his life. When tested, Barry's advice to put peace out into the world seemingly rings hollow during several fight sequences. Both Maria and the audience appreciate the friction between therapeutic advice and the realities of Ladybug's professional situation. Ladybug is aware of this conflict—who better than him to take full inventory of his situation—and he decides to maintain course with his intent to change. Notably, he does not initiate combat but instead consistently seeks to de-escalate situations. Despite the comedic effect of these scenes, his efforts are ultimately impactful. The hired assassins react with incredulity towards Ladybug's request to "talk things out." As bemused or frustrated as other characters might be by his mannerisms, he successfully survives and assists the side of good prevailing over bad. His survival despite multiple violent conflicts—even if made light of—partly owes to the coping mechanisms that he learns from therapy. Ladybug's open discussion of therapy and practical use of therapeutic methods starkly contrast with traditional masculinity, which would expect him to use violence with ease and impunity as an action hero.

Surprisingly, mid-film, Ladybug's intentional use of listening and conversation reward him with personal growth, illustrating a win for prosociality. The audience learns about the events that catalyzed Ladybug's therapeutic journey: a job gone wrong in Johannesburg, where he was twice shot by another contract man who also happens to be on the train, Lemon (Brian Tyree Henry). While talking to Lemon, Ladybug processes his trauma and the two arrive at an unexpected mutual understanding. This is only possible because of Ladybug's active listening. Unlike many other characters who appear bored while listening, Ladybug listens with intent. He shows an earnest interest in understanding those around him, even as they may seek to kill him. Through another lens, Ladybug's efforts to "talk things out" and employ lessons learned from therapy sessions, the audience is prompted to consider the benefits of a less reactive demeanor. This effort to process and fully take in one's surroundings is reminiscent of Hutch, who also talks through his relationships with other characters and the roles expected of him.

There is an important prosocial substance in these types of communicative exchanges that occur in all three films. Unlike the Sisyphus mythology that Six explains to Claire in *The Gray Man*—Sisyphus carries the burden of the world on his shoulders without satisfaction or gratitude—these leading men seek out understanding and connections to others. This self-aware

trait values the experience of sharing emotional-intellectual perspectives, and, because of it, the men appear more resilient and better equipped to handle the complex situations of their lives.

Conclusion: Different Breaking and Breakthrough Points

The reluctance to perform traditionally masculine roles, especially that of the violent actor, demonstrated by Hutch, Six, and Ladybug is an important signal that disruption (Connell 37)—"revision and refusal" (Butler 32) of hegemonic American masculinity—are at work. There is not one shared experience that all three characters go through to arrive at their skepticism, or a singular catalyst for their development. For Hutch, the home invasion and his subsequent vigilantism prompt self-reflection. His efforts to communicate are often imperfect, yet his intentionality in cultivating nurturing bonds represents a break from stoicism. Six's breakthrough comes when he establishes nurturing bonds of chosen family and cultivates those in lieu of isolation and violent aggression on behalf of the U.S. government. Ladybug's breaking point comes from his near-death experience, and his breakthrough comes from subsequent therapeutic treatment, specifically talking to a mental health practitioner.

The characters each explicitly convey their doubt towards the hegemonic masculine-coded roles with others, and acknowledge their apprehensions about the status quo of masculinity, power, and society. This is a break from what Jesse Gerlach Ulmer examines in the closed-mouth American cowboy as a "model of masculinity that renounces language [illustrates] psychologically and socially dysfunctional American men" (73). The break in stoicism shown by Hutch, Six, and Ladybug aligns with the nuance that Ulmer finds possible in specific portrayals: "Western men do not always use language to subjugate women, and…the valuing of language over action does not always result in violence or exploitation, that the rejection of language, if it is a rejection at all, signifies the embrace of other forms of communication" (87-88). The language employed by these heroic characters works to dismantle masculine domination. Not only do these reluctant heroes *tell* audiences their qualms with gender expectations, but they also show us that nurturing social connections matters.

Though all three characters are still required to use brute force in facilitation of the action films' plots, all three struggle with their sense of purpose and must find ways to connect beyond professional obligations, to break free of the limited roles they are assigned as men and as action heroes. The characters' turn towards social bonds represents a significant turn away from the rugged isolationism and stunted emotionality associated with traditional American masculinity. In his research on American boys and men, Reeves references a 2017 Pew Research study that distinguishes an individual's sense of purpose and meaning along gender lines: "women find more meaning in their lives, and from more sources, than men" (39). Reeves calls for stronger prosocial bonds for men (169). For Hutch, his roles as husband and father are written into his character, but it is his acknowledgement of his failings in these roles and his commitment to change for the sake of strengthening his bonds that are remarkable. Both Six and Ladybug also demonstrate a growing desire for connection, though they are not part of traditional family units. Six steps into a familial role with Claire and transitions from an untethered violent actor to abonded companion. Ladybug, arguably the furthest removed from a traditional family unit onscreen, demonstrates a rapid cultivation of social ties (with strangers on a train) and conveys an openness to such commitments. This outwardly growing network of social responsibility—moving beyond the traditional family structure towards community and global connectedness—is encouraging. Though not without missteps, the characters' prosocial behaviors—willingness to listen and think before acting and persistence in de-escalation—indicate changes around masculinity and the ways that men can find meaning in their lives.

The open expression of doubt portrayed by all three characters cannot be ignored because the films' representations of these masculine heroes reflect larger societal change. Risman traces this rejection of hegemonic masculinity to generational shifts, specifically to millennials who see it as "oppressive…so they withhold enthusiasm when discussing their own masculinity, sometimes even apologizing for it" (110). Onscreen, the men are primarily Boomers (with Six as the only exception), yet their audiences are multigenerational. They are in process as they craft their identities and relationships with others, and with this work comes fallibility. The cultural expectation of masculine perfection from action heroes upholds the myths of hegemonic American masculinity and stereotypes of what it means to be a man of action in America.

Social change and subversion of dominant perspectives abound in action films, rendering ongoing debates regarding masculine roles and stereotypes accessible to a wide audience. Critique of harmful traits associated with hegemonic American masculinity can be complemented by critical engagement with positive media portrayals that challenge traditional stereotypes. If there is any merit to psychologist Ryon McDermott's claim that "if we change men […] we can change the world" (quoted in Pappas), then efforts to mark prosocial behaviors in masculine portrayals in mainstream media are useful. Replication of stereotypes is not inherent in the cultural artifacts themselves, nor must it be in those who create and consume pop culture. Butler argues:

> A critique of something is not simply a way of opposing something and being done with it or calling for its abolition. A critique of masculine domination, for instance, shows that life does not have to be organized by this social form. With critique comes a new way of understanding the world, one that can be essential to struggles for social change and the opening up of new possible ways of living. (141)

The onscreen skepticism undeniably expressed by Hutch, Six, and Ladybug offers such openings. Gender "innovators" craft "their definition of self" against hegemonic masculinity (Risman 151)—rejecting domination, aggression, competition, and stoicism. If we, as viewers of onscreen heroics, mark the ways that masculine characters emotionally and intellectually examine and recraft their gender roles in action films, then we also have a pathway towards productive mainstream critiques of gender templates.

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Lost in the Fanhouse: KingCon and Stephen King's Fandom

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In Stephen King's fiftieth year of publishing books, the inaugural KingCon took place in October of 2024 in Las Vegas. One of the first events of its kind as a major fan convention for an individual writer of literature, KingCon merits examination for what it reflects about Stephen King fandom within the context of both the history of fandom studies and King's own depictions of fandom in his work.

I attended KingCon as part fan, part academic, or as Katherine Larsen and Lynn Zubernis put it, an "aca-fan," summarizing likenesses between these two groups – both "are passionate, acquisitive and seek as much information about their objects of interest as they can get, often down to minutiae that others might consider obsessive" – with a distinction remaining in that "we are more likely to embrace the 'aficionado' while distancing ourselves from the 'fan'" (44). This binary between academic and fan evokes a binary that Harold Bloom implies in his claim that King represents "the death of the Literate Reader" in the preface of his 2007 edited volume of academic criticism on King's work (3) (the same year, it is worth noting, that King himself edited the respected annual volume of literary fiction *Best American Short Stories*). King's own designation of his communal fan base, the "Constant Reader" he addresses in the fireside-chat-like prefaces and afterwords to so many of his works, supplies the antithesis of Bloom's Literate Reader in representing the latter's death. If the proliferation of academic criticism on King's work since the mid-1980s evidences that plenty of Literate Readers have engaged with his work, the existence and nature of such a popular fan convention as KingCon, whose attendees would predominantly qualify and self-identify as Constant Readers, provides insight into the nature of King's legacy and what amount of overlap resides between Literate and Constant Readers of his work. If, as Tony Magistrale puts it, "[t]he impact of Stephen King's career on American culture is difficult to ascertain," KingCon consolidates some of the "crude benchmarks" we might use to do so into a picture that reinforces Magistrale's refutation of Bloom reducing "King's place in American popular culture to an ephemeral commodity of our disposable epoch that carries no real significance beyond its moment in time" ("Why Stephen King Still Matters" 362; 355). KingCon cements King's place in mass culture in a testament to his staying power

by concisely exhibiting in one place and time the range of his impact on visual, cinematic, and literary art.

Fandom scholar Matt Hills contends that "cultural theorists' tendency to split fandom into 'good' and 'bad' components" that align with "the basic valuation of 'production' and the basic devaluation of 'consumption'" underpins the history of fandom studies (*Fan Cultures* n.p.). That fans attending KingCon convened in Las Vegas like antagonist Randall Flagg's followers in King's novel *The Stand* (1978/1990), potentially the most emblematic of King's works exploring good versus evil, thematically renders KingCon a resonant setting for exploring how Constant Readers fit into traditional conceptions of "good" and "bad" fandom while also evaluating their negative status in Bloom's stark formulation that pits fan against academic. Though King's criteria for good and bad fandom differs significantly from that applied in fandom studies, we will see that King's own conceptions of "good" and "bad" fandom in his work maintain a binary about as rigid as Bloom's in categorizing Constant Readers as negative, only the good side they are opposed to is not the academic, which in King's depictions remain equally negative, but rather sports fans. Of course, any such binaries are reductive, since "[t]he binary oppositions against which fandom could once be conceptualized as oppositional practice may be fast disappearing" (Sandvoss et al. 23). Hills further observes that these binary oppositions "imply different moral dualisms" of good and bad in generating formulations of "us" and "them," and counters that "cultural identities are performed not simply through a singular binary opposition such as fan/academic, but rather through a raft of overlapping and interlocking versions of 'us' and 'them'" (*Fan Cultures* n.p.). Bloom's "fan/academic" binary of Constant versus Literate Readers aligns with King's own struggle with his status as brand versus writer that he addresses in his essay "On Becoming A Brand Name," and, in reinforcing the "overlapping and interlocking" aspects of King fan production and consumption, KingCon does more to reinforce King's status as a brand than highlight his legitimacy as a writer. This might hardly be surprising considering the nature of the fan convention, which "arise[s] from a collective engagement with a subject that is consumed across multiple formats (e.g., films, TV series, merchandise)…. These events are not designed to promote the subject itself, but rather to build upon its already widespread appeal" (Terraferma et al. 5). But KingCon does confirm that Constant Readers did not much challenge the fan convention format to incorporate literary engagement, even if their fan production practices certainly display a unique creativity that we might attribute to the

literariness of its subject. If Constant Reader fan behavior at KingCon supports the success of King's own branding strategies, we must also consider the functionality of such appeals in the face of King's negative depiction of certain types of fans in his work. "I am loving all these posts from people traveling from all over to meet in one location," posted the user Jennifer Bowman on the KingCon Facebook page the day before the Con started. "Feels like we are living out *The Stand*" (n.p.). With the implied parallel to the followers of this novel's antagonist, this Constant Reader seems to have overlooked that this comparison codes attendees as negative by King's canon's own logic and, by extension, allegorically locates them on the "bad" end of his fandom spectrum.

Enter the Con … and Escape IT

The cover image for *Fan Cultures*, Matt Hills' 2002 study of fandom, shows a torso in a denim jacket bearing different fan-related pins, which, if you're in a *Stand* state of mind, evokes King's description of Flagg's "button on each breast of his denim jacket. On the right, a yellow smile-face. On the left, a pig wearing a policeman's cap. The legend was written beneath in red letters which dripped to simulate blood: HOW'S YOUR PORK?" (*The Stand* n.p.). These pins, contradictory emblems of peace and violence, represent how Flagg plays both sides, politically, in the interest of sowing maximum chaos. Flagg blurs the political binary, revealing not the blurring itself as evil and thus reinforcement for the value of binaries; rather, it is the existence and nature of the binary construction itself that is exploitable and so, by extension, problematic. Although, as Michael J. Blouin puts it, erasure "of what is presumed to be beyond the binary of 'good and evil' […] remains fundamentally (im)possible" in *The Stand*, which ultimately "highlight[s] the crucial role of antagonism" (184).

KingCon took place just a few days before the 2024 presidential election, in response to which the organizers posted on the website to "please respect that KingCon is an apolitical space. Please refrain from wearing any attire promoting messages for or against any political candidate or party. KingCon should be a much needed, all-too-brief respite from politics."[1] And yet, the KingCon cap for sale at the Con's merchandise table inadvertently contradicts this insistence on its apolitical nature: its white text on a red cap to accentuate the red balloon logo

[1] As of this writing, administrators have removed all materials referring to the 2024 KingCon from the KingCon website, which now exclusively refers to content for the upcoming 2026 KingCon.

engenders a certain likeness to the potent political symbol of the MAGA cap, an ironic echo of how King's "brand of anti-politics" displaces the political with "the folksy, blue-collar 'common sense' of citizen-consumers" (Blouin 4; 9). If King's work "preserves the political" by way of its very efforts to repress it (Blouin 4), KingCon's attempt not to blur the political binary but rather to bypass it entirely recapitulates how King's work inadvertently renders politics inescapable. After all, "the more being a fan is commonplace […] the more it shapes the identities and communities in our mediated world and with it the […] politics of our age" (Gray et al. 23).

Just as politics is inescapable, Hills designates fans' "inherently contradictory" aspect of being "simultaneously inside and outside processes of commodification" as "an inescapable tension" (*Fan Cultures* n.p.). The Las Vegas tourist attraction Escape IT offers a case in point. This *IT*-themed escape room experience consists of two "adventures": "The Sewers," based on the 2017 film adaptation of King's 1986 novel, and "The Funhouse," based on the 2019 sequel. In his 2005 study *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption*, Cornel Sandvoss figures fandom as a mirror through which individuals construct their self-identity, and the disavowal of the political at KingCon and in King's work alike is itself a sort of funhouse mirror distortion in reflecting Constant Readers as apolitical, placing them in the fan demographic that is unable to use this reflective identity construction to, as Hills puts it in his review of the study, "break out into […] more challenging forms of self-understanding" (150), foreclosing fandom's "potential for empowerment and emancipation" (Sandvoss 32). KingCon reflects the Constant Reader as engaging with King's work in a mode that preserves "existing power structures within society" (Sandvoss 156), mirroring how "in his rush to dismantle History as a tool manipulated by the powerful, *King sometimes empowers the ruling class that he apparently wishes to undermine*" (Magistrale and Blouin n.p., italics in original). KingCon thus elucidates a potentially critical distinction between Constant Readers and Literate Readers: the inclination to accept King's claims at face value rather than detect and interrogate their contradictions, which in turn demonstrates the success of King's antipolitical appeals as part of his branding strategy.

Michael J. Blouin reads a major political contradiction into *IT,* specifically when he argues that King's novel "oscillates between communitarian and liberal ideals…. In one moment, *IT* contends that individuals are always-already embedded within their community; in the next moment, the narrative implies that

individuals are fundamentally detached from their social context" (89). It is therefore appropriate that KingCon takes a signifier from *IT* as its logo, since it enacts a parallel contradiction: gathering with fellow fans at a convention in one sense embodies the communitarian, but in its disavowal of the political, KingCon effectively detaches attendees "from their social context," stripping King fans as a collective of power and agency. Stephen Reysen et al. draw a distinction between "fandom" as "the social component of fan identity," and "fanship" as "the more individualistic component of fan identity," and conclude from their study that, rather than fanship, it is fandom, manifest in "attending fan events" such as KingCon, that is the greater indicator of psychological well-being due to its face-to-face rather than online engagement (681) – which is to say, communal gathering engenders individual benefits rather than collective ones. This same emphasis on the individual over the collective marks the transition between the first wave of fan studies and the second, constituting a "crisis of signification [that] has a profound impact on questions of power in fandom. […] Rather than functioning as a practice of subversion, fandom […] further cements the *status quo* by undermining the role of class as a vector of social change" (Sandvoss 156, italics in original). Such cementing aligns with King's work via his assertion that "the writer of horror fiction is neither more nor less than an agent of the status quo" (*Danse Macabre* 39), despite having himself protested what would amount to said status quo in the students' revolts of the 1960s. The KingCon swag bag distributed to attendees at registration included a copy of *Hearts in Suspension* (2016), a book from an academic press that documents this period of King's political awakening, further underscoring KingCon's inability to escape the political.

Escape IT might go further than KingCon itself in reinforcing the communitarian aspect of King's seminal narrative, since the nature of the escape room format necessitates working together – often with strangers – to achieve a concrete goal. The "Funhouse" section of Escape IT follows the 2019 *Chapter 2* movie more closely than the "Sewers" follows the initial 2017 film, a distinction that ends up emphasizing the sequel's shifting of the climactic confrontation with the monster from championing the individual – in the novel Bill himself effectively defeats the monster – to championing the communitarian: the "Funhouse" concludes with participants acting out the film sequence in which the adult Losers hold hands and chant "Turn light into dark," a gesture that fails in the film but foreshadows that ultimately a group effort defeats the monster (collectively shouting diminishing insults at It). One divergent aspect of Escape IT's "Funhouse"

from the film is the funhouse sequence itself, with a room where participants play carnival games before entering the funhouse setting as it appears in the movie. The divergence of the funhouse sequence in the escape room mirrors the addition of the funhouse sequence to the movie that does not appear in King's text. This sequence symbolically represents a violence inherent in consumption that lurks behind the mirror's surface reflection, as Bill watches helplessly while Pennywise consumes a child on the other side of the transparent glass before it returns to the opaque mirror in which he can only see himself. And yet, what transpires when the mirror is transparent might itself offer a reflection of Bill in the sense that Pennywise shows him his reconstituted formative childhood trauma, the trauma that essentially constitutes Bill's identity as a horror author, and so Pennywise shows him a deeper reflection of himself.

In looking "[b]ehind the mirror," Sandvoss asks "whether it matters if fan texts offer a space for self-reflection rather than worldly engagement…. The answer […] depends […] on the extent to which one subscribes to a social function of art and popular culture" (145). If KingCon effectively forecloses Constant Readers' collective empowerment with its political disavowals, the depth of individual self-reflection garnered from the object of fandom might take Constant Readers beyond a "surface level" reading of themselves individually. The figure of Pennywise himself functions as a symbolic funhouse mirror of sorts in how he adopts different forms that reflect the viewer's specific fears. But as Rebecca Frost notes, "It feeds on popular culture just as much as It feeds on fear. […] It's main source of inspiration seems to come from the children's own imaginations, so It feeds largely on the popular culture that the children consume" (n.p.). Put another way, It consumes consumption. Since Bill's consumption leads to more concrete production than his fellow Losers by way of his adult occupation as a horror writer, that Bill defeats the monster individually in King's text aligns with first-wave fandom studies' valuing of production over consumption, while aligning with later waves of fandom studies in its emphasis on the individual.

The existence of both Escape IT and the *It*-based KingCon logo reinforce what King himself believes about his legacy: "People are gonna forget who the hell Stephen King was, but they're never gonna forget that fucking clown! He's gonna be up there with Frankenstein and Dracula and Freddy Krueger: Pennywise, the Dancing Clown!" (Vespe and Wampler 39:57-40:15). Both of these fan attractions privilege the more recent *It* adaptations over King's text – the KingCon logo with its red balloon derives from the 2017 and 2019 films rather than King's text in

which the balloons are not, as they are in the films, exclusively red (the color that, apparently inadvertently, becomes so politically loaded). This privileging emphasizes that the Con-worthy nature of King's work derives in large part from its adaptations, which, as we will see, the Con reflects in other ways as often, but not always, manifesting fan production.

KingCon's Events

The respective themes of KingCon's two main full days appear to take up fan consumption and production as distinct categories but ultimately reveal the "overlapping and interlocking" (Hills, *Fan Cultures* n.p.) aspects of this, as well as other fandom binaries. With the designated theme "Art, History, and Publishing," the Con's first full day focuses on consumption in the form of collecting, while the second day focuses on production in the form of influence with the theme "The Impact of Stephen King's Work on Authors and other Media"[2] ("Welcome to Fabulous KingCon" 4-5). The privileging of the consumption end of the fandom binary that its first-day status implies is consistent with the convention's conception originating in the collecting community, specifically the Rare King Collectors group, where, as group member James McKenzie explains, "it was first planned to be a get together of collectors who had all been friends online…. But very quickly, they realised demand for a King focused event was beyond what they had anticipated, and MANY general King fans were also keen to attend a convention" (n.p.). The entire "Team" who organized the convention is from the Rare King Collectors group, profiled in the program not with descriptions of their favorite King works, but rather with their "Collection Focus" and "Most Prized King Item" ("Welcome to Fabulous KingCon" 46-7). The convention's main sponsor was Indy Editions, whose owner, Rare King Collectors member and book dealer Kristopher Webster, served as the MC for most of the convention's events. Collecting was also prominent both days of the Con by way of the vendor room, the wares ranging from limited edition books to prints of book art to specialized protective cases for books from Kings Domain Designs. A panel on the collecting day featured visual artists who have worked on covers and illustrations for special editions of King's work: Glenn Chadbourne, Vincent Chong, Francois Vaillancourt, and Rob Wood. In one

[2] The theme designations appeared in slightly different forms on the KingCon website, with the first day billed as "Stephen King Limited Editions: art, history, and publishing," and the second day billed as "Influenced by Stephen King: the direct and indirect impact of Stephen King's work on authors and other media."

of the Con's many intersections of production and consumption, Rob Wood, the illustrator of King's *Needful Things* cover among others, also gave an individual lecture about his illustrating process on the influence day; this process included the publisher sending him early manuscripts that often included King's margin notes, and Wood provided one such manuscript of King's novel *Insomnia* (1994) to be auctioned off to Con attendees.

Hills observes in some fan criticism an anxiety over fans' relationship to consumption in "moving all too rapidly from the ('bad') fan-commodity to the ('good') fan-community" (*Fan Cultures* n.p.), and KingCon demonstrated this rapid movement in the space it created for community bonding over the collecting of commodities. Each attendee's swag bag was full of merchandise stamped with the red KingCon logo and also contained a set of three identical bookmarks to encourage interaction with other attendees by trading to procure a complete set of the three different ones adorned with *Dark Tower* imagery by visual artist Michael Whelan. Commodity and community also overlapped in the long lines in the vendor room to get autographs from the visual artists whose prints were for sale, which provided a prominent space for face-to-face interaction among attendees, especially since the lines moved slowly due to the artists adorning their autographs with miniature illustrations. Based on line length, the illustrator Francois Vaillancourt seemed to be the most popular, fittingly, since Vaillancourt designed the Con program's cover art, positioning the KingCon logo in place of the city's name on the iconic "Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas" sign. In keeping with the Con's emphasis on collecting, its program is collectible (billed on the cover as a "first edition") and designed for attendees to collect autographs from the Con's featured guests, while still incorporating the production aspect by including an original short story from Philip Fracasi, one of the horror authors in attendance, as well as an interview with director Mike Flanagan.

Other panels on the collecting day showcased rare and special book editions by Phantasia Press and Suntup Editions with their respective founders, Alex Berman and Paul Suntup. Publishing books in "Artist editions," "Numbered editions," and "Lettered editions," Suntup launched his press with Stephen King titles specifically, forming the subsidiary Dragon Rebound Editions to publish first editions of King novels rebound "in a unique way that ties into the story" ("Firestarter"), a reflective emblem of Mieke Bal's idea that "collecting is an essential human feature that originates in the need to tell stories" (103). Suntup added an eighth and final book to the Dragon Rebound series for a surprise

KingCon giveaway via random ticket number selection – an edition of *Duma Key* (2008) designed to look like a painting on an easel that folds into a case.[3]

The collecting-themed day of the Con concluded with a double screening of films from two of the most prominent King adaptation directors, Mike Flanagan's *Gerald's Game* (2017) and Mick Garris's *Riding the Bullet* (2004). While Garris attended the Con in person, Flanagan was in virtual attendance both by posting a video to attendees on the Con's Facebook page and by providing special limited edition autographed posters for *Gerald's Game* to those who attended the screening. Flanagan himself represents a significant overlap between collecting and influence, both in his own creative work as well as in collecting and creating King artifacts. Flanagan's KingCon program interview reveals that he owns Suntup's Lettered Edition of *Misery*, and in keeping with the Dragon Rebound aesthetic, Kris Webster frames the edition Flanagan commissioned of the script of his adaptation of *The Life of Chuck* (2025) in this interview as "truly a work of art […] it cements itself as arguably the top limited edition in the King collecting universe" ("Welcome to Fabulous KingCon" 11).

If, by virtue of King's prominent consuming monster characters like Pennywise, the Con's collecting day is more emblematic of what King seems potentially conflicted about regarding fandom practices, the influence day demonstrates the extent of his creative generosity toward those who have engaged with his work on a more textually productive level. It also calls into question the degree to which King himself has utilized literary fandom in his own textual production; the official designation of the influence day theme implicates this confluence, even more so in parsing the "direct and indirect impact" of King's work in its form on the website. This day's panel of horror authors that King's work influenced, a reminder of King's active promotion of other writers by providing blurbs and social media posts for their books, constitutes an overlap between Constant and Literate Readers. Bloom might well disdain the genre work of these authors and not consider them any more "Literate" than he considers King, but at least one, Rebecca Rowland, produced a graduate academic thesis on King's work, specifically about his treatment of female characters – evidence that genre authors can qualify as Literate even by Bloom's reductive definition.

[3] Visual artist Kristen Bird reproduced this construction on a smaller scale; her fan-art booth in the vendor room included miniature paintings of King's first-edition book covers on tiny easel stands.

This panel addressed the question of what attracts Constant Readers to King's work, offering, in accordance with Sandvoss's formulation, that King's work depicts real-life people in which readers can see themselves. While Rowland spoke in a more analytical mode about the narrative effectiveness of King's grounding his supernatural premises in realism, authors Jonathan Janz and Kalvin Ellis both used King's novel *IT* to provide examples of seeing themselves reflected in King's work when they were growing up; Janz identified with Ben and his body image issues, while Ellis identified with Bill's trauma in the loss of his younger brother. "When I read *IT*, I felt less alone," Janz declared, emphasizing emotion rather than rationality in engaging with King's work despite his potential as a writer to read in a more Literate mode: "Exactly at the point where we might—in the terms of an academic imagined subjectivity—expect a rational explanation of the self's […] fandom, we are […] confronted by a moment where the subject cannot […] 'rationally' account for its own fan experience" (Hills, *Fan Cultures* n.p.). But Janz has effectively blurred the distinction between a fan's emotion and an academic's logic by rationally explaining his emotional attachment, in contrast to the fan Hills quotes who claims his object of fandom "'had something to say to *me* about *my* life. I just didn't have any idea what'" (*Fan Cultures* n.p., italics in original). Janz's comment also implicitly highlights the irony of how fanship in a specifically literary mode facilitates individual engagement that attains the status of communal connection without literal face-to-face interaction, thus blurring the fanship-fandom binary. But Janz also highlighted the value of face-to-face interaction and how fans at KingCon appreciated seeing their King fandom reflected in other fans, posting to the group's Facebook page after the Con was over: "Still basking in the glow of KingCon, where I met so many of my people. The kinship among Constant Readers is truly special" (n.p.).

Janz and Ellis wore Stephen King-related t-shirts, Janz of the cover of *The Stand* and Ellis one that said "Stephen King Rules." This wearing of their fandom on their sleeves, as it were, offers an example of the critic John Fiske's category of enunciative productivity, a form that facilitates social interaction, in this case by way of non-verbal communication (Sandvoss 29). (This was a practice very much on display among KingCon attendees, who predominantly reserved cosplay for the climactic costume ball; up to that point, a range of Stephen King-themed t-shirts abounded.) Janz and another writer on this panel, Ronald Malfi, also have stories in the recent fan-fiction anthology *The End of the World as We Know It: New Tales of Stephen King's* The Stand, which Janz advertised at his table in the vendor room.

This project underscores the connection between literary influence and more explicit forms of textual fan production, and by writing an introduction for it, King has ostensibly given his blessing for fan fiction of his work.

A panel on the influence day, comprised of "Dollar Babies," reinforces King's generosity in the realm of fan production. The "Dollar Baby" program ran for decades, in which King optioned the non-commercial rights to his stories to budding filmmakers for one dollar. Since these films were not made for profit, they are hard to find for general consumption, but over the course of both days of KingCon, Dollar Baby short films screened continuously, with some of their creators on hand to provide commentary.

Other speakers on the influence day included special effects technician Robert Kurtzman, "the fx artist that has worked on the MOST Stephen King films […] eight in total!" ("Welcome to Fabulous KingCon" 23), and one of the most prominent directors of King adaptations, Mick Garris. The actor Thomas Jane, who has starred in three King adaptations, was also scheduled for a Q&A, but had to leave unexpectedly after doing an interview for a live *Kingcast* recording with host Eric Vespe on KingCon's opening night. The Con organizers decided to interview Vespe as a replacement for Jane; out of a range of podcasts dedicated to King, *The Kingcast*, subtitled "A Stephen King Podcast for Stephen King Obsessives," most prominently showcases the degree to which King has influenced the culture with their regular rotation of guests involved in some degree of King fan production, whether in adaptations of King's work directly or in original content that bears the imprint of his influence. The work of Mike Flanagan, a frequent *Kingcast* guest, provides examples of both. In a bonus episode of *The Kingcast*, Vespe and his fiancé Kelsey Morrow theorize what makes Flanagan so successful at adapting King's work, with Vespe suggesting a shared knack for character development, and Morrow adding that it is also "because he is such a big fan of the original source material…. He knows what fans would want because he is one" (8:20-9:04; 45:50-46:11).

If King adaptations like Flanagan's reside in the category of fan production, one of the most significant to King's legacy does not: Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980), with collaborating screenwriter Diane Johnson very much in Bloom's camp in declaring that the novel "is not part of great literature," is "a very bad book," ("Is Stephen King Worth Reading?" n.p.) and that Kubrick told her it was "a lesser literary work" (Johnson n.p.). King's own dislike of the adaptation amounts to infamous, yet this hardly stopped KingCon's organizers from using it

as the theme for the Con's climactic costume ball. The invitation to attendees to dress as a King character or in 1920s flapper attire indicated that, like the Con's logo, the ball's theme derived from an adapted version of the text rather than King's, since the ball takes place after World War II in King's novel. Convening attendees for a group photo to replicate the iconic one that appears at the end of Kubrick's film reinforced this distinction. Of course, King has had plenty of involvement in screen adaptations of his work, which the preponderance of Jordy Verrill costumes at the ball implicitly highlighted, as Verrill is the character King himself played in one of the shorts he wrote for the anthology film *Creepshow* (1982).

Cosplay resides in Fiske's category of enunciative productivity, while the "play" inherent in cosplay is an example of the "affective play" Matt Hills addresses in *Fan Cultures*, which "transgresses" another binary in fandom studies, that of "affect [and] cognition," or between emotion and logic, by helping to "manage tension between inner and outer worlds," keeping them "separate but also interrelated" in a way that promotes mental health[4] (n.p.). King fans in particular might gravitate toward this playful process due to the emphasis in King's work, epitomized in *IT*, on the power and magic of children that adults grow out of but would do well to recapture, as the adults in *IT* "must move from mundanity back to magic by reclaiming their childhood faith and imagination" in order to defeat Pennywise (Stevenson n.p.).

Within the enunciative production of cosplay, divergent modifications to costumes from their representation in the text offer potential for textual resistance and/or commentary; as Nicolle Lamerichs notes, "cosplay motivates fans to closely interpret existing texts, perform them, and extend them with their own narratives and ideas" (203). KingCon costumes were predominantly faithful either to King's texts or their adapted versions, with the exception of several versions of Pennywise costumes rendered as feminine rather than masculine, with skirts instead of pants. Such character gender-bending is hardly unprecedented at fan conventions: "Drag and cosplay explicitly come together in the subgenre of crossplay, in which players dress up as characters of the opposite gender. […] The motivations of crossplayers […] vary" (Lamerichs 212). Whether KingCon crossplaying was a commentary on King's potential gender bias, a nod to the character's underlying female nature

[4] The addition of the iconic line "all work and no play make Jack a dull boy" in Kubrick's version of *The Shining* would support this supposition.

revealed later in the text,[5] or simply women wanting to maintain a feminine appearance while dressed as an iconic male character is unclear. Other popular costumes evoked Kubrick's *The Shining*, with different clothing items bearing the Overlook Hotel hallway carpet pattern from the film, and multiple sets of *The Shining* twins. Though there was no official tally, roughly half the attendees appeared to opt for character costumes while the other half dressed as if attending the 1920s Overlook ball. Of the half in character costume, the vast majority depicted characters as they appeared in adaptations, underscoring the obvious point that adaptations of King's work are largely what have made him such a powerful cultural force. That the magnitude of this cultural force would necessarily wipe out Literate Readers in a tidal wave of blood as pours forth from Kubrick's and not King's Overlook elevators remains oversimplified; as Tony Magistrale notes, that King "has had several novels adapted into movies that have already entered into the cinematic pantheon […] bridg[es] the popular with the critically acclaimed" ("Why Stephen King Still Matters" 354). A surprisingly popular costume at the KingCon ball was Rose the Hat from Mike Flanagan's 2019 adaptation of *Doctor Sleep* (King's 2013 sequel to *The Shining*) in which Flanagan attempts to reconcile the differences between King's 1977 novel and Kubrick's film. If Kubrick resides more in the camp of Literate Reader while Flanagan is an avowed Constant Reader, they highlight a generational distinction: Kubrick would not have grown up in the shadow of King's cultural omnipresence, as Flanagan did. Yet Flanagan's King fandom does not limit his adaptations to the narrow scope of remaining faithful to the object of fandom or necessarily exile him from the realm of Literate. The range of variation and quality in King adaptations, many of which have been remade multiple times, are a microcosm of how his work provides a mutable template for potentially Literate filmmakers.

How King Views Fandom

Studying fandoms not just as an academic outsider but as an insider made Henry Jenkins' 1992 study *Textual Poachers* groundbreaking in its stance "that speaking as a fan is a defensible position within the debates surrounding mass culture" and in framing media fans as "consumers who also produce, readers who also write, spectators who also participate'" (Hills, *Fan Cultures* n.p.). Thus, we see that

[5] The drag-related aspects inherent in the character of Pennywise are explored in John R. DeLamar Jr.'s *The Closet and the Clown: Same-Sex Desire as Contagion in Stephen King's* It (2013).

KingCon's blurring of fandom binaries enacts the evolution of fan studies itself. Jenkins opens his study with a description of an infamous *Saturday Night Live* sketch from the 80s in which guest host William Shatner yells at a bunch of Trekkies at a fan convention to "Get a life!" (*Textual Poachers* 10). Scott Wampler, once co-host of *The Kingcast*, invoked this Shatner quote as a prelude to posing what he designated a "deeply nerdy" question to King in a 2022 interview, one that highlights the prevalence of King's construction of monsters characterized by consumption and thus implies that King might be aligned with fandom critics who have devalued consumption and coded it "bad": "if Dandelo feeds on laughter, and Pennywise feeds on fear, and the character from the outsider […] feeds on grief, are these all the same species?" Though King would go on to engage thoughtfully with Wampler's question, he was clearly waiting to pounce with a punch-line response: "Get a life" (Vespe and Wampler 40:22-41:37).

Would King have offered this quip to the hundreds of fans attending the inaugural KingCon? We do not know, because he did not go. His absence at such an event is likely unsurprising to anyone familiar with his 1987 novel *Misery*, in which self-avowed "number-one fan" Annie Wilkes takes her favorite writer hostage and forces him to rewrite the titular character's narrative arc to her liking. *Misery*'s depiction of fandom aligns with the early academic research in the field of fan studies by "contribut[ing] to the ongoing marginalization of pop culture fans through construction of a public image of fans as out-of-touch loners, losers or lunatics" (Schimmel et al. 582). Though to be fair, *Misery*'s opening lines, which garble the phrase "number one fan," also potentially imply its image of fandom is a funhouse mirror reflection, distorting a kernel of truth.

Thomas B. Frazier points out *Misery*'s "cloaked reference" to John Barth's story "Lost in the Funhouse" (1968) in the context of Paul's drug hallucinations as support for King's choice of a "disembodied narrator" (99-100). King's interview with Michael Schulman for the 2019 *New Yorker* article "Superfans, A Love Story" due to *Misery*'s infamy reveals other funhouse aspects: in attributing the backlash against the conclusion of his *Dark Tower* series to "Those fans [being] absolutely rabid about those books," King fans will likely see themselves reflected in the titular character of the rabid Saint Bernard Cujo from King's 1981 novel, a not exactly favorable comparison. Schulman also emphasizes how real life reflected fiction in the case of *Misery* when King's "novel about a stalker fan [] summoned a stalker fan." King mentions in this interview having based Annie Wilkes on Mark David Chapman, "who assassinated John Lennon hours after getting his

autograph," while elsewhere King has mentioned he believes Chapman solicited his own autograph as well (Streitfeld n.p.).[6] Considering that the apparent motivation for killing Lennon involved Chapman's fanship of J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (Stashower n.p.), King's view of fans would not seem to have progressed much based on his 2015 novel *Finders Keepers*, in which the antagonist Morris Bellamy kills the reclusive writer John Rothstein for having degraded a character Bellamy once idolized, with Rothstein functioning as at least a partial Salinger stand-in[7] by way of a reference to Salinger's story "A Perfect Day for Bananafish": Rothstein wrote "The Perfect Banana Pie."[8] King thus depicts a stalker fan in relation to a popular novelist in one narrative and a stalker fan in relation to a literary novelist in another, and in *Lisey's Story* (2006) he splits the difference, twice, by 1) having a fan stalk the wife of an author who occupies both popular and literary spheres, and 2) having the fan stalk this author's wife at the behest of an academic who covets the author's unpublished papers for the sake of scholarly endeavors. That both the author and the stalker fan straddle popular and literary realms reflects that King himself disavows Bloom's binary segregating the fan and academic.

King's concluding take on fans to Schulman is measured but tips toward the negative: "'People have gotten invested in culture and make-believe in a way that I think is a little bit unhealthy…. I mean, it's supposed to be fun, right?'" And yet there are positive depictions of fandom in King's canon. If the structure of KingCon provides insight into oversimplified conceptions of "good" and "bad" fandom largely through the production-consumption binary, King's depictions of "good" and "bad" fandom predominantly align with a binary of life-saving and life-threatening. In *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon* (1999), King figures fandom as saving the main character Trisha's life both in connecting her to the outside world by listening to Boston Red Sox games on her Walkman when she is lost in the woods, and, in the novel's climax, performing the pitch and gesture of her favorite

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[6] There is also a conspiracy theory that King himself killed Lennon apparently based in part on a physical likeness he bears to Chapman (Neuhaus n.p.).

[7] *The Guardian* identifies Rothstein as "a towering amalgam of Roth, Salinger, and Updike" (Smythe n.p.).

[8] The third season of the series adaptation of *Mr. Mercedes* (2019) adds the element that the protagonist Bill Hodges is also a fan of Rothstein, one avid enough to have a personal vendetta against Rothstein's murderer, thus adding more nuance to degrees and types of literary fandom than exists in King's text.

Red Sox player to save herself from a "bear-thing" that's been stalking her. Reading this beast's systematic and relentless stalking of Trisha as symbolically akin to that of stalker fans like Annie Wilkes figures this climactic face-off as King's types of good and bad fandom pitted against each other. Trisha, wearing both a Tom Gordon jersey and a cap bearing his autograph, throws her Walkman at the beast to drive it away. King thus emphasizes the power of objects of fandom on two fronts: the figurative object of fandom in baseball player Tom Gordon, and the literal object of fandom – the Walkman – that facilitates her engagement with the figurative object.

Schulman notes that King was at a baseball game himself when the real-life stalker fan broke into his house, and other depictions of fandom in King's canon align "good" fandom with baseball fandom specifically. The subtitle of *Faithful*, the nonfiction account of the Boston Red Sox's 2004 season that King co-wrote with Stewart O'Nan, classifies King's own Red Sox fandom as "diehard," certainly a more favorable descriptor than "rabid." In the short story "On Slide Inn Road" from King's 2024 collection *You Like It Darker*, baseball fandom attains a life-saving status akin to that in *Tom Gordon* when a character uses an autographed baseball bat to disarm a murderer threatening his family with a gun. The story sets up this bat and other items of baseball memorabilia as integral to the bond between this character and his dying sister. The King canon codes baseball fandom as "good" in its capacity to protect and connect, while coding literary fandom as "bad" in its instability and threat of violence.

That King's own depictions of fandom privilege sports fandom over fandom spanning across literary, media and pop culture spheres echoes a disjuncture in the academic study of these fields: "Compared to sport fan scholars, pop culture fan scholars were uniquely preoccupied in early decades with the question of fans' ability to distinguish between 'reality' and the fictional worlds consumed" in pop culture (Schimmel et al. 582). Yet Cornel Sandvoss's work on fandom has shown "that fans of sports teams and rock groups interact with their object of fandom much the same way as authors of media-based fandom do" (Taggart n.p.). That Trisha's object of baseball fandom in *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon* is an individual player rather than a team exemplifies the overlap between these fields in offering an example of "the increasing 'celebrification' of sport personalities" (Schimmel et al. 583). *Tom Gordon* also thematically takes up the preoccupation with the distinction between real and imagined that characterized the early era of academic-outsider takes on fandom: King has used a "real-life" figure

in the selection of the actual Red Sox player Tom Gordon for Trisha's object of fandom, but Tom Gordon appears exclusively in the novel as a figment of Trisha's imagination. Trisha predominantly understands the illusory nature of the Tom Gordon figure even as she holds dialogs with him, but this imagined figure also plays a material role in the outcome of her predicament, not just in her embodiment of him in the novel's climax to defeat the "bear-thing," but in another critical moment when the Gordon figure points out a wooden post that marks the remnants of a path she might not have otherwise noticed. The "bear-thing" stalking Trisha also bears elements of this blurring of real and imagined in the ambiguity of its supernatural nature in Trisha's conception of it as the "God of the Lost." While the Tom Gordon figure's (real) pointing upward to the sky signifies his acknowledgment of a deity, the God of the Lost points at Trisha in conjunction with the expression "*she is mine, she is my property*" (n.p., italics in original), which inverts the fan and fan-object relationship not unlike the depiction of Annie Wilke's inversion of it: Annie is Paul's fan, i.e., within his possession, yet she effectively takes possession of Paul by abducting him. If the "God of the Lost" becomes implicitly associated with negative fandom by way of its stalking, its explicit association with being lost represents literary/media/pop-culture fans as misguided, in contrast to sports fandom, providing a concrete sense of direction. Yet with these likenesses of material ambiguity and pointing shared by the Tom Gordon figure and the God of the Lost, King reflects – if inadvertently – "overlapping and interlocking" aspects across sports fandom and pop culture fandom despite positioning them oppositionally in the novel's climax in what appears on the surface as a basic binary of good versus bad.

Through the depiction of this "God of the Lost," *Tom Gordon* explores spiritual themes associated with fandom that resonate with Nicholas Abercrombie's and Brian Longhurst's "three different groups of fans: fans, cultists, and enthusiasts" that exist between the "polarities" of "consumption and production" (Sandvoss 30). If "different degrees of productivity" demarcate these categories, Sandvoss and Hills take issue with the nomenclature: "The use of the term 'fan' to describe only a small section of consumers whom we have identified as fans, as much as the religious connotations that terms such as 'cultist' carry, is misleading" (Sandvoss 31). Yet, as the themes of *Tom Gordon* as well as the title "*Faithful*" indicate, King might be on board with the implications of such religious connotations when it comes to baseball fandom, a position further underscored by his cameo making the opening pitch of a Red Sox game for the 2005 movie *Fever*

Pitch, in which the main character Ben's baseball fandom (specifically Red Sox fandom) constitutes the central conflict and which Ben defends in spiritual terms: "I like being part of something that's bigger than me…. It's good for your soul to invest in something that you can't control" (29:57-30:04).[9]

In this particular conception of a lack of control, Ben seems to have identified an aspect unique to sports fandom, and a positive one at that, but after elucidating some of the similarities between sports fandom and other fandom types, Lori Kido Lopez and Jason Kido Lopez identify aspects unique to sports fandom "that lead to a particularly combustible set of factors," including a propensity to violence, which derive from "the structure of pitting one contingent of fans against the other. […] sports fans can often be considered anti-fans in the sense that their love for their own team is often positioned against their hatred of a rival team" (323). That sports fandom is "premised on opposition" and "divided into binary oppositions of 'us' versus 'them'" (Lopez and Lopez 324) might provide some insight into King's Red Sox fandom influencing an oppositional and binary-adhering mindset when it comes to sports fans versus media/literary fans, a mindset that ironically echoes Bloom's in its reductive rigidness, even though, per the aforementioned overlaps in *Lisey's Story*, King disagrees with the content of Bloom's binary as he articulated in an interview with *PBS NewsHour*: "There was a time when I felt like nobody will ever take me seriously as a writer's writer…. [I]t seemed to me that there was an underlying assumption about popular fiction, that if everybody reads it, it can't be very good. I have never felt that way. I have felt that people can read and enjoy on many different levels" (5:15-5:45). In a sense, King's work treats sports fans like his own valorized Red Sox while treating media/literary fans like their long-standing rival, the New York Yankees, which King refers to in *Faithful* as "the Evil Empire." King further notes in *Faithful* that by the time he is writing about the 2004 baseball season, the real Tom Gordon is no longer playing for the Red Sox but rather "wearing the uniform of the hated New York Yankees" (n.p.), raising a thematic parallel with the climactic face-off at the end of *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon* that pits the bad stalker life-threatening fan against the good life-saving fan in an explicitly oppositional dynamic that (inadvertently) reinforces their implicit likenesses. King thus undermines his own rigid binary, revealing, like his character Randall Flagg's exploitation of the

[9] The tagline for the film further underscores fandom as a spiritual practice: "Life gets complicated when you love one woman and *worship* eleven men" (italics added).

political binary, that it is not one side or the other that is inherently "bad," but rather the problematic nature of the binary construction itself.

Per this blurring of binaries, the fan Luke Condon, who produced an album of Stephen King-inspired songs specifically for KingCon entitled *The King Rides a Bear*, is not inherently "good" by way of his creative fan production, but Condon's work provides an interesting insight into an aspect of King fandom. In the track "Faithful" on this album, Condon lists the titles of all the King books that he has read before launching into the chorus that announces "Someday I'm gonna get around to reading that Red Sox book," i.e., the one that shares the title of the song. Condon highlights an implicit irony: King discussing his own object of fandom becomes the least interesting content for King's fans to read about, and qualifying as a "faithful" fan of King's does not require being a fan of King's fandom. King fans are more fans of the man's work than of the man himself, contrasting the nature of Annie Wilkes' preoccupation with and conflation of her fandom of the work and the man who produced it. King's depiction of "bad" fan Annie Wilkes – in his terms, life-threatening – highlights the shortcomings of the production-consumption binary along the poles of good and bad: by this framework, Annie Wilkes would be a "good" fan in engendering the production of a new novel when she forces Paul to write one. Yet we might also recall that King's cultivation of his communal fan base by designating them his "Constant Readers" includes Annie among their ranks: in *Misery,* Paul Sheldon observes that Annie is "the embodiment of that Victorian archetype, Constant Reader" (n.p.).

Since KingCon highlights the prominence of collecting in Constant Reader culture, it is worth examining to what extent King's depictions of collecting align with his depictions of fandom. Jenkins observes that the "absence of studying collector culture perhaps reflects an ongoing discomfort among academics with forms of consumption that cannot easily be reread as forms of cultural production" ("'What Are You Collecting Now?'" 222). The elaborate and artisanal special editions of King's work produced by Paul Suntup certainly bring production value to the consumption of King collecting culture. That Suntup's special collectors' edition of *Duma Key* was KingCon's major surprise giveaway is thematically fitting, since this text emblematizes the prominence of visual artists in the collecting culture surrounding King through their contributions to special editions. As Syed Hosseini observes, "Like most of King's works, *Duma Key* is self-reflexive and bears references to his creative job" (110), except its main character, Edgar Freemantle, is a visual artist instead of a writer like so many of King's other

protagonists in the funhouse of his canon. In his thesis "Macabre Collectibles: Collecting Culture and Stephen King," Hosseini connects the act of collecting to King's own textual productivity in noting that "King is a huge collector of macabre ideas" (7). In cataloguing some of King's depictions of collectors, Hosseini reveals a range of characters engaging in it; there are "good" ones like Andy Dufresne from "Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption," who collects rocks as a means of facilitating his escape from prison, as well as Nick Andros from *The Stand*, who collects books, and there are "bad" ones like the game show host from *The Running Man*, who tells the main character he would like to collect him like a piece from his cave art collection, and Todd Bowden from "Apt Pupil," whose interest in death camps is likened to coin or stamp collecting (Hosseini 10-11). Town constable Ruth McCausland from *The Tommyknockers* presents a case that encapsulates the contradictory messages about the nature of collecting in King's canon: Ruth "is mostly disconnected from the outside world and lives in the miniature world of her doll collection," but it is specifically her interaction with the inanimate objects in her collection that enables her to resist the mind control of the invading alien force longer than others (Hosseini 11-12). King's treatment of collecting would thus seem to align with Sandvoss's conception of fandom's detrimental or beneficial potential, depending on the individual engaging with it.

If King's treatment of fandom at large dilutes the complexity of Sandvoss's position when King favors baseball fandom over that of literature and media and thus renders the object of fandom itself as inherently good or bad, King's treatment of the more specific facet of collecting culture levels the playing field. In "A Good Marriage" (2010), Darcy's husband Bob is a serial killer with a "business in collectible American coins, baseball trading cards, and old movie memorabilia" (Hosseini 161) who uses his collecting as a pretense to commit his crimes. The central premise of *Needful Things* (1991) is that people put so much value on things that it becomes their undoing, and as in "A Good Marriage" with the range of Bob's collecting, here King treats pop culture and sports fans as equally problematically susceptible to the literal objects associated with their figurative objects of fandom when the evil proprietor of the titular shop, Leland Gaunt, sells townspeople items to complete their collections that include a Sandy Koufax baseball card as well as a pair of Elvis's sunglasses. King goes even further when a piece of baseball memorabilia becomes a cold-blooded murder weapon in *Under the Dome*, and proves more effective as such because it is a baseball made of gold, thus implicating the capitalist underpinnings of collecting culture. In "On Slide Inn Road," a piece

of baseball memorabilia, in this case a baseball bat autographed by Ted Williams, becomes the life-saving device – albeit by killing the murderer who is threatening the family. The collected baseball item demonstrates lethality in both unequivocally good and bad contexts, and, in the latter case, accords special significance to the signature in the vein of Trisha's autographed baseball cap in *Tom Gordon*.

Hosseini identifies "three major modes of collecting—souvenir, fetishistic and systematic" (180). King mentions in *On Writing* (2001) that his original conception of *Misery*'s ending had Annie Wilkes creating her own special edition of *Misery's Return* bound in Paul Sheldon's skin (167), which would seem to parody the elaborate designs of the limited editions showcased at KingCon by Suntup Editions – yet in 2018 King did approve and sign copies of a limited edition of *Misery* that was largely responsible for launching Suntup's publishing venture (Suntup). If Suntup's strategies in engendering collaborations between artists and artisans to create collectible commodities render these commodities works of art in their own right, King's theoretical edition of *Misery's Return* highlights the implicit potential of such editions as fetish objects in spite of – or even because of – his own participation in their production. Tony Magistrale notes that *Misery* "is indebted to [John Fowles' novel] *The Collector* on a variety of levels," and highlights serial killing as a form of collecting (*Second Decade* 124, 125). As showcased on the company's website, Suntup's cover for its Artist Edition of *The Collector* would seem to inadvertently reproduce the fetishization of fan object in its reproduction of the novel's first-edition cover, which itself problematically reproduces the titular killer-collector's objectifying photographs of the abducted Miranda. It also echoes certain fetishistic facets of King's own collecting: "'I have a lot of fifties paperbacks because I love the covers, and I've collected a certain amount of pornography from the sixties, paperback pornography that was done by people like Donald Westlake and Lawrence Block, just because it amuses me'" (King qtd. in Hosseini 6-7).

Per Abercrombie's and Longhurst's cultist category of fandom and its religious undertones, the nature of book collecting plays a significant role in Gary Hoppenstand's and Ray Browne's attributing to King what Hosseini designates a "godly position": "'The physical products of the author's labor, his books and manuscripts, become icons of worship and hence become of immense money value, inflated far beyond a reasonable worth by the slavish drive of the cult follower to

purchase, at any cost, those books and manuscripts'"[10] (qtd. in Hosseini 26). Given that the problematic nature of worship is itself a theme in *The Stand* in regards to Randall Flagg's followers, it seems appropriate that the biggest prize giveaway during the Con's climactic costume ball, promoted on the Con's website ahead of time, was a signed "Coffin" edition of *The Stand* congruent with the Con's Vegas setting, and even more appropriate that the attendee who won this prize during the ball happened to be cosplaying Randall Flagg. That the biggest collectors' giveaway replicates a coffin metaphorically reinforces themes King appropriated from Fowles of collecting's lifelessness, inadvertently undermining the practice of collecting that KingCon purports to promote and celebrate. This mixed message is akin to the disavowal of the political that the inclusion of *Hearts in Suspension* in the Con's swag bags contradicts; that a copy of this text signed by Stephen King was the prize for the winner of the climactic ball's costume contest compounds this contradiction. The winners of this contest were a couple, a Jordy Verrill with his partner dressing as the meteor responsible for the grass that consumes Jordy, giving them the edge over the other Jordy Verrills. Here again we see a text in which King villainizes consumption, in this case with themes more directly evoking money and commodification: Jordy picks up the meteor that lands on his property fantasizing that a community college, of all entities, will pay him good money for it, and then due to his physical contact with said meteor, begins to sprout green plant matter all over his body that becomes more readable as symbolic of money in the context of the earlier fantasy as well as the portrayal of the character by King himself, who, in 1982, is entering a period of unprecedented fame and fortune. That this character kills himself in anticipation of this symbolic money swallowing him whole reflects an anxiety on King's part that his fame, and therefore his fans, have effectively rendered him a lifeless commodity.

While writers Ronald Malfi and Jonathan Janz demonstrated at KingCon a demarcated line between the implicit fan production of their own original work bearing King's influence and the explicit fan production of work written in a fictional world King has created, King's own work in his most recent story collection is less delineated. With the positioning of the acknowledgment "*Thinking of Flannery O'Connor*" at the end of the story "On Slide Inn Road" rather than at

[10] Though King owns his own rare editions of books by other authors (Hosseini 6), he might well agree with the negative implications of such cult following; in *Finders Keepers*, the encouragement of an unscrupulous book dealer motivates Morris Bellamy to rob the famous author he ends up killing of his unpublished manuscripts.

its beginning (n.p., italics in original), the literary influence on the story is rendered as something of an afterthought. Perhaps this choice implies that foregrounding the influence might distract the reader – or that it might even influence a reading of the story as some version of fan fiction; regardless, the influence will likely assert itself quickly to anyone familiar with O'Connor's frequently anthologized story "A Good Man is Hard to Find." If fan fiction in the technical sense would require direct use of O'Connor's characters or other explicit references to the world of her story, the likeness in her story's premise to King's of a family stranded by car trouble in the direct vicinity of men who turn out to be murderers seems to blur the boundary between influence and fan fiction. Through the detail of the grandfather's Red Sox fandom specifically, King's story verges on the "self-insert" variety of fan fiction: King replaces O'Connor's grandmother character with a version of himself. The grandfather's explicit racism, a trait the character shares with O'Connor's grandmother, complicates the question of whether King potentially did this because he saw himself reflected in this character, though a major difference exists in that the grandfather – with his autographed baseball bat – saves the family rather than living to hear them all executed before succumbing to the same fate, as O'Connor's grandmother does. That King's plot change valorizes the character who exhibits a toxic tendency for MAGA-like nostalgia rather than having the character suffer horrendous consequences as a direct result of this toxically nostalgic worldview – as occurs in O'Connor's version – certainly has moral and political implications, but despite the seeming opposition of these implications in King's version of the story and O'Connor's, both writers' work shares degrees of political obfuscation that apparently appeal to their audiences: "O'Connor's rise to critical eminence in the 1950s depended on […] her institutional support but also on a widespread hunger for an alternative to political modes of thought" (Bennett 41). Yet "her institutional support" was the Iowa Writers' Workshop, whose founder, Paul Engle, made it "a bastion of anti-Communism. […] Engle employed political insinuations and explicit statements to sell the Program in Writing to the region and the nation…. He pitched Iowa as the home of the free individual, of the poet at peace with democratic capitalism…." (Bennett 93). Thus, the so-called Literate Readers of O'Connor, a writer trained by the academic establishment, and the Constant Readers of King would seem to share a propensity for the politically antipolitical by way of promoting the individual over the collective.

To what degree literary influence necessarily signals fandom is a question that informs just how contradictory King's negative treatment of literary fans might

be, as the "overlapping and interlocking" aspects of fandom and literary influence are certainly present in other areas of King's work. The prevalence of consuming monsters in King's canon that Scott Wampler's aforementioned question highlights reflects King's debt to Ray Bradbury, as Conny Lippert notes regarding the monster that KingCon reinforces as underwriting King's legacy: "Reminiscent of the dark carnival in Ray Bradbury's 1962 coming-of-age classic *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, the creature in *It* sustains itself on human fear…" (n.p.). Lippert also locates the potential for this monster's destruction in Bradbury's influence: "Much like the smile carved on a bullet in Bradbury's aforementioned tale, the children, in true disruptive, carnivalesque fashion, manage to weaponize ludic laughter to defeat the clown" (n.p.). While Bradbury's *Macbeth* reference in his novel's title signals the role of literary influence, the degree to which this signifies Bradbury's Shakespeare "fandom" is more nebulous. If recurring references signal a potential line has been crossed into fandom, King's explicit references to Bradbury's *Something Wicked* in his 2022 novel *Fairy Tale* tip him closer to fandom, as does the story "I Am the Doorway" from his first collection *Night Shift* (1978) that verges on Bradbury fan fiction. Certain references refract through King's canon in funhouse fashion – or rather, fanhouse fashion. Lippert's description of *IT*'s climax, consisting "of telling riddles and jokes" (n.p.) calls attention to another mainstay of King's literary influences that verge into fandom, J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* series. In the *Reddit* thread "r/FanTheories," user Denny_Crane asserts, "The creature from It is actually Ungoliant from the Tolkien Legendarium," with a commenter adding, "The similarity in I.T [sic] is from King being a Tolkien fan boy to the extent in another one of his books they have a riddle off straight from the hobbit." Thus, we see the work that appears most integral to King's legacy is a product of his own literary fan production. In addition to the demonstration of Tolkien's influence that consists of both explicit references and narrative similarities in *The Stand* and the *Dark Tower* series, there is King's novel *Joyland* (2013), in which the central mystery surrounds a murder in a fairgrounds funhouse; in the course of attempting to solve this mystery, the main character Devin reads *Lord of the Rings* for no apparent narrative reason other than to pass the time. Joyland is a metaphorical land of fandom, complete with a funhouse like the "mirror maze" in Bradbury's *Something Wicked* – and that something wicked has happened in King's Joyland funhouse does not undermine the joy of fandom, it expresses if we take into account that such a plot development reflects his fandom and/or the influence of Bradbury. Joyland thus expresses Hans-Åke Lilja's

signifying affect of fandom consisting of "joy" in his explanation of why he has maintained a Stephen King fan site for more than two decades: "[W]hat it all comes down to in the end, for me, is the excitement I get when I open a new King book and know that I have several hundred of unread pages in front of me. That is pure joy" (93). Despite King's own oft-negative depiction of literary fans, it seems his own literary fandom is not so different from theirs, after all.

Conclusion

KingCon reflects the prevalence of collecting in Constant Reader culture, the ubiquity of screen adaptations of King's work, his influence on horror writers and filmmakers, and, through all of these avenues, his inescapable influence on the culture at large, all of which adds credence to Bloom's supposition that King is a "sociological phenomenon" (3) if the nature of this phenomenon is to carry "real significance beyond its moment in time," rather than not, as Magistrale surmises Bloom to mean ("Why Stephen King Still Matters" 355). While constituting such a phenomenon does not inherently preclude King's literary status, and while KingCon does demonstrate King's literary aspects by way of showcasing his influence on writers, this convention ultimately does more to reinforce King as a brand and commodity through its stronger emphasis on – and in fact origin in – collecting. KingCon is a venue where the value of the literal object of the book is greater than the value of the book's content, though again, the latter is far from discounted entirely, leaving space for Constant Readers who engage with King's work in a more Literate mode. That said, the engagement with the figurative text is more as a mirror for readers to see themselves reflected rather than an engagement with the text's larger cultural and political implications. KingCon evidences the effectiveness of King's own branding strategy of appealing to the everyman reader by "disinviting the political" (Blouin 3), in a sense demonstrating the success of King's own construction of his Constant Reader as someone who feels more than thinks. That the range of fan practices on display at KingCon reinforces the inextricability of fan production and consumption more implicitly than explicitly challenges a marked distinction between Constant and Literate Readers – it does not deconstruct the distinction of these categories as much as show that they can coexist, that the Constant Reader need not constitute the demise of the Literate Reader. Just as fandom "'cannot be easily bifurcated into good and bad'" (Hills, *Fan Cultures* n.p.), so Literate and Constant Readers need not be bifurcated into

good and bad. KingCon is a celebration of the range of artistic outlets King's work lends itself to as an extension of the literary text, reinforcing, as Magistrale puts it, that "Stephen King is that rare phenomenon whose art has inimitably shaped the larger culture" ("Why Stephen King Still Matters" 363).

Perhaps the greatest evidence that Constant Readers engage with King's work more emotionally than rationally is the necessity of overlooking the negative treatment of fandom in King's work. While KingCon mitigates conceptions of "good" and "bad" fandom in blurring the production-consumption binary, King's work more categorically renders a particular demographic of fans, the same demographic as KingCon attendees, as "bad." Certainly it is one of the many contradictory aspects of King's work that he courts his Constant Readers by speaking directly to them in his forewords and afterwords, framing fictional narratives that demonize members of their ranks; grappling with such contradictions undoubtedly resides more in the analytical Literate mode than the emotional Constant one. Hence at KingCon, Constant Readers can cosplay Annie Wilkes without apparent irony, grinning gleefully with sledgehammer in hand. But we will also remember that Annie Wilkes, even at the furthest end of the Constant Reader spectrum, overlaps with the Literate: "He understood how she could like what he had written and still know it was not right—know it and say it not with an editor's sometimes untrustworthy literary sophistication but with Constant Reader's flat and uncontradictable certainty. […] She was right." (n.p.).

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Aspirational Feminism:
Evaluating Agency in Romantic Relationships in 2020s East Asian Dramas

NIVI ENGINEER

Introduction

The K-drama *Business Proposal*, C-drama *Best Choice Ever*, and J-drama *Only Just Married* present East Asian women and men evolving past the binary options of either sacrificing their dreams and fulfilling gender requirements or rebelling against societal expectations. Instead, these characters model strategies for navigating societal pressures while exercising increased agency. These dramas present characters who reflect these navigations, especially through choices and behaviors related to East Asian preferences for indirect communication and social sensitivity, encoded in the cultural values of Korean nunchi ("eye force," 눈치), Chinese yanse ("eye color," 眼色), and Japanese kuuki wo yomu ("to read the air," 空気を読む). This chapter applies these concepts to a rubric of interpersonal dynamics—including empowerment, perspective, intimacy, trust, and agency—to analyze how characters in popular dramas support each other. This research reveals that characters with high scores on the aforementioned rubric demonstrate high nunchi skills. These dramas present clear messages prioritizing healthy relationships over fulfilling traditional familial marriage and reproduction requirements.

Societal Background

China, South Korea, and Japan all currently face issues regarding reproduction decline, aging populations, marriage avoidance, and women's equity. As decreasing national populations hold serious economic and cultural impacts, East Asian governments are initiating programs to address these issues. According to an article in India Times,

> South Korea has implemented policies to encourage higher birth rates, such as recruiting foreign domestic workers for childcare, offering tax benefits, and even proposing to exempt men from mandatory military

> service if they have three or more children by the age of 30." (Economic Times)

The goal, clearly, is to encourage couples to marry and bear children, with the promise that the difficulties they may have encountered in the past have been suitably addressed. China, too, has taken measures to combat population decline:

> China announced that couples in China will now be allowed to have up to three children, i.e., the so-called "three-child policy". To further boost birth and address the country's demographic imbalance, China also released a series of supporting measures for the three-child policy, which include tax deductions, affordable childcare service and education, and the introduction of childcare leave. Moreover, local governments have started to provide financial subsidies to encourage childbirth. (Fincher)

And in Japan,

> [the] government introduced a major package of pro-family policies, including an increase in daycare capacity, free daycare for children aged 3 to 5 (and for younger children in low-income families), and free preschool education for all. (Nippon)

On the surface, these policies would make life easier for married women, which ought to make marriage and childbearing more appealing to women. And yet, despite these policies, all three countries continue to face declining populations. One can only deduce, then, that these policies alone are insufficient. As stated in the Economic Times article about South Korea, yet true also for China and Japan,

> South Korea's fertility crisis is not just a demographic challenge; it is a reflection of the country's deep-seated gender inequalities and cultural conflicts. As the population continues to age and shrink, the country faces the daunting task of

> addressing these issues while navigating the complexities of family, work, and gender roles…
> The root cause of the problem lies in the country's social and cultural landscape. Many women, especially in urban areas, prioritize careers over starting families, with over half of respondents in a 2023 government survey citing the "burden of parenting" as the biggest obstacle to female employment... Until South Korea can bridge the widening divide between men and women, and create a society where both genders can thrive equally, its fertility crisis may continue to worsen, leaving a shrinking and aging population to contend with the future. (Economic Times, retrieved 12/27/24).

The problem, then, is not something that legislation alone can fix. Government policies can make the environment legally better for women, but society must also follow suit and change people's thinking. This article's assertion–about the need for a society where both genders can thrive equally–is where dramas fit in. While government policies aim to bridge the divide on a societal level, dramas can model what relationships built on equality look like.

Before convincing people to change their mindsets, it is helpful for both sides to understand each other. Dramas help convey a particular mindset. As Akiha discusses with her grandmother Hatsue in *Only Just Married*, arranged marriages were not so uncommon and love was not the central focus.

> HATSUE
> Back in my day, marriage wasn't all about romance.
> AKIHA
> In that case, you didn't love grandpa when you married him.
> HATSUE
> I guess so. My parents decided it, and I married him because he was to be my partner.
> AKIHA

> Did you fall for him as you lived together as a married couple?
>
> HATSUE
>
> To be honest, I never felt I loved your grandpa, even while married…Every day was busy, and I had no time to even think about things like that. Rather than someone I loved, he was like my comrade in arms…when I was left alone after his passing, I felt incredibly lonely. Then I realized I loved this person. It isn't that I'm lonely when I'm alone. It's lonely when you cannot be with the one you love. (*OJM*, episode 8, 28:25)

Given Southeast Asia's decreasing population, it's not unreasonable to suspect that certain romantic notions may be influencing decisions to delay or forego marriage (along with the desire to eschew traditional restrictive gender roles). One approach dramas take, then, is to bridge the culture gap between generations by presenting a fresh, relatable perspective on old practices, for example by comparing contract marriages–a popular drama plotline–to marriages arranged by parents in generations past. But along with helping younger generations understand their elders' mindset, dramas can also serve to do the opposite, helping elders understand (and perhaps remember) the struggles and perspectives of the young.

The central conflict in *Best Choice Ever* is between Chenghuan and her mother, illustrating this generational conflict with the mother representing the older generation's insistent focus on securing a marriage and bearing children as a woman's primary responsibility. Chenghuan, meanwhile, models the ideal daughter. As she states at the start, "I'm your daughter, and my role is to take care of and please my parents. Your opinion is all that matters" (*BCE*, ep. 1, 7:23). This drama explores how untenable the older generation's dream is in modern society as even the most obedient of daughters recognizes the inherent flaw in the old system: a woman must either choose obedience (self-sacrifice) or personal goals (self-satisfaction). Individual goals and desires are often at odds with family's or society's needs and thus are inherently in conflict. For the sake of harmony, it has historically been women who have been called upon to sacrifice their personal goals for the sake of the whole. Even as girls have been granted access to education and

employment opportunities, society has continued to relegate the responsibility of family harmony to women. Consequently, more and more women are opting for self-satisfaction, as family and societal harmony seem less desirable (or necessary).

If a system can only be sustained at the expense of self, many women have decided that the system need not be sustained. As Leta Hong Fincher discusses about the recent trend of Chinese women rejecting marriage in an article about the 10th anniversary of her landmark book *Leftover Women*:

> Like many other single women over 27, [Lan had to endure pressure from her family and colleagues, and insults from the media, but she had learned to shrug it all off: "This is just gender discrimination and I don't pay attention anymore." (Fincher)

Clearly, government policies and societal changes will be necessary to make marriage more appealing to younger women. More than that, however, women are currently asked to sacrifice personal identities and goals for familial and personal relationships, especially with pressures to marry and reproduce and evolving gender role perspectives. Instead, what would motivate them to accept marriage as a reasonable option is the belief that their relationships can and will be based on mutual respect and equity.

Face Culture

Before delving into details about the dramas themselves, this chapter examines the notion of "face culture" prominent in these three societies. While not exactly identical, the untranslatable terms of Korean *nunchi* ("eye force," 눈치), Chinese *yanse* ("eye colour," 眼色), and Japanese *ba no kuuki wo yomu* ("to read the air," 場の空気を読む) present the concept of "noticing," an important aspect of all three societies.

These three cultures all hold societal harmony as highly important, to the point that children are taught from an early age how to "read the air" to observe how those around them behave and act accordingly. In a societal context, practicing *nunchi* leads to fewer conflicts as individuals follow the flow of those around them. "It entails observing and comprehending the emotional states of others, such as when entering a crowded room, determining the general state of the people in the

room, and directing your behavior accordingly" (Uluer). In Japan, "People are socially obligated to respond according to *tatemae*, defined by social expectations and opinion, regardless of if it contradicts their own *honne*" (Nihonmaster), where *tatemae* is what one expresses in public and *honne* is what one truly feels.

At a societal level, nunchi teaches individuals to sacrifice their own desires in order to maintain harmony as a whole. In the context of romantic relationships, the careful observational aspect of nunchi can help couples achieve harmony and equality. "Couples who are considerate of each other's feelings, and who can anticipate each other's needs, have a way of spreading those good and thoughtful vibes to others" (Hong 93). Developing careful observation of one's partner can contribute to an effective healthy relationship.

The Dramas

In each of the three dramas–Chinese drama (C-drama) *Best Choice Ever*, Korean drama (k-drama) *Business Proposal*, and Japanese drama (J-drama) *Only Just Married*–the characters live in societies where pressures to marry influence their actions. The romantic relationships between the male lead and female lead in each case develop over time. In each story, the female lead is career focused. The male leads, meanwhile, are overbearing and demanding. In each case, the female lead manages to break through the tough exterior of the male lead and soften him, so that by the end of the drama, in order to win her over, he must abandon his initial rudeness and do more than just show some consideration. In other words, he must develop his *nunchi* to be a good partner. While the characters do not necessarily start as good partners, this chapter evaluates whether they end up as good partners in healthy relationships.

C-drama *Best Choice Ever (BCE)*'s Mai Chenghuan[11] works at a hotel in the administration office, having worked her way up from working at the reception desk. At twenty-nine, she is often pressured to marry by her mother, unhappy with Chenghuan's long-term boyfriend Xin Jia Ling for his lack of ambition and propriety. When Chenghuan's mother learns he is rich, her previous disdain disappears, and she encourages Chenghuan to marry him. Chenghuan, on the other hand, feels betrayed by the fact that he had hidden this truth from her for three years

[1] Names throughout this paper are written with the family name first to match Eastern practices. Chenghuan belongs to the Mai family. Akiha belongs to the Okado family, and Ha-ri is part of the Shin family.

and they eventually break up. Her acquaintance with male lead Yao Ximing begins both professionally (he arrives as the new president of the hotel company where she works) and personally (his grandmother married her grandfather, making them stepcousins). Chenghuan's mother, anxious to secure a good future for her daughter, often causes trouble for Chenghuan both by meddling in her relationship and undermining her professional authority by appearing at Chenghuan's workplace, repeatedly demonstrating an extreme lack of *nunchi*, or ability to read the room. Ximing is ruthlessly ambitious, having come to town to convince his grandmother to sell her inn to his company to secure a promotion. Chenghuan, meanwhile, is unaware of her grandmother's wealth, and frequently visits her at the nursing home out of love. When the Mai family home floods, Grandmother offers to let them stay in her house. When Grandmother dies, she leaves her house to Ximing and the inn to Chenghuan. Ximing moves into the house, allowing the Mais to stay, and grows to love being surrounded by family, an experience he had lacked growing up. Chenghuan faces numerous challenges in managing the inn and must learn to overcome them, which she does with support from Ximing, who admits to initially coveting the inn and thus must prove to her that he is trustworthy.

J-drama *Only Just Married* (OJM)'s female lead Okado Akiha has always presumed she would live alone, ignoring her grandmother's hints that she ought to marry. In her view, "I'm satisfied with my job and work is fun, though. I tend to think marriage equals change. I see no reason to change my current lifestyle." (*OJM, episode 1, 2:08)*. Male lead Shu Momose, meanwhile, proposes a contract marriage with no emotions for personal reasons. Akiha initially refuses, yet when her grandmother is hospitalized and the hospital bills exceed her budget, she agrees to the arrangement, lying about the marriage to make her grandmother happy. Initially, Momose is in love with his brother's wife and marries Akiha to allow him to be left alone to continue loving his sister-in-law. Akiha perceives this truth and accepts it, since they are essentially strangers. Akiha and Momose's relationship begins as two housemates used to living alone learning to adapt to one another. But each is emotionally immature, and numerous missteps push them apart even as their feelings grow, until they finally learn to develop their *nunchi*, communicate, and understand each other.

Shin Ha-ri, the female lead in *Business Proposal (BP)* is not being pressured to marry, but rather her best friend Jin Young-seo and the male lead Kang Tae-moo are. When Young-seo's father sets Young-seo up on a blind date with Kang Tae-moo, Young-seo enlists Ha-ri to go in her place. Donning an outrageous persona,

Ha-ri meets Kang Tae-moo, who she discovers is the president of the company where she works. She attempts to tank the date and end it miserably, as she has done countless times in the past for her best friend. Tae-moo, however, is facing relentless pressure from his grandfather to date (including having to go on ten dates in one day) and decides not to break it off with the entertaining Ha-ri. After Young-seo apologizes to Tae-moo for the deception, Tae-moo insists on meeting Young-seo's stand-in. Fearing repercussions at work, Ha-ri meets him as the character Shin Geum-hui. He hires her to pretend to date him to fool his grandfather. The deception stresses Ha-ri, but feels she has no choice but to play along. When Tae-moo discovers the deception, he is angered at first and tries to punish her, but eventually falls for her and works hard to win her over.

This investigation examines the characters' choices, behaviors, and dynamics in terms of the tensions between the traditional versus modern applications of these EQ values, which are encapsulated in *nunchi*.

What Constitutes a Healthy Romantic Relationship

While a conflict-free relationship with a kind, generous partner is nice, a romantic drama can do better. More than simply sharing the story of bringing together two likable characters who then proceed to live happily ever after, dramas model a society's concept of the ideal relationship, weaving in cultural norms and practices. So, scrutinizing the relationship between the main couples in various dramas can reveal underlying beliefs about the rights of women within the context of romantic relationships to judge whether women truly have agency.

When aspiring to gender equality, it helps to have an example to model after. A healthy relationship between two partners can be defined as one in which both parties are equally empowered; share a healthy, mutually-agreeable level of physical intimacy; understand, accept, and respect the other's perspective; trust one another; and retain their own agency. This is not a comprehensive definition of a healthy romantic relationship. In real life, there are additional traits that help, including respecting that each person will grow and change over time, mutual feelings of physical attraction (not strictly necessary, but it doesn't hurt), and supporting each other's hopes and dreams. While the first element is addressed in the story arc of the dramas under consideration, the second characteristics is equally modeled across all three dramas so is omitted from discussion in this paper, and supporting each other falls under the discussion of empowerment, the first characteristic of a healthy relationship, to be discussed below.

In a Healthy Relationship, Both Parties are Equally Empowered

A healthy romantic relationship is one in which the two people have equal footing, such that one does not have authority over the other partner. While professionally– at least in the context of many dramas–the two may have professional roles where one has authority over the other (a common trope pairs a CEO with his employee or a team leader with his team member), this authority should not carry over into their personal relationship if they are to be considered equals. For the lower-ranked female, the risk is greater in exerting her will in the relationship; if the higher-ranked male perceives disrespect, he[2] may retaliate both personally and professionally. Ideally, the separation between roles is clearly delineated, such that issues in one context do not carry into the other.

Alternatively, a relationship can work if the 'boss' doesn't overstep his authority to exert his will over his underling romantically. However, the one arrangement that does not allow for equal empowerment within a relationship is for the lower-ranked partner to grant the higher-ranked partner (or for the higher-ranked partner to simply assume) authority over the lower-ranked partner. This arrangement may lead to relationship harmony and avoid conflict, but it is certainly not equal.

In two of the three dramas, this boss-underling relationship trope is used. *Business Proposal* and *Best Choice Ever* explore the downsides of relationships starting from an imbalance business relationship. Although Shin Ha-ri finds Tae-moo attractive from the start, she does not regard him romantically once they start their date and she learns he is her boss. Each time she pretends to be Shin Geum-hui, her fear of losing her job supersedes any other emotions. The fact that when he learns of her true identity, he ekes out his petty revenge reinforces her belief of the dangers of a relationship with her boss. He is the president of her company, so when he prepares to confess his feelings to her, he is certain he will succeed. "What kind of woman would reject me? It's me, after all" (*BP*, Episode 6, 4:58). But when they meet at a restaurant, she thinks he's about to fire her and doesn't give him a chance to get a word in edgewise:

SHIN HA-RI
Everything you did to me after finding out I'm Shin Geum-hui, I understand. You wanted to fire me.

[2] Since all dramas in this paper have a male boss/leader and female subordinate, I will use he/him pronouns for the boss and she/her for subordinates. This is done strictly for the sake of readability.

> Yeah, you have good reasons to get mad, but, eleven so, it's true I've offended you personally, I don't think I did anything wrong as an employee. So what I'm saying is…so please, please give me another chance.
>
> KANG TAE-MOO
>
> Another chance?
>
> SHIN HA-RI
>
> You can listen to my presentation first, then after that, make an assessment and decide if you still wanna let me go or not…
>
> KANG TAE-MOO
>
> That is not why I called you here. (*BP*, Ep 6, 11:00)

She continues with her presentation and doesn't give him a chance to confess his feelings. Even though he is her superior at work, and even though she first meets him in a risky situation which puts her at a disadvantage, once she apologizes, she speaks her mind and stands up for herself. If even in this scenario she feels empowered to speak, she certainly feels it in the relationship.

Meanwhile, thanks to Ha-ri, Tae-moo finally gets the opportunity to heal from his trauma surrounding losing his parents. When she returns to his hospital room because of the rain, he acknowledges how much she helps him:

> TAE-MOO
>
> I don't remember the last time I looked at the rain for this long. Thank you for coming back because you were worried about me. I used to hate it. Words of sympathy or worried expressions. I felt like no one knew what I was really feeling. So they just felt like empty words and actions. So I pretended to be fine, and eventually, I believed it too. But one day…I realized I was rotting on the inside. So I was in a lot of pain for a while. (*BP*, ep. 11, 9:40)

In their relationship, <<INSERT>>

In *Only Just Married*, Akiha and Momose's relationship is an equal partnership from the beginning. After careful deliberation, they reach an agreement that is mutually agreed upon.

> OKADO AKIHA
> I'm only stamping this registration form and turning it in. When I return the money, we can divorce. We are not becoming a real married couple. So in exchange for this marriage registration form, please lend me five million yen. I'm not selling myself. This is an equivalent exchange…
> SHU MOMOSE
> I shall accept your proposal. (Ep 1, 28:50)

Akiha moves into Momose's house and works hard to abide by his meticulous rules, determined to pay back the loan and leave as soon as possible. She doesn't voice her frustrations, attributing her reaction to living with someone for the first time, and bears his criticisms since the house is his. She does not, in fact, start out feeling like they are on equal footing. She leaves the house and stays at the office after an argument where she finally lashes out, and he comes to her office.

> SHU MOMOSE
> If we're living together, we will have to interact. Please do not force yourself to bear with things and tell me. We're…not a real couple, but there's no need to be so reserved towards each other. Because of the "couple" we are, we should clearly speak our minds…and become a "married couple" fit for us." (*OJM*, Episode 1, 53:10)

In *Best Choice Ever*, even before they start dating, Yao Ximing tries to empower Mai Chenghuan. As he admits to his grandmother,

> I've had plans for her. I think highly of her competency, but she's stayed at her former department for too long, so she's diligent yet lacks

drive. It's good to transfer her so that she can hone her drive" (*BCE*, episode 12, 17:29).

Gradually, they form a friendship. After they start dating, much of the relationship between Mai Chenghuan and Yao Ximing involves helping Chenghuan with their family issues. Ximing repeatedly encourages Chenghuan to settle disagreements, while being careful not to overstep.

YAO XIMING

I think you'd better have a peaceful talk with your mom. I really think she just did something wrong out of good intentions. After all, you're family. There isn't anything you can't talk through. But this is advice from an outsider. You may choose not to take it.

MAI CHENGHUAN

I think…you're right. And you are no longer an outsider. (*BCE*, Ep 27, 36:16)

Later, after Yao Ximing's father returns from prison and tries to cause trouble by claiming the inn belongs to his family, Chenghuan offers him a room and caters to him, even attempting to help the two reconcile. After some time, she convinces Zhiming to share a meal with his father, which he does for her sake.

CHENGHUAN

It seems there are a lot of happy memories between you and your father. Have you changed your mind about him after this meal?

ZHIMING

Things that have happened, right or wrong, good or bad, cannot be changed and cannot be offset by each other. So, I can never say that I will forgive him.

CHENGHUAN

It's okay for you to not forgive him…We are our parents' children for life. Neither parent nor child agreed to it, but the blood relationship is always there

> and cannot be shaken off. It's best if we can have a happy family. If not, we should show respect to one another. It's better to treat each other with respect than to torment one another…This is how I grew up. But most importantly, I don't want these things to stay stuck in your heart. I want you to be happy and move on.
>
> ZHIMING
>
> Okay. I'll listen to you. As long as he doesn't stir up trouble, I won't bother him. We can live peacefully together. (*BCE*, episode 32, 31:00)

Just as Zhiming encourages Chenghuan to improve her relationship with her mother, Chenghuan helps Zhiming reconcile with his father, thus empowering one another to become better versions of themselves.

The message to audiences in all three of these dramas is that both parties in a relationship ought to feel comfortable both speaking their minds inside and outside the relationship. As a result, not only does the relationship grow but both parties can too.

Both partners share a healthy, mutually-agreeable level of physical intimacy

In a loving relationship in which both parties trust one another, physical intimacy is normal. Asian dramas generally show no more physical contact beyond kissing, although some do imply more intimate acts that may or may not impact the plot. Yet the c-dramas perpetuate the model of the ideal chaste woman, one who expresses no interest in physical intimacy. The men, meanwhile, are conveyed as the pinnacles of self-restraint, wishing for more intimacy that is kept in check only because of the strong resistance of the woman.

This portrayal of man's innate lasciviousness and woman's strong resistance all sexual advances is troubling from a societal standpoint, placing the responsibility of not-having-sex squarely upon women. After all, if this responsibility is placed upon a woman within a relationship where the man "allows himself" to be resisted, the implication is that when a man's natural instincts are not controlled, the woman is at fault for allowing it. This model also does not permit women to possess any sexual instincts of her own, denying her control over her own bodily desires.

Best Choice Ever shows relatively little intimacy, although Mai Chenghuan initiates the first kiss between her and Yao Ximing.

CHENGHUAN
Yes, I've been very popular since I was a kid. What's the problem?

ZHIMING
I knew it. It was probably with that Fang guy, wasn't it? He kept saying you were childhood sweethearts.

CHENGHUAN
Do you mean Fang Da? Please. Your thinking really is weird. I barely met him when I was a kid. Now that I've grown up, I can hardly remember what he looked like. Besides, I'm not into him. But what does it have to do with you?

ZHIMING
Of course, it has something to do with me because I like you.

CHENGHUAN
You like me? Are you joking like last time?

ZHIMING
I'm serious this time. Be my girlfriend.

CHENGHUAN
Are you serious? How can you prove you're serious?

ZHIMING
How can I?

CHENGHUAN
Yao Zhiming, you coward. [she leans over and kisses him. They kiss].

In *Only Just Married*, Momose is particularly bad at communication, but Akiha aims to clarify how she feels. Frustrated because she developed feelings for him that she thought were unreciprocated, she is ready with money to repay him and signed divorce papers. But before she speaks, Momose confesses his feelings.

MOMOSE

> I don't think I can cheer you up very well, and I might make you upset again one day, but…I want to become a married couple fit for us.
>
> AKIHA
>
> Thank you.

She doesn't mention the divorce papers or the money she has received from her parents to pay him back, but they fall to the ground. She asks him why he kissed her. Then she pulls his tie and kisses him. (Ep 6, 42:02) Of course, he misinterprets this as her wanting a divorce, and it takes them some more time before they manage to get together. But in terms of intimacy, the show makes no judgment regarding intimacy.

In *Business Proposal*, at their first meeting, Kang Tae-moo is more amused than offended when Shin Ha-ri pretends to be sexually promiscuous in an attempt to ruin the date on her best friend's behalf. Later, when Tae-moo pursues Ha-ri, he expresses his interest, then waits for her to initiate intimacy, awaiting more than mere consent but willful agreement. She finally admits her feelings for him over the phone, and they meet on a bridge.

> TAE-MOO
>
> Ms. Shin. If you come any closer, I'm never going to let you go again. [she smiles and walks to him] You won't say this is a mistake too, right?
>
> HA-RI
>
> I'll pay you back for that kiss with another kiss. (*BP*, episode 8, 2:38l)

In all three stories, women are not demonized for being intimate and instead are equally participatory in initiating intimacy. The dramas thus demonstrate that intimacy within a romantic relationship is normal, something that can be initiated and enjoyed by both parties. In a trusting relationship, the women know that they can express their desire for physical contact without fear. Mutually-consensual intimacy does not necessarily lead immediately to a woman being defiled. Even the notion of intimacy in a relationship being sinful or disgraceful is absent in these stories. By removing the social censure, a couple can focus only on nurturing the

relationship. Freeing a woman from having to hold a man's desires at bay while denying her own feelings gives her agency over this aspect of the relationship.

Each person understands, accepts, and respects the other's perspective

Beyond allowing both parties all their feelings, a healthy relationship involves respecting the differences between experiences; being able to see someone else's point of view and accommodate it demonstrates not mere empathy, but *nunchi*, which doesn't require one to adopt another's point of view in order to support them.

In *Best Choice Ever*, when Chenghuan gets in a fight with her mother and stays at the hotel, Zhiming suggests she go home. Chenghuan disagrees.

> CHENGHUAN
> I'm an adult, and I know how to handle my own things. Don't worry about me…I don't know how to face her after going back, so I want to give us each other some time to calm down.
> ZHIMING
> Okay. I'll listen to you. (Ep 27, 25:00)

While Zhiming believes otherwise, rather than insist that she do what he believes is right, he respects her enough to make her own decisions and supports her. On another occasion, Zhiming's estranged father comes to town. He runs off when Zhiming attempts to drive him to the airport and goes to the hotel. Despite Zhiming's resentment toward his father, Chenghuan gives the man a room. She later explains her decision to Zhiming, modeling how she could respect Zhiming's perspective without sacrificing her own ethics.

> CHENGHUAN
> I can't make up for what has happened in the past. However, in the future, I want to face all of your problems with you. As for your dad's situation, here's the thing. I can't just leave him out on the streets. Anyway, I've provided him with a room. If you don't want to see him, I won't pay attention to him either. I will ignore him. However, if you want to talk to him,

> I'll provide you with space. I'll support you. How about that? (*BCE*, Ep 30, 38:10)

Their relationship does not falter because Chenghuan acted against Zhiming's wishes. On the contrary, by demonstrating that she respects his perspective, she can later orchestrate a reconciliation, thus empowering him.

In *Only Just Married*, Akiha does not completely understand Momose's choice to marry her in order to keep loving his sister-in-law, but she supports him and plays along. In the end, Momose recognizes this as he finally realizes his own feelings toward Akiha.

> MOMOSE
> If I think back on it, Akiha-san always accepted my feelings, despite my peculiarities. Even when we entered this fake marriage…Even when I told her of my fruitless love…Even when I was troubled over Miharu…Since I met Akiha-san, my feelings are…no longer alone. Perhaps this isn't friendship. (*OJM*, Ep 8, 42:44)

At the time, however, she has moved out of his home and is working obsessively to submit a design proposal to a contest. He learns the contest she entered was rigged. He goes to the contest site and kneels on the ground before the judge on Akiha's behalf.

> MOMOSE
> She entered this contest to attain her dreams and to show you her work. She poured her soul into creating something that satisfied her. So, please, could you at least look at her work? Please! (*OJM*, episode 9, 39:27)

After Kang Tae-moo and Shin Ha-ri start dating, they go on their first date. At the end of a date, they stand outside the restaurant.

> TAE-MOO
> [hugs Ha-ri] Thank you for accepting my feelings.

HA-RI

What if someone sees us?

TAE-MOO

Who cares? I'm just hugging my girlfriend. I can't wait until the entire world knows about us.

HA-RI

It's because you feel bad about lying to your grandfather, right? Actually, that day, I—

TAE-MOO

When you feel ready, let's tell him. (*BP*, Ep. 10, 7:00)

This is a scene in which they both demonstrate that they understand and respect one another's perspective. While posing as Geum-hui, Ha-ri had struggled to keep her distance from Tae-moo's grandfather out of fear of being recognized, but had done so clumsily and inadvertently made a bad impression on him. In this scene, they each demonstrate their consideration for the other's perspective, showing that their relationship is off to a good start.

In all three shows, as couples, the individuals do not act in ways that would harm the other. They do not choose to act of their own interests and apologize later if they happened to disrespect their partner. On the contrary, they each demonstrate that their decisions are made while considering their partner's perspective. The stories do not lack conflict. Rather, it is only after they have learned to understand and respect one another's perspectives and earn one another's trust that they even become a couple.

The way the male leads learned to improve this trait is by tapping into or developing their *nunchi*. One key element of *nunchi* is that it differs from empathy, which requires someone to embody the other person's emotions. According to Hong, "When you are 'embodying' someone, it's impossible to really see them objectively because you are far too close" (Hong, 33). Concurrently carrying one's own perspective and someone else's is not only possible, but preferable in a healthy relationship; one person doesn't merely sacrifice their own self for the other.

In a Healthy Relationship, Both Partners Trust One Another

A healthy relationship requires trust. The notion of trust involves not only believing that the other person would not be swayed by someone else's attention but also being emotionally available and vulnerable with one's partner.

In *Best Choice Ever*, Zhiming must earn Chenghuan's trust over time. At the start, he is ruthless and career-driven, with an agenda that leads him to use Chenghuan. Between that and her previous relationship in which she was lied to for three years, Zhiming must work hard to earn her trust. With time and hard work, he does. At one point, Chenghuan's mom arrives at the office and Chenghuan lashes out, causing her mom to storm away upset. In a clear show of how trusted he is by then, Chenghuan calls Zhiming.

CHENGHUAN

My words actually hurt her just now. So she is sad. Could you go see how she's doing for me? I don't want to do it myself right now, because I feel like it would be very embarrassing for me.

ZHIMING

Okay, leave it to me. (Episode 28, early. < 7:11)

Clearly, she trusts him to tend to her family. Throughout the drama, they turn to each other whenever they need emotional support. And when a woman comes to town claiming to be his girlfriend, she doesn't simply believe the woman's claim.

CHENGHUAN'S MOTHER

Today, Zhang Peisheng's daughter came to visit Yao Zhiming. She said she was his girlfriend. [MC sad] It turns out Yao Zhiming has a girlfriend.

CHENGHUAN

Girlfriend? Did Yao Zhiming tell you that?

CHENGHUAN's MOTHER

No. He denied it. He said he just takes her as his sister. (*BCE*, Ep. 26, 1:36)

So strong is Chenghuan's trust in Zhiming that she not only doesn't ask him about it but they start dating shortly after.

In *Only Just Married*, they divorce once her debt is repaid, and once their feelings for each other are expressed, Momose assumes they will marry, while Akiha has no intention of marrying. Instead, they agree upon a relationship built

not on convention but on trust. At the end, after considering the others' feelings, each is ready to compromise because they trust each other.

MOMOSE

> You've always accepted me, despite how bad I am at expressing myself…Though we only just married, it all changed. Akiha-san, you changed me. I thought no further unhappiness awaited me…yet I've come to realize I desire to become happy…I want to become happy with you.

AKIHO

> Me, too. I also want to …become happy with you, Momose-san…Let's get married…I've thought about it a lot since then. What makes a "married couple"? I didn't reach an answer. Entering the family register or not…To be frank, I don't mind either way. But we met because we "just married." Maybe if we try again, good things will come our way. (Ep 10, 39:36)

In *Business Proposal*, Tae-moo has an anxiety attack during storms ever since witnessing his parents die in a car accident as a child. While the incident is known by others, his anxiety is not. He lashes out at others instead. But with Ha-ri, he trusts that he can open up to her.

TAE-MOO

> You're different, Ms. Shin. When I bring up my parents, most people look like they don't know what to say and say that they're sorry. So I never got to talk about this despite it being one of the fondest memories I have. Even to my grandpa. But sometimes…I want to talk to someone about my parents. Thank you for letting me talk about it like this. (Ep 8, 30:00)

In each instance, the leads have strong enough awareness of one another and confidence in the relationship and their partner to trust them. Just as *nunchi*'s notion

of paying attention can indicate that something is wrong, so too can that *nunchi* enable trust. Knowing their partner has demonstrated *nunchi* toward them, they can trust their partner to do so in the future–or at least trust the ability to tell when they should no longer extend that trust.

In a Healthy Relationship, Each Party Retains their Own Agency

While each of the previous points are elements of agency, the freedom to choose and control one's actions is the specific definition of agency. In any relationship, a truly equal partnership is one in which each person controls themself. Either party has the means and opportunity to walk away from the relationship, yet the relationship should be nurturing enough that they have no motivation to do so. If one person remains because they have no choice, then they lack agency.

In *Best Choice Ever,* Chenghuan doesn't have to be with Zhiming, but rather chooses to be with him because she is fulfilled in the relationship. Her mindset, after her mother tried to force her to get engaged to Jai Liang, changed. As she articulated to Zhiming,

> CHENGHUAN
> Do you know what my name means?
> ZHIMING
> Mai Chenghuan. To cater to someone and please someone?
> CHENGHUAN
> To serve one's parents and please them. That's the true meaning of this name.
> ZHIMING
> That is quite frustrating. Your own name implies a life for someone else.
> CHENGHUAN
> Today, for the first time in my life, I ignored the meaning of this name. I have mixed feelings about that. But no matter what, I used to please my parents. But from now on, I just want to please myself. (*BCE*, ep. 16, 16:35)

Later, Chenghuan explains to her mother that the forced engagement "made me determined to free myself from such a life. I want to live a life where I can make

choices and be confident" (*BCE,* ep. 28, 16:10). Chenghuan will not sacrifice her agency for anyone, not even a romantic partner. Her personal journey is to learn that "our family is what drives us to move forward. And love is the reason why we stay" (*BCE*, ep. 37, 37:43). In other words, she fully understands the importance of having agency. She not only ensures it for herself but also offers it to Zhiming. After his father dies, Chenghuan tells him, "Zhiming, as long as you're willing, my family is your family" (Ep 34, 7:40).

In *Only Just Married,* Momose and Akiha's relationship is built, from the beginning, as an arrangement. As Akiha clarifies with Momose before agreeing to the marriage, "in exchange for this marriage registration form, please lend me five million yen. I'm not selling myself. This is an equivalent exchange" (*OJM*, ep. 1, 29:00). When her parents visit and learn of the arrangement, they give her the money required to repay him. At this point, she no longer wishes to leave but knows she will have to once the debt is erased. Once they settle the debt and divorce, there is no reason to stay together except if they wish to.

MOMOSE
Please, right now…file a divorce with me…I want to rectify some things…I wish to confess my honest feelings to the one I love. In order to do so, I must face her with no lies.
AKIHO
Then why did you hug me?
MOMOSE
To confirm my own feelings.
AKIHO
I understand. (*OJM*, ep 9, :29)

Actually, she misunderstands him. She thinks he plans to confess this to his sister-in-law when the woman he loves is actually Akiha. Their lack of clear communication has them acting against their own interests. Yet it is out of consideration for one another that they are pointedly not looking to control each other that they each act the way they do. In the end, it is that choice that they make together. However, even within the constraints of the marriage contract, other than paying off the debt, there is no attempt to restrict the other's agency. As Momose

states, “Akiha-san always grants my requests. So in return, I'll always want her to be free to do what she wants” (*OJM*, Ep. 6, 21:55).

In *Business Proposal*, Ha-ri and Tae-moo support one another. They understand each other and support one another, and do not attempt to control each other. In the final episode, Tae-moo’s grandfather falls ill before Ha-ri has won him over.

TAE-MOO

There’s a problem with his blood vessels, but there’s no treatment in Korea yet. So, I’m going to take him to the States. Speaking of which, Ha-ri, will you come with me? I know that it’s selfish and I know it’s a lot to ask of you But I want you by my side. I’m not telling you to quit your job. There’s that program we have, where we send researchers overseas. If you apply for that, I’m sure you will—

HA-RI

No. I’m sure I’d get it, though. But…if I do that, there will be rumors about it in the company.

TAE-MOO

Don’t worry about other people.

HA-RI

I don’t care about other people, either. I just…don’t want this situation to hurt you anymore.

TAE-MOO

Hari, I’m so worried. My grandfather is…both my father and mother. But if something…happens to him…

HA-RI

I know. That’s all the more reason why I can’t go with you. Chairman Kang’s health is the most important thing right now. He still doesn’t approve of me. So how could I possibly go with you?

TAE-MOO

I’m sorry. I know it all…but I couldn’t help it.

HA-RI

I understand how you feel. (*BP,* Ep 12, 42:30)

Tae-moo and Ha-ri love each other and wish to be together. But they also want his grandfather's approval. So ingrained is the cultural need for family that they would rather delay moving forward in their relationship than sacrifice familiar support. When Tae-moo suggests Ha-ri join him in America, he wants to empower her by suggesting she join the company's research program abroad. But he also respects her decision not to take it. Indeed, they proceed to maintain the long-distance relationship for a year. In this relationship, they are both free to choose the best action for themselves (and their loved ones) without being pressured but rather being supported by the other. In other words, by respecting and supporting one another, they both have agency.

The Role of Nunchi in Healthy Relationships

The three dramas all illustrate couples who end up in healthy relationships. The fact that none of the dramas ends with the standard fairy-tale wedding scene reflects the current mindset of many viewers. These stories all have happy endings, yet despite the fact that the young couples concede to familial pressures to find a dedicated partner for life, the happy ending does not necessarily mean marriage and children. In fact, *Best Choice Ever* could be said to serve more as a cautionary tale against buying into the myth of marriage and children as a woman's end goal, since Chenghuan's best friend, second female lead Mao Mao goes through countless ordeals with her divorce and child custody battle from choosing to marry the wrong man A common element in each of the

In Korean, Chinese, and Japanese cultures, young men and women are expected to eventually marry and have children. The c-dramas paint a world in which women are expected to sacrifice their rights to have a successful relationship while men ready themselves for marriage by accepting the burden of responsibility for their life partner. In k-dramas, on the other hand, a woman is not forced to choose between love and control over her own life. Women in Korean dramas have greater agency, have more control over their lives, and are less constrained by societal expectations, thus modeling true equality within romantic relationships. By conveying romantic relationships in which both partners are empowered by one another, k-dramas offer a vision of a future with appealing possibilities as opposed to burdensome obligations built on sacrifices.

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The *Popular Culture Studies Journal* Reviews: Introduction

CHRISTOPHER J. OLSON

As the United States descends further into authoritarianism and oligarchy – and as the Trump regime seeks to obscure or rewrite the nation's long history of systemic oppression – it becomes ever more important for scholars of popular culture to confront these forces and examine how they manifest in media. The reviews in this issue take up that task. The books, films, and streaming series examined here all center on questions of power: who holds it, who is harmed by it, and how it might be resisted or reimagined. From the deadly spectacle of *Squid Game* to the hidden violence behind *Woman of the Hour*, and on to the algorithmic control exerted by AI-generated culture, the texts reviewed here expose the mechanisms of inequality, authoritarianism, and systemic control that shape contemporary life. At the same time, these texts offer glimpses of resistance – Black fandoms asserting cultural clout, queer game designers reimagining worlds, and participatory cultures that push back against dominant narratives. Taken together, these works remind us that popular culture is not merely entertainment, but a contested space in which the politics of oppression and liberation are constantly in play.

In this issue, Melissa Beattie reviews *Fandom for Us, by Us: The Pleasures and Practices of Black Audiences*, in which Alfred L. Martin, Jr. centers the motivations (or the "whys") behind Black fandom, rather than its methods. According to Beattie, Martin, Jr. challenges the white-dominated lens of fan studies by examining how Black audiences find joy, cultural affirmation, and role models in media, often navigating class, clout, canon, and comfort within a racially biased entertainment industry. Jana Fedtke, meanwhile, considers *AI-Generated Popular Culture: A Semiotic Perspective*, in which Marcel Danesi draws on semiotic theory to argue that generative AI is not just reshaping artistic production but altering the very systems of meaning that underlie popular culture. According to Fedtke, Danesi sees GenAI as both a technological and cultural agent, raising urgent questions about authorship, authenticity, and the future of human creativity in an increasingly synthetic media landscape. Nicolle Lamerichs explores *Participatory Culture Wars: Controversy, Conflict, and Complicity in Fandom*, a wide-ranging collection that examines how fan communities have become sites of cultural tension, political polarization, and misinformation. Drawing on the concept of "fanization," the essays explore how affect, identity, and power circulate in contemporary fandoms,

revealing how participatory cultures can reproduce hierarchies, gatekeeping, and even reactionary ideologies. Lastly, Mickey Randle reviews *How to Queer the World: Radical Worldbuilding Through Video Games*. Here, Bo Ruberg argues that video game worldbuilding offers a powerful site for queer imagination and resistance. As Randle notes, through close readings of both mainstream and experimental games, Ruberg shows how gameplay mechanisms and operational logics can destabilize dominant norms of gender, sexuality, time, and space, demonstrating that queerness is not just represented in games but embedded in how their worlds are built, navigated, and imagined.

Turning attention from scholarly books to films and streaming video, Elizabeth Shiller offers reviews of two recent and altogether timely films: *Woman of the Hour* (Anna Kendrick, 2024) and *Sinners* (Ryan Coogler, 2025). First, in her review of *Woman of the Hour*, Shiller focuses on the film's unsettling portrayal of how patriarchal violence hides in plain sight, often behind charm, media spectacle, and the social conditioning that teaches women to fawn and de-escalate in the face of threat. Framed around a real-life case, the film resists sensationalism to instead explores the psychological toll of being forced to navigate male violence masked as normalcy. Shiller then examines how director Ryan Coogler's *Sinners* uses a Prohibition-era vampire allegory to explore issues such as colonialism, cultural appropriation, racial violence, and the complex ways systemic oppression infiltrates marginalized communities – not always by force, but often by invitation. Lastly, Hee-seong Lim reviews the second season of the hit Netflix series *Squid Game* through a uniquely Korean cultural lens; Lim argues that while season 2 faced criticism for its repetitive themes and weaker character development, it instead offers a sharp commentary on pseudo-democracy and collective greed, mirroring the current sociopolitical climates of both the U.S. and South Korea. According to Lim, the season uses a combination of stylized brutality and manipulated voting processes to confront viewers with a chilling reflection of how authoritarianism and mass egoism can thrive under the illusion of choice.

Taken together, the texts reviewed here all help to uncover the myriad ways contemporary popular culture reflects and responds to escalating political and social crises. From algorithmic control to the manipulation of democratic processes, from structural racism to patriarchal violence, the works examined in this section confront the systems that shape our media and our lives. At the same time, they serve as reminders of the subversive possibilities that exist within popular culture: its ability to critique, to resist, and to imagine other realities. In a moment when

authoritarianism thrives on distraction and distortion, popular culture remains a vibrant site of both reflection and resistance, one that scholars must continue to interrogate with seriousness and resolve.

This is my last issue as reviews editor for the *Popular Culture Studies Journal*, and I am proud to conclude my tenure with a collection of reviews that speak directly to the cultural and political stakes of this moment. The texts reviewed here critically examine the cultural conditions that have contributed to – or, in some cases, directly enabled – the current wave of authoritarianism in the U.S. Through their insightful analyses, the reviewers have helped to further illuminate how popular culture both reflects and shapes these conditions, revealing the complex interplay between media, power, and resistance in our moment. I am grateful to have played a small part in shaping and amplifying these important insights during my time as reviews editor. In an era when silence can too easily become complicity, it is essential that scholars of popular culture continue to speak out, critically engage, and challenge the forces threatening democracy and justice. I will deeply miss the opportunity to continue serving as reviews editor and helping to bring these vital conversations to the forefront. Unfortunately, my current responsibilities at my institution make it difficult, if not impossible, to continue in this role in any sort of substantive way.

That said, I have complete confidence that my successor, Elizabeth Shiller, will carry this work forward with integrity and care. During my time as reviews editor, Elizabeth not only contributed numerous thoughtful and incisive film reviews to the journal but also served as assistant reviews editor. Her work has consistently demonstrated a deep engagement with questions of representation, justice, and cultural power. Based on that experience, I have no doubt she will continue to spotlight works that not only enrich scholarly research and pedagogy but also speak directly to the broader political realities of our time.

Again, it has been my honor to serve in this role during such a critical moment for both media and democracy. As popular culture continues to shape how we understand ideas of power, identity, and resistance, I urge my fellow scholars to remain vigilant, courageous, and unafraid to confront the systems that imperil both truth and justice. The stakes are too high for silence and too immediate for delay.

Danesi, Marcel. *AI-Generated Popular Culture: A Semiotic Perspective*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2024.

Marcel Danesi's *AI-Generated Popular Culture: A Semiotic Perspective* offers an ambitious and timely examination of how generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) is reshaping the symbolic foundations of contemporary popular culture. Published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2024, the book spans nearly 200 pages and is structured into ten substantive chapters that explore an impressively broad spectrum of cultural domains – from literature and cinema to music, advertising, gaming, and art – through the lens of semiotic theory.

A Professor Emeritus at the University of Toronto and a prominent scholar whose research has focused on semiotics and linguistic anthropology, Danesi brings his longstanding expertise to bear on one of the most pressing questions of the digital age: how do generative systems which mimic human creativity and language alter the ways in which cultural meaning is produced, transmitted, and interpreted? While several studies have addressed AI's technical or sociological facets, this book is the first to engage rigorously with the semiotic dynamics of AI generated work, especially within popular culture. Danesi's central argument is that GenAI automates creative production and, in this process, reconfigures the semiotic relationships underlying cultural interpretation.

In chapter 1, "AI, Popular Culture, Semiotics," Danesi outlines the historical roots of semiotic inquiry to establish a foundation for his argument. The subsequent chapters focus on one medium at a time: "AI-Generated Literature" (chapter 2), "AI-Generated Cinema" (chapter 3), "AI-Generated Music" (chapter 4), "AI in the Mass Media" (chapter 5), "AI-Generated Art" (chapter 6), "AI in Marketing and Advertising" (chapter 7), and "AI and Gaming Culture" (chapter 8). The book follows a consistent chapter structure: Danesi introduces each medium and its historical background, provides contemporary examples of AI-generated artifacts, explains the theoretical framework, and conducts a semiotic analysis to answer the overarching question of how generative systems affect cultural productions and the audience's interpretation of them. This thematic clarity throughout the chapters is a strength of the book because readers can trace parallels and divergences in AI's deployment across cultural fields. While this breadth is commendable, it occasionally comes at the expense of depth.

The book's theoretical framework is grounded in canonical semiotic thought, specifically the work of Charles Sanders Peirce, Ferdinand de

Saussure, and Jean Baudrillard. Danesi mobilizes these theories as conceptual scaffolds for interpreting the cultural logic of GenAI. His application of Baudrillard's notion of the simulacrum is especially compelling in chapter 9 ("Simulacrum Culture"), which analyzes "Virtual Reality," "Deepfake Culture," and "The Metaverse and the Narraverse" as examples of simulacra. Danesi suggests that GenAI imitates existing cultural forms and produces hyperreal copies.

Finally, chapter 10, "AI and the Future of Pop Culture," examines future directions of "the shift from real-world human-created pop culture to AI-generated pop culture" (176). Danesi argues that

> There is little doubt that the advent of generative AI in the creation of cultural artifacts has broken the historical flow of pop culture in ways that are unprecedented. At the very least, AI has installed itself as a partner with human creators, as audiences seem to be increasingly indifferent as to who or what the source of the artwork is, as long as it moves them in some emotional way. (175)

Throughout the book, Danesi investigates the mechanisms of Large Language Models (LLMs) as well as how the texts they produce relate to existing conventions. He raises questions about originality, authenticity, agency, authorship, and coherence, suggesting that AI-generated cultural productions both conform to and disrupt narrative codes that have historically defined human creativity. Danesi argues that the rise of synthetic content and algorithmically scripted narratives introduces new challenges to traditional understandings of authorship and spectatorship. The author's broader thesis is that the emergence of generative culture marks a semiotic rupture, an epochal shift in the infrastructure of signification itself. In this context, one notable strength of the book is its insistence on seeing AI as both a technological force and as a cultural agent.

Danesi asks how GenAI participates in and reshapes the shared systems of signs through which cultures understand themselves. This semiotic perspective proves especially valuable in a time when discussions of AI often revolve around either ethical concerns or engineering feats. Danesi brings the conversation back to questions of meaning, creativity, and cultural continuity, reminding readers that the rise of GenAI demands cultural and philosophical reflection beyond technical literacy.

The cultural scope of the book is predominantly Western with limited attention to how AI-generated culture is evolving in non-Western contexts. Given the global proliferation of GenAI tools and platforms, a more cosmopolitan analysis might add valuable insights – perhaps to a future study.

Despite this, Danesi's *AI-Generated Popular Culture* offers a comprehensive exploration of how GenAI is reshaping the semiotic dimensions of popular culture. In its systematic examination of AI's incursion into literature, cinema, music, mass media, art, advertising, and gaming, this book stands out for its theoretical depth and its commitment to understanding how AI creates new meanings. By framing generative technologies as agents of semiotic transformation, Danesi provides a novel and intellectually rigorous account of cultural production in the era of algorithmic creativity.

Scholars in media studies, cultural theory, digital humanities, and communication among other disciplines will find this book both provocative and illuminating. It opens new pathways for thinking about the relationship between human meaning-making and machine-generated expression, which makes it an essential resource for anyone seeking to understand the cultural stakes of artificial intelligence.

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Driessen, Simone, Bethan Jones, and Benjamin Litherland (eds). *Participatory Culture Wars: Controversy, Conflict, and Complicity in Fandom*. U of Iowa P, 2025.

Controversies increasingly occur in fan cultures, especially on digital platforms. Movements such as #gamergate, the rise of toxic fandom, or the cancellation of celebrities all reveal that digital cultures are not always places of connection, but can also provoke cultural tensions, conflict and gatekeeping. The collection *Participatory Culture Wars*, edited by Simone Driessen, Bethan Jones, and Benjamin Litherland, offers a rich resource on conflicts in participatory culture through different cases, practices, and communities. The authors of the collected essays deepen our understanding of how fans interact with brands and celebrities through deep qualitative research, based on such sectors as music, television, and beauty culture. The studies show that these conflicts or "participatory culture wars" are often situated within wider culture wars, for instance related to gender, race, or politics.

A critical lens in this collection is fanization – a concept which interprets different media practices in relation to fandom and fan studies. Fandom, and engaging with things as a fan, has increasingly become a norm in our media landscape. The fanization approach works well to reveal the complex emotional relationships, high engagement, and rich participatory cultures behind controversies. This idea also sheds light on the emotions behind these seemingly critical and rational debates, and shows how community, lifestyles, and hierarchies are often at stake. Overall, the collection features many insightful chapters, each of which is relevant and closely connected to the main theme of controversy. Reactionary fandom is examined in-depth while others apply major themes from fan studies, such as affect, to different communities. The opening chapter by Mel Stanfill sets the tone well by exploring the origins of toxic fandom and its related discourse. Their focus is on the harm that these discourses cause to certain fans and users, for instance through their misogynism and racism.

Subsequent chapters focus on conspiracies and misinformation as major themes. Christina Wurst, for instance, reveals the overlap between the participatory culture of conspiracy theorists and fandom. These both act as sites of play, affect, and digitalization. They even overlap, for instance in the domain of fan theories and conspiracies. Renee Barnes continues this theme of conspiracies in a study on COVID-19 and antivaccination discourses. Participants in these discourses also gain pleasure out of being a part of these communities, and this is where fan studies could provide additional insights into other groups. She stresses that studies in this area could focus more "on the personal fulfillment and pleasure that drives a person engaging with these ideas" (91). If this engagement is understood, such studies could help understand the

spread of misinformation and contribute to enhancing media literacy. Finally, Michelle Stewart and Sklaerenn Le Gallo add to the previous authors by focusing on how micro-celebrities added to debates about the COVID-19 pandemic. By analyzing discourses of misinformation and fan/celebrity interaction, they also reveal additional insights on how micro-celebrities function within society.

Following these chapters the book shifts its focus to different problematic fan cultures and celebrities. Zoe Hurley considers beauty cultures and how they interlace with promotional interests. She critiques how they create "facial regimes" which can be sensitive in certain regions (123). Simone Driessen and Bethan Jones, meanwhile, examine "anti-fans" who leave a fandom due to concerns over their fan object. They provide insights into how the identity and emotions of fans are affected when their idols are involved in problematic situations or controversies. Rebecca Williams provides an interesting continuation of this theme as she investigates how fans respond to J. K. Rowling's transphobia and what this means for the overarching brand of the Wizarding World. She is interested in how fans navigate transmedia experiences, such as tourism, considering this situation. Do they still support the franchise, and what financial, emotional, and social boundaries do the fans set?

The final group of chapters offer different perspectives on crises around companies and celebrities. Monica Flegel and Judith Leggatt focus on conflicts in comic book fandom and their intergenerational dimensions. They explore how Marvel sometimes segments different types of fans, for instance "old fans" and "new fans," in their own marketing strategies. The company often vilifies its own fans in these tactics and provokes different fans. The authors conclude that "[b]y keeping the focus on intergenerational conflict and implicating its own fans in the process, Marvel could be read as akin to trolls on the internet, stirring up trouble to get attention" (174). Alfred Archer and Georgie Mills investigate Britney Spears, and how fans supported her during her mental health crisis. Elsewhere, Peng Qiao and Xing Fan focus on gendered discussions around the boys' love (BL) fan community. In this typically female-driven space, straight men interact in specific ways toward reaction videos "constructed from a male gaze perspective when they watch the BL content" (208). In the final chapter, James Rendell investigates controversies around "blackwashing," in which a typically white character is cast as black. Rendell historicizes these discourses and provides a sociocultural account of this form of gatekeeping.

Overall, *Participatory Culture Wars* explores fandom and fan-like engagement in relation to politics and wider social issues. This makes the collection extremely topical. The wide array of cases is appealing, as well as the different frameworks used to study these conflicts. With its focus on digital

culture, social controversy and celebrities, this critical, interdisciplinary collection will appeal to scholars from many different fields.

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Ruberg, Bo. *How to Queer the World: Radical Worldbuilding Through Video Games*. New York UP, 2025.

The discovery of new worlds may seem to be possible only for astronauts and fantasy authors, out of reach for the rest of us who cannot seem to get the hang of rocket science or new Elven language development. Yet these new worlds may be closer than you might think. In *How to Queer the World,* Bo Ruberg suggests that when we play games, we all have the power to build our own worlds and explore new ones.

For Ruberg, worldbuilding via video games can present an array of new opportunities and even new natural laws. Many of these virtual worlds naturally or metaphorically defy the systematically heteronormative social rules we all live by, making the process of worldbuilding almost inherently queer. Ruberg calls for a rethinking of worldbuilding as the process of understanding the world. Video games that present queer worlds allow us to redesign and potentially change the real world, allowing us to "destroy" the current world and make new ones with more equitable societies (23). Ruberg presents several examples of video games that present new worlds in a way that reflects queer world-building in real life: through communities. Many of the games Ruberg looks at have queer narratives and characters, but this is only part of queer worldbuilding. Instead, Ruberg chooses to examine operational logics and game mechanisms. Through their understanding and analysis, Ruberg presents an expertly designed explanation of how video games can be spaces for queer world-making.

In chapter 1, Ruberg discusses the game *What the Golf*, in which the player tries to theoretically use a club to get a ball into a hole. However, the game is constantly upending its own rules, destabilizing the world the player knows. Each level has different rules; some may ask the player to play as the club and try to get the human into a hole, while others may ask the player to feed a giraffe ice cream, or other sorts of absurdist notions. The point of the game is not to be a golf game at all. For Ruberg, *What the Golf* presents an abundance of worlds, helping us see how the boundaries we set up in the real world can be blurred. Because *What the Golf* has alternate rules, it helps the player think about alternate desires, which Ruberg then equates to queerness.

In chapter 2, the graphic novel/video game *If Found* brings queer worldbuilding to the forefront of the mind via its erasing mechanic. The game presents parallel

storylines, one about an outer space explorer, and one about a struggling trans youth. The player experiences the game through the character's diaries, which they must then erase. This, Ruberg says, is a game about trans time. Because the self (any self, not just transgender people) is constantly being remade, the erasing mechanic in the game helps us understand a generally nonlinear perspective akin to the trans identity. The world of *If Found,* with all its cosmic propensity, suggests that our world may already be deeply queer.

Chapter 3 sees a discussion of changing the physical rules of the world via games like *Wobbledogs* and *Goat Simulator.* Both these games feature zany animals that move in a way that opposes the natural laws of the universe we know. Because games have physics machines that help them feel real, understanding how games use physics is key to their world building. In *Wobbledogs,* reproductive mechanics become something else entirely. In *Goat Simulator*, a goat floats around and disturbs the peace of the game's human beings. Ruberg suggests that the worlds these games build allow us to once again question our reality. Do the laws of physics have to be laws? What if they were not? For Ruberg, these games highlight how current beliefs about sexuality and gender dominate the world that we understand and encourage us to think outside of the box.

In chapter 4, Ruberg begins to discuss alternate dimensions. They write that video games can be used to bring about a "specific mode of seeing" (142). Such games can transport the player to a world with alternate depths, among other things. Ruberg discusses the history of dimensionality in games, focusing on 2.5D games like *Paper Mario*, that hybridize traditional 2D games with 3D games, creating an apparent crossing between physical and digital world. Examining the game *OlliOlli World*, Ruberg discusses how dimensionality in games can block off visible spaces for the player. These 2.5D worlds are then tinged with desire but always keep the player's longing at bay. Ruberg states that this creates a metaphor for the queer experience, in that queer people are always envisioning a better world.

Chapter 5 features spatial orientation and player opportunities in the celebrated queer game *Gone Home.* Ruberg provides a well-thought-out and interesting critique of a game considered by many to be a landmark in video game history. Ruberg's main idea is that the game is "overbuilt" (172), and it prevents the player from having a truly queer experience because of a lack of true freedom. Even though the game appears to allow the player to deviate from the path in its environmental design, it always leads them to the same conclusion, inadvertently steering the player in a straightforward direction. Ruberg compares this to a dark

ride from a theme park. Though the rider cannot see the destination, they are on a track that leads to a specific place. Yet Ruberg also brings up the concept of speedrunning (the practice of trying to complete a game as quickly as possible), and states that this may be a way to understand how queer operational logics can be found in a game like *Gone Home*.

Ruberg examines an art installation that takes the shape of a video game in chapter 6. They examine *San Andreas Deer Cam*, which takes the world of the popular video game franchise *Grand Theft Auto* and replaces the central character with a deer. In this case, the player simply watches the deer explore the virtual world in real time. The deer triggers responses from NPCs, and roams around as it pleases. Ruberg states that this art piece is an experiment in queer posthumanism. The deer cam in the game suggests a world that is not built for humans and thus cannot be played by human players. This helps us see that other worlds are possible, and that we often live alongside them without realizing.

The analysis of all the selected games in *How to Queer the World* is meaningful to games scholars and presents a much-needed approach to real world social change. The book also presents a unique and inspiring approach to video game scholarship and the processes of worldbuilding. Ruberg's writing occasionally deviates from the confines of media studies, but does so with expertise, making the book more interesting, even to those who are not interested or familiar with video games. This book would be well used in an undergrad class on video game design or study, or for anyone interested in alternative ways of making queer media. In the book's conclusion, Ruberg writes that we are "never done" building the world (236), suggesting that the promise of video games contains an untapped potential.

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Sinners. Dir. Ryan Coogler. Screenplay by Ryan Coogler. Perf. Michael B. Jordan, Hailee Steinfeld, Miles Caton, Jack O'Connell, and Delroy Lindo. Warner Bros., 2025.

Sinners (2025) follows Smoke and Stack as they return to the Mississippi Delta to open a juke joint for their community only to be confronted by vampires who also want an invitation to the party. If we dig deeper into the story, we learn that Ryan Coogler's *Sinners* is more than just a vampire movie starring Michael B. Jordan in two different roles. It is an allegory for colonialism.

The main threat to the juke joint is Remmick, an Irish vampire played by Jack O'Connell. Because Remmick's first victims are Klan members, the vampires are initially thought to represent racism. Coogler confirmed this in an interview saying:

> Yes, the vampires represent the destructive evil of racism that has drained the blood of the South for decades. But the vampires can also represent white populations who absorb parts of Black American culture for their own selfish fulfillment and then exploit parts of that culture until nothing is left. (Bleeding them dry so to speak.) The vampires can also be an allegory of a Black community that is infiltrated by evil forces and then turns on itself, resulting in generations of suffering. (Allen)

This statement is fully represented as Remmick enacts his plan, first by infiltrating the juke joint.

True to vampire lore, Remmick needs to be invited in. To get that invitation, Remmick attempts to manipulate Smoke and Stack. When asked if he was a part of the Klan, Remmick acted offended. His response, "*Sir*…we believe in equality and music," would have been convincing had he and his backup singers picked a different song to sing. Remmick's choice of "Pick Poor Robin Clean" could have been an attempt to bond, but it comes off more as an appropriation of the music rather than an appreciation (Jordan). Regardless of the intent, the trio is still denied entry. Remmick then references Hailee Steinfeld's Mary, who is white passing but a rightful member of the community, hoping that she would invite them in. Instead, it draws Mary outside. Mary wants to help the twins succeed; after all, money is money regardless of who is holding it but ultimately becomes Remmick's ticket to the inside. Mary easily gets back inside the juke joint and turns Stack, effectively shutting down the party and sending more unsuspecting victims outside to be killed and turned into vampires.

Even though their bodies are undead, they now share a hive mind, whereby their consciousnesses are connected to Remmick. To understand each other and fully assimilate as a singular unit, the growing horde performs "The Rocky Road to Dublin." This performance mirrors Remmick's own journey with confronting colonial forces highlighting the similarities between Black Americans and Irish immigrants. Coogler intentionally made Remmick Irish because of their paralleled experiences with discrimination. Although it was not so much for the color of his skin as it was for religion, Remmick does empathize with their struggle. These parallels later convinced me that Remmick was genuinely offended when asked if he was a part of the Klan, he was not acting. The way he said "*Sir*…" makes sense now that we know he is Irish (Long; IndieWire).

In his efforts to convert the remaining survivors, Remmick once again tries to negotiate. This time, though, he uses the memories of the community to make a much more compelling argument. See, Remmick wants Sammie, played by Miles Canton, whose music can summon spirits of both past and future. In exchange, he offers the survivors immortality and an escape from racism, providing a not-so-subtle threat to join him or die because the Klan is coming to attack the juke joint at dawn. Still facing resistance, he resorts to showcasing his theft and exploitation of culture as he taunts Grace, the Chinese shopkeeper, in her native language, Taishanese, and threatens to attack her daughter. By doing this, Remmick is saying "look what I can take from you. Do you want me to take everything?" (O'Neal).

The climax of the film results in the vampires overpowering the survivors. During the final confrontation with Sammie, Remmick reveals that he is continuing the cycle of oppression to replace the community that he lost (Hart), saying,

> Long ago, the men who stole my father's land forced these words upon us. I hated those men, but the words still bring me comfort. [...] Those men lied to themselves, then lied to us. They told stories of a God above and a devil below and lies of a dominion of man over beast and Earth. [...] We are Earth and beast and God. We are woman and man. We are connected, you and I, to everything.

Ultimately, Smoke and Sammie defeat Remmick and the vampire horde with some help from the sun, and all seems well. Sammie goes home and Smoke returns to the juke joint, both injured, but alive. Yet all is not well; the Klansmen attack the juke joint but are no match for Smoke who, despite being fatally shot, manages to be the last one standing.

There is much more to be said about the many themes running throughout *Sinners*, but my takeaway here is that no matter how resilient a culture is, colonialism is never ending, it will just return in new forms. This becomes apparent at the end when Smoke faces the Klan and in the first post-credit scene when a now elderly Sammie declines Stack's offer of immortality because he is still feeling the effects of that night 60 years later. Colonialism does not always rush in with weapons, sometimes we invite it in.

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Woman of the Hour. Dir. Anna Kendrick. Screenplay by Ian McDonald. Perf. Anna Kendrick and Daniel Zovatto. Netflix, 2024.

Crime thrillers are fascinating because we are often curious about the motivations of criminals and enjoy the thrill of solving a real-life mystery without real-life consequences (Hayden; Jared). According to Patricia Bryan, Henry P. Brandis Distinguished Professor of Law emerita, "There's something about facing danger when it's not real, it's not personal. People like to be scared or like to see the dark recesses of someone's mind. Some people would say it helps us prepare for the violence in our own lives," (Jared). While I agree with Bryan's statement, I think what makes *Woman of the Hour* fascinating is that Anna Kendrick's approach makes the story real and personal. For viewers like me, we do not need *Woman of the Hour* to help us prepare for potential threats, we have already lived through them.

Woman of the Hour follows the story of Sheryl Bradshaw, played by Anna Kendrick, who escaped the clutches of the Dating Game Killer, also known as Rodney Alcala, played by Daniel Zovatto. What makes *Woman of the Hour* stand out from other crime thrillers I have watched is that, despite taking place almost 50 years ago, it hit very close to home. Instead of being "a part of the action without *really* having to be a part of the action," I was reminded of times where I was a part of the action, thankfully not to the same extremes as the film (HarperCollins Publishers, emphasis in original). In *Woman of the Hour*, we know who the killer is, and we know that Sheryl survives, so rather than taking viewers along on solving the mystery, the film highlights the fear of escalation that still plagues women to this day.

From an early age, women are conditioned to minimize or de-escalate a situation, much to the detriment of our agency. This is also known as the fawn trauma response (Gaba). As writer Gretchen Kelly notes:

> We have all learned, either by instinct or by trial and error, how to minimize a situation that makes us uncomfortable. How to avoid angering a man or endangering ourselves. We have all, on many occasions, ignored an offensive comment. We've all laughed off an inappropriate come-on. We've all swallowed our anger when being belittled or condescended to. It doesn't feel good. It feels icky. Dirty. But we do it because to not do it could put us in danger or get us fired or labeled a bitch. So, we usually take the path of least precariousness.

What set Alcala off in every scenario was that each woman does not reciprocate his advances. Seeing that he has shifted from a nice guy to a potential threat, each woman makes a choice in how to react to his aggression. The women who are killed chose to either run away or fight back. The women who survived did so by de-escalating the situation. An example of this comes at the end of the film when Amy, the young runaway played by Autumn Best, flips the script on Alcala by asking him if they could go back to his place. By giving in and acting like she wants to go with him, Amy successfully gets Alcala to take her to a place where she can find help.

Unfortunately, not every attempt to fawn or de-escalate the situation is successful. We see this when Kendrick's character, Sheryl, attempts to de-escalate her encounter with Acala by giving him a phone number when he asks. Sheryl's response is an example of fawning as she became too afraid to tell him "no" so she tried to be polite by giving in to his desire to get her phone number (Gaba). He suspects that it is a fake number and follows Sheryl across an empty parking lot to her car so that he can hurt her. She is lucky because they are interrupted by a group of people who would be potential witnesses to whatever Alcala was going to do.

What I found most alluring about this film is that I was also drawn to Alcala despite knowing what he was capable of. Even with the flashbacks constantly reminding me that this man is dangerous, Zovatto's charismatic portrayal further humanized Alcala in a way that felt very true to life. Even though the film tells us exactly who Alcala is right from the start, it was hard to not root for him at times. The opening scene, for example, first depicts Alcala as kind and empathetic, but then we see him quickly shift from gentleman to killer. This opening scene puts us right into his victims' shoes by drawing us in with a false sense of security before showing us who Alcala really is. Kendrick intentionally depicted Alcala as a normal guy who is incredibly charming and likable to not only make his violence toward women more heinous, but also to make viewers understand why those women got in his car or invited him into their apartment or picked him on a game show (In Creative Company; Sawka). Kendrick admits that this was intentional, adding

> The question that hangs over so many interactions that people have is: "Do you see me as human? Am I safe with you? Who are you underneath your mask? And the fact that we won't get satisfying answers to that, and yet we have to continue living our lives, is complicated." (Jackson)

As frustrating as it was to root for Alacala at times, by depicting him in this way, Kendrick also reminds me and other women, how we came to be put in uncomfortable situations in the first place.

I am truly in awe of what Anna Kendrick did with this story. She not only told an incredible story, but she helped women articulate why we are afraid of men in certain situations and why we react to them the way we do. While it is important to acknowledge that it is "not all men," through this film, Kendrick helps us also acknowledge that it is better to be cautious and safe than ignore our instincts. This film was uncomfortable to watch, but because many of us have been in the shoes of characters like Sheryl and Amy, it was thrilling to watch these women escape Alcala.

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Squid Game Season 2. Dir. Hwang Dong-hyuk. Screenplay by Hwang Dong-hyuk. Perf. Lee Jung-jae, Lee Byung-hun, Wi Ha-joon, and Gong Yoo. First Man Studio, 2024.

Squid Game returned last year after a long hiatus and, thanks to the show's devoted fans, it emerged as a massive hit after just four days of release with 68 million views, marking the biggest debut in Netflix history (Hailu). Contrary to fans' high expectations and positive reception, however, critical responses to the show were acerbic and even scathing. Critics have argued that the theme of season two is repetitive, the characters are less interesting, and the various subplots are underdeveloped. This review aims to reassess the show's critical reception and provide a new lens through which to read this season of the show not as a mere extension of season 1, but rather a clear reflection of the current sociopolitical climates of the United States and South Korea.

This first section of the review contains a spoiler, so readers are advised to proceed with caution. Season 2 of *Squid Game* starts with Gi-hun (Lee Jung-jae) returning from the airport, determined to take down the mastermind of Squid Game. Gi-hun has spent the two years since season 1 searching for the Recruiter (Gong Yoo) and finally finds a way to contact the Front Man (Lee Byung-hun), teaming up with former police detective Hwang Jun-ho (Wi Ha-joon), who is trying to find his brother. This collaboration is part of Gi-hun's plan to capture the Front Man and put an end to the game, preventing any further victims. Yet the Front Man sees through Gi-hun's plan and abducts him to the secret island, where the game continues. As a last resort, Gi-hun rebels against the Front Man, who quickly quells the rebellion resulting in multiple casualties, including the loss of Jeong-bae (Lee Seo-hwan), Gi-hun's best friend. The season concludes with a cliffhanger that the rest of the story will continue in season three.

Season 2 begins by introducing a villain, leaving a lasting impression on viewers, and the whole season shows stylistic continuity; however, this new season faced many harsh criticisms. One is that the repetitive theme is delivered in an underwhelming way. Critics point out that the central theme of *Squid Game* is how vulnerable and imperfect democracy is in the face of one's self-interest and how it can be manipulated by power. *New York Times* reviewer James Pomniewozik contends that season 2 has less interesting characters, underdeveloped subplots, and consequently, "You will see things you saw in season 1…are we, collectively, just

a bargain-basement version of the V.I.Ps?" In her evaluation of season 2, Lili Loofbourow argues, "these repetitions [of theme and characters] aren't as rich or resonant as one might hope." Daniel Fienberg likewise writes that season 2 of *Squid Game* is "a thorough letdown" because it serves as little more than "a protracted bridge" to season three, lacking new games, characters, and a cohesive theme.

Despite these criticisms, the show's second season exhibits thematic continuity from season 1, while simultaneously presenting a distinct approach to the voting process under the direction of Hwang Dong-hyuk. While players had a handful of opportunities to stop or continue the game in season 1, players in season 2 vote at the end of every round and they can go home with some prize money rather than empty-handed. Of course, players want to go home after the first brutal game, but they change their minds as soon as they witness the blood money in a shiny piggy bank, and the Front Man, who disguises himself as a player 001, fails to dissuade them from continuing the game. Fienberg interprets the voting process as dragging on for too long without "comparable payoff," but I contend that this scene adroitly depicts the core of human greed in this second season, especially when people chant "one more game" in unison. Rebecca Sun juxtaposes this scene with current U.S. politics, noting that the players' chant is uncannily reminiscent of Trump supporters' chant of "four more years" during a rally on November 5th, 2024. This scene also parallels the Korean political situation, as former president Yoon's supporters gathered to demonstrate and frantically shout "Yoon again" in the hope of his comeback despite his illegal declaration of martial law and subsequent impeachment. While some critics may perceive this thematic reiteration as overly familiar or repetitive, such responses underscore the persistent relevance of these themes. Director Hwang ingeniously employs new mechanisms to convey these messages to his audience.

It is noteworthy that reviewers unanimously define this voting process as democratic, but the voting process in *Squid Game* is more like pseudo-democratic at best. The basic principles of democratic voting include universal and equal suffrage, secret ballot, and fair administration. The voting in *Squid Game* is an open ballot, so the players' decision is often interrupted by other players, consequently rendering voters' decisions susceptible to peer pressure. Voters here are not fully protected. In addition, the Front Man, who heads the administration of the vote and is supposed to be neutral, participates as both a player and voter. In episode three, when votes tie (182 vs 182), it is the Front Man who enters the game and makes all

the players stay and continue the game. This interference of the administration is a clear violation of fair and democratic voting, suggesting there is no democracy in this world, and as such it is erroneous for critics to call this democratic. The voting is not to show the vulnerability and imperfection of democracy, rather it is an apparatus to maximize players' collective egoism based on the utilitarian principle, "The greatest happiness for the greatest number."

Hwang's signature visual aesthetic emphasizes human greed and collective egoism. While the central theme of season 2 is grim and dire, the set and visual aesthetic of the show are colorful, bright, and even reminiscent of childhood. This drastic contrast between the theme and the set deepens the gravity of the tragic deaths of people during the game. Plus, the famous Korean children's song, "Round and Round," which has an addictive melody with a cheerful tone, likewise highlights the stark contrast between the theme and gory scenes.

Although season 2 of *Squid Game* features some weak subplots and may not have fully met audiences' expectations, it should not be underestimated as "a mess" or "a thorough letdown" (Loofbourow; Fienberg). Season 2 invites audiences to visit a fictional reality replete with avarice and collective egoism operated by a pseudo-democratic voting system, which uncannily resembles both the U.S. and South Korea's current sociopolitical landscapes. It is no wonder that audiences expressed exhaustion from witnessing this on screen once again.

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